



# The inner frontier. Images of the USA in recent Western cinema (2000–2020)

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**Abstract** At the heart of the American western cinema lies the myth. And the western myth is closely linked to the frontier, that boundary between civilization and wilderness that is constantly being negotiated. The frontier mythology is an integral part of scholarly writing on the western, and especially works well with the classical western of the studio era, where the dichotomy of wilderness and civilization had been considered the key to the genre. The following study will go back to the original term frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner’s concept of frontier mythology and Matthias Waechter’s re-reading of this mythology, and will seek for a new angle to discuss recent westerns in the light of current events. This is necessary as most of the examples may look like westerns, but most of them are only told in the mode of a western or use the classical form and iconography to aim for something different than in earlier decades. Genre cinema has become more of a discourse today which is not created according to a classical formula any more. This article takes this fact into account and will furthermore show that the outer boundary between civilization and wilderness is turned inward in films of the last decade: This means that the ‘stranger’ is part of the self, the abject lurks in one’s own forests and mountains—or in one’s own

micro-society, even if films are only told in Western mode, such as the crime thriller ‘Wind River’ (2017) by Taylor Sheridan.

**Keywords** Frontier theory · Western · Genre cinema · Wilderness · Civilization · Hybridity · Mexico · Borderland

## Generic mythology of Western cinema

At the heart of the American western cinema lies the myth. And the western myth is closely linked to the frontier, that boundary between civilization and wilderness that is constantly being negotiated. This is how the idea of the pioneers and settlers was founded, who made the newly discovered land arable in a biblical sense, secured the frontier in a constant conflict with ‘the savage’ and expanded it to the west, north, and south. The cliché of the hostile ‘savage’, the ‘Indian’ or ‘Mexican’ shaped the genre semantics of the classic western films between 1930 and 1960, the era of Classical Hollywood, the studio system. Even if directors like Robert Aldrich questioned the cliché image of Native Americans as early as the 1950s—in ‘Apache’ (1954)—the image of the ‘cruel savage’ dominated the screen, who was allowed to be shot dead in a row during breathtaking chases, very similar to the buffalo, those iconic animals of the ‘wild’ west. It was only during the renaissance of (New) Hollywood after 1967 that elaborate productions emerged in which the

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fate of the Native Americans themselves became the focus. In the wake of John Ford's 'Cheyenne Autumn' (1964), a number of critical 'Indian westerns' were seen illuminating the genocide of Native Americans from different perspectives: 'Soldier Blue' (1970) by Ralph Nelson, 'Little Big Man' (1970) by Arthur Penn and 'Ulzana's Raid' (1970) staged the war between settlers, army and indigenous people with drastic means—often in analogy to the simultaneous Vietnam War, the excesses of which are metaphorically processed here.

At that time neo-westerns appeared, which transferred the classic iconography of the genre to the present day in the United States, most successfully probably the 'Billy Jack' trilogy (1971–1977) directed by and starring Tom Laughlin. Here is a half-breed with arguments and fists for Native American rights and a mark against races. In the modernized neo-westerns the American founding myth is dealt with very sceptically. After the outer borders of the USA had been defined, the frontier appears within the country itself. This Inner frontier of the country no longer separates the country by civilization and wilderness, but along the lines of town and country, one's own and the foreign, and of class, race and gender. What once had been the classic western idealization—the formation of the United States according to the law 1861–1865—turns out to be the beginning of a rift in social reality that is shaping society to this day, the deeply chaotic year 2020.

The frontier mythology is an integral part of scholarly writing on the western, and especially works well with the classical western of the studio era, where the dichotomy of wilderness and civilization had been considered the key to the genre. Rick Altman notes (2005, 32) with a nod towards John Cawelti: 'the western is always set on or near a frontier, where man encounters his uncivilized double. The western thus takes place on the border between two lands, between two eras, and with a hero who remains divided between to value systems.' In his pioneer study 'Horizons West' (1969, 10–14) Jim Kitses creates pairs of antagonisms that signify the elemental frontier conflict of wilderness vs. civilization in westerns, like the individual vs. the community, freedom vs. restriction, honour vs. institutions, nature vs. culture, purity vs. corruption, savagery vs. humanity etc. Along this frontier, the Law is established. Steve Neals comments (1980, 58): 'These [dichotomies] in turn find

