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# Seeing the Past: Jesse James and American History in Motion Pictures

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**SEEING THE PAST:  
JESSE JAMES AND AMERICAN HISTORY IN MOTION  
PICTURES**

By Clinton Scott Loftin

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in History)  
May, 2000

Historically-based films often reveal more about the time in which they were made than about their historical subjects. Three motion pictures about Jesse James made in three very different eras reveal more about contemporary history than they do about the facts surrounding the legendary outlaw's life. While each film, in some way, purports to tell the "true" story of Jesse James' life, each offers a different history of that life. In order to understand the reasons for this it is necessary to examine the events that surrounded the making of each picture. More specifically, there are four major forces that must be examined in order to understand Jesse James' transformation in the three pictures: the socio-political environment at the time each film was made, the state of the motion picture industry, developments within the genre to which the films belong (the Western), and the unique contributions of individual filmmakers. These four forces best explain why Jesse James changed so

dramatically from 1939 to 1957 to 1972; furthermore, they lend credibility to the claim that motion pictures are as much a cultural artifact as literature, poetry, theatre, and other artforms.

**SEEING THE PAST:  
JESSE JAMES AND AMERICAN HISTORY  
IN MOTION PICTURES**

By

Clinton Scott Loftin

B.S. University of Georgia, 1997

A THESIS

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# Introduction

*Art is a lie that tells the truth.*

--Pablo Picasso

Nowhere are Picasso's words more appropriate than the movies. This study examines three movies that are, in large part, lies and fabrications about Jesse James' life. Each movie purports to tell the "real" story of the legendary outlaw's life, but each, in the end, is a product of the entertainment industry, a piece of art designed to capture audience interest. Yet behind the art, behind the lies, hide some important truths about twentieth-century America.

In its attempt to expose the truth behind the lies, this study puts forth two major arguments. First, it argues that historically -based films reveal as much about contemporary history as they do about their historical subjects. Three films about Jesse James reveal more about the socio-political environments they were made in, the state of the motion picture industry at the time, shifting developments within the Western genre, and the worldviews of filmmakers than they do about Jesse James. Secondly, the study argues that contemporary history, in turn, is responsible for how

history is presented in motion pictures. Changes in the socio-political environment, motion picture industry, and Western genre, along with the personalities of different filmmakers, resulted in three very different pictures about Jesse James' life. Films not only reveal contemporary history; when they take on historical subjects, their interpretations of the past are determined by that history.

Proof of such an argument requires a synthesis of ideas put forth by others. It combines the work of a number of historians who have studied the changing socio-political environment in twentieth-century America, those who have researched the motion picture industry, those who have studied film genres, and those who have chronicled the lives of various filmmakers. These are the four major forces that affect how history is presented in motion pictures: the socio-political environment at the time a film was made, the state of the motion picture industry, developments within a film's genre, and the contributions of filmmakers. These forces are interconnected: changes in one often produce changes in another, and to overlook one at the expense of another results in an incomplete history. For example, the breakdown of the studio system and the dissipation of the motion picture industry's Production Code in the 1960s allowed a new crop of independent filmmakers to enter the industry; young filmmakers like Sam Peckinpah, in turn, pushed the Western genre in new and riskier directions, often using their pictures to comment on contemporary social and political issues. Therefore, in order to understand how history is used in *The Wild Bunch* (1969) it is necessary not only to understand Peckinpah but also the motion picture industry, the Western genre, and the socio-political environment in the late 1960s.

Historians have conducted studies similar to this but never with the full inclusion of all four forces. Richard Slotkin, in his book *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, offers one of the most thorough discussions of how and why history is used in motion pictures. Slotkin examines developments within the Western film genre and argues that they mirror developments in the socio-political environment. His chapters on the Western include “Studies in Red and White: Cavalry, Indians and Cold War Ideology,” “Gunfighters and Green Berets: Imagining the Counterinsurgency Warrior,” and “Conquering New Frontiers: John Kennedy, John Wayne, and the Myth of Heroic Leadership.” According to Slotkin, in order to understand how the past is used in motion pictures one must first understand the genre (in his case the Western) and, second, how the genre is shaped by major social and political events. Slotkin’s study is vast and impressive, but it has deficiencies. It lacks any in-depth discussion of developments within the motion picture industry, and it offers little on how individual filmmakers (with the lone exception of John Ford) contribute to the genre; these two factors--the motion picture industry and the contributions of filmmakers --played a major role in the changing directions of the Western throughout the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Others have been guilty of overemphasizing filmmakers’ influence at the expense of other important elements. Those who support the *auteur* theory believe that “a film’s director (or, less often, the screenwriter, occasionally a combination of the two) is the *auteur*, author, the shaping intelligence that stamps a motion picture

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992).

with a distinctive style.” Under the *auteur* theory it is assumed that “any director creates his films on the basis of a central structure and that all his[her] films can be seen as variations or developments of it.”<sup>2</sup> In his work, *The American West in Film*, Jon Tuska devotes entire chapters to directors like John Ford, Henry Hathaway, Anthony Mann, and Peckinpah, claiming that it is the individual vision of these directors that is responsible for the many different versions of history in Westerns. Noticeably absent from Tuska’s study, however, is any discussion about social and political events or changes within the motion picture industry that may have affected the filmmaking process. Robert Brent Toplin, in his work *History By Hollywood*, takes a similar approach but blends the *auteur* theory with the socio-political environment at the time a film was made. This blend results in what Toplin calls “production histories,” which are responsible for how and why the past is presented in movies. But like Tuska, Toplin overlooks some important ingredients: he offers no discussion of changes within the motion picture industry, and he neglects genre trends that seriously affect a film’s outcome.<sup>3</sup>

A full understanding of how and why the past is presented in motion pictures requires inclusion of socio-political factors, changes in the motion picture industry, developments within film genres, as well as the contributions of filmmakers. Focusing on three films from three different eras, all about the same subject and all within the same genre, will demonstrate just how influential each of these four forces are. Ideally, this identification of the four major forces that affect how history is

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

presented in motion pictures will yield a critical formula from which to approach all historically-based films.

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Jesse James is the hinge of this study for several reasons. First, his film life is highly accessible. He has been the subject of no less than twenty-five major motion pictures, ranging from his film debut in the 1921 picture *Jesse James Under the Black Flag* to his most recent appearance in the 1994 film *Frank and Jesse*; a film about Jesse James has been released in every decade since the 1920s. Such omnipresence makes it possible to select three films about Jesse James made in three very different eras, thus permitting an exploration of the affect time has on the way the past is presented in motion pictures. An examination of films about Jesse James released in 1939, 1957, and 1972 makes it possible to gauge the influence of the socio-political environment on the way the past is presented in movies. The socio-political climates in these three periods were markedly different from each other, and the films reflect the preoccupations of their own era. Furthermore, the motion picture industry went through drastic change between the 1930s and 1970s. An examination of films from 1939, 1957, and 1972 demonstrates how changes in the industry affect how the past is presented in film.

Jesse James is attractive for a second reason. With the exception of a few strays, all of the films made about Jesse James are confined to the same genre, the Western. Like other trends, film genres change and develop, flourish and recede. The fact that *Jesse James* (1939), *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), and *The Great*

*Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972) are confined to the Western genre makes it possible to understand how developments and dominant trends within a genre influence the making of a picture. The Western genre, in particular, is largely known for its presentation of historical material and its portrayal of the American frontier. Shifts within the genre are partly responsible for the many different versions of the frontier that appear in movies. The Western in 1939 is very different from the Western in 1972, thus the frontier in 1939 is different from the frontier in 1972. Jesse James is a valuable vehicle for understanding this distinction.

Third, more factual information exists about Jesse than his Western counterparts like Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp. He has been the subject of numerous studies by biographers and by amateur and professional historians alike. William Settle, Jr., in his book *Jesse James Was His Name*, provides a solid factual foundation from which to compare Jesse's real life with his film life. The research that attempts to get at the "man behind the myth" is important because it allows us to identify what parts of the real man's life are distorted; knowing what parts are distorted, it is possible to understand how contemporary history shaped the many film lives of Jesse James.

## **A Man of a Thousand Lives: Jesse James**

Jesse James' legend took root long before his death in 1882. After he died, the legend continued to grow, while the real man, Jesse James, faded into the obscurities of history. His popularity in print, folk music, and eventually movies made the legend more pervasive than the man, and the facts more difficult to discern from the fictions. Most biographers and historians have been unable to escape the legend, often weaving unsubstantiated tales and imaginary quotes into their work. A few studies, however, most notably William Settle's *Jesse James Was His Name* and Marley Brant's *Jesse James: The Man and the Myth*, provide a solid factual basis from which to peel back the layers of legend and reveal the man that hides beneath them.

Jesse Woodson James was born in Clay County, Missouri on September 5, 1847. For most of his youth, he was a fatherless child. He was not yet three when his father, Robert James, fell ill and died on a California gold expedition in 1850. It might surprise some to know that Jesse's father was a preacher and as much of an intellectual as his time and money could afford. His library included fifty-one books on subjects ranging from philosophy to history to Greek and Latin. Many of Jesse's biographers have speculated about the difference a respectable father figure would have made in his life. It is true that his mother remarried twice, but there is no evidence to indicate that Jesse was close to either one of his step-fathers. He was, for

all intents and purposes, raised by his mother, a slaveholder and Southern sympathizer during the Civil War.<sup>4</sup>

Jesse James, called Dingus by his friends, reached about five feet eleven inches tall in maturity. He was fair complexioned with black hair and a trimmed beard. Granulated eyelids forced him to blink uncontrollably. At some point in his life, he lost the tip of the middle finger on his left hand. He came of age in a time of uncertainty and violence. In 1854 Congress opened Kansas and Nebraska for settlement, and settlers were left to decide whether or not the two new territories would permit slavery. Neighboring Missouri, on the other hand, was an established slave state. Though slaves made up only 9 per cent of the population, three-fourths of the people of Missouri had been raised in slave-states. The thought of an anti-slavery state on their Western doorstep frightened and angered many Missourians. Those in Western counties like Clay feared their slave property would not be safe. The conflict between anti-slavery forces in Kansas and pro-slavery forces in Missouri produced a number of nasty skirmishes and bloody border raids. "Bleeding Kansas," as it came to be known, withstood attacks from Missouri's "Border Ruffians," and the presence of John Brown ensured that Kansas countered with some bloody attacks of its own. Jesse was not yet a teenager at this time of heightened conflict on the Missouri -

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<sup>4</sup> William A. Settle, Jr., *Jesse James Was His Name: Or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), pp. 6-11; Marley Brant, *Jesse James: The Man and the Myth* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1998), 9-11.

Kansas border, but it seems unlikely that his youth went untouched by the violence and uncertainty of the age.<sup>5</sup>

Jesse James was thirteen when the Civil War began. There was no consensus in Missouri as to which side the state would join. Governor Claiborne Jackson sided with the Confederacy, but soon Union forces infiltrated the state and began to sway public opinion. By 1862 Federal troops had the upper hand in Missouri. They claimed the state for the Union. Those Missourians who wished to continue defending the Confederacy went underground. They became guerrilla warriors, launching swift, deadly attacks on Union forces and then retreating into the Missouri countryside where they depended on local sympathizers for food and shelter. They became known as “bushwhackers.” Sometime between 1862 and 1863 Jesse’s brother, Frank, joined the infamous William Clarke Quantrill’s band of guerrilla warriors. Quantrill’s band was notorious among Union sympathizers and legendary among Confederates. They robbed, killed, pillaged, and plundered, all in the name of the South. In his wild and reckless rides with Quantrill Frank James met one of his future partners in crime, Cole Younger.<sup>6</sup>

Oral tradition holds that while Frank was riding with Quantrill, Union soldiers visited the James farm on suspicions that they were aiding and abetting guerrillas. When Jesse’s step-father proved uncooperative, they threatened to hang him. He refused to talk, so the soldiers went after Jesse’s pregnant mother. They assaulted and

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<sup>5</sup> James D. Horan, *Desperate Men: The James Gang and the Wild Bunch* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 8-9; Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, pp. 9-11; Brant, *Jesse James*, pp. 13-18.

<sup>6</sup> Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, pp. 12-28.

abused her. She too refused to talk. Finally, they went after Jesse. They found him working in a field. They were able to get in a few lashes of the whip before Jesse escaped into some cornrows. Many biographers and historians believe the cruel actions of the Union soldiers fueled Jesse's desire to join his brother in the war against the Union.<sup>7</sup>

It was under Bill Anderson in 1864 that Jesse joined the Confederate cause. He rode in one of Anderson's most legendary raids, the Centralia Massacre. In Centralia Jesse made a name for himself. Anderson's men intercepted a train full of Union troops. They ordered the troops off the train and began firing on them. The leader of the troops arrived on a later train to discover the massacre. Major A. V. E. Johnson rode out with some of his men to find Bill Anderson. Upon finding Anderson, Johnson ordered his men to dismount. Anderson's men charged. The Union forces were destroyed. Over one hundred Union men were killed, including the Major. It became accepted fact that Jesse James fired the shot that killed Major Johnson; years later Frank confirmed in an interview with a Columbia newspaper that it was, indeed, Jesse who shot Major Johnson.<sup>8</sup>

The end of the War did not spell the end of guerrilla bands in Missouri. Radical Republicans in Missouri adopted a state constitution that disenfranchised any individual who aided the Confederacy and forbid them from joining the "principal professions." With such restrictions, many guerrillas saw no reason to disband; rather

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 26; Brant, *Jesse James*, pp. 26-29. There is some uncertainty as to who was approached first by the Union troops, but most sources maintain that all three —Jesse, his mother, and step-father— were assaulted.

<sup>8</sup> Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, pp. 27-28.

they targeted new enemies, one of which was the banks. Between 1866 and 1868 Western Missouri experienced a rash of bank robberies. There is no evidence to indicate that Jesse James took part in these robberies, but it is most certain that he later fell in with some of the men who did. Most likely, he knew many of them from his days in Anderson's guerrilla band.<sup>9</sup>

Jesse and his brother Frank first became suspects after the December 7, 1869 robbery of the Gallatin Bank. Two armed men shot and killed the owner of the bank and wounded a clerk. The clerk stumble into the street where he cried out that the bank was being robbed. The bandits quickly mounted their horses and dashed out of town under fire from townsmen. A posse failed to locate the robbers, but it was believed that they retreated to Clay County. Witnesses of the robbery claimed that one of the horses belonged to Jesse James. Lawmen converged on the James' home looking for Jesse and Frank. While they entered the house and searched for the two men, Jesse and Frank snuck out a back entrance. By the time the lawmen could make it back outside Jesse and Frank dashed away on their horses.

It is not certain that Jesse and Frank robbed the bank at Gallatin. Their evasion of the law could quite possibly have resulted from fear of punishment or imprisonment for their service in the Confederacy. Still, Gallatin made Jesse famous. Soon after, his name became associated with a number of other robberies, including the rash of robberies from 1866 to 1868, to which he was previously not associated.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-37.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 37-42

There is no way of knowing how many bank and train robberies Jesse James committed. William Settle, Jr., author of the definitive biography of Jesse James, warns that the period between 1866 and 1876 “must be regarded as a period for which much of the fact cannot be separated from the fiction.”<sup>11</sup> What is certain, however, is that after the Gallatin robbery Jesse became *the* prime suspect in most major robberies in the Midwest. It is doubtful that Jesse would have attained such notoriety without the efforts of the press. The labors of local newspaper editor John Newman Edwards, in particular, were largely responsible for the constant circulation of Jesse’s escapades, first in the Midwest and then later along the Eastern seaboard.

Major John Newman Edwards fought with the guerrillas of Western Missouri in the early years of the Civil War and was a sympathizer with the Confederate cause. It is not known if Edwards crossed paths with Jesse or Frank during the War, but his loyalty to his guerrilla comrades was unquestionable, and his defense of Jesse James in the local newspapers was the stuff of legend. When the newspapers reported another bank or train robbery in Missouri and made Jesse a suspect, often a mysterious letter would arrive in the hands of John Newman Edwards. The letters were allegedly from Jesse himself. In one such letter printed in Edward’s *Kansas City Times*, Jesse denied any involvement in the Gallatin robbery. The letter was addressed to Governor Joseph McClurg by one Jesse James “to let those men know who have accused me of the Gallatin murder and robbery that they have tried to swear away the life of an innocent man.” There is no evidence to indicate that Jesse actually wrote

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

such letters; biographers and historians suspect that Edwards may have crafted them himself because of his dedication to the Confederacy and his desire to sell newspapers. Eventually, Jesse's letters of alibi became so frequent and so seemingly detached from the outlaw that another Kansas City newspaper called them "suspiciously—almost nauseatingly—monotonous." Nonetheless, accusations of Jesse's guilt and the alibis printed by Edwards to counter them were enough to make Jesse both a despised *and* celebrated figure in the Midwest.<sup>12</sup>

Edwards covered one of the most noted events in the life of Jesse James. Late one night in January of 1875 lawmen got word that Jesse was hiding out at his mother's house in Clay County. In an effort to force Jesse out of the house, the lawmen busted out a kitchen window and tossed a fiery ball of cotton into the house. Awakened by the commotion, Jesse's mother and her husband scrambled to get the flaming ball into the fireplace, only to have another thrown into the home. They rushed to get the second ball into the fireplace. It exploded. Jesse's nine-year-old half brother, Archie Samuel, died from the blast. His mother's right hand was so mangled it had to be amputated. Jesse was not in the house.<sup>13</sup>

The bombing demonstrated how far the law would go to capture or kill Jesse James. It also demonstrated what a sympathetic character he was becoming in the eyes of many Missourians. The Kansas City *Times* wrote of the raid: "There is no crime, however dastardly, which merits a retribution as savage and fiendish as the one which these men acting under the semblance of the law have perpetrated." The

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 16, 73-78, quote attributed to Jesse from p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-80.

Richmond *Conservator* remarked that the “James boys never fired a dwelling at midnight.” Even those working for the State spoke out against the lawmen. Missouri senator James Shields called the incident “ the most cowardly and brutal outrage ever committed in the State.” Bold statements like Shields’ encouraged other members of the State to get involved in bringing an end to the Jesse James case.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after the bombing, conservative members of the Missouri legislature drafted a bill to grant amnesty to the James boys and their suspected partners in crime, the Youngers. The bill granted the Jameses and Youngers amnesty for all acts committed during the War and promised them a fair trial on all charges of crime after the War:

Whereas, Believing these men too brave to be mean; too  
generous to be revengeful, and too gallant and honorable  
to betray a friend or break a promise, and believing further,  
that most, if not all, the offences with which they are charged  
have been committed by others . . . sound policy and true  
statesmanship alike demand that that general amnesty should  
be extended to all alike . . . for attacks done or charged to have  
been done during the war; *therefore be it resolved . . .*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-79.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-84.