a particular focus in the body of the male hero. They articulate the space of the functioning of what is defined in the genre as the Law, and the space which is defined as outside it, as Other.' In this sense Neal sees the psychological western narrative as a process of the inscription of the Law on the human body. 'All this is inscribed quite systematically into the westerns of Mann, Peckinpah and Hawks, where the relationship to the problematic of male narcissism and male homosexuality becomes, if not explicit, at least readily apparent.' Seen from this perspective a film like Sam Peckinpah's bordercrossing 'The Wild Bunch' (1969) can be seen as a coded male melodrama about the unfulfilled love the male antagonists Pyke Bishop (William Holden) and Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan). Peckinpah or Robert Aldrich (in 'Vera Cruz', 1954) already used the frontier-mythology as a metaphor for topics going far beyond the realm of classical western mythology.

The following study will go back to the original term frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner's concept of frontier mythology and Matthias Waechter's re-reading of this mythology (Waechter 1996), and will seek for a new angle to discuss recent westerns in the light of current events. This is necessary as most of the examples may look like westerns, but most of them are only told in the mode of a western or use the classical form and iconography to aim for something different than in earlier decades. Genre cinema has become more of a discourse today (Stiglegger 2020, 7) which is not created according to a classical formula any more. This article takes this fact into account and will furthermore show that the outer boundary between civilization and wilderness is turned inward in films of the last decade: This means that the 'stranger' is part of the self, the abject lurks in one's own forests and mountains—or in one's own micro-society, even if films are only told in Western mode, such as the crime thriller 'Wind River' (2017) by Taylor Sheridan.

### The frontier theory

According to the seminal frontier essay by Frederick Jackson Turner, American progress has repeatedly gone through a cyclical process on the border as society had to re-develop as it moved westward: 'Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement

away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines. And to study this advance, the men who grew up under these conditions, and the political, economic, and social results of it, is to study the really American part of our history' (Turner, 1893, Chapter 1).

American history until the 1880s relates to that western border in different ways. Nevertheless, according to Turner, this fact had hardly been investigated seriously by historians and economists. The frontier that separates civilization from the wilderness is the 'fastest and most effective' drive for 'Americanization' (ibid.). The proceeding evolution of the western border lured the Europeans across the sea and shaped these immigrants into a new type, the pioneer of the frontier region. The move to the west was not motivated by government bonuses, but benefited from its own independent 'expansive force' (ibid.) that wanted to conquer nature. In this logic civilization was meant to take its place. What was conveyed as 'pacification' was essentially an act of brute force: driving out and exterminating Native Americans, exploiting resources and hunting the buffalo.

Turner's theses lead to a consideration of the impact this frontier way of life had on the new Americans' understanding of democracy. Individualism, which was shaped by the wilderness of the border and conjured up a national spirit—and which ultimately complemented the democracy of the official state, since the wilderness escaped public control, became central. The ideal is a maximum of individual freedom, which finds its most extreme expression in the right to own weapons. The east coast stands for the European urban culture, while the west is an expression of 'freedom'—this is where the myth of the Wild West, which genre cinema propagated early on, is based on. In this sense, the political and religious institutions of the East Coast are still seen today as a threat to the rest of the USA, as they tried to guide and influence the West even after the declaration of independence.

From this described disposition, a specific frontier intellect emerged, which combines rudeness and strength with sharpness and curiosity; this practical, inventive approach that invents new tools quickly; the masterful apprehension of material things that are artistically lacking but powerful to achieve great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism that works for good and for evil, and the

exuberance that comes with freedom. The conclusion of Turner's theses is that with the provisional closing of the frontier, the first formation phase of the USA in 1890 had been ended. It can be assumed, however, that the move to the west did not open up the only possible frontier, but that further challenges exist towards the north and the south, which to this day are viewed as a threat, challenge or the 'foreign', e.g. the ongoing border conflict with Mexico.

Matthias Waechter systematized this model in 2019 by differentiating six perspectives: 1. the evolutionist; 2. the political; 3. the cultural; 4. the mythological; 5. the regionalist; and finally 6. the gender theory. These are also the dimensions in which the frontier theory can be analyzed and still be applied today. All of these aspects are discussed selectively in the following sections and demonstrate how important Turner's theses are still today as a basis for discussion. Waechter (2019, 9–10) comments most extensively on the 4th category, quoting D. H. Lawrence from his 'Studies on Classic American Literature' (1955): '[...] you have there the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is sort of a by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted.' (Lawrence 1955, 72–73, quote in Waechter) In this context, Richard Slotkin's 'Gunfighter Nation' (1992) is also noteworthy, in which the American myth of the Frontier is viewed as a "cult of violence". Slotkin discussed along famous western films, how the still virulent gun cult arose and was affirmed by the idea of protection against the threats of the wilderness. As we shall see, this approach continues in the westerns of the last two decades—analogue to the discussions of the Trump era about gun laws and the (ethical) legitimation of the National Rifle Association.

### The inner frontier and the western genre

Anyone who has visited the USA in recent years—especially since Donald Trump took office as President in 2016—will have experienced this country as deeply torn, as a melancholic place that seems to be dawning in the consciousness of its own failure. Where the old energy is still unleashed, it deepens this split and clarifies the inner rifts that run through the country: in the latent conflicts of race,

class and gender. At these ruptures, new borders emerge, which would have to be explored and overcome if they weren't a final framework for national identity for some. For others, however, they are a new challenge; they activate intellect, ingenuity and a striving for another form of freedom. I would like to call these new borders the Inner frontier(s), because the border between civilization and wilderness has never been fully opened up, rather it forms cyclically anew, which above all promotes the emergence of inner borders. Don Siegel has dealt with these aspects in his neo-western 'Coogan's Bluff' (1968): a sheriff from Arizona (Clint Eastwood) travels to New York, where he is confronted with continuous prejudices against his rural identity. He is continuously referred to as 'Texas' and 'cowboy'. The film also tangles aspects of race-prejudice in Arizona as well as New York. It seems that cinema has shown a conscience of the Inner frontier long before it had been discussed in recent politics.

The term Inner frontier appears in a slightly different definition in Ramón Máiz' book 'The Inner frontier: The Place of Nation in the Political Theory of Democracy and Federalism' (2012), as this volume mainly deals with the political limits of federalism. In the present article, however, the term is intended more in terms of cultural philosophy and is now to be discussed in various aspects that are reflected in western films of the last two decades.

If the western film is the heart of the North American myth, then all updated variants can be understood as transformations of that myth. The western as a genre has now become a discourse that mobilizes modality, transformation and hybridity in order to do justice to contemporary phenomena with mythical motifs. In this context, the Inner frontier should be understood as the encounter with strangers in what is supposedly one's own: one's own country, one's own city, one's own family. This alien dimension of the own is mostly publicly denied, it therefore appears as the abject in the sense of Julia Kristeva. Current westerns about the indigenous population, slavery and religious fanaticism show this Inner frontier in a drastic way. In psychoanalytic theory, the abject is the denied own, which is, however, met with disgust and fear (Kristeva, 1982, 1). The westerns of the past few years have reflected these abject mechanisms in many

layers and create an impression of the Inner frontier that pervades the United States today.

### **The faces of the inner frontier in westerns of the 2000s**

#### The foreign as part of one's own

The US Inner frontier can take many forms and even shows—as we will see—the foreign as part of the own self, as the abject. Even in the literature of James Dickey ('Deliverance', 1970) one can find the idea that what is culturally foreign is mostly part of one's own. 'Heartland' and 'Bible Belt' are synonyms for large areas of North America that are perceived as 'strange' by the urban cities and coastal areas. The abject lurks in the woods and inaccessible regions. The genre of backwood horror arose from this model of the urban–rural conflict: The warning not to deviate from the path or to go too far into the forest is justified here in a terrifying way: behind the mountains there are hardly imaginable creatures that become a danger to life. In horror series such as the 'Wrong Turn' films, the parallel existence of 'indigenous cultures' is exaggerated when bloodthirsty forest dwellers attack modern civilization primarily with archaic weapons: arrows, spears, clubs and traps. They embody the latent fear of a vengeful return of indigenous America.

More recently, a striking western in particular has cultivated this model of the Inner frontier between pioneers and the indigenous population as a model of fear. 'Bone Tomahawk' (2016) by S. Craig Zahler begins with a seemingly incidental, but drastic event: a looter cuts the throat of his last living victim and listlessly searches his prey: some books. His friend advises him not to throw a Bible into the fire, as it would bring bad luck. Horsemen approach and the looters flee into a nearby canyon that opens into a ritual site. Human skulls are impaled there and strange, croaking screams can be heard. A little later the two men are dead, literally slaughtered by dust-covered creatures that utter high-pitched noises and are armed with bone axes.