The amnesty bill received 58 ayes and 39 nays, less than the two-thirds percentage needed to pass. It is doubtful that Jesse would have turned himself in if the amnesty vote passed. He must have known there were few places where he could receive a fair trial, and personal experience taught him that the law was difficult to trust.

A year-and-a-half after the amnesty vote failed, perhaps the most notorious robbery ever attributed to the James gang occurred in Northfield, Minnesota. On September 2, 1876 a gang of eight men rode into Northfield. Three kept watch on the outskirts of town, two stood guard outside the First National Bank, and three entered the bank. When the cashier refused to open the safe, the robbers slit his throat and shot him. Another teller took a bullet through the shoulder but managed to escape into the street where he warned the rest of the town. Chaos ensued. Townsfolk grabbed their firearms and shot at the robbers. The robbers returned fire. Nicholas Gustavson, a Swedish immigrant who could not understand the orders being shouted at him, was shot and killed. Two of the robbers were killed, another severely wounded. The rest of the band escaped under heavy fire. The two dead robbers were identified as Bill Chadwell and Clell Miller, known accomplices of Jesse James. A posse formed and went into the woods to hunt down the remaining six robbers, now believed to be Cole Younger, his brothers, and Frank and Jesse James. After several days of searching, the posse killed one of the men and captured three others. The dead man was Charlie Pitts. The three captured were Cole, Bob, and Jim Younger.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-97.

Two of the robbers escaped, presumably Frank and Jesse James. On his deathbed in 1916 Cole Younger acknowledged that Frank and Jesse took part in the Northfield raid, and that it was Frank who murdered the cashier.<sup>17</sup>

In the years leading up to and following the Northfield raid attitudes towards outlaws in Missouri began to harden. Between the end of the War and the early 1880s Missouri acquired a national reputation as a refuge for outlaws and cutthroats. The New York *Illustrated Times* remarked in 1882, “Missouri is under the bloody sway of a band of cut-throats, outlaws and assassins and has been for the last fifteen years and more.” Papers in Chicago and Cincinnati echoed these sentiments and warned travelers of the dangers of Missouri. The Governor of Missouri, Thomas Crittenden, felt it necessary to clean up the state’s image, part of which involved the removal of the state’s most notorious outlaw, Jesse James. It is widely believed that Governor Crittenden contracted Bob Ford, a newly recruited member of the James band, to have Jesse killed. On April 3, 1882 Jesse James was shot through the back of the head in his home. Bob Ford and his brother Charles immediately surrendered to police. A grand jury indicted the two men for the murder. On April 17 they entered guilty pleas and were sentenced to hang. Receiving this news, Crittenden stepped in the same afternoon to grant the two men full and unconditional pardons. Crittenden never revealed who he contracted to kill Jesse James, but in his autobiography he boasted, “the proclamation of a reward accomplished its purpose in less than one year at a cost

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<sup>17</sup> Brant, *Jesse James*, pp. 258-259.

not exceeding \$20,000, not one cent of which was drawn from the state.” How much of this reward, if any, Bob and Charlie Ford received is not known.<sup>18</sup>

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People often take of Jesse and make of him what they want—or perhaps need—ignoring the few but important facts about his life. Jesse is an artistic license in and of himself. As a man he lived one life, as a legend he has lived a thousand.

The legend of Jesse James has adoring homes in print, music, and motion pictures. His legend began to take shape in print several years before his death; he has been the subject of numerous biographies and histories, as well as the legendary romantic of hundreds of dime novels. Folk musicians found him a suitable subject; one ballad in particular has been adopted and altered by many folk musicians. Finally, the motion picture industry provided the most prolific and enduring medium through which the legend of Jesse James could thrive.

The first book to appear concerning the life of Jesse James was John Newman Edwards' *Noted Guerrillas* in 1877. Edwards' book, of course, was a sympathetic portrayal of Jesse's life. Of Jesse and Frank, Edwards said, "No men ever strove harder to put the past behind them . . . They were not permitted so to do, try as they would, and as hard, and as patiently." In 1880 J. A. Dacus wrote the *Life and Adventures of Frank and Jesse James and the Younger Brothers, The Noted Western*

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<sup>18</sup> Settle, *Jesse James Was His Name*, pp. 103, 124-126. There were no more orchestrated attempts to arouse public sympathy for the James boys. Of course, Edwards kept up his usual defenses of Frank and Jesse, but they had become tiresome and now elicited little response. Interest and efforts in capturing outlaws increased

*Outlaws*. The book was a success, as new editions appeared in 1881 and 1882. In 1882 William Buel wrote two books about Jesse: *The Border Outlaws* and *The Border Bandits*. Jesse's popularity in print continued with *The Outlaws of the Border or the Lives of Frank and Jesse James*, an 1882 publication that denied their participation in many of the robberies attributed to them. Similar books followed soon after Jesse's death: *The Life and Career of Frank and Jesse James, Outlaws of the Border, Train and Bank Robbers of the West*, and *The Life, Times and Treacherous Death of Jesse James* were all published in the early -1880s, and all claim to tell "the truth" about Jesse's life.<sup>19</sup>

Publishers of dime novels also found Jesse an alluring subject. Between 1901 and 1903, 277 novels about Jesse James appeared in Frank Tousey's *James Boys Weekly* and Street and Smith's *Jesse James Stories*. In these dime novels Frank began to fade from the legend, and the alliterative quality of Jesse's name emerged. The titles of early dime novels (1897-1899) imply Frank's presence: *The James Boys at Bay*, *The James Boys in Deadwood*, *The James Boys and the Dwarf*, and *The James Boys and the Mad Sheriff*. However, between 1901 and 1904 Street and Smith published 138 issues solely about Jesse: *Jesse James at Coney Island*, *Jesse James Among the Mormons*, *Jesse James in New York*, and *Jesse James at the Stake*. Jesse's omnipresence in dime novels at the turn of the twentieth century is a testament to his malleability as a folk hero and his power to inspire imaginations.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 180-94.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 187-90.

Folk musicians also found a hero in Jesse James. One ballad, in particular, became a favorite of late-nineteenth and early -twentieth folk singers. The ballad is best known for its chorus refrain, “That dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard/Has Laid poor Jesse in his grave.” No printed copies can be dated before 1900, but noted folklore authority Vance Randolph claimed the ballad appeared not long after Jesse’s death. Randolph has found six different versions of the popular tune, many of which have common stanzas. The following is a sampling:

Jesse James was a lad who killed many a man.

He robbed the Glendale train.

He stole from the rich and he gave to the poor,

He’d a hand and a heart and a brain.

Chorus:

Jesse had a wife to mourn for his life

Three children, they were brave,

But that dirty little coward that shot Mister Howard,

Has laid poor Jesse in his grave.

The people held their breath when they heard of Jesse’s death,

And wondered how he ever came to die,

It was one of the gang called little Robert Ford,

That shot Jesse on the sly.

Like many of the histories, biographies, and dime novels, folk music about Jesse James tends to present him as a Robin Hood, a man who only robbed the rich because he wanted to help the poor.<sup>21</sup>

When Jesse James might have begun to wear out his welcome in print and music, motion pictures provided a new and exciting way to revive the legend. It took time, however, to discover the most effective way to present the legend. The first full-length films about Jesse James, *Jesse James Under the Black Flag* and *Jesse James as the Outlaw* were produced in 1921. *Under the Black Flag* focuses on Jesse's service with Quantrill. It depicts a generous judge who forgives Jesse's actions and allows him to spend a peaceful life with the woman he loves. At times the film is shameless in its effort to sanctify Jesse James. In one scene he comes upon the bedside of a sick girl. All the little girl wants is her "dollie." Jesse vows to get the little girl's doll. He risks capture at the hands of Pinkerton detectives as he rides across the countryside to retrieve the doll. Finally, he returns with the doll, and the little girl is quickly nursed back to health. An even more overt attempt to gloss the image of Jesse James occurs in the final scene. As Jesse is shot and falls to floor, his family rushes in to hold him as he gasps his last breath; the inter-title of the silent picture remarks, "This marked the end of America's Robin Hood." *Jesse James as the Outlaw* reveals how Jesse was falsely accused of a bank robbery, and how this accusation forced him into the life of an outlaw. Both pictures failed financially.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 173-74.

It was not until 1939 that a popular and critically acclaimed motion picture about Jesse James appeared. Director Henry King's *Jesse James*, starring the dashing young Tyrone Power, was such a hit with audiences and critics that it spawned a sequel and a flood of Jesse James pictures in the 1940s and 1950s. In the film Jesse's mother is slain by greedy railroad men determined to run tracks through her home. Jesse vows vengeance and takes to robbing trains. It is not until the end of the film that Jesse is finally reunited with his family. He talks of moving west and settling down, only to have his dream cut short by a bullet from Bob Ford's pistol.

The sequel to the 1939 success, *The Return of Frank James* (1940), corresponded with Republic's release of three Jesse James films in four years: *Days of Jesse James* (1939), *Jesse James at Bay* (1941), and *Jesse James, Jr.* (1942). Republic revived its love affair with Jesse James in the late 1940s with a three part series devoted to the James legend: *Jesse James Rides Again* (1947), *Adventures of Frank and Jesse James* (1948), and *The James Brothers of Missouri* (1950). All three attempt to "whitewash" Jesse by presenting him as a victim of circumstances beyond his control. In the first, he is accused of a bank robbery he did not commit; in the second, Jesse and Frank pledge to pay back everyone they have robbed; and in the third, they help a lady save her freight business from scheming businessmen.<sup>22</sup>

The 1950s witnessed several romantic films about Jesse James. In *The Great Missouri Raid* (1951), Union soldiers, attempt to seize the James farm and are attacked by Jesse and Frank. In the raid the provost marshal's brother is killed and

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<sup>22</sup> Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 142-43.

Jesse is blamed. The marshal offers Jesse amnesty, only to double-cross him. Jesse escapes and is forced into the life of an outlaw. Eventually Jesse decides he must settle down and be with his family. Soon after he is gunned down by one of his own men. In *Jesse James' Women* (1954), Jesse plays the romantic lover. As his gang arrives in Mississippi, dreamy-eyed women swoon and clamor over Jesse; two girls are so attracted to the outlaw that they are driven to fisticuffs over his affection. *Jesse James vs. The Daltons* (1954) has a mixed-up plot in which the main character believes he is Jesse's son. In a conniving scheme one of the Daltons arranges to have the boy meet his father, only to have Bob Ford, not Jesse, show up. Ford tells the young man that Jesse is dead and that he is not his son. The two then form an alliance to seek revenge against the dirty, scheming Daltons. These movies of the 1950s — along with the 1966 release *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*—are examples of the James legend being pushed to its outer limits.<sup>23</sup>

One film in the 1950s, however, attempted to wrestle with the legend of Jesse James. *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957) sought to weed out much of the fiction presented in pictures about Jesse James in the Forties and Fifties. Director Nicholas Ray based the film on Nunnally Johnson's 1939 screenplay for *Jesse James*. Ray, however, presents events in Jesse's life and aspects of his character that are not present in the 1939 film. The 1939 film attributed Jesse's life of crime to greedy railroad men wanting to lay tracks through his home; the 1957 film has Jesse driven into outlawry by "Yankees" who threaten and terrorize his family and by an adult-dominated world that continually betrays him. In 1939 Jesse is fun-loving, carefree,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 145-46.

and comical; in 1957 he is complicated, obsessed, regretful, and contemplative. Ray's film also tries to understand the place of legends and myths; that is, he tries to understand why the public needs and latches on to Jesse James. Although based on the same screenplay, the two films can hardly be considered similar in their treatment of Jesse James.

By the 1960s Jesse James had fallen out of favor with the motion picture industry. The Western continued to flourish as an art form in the 1960s, but only one film, *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*, was released about Jesse James, and it was a Science-Fiction film.<sup>24</sup> Westerns in the 1960s took on increasingly complex subjects and even more complex characters. Violence was more gruesome, and the once well-defined lines of morality were blurred. Jesse James' history in motion pictures worked against him. In most of his pictures, he was not a complex subject. With morality lines clearly defined, Jesse was usually on the good side. Many of the films during the 1940s and 1950s presented Jesse as a romantic figure; in the 1960s there was little room for a romantic. Romantics gave way to hardened introverts. It took a complete reworking of the James legend to make him interesting to a 1960s audience.

In the late 1960s director Philip Kaufman overhauled the James legend. Kaufman claimed to have spent his spare time at the University of Chicago studying the exploits of the Jameses and Youngers. Like Henry King and Nicholas Ray before him, he too set out to present the "real" Jesse James. Several years after the release of

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<sup>24</sup> The American Broadcasting Corporation began a weekly television series about Jesse James in 1965, but due to poor ratings, it was cancelled in less than a month.

*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, Kaufman said that the purpose of the film was to show the “sense of Jesse James as a hero who came out of the movies” and to expose the “bogus history we’re generally given in movies.” Kaufman went to extremes to de-mystify the legend of Jesse James. He cast a balding Robert Duvall as Jesse. Duvall portrays Jesse as a “maniacal killer” obsessed with revenging the Yankees long after the Civil War is over. Jesse is skittish. He stutters. He blinks uncontrollably. He preaches and hollers at the sky. He will kill anyone, even a helpless old lady. Meanwhile, his Bible -toting brother Frank feels a need to preach to everyone. The two odd brothers, Frank and Jesse, are de-centered from plot, in favor of Cole Younger, who emerges as the antithesis of the psychotic Jesse and the hero of the film. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* presents a version of Jesse James heretofore unrecognized in motion pictures.<sup>25</sup>

Audiences who saw *Jesse James* in 1939, *The True Story of Jesse James* in 1957, or *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* in 1972 encountered different versions of Jesse James’ life and different versions of American history. Each of the films made some claim to historical accuracy: Henry King consulted Jesse James’ granddaughter; Nicholas Ray staked a claim to the truth in the very title of his film; and Philip Kaufman claimed he was challenging “bogus history.” So how then, did these three films end up telling completely different histories of Jesse James’ life? Only by examining each film on its own terms —the socio-political environment

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<sup>25</sup>Quotes from Don Graham, “*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* and the Cinematic Legend of Jesse James” in the *Journal of Popular Film*, Summer 1977, pp. 77-85. Since *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, only two pictures have been released about Jesse James, *The Long Riders* (United Artists, 1980) and *Frank and Jesse* (Trimark, 1994).

surrounding its production, the state of the motion picture industry at the time, the dominant trends in the genre to which it belongs, and the contributions of those who made the film—and only by considering all of these forces is it possible to determine how and why Jesse James lived three very different lives in three very different movies.

## ***Jesse James (1939)***

*Jesse James* is a romantic picture. Though it makes a minor claim to historical accuracy in the opening credits by acknowledging that “historical data” for the film was compiled by Rosalind Shaefer, a biographer of Jesse, and Jo Frances James, Jesse’s granddaughter, the movie is not concerned with the factual history of Jesse James’ life. The movie runs so far astray from the facts about Jesse’s life that his granddaughter, upon viewing the film, remarked that the only thing factual about the film was that “there was once a man named Jesse James and he did ride a horse.”<sup>26</sup>

The film opens up with railroad men dressed in dark suits riding across the open hills of the Missouri countryside. The men are forcing farmers to sign a contract that gives them one dollar per acre for their land, because the St. Louis Midland railroad is planning to lay tracks across it. The railroad men tell the helpless farmers that if they do not sign the contract, the government will take the land and the farmers will not receive any compensation. The crooked and conniving leader of the railroad men, Mr. Barshee, forces two farmers to sign the contract and is on his way to a third farm, the James farm, when the viewer first sees Jesse James.

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<sup>26</sup> “Jesse James,” *Time*, January 23, 1939, p. 26.

Jesse is working in a field with a scythe when the railroad men pass by, the sun shining majestically over his head. Played by young Tyrone Power, Jesse is tall, lean, and handsome. His skin is golden. His teeth are white. Mr. Barshee stops to ask the young man his name. Jesse replies in a well-spoken and mannerly tone. He offers a half-smile. The railroad men inquire about his mother, and Jesse responds politely that she is up at the house.

Mr. Barshee offers Jesse's mother the same proposition as the previous two farmers, a dollar per acre. She refuses. Mr. Barshee persists. She refuses again. Mr. Barshee gets visibly upset, telling Jesse's mother, "we'll get your land just the same." Frank steps in to tell the man that his mother does not have to sign anything without talking to a lawyer. Mr. Barshee pretends to shake Frank's hand but then tries to punch him. Frank sees what the man is doing and hits him hard across the face. Jesse appears with a pistol and says he will watch the other railroad men if Frank wants to fight the man. Frank beats Mr. Barshee badly and the railroad men are forced to retreat.

Later the railroad men, backed by state authorities, return to the James farm looking for Frank and Jesse. Having been forewarned, Frank and Jesse hide out in a cave in the hills. The railroad men see a light flicker in the house and think that Frank and Jesse are inside. Instead, it is their mother. Mr. Barshee throws a bomb into the house to scare the boys out. It explodes, killing Jesse's mother.

It is the slaying of his mother that sends Jesse on the path to outlawry. Soon after her death, he kills Mr. Barshee in a saloon. Jesse's plan for revenge is grander

than the death of one crooked railroad man, however. He wants to make the railroads pay for his pain, as well as for the suffering they caused the farmers of Missouri. He vows revenge: "I hate the railroads, and what I hate I gotta do something about." This is the version of Jesse James' life and American history movie-goers saw in 1939: the railroads are corrupt and do not care about the common man; the killing of Jesse's mother at the hands of the railroad caused Jesse to become an outlaw.

With his mother gone, Jesse finds another noble woman to comfort him, his wife Zee. Jesse longs to be with Zee. She continually urges him to give up his outlaw life, warning him, "it will get in your blood." Jesse is in too deep, however. Outlawry may not be in his blood, but the railroads and the state are after him. Eventually, Jesse gives up any hope of reuniting with Zee. He and his gang begin a spree of dangerous train and bank robberies, culminating in the famous Northfield raid. The bank men get word of the gang's plan, and the Northfield robbery is botched. Jesse is shot in the chest. He makes it out of Northfield and heads home to Zee. She nurses him back to health, while Jesse meets his five-year-old son for the first time.

Jesse and Zee make plans to leave Missouri and begin a new life. Jesse promises to settle down and become a farmer and a family man. It is not to be, however. Bob Ford arrives at the house and shoots Jesse in the back. Zee rushes to his side, but it is no use, Jesse James is dead.

The film ends with a eulogy given by Rufus Cobb, the sympathetic editor who defends Jesse in the local newspaper. The community is gathered around Jesse's

tombstone, which is tall and elegant, suitable for a president. It is sunny. Birds are singing:

There ain't no question about it. Jesse was an outlaw, a bandit, a criminal. Even those that loved him ain't got no answer to that. But we ain't ashamed of him. I don't know why, but I don't think even America is ashamed of Jesse James. Maybe it was because he was bold and lawless like all of us like to be sometimes. Ma ybe it's because we understand a little that he wasn't altogether to blame for what his times made him . . . All I do know is he was one of the dog-gonedest, gol-dangedest, dad-blamedest buckaroos that ever rode across these United States of America.

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The content and mood of the picture were influenced by the socio-political environment surrounding its production and release. Domestically, the years preceding the production and release of *Jesse James* were some of the most turbulent in America's history. The passage of the National Industry Recovery Act in June of 1933, which included section 7(a), permitting workers to elect their own labor representatives and bargain collectively with corporations, inspired a resurgence of worker organization and protest. In 1934 some 1.5 million workers took part in nearly 1,800 strikes. General strikes occurred in Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Toledo.

Also in 1934, 400,000 textile workers from Maine to Alabama organized what remains the largest strike in a single industry in American history. The state of California experienced the largest agricultural strikes in American history. Historian Michael Denning argues, “1934 stands as one of the lyric years in American history . . . an emblem of insurgency, upheaval, and hope.” Indeed, it was the rare industry that did not incur insurgency and upheaval, and it was the rare worker who was not lifted by a new sense of hope.<sup>27</sup>

In 1935 the Committee for—later, Congress of—Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed with the hopes of gathering all industrial workers under one politically powerful tent. Workers unhappy with their treatment in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as well as workers who were denied access to the AFL—many of whom were minorities and worked in the lowest paying jobs with the poorest working conditions—flocked to the CIO. The CIO united workers from many different industries as well as many different racial and ethnic backgrounds: “It was a mass movement with a message, revivalistic in fervor, militant in mood, joined together by class solidarity.” Formation of the CIO ensured that protests of 1934 would continue. In 1936 the CIO organized successful sit-down strikes for rubber workers in Akron, Ohio. Between December 1936 and February 1937 the CIO organized autoworkers in Flint, Michigan. By the early 1940s the CIO could claim such massive organizations as the United Mine Workers, United Auto Workers, United Steel Workers, and the

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<sup>27</sup> Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: New York Times Books, 1984), pp. 224-228; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), p. xiv

United Electrical Workers. It was the “age of the CIO,” it was the age of the working class.<sup>28</sup>

Agricultural workers also contributed to an activist mentality in the 1930s. In California in 1933, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union was formed to protect the rights of farm laborers. In April of 1933 the CAWIU backed 2,000 pea pickers in Alameda and Santa Clara who struck for higher wages. In June the union organized two major agricultural strikes amongst berry and cherry pickers. In August 1,000 sugar-beet workers struck for higher wages, an eight -hour day, and union recognition. The CAWIU also backed a violent cotton strike in the San Joaquin Valley in October of 1933. The 1930s also saw the rise of the anti -labor Associated Farmers of California, which was financed by banks , railroads, utilities, and oil companies with the intent to quash farm labor protests. The CIO entered the struggle when it formed the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America in 1937. Though the CIO began to distance itself from the struggle in 1939, the formation of the UCAPAWA and the reaction it drew from the Associated Farmers kept attention on the plight of farm laborers when it might have otherwise faded.<sup>29</sup>

Hollywood was not immune to the types of worker organization and protests occurring in urban industries and on farms within its own geographic periphery. In the 1930s the Studio System was at the height of its dominance. Five major studios

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<sup>28</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Cletus Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell Univeristy Press, 1981), pp. 141-285.

ruled Hollywood: Warner Brothers, Fox, Paramount, RKO, and Leow's. The "Big Five" controlled all major aspects of the movie business: production, distribution, and exhibition. They owned and controlled the studios where movies were made; they controlled the rental of films to independent theatres; and they owned the majority of large and lavish theatres in the country. With control of the entire industry in the hands of a few corporate bosses, it is not surprising that workers in all areas of the industrial process began to organize. The Screen Actors' Guild formed in 1933 and was officially recognized by producers in 1937. The Screen Writers' Guild revived itself in 1933. Another union, Screen Playwrights, competed for the loyalty of writers. Also of importance was the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Operators. Other Hollywood Unions in the 1930s included the Unemployed Artists' Group, the Unemployed Writers' Group, the Commercial Artists and Designers Union, and United American Artists. When it comes to the labor movement in the 1930s, Michael Denning emphasizes, "the Hollywood studios were without a doubt the central cultural apparatus on the West Coast." The fact that labor unions helped bring the lawsuit (*United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., et al.*) that eventually brought down the studio system is a testament to their presence and power.<sup>30</sup>

*Jesse James* responded to the rise of organized labor and the activist mentality of the 1930s in a scene in which all the local farmers gather at the James farm. Jesse

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<sup>30</sup> Ethan Mordenn, *The Hollywood Studios: House Style in the Golden Age of Movies* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988), pp. 3-18. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 18, 86-89. *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., et al.* was brought in 1938 but did not reach the Supreme Court until 1948.

calls the meeting after he discovers that the railroads are cheating the farmers out of their land. The farmers pack in a large room in the James house, and Jesse's mother lies ill on a bed, a testament to what ruthless railroad men will do to get their land. Jesse tells the farmers that they all need to chip in some money, whatever they can afford, to pay for a lawyer. He says that the farmers bought their land and grew their own crops, and if they have to give them up, they ought to at least get a fair price for them. The film stops short of making the farmers into radicals who refuse to give up their land no matter the price. Rather than take up arms against the railroad, the farmers are willing to give up their land for a fair price. The scene captures the importance of organized labor in the late -1930s, but it does not go so far as to say that the farmers would be right to protest the sale of the land or, even worse, take up arms over it.

While Jesse's gathering of the local farmers did little to improve their standing with the railroads, worker protests in American cities, though they resulted in official recognition of unions, did little to improve the fledgling economy. Just when it looked like the economy was nursing itself back to health, it collapsed again in August of 1937, the stock market dropping from 190 to 115 over the next two months. In March of 1938 another 4 million Americans were added to the unemployment rolls; the unemployment level was again approaching 20 per cent. By March of 1939, 9.4 million Americans remained unemployed (17.2% of the work force). To many workers the New Deal, with all its unrealized promises, and the corporations, with their exhortations for patience, seemed incapable of providing for

working class Americans. The rise of the CIO, corresponding with the Communist Party's height of popularity in America, and the development of what Michael Denning calls a "cultural apparatus" —that is, the emergence of a mass media entertainment which gave left wing intellectuals and labor unions an avenue for discussion—gave birth to a massive social-democratic movement in the United States. Cries for socialism and intense regulation of the major corporations throughout the late 1930s made such an impact on Americans that a 1942 *Fortune* magazine poll showed the 25 per cent of Americans favored socialism, while another 35 per cent had an open mind about it.<sup>31</sup>

By making the railroads, and at times the state, the chief enemy of Jesse James, the film responded to the anxieties of working class Americans. In the search for Jesse James, the railroads receive assistance from the state, usually in the form of military troops. This gives the impression that the common laborer has to fight a dual war: against both the corporations and the much more powerful state. Backed by the state, the railroads come across as the major cause of grief and hardship in the West. It is the businessmen from the East, mainly those from the St. Louis Midland Railroad who upset the harmony and natural order of small-town life. Their greed brings disorder into what was a pristine community. But again the film stops short. Instead of Jesse fighting a war of principle against the corrupt business practices of the railroads, he fights to avenge the death of his mother. By making the murder of his mother the chief cause of Jesse's life of crime, the film skirted the more serious social

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<sup>31</sup> McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, pp. 298-307; Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 4.

and political issues of the day. As will be shown below, the motion picture industry was not conducive to such controversial subject matter.

It is less a surprise, then, that Jesse James, with his legendary battles against the banks and railroads would emerge as a popular figure in the late 1930s. Americans, still struggling to overcome the hardships of the Depression, were in an unforgiving mood toward banks and corporations. For many, Jesse James was doing on the silver screen what they wish they could have done in real life: revenge the people who caused them so much harm. Just as Jesse was wronged by the railroads on the screen, so too had many Americans experienced hardships at the hands of major corporations. Jesse James was an ideal figure to represent America's frustrations in 1939.

The motion picture industry was vulnerable to the greater socio-political events of the time. Hollywood was able to stave off the devastating effects of the Crash of 1929 for nearly two years—largely because of the introduction of sound—but in 1931 the Depression crept into Hollywood. Most of the major studios lost money in 1931: Warner Brothers lost \$8 million; Fox suffered \$3 million in losses; and RKO incurred a \$5.6 million deficit. Paramount managed to make a profit in 1931, but in 1933 the studio giant fell into bankruptcy. Admission prices were slashed. Audiences dwindled from a high of 80 million per week in 1929 to 60 million in 1932 and 1933. Meanwhile, production costs doubled because of sound. In

the early 1930s Hollywood suffered, like much of the country, through its darkest days.<sup>32</sup>

As economic conditions worsened, film studios were forced to find more shocking and titillating storylines. The early 1930s saw a rash of gangster films. It was the age of *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932). These films were characterized by heightened levels of sex and violence as well as a propensity for social commentary; *Little Caesar*, in particular, wrestles with the role immigrants play in the pursuit of the “American Dream,” insinuating that immigrants are often forced into lives of crime in order to achieve their dreams. The early 1930s was also the age of shocking horror films like *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931). It was the peak of the sexy and seductive Mae West’s career. She teased and dazzled in pictures like *She Done Him Wrong* (1933). It was also the height of the Marx Brothers’ artistic and comic genius. The brothers made such memorable films as *Duck Soup* (1934), a probing satire of American politics and patriotism. Together with the introduction of sound, the once-taboo subjects that Hollywood took on in the early 1930 struck a chord with audiences who enjoyed seeing their Depression - riddled world lampooned on the silver screen.<sup>33</sup>

A number of factors, however, combined to end Hollywood’s experimentation with sex, violence, and self-parody. Dwindling sales receipts along with a number of monumental protests from conservative and religious groups forced Hollywood

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<sup>32</sup> Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), pp. 213-214.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 178-186.

executives to re-think the kind of pictures they were making. At the same time that ticket prices fell and audience attendance plummeted, the Big Five felt pressure from religious groups, most zealously from Catholics. Catholics formed the Legion of Decency, designed to approve or disapprove of content in motion pictures. At the height of its power the Legion of Decency persuaded more than 11 million Church members to boycott offensive pictures. With the industry suffering through brutal economic times, it caved to outside pressures. In 1934 the industry agreed to make the Production Code harsher. All scripts and pictures still had to be reviewed and approved by the Production Code Administration, but now violators of the code were subject to a \$25,000 fine and their pictures barred from all theatres affiliated with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Included in the new code was the amendment, "Evil and good are never to be confused throughout the presentation." The line in the sand was thick and easy to see.<sup>34</sup>

The new code achieved its objectives. Controversial subject material all but vanished in the late 1930s. Robert Sklar, historian of the motion picture industry, argues, "the code cut the movies off from many of the most important moral and social themes of the contemporary world." The result, he says, is a much different portrayal of American life in pictures of the late 1930s: "a glamorous, appealing, mythical world of satisfying values in life and on screen." The second age of motion pictures in the 1930s was one of conservative retrenchment and denial.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Balio, *The American Film Industry*, pp. 220-222; quote from Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 174.

<sup>35</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 174.

The presence of the hardened Production Code is clear in *Jesse James*. Jesse and Zee never engage in anything riskier than an emotionally -detached kiss. In fact, Tyrone Power was recognized in Hollywood for his dispassionate kissing scenes; his ability to kiss a woman without arising sensation made him perfect for the late 1930s. The sexual innuendo so evident in the films of the early 1930s is all but absent in *Jesse James*. Violence is also restrained. One might expect a picture about “America’s greatest outlaw” to be full of violent scenes, but *Jesse James* manages to make potentially violent situations harmless. When Jesse and his gang rob a St. Louis Midland train nobody gets shot, the robbers politely tell the passengers they want money and no jewelry, and then kindly thank the passengers for their money. The movie has only two robbery scenes. The other robberies Jesse embarks on are shown through a series of newspaper clippings, allowing the film to avoid an abundance of violent scenes, and thus censure from the Production Code Administration. The film does get away with one violent scene, the final robbery at Northfield, but even then, it is careful not to show any blood or to focus too long on the men who were shot.

By 1939 Hollywood was thriving again. The Depression stilled weighed heavy on people’s minds and the brutally slow recovery kept many people poor and out of work. Hollywood offered Americans a release in the late 1930s, be it only for two or three hours. The movies of the late 1930s sought “to boost the morale of a confused and anxious people by fostering a spirit of patriotism, unity and commitment to national values.” The “screwball” comedies of the era were a huge hit with audiences. While not taking on the social and political issues of the Marx

Brothers films of the early 1930s, the screwball comedies delivered the same antics and laughs without challenging the status quo. Comedies like *The Awful Truth* and *Nothing Sacred* (1937) made Americans laugh while minimizing criticisms of social and political problems and reinforcing the purity of marriage, class distinctions, and separate spheres. By showing that Jesse's love for Zee is the only thing that can save him from outlawry, *Jesse James* upholds the sanctity of marriage; the stark contrasts the film draws between businessmen, farmers, and Jesse's black servant, Pinky, upholds class distinctions; and its placement of women entirely within the domestic sphere reinforces the sexual stereotypes of the day.<sup>36</sup>

There were also a great many pictures made about the past in the late 1930s, many of which consisted of adaptations of novels. *David Copperfield* and *Anna Karenina* were made in 1935; *Les Miserables* in 1936; *Romeo and Juliet* in 1937, and *Marie Antoinette* in 1938. In 1939 Director John Ford, alone, released three historically based films: *Stagecoach*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, and *Drums Along the Mohawk*. The best picture in 1939, *Gone With the Wind*, was set in the Civil War. Jesse James was not overlooked during Hollywood's captivation with the past. Twentieth Century-Fox released *Jesse James* early in 1939 and Republic released *Days of Jesse James* later in the same year.<sup>37</sup>

The motion picture industry's fascination with the past in the late 1930s was, in large part, an attempt to co-opt the industry's conservative critics. Films about the past seldom addressed controversial social and political issues of the day, like the rise

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 175, 187-190.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 191-194, Mordern, *The Studio System*, p. 282.

of the Communist Party in the mid -1930s. Also, films set in the past were less likely to present the same type of sex and violence characteristic of films in the early 1930s. Focusing on the past often made it possible to ignore the problems of the present. *Jesse James* is not entirely guilty of this. It does take on contemporary social and political issues, like the struggle between labor and big business. The film, however, stops short. Where it could have delved deeper into issues and further illuminated the struggle between labor and big business, it shifts the focus to family, to a son who must avenge the murder of his mother, to a storyline as old as the movies themselves.

For most of the 1930s, the Western genre fell out of favor with audiences and studios. While “B” Westerns continued to be released in high volumes, “A,” or feature, Westerns suffered through difficult times. In 1930 “A” Westerns constituted nearly 3 per cent of all films made, and 21.4 per cent of all Westerns. By 1932 “A” Westerns made up only 0.6 per cent of all films, and 4.7 per cent of all Westerns. At its nadir in 1934, the motion picture industry did not release a single “A” Western. In 1937 the major studios released only three “A” Westerns, in 1938 only four. The popularity of the gangster and comedy films of the early 1930s, and their ability to comment on contemporary social and political issues, made the Western look tired and worn-out. It took until the end of the decade before promoters of the Western were once again able to make their product speak to American audiences.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 255-56. Slotkin is one of the few scholars of the Western that gives adequate attention to the 1930s.

The Western underwent a “renaissance” in 1939. Nine “A” Westerns were released that year, and many of them, like *Jesse James*, *Stagecoach*, and *Dodge City*, did remarkably well at the box office. They did so well that the industry released fourteen “A” Westerns in 1940, 3.5% of all productions, a popularity not realized since the 1920s. Indeed, it was the popularity of the great Westerns of 1939 that inaugurated a thirty-year reign in which the Western was the dominant form of production in the film industry.<sup>39</sup>

How did the Western make such a strong comeback in the late 1930s? Part of the answer lies in the talent of directors like John Ford and Henry King who were able to make the Western, at the same time, action-packed and aesthetically pleasing. They went to great lengths to capture the “spirit of the West:” Ford filming *Stagecoach* on location in Monument Valley and King directing most of *Jesse James* in the rolling countryside of Missouri. In addition to the talents of such directors, the invention of Technicolor also helped breathe new life into the Western. Yet another reason for the Western’s success in the late 1930s was social and political change. Americans still suffered from the effects of the Depression: low wages and high unemployment. The New Deal tried to re-order much of American society. New threats arose to challenge the status quo: the Communist Party internally, fascism externally. Richard Slotkin sums up the moment:

This was the ideological crisis of the late New Deal: How far  
did Americans want reforms to go? What was our proper role

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 278. The lone exception to the Western’s reign in Hollywood was the war years, 1941-1945.

among the world powers? To resolve the crisis, writers, historians, scenarists, and politicians of varying political and social affiliations looked to American history and mythology for precedent and direction.<sup>40</sup>

Westerns, with their tales of conquest and civilization on the frontier, were an obvious place to turn in order to restore Americans' faith in themselves and their country.

Slotkin identifies three sub-genres of the Western emerging in 1939. The first is the "classical" or "neo-classical" Western. These films adopt old styles and storylines and often refrained from openly commenting on technological progress and modernization. They differ from Westerns of the Silent Era in that they did not readily come down on the side of good or bad; instead, these films, often in a complex manner, confuse roles: the respectable banker who turns out to be a crook, the alcoholic doctor, or "the whore with the heart of gold." Most representative of the classical Western—and considered by many to be the best Western ever made—is *Stagecoach*. The second sub-genre is the "progressive" Western. It celebrates civilized society, rapid transportation, higher rates of production, and technological innovation. *Dodge City* (1939), which links the coming of the railroad to modernized, and thus civilized, society, is an example of a progressive Western. The third and final sub-genre Slotkin identifies is the "outlaw Western." The outlaw Western directly confronts the conclusions of the progressive Western. It attempts to explore

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 278-79.

the dark side of progress, to show how modernization can lead to injustice, oppression, and eventually crime. These films manage to confront notions of progress without attacking American values and patriotism. *Jesse James* is an outlaw Western.