This is how Zahler's first directorial work begins. The Western 'Bone Tomahawk' starring Kurt Russell appeared literally unexpected and still seems astonishingly old fashioned today: a genre film in the tradition

of New Hollywood of the 1970s, clearly inspired by Sam Peckinpah, Walter Hill and John Milius, wildly mingled with elements of the Italian cannibal film of the late 1970s. John Ford's 'Searchers' (from the classic western from 1958), a group of men searching for the woman kidnapped by Indians, encounter the literal 'savage', enter the land beyond the mythical 'frontier', the border between civilization and wilderness. Nobody in this film is really sympathetic or heroic, nobody will survive unscathed. Zahler's world functions according to the ancient 'Lex Talionis', the law of the claw. In his films and novels, the stratum of civilization proves to be thin and fragile, under this membrane lurking predatory killing rage, motivated by a ruthless urge to survive.

With all this latent aggression, Zahler's audiovisual style is characterized by an almost classical realism. As in the New Hollywood films, he uses soundtrack music scarcely, confronting us with long takes that bring ambivalent characters almost uncomfortably close to us, and then suddenly lead to brutal escalations of violence. Male bonding and the heterosexual couple relationship remain the only models of temporary reliability. But this model can also be assigned to a biological determinism, which leads to the realization that we will all die. Sooner or later. And life is an endless series of borderline situations, whether we want it to be true or not. In 'Bone Tomahawk' it is the inexperienced and unscrupulous looters who, rather by chance, desecrate an archaic burial place, whereupon the provoked natives kidnap the woman in return. The narrow passage through the gorge at the beginning leads into a strange, frightening world, like another time zone, in which people in America of the late nineteenth century live like in the Stone Age. Everything about these Native Americans is strange and premodern: the stone axes, the ragged clothing and the modification of the larynx that leads to an animal-like voice. Few films have staged the revenge of the 'defeated' Native Americans more frighteningly than Zahler, who at the same time dehumanizes them – in a more drastic way than the early John Ford's cinema can ever be accused of.

Jeremy Saulnier's 'Hold the Dark' (2018) based on the novel by William Giraldi paints a more ambivalent picture. Here, an indigenous wolf cult and animal atavisms are invoked to portray the lives of people in the snowy forests of Alaska. In December 2004, Medora Slone (Riley Keogh) calls the wolf specialist

Russell Core (Jeffrey Wright) for help: In her remote home in Keelut, Alaska, three children were abducted by wolves, including her son Bailey. Core finds a place marked by cold and darkness, and indeed he observes infanticide in a nearby wolf pack: the wolves are eating their offspring. Medora also approaches Core physically because her husband Vernon (Alexander Skardgard) is in Iraq. She doesn't know he'll be back soon. An older native woman warns Core about Medora – 'she knows evil!' In fact, he finds the missing child in the basement and learns that Medora is possessed by a Tournaq, a wolf demon.

Vernon, who is also Medora's brother, returns and begins to kill all people involved in order to ritually bury his son. It soon becomes clear to Core that the old shaman was right – since the influenza epidemic in 1918, in which wolves ate the many dead of the Yup'ik tribe, the place Keelut has been haunted by these wolf spirits, who have repeatedly demanded child sacrifices.

As a director, Saulnier is interested in processes of violence, as he emphatically demonstrated in the previous films 'Blue Ruin' and 'Green Room'. And the demonic reference in this neo-western remains ambivalent, because ultimately there are no supernatural elements here – only psychotic acts of violence. But the motif of obsession once again emphasizes the Inner frontier that pervades North America: The Native Americans appear as victims of genocide and pandemic and only live like ghosts among the white Americans of this northern border region of Alaska.

It is also no coincidence that only Core, as an African American, manages to survive between these worlds. The wolves symbolize the fate of the largely exterminated natives. The downfall of the North American natives remains a repressed guilt that can repeatedly penetrate to the surface by force. It is no coincidence that films like 'Bone Tomahawk' and 'Hold the Dark' combine motifs from the Western with the horror genre in a hybrid way. The generic hybridity itself already harbors the ambivalence that characterizes the inner rift that pervades the American present. The Inner frontier between past and present, between guilt and repression, between natives and invaders is a thin red line of horror.