Outlaw Westerns drew heavily on the success of the gangster films of the early 1930s. They lacked the violence and sexual innuendo but have similar themes and emphases:

Both types of film focus on the career of a social outlaw in a narrative that is generally terse, “gritty” in style, and “realistic” in its pretensions. They take a hard-boiled view of the main character and motives in general, and of politicians in particular, and they develop female figures . . . as the symbols of moral force that point the hero toward redemption or damnation.<sup>41</sup>

All of these elements are present in *Jesse James*. Jesse is definitely portrayed as a social outlaw; that is, his own evilness did not drive him to outlawry but rather societal circumstances, and once an outlaw, he committed his train and bank robberies under the notion that he was helping those who could not help themselves; he is a Robin Hood of sorts. Jesse’s character lacks the “gritty” style of the gangster films heroes, but Frank, played by Henry Fonda, brings a raw, straight-shooting, tobacco-chewing presence to the picture. The film certainly questions the motives of politicians when it aligns the state with the railroads and against the farmers. Lastly,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 286-312, 260.

Jesse's wife, Zee, serves as the moral force in the picture. It is she who continually tells Jesse that what he is doing is wrong, and it is only she who can force Jesse to settle down and be with his family. In summary, the major themes of the gangster pictures of the early 1930s translate to this outlaw Western of the late 1930s.

Outlaw Westerns were also influenced by the "B" Westerns of the late 1930s. Many of the "B" Westerns weaved contemporary social issues into a traditional Western plot, often times blurring the line between past and present. The Mesquiteers movies made after John Wayne entered the series in 1938 dealt with a number of issues concerning the New Deal and fascism. Among the issues confronted in the Mesquiteers films are dam-building projects, conservation, abuse of federal work relief, and tyranny by a gang of black-shirted men. Slotkin argues, "By obscuring the distinction between then and now, the 'B' Western effectively dissolved the implicit limitations that historical location placed on radical or violent solutions to the problems of social injustice, economic oppression, or political privilege." The "B" Western proved that the Western itself was not dead as an art form, that it could adapt to change and meet the needs of contemporary American society.<sup>42</sup>

*Jesse James* offers a political commentary like the "B" Westerns, but only in a half-hearted manner. The film addresses issues of labor unions and farm worker organizations; it speaks to the close relationship between big business and the state; and it questions the effects of modernization on small-town life. These remain

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 274-277.

secondary issues, however. The forces that drive the plot are traditional: the death of a young man's mother, and his love for his wife and child.

These changes in the socio-political environment, the Hollywood industry, and the Western genre are largely responsible for the version of Jesse James' life and American history that movie-goers saw in 1939. Yet there is another important aspect. Those who made the movie—specifically, the writer and director—also played a major role in determining how and why Jesse James was used in 1939.

*Jesse James* was Nunnally Johnson's baby. Johnson, the eventual screenwriter and associate producer for the picture, pitched the idea to Darryl Zanuck, president of Twentieth Century Fox. Zanuck responded coldly. He knew that Westerns had fallen out of favor with audiences. Reluctantly, he agreed to present the prospect of a Jesse James picture to his executives in New York. The executives told Zanuck the movie would only make money in "Missouri, Kansas, and parts of southern Illinois." Zanuck did not fully agree to make the picture, but he did hire some assistants to work with Johnson on a treatment of the script. In 1936 Johnson began researching Jesse James. He solicited the help of Rosalind Shaeffer, who was writing a biography of Jesse at the time, and Jesse's granddaughter, Jo Frances James. Both women were paid for their research and, though little of it was used in the picture, both received screen credit for their help.

By early 1938 Johnson completed his script. He took it to the only man he wanted to direct it, Henry King. King loved the script and he too urged Zanuck to make the picture. Zanuck greatly admired Johnson's writing ability and King was one of his

favorite directors because he let Zanuck hang around the set and make suggestions; he found their exhortations irresistible and agreed to make the picture.<sup>43</sup>

Nunnally Johnson's fondness for Jesse James originated in his childhood. When he was still a boy in Georgia, Johnson and his friends made repeated trips to the local playhouse to see the Jewel Kelly Stock Company perform an old melodrama, *The James Boys in Missouri*. The plot of the production emphasized the daring and chivalric deeds of the James boys and the deceitfulness of Bob Ford. Johnson recalled being very fond of the play, so much so that he adapted its ending — with Jesse straightening a picture on the wall as he is shot in the back — to his own screenplay.

Much of Johnson's worldview is evident in the final script. Johnson was born and raised in small -town Columbus, Georgia. His family was middle -class: his father worked for the railroad, his mother was a member of the Board of Education. Johnson said of his childhood that it was "strictly Norman Rockwell, which is why Norman Rockwell is my favorite painter." Though Johnson later moved to New York and Hollywood, his biographer insists: "His values remained those of his parents. He still believed in marriage, the family, and the home. He retained the qualities of kindness, loyalty, and good manners, and, in his personality, he was very much the child of his parents." Johnson cherished "small -town" values and he worked hard to integrate them into pictures like *Mama Loves Papa* (1933), the *Country Doctor* (1936), *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), and *Jesse James*.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tom Stempel, *Screenwriter: The Life and Times of Nunnally Johnson* (San Diego: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1980), pp. 70-72.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-77.

The character of Jesse James certainly cherishes marriage, family, and the home. The opening scene, in which Frank and Jesse come to the defense of their mother as the railroad men try to swindle her out of her farm, makes it clear that a crime against one's mother is not something the boys can overlook. Eventually, Jesse is driven into outlawry because he feels he must defend his family's honor and avenge the murder of his mother. Jesse also values marriage and the home. Before turning himself in, Jesse asks Zee to marry him. "Will you wait for me Zee?" he asks in melodramatic fashion. Later in the picture, as Jesse falls deeper and deeper into the life of an outlaw, he longs to be with Zee and their newborn child. His regrets over not being with his wife and child eventually drive him mad. After he returns home at the end of the picture he swears to Zee that his outlaw days are over; the family plans to move to California where they will find a home and begin a new life.

Jesse's character also exhibits the kindness and good manners Johnson admired. In one scene in particular, Johnson goes out of his way to make Jesse a kind-hearted figure. The railroad men make a deal with Jesse that if he gives himself up he will serve no more than five years in prison. Jesse, at the request of Zee, turns himself in. The president of the railroad reneges on the deal and brings in his own judge to try and hang Jesse. Frank gets word of the crooked deal and busts Jesse out of jail. As Frank and Jesse are leaving the jail, the railroad man is lying on the floor. Jesse approaches him, whereupon the squeamish little man begs for his life. Jesse crumbles up the written agreement and stuffs it in the man's mouth. It is certainly a cruel and vengeful act on Jesse's part, as he forces the man to chew on the paper at gunpoint. But as he and Frank prepare to leave the jail, Jesse orders one of the prison guards to

supply the man with water! The order is not delivered in the sort of dry, mocking tone that might be expected, rather it is carried out in a serious manner. Jesse wants the man to have some water, because he feels guilty about making the man chew paper. It is an awkward line, one designed to soften Jesse's image.

*Jesse James* helped Nunnally Johnson recapture some of the most cherished moments and values of his youth. Johnson's biographer offers additional insight into Johnson's captivation with the legendary outlaw:

Johnson's script is a glamorization of Jesse James, but it comes out of Johnson's own feeling for the material . . . Johnson's feelings about Jesse coincided with the feelings of the audiences of the time. They had seen and accepted the glamorization of outlaws and gangsters, not only in films, but in real life . . . Johnson's sense of the appeal of the outlaws is what underlies his vision of Jesse, and he understood that appeal because that was what had drawn him to the stage melodrama.<sup>45</sup>

It appears, then, to be Johnson's fondness for his own past along with his understanding of popular audiences in the late 1930s that helped him create his version of Jesse James.

Henry King was the proper selection to direct Johnson's screenplay. King's own experience and values meshed well with Johnson's. King too was from a small southern town, Elliston, Virginia. His family attended the Methodist church. His father was a farmer, his mother a housewife who "set a good table." Young Henry

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

King worked on the railroads (his experience must not have been pleasant given his portrayal of the railroads in his picture) before acting in traveling productions and finally landing a job in Hollywood as a director.

Despite his travels and his life in Hollywood, King, like Johnson, is noted for retaining the values of his small -town upbringing. Gregory Peck, who worked with King in such pictures as *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949) and *The Gunfighter* (1950), said of King that he is “very American in character, old -fashioned in his ideals and in his code.” His pictures reflect “honor” and “integrity.” King never saw himself as an artist, only a good storyteller. He preferred melodrama and romantic love stories to in-depth character exploration and ambiguous plot lines.<sup>46</sup>

Walter Coppedge, King’s biographer, identified similar themes in all of King’s pictures, themes that hold to his “old -fashioned” values:

- 1) “A person seems better equipped to face life if he lives in the country or a small-town.”
- 2) “Separation from significant social bonds is dangerous and destructive . . . isolation is often catastrophic”
- 3) “Separation from the family . . . frequently constitutes the *peripeteia* in a King picture.
- 4) “The mother is central figure and often the protagonist”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Walter Coppedge, *Henry King’s America* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1986), pp. ix-xv, 23-36.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Coppedge argues that these motifs are inherent in any number of King's pictures from his silent films of the 1920s to his direction of *The Gunfighter* in 1950. *Jesse James* is no exception to Coppedge's rule.

Jesse is certainly better equipped to face life because he lives in a small town. His character--who is handsome, easy-going, and loyal to his family—exists in sharp contrast to the rather greasy, money-hungry, deceitful railroad barons from the city. King demonstrates the small -town's distrust of the city men and the importance of community loyalty by allying nearly every small -town character with Jesse: local farmers, the newspaper editor, the doctor, even the jailer and the marshall are sympathetic to Jesse's actions.

King also makes it clear that separation from significant social bonds is unhealthy. After Jesse leaves his family for the last time and begins a spree of train and bank robberies, the mood of the picture changes. Jesse's character becomes paranoid, suspicious of his own kind even, local farmers. He lashes out at his gang members and his brother. He plans the Northfield raid, which many in his gang argue is suicide. He decides that he will never go back to his wife and that his boy should not know anything about him. Jesse's life is no longer about avenging his mother's death or sabotaging the railroad; rather he becomes a slave to outlawry, locked in a lifestyle he can no longer handle. The Marshall puts it aptly when he tells Zee that he liked the old Jesse but despised what he had become: "Jesse's not a knight anymore, he's an animal." Separation from social bonds turned Jesse into a savage.

Separation from his family, of course, is at the heart of Jesse's savageness. Zee is not around with her sagely advice and calming words. Jesse is in shambles

without her. He regrets not seeing the birth of his young son. His love for his son is evident when he asks Pinky, his black servant, all about the boy: “What does he look like Pinky?” “What color are his eyes?” Jesse’s pain becomes apparent soon after he realizes that he has become too much of a barbarian to meet his own son. Jesse thinks he would only do Zee and his son harm by returning home. Frank too becomes estranged from his brother, finally warning Jesse that he is losing control of himself: “either you’re crazy or you’re a skunk,” Frank tells him. The two brothers almost come to blows before Jesse gives in and agrees with Frank that he must settle down. Without the love of his family, Jesse loses control of his life. It is only in the brief scenes when Jesse is reunited with Zee, and at the end of the picture when he meets his young son, that Jesse appears truly happy and willing to lead a normal life.

Finally, the mother is a central figure in King’s direction. King demonstrates her importance in the opening scene. The character of the mother is clearly an upholder of virtue, as she is the only one of three farm owners in the opening scene who does not sign off on her land; it is clear to her that what the railroad men are doing is wrong and she stands up to them. She pays the ultimate price for her virtue when she is killed. The brutal slaying of Jesse’s mother —and King emphasizes the brutality in a shot where the mother’s battered and bleeding body is laid out on a blanket in the yard --the murder of this angelic figure is the basis for the rest of the movie.

Johnson’s script and its harmony with several of the major themes of King’s work results in a sympathetic portrayal of Jesse James that was more concerned with small-town values than portraying the actual history of Jesse James’ life:

Jesse James is thus not a film to deal with historical verisimilitude, nor could the details of killing, robbing, and terrorizing in themselves enlist sympathy. The legacy of the legend —what people wanted to believe and what they selectively remembered —would be the stuff on which Johnson and King fashioned their dream of a rebel whose defiance defines the law, of an American who springs from the people and is more sinned against than sinning, of a “buckaroo” whose wide country offers him the mobility which is the essential character of freedom, of an individual who is propelled in crime by the very American ethos of success.<sup>48</sup>

Both Johnson and King found the legend, and the elements they could add to it, more alluring than the factual history of Jesse James’ life.

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*Jesse James* was a rousing success at the box office and with critics. Headlines in *Variety* included: “Jesse’ Sock \$61,000 2d Week, Top B’Way,” “James’ Haul in L.A. Big \$38,000,” and “James’ Shoots to Wham \$43,000 in Snowbound Chicago.” *The New York Times* called it “the best screen entertainment of the year.” *Commonweal* said it was “outstanding,” with a “lively screenplay” and “smooth direction.” *Life* remarked that the film “makes good melodrama,” while *Newsweek* conceded that it is “fanciful as biography, but immensely effective as melodrama.” As

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

both entertainment and a business venture, *Jesse James* triumphed, but as a treatment of a historical figure the film distorts many of the realities of Jesse James' life.<sup>49</sup>

At least one critic understood the film's mishandling of history. John Mosher of *The New Yorker* commented that the picture was "a rather dreamy sketch of outlawry and frontier customs," and he sarcastically added that it was "a nice and courteous study of such crude folks [the James brothers]." It "irked" Mosher that the film contained only two robbery scenes; this, he says, is not at all emblematic of Jesse's life. He wanted to see more of what made Jesse famous—robberies and killing—and less of the Hollywood love story between Jesse and Zee. The film is careless about the facts of Jesse's life. Perhaps this would not be so unsettling had the film not made surface claims to historical accuracy by filming on location in Missouri and by consulting and giving screen credit to Jesse's biographer and granddaughter.<sup>50</sup>

In the end, *Jesse James* is less reflective of the legendary outlaw's life and more representative of the social and political issues of the day, the state of the motion picture industry in 1939, the Western genre, and the worldviews of Nunnally Johnson and Henry King.

By making a major corporation, the St Louis-Midland Railroad, the chief cause of Jesse's outlawry—a claim unsubstantiated by historical facts—the film represents a social democratic mindset that permeated much of American life in the 1930s; both urban industrial workers and farm laborers organized on unprecedented

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<sup>49</sup> "Pictures," *Variety* 25 January 1939, pp. 7-12; "Pictures," *Variety* 1 February 1939, p. 7; B.R.C., "Jesse James with Tyrone Power in Feature Role," *New York Times* 14 January 1939, p. 13; Philip Hartung, "Freshman Civics and History," *Commonweal* 27 January 1939, p. 386; "Zanuck Makes Hero out of U.S.'s Greatest Outlaw," *Life* 30 January 1939, pp. 40-43; "Terrible Tempered Tyrone," *Newsweek* 23 January 1939, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> John Mosher, "Outlaws and Low People," *The New Yorker*, 21 January 1939, p. 59.

levels and placed much of the blame for their hardships on the major corporations. Jesse's battle against the railroad in the 1870s symbolized the struggle many Americans undertook against big business in the 1930s.

Developments within the motion picture industry, mainly a revised and stricter Production Code and a fascination with films that gilded the American past, are also reflected in the film. Violence is minimized by using newspaper clippings, instead of robbery and shoot-out scenes, to follow Jesse's path of outlawry. Sex is non-existent: Jesse and Zee never engage in more than a dispassionate kiss. Jesse is portrayed as a handsome, charming, Robin Hood-like hero, a romantic nugget of the American past.

Elements of the Western genre are also present in *Jesse James*. The "A" Western underwent a reinvention in the late 1930s, splicing into three major sub-genres—Neo-classical, Progressive, and Outlaw—and adapting to contemporary audiences; the "B" Westerns of the day proved the Western was a valid artform through which to address social and political issues. An Outlaw Western that addressed contemporary social and political issues, *Jesse James* was very much a part of this period of transition for the Western.

Lastly, the film reflects the worldviews of its writer and director. Screenwriter Nunnally Johnson's fondness for what he perceived to be the pristine values of small-town America are central to the picture. Johnson's Jesse James is one who cherishes marriage, family, and the home, whose only salvation is to be found in a simple life on the farm. Director Henry King's belief in the devastating effects of social isolation resonate when Jesse becomes paranoid and disillusioned after separation from his

family. King also makes the mother the redemptive character in the film, a common element in many of his pictures.

These four forces—socio-politics, industry, genre, and contributions of filmmakers—are undoubtedly present in most motion pictures. Yet they take on added significance when a film is based on a historical figure or event. Millions of Americans saw *Jesse James* in 1939, and if that was their primary source of information about the outlaw—if they did not read books or historical accounts about Jesse James—then they left the theatre with the impression that he was a romantic hero driven to a life of crime by greedy capitalists. If those who saw the picture in 1939 were around long enough to see *The True Story of Jesse James* in 1957 they experienced a much different version of the outlaw's life. Eighteen years later the socio-political environment was dramatically changed, the motion picture industry was substantially different, the Western was exploring new concepts, and a new writer and director brought unique contributions to the screen. Eighteen years later Jesse James changed. History changed.

## ***The True Story of Jesse James (1957)***

*The True Story of Jesse James* is based on Nunnally Johnson's 1939 screenplay, but it is a much different film. The cause of Jesse's outlawry shifts from the railroads to the Civil War. The kind-hearted but regretful Jesse James who graced the screen in 1939 becomes a violent and rebellious youth trapped inside his own vanity in 1957. His appearance and his mannerisms have a rougher edge. The soft, and somewhat comic, robbery scenes in the 1939 film are now bloody and ruthless. The kissing scenes are more passionate. The 1939 picture is, in large part, a love story, a tale of an outlaw separated from the woman and son he loves. While the 1957 film includes the love story, it is de-centered from the plot in favor of a psychoanalysis of Jesse, a more historically accurate portrayal of his life (hence the title), and an exploration of the legend that took shape in his own time. What was a romantic picture in 1939 becomes a psychological picture in 1957.

The film opens with a loud and violent gunfight outside the First National Bank in Northfield, Minnesota. Seconds into the scene Jesse bursts out of the bank doors, scowl on his face, firing a pistol—a stark contrast to his initial appearance in 1939. The James Gang's attempt to rob the Northfield bank has gone awry. Jesse and his men try to maneuver their way out of town under heavy fire from townsmen. One of the robbers is shot off his horse. He lies face down in the mud. The townsmen lift the

man up to discover his shirt is covered in blood and toss him back into the mud. A chase ensues in which a local posse dynamites a cave, thinking Jesse is inside. The posse then tracks down and shoots three men they suspect are the Younger brothers. It is a violent opening.

Soon after the Northfield debacle, the film finds Jesse hiding out with his brother Frank and another member of the gang in the Minnesota hills. From here, the film takes the viewer through a series of lengthy flashbacks leading up to the Northfield raid; these flashbacks constitute the majority of the film. The scene shifts to Jesse's mother who is ill and apparently on her deathbed. She recounts to her husband and Jesse's wife Zee how Jesse was "driven to it," forced into outlawry by the "Yankees." As she begins the story colored clouds and harp music transport the viewer back to Jesse's days as a teenager on his mother's farm. Union soldiers have come to look for Frank, claiming that "any man who fights for the South is a traitor." Jesse's mother refuses to tell the men Frank's location. Meanwhile, other soldiers have tracked down Jesse. He too refuses to tell the men where Frank is. A neighbor who has agreed to help the soldiers find Frank then takes out a belt and begins to whip young Jesse, telling him, "I'll beat it out of you if it takes all night." Finally, a farmhand steps in to stop the flogging. The soldiers, realizing they will not get any helpful information, leave Jesse, bare-backed and bloodied, lying in the dirt. Jesse vows revenge on the neighbor. After the soldiers leave, Jesse rushes to his horse in the stable. As he is leaving his mom asks, "Jesse, baby, where are you going?" Jesse replies that he is going to join Frank: "If I'm old enough to be whipped, I'm old enough to fight

back.” Thus Jesse, betrayed by his own neighbor, leaves to help Quantrill’s guerillas fight the Yankees.

The viewer is brought back to the ill mother’s bedside for the next flashback, which finds Jesse and Zee at their wedding. It is a happy occasion and Jesse and Zee plan to live a peaceful life. But on the night of his wedding, Northern sympathizers attack the James home. They throw rocks and fire bullets into the home and set much of the family farm ablaze. They also hang the farmhand who was so loyal to Jesse when the Union soldiers flogged him. Jesse, Frank, and their friends gather to decide how they will avenge this attack. Jesse suggests that the best way to get back at the Yankees is to rob them. “The war has sapped us bone dry,” he says. He points out that every bank in Missouri is owned by a Yankee. He suggests robbing just one or two banks so that the men “can get their homes and farms whipped into shape” and, at the same time, payback the Yankees. Somewhat reluctantly, the men agree. So begins the notorious career of America’s legendary outlaw.

The next flashback carries the viewer to a train robbery, Jesse is already well into his career as an outlaw. Much of the footage for the train robbery scene was adapted from a similar scene in the 1939 film. The robbery transpires quite differently, however. Whereas in the 1939 film Jesse and his gang crack jokes and thank the passengers for their contributions, there is no polite or good-humored element to the robbery scene in 1957. Jesse and his men bust open a bank safe and methodically package the money into white sacks, as loud shots fire repeatedly in the background. They shoot out the lights and ride off into the darkness. Shortly thereafter, as Jesse

and Frank are headed to their mother's farm, they see from a hilltop that the farm is under siege. Before the brothers can get to the house, a bomb explodes, killing Jesse's step-brother, Archie, and maiming his mother's hand. Jesse tracks down the neighbor who earlier gave him up to Union soldiers, and who he suspects helped organize the bombing. As the man begs for his life, Jesse cold-bloodedly guns him down. Frank claims this murder kept the brothers "on the same dirty road, the road that finally led us to Northfield, and disaster." The plot then brings the viewer back to the Northfield scene that began the film.

After battling through a more detailed account of the Northfield raid than was presented at the start of the film, Jesse, wounded and weary, makes his way back to Zee. There he repents. He tells Frank that he was right to scold him for his vanity and selfishness and that his outlaw days are over: "Right now, I just want to live in peace somewhere." He and Zee agree to get a farm in Nebraska. Their plans are spoiled, however, when Bob Ford pays a visit and puts a bullet in Jesse's back as he is straightening a picture on the wall. Ford escapes into the street and begins yelling to the town, "I just killed Jesse James, me, Robert Ford!" The townspeople pack into the house to get a glimpse of the fallen outlaw. The film fades out with a guitar player in the street singing the famous folk ballad about Jesse James:

Jesse James was a man

Who lived outside the law,

And no one knew his face.

He was killed one day  
In the county of Clay,  
And he came from a solitary race.

Jesse came to the end  
With his back turned to a friend,  
A friend he thought was brave.

And the dirty little coward  
Who shot Mr. Howard  
Has laid poor Jesse in his grave.

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Like the two films about Jesse James during the same period, America changed dramatically between 1939 and 1957. More than a decade of economic depression, nearly five years of a brutal world war, the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, and a revived and healthy economy—all of these factors combined to push Americans out of the public sphere and into the comfort and privacy of their homes. In many ways the mid-1950s were the antithesis of the late 1930s. The years immediately following World War II saw a rash of worker strikes, but by the late 1940s the mood of the country turned a new corner. For everyday Americans, the

early to mid-1950s were some of the most apolitical years America ever experienced. Americans locked themselves away in a world in which family and domestic comfort, not politics and foreign policy, were their primary concerns.

Perhaps the most telling sign of America's transformation between 1939 and 1957 was the dissipation of the labor movement in the 1950s. Passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 indicated a shift in the relationship between labor unions and the state, namely that the state would no longer tolerate the types of radical protests that characterized much of American industry in the 1930s, as well as the years immediately following the war. The 1947 act included anti-Communist affidavits, prohibition against secondary boycotts, a ban on foreman unionism, and a section (14b) allowing states to prohibit union shops. The rise to prominence in the late 1940s of the conservative House [to Investigate] Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) worked together with Taft-Hartley to handcuff the labor movement. HUAC used "Red-baiting" techniques to eliminate the threat posed by radical leaders of the labor movement. The committee served as a political tool that disposed of not just labor radicals but of any activists--especially those in Hollywood--who challenged the status quo on foreign policy and race relations. Organized labor, with its consistent challenges to the status quo, found its voice softening, almost to a whisper, in the 1950s.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, "The Eclipse of Social Democracy" in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle's *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 122-152.

The backlash against the American left combined with the fear and paranoia raised by the threat of nuclear war spurred the rise of McCarthyism. Senator Joseph McCarthy struck a chord with many Americans when he claimed that not only were Communists taking over Hollywood but they were infiltrating the United States government as well. McCarthy lit a fire under HUAC and sparked a Communist witch-hunt that dominated domestic politics. For the period 1947 -1956, historian David Caute estimates that civil service positions saw some 2,700 dismissals and 12,000 resignations related to the Communist witch -hunt. Though McCarthy's political spotlight faded in 1954, his demagoguery and his constant warnings of the evils of Communism were well -rooted in the American mind . His popular reception with many Americans inspired others to carry out his witch -hunt; as Ellen Schrecker writes, "there was not one, but many, McCarthyisms." The many McCarthyisms resonated well into the 1960s. Thus even with McCarthy exposed as a false prophet by 1954, the mid- and late 1950s remained a dangerous time to be a critic of the status quo in America.<sup>52</sup>

Hollywood was a prime target for "Red baiters." Perhaps the most dramatic and often cited event in the motion picture industry is the Hollywood Red Scare, which gathered full momentum in 1947 and carried forcefully through 1954. J. Parnell Thomas, head of HUAC in 1947, intended to prove that card -carrying members of the Communist party dominated the Screen Writers Guild. Hearings began on October 20, 1947 and lasted two weeks. The first part of the hearings was

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<sup>52</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: St. Martins Press, 1994); William L. O'Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960* (New York: The Free Press, 1986, p. 162.

devoted to taking testimonies from friendly witnesses, most of whom belonged to the right-wing organization, the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, and most of whom did not hesitate to “name names.” During the second part of the hearings, however, the committee ran up against a group of ten unfriendly witnesses. The “Hollywood Ten,” as they came to be known, refused to answer the committee’s questions, invoking their First Amendment rights. The men were cited for contempt of Congress and subsequently sent to federal prison. The situation was enough to panic Hollywood executives, who publicly denounced the Hollywood Ten and agreed to cooperate with HUAC. In 1951 HUAC began another round of hearings concerning Communists in Hollywood. These hearings lasted sporadically until 1954; ninety industry figures were called to testify. As a result of the hearings, the studios blacklisted 324 people.<sup>53</sup> Whereas Hollywood films in the 1930s, both overtly and subtly, criticized political and social policies, filmmakers in the 1950s found it increasingly dangerous to critique the status quo in America.

With the decline of the labor movement, the assault on the American left, and the Red Scare’s attack on Hollywood it is not surprising that *The True Story of Jesse James* shifts blame for Jesse’s outlawry from the railroads and greedy capitalist barons to the Civil War and weaknesses in Jesse’s psychological make-up. At a time when corporate America had, by and large, re-established friendly relations with the state, it was dangerous to criticize that relationship. State actions against the Hollywood Ten frightened most filmmakers away from serious criticisms of the corporate system and the state’s backing of that system. Though *The True Story of*

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<sup>53</sup> Balio, *The American Film Industry*, pp. 326-328.

*Jesse James* was made several years past the height of McCarthyism, reverberations of the Red Scare could still be felt, and the film minimizes possible confrontations with Red baiters and defenders of the corporate system. Furthermore, shifting blame from the railroads to the Civil War was a natural and easy transition. With World War II, Korea, and the developing Cold War fresh in American minds, the years leading up to 1957 were part of a more war-conscious era than those leading to 1939, which found America twenty years outside of its involvement in World War I and two years shy of its entry into World War II. In 1957 Americans could readily understand the brutal effects of War, but many had tired of the social activism of the 1930s and were co-opted by the prosperity of the 1950s. Thus placing blame for Jesse's outlawry on the Civil War, and not a major corporation such as the railroads, was a comfortable fit in 1957.

While it reflects some of the chief political issues of the time, *The True Story of Jesse James* also responds to a major social issue in the early and mid -1950s. By the mid-1950s there was fear that a whole generation of youth was rebelling against the family values of their parents. Rock n' Roll music, frenzied new dances, "hot rod" cars, gang violence, and suspicion that kids were having sex at an earlier age inspired a panic of sorts. In 1954 the *New York Times* printed fifty articles concerning juvenile delinquency; Senate hearings in the mid -1950s debated the relationship between the mass media and the rise in juvenile delinquency; in 1955 nearly 200 bills concerning delinquency were pending in Congress; local jurisdictions took the liberty of censoring the cultural activities of teenagers; and crusaders like psychiatrist Fredric

Wertham persuaded the American public that comic books and films were leading kids astray. Many scholars question this perceived rise in juvenile delinquency on the grounds that those organizations compiling evidence on teenage crime, like the FBI, deliberately exaggerated data to incite a conservative backlash. They also point to demographic changes, specifically a sharp population increase as a result of the baby boom as contributing to the perception that juvenile delinquency was an increasing problem. The statistics, however, were difficult to ignore. For example, the number of youths age 16 to 20 arrested in New York City rose from 10,736 in 1942 to 31,581 in 1950, and up to 81,423 in 1959 (this last number is somewhat skewed given that it includes traffic violations and misdemeanors).<sup>54</sup>

Juvenile delinquency was a popular subject for films in the 1950s. Hollywood executives recognized that teenagers were becoming a larger percentage of their audience, as demonstrated by the sharp increase in drive -in theatres at a time when the rest of the industry steadily declined. While over 4,000 conventional theatres closed their doors between 1946 and 1956, the number of drive-in theatres, popular hang-outs for teenagers, rose to 5,000 in 1956. Popular films like *The Wild One* (1953), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1956), and *Children of the Dark* (1956) responded both to an expanding teenage audience and perceived fears that juvenile delinquency was out of control in America. Many such films tell the stories of distraught youths driven to crime by overbearing parents and unforgiving social environments, and in the case of *Rebel Without a Cause*, by the

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<sup>54</sup> James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 3-23, 63-78.

hollow, even hypocritical, values of middle class America. Filmmakers claimed to be doing the country a favor by exposing the problem of juvenile delinquency; others saw it as the exploitation of a serious issue and claimed that such movies only made the problem worse by inspiring “copycats.” James Gilbert, who studied juvenile delinquency in the 1950s, writes: “The movie industry tried to have it both ways: it claimed to be helping in the national fight against delinquency while it exploited public interest in, and even fear of, juvenile culture.”<sup>55</sup>

It is less surprising, then, that *The True Story of Jesse James* focuses much of its attention on Jesse’s youth. In many ways, it is a classic juvenile delinquency film. Director Nicholas Ray cast young Robert Wagner as Jesse. For the part, Wagner grew a thin moustache and long sideburns, popular statements of rebellion for teenagers in the 1950s. And though Jesse still wore traditional Western clothes, designers modernized the wardrobe, so that in some scenes it is difficult to distinguish past from the present.

More than simple appearance makes this a juvenile delinquency film. Young Jesse wants to live a “normal” life like most other teenagers but is repeatedly edged into outlawry by the actions of uncaring adults. The viewer gets a good indication of young Jesse’s disdain and distrust for adult values when he tells Zee, “I don’t care much for the way grown ups think.” Most of the adult figures in the film --outside of those in Jesse’s immediate family --are portrayed as selfish, materialistic, and unsympathetic to the troubles of youth. For example, when young Jesse is wounded

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<sup>55</sup> Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, pp. 162-195, quote p. 163.

while fighting with Quantrill and needs a place to recuperate, he goes to his cousin's house. The adult caretaker of the house refuses to take Jesse in. He bitterly remarks, "I don't care how bad he is wounded, he can't stay here. Every moocher in the Confederacy comes knockin' at this door." Reluctantly, he gives in to the pleas of his wife and Jesse's cousin Zee and lets Jesse stay, but he forces his brother Frank to work off the money for Jesse's board. The scene ends with Rufus Cobb complaining, "A man tries to get ahead and save every penny . . . aaggh!" Later, a fully recuperated Jesse, asks Cobb for Zee's hand in marriage. As Frank and Jesse smile and Zee and her sister hug in celebration, Cobb's response is cold and selfish: "you got compensation?" Cobb claims that he has housed and fed Zee for nearly a year and that he is due expenses. A materialistic and bitter adult who has forgotten the thrills of young love, he will not allow Jesse to marry Zee until he is adequately compensated. Later in the picture Jesse shows up at Cobb's house and tosses him a bag of gold. Only then does he Zee relinquish to Jesse.

The local preacher is another adult character who is both out of touch with and unforgiving of the troubles of youth. When Jesse's mother asks the preacher to pray for Jesse and Frank, the preacher responds with bitter resentment: "As for your sons, treading the path of the unrighteous, breaking God's laws as well as man's, steeped in sin beyond redemption . . ." Zee interrupts to tell the preacher that Jesse is not a sinner, but the preacher disagrees: "with salvation in his grasp, he let the Devil enter into his heart . . . only Satan could have prompted him." Jesse's mother and Zee reject

the angry tirade by the preacher, claiming that he is unaware of the real reasons for Jesse's outlawry.

Lastly, there is the adult neighbor who turns Jesse over to the Union soldiers and later organizes a raid on the James farm. He is a deceitful character who exposes the James' Confederate sympathies to save his own property. His traitorous deeds and his violent flogging of Jesse as a youth, demonstrate the lengths to which this adult would go to protect his own neck. So while Jesse's actions seem to many to be those of an evil murderer, he is in actuality a good kid whose own selfish neighbor sends him on the path to outlawry. It seemed everywhere Jesse looked, he saw an adult that either betrayed or completely misunderstood him.

The popularity of juvenile delinquency films in the 1950s could not sustain Hollywood's pre-war prosperity. The motion picture industry stumbled through its most tumultuous years in the late 1940s and the 1950s. In 1946, the first full peacetime year after the war, weekly attendance at movie theatres reached its all-time high. The studios estimated that nearly three-fourths of all Americans physically able to go to the movies attended at least one picture a week. Such prosperity, however, was short-lived. A number of factors combined to diminish attendance figures and force a re-structuring of the motion picture industry.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to the strain put on it by the HUAC investigations, Hollywood was also significantly changed by the 1948 Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Paramount Pictures, et al.* The decision initiated the break-up of the studio system.

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<sup>56</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 269.

Studios were no longer allowed to control the distribution process; that is, they could not force independent theatre owners into “block booking,” or renting several of a studio’s pictures when they only wanted one. Furthermore, the decision called for “the splitting of the existing companies into separate theatre and producer -distributor companies with no interlocking directors or officer.” The studios were, in effect, cut off from the theatres they once controlled.<sup>57</sup>

Though it would be a slow process, the breakdown of the studio system brought about many changes in Hollywood. The number of independent films rose sharply. Between 1953 and 1957 United Artists, which functioned as a distributor for independent producers, released nearly fifty pictures a year. By 1958, 65 per cent of Hollywood movies were made by independent producers. The number of European films in the American market also increased. The early 1950s saw the rise of “art houses,” which specialized in showing British and foreign language films; Americans responded well to these films, and many believed that Europeans had a much better understanding of the cinema as an art form than did Americans. The break up of the studio system also made it more difficult to enforce the Production Code. Because the Big Five no longer owned first-run theatres, they could not enforce the Code with the same strictness that they did in 1939. The Code still carried weight, and many theatres would not show films without the Production Code Seal, but it was becoming clear to many that change was eminent.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Balio, *The American Film Industry*, pp. 316-20, quote p. 317.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, pp. 293-94.