## The foreign in the war of the sexes

Not only the conflict between natives and other residents of the USA characterizes the model of the Inner frontier, the social microcosms are at the same time permeated by a latent conflict between the sexes – primarily the gender battle between men and women, but also the discrimination of other gender definitions play a role here. In such microcosms, the opposite sex remains, to a certain extent, the alien in their own house. Religion, which is so important in the USA, seems to unite, but at the same time it draws new boundaries, especially those between the sexes. The woman is defamed, harassed and attacked as the tempter, the ‘bearer of original sin’ in an Old Testament sense. In recent years, some western films and series have taken up the theme of women in the Wild West (Waechter’s 6th category of the frontier), and the Inner frontier between the sexes always plays the essential role. I would also like to show the cinematic reworking of the gender struggle using two different examples.

‘Brimstone’ (2016) by Martin Koolhoven is located in the Old West, in which religion becomes a weapon in the battle between the sexes. The film tells its nested plot in four biblically named sections: Genesis, Exodus, Revelation and Retribution. The first three parts are assembled in reverse chronological order so that the film gradually reveals its inner logic. Liz (Dakota Fanning) is a woman with a dark history as a prostitute. To escape from it, she moves to a fundamentally Christian village and marries the widower Eli (William Houston). One day a creepy priest (Guy Pearce) appears in town and appears to be chasing after Liz, her husband and their two children. Liz sees herself isolated because she cannot communicate verbally: her tongue had once been cut out.

The film unfolds over four time levels in which the fate of a young woman is shown as a connecting element. The sinister aspect of her sexually degraded and physically violated femininity seems to be passed down from generation to generation. The priest incorporates her nemesis, a personification of toxic masculinity, paired with religious fundamentalism. Like the prostitution system, the religious society turns out to be a deeply misogynous system of oppression. In Liz, who was forcibly deprived of her voice, and the physically marked, ultimately false priest, the film sums up a latent war between men and women,

which continues into the most recent discourses around the #metoo movement. Based on the experiences of the pioneering days, stereotypical images of women emerged in westerns that keep popping up: the prostitute, the teacher and the farmer. These stereotypes convey the image of women assigned to the women of the West in the process of civilization and the opening up of the frontier. The dichotomy of this society is evident in the prostitute and the farmer – male pleasure and family care were split up, while women seemed to have neither dynamism nor stubbornness. The figure of Liz may be physically mute, but her step from one sphere to the other shows her as a self-empowered person who also becomes a danger. An iconic image of the film shows a metal gag that condemns the woman to silence.

The problems of an independent formation of gender identity for the female protagonists of frontier society are not only evident in the Old West, but are also handled in contemporary examples. ‘Wind River’ (2017) by Taylor Sheridan deals with the death of a young Native American who was frozen to death after being raped by security forces of an oil company in the wasteland of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. The white tracker Cory Lambert (Jeremy Renner) has to mediate between the cultural worlds of the reservation and gets caught in a vortex of violence.

Taylor Sheridan is the author of a modern Frontier-trilogy that began with ‘Sicario’ (2015, by Denis Villeneuve) and ‘Hell or High Water’ (2016, by David Mackenzie). Sheridan himself sat in the director’s chair for ‘Wind River’ and dedicated himself to the phenomenon of countless sexual assaults against indigenous women in North America. He consciously chose a frontier man, a tracker and hunter who ties in with the deer slayer and trapper, that archetypal figure of the as yet undeveloped borderland. This figure of the ‘trapper’ has always stood between cultures and mediated among the residents of the frontier country. He has to mediate again and again between the indigenous population of the reserve and the workers of the oil company and thus stands between cultures. As a deer slayer, he proves to be the genuinely American mythical figure. And so Renner acts in his role as a mediator, but also a hunter. He has access to the Native Americans, knows their culture and their problems, but he remains the white tracker who supports FBI agent Jane Banner (Elisabeth Olsen).

‘Wind River’ shows the violent battle between the sexes (sexual abuse and femicide) as a continuation of the archaic conflict that ‘Brimstone’ mythically exaggerates. The sexually encoded gender struggle here is simultaneously shaped by racist tendencies and a latent class conflict between the residents of the reserve and the employees of the oil company. The Inner frontier in ‘Wind River’ addresses cultural, gender-political, class-political, racism-based and mythical aspects, which makes the film interesting for this topic in a complex way. The class struggle in the USA is proving to be particularly significant in the light of the political developments in the USA in the 2020 election year, because the two-party democracy decides and ignites its debates not only along the lines of race and gender issues (#metoo and migration), but also as a class conflict with a focus on the urban / rural contrast: the poor allow themselves to be seduced by a lobbyist of the privileged minority using hate speech. The films in discussion use the Inner frontier struggle in past (‘Brimstone’) and present (‘Wind River’) to create relatable metaphors for the contemporary audience. In ‘Brimstone’ the modern parallel would be the Christian fundamentalism in the US-heartland, while ‘Wind River’ elaborates on the peripheral conflict between natives and white company workers, who infiltrate the reservation. The fights here combine the elements of race, class, and living space.

#### The foreign in the class struggle

In the previous examples it becomes clear again and again that the foreign is always part of one’s own, even if it is denied as an object of society (the prostitute, the little gangster). This section will use the latent class struggle and the competing milieus of the US South to illustrate how the Inner frontier is formed here. It will hardly come as a surprise that it is precisely here that the Western mode mixes with gangster and cop films as well as melodrama.

With the adaptation of Nic Pizzolatto’s novel ‘Galveston’ (2018), the actress Mélanie Laurent was filming a tragic gangster melodrama whose meandering narrative structure is reminiscent of the similarities between the road movie and the classic western. ‘Galveston’ is one of the most modern examples in this article, a film whose western mode has already been filtered through numerous media levels, told by

a young French filmmaker who undoubtedly focuses on the class and gender aspects of the novel. The key western elements are the constant travelling through wasteland locations and violence as a first choice in an attempt to solving conflicts. Also the title with the significant name of the town ‘Galveston’ is important, reminding of classical western named after towns like ‘Warlock’ or ‘Rio Bravo’. While the film establishes modernized versions of the western stereotypes of the gunslinger (the hitman) and the ‘whore with the golden heart’, it is too cynical to even grant a glorious showdown after the female protagonist had been killed. The film might be considered a gangster-couple-road-movie told in the mode of western.

In New Orleans in 1988, the professional killer Roy (Ben Foster) is diagnosed with lung cancer. He returns to his hometown Galveston after being betrayed by a gang boss: he managed to kill the hit men and free a young prostitute, Rocky (Elle Fanning). On the way, Rocky picks up a little girl, Tiffany (Anniston and Tinsley Price), from her stepfather’s house, whom she spontaneously shoots.

Pursued by the gangsters, Roy, Rocky and Tiffany flee to the sea. Numerous misunderstandings arise, in the course of which it becomes clear that Tiffany is actually Rocky’s child, conceived in abuse by her stepfather. ‘Galveston’ is the story of a long, tragic journey through the dreary parts of the United States, a glimpse into poverty and social insecurity. Health and economic insecurities lead the protagonists into crime, murder and prostitution, whereby they always remain at the lower end of the food chain. Rocky has no choice but to sell her body when the last cent is used up, while Roy never escapes the spell of the syndicate which betrays him. A dreary city in Texas becomes the eponymous metaphor for that rift between the milieus, between immeasurable wealth and absolute misery, an Inner frontier of the classes that is more than obvious for an artist socialized in Europe like Mélanie Laurent. The mode of the western film always shines through when it comes to pushing or overcoming the boundaries when Roy and Rocky rebel against their predetermined fate, but the pessimism of the film vividly shows how the economic situation is going for many people in the US. The class boundaries seem impermeable, creating ever new stages of dependence and impoverishment.

Taylor Sheridan also wrote the screenplay for David Mackenzie’s neo-western ‘Hell or High Water’,

in which two brothers, divorced father Toby Howard (Chris Pine) and quick-tempered Tanner (Ben Foster), fresh out of prison, robbed banks venture to save their ailing and heavily indebted farm. But all of that takes place in Texas, and the two are not aware of Texas Ranger Marcus Hamilton (Jeff Bridges), who wants to solve a big case right before his retirement. Together with his colleague Alberto Parker (Gil Birmingham) he analyzes the personalities and the methodology of the robbers. He teases Parker with his half-Mexican, half-Indian ancestry, who counters this with remarks about Hamilton's age. Together they determine which bank could be robbed next, but they are too late – the brothers have already been involved in a shootout there, which results in two deaths and Tanner injured. Hamilton and Parker pursue the fugitives and Tanner manages to shoot Parker. Hamilton hits the shooter from an ambush. Toby succeeds in 'washing' the money in the casino and escaping with new wealth.