With Hollywood undergoing the monumental transformations brought about by the breakup of the studio system, the rise of European cinema, and the breakdown of the Production Code it is no wonder that the industry largely overlooked two important factors in its own decline: demographic shifts and the rise of television. The postwar flight to the suburbs meant that many middle and upper class whites --a large portion of the industry's patrons--no longer lived near the large first-run movies houses, most of which were located in urban areas. Robert Sklar also points out that the content of pictures in the late 1940s and early 1950s alienated suburban audiences and failed to appeal to their changing lives; ironically, he says, "As the country prospered, Hollywood did not."<sup>59</sup>

Hollywood was also caught off guard by the television boom. In 1948 Americans owned approximately 172,000 television sets. Only one year later that number climbed to one million. By 1954 there were 32 million television sets in American households. Americans were now able to watch situation comedies and movies in their own homes, many of which seemed comparable to what played in the theatres. It seems an unlikely coincidence that in 1953, when nearly 50 per cent of American households owned a television, motion picture attendance dropped to half of what it had been in 1946. Certainly, television was not the sole cause for this dramatic dip in attendance. The break-up of the studio system, HUAC's Communist witch-hunt, and what many perceived to be a lack of innovation and artistry in postwar pictures all

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<sup>59</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, pp. 271-272.

affected attendance, yet television became the arch-enemy of Hollywood, and many of the industry's changes were in response to that threat.<sup>60</sup>

The setbacks endured in the late 1940s and early 1950s forced the motion picture industry to reinvent itself. Innovations like three-dimensional pictures, CinemaScope, which attempted to create the 3-D effect without the necessity of glasses, and the wide-angle lens were all products of the 1950s. The content of films became more risky, partly in response to the success of European films and partly in hopes that theatres could lure consumers in with material not permissible on their television set. The 1952 Supreme Court case *Burstyn v. Wilson* aided this process. The decision acknowledged that movies are “a significant medium for the communication of ideas” and that their purpose is “to entertain as well as inform.” Though the decision did not eliminate government censorship boards, it protected movies under the free speech clause of the First Amendment. The decision opened the door for films like Otto Preminger's *The Moon is Blue* (1953) which United Artists released without the Production Code Seal; the Seal was withheld on the basis that the film implied that premarital sex was not an issue of morality. Codeless, the film was a success at the box office. Other films, like Elia Kazan's *Baby Doll* (1956), challenged the Production Code until in 1956 the Administration revised the Code to allow some mention or depiction of drug usage, prostitution, abortion, racial intermarriage, and strong language.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Balio, *The American Film Industry*, p. 315; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 272.

<sup>61</sup> Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, pp. 283-296; quote from Balio, *The American Film Industry*, p. 432.

Though *The True Story of Jesse James* does not address such controversial issues as drug usage or prostitution, it was part of the reinvention that swept Hollywood in the mid-1950s. Filmed in color—still not commonplace in 1957—the movie was shot on wide-angle “CinemaScope” lenses designed by Bausch and Lomb. The film also took advantage of relaxed enforcement of the Production Code. Robberies and gunfights in *The True Story of Jesse James* are more gruesome than similar scenes in the 1939 picture, and far more violent than anything on television in 1957. The trend towards more graphic violence is evidenced by the film’s altering of two scenes from the 1939 film. Though it employs actual footage from the train robbery and the Northfield raid in *Jesse James*, *The True Story of Jesse James* changes the scenes to make them more bloody and violent. Furthermore, whereas the 1939 film used newspaper reports and “Wanted” signs to account for Jesse’s exploits, the 1957 film includes more robbery footage. The film also includes the brutal scene in which Jesse tracks down his traitorous neighbor and shoots him in cold -blood, showing no expression of grief or remorse. Finally, there is the scene in which Frank scolds his brother, “You really like killing, don’t you?” Jesse responds calmly, “It comes easy in our business.” Jesse reminds Frank that he too has done his share of killing. Frank says he is not proud of it, to which Jesse angrily responds, “Well I am! Jesse James, that name means something.” At this point Jesse is a self -obsessed animal whose only satisfaction comes from robbing and killing. It is doubtful that such violent tones would have appeared in *The True Story of Jesse James* without the breakdown of the Production Code and the challenges brought about by television, European cinema, dwindling theatre attendance, and the breakup of the studio system.

At a time when the motion picture industry was beset by drastic change and declining attendance figures, the Western managed to revive itself. The number of feature Westerns rose from 14 in 1947 to 31 in 1948, to 40 in 1952, and to 46 in 1956. Though somewhat later, the Western also became a popular prime-time television production. Between 1955 and 1957 the percentage of prime-time television hours devoted to Westerns rose from 4.7 to 15 per cent; by 1959 that number rose to 24 per cent.<sup>62</sup> This surge in popularity did not result from drudging up the same plots and themes reminiscent of pre-war Westerns. A changed—and continuously changing—social and political environment provided new allegories (though it made it increasingly dangerous for filmmakers to pursue those allegories). Changes within the motion picture industry—mainly the breakup of the studio system and the breakdown of the Production Code—made it possible explore new themes and emphases. A young crop of directors, as well as some innovation by older directors, pushed the genre in new directions.

During the peak years of the Red Scare in Hollywood and McCarthyism in Washington (1947-1954), most Westerns side-stepped social and political commentary. Not many studios, producers, or directors were willing to risk their names, much less their careers, to take on America's pressing social and political issues. There were, however, a few bold Westerns made in the early 1950s. But even these were careful not to be overt in their commentary, their "messages" often wrapped in ambiguity. Films like *Devil's Doorway* (1950) challenged the traditional

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<sup>62</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 347-48. For a thorough study of television Westerns in the 1950s see J. Fred MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff? The Rise and Fall of the Television Western* (New York: Praeger, 1987).

film image of Native Americans. The film tells the story of dispossession from an Indian point of view; its sympathetic portrayal of the deceit and aggression perpetrated against Native Americans could be seen, if looked upon closely, as a critique of race relations in the early 1950s. *High Noon* (1952) can also be viewed as a critique, not of race relations but of McCarthyism. In this film Marshal Kane (played by Gary Cooper) holds firmly to the dictates of conscience despite the conformist tendencies and reprimands of an entire town. Kane vows to defend the town of Hadleyville, and his own honor, against his sworn enemies who are to arrive by train at “high noon.” But the town wants him to leave, fearing that a confrontation will give the town a bad name, discourage outside investors, and destroy the town’s businesses. They are willing to tolerate the bad men, as long as they do not disrupt business. Yet Kane, the free-thinking individual, holds to his conscience and defeats his enemies. Carl Foreman actually wrote the screenplay for *High Noon* while under subpoena by HUAC and, despite John Wayne’s objection to the film being anti-American, it won Best Picture honors. The Western was such a uniquely American phenomenon, so wrapped in the “heroic fable of American progress,” that, for many, it was hard to detect critical variations of age-old themes.<sup>63</sup>

*The True Story of Jesse James* is not as bold as films like *High Noon* in its political criticisms. The director of the film, Nicholas Ray, is noted for avoiding “explicitly ‘political’ films” in the 1950s (it was not until the 1960s that he began to place primary importance on political commentary in his films). What is more, Ray

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<sup>63</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 366-74; John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 115 -21 for the discussion on *High Noon*.

was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party in the 1930s. He worked with leftist and activist theatre groups and befriended radical folk musicians like Woody Guthrie. It was only his service as a radio programmer with the Office of War Information during World War II and a close and steady friendship with studio mogul Howard Hughes that saved him from the Communist purge that swept Hollywood. Ray, who directed and released his first film (*They Live by Night*) in 1949, was still in the early stages of his career in 1957; his past associations with the radical left well documented, Ray was careful not to be too “political” in his films.<sup>64</sup>

*The True Story of Jesse James* is indicative of Ray’s predicament. There are no obvious allegories to McCarthyism. Certainly, Jesse is a nonconformist but not in a heroic sense. His nonconformity does not aid society in any way; on the contrary, it eventually becomes his ruin and spells doom for the rest of society. There is only a slight mention of race in the film (when Jesse’s mother points out to Union soldiers that she never owned a slave or supported the institution). Like many others working within the genre, Ray opted for a psychological exploration of Jesse James rather than use the legendary outlaw as a tool for political commentary. In many film genres, the Western in particular, psychology served as a substitute for dealing with contemporary social and political issues.

In many ways *The True Story of Jesse James* follows the success of the new and developing “psychological” Westerns. These films moved away from simple revenge

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<sup>64</sup> Peter Wollen, “Never at Home” in *Sight and Sound*, May 1994, p. 12(4). This article illustrates the contrast between the apolitical nature of Ray’s films in the 1950s with his more political films of the 1960s.

plotlines and social causations of outlawry to more in -depth character studies, exploring the psyche of gunfighters. Richard Slotkin writes that in psychological Westerns “pathological elements are emphasized at the expense of the character as lawman or social rebel.” *The Gunfighter* (1950) was one of the first critically acclaimed Westerns to explore the psychology of an outlaw. The film is about Johnny Ringo, who possesses perhaps the fastest and most deadly gun in the West. Ringo is tired of his gunfighter lifestyle and wants to settle down with the woman he loves, but his own past makes this impossible. Ringo is constantly challenged by “young guns” trying to make a name for themselves. He despises these “brats” but constantly finds himself in their presence. It is a life that he greatly resents, but one that he is trapped inside; it is this psychological dilemma that the film turns on. The fact that the film did poorly at the box office did not stop other Western filmmakers from exploring this sub-genre. *High Noon*, which employs elements of the psychological Western in addition to its social and political commentary, was both a box office and critical success. Jesse James had already been the subject of two psychological Westerns before 1957. *Kansas Raiders* (1950) and *The Great Missouri Raid* (1951) explore the psychological effects of Jesse’s oedipal engagement with his mother, his service with a father-like Quantrill, and his unstable childhood. Although they limited the Western’s ability to speak to greater social and political issues, these types of psychological explorations opened the genre --and Jesse James--up to more probing engagements with characterization.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 379-404.

One important aspect of Jesse's psyche that *The True Story of Jesse James* explores is the change over from man out to avenge attacks on himself and his family to outlaw desperate to fill the needs of his own vanity, a rebel without a cause. After Jesse begins his spree of bank and train robberies and becomes something of a mythical figure in local newspapers, he gets caught up in enhancing his own legend. He continues to push his gang into more precarious situations (like the Northfield robbery) despite their pleas and warnings. His obsession with his own legend eventually forces his brother Frank to desert him. A scene towards the end of the film, after the Northfield debacle, finds Frank and Jesse in a heated argument. Frank reminds Jesse that they became outlaws for good reasons but now they have none: "In the beginning it was for Zee and Ma and protecting the farm . . . What are we doing here now, four-hundred miles from home? Who are we fighting for? Ma? Zee? . . . No Jesse, we're doing this for you." Jesse replies heatedly, "For me! I've carried you and Cole and the rest on my back for years. If it wasn't for me, you'd all be sharecroppers on some miserable farm." Frank shoots back sarcastically, "Oh sure, we're a big success now, aren't we? Everybody knows our name . . . and your face is on every post office wall." The scene ends with Frank punching Jesse and leaving him alone in the Minnesota hills. Jesse has yet to resolve the psychological issues spinning in his head.

Another psychological aspect the film addresses is what one author referred to as the "grey solitary man" behind Jesse James.<sup>66</sup> Unlike the light-hearted and somewhat comic Jesse played by Tryone Power in 1939, Robert Wagner's portrayal

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<sup>66</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard* (New York: Da Capo, 1972), p. 60.

is of a deeply unhappy man. Jesse never cracks a joke, and he rarely smiles (only in a few brief scenes with Zee). Underneath his hardened outlaw shell, he is a man who cares deeply about what others think of him. In a scene which finds Jesse, using the alias Mr. Thomas Howard, talking to a detective --who is actually looking for Jesse but has no idea what he looks like --Jesse explains to the man that this feared outlaw, Jesse James, might not be so evil after all. "Some folks don't considered the James boys to be so bad," Jesse says. The detective reminds him that the James boys murdered four of his men. Jesse responds, "Murdered? Maybe it was self-defense?" Frank chimes in, "You may not be aware of it sir, but many of the crimes attributed to the James brothers were actually committed by others, a fact well known here in Missouri." The scene exposes a glaring contradiction in Jesse's character: while he is obsessed with promoting his own legend as an outlaw, he is also concerned that people not view him as a bad person.

The mental issues the film addresses in Frank and Jesse's argument and Jesse's discussion with the detective, as well as the attention given to Jesse's teenage years and his disdain for "the way grown ups think," bring a heavy psychological element to the story and represent a conscious movement away from "political" films. In the end, *The True Story of Jesse James* is a study in character exploration, a journey inside the mind of one of America's most popular outlaws.

The psychological emphasis of the film stems largely from social and political change, as well as changes with in the film industry, in particular the Western genre,

and *not* from director Nicholas Ray as some critics suggest. Ray, however, did bring his own unique contributions to this film history of Jesse James' life.

A high school drop-out and alcoholic at an early age, Ray overcame the recklessness of his youth and worked his way into Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's colony for architects and artists. There he worked as an apprentice in architecture and a "master" in theatre. In 1932 he moved to New York where he worked with leftist and activist theatre troupes, including the Workers' Laboratory, Group Theatre, and Theatre of Action. Ray also worked with the WPA-sponsored *Living Newspaper* and acted in their production of *Injunction Granted* in which he was featured as a leftist leader. Next, Ray went to work for the WPA, traveling the southern and western states collecting recorded material of folk music and folklore. His love for folk music eventually carried him to radio, where he organized a program, "Back Where I Come From," for CBS that featured the likes of Woody Guthrie and Hubie Ledbetter (Leadbelly). Ray maintained his connections to his radio show and his folk musician friends even during his service with the Office for War Information. So long before Nicholas Ray made it to Hollywood, he had developed an extensive interest in folklore.<sup>67</sup>

Ray's interest in folklore spurred another important element in *The True Story of Jesse James*. He borrowed material about the James legend from B.A. Botkin's *A Treasury of American Folklore*. The somber music from Botkin's version of the "Ballad of Jesse James," carries throughout the film, and Ray fully displays at the end

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<sup>67</sup> Blaine Allan, *Nicholas Ray: A Guide to Resources and References* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984), pp. 1-12.

when a guitar player strums the tune and sings the lyrics following Jesse's death. He also inserts Botkin's "Jesse James and the Poor Widow." In this unsubstantiated tale Jesse and his gang, hungry after being on one of their long trips, stop at the farm of an old widow for something to eat. After the kind old lady serves the men supper, she begins to cry and explains that a banker is on his way to foreclose on her farm. Jesse, feeling sorry for the old lady, and wishing to indulge his own vanity, gives the lady enough money to keep her farm. Jesse asks the lady to describe the banker to him and he and his gang depart. Soon after, the banker arrives, disgruntled to discover that the widow has the money for her mortgage. He signs the mortgage and reluctantly retreats. As he is on his way back to town, Jesse surprises the banker and robs him of the mortgage money he initially gave to the poor widow.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to working in elements of Botkin's study of folklore, Ray also wanted an unusual visual style that would take the film into areas of folk art; he wanted it done "entirely as a ballad, stylized in every aspect, all of it shot on the stage, including the horses, the chases, everything . . ." Studio executives objected to Ray's radical approach, claiming that it would be a miserable failure at the box office. Constant protests from studio executive Buddy Adler forced Ray to rework much of the film, and though the end product was not as "folksy" as Ray would have liked, the film certainly has a folk style, and it addresses issues of the folk legend that developed in Jesse's own time.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> B.A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore: Stories, Ballads, and Traditions of the People* (New York: Crown, 1944), pp. 107-12.

<sup>69</sup> Eisenschitz, *Nicholas Ray*, p. 284.

Ray's interest in the legend developing around Jesse in the late 1870s and early 1880s is evident from the outset. A scene in which a local Missourian is talking to a detective is illustrative. The detective discovers that local citizens might not cooperate in his search for Jesse James. He wants to know why. The man tells him:

Public opinion, or better yet, public need. Jesse James is the shooting spokesman for everyone whose life is quietly desperate. To you he is a thief, to these people he is already becoming a legend, one that kindles a fire in their hearts. They want him to go on . . . When the public no longer needs Jesse James that'll be the end of him.

In this scene Ray makes the point that it is not the man himself that the public adores, rather it is his legend that they *need* to satisfy their own wild desires.

Ray also examines the legend from the point of view of those who refuse to accept it. After the Northfield raid at the beginning of the film, newspaper editors are trying to figure out what to print about the incident. One of the editors is tired of writing about Jesse James. He can't understand why people are so interested in the exploits of a criminal, and why, after even the most minor of incidents, he is required to write a lengthy obituary. This time he refuses. He will not respond to the popular outcries for print on the outlaw: "I am too old for this nonsense," he says. His partner asks what the writer will say to his boss, to which the writer responds, "What I've been saying to myself all night, What makes him Jesse James?" Instead of glorifying the legend in this scene, Ray directly questions its validity.

Ray also brings into doubt the Robin Hood aspect of Jesse's legend in the poor widow scene. As the gang is waiting for their supper, Cole Younger reads a comic book about Jesse James. Mockingly, Cole says, "It says here Jesse James really isn't a criminal, that he is just misunderstood . . . Why does he rob? Why does he plunder? He gives it all to the poor . . . Oh, it's all I can do to keep the tears back." The entire gang, with the exception of Jesse, has a riotous laugh at Cole's summary of the book, indicating that none of the gang is familiar with any Robin Hood-like deeds on Jesse's part. Still, the scene goes further to debunk the Robin Hood myth. Cole bets one of the gang that he can make Jesse give the widow the money for her mortgage, then kindly offers her a few dollars for travel expenses so she can go live with her relatives in another county. Jesse, not to be outdone by Cole's gesture, shows him up by offering the lady \$600 to pay her mortgage. It is a vain act that Jesse does only to enhance his already developing legend, completely spoiling the idea that he had any heart-felt sympathies for the poor.

It is difficult to determine the contemporary significance of Ray's challenges to the legend; perhaps his interests in the function of legend were tied up with the psychological trends of the day. Nevertheless, this is a unique element of the film belonging largely to the director, an element that its predecessors avoided and one that *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* carried to its extremes.

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*The True Story of Jesse James* was not a popular success like *Jesse James*. There were too many flaws in the plot and the flashback sequences were arranged in a fashion that made the film difficult to follow; this was largely the result of Ray pushing the film into new artistic frontiers and Twentieth-Century Fox pulling the film back into traditional Western storylines. Before filming was complete, Ray walked off of the picture, disgusted that studio executives did not trust his artistic vision.