The key moment of the film comes after Hamilton retires and visits Toby's redeveloped farm. Toby explains to Hamilton that he wanted to save his children from the poverty that threatened him all his life. As in 'Wind River', poverty is a curse for the people in rural areas, driving them into crime and deepening the frontier of social classes. The films written by Taylor Sheridan can be understood as an Inner frontier cycle, as the next chapter will show.

#### The foreigner beyond the wall

The border conflict between the USA and Mexico is not only an ongoing political issue that shaped Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign ("We build a wall!"), But also a further symptom of the Inner frontier, which is connected here with the Outer Frontier. Although the partially illegal immigrants and commuters from Mexico are popular and cheap workers in the US border region, they remain the 'invading foreigner' that is subject to massive discrimination by the border troops and homeland security. The foreign is emphatically excluded: Trump urges that the border conflicts between the USA and Mexico be resolved through a border wall thousands of kilometers long. However, historical experience shows that smugglers are very well organized and that some permanently installed tunnels connect the countries far into the other territories. Taylor Sheridan took this theme as

the basis for his screenplay 'Sicario' (2015), which Denis Villeneuve made into a visionary neo-western.

In 'Sicario' we follow the FBI agent Kate Macer (Emily Blunt), who is sent with an undercover special unit to the border area of Arizona and Mexico in order to put an end to drug smuggling there if necessary. Their first mission turns into a disaster when the motorcade is ambushed. Kate threatens to drown in a network of inscrutable colleagues (Benicio del Toro, Josh Brolin) who move effortlessly between friend and foe. Even if there are partial successes, Gillick (del Toro) recommends his distraught colleague to quit the job: 'This is the land of wolves now. And you are not a wolf.' In syndicate fashion, he executes the drug lord's entire family.

Sheridan's nihilistic view of American history, its politics and its myths is intensively implemented in Denis Villeneuve's epic desert images and sliding tracking shots. The droning and pulsating music of Jóhan Jóhannsson casts out a last bit of hope when Kate Macer experiences the bloody hustle beyond the border for the first time and the mutilated corpses of the syndicate victims dangle from the bridge. The gangs – as suggested by the logic of colleague Gillick, the eponymous sicario ('murderer') – can only be fought with their own means. In the border conflict, the Inner and Outer frontier fall into one and break out in a disturbing massacre, which is emphatically shown in the second part of 'Sicario: Day of the Soldado' (2016).

The logic of the cycles of all-encompassing brute force associated with the border region is taken to extremes following this spirit in a more recent example: John Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone and devised by David Morrell, has always been a spirit of the frontier. As such a 'ghost' he visited his (foreign) hostile homeland in the first film 'First Blood' (1982) as an unwelcome returnee from Vietnam. In the following films he had been instrumentalized as a killer abroad, in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Burma. His Indian and German origins were always emphasized and qualified him as an outsider who was condemned to live on the frontier. So it is hardly surprising that in Adrian Grünberg's fifth film 'Rambo: Last Blood' (2019) he moves into frontier country itself and becomes a true neo-western. The film thus shows distinct connections to some classical westerns, where troubled westerners transgress the Mexican border to escape their past lives like Gary Cooper in 'Garden



of Evil' (1954) by Henry Hathaway or 'Vera Cruz' (1954) by Robert Aldrich, or Robert Ryan in 'The Wild Bunch' (1969) by Sam Peckinpah. But instead of fighting the war on 'the other side', 'Rambo: Last Blood' brings the war right back into the USA.

At the end of the former sequel 'John Rambo' (2007), we see the war veteran return to his father's ranch in Bowie, Arizona. Thus it is not surprising that 'Last Blood' is now devoting itself to the western genre. The film begins with a catastrophic storm in which Rambo, as a volunteer on his horse, retrieves some lost hikers from the storm surge. He returns to his farm, which is run by the Mexican Maria Beltran (Adriana Parazza) and her daughter Gabrielle (Yvette Monreal). The native Rambo lives in harmony with the Mexican 'strangers' in his house. He has already overcome the Inner frontier, literally settled down beyond the frontier. Or – as one could see it when he explores the pastures on his horse in the golden sunshine – he has become a mythical being of the frontier himself.