Those who were familiar with Ray's work, however, like the French critic Jean-Luc Godard, understood the direction in which Ray tried to take the picture. In a review, Godard commented, "Even though battles on the set may have finally sabotaged this delicate task, one should not forget the ambition which attended its inception . . . One must judge *The True Story of Jesse James* on its intentions." Ray's biographer, Bernard Eisenschitz, remarks, "*The True Story of Jesse James* . . . survives as the broken fragments of a film . . . Deprived of overall rhythm, the film nevertheless contains stunning moments." The film's intentions and its stunning moments were not enough to make the film a success at the box office.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to the choppy plot, the film's failure at the box office may have derived from audience burnout. Between 1939 and 1957 the motion picture industry released nearly 15 major films about Jesse James. A review in the *New York Times* aptly commented, "About the last thing anybody might expect these days is a well -

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<sup>70</sup> Godard, *Godard on Godard*, p. 60; Eisenschitz, *Nicholas Ray*, p. 289.

made film about that saddle -sore screen varmint Jesse James.” Another review in *Time* pointed out, “In the last 35 years, the moneymen have cheerfully financed at least a dozen pictures about the character who was once their deadliest enemy.” At least among some critics, Jesse James had worn out his welcome on the silver screen.<sup>71</sup>

Despite lacking the popular success of its predecessor, *The True Story of Jesse James* does present a more accurate history of the outlaw’s life. For example, in the 1939 film Jesse’s mother is bombed and killed by railroad men, setting Jesse on the path to outlawry, while the 1957 picture correctly places the bombing of his mother’s home well after Jesse has taken to robbing trains and banks; furthermore, she is not killed by the bomb, rather her arm is maimed, a depiction supported by historical evidence. The 1957 film introduces the Younger brothers, who were instrumental in the gang’s exploits, and who the 1939 picture completely ignores. *The True Story of Jesse James* also addresses Jesse’s service with Confederate guerrillas. Although it implies he served with Quantrill, a claim that cannot be substantiated by facts, Jesse’s service with the Confederacy is nevertheless an important part of his life recognized by historians and biographers.

The makers of the film felt so confident in their understanding of Jesse James’ life they included a prologue at the beginning of the film claiming “much that you will see here is fact and much is as close to what actually happened as any man can testify.” Though the film makes such a bold statement about its presentation of the

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<sup>71</sup> H.H.T., “Screen: Jesse James: Outlaw Returns in a Well -Made Movie,” *New York Times*, 23 March 1957, p. 17; “Cinema: The True Story of Jesse James,” *Time*, 18 March 1957, pp. 100-105.

past, it actually tells us more about the 1950s than it does about Jesse James' life. Shifting the cause of Jesse's outlawry from the railroads to a combination of different factors—the Civil War, untrustworthy adult figures, and inadequacies in Jesse's psychological makeup—reflects political changes during the 1950s, in particular the decline of labor activism and the rise of anti-communism, which discouraged filmmakers from making pictures critical of the corporate state. The decision to cast Jesse as a misguided youth continually betrayed by adult characters is indicative of the country's fascination with juvenile delinquency and young people's growing skepticism of adult values. Changes in the motion picture industry --mainly the breakup of the studio system, the challenges presented by television, and relaxations in the Production Code—allowed Jesse James to appear more violent and passionate than he had been in previous pictures. The psychological aspects of the film were part of a greater trend in the film industry, particularly within the Western genre. Others Westerns, like *The Gunfighter*, used psychology as a substitute for social and political commentary in film. Lastly, the film conveys the passions of its director. Behind the folk ballads and folktales and the heretofore unparalleled exploration of the validity of the James legend sits the unique imprint of a director, Nicholas Ray, that many considered to be years ahead of his time.

In its handling of Jesse James, *The True Story of Jesse James* rests somewhere in between *Jesse James*, which offers the most romantic interpretation of the three films under study, and *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*, which offers the most despicable portrayal of Jesse James to ever appear on the silver screen.

## ***The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid (1972)***

*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* was filmed in 1969 but not released until 1972. It is a stark revision of all of the James films that preceded it. It is, without doubt, the harshest treatment Jesse James has ever received on film. As the prologue aptly summarizes, “winds of change were blowing across the land,” a statement as much true of the late 1960s as it is of 1876, the year in which the picture is set. These winds of change--in the socio-political environment, the motion picture industry, and the Western genre--along with the introduction a new crop of filmmakers in the 1960s combined to produce perhaps the most unique film portrayal of Jesse James’ life.

The film begins with an amnesty proposal in the Missouri Legislature. Several Missouri politicians want amnesty for the James and Younger gangs: “Let ‘em go scott-free, and let those who have pursued them cease and desist immediately . Let these James and Younger boys return to their homes and families to lead fruitful lives.” The railroads, however, have different ideas. They hire the Pinkerton Detective Agency to put an end to the exploits of the James and Younger gangs, once and forever.

Meanwhile, the gangs are hiding out in the remote hills of Missouri. The first time the viewer sees Jesse James he is sharing a two -seat toilet with his brother Frank

in a dank Missouri outhouse, a stark contrast with his more glamorous introduction s in *Jesse James* and *The True Story of Jesse James*. Jesse, played by Robert Duval, speaks irregularly and is slightly balding. His eyes blink uncontrollably. He is not an attractive character. As he reaches for some scrap paper to wipe himself, he finds an old robbery prospectus of Cole Younger's for a bank in Northfield, Minnesota. Jesse is excited about the plan and wants to carry out the robbery. Cole, on the other hand, knows there is a pending amnesty vote in the legislature and wants nothing to do with the plan. He wants to begin a new life and urges the gang to wait -out the amnesty vote.

Jesse gets a chance to carryout the Northfield raid when Cole is severely wounded in a shoot-out. As Cole lies unconscious in a cave deep in the Missouri hills, Jesse tells the gang of a "vision" he had about a bank in Northfield, Minnesota. He gets excited and begins preaching at the sky. His speech is uncontrollable, as if he is talking in tongues:

I had me a vision. I seen a -Yankee city afar to the North  
 with the biggest bank I ever seen. I seen us ridin' fine Kentucky  
 Bluebloods into this smug Yanke es city built on the spoils of  
 war. We was guerrillas again. Behind enemy lines! And we  
 made that a-Yankee town a-weep, that a-Yankee town a-weep.  
 I seen a place called a-North, a place called a-North, a place  
 called a-North, a place called a-North, a place called Northfield!

Jesse then howls wildly at the sky. The rest of the gang offers an “amen” and begins to howl with him. Jesse comes across as a hysterical, religious maniac and a false prophet.

Cole recovers in time to pursue Jesse and the rest of the gang with the hope that he can stop the robbery and preserve the gang’s chances for amnesty. On his way to head-off Jesse, however, Cole discovers that railroad men bribed the legislature and that the amnesty proposal was defeated. Now he decides to pursue Jesse with the new hope that they can rob the Northfield bank and get enough money to, in effect, re-bribe the legislature to pass the amnesty proposal. The Northfield robbery is botched, however. Two of the gang are killed, one of the Younger brothers is severely wounded, and the rest of the gang make a daring escape into the backwoods of Minnesota. Jesse wants to leave the wounded Younger brother behind because he is slowing the gang’s escape, but Cole refuses. Jesse and Frank decide to leave Cole and the rest of the gang. They escape to Missouri in a buckboard wagon. Shortly thereafter, the rest of the gang is raided by a local posse. In a violent and bloody shootout, Cole and his brothers are severely wounded and captured.

The film ends with contrasting scenes. The first scene shows Jesse and Frank in a buckboard wagon on their way back to Missouri. Jesse is wearing the bloodstained clothes of an old woman he murdered in route to his escape. He vows with his brother Frank to form a new gang in Missouri and continue the “guerrilla raids” against the Yankees. The next scene cuts from Jesse to Cole, as he and his brothers are brought back through the Northfield streets in a steel cage. A crowd that has gathered in the

street gawks at the bloodied and dying men. Cole musters enough strength to stagger to his feet. The crowd roars in amazement and Cole wryly responds, “Ain’t that a wonderment.” A narrator chimes in to say that Cole “lived to see the birth of a new age.” Cole Younger, not Jesse James, emerges as the hero of the picture. For the first time in his cinematic career, Jesse James is de-centered from a film’s plot in favor of another outlaw, and, for the first time, Jesse James finds himself the object of ridicule.

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*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* borrows much from the social and political events of the 1960s. The film uses its two main characters, Cole Younger and Jesse James, as metaphors for the complexities of the time. Cole is a complicated individual who accepts change as a part of life, who is in awe of technological innovation in a rapidly modernizing world, but who also, in his experiments with alternative religion and psychedelic drugs and challenges to sexual mores, represents a segment of the population that often opposed the effects of modernization. Jesse is portrayed as a conservative individual who rejects change, is obsessed with the Lost Cause of the Civil War a full decade after it is over, and holds firmly to his rural brand of Christianity which forbids him from experimenting with sex, drugs, and alternative medicines. A closer look at the major social and political developments of the 1960s, as well an examination of how the characters reflect these events, reveals a strong socio-political influence in *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*. Produced in the shadows of the events of 1968--which included the Tet Offensive, large-scale protests by students at Columbia University and women in Atlantic City, riots at the

Democratic National Convention, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, and the election of the conservative Richard Nixon as president of the United States--the film could not escape their influence.

It is dangerous to generalize about America in the 1960s, but if there is one description that most accurately describes the decade it is that it was a period of challenging authority and questioning accepted institutions. Activists hammered at the status quo on race, gender, and foreign policy and questioned the honesty and integrity of traditional American institutions like universities and government. Historian David Chalmers writes of the 1960s, "Never before in America had there been so much conscious talk of raising and changing expectations." For many Americans, it was "a time of intense conflict and millennial expectations," a time for self-examination, for the country to question the institutions that held blacks and women in various forms of bondage and sent young men off to die in a mysterious jungle on the other side of the world. Indeed, it was, as David Farber has labeled it, "The Age of Great Dreams," an age when America was pushed and pulled into diverse utopian visions.<sup>72</sup>

Cole's character represents both the hopes and suspicions of many Americans in the 1960s. Upon close examination, he can be seen as a protester of the Vietnam War and one suspicious of the government's handling of the situation. He is a peace

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<sup>72</sup> Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1-6, 165-186; David Chalmers, *And Crooked Places Made Straight: The Struggle for Social Change in the 1960s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. xvii; David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

advocate. He urges Jesse and the rest of the gang to put aside their bitterness and overcome their hawkish tendencies. The war, he claims, is over and no longer winnable. The only way to peace is through the amnesty proposal, which would allow the gang to give up their lives as outlaws and readjust to lives as law-abiding citizens. While Cole hopes for peace, he also harbors a distrust of government. When he discovers the amnesty bill has been rejected, his disgust quickly turns to suspicion. He suspects that the Missouri legislature was paid off by railroad men and detectives trying to track down the Jameses and Youngers. A shady, “behind-closed-doors” scene reveals that Cole’s distrust is valid, as the Speaker of the Legislature is given an envelope full of cash in return for his stance against amnesty. This bribery and the deceitful nature of the Missouri government force the men to remain outlaws, and thus locked in a war against society and the law that they cannot win.

Still, what adds more to the allegorical qualities of Cole’s character is his genuine disdain for Jesse, who holds different political views, and who he perceives as backwards and deceitful. Jesse’s refusal to give up the Lost Cause of the Civil War can be taken as a metaphor of the refusal to give up the fight against communism in Vietnam. Over ten years after the Civil War has past, Jesse still insists that the gang’s robbery in Northfield is a “guerrilla raid” to “show them Yankees.” It is clear to Cole that the war is over and the South has lost, but Jesse insists, in vain, on continuing a losing battle—much like the war that was dragging out in Vietnam in the 1960s. His loyalty to the ‘Lost Cause’ is also emblematic of many conservative southerners who continued to oppose integration. Jesse wants a return to the antebellum South, which

included slavery, just as many conservatives in the 1960s, particularly those in the South, wanted a return to Jim Crow. Jesse's politics have no credibility, however. In making him a war -obsessed, hypocritical religious zealot who justifies his senseless murders with Biblical scriptures, the film sides with the politics of his antithesis, Cole Younger.

While it responds to heated political issues like the war in Vietnam and integration, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* also captures some of the major social and cultural issues of the 1960s, like alternative religion and spirituality, drug use, and sexual experimentation. Traditional Western religious institutions were challenged in the 1960s, as many looked eastward to the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism; others gathered in communes to live and work and search out their own spirituality, still others combined the meditative teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism with herbal medicines and mind -altering drugs. Many young people in the 1960s experimented with marijuana and LSD. Popular musicians, like Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and Jimi Hendrix made reference to drug usage in their songs. Scientists, like Harvard's Timothy Leary, used LSD, wrote about it in academic journals, and promoted it as a mind -opening experience.

One thing many Americans did open their minds about was sex. Many scholars identify a "sexual revolution" in the 1960s, "an insurgency rooted in the conviction that the erotic should be celebrated as an utterly normal part of life." The birth control pill was first made available in 1960; Hugh Hefner mass marketed sex in his new *Playboy* magazines and clubs; and the Kinsey Report "exploded the myth

of puritanical America,” revealing to 1960s youth high levels of premarital intercourse, homosexual acts, and masturbation among their parents generation of the 1940s and 1950s. Experimentation with sex, drugs, and alternative religion represented another challenge to traditional American institutions and values.<sup>73</sup>

In *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* issues of alternative religion, drug use, and sexual experimentation appear in a nineteenth-century context. Early in the movie, after Cole is shot by bounty hunters, gang members take him to an “herb lady.” The old woman has a gypsy-like appearance. She provides the gang with silk to pull through Cole’s bullet wounds and herbs to heal the damage to the flesh. As the men are set to leave, she provides them with “buzzard feathers, and dried cats blood, and mole pee” in an “acidity bag.” Finally, a vision warns her that Cole will be in great danger if he goes to Northfield. Frank James responds to this alternative brand of medicine and spirituality: “That superstitious blabber ain’t gonna do any good . . . From the look of it, I’d say a prayer would be better.” The men shrug off Frank’s suggestion; it is a sign that Cole and his gang have rejected organized religion, in favor of a more earthy and mystical experience.

The film also addresses drug use and sexual experimentation. In one scene Cole takes his gang to a prostitution house on the outskirts of Northfield. He and his gang drink, dance, and have sex with the women of the house. In the midst of their partying, one of the men approaches Cole with a pill that will “give you real zeal;” Cole puts the pill on his tongue and then chews it. He begins to hallucinate, as half -

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<sup>73</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided*, pp. 147-164, quotes from 151, 152.

naked women swarm around and entice him with their bare breasts. Five prostitutes follow Cole down the hall to a bedroom; as the door begins to close the “madam” of the house laughingly says, “one at a time girls, one at a time.” The scene ends at this point, leaving the viewer to ponder what transpired between Cole and the five prostitutes. By associating alternative religion, drug use, and sexual experimentation with the hero of the film (Cole)—while having the psychotic antagonist (Jesse) reject them—*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* promotes such a radical lifestyle while shunning the more backward, conservative philosophy of Jesse James.

The film also reflects a society increasingly overwhelmed by violence. In the early-sixties television captured the brutal violence suffered by civil rights protesters at the hands of white police officers with billy-clubs, shepards, and fire hoses. The mid-sixties saw the transformation of many in the civil rights movement who gave up King’s nonviolent philosophy in favor of the more radical and militant philosophies proposed by Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, who in 1965 coined the phrase “Black Power.” In the years to follow urban blacks took to the streets in massive riots in Watts and Detroit that killed a total of 77 people and wrought millions of dollars in damages to local housing and businesses. Bloody riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in the summer of 1968 added to perceived fears that violence was out of control in America. Television images of death and destruction in Vietnam brought violence into American living rooms on a daily basis; television images of the war were so ubiquitous throughout the Sixties that by 1970 NBC executives decided to soften their coverage: “We got tired of combat footage and we said ‘let’s

get some pacification footage.” In addition to the violence in street riots and on television, the country also witnessed the assassinations of some of its most cherished leaders: John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. It is a rather twisted irony that a decade marketed as a time of “peace and love” was actually one of the most violent periods in the nation’s history.<sup>74</sup>

*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* captures the omnipresence of violence in American life in the 1960s. It is, without doubt, the most bloody and violent of the three films under study. The outlaws carry shotguns and rifles (as opposed to pistols in the previous two films), which fire off louder and deadlier shots. The number of robbery and shooting scenes increases. Included is a scene in which Jesse, for no other reason than the thrill of killing, shoots a man off his horse, and as the man lays dying on the ground, he fires another bullet into his head. Jesse also slaughters a group of Union soldiers, shooting them all at point-blank range. He goes so far as to shoot and kill an old lady. Cole’s life is so loaded with violence that he wears a bullet-proof vest wherever he travels; the vest is littered with bullet holes, a testament to a life saturated with violence. When Cole and his gang are shot down by a posse, they are carried into town on a cage; their hair, teeth, and beards are soaked with blood; they wail and moan in pain; and the crowd in the street is mesmerized by the sight of the bloodied and battered men. Cole seems to understand this fascination with violence; when a man suggests that a new sport, baseball, is going to become

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<sup>74</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), pp. 86-113; Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 192-209, quote from 245.

America's favorite pastime, Cole rejects the man's claim, arguing that "shootin'" is the country's favorite pastime and always will be.

The prevalence of violence, sex, and drug use in films like *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* is not simply a response to social change; it also has much to do with alterations within the motion picture industry. Movies in the 1960s, like *Lolita* (1962), *Tom Jones* (1963) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), continued to push the Production Code to its outer limits. The critical and economic success of films released without the Production Code Seal (like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*) further weakened the credibility and authority of the Code office. Meanwhile, competition with television remained, as movies tried to provide a more shocking and titillating experience, a process becoming more and more difficult as violent images of war and civil protests flooded the airwaves. The last vestiges of the studio system collapsed in the 1960s as independent filmmakers began to take over the industry and launch an all-out assault on the laws governing the Code. In response, the office liberalized the Code in 1966 and implemented a "Suggested for Mature Audiences" ("SMA") category so that films dealing with sexual themes, erotic behavior, and harsh violence could be released under the auspices of the major Hollywood production companies--thereby not excluding the major studios from cashing in on the popularity of films that addressed risky sexual and violent content. Yet the "SMA" addition to the Production Code was not sophisticated enough to handle the varying levels of violence and sexual content in films during the late 1960s. At the same time, the Supreme Court ruled precensorship and municipal

ensorship boards to be unconstitutional. Two years later in 1968 the Motion Picture Association of America pushed the industry in a new direction, unveiling a new rating system that finally destroyed the Production Code. Films could no longer be censored or forbidden exhibition; rather they were given ratings —“G” for general audiences, “M” for mature audiences, “R” for restricted audiences, and “X” for audiences over eighteen—based on the amount and severity of sex, violence, profanity, and “adult situations” in a film.<sup>75</sup>

The rising popularity of European films in the 1960s also challenged the Production Code and forced Hollywood to deal with riskier content. Not only could young people see European films in art houses and other small theatres but colleges began to offer film courses, many of which introduced students to content and film techniques not found in American pictures. French “New Wave” films like Jean -Luc Godard’s *Breathless* (1960) and Francois Truffuat’s *The Four Hundred Blows* (1960) sought to create “an atmosphere of supercharged realism” by employing improvisation, casual plotlines, ultra rapid cutting, slow motion, and most importantly, a flood of sex, violence, and profanity. This brush with “realism” must have been shocking to American youths who grew up watching “B” quality television and Hollywood movies governed by a strict Production Code. Young filmmakers attempted to introduced American audiences to this “realism” in the late 1960s.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Balio, *The American Film Industry*, pp. 445-57; Ronald L. Davis, *Celluloid Mirrors: Hollywood and American Society Since 1945* (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 1997), pp. 104-07.