The tragedy begins when Gabrielle secretly travels to Mexico to see her friend Gizelle (Fenessa Pineda) and to meet her father. But he is hardly enthusiastic and a little later she is drugged and sold as a sex slave by the local cartel. Rambo's desperate search for the girl gradually turns into a hopeless crusade against the unscrupulous cartel brothers Victor (Óscar Jaenada) and Hugo (Sergio Peris-Menchetta). Rambo manages to free Gabrielle and kill Victor, but she dies on the way back to the ranch.

The ranch had been under-tunneled by Rambo, so it is easy for him to turn the whole area into a system of archaic traps, as he had learned to do in Vietnam. When Hugo arrives with his men, he is hunted down by the native half-blood Rambo with bow and arrow and a Bowie knife, the traditional frontier weapons. In a seemingly pagan ritual, he crucifies the Mexican at a barn door and cuts out his beating heart.

Both 'Sicario' and 'Rambo: Last Blood' can be seen as an affirmative view of the USA / Mexico border conflict: On the surface, they diagnose the Mexican border cities as 'beasts', as an inhuman limbo that is only dictated by cartels. At the same time, however, both films find a way to create ambivalence by integrating protagonists whose lives connect the fates of both countries in a variety of ways. In 'Sicario', it is the inscrutable Gillick, a former lawyer whose family had once been murdered by the cartel, and who

uses the American special operation primarily to seek personal revenge. When he speaks of the 'land of wolves', he says so in the USA–'Sicario' is accordingly nihilistic in its parallelization of the two countries, which seem to be caught in a spiral of violence from which no one will leave. No covert US reconnaissance can help.

'Rambo: Last Blood', on the other hand, personifies the conflicts and turns Mexico into a 'realm of evil' in which only a few upright people can be found (including a reporter who helps Rambo). But Maria and her daughter only seem to find peace in the USA, protected by the border. John Rambo, who himself was initially not welcome and alienated from his homeland, has settled in the dying frontier country. The system of tunnels he built under the farm shows that he doesn't trust the peace. He lives in a constant state of war, as flashbacks show. Even if he temporarily completes the mythical cycle with the final 'gangster / regicide', he has no solution for the virus of violence that contaminates both countries. Except for Maria, whom he sent away, he lost everyone and brought the war into his own country. Ultimately, 'Rambo: Last Blood' dreams of 'Regeneration Through Violence' (Slotkin 1973), but does not overcome the Inner or Outer frontier. In this way, the foreign beyond the 'wall' remains as an American nightmare without contrasting it with a functioning utopia. Instead of becoming an ideological dream of the Trump Republicans, the film, like its protagonist, is the representation of a country at the end of its cycle, scarred and traumatized by its unresolved conflicts, criss-crossed by boundaries in the self, dedicated to the dream to create a better world by violence.

## Conclusion

In this article I analyzed contemporary takes on the western-genre by returning to the founding myth of the genre: the frontier theory. But besides the manifold genre theorists who have worked on the meaning of the frontier for the western before, I illuminate these examples in the light of a contemporary concept which I called the Inner frontier. Along different subtexts like the foreign, the border, race, class and gender, I showed how different films deal with the phenomenon of the Inner frontier which gradually replaced the idea of the Outer frontier of the

foundation myth. This article finally highlights one problem: The conflict of the Inner frontier can currently no longer be understood as a process of progress, as Turner and Waechter assume in the context of the classical frontier theory, but at best as an expression of latent and repressed grievances that manifest.

In the films discussed here, generic hybridity turns into a contemporary transformation of myths, which provides fundamental information about the deeply historical problems with which the USA has to struggle. Born from a myth of violence, invigorated and expanded. In the 2020 election campaign, Donald Trump deepened precisely that gaping rift in society that I have described as the Inner frontier. The tragedy of this mythical narrative is the certainty that violence will always lead to further violence, a cycle that was firmly established in film history by John Ford, Robert Aldrich and Sam Peckinpah and is now bitterly absorbed in the neo-western world.

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