<sup>76</sup> Sklar, *Movie Made America*, pp. 294-304; Davis, *Celluloid Mirrors*, pp. 101-03.

In the late 1960s Hollywood responded to the European challenge and the dissipation of the Production Code with some of its most violent and sexually explicit films. Pictures like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) took violence to gruesome new levels and, in the process, glorified the vicious and murderous deeds of its central characters. Other films like *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) explored once-forbidden sexual content--like female nudity and simulated copulation--and attained popular success despite restrictive ratings. In addition to their sexual and violent content many films in the late 1960s also employed profanity to a degree yet unheard. Words and expressions that had once been forbidden were fast becoming a mainstay in Hollywood scripts.

*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* took advantage of a liberalized atmosphere in Hollywood and implemented a multitude of sex, violence, and profanity. Less than ten minutes into the movie Cole rides into a dusty Western town where a posse is organizing a capture of the wanted outlaw. In order to lure Cole within shooting distance, the men force a prostitute to seduce Cole from a second-story window. The pretty young blonde takes off her dress and leans out the window exposing her bare breasts to the drop-jawed Cole. The viewer is offered a side and a rear-shot of the naked young lady. Absorbed in all her naked beauty, Cole is suddenly ambushed by the posse in a scene that turns sexual seduction into brutal violence, as Cole is shot through chest and blood rushes from his torso. This scene, combined with the prostitution house scene and the brutally violent acts committed by Jesse, testifies

to an increased level of sex and violence in the life and times of Jesse James, a level not approachable by filmmakers in 1939 or 1957. The film also employs profanity, a device not used by the other two films. “Hell” and “damn” are commonly used words; Jesse refers to one of Cole’s robbery proposals as “a dumb-ass plan if I ever heard one.,” Cole constantly refers to Jesse as a “blinky-eyed bastard” and warns of “son-of-a-bitches” who want to kill him; one of Cole’s partners speaks of his disdain for shoveling “mule shit;” and the railroad men in pursuit of Cole and Jesse are referred to as “those bribing railroad dicks.” In short, like sex and violence, profanity abounds in *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*.

The film also responds to another development within the motion picture industry, that is, Hollywood’s recognition of an expanding youthful audience. In 1969 it was estimated that 50 per cent of all filmgoers were between the ages of 16 and 24. Popular films like *The Graduate* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) owed much of their success to youthful audiences.<sup>77</sup> *The Graduate* centers around Benjamin Braddock, a middle-class suburban kid fresh out of college who sees no value in his degree and has no idea where he wants to go in life; all he knows is that he wants to be “different” from his stale parents and their even staler friends. Benjamin is seduced by a suburban housewife who is unhappy with her marriage and drinks heavily to overcome her misery. The film relates the difficult experiences of youth in the late 1960s as well as a disdain for the materialistic values of an older generation. *Easy Rider* offers a much different portrayal of American youth in the 1960s. As three young men motor across America on motorcycles, they smoke marijuana and drop

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<sup>77</sup> Davis, *Celluloid Mirrors*, p. 109.

acid, visit a youth commune, and patronize a prostitution house where they can experiment with sex without the trappings of a relationship.

*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* plays to issues of youthful rebellion. In addition to their prostitution house visits and drug usage, the central characters of the film are presented as rebellious youth who, though they have ran afoul of the law, are kind-hearted characters and fun to be around (except for Jesse, of course). In contrast to the older characters in the film whose central concern is silencing the rebellious youth and preserving their own material wealth, the James and Younger gang appear full of vitality and clear-headed perceptions of the corruption of government and the hollow values of society. In this respect, the film is similar to *The True Story of Jesse James*, but a different socio-political climate and changes within the motion picture industry allowed *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* to explore aspects of youth culture not approachable in the 1950s.

Much like the motion picture industry, the Western was in a state of transition in the late 1960s. John Lenihan identifies a “dichotomy” in motion picture Westerns during the 1960s, a dichotomy that has the dominant trends in the genre shifting from the “conservative Westerns” of John Wayne in the early 1960s to the “liberal-left” Westerns of directors like Sam Peckinpah in the late 1960s. The popular Wayne films of the early-1960s, like *The Alamo* (1960), *The Comancheros* (1961), and *McLintock* (1963) continued to glorify frontier life and defend the harsh violence perpetrated against natives in order to establish a civilized society. *McLintock*, released at a time when the social welfare policies of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were being

pushed forward, finds Wayne's character defending private enterprise against bureaucratic invasion. Wayne went on in the late 1960s to make films, like *El Dorado* (1967) and *True Grit* (1969), that expressed his conservative politics and his "tough-mindedness about law and order." It was the Westerns of the early 1960s (along with his various war pictures), however, that cemented Wayne's status as cultural icon and folk hero.<sup>78</sup> Richard Slotkin argues that Wayne "came to be seen, not as a player in cowboy and combat pictures, but as an authentic representative of 'the Old West' or of 'the American soldier.'" Many young American men were so awed by Wayne's screen presence that they carried his ideas and actions into combat with them in Vietnam and were dismayed and disillusioned when they discovered they could not live up to the standards of bravery and violence put forth by Wayne's screen characters. This disillusionment was so pervasive among American soldiers that it was given a categorical name, the John Wayne Syndrome.<sup>79</sup>

Wayne's popularity, along with the nationalistic and conservative ideas put forth in many of his films, was challenged by a number of "liberal -left" Westerns that sought to demystify many of the glories associated with the "Old West." Films like *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962) and *Ride the High Country* (1962) expressed fear over how frontier expansion and technological progress threatened the pristine life of the West. They criticized conformity and expressed a "sentimental attachment to individualism and a regret over the loss and disregard for individualism in a changing America." They illuminated ways in which many individuals suffered at the hands of

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<sup>78</sup> Lenihan, *Showdown*, pp. 148-53.

<sup>79</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 512-20.

capitalist expansion. This critical approach to the Western, along with the transforming socio-political environment, gave rise to a new “school” that supplanted the popularity of the conservative Westerns of the early 1960s and dominated artistic trends within the genre during the late 1960s.<sup>80</sup>

The success of this new school is reflected in the popularity of films like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Wild Bunch*, as well as the rise of the “Spaghetti” Westerns of Sergio Leone. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* depicts outlaws trying to preserve a way of life against increasingly effective law enforcement that is funded by a giant corporation, the railroad. By portraying Butch and Sundance as light-hearted and comic characters the film creates a moral ambiguity that makes it hard to distinguish good from evil; it pines for a level of sympathy for the two outlaws. In the end, the death of the outlaws at the hands of an entire police force represents the “death of frolicsome innocence” and the entrenchment of law and order. The *Wild Bunch* creates a similar ambiguity by setting up three versions of social order—the Christian order, the order of the law, and the order of the Wild Bunch—and suggesting that the wildest of the three might be preferable to the civilized orders of the church and the law. The Sergio Leone Westerns, particularly those starring Clint Eastwood, presented an American West where “Human decency and morality have no place . . . where the greedy and power-hungry contend for material spoils.” Though Eastwood’s characters were the heroes in films like *A Fistful of Dollars* (1967) and *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1967),

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<sup>80</sup> Lenihan, *Showdown*, pp. 155-60, quote from 158.

they were “laconic fortune hunters . . . devoid of ideals or any purpose save survival and a quick buck.” Leone’s is a cynical vision of the frontier, one where individuals are forced to commit unthinkable acts in order to survive; the romance of the frontier is nonexistence. The Spaghetti Westerns of Leone along with *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* form the canon of what Slotkin refers to as the “demoralization” Westerns of the late 1960s.<sup>81</sup>

Though *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* was produced during the height of popularity of the revisionist Westerns in the late 1960s, the film is a strange blend of the ideas put forth in both conservative and liberal Westerns. It maintains consistencies with the Wayne Westerns of the early 1960s in that it celebrates the achievements of progress, more specifically the civilizing effects of technological advancement. The hero of the film, Cole Younger does not reject the encroachment of modernity in the West, he embraces it; more so, his fascination with the steam engine, the calliope, and the new game of baseball and his desire to explore these inventions inspire him to give up his life as an outlaw, to forsake the Lost Cause and “move on” with his life. The substantial attention paid to modern inventions in the film, Cole’s wide-eyed amusement with them, and his constant referral to them as “wonderments” is a clear rejection of the critical stance against technological progress and modernity in films like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Wild Bunch*. Furthermore, by pitting the comic and likable character of Cole against the psychotic and detestable character of Jesse, who rails against the encroachment of progress and holds fast to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 161-72, quotes regarding Leone films from 168-69; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 591-613.

his brand of rural Christianity, the film concludes that the sanest of men accept technological progress as a part of life, while those who reject it are driven into disillusionment.

While it supports the march of progress put forth in Westerns of the early 1960s, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* also contains elements of the revisionist Westerns of the late 1960s. Like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *The Wild Bunch*, it too creates a level of moral ambiguity regarding its major characters. Much like Butch and Sundance are presented as comic and likable figures, Cole's character has a pleasant aura about him; he is admired by young and old, as they gasp at his "war stories" and chuckle at his wry brand of humor; he is adored by women, who longed to go to bed with. The viewer is seldom reminded that Cole is a murderer and robber. Juxtaposed against law officers, government officials, and bankers, Cole is the most likable character in the film. Jesse too, can be seen as a sympathetic character. His revengeful nature and psychotic tendencies are attributed to the havoc wreaked upon his family during the Civil War. Though his character is less likable than Cole's, Jesse can be seen as a victim of forces beyond his control.

In addition to making murderers into sympathetic figures, the film also challenges accepted social orders. Like the *Wild Bunch*, it presents three versions of social order: a Christian order, legal order, and a wilder, alternative order best represented in the character of Cole. Jesse and Frank's justifications for their violent, and often unnecessary, killings through Biblical Scriptures exposes the hypocritical nature of the Christian order. The Legislature's acceptance of a bribe from the

railroad exposes the corrupt nature of the legal order. Meanwhile, the wilder alternative finds some credibility in the comic and sensible character of Cole. In its questioning of accepted mores and search for ambiguity, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* represents Slotkin's "demoralization" Westerns of the late 1960s.

Like other new school Westerns, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* allegorizes the Vietnam War. Richard Slotkin argues that, with the release of the *Magnificent Seven* in 1960, several Westerns began to mirror the controversy surrounding counter-insurgency wars. These "Mexico Westerns" used the peasant villages of Mexico and the experiences of cowboys, outlaws, and hired gunmen assigned to defend these villages to tell the story of the Vietnam War. Films like *Major Dundee* (1965), *The Professionals* (1966), *100 Rifles* (1968), *Guns of the Magnificent Seven* (1968), and *The Wild Bunch* all present situations in which outside gunmen find themselves in the midst of a bloody internal conflict between opposing forces in Mexico. Slotkin points out that these films raised "questions about the war and the counterinsurgency project, and . . . identify American heroism with a propensity for violence that is presented as extraordinary in its methods and scope." The malleability of the Western made it difficult for Western filmmakers to resist allegorizing the war.<sup>82</sup>

Though *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* does not go to the lengths of *Major Dundee* or *The Professionals*, it nevertheless attempts to allegorize the war. Jesse's character is the "hawk" (the Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon) who insists

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<sup>82</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 560-77, quote from 574.

that “there will always be enemy lines,” that the Civil War (Vietnam War) will continue despite the naysayers who insist it is over and cannot be won. His robberies are not robberies at all, but “guerrilla raids.” Cole, on the other hand, is the “dove” (the Bobby Kennedy or George McGovern) who believes that the war was for a valiant cause but that it has been lost; he accepts defeat and urges Jesse to put the war behind him; he warns Jesse that obsession with the war will only lead to further misery. Cole wants amnesty. He wants to be forgiven for his actions during and after the war so that he can go on to live a life of peace, but Jesse’s hawkish tendencies and the corruption of the Missouri legislature at the hands of the railroad keep Cole involved in Jesse’s futile war. The film ends with the hawk, Jesse, escaping to continue his war against the Yankees, and the dove, Cole, silenced by long years of imprisonment.

One last element that *The Northfield Minnesota Raid* adopts from the revisionist Westerns of its time is the tendency to debunk the myths built around some of the West’s most legendary figures. *Hour of the Gun* (1967) revised the heroic image of Wyatt Earp, suggesting a man prone to and obsessed with violence. His vengeful pursuit of the Clantons overrides considerations of justice and the integrity of the law. Billy the Kid became the subject of a debunking in *Dirty Little Billy* (1973). Whereas Billy was portrayed by the handsome and charming Kris Kristofferson in the same year (*Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*), in *Dirty Little Billy* he was portrayed by Michael J. Pollard as a “sniveling, filthy runt.” He is the product of squalor—a bastard child whose mother prostitutes for money—from a Western town

that lacks values and is obsessed with material concerns. Unable to overcome such hardships, Billy becomes a conniving rat with no regard for humanity. The demystifying of such legends as Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid made it nearly impossible for Jesse James to escape the same fate.<sup>83</sup>

The demystifying of the Jesse James legend is certainly director Philip Kaufman's unique contribution to *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*. Kaufman first became interested in the James legend as a student at the University of Chicago in the 1960s. In his readings and research he was captivated by the lack of romance and glamour in the outlaw's life. Jesse's physical shortcomings, like his granulated eyelids and incessant blinking, and his "backwoods" upbringing as a fatherless child and subject of a very conservative brand of Protestantism fascinated Kaufman. Years later when he decided to make a film about Jesse James, Kaufman went out of his way to expose the "romantic and false celluloid hero" behind the James legend. It was time, he felt, for filmgoers to meet the real Jesse James.<sup>84</sup>

Kaufman's history as a filmmaker attests to his displeasure with glamorous and melodramatic films and his inclination towards a rougher, more realistic brand of filmmaking. In the 1960s Kaufman was inspired by the Italian and French New Wave and the verite features of John Cassavetes and Shirley Clark. His first film, *Goldstein* (1964), reflects the hard edge, spontaneous, anti-glamour style of many European films in the 1960s. Of his style, Steve Chagollan of *Variety* says, "his work falls

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<sup>83</sup> Lenihan, *Showdown*, pp. 162-66.

<sup>84</sup> Steve Chagollan, "The Road Less Taken: As High-Concept and Soulless Knockoffs Prevail, Phil Kaufman Values Story, Character, Humanity" in *Variety* 20 July 1998, pp. 30-32.

precariously between arthouse and grownup films on a major league scale.”

Kaufman’s propensity for “realism” led him to de-bunk legendary figures other than Jesse James. For example, when he was making *The Right Stuff* (1983), he threw out William Goldman’s script because it focused too much on the astronauts and not enough on the test pilots who paved their way. Kaufman rewrote the script to de-center the astronauts somewhat and create a story that was both reverential and sardonic in its view towards them.<sup>85</sup>

Kaufman’s efforts to de-bunk the James legend laid out in other Hollywood pictures are clear from the outset. A color film, it opens with a black and white prologue showing “Okie-like” farmers being driven from their farms, then a narrative voice intones that “fresh winds of change have begun to blow across the land” and the film switches to its color format and captures the outlaws on their horses. Kaufman intended the opening as a commentary on the outdated and unsubstantiated version of the James legend put forth in Henry King’s *Jesse James*. Its purpose is to inform the viewer that the film will not trample down the same paths as other James films, that *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* is a new interpretation of Jesse’s life.

Originally, Kaufman’s prologue included references to other James films he thought significant but misleading in their portrayal of the outlaw’s life; Universal, however, insisted that most of this footage be cut. Kaufman, young and inexperienced at the time, carried little clout in the industry and dutifully obeyed the studio’s orders.

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<sup>85</sup> Chagollan, “The Road Less Taken;” Gavin Smith, “Heroic Acts and Subversive Images” in *Film Comment* July-August 1993, pp. 36-44.

Kaufman's revision is apparent early in the film as Jesse sits side-by-side with his brother Frank on a two-seat toilet in a Missouri outhouse. Flies swarm around their heads. Jesse's dialogue is interspersed with grunts as he defecates. Spit hangs from his bottom lip. His speech is driven by a strong southern accent and unfinished sentences. Like a hawk, he rants about the Civil War. In a child-like manner, his brother Frank nods in agreement with everything he says. All of this combines to create a first-impression of Jesse as stupid, unmannerly, and, ultimately, detestable. Jesse is "an anachronism that the movie refuses to mourn." Like so many other American traditions and institutions in the 1960s, Jesse James became the subject of suspicion and scorn.<sup>86</sup>

As the film progresses, Kaufman proceeds to de-bunk all major aspects of the James legend. Jesse's image as a romantic lover is quashed when he, in a trepid manner, refuses to join the rest of the gang in their visit to the prostitution house. At the prostitution house Cole remarks to another member of the gang that Jesse "never much liked the ladies." His reputation as a war hero is invalidated by the ruthless killing of six Union soldiers assigned to keep the peace ten years after the war; as a "crazy guerrilla fighter" and a murderer of soldiers, civilians, and women, Jesse lacks the honor and integrity often associated with war heroes. The film also spoils Jesse's image as an action/adventure hero. In his escape after the Minnesota raid, Jesse does not jump off cliffs or crash through windows; instead, he quietly escapes in a buckboard under cover of female dress.

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<sup>86</sup> Quote from Michael Dempsey, "Reviews: The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid" in *Film Quarterly* Summer 1972, p. 49.

Kaufman not only discredits Jesse's reputation as a romantic lover, war hero, and adventurer, he also demystifies perhaps the most identifiable aspect of the James legend, Jesse as Robin Hood. Nowhere is this more evident than in Kaufman's reworking of the "Jesse James and the Poor Widow" story used in *The True Story of Jesse James*. Jesse offers to pay the widow's mortgage. She accepts but wants to give Jesse something in exchange for his kind deed. Jesse asks for and receives one of the lady's dolls and then leaves with his gang. After the banker collects the mortgage from the old lady and is on his way back to town, Jesse confronts him in the woods. He orders the banker to hand over the mortgage. As the man is reaching in his pocket for the money, Jesse fires a bullet through his head. He then places the old lady's doll next to the body so that she will be blamed for the murder. Later in the picture, as Jesse and his gang are on the run after the Northfield raid, he travels back to the old widow's house for protection. When he realizes the posse is closing in on him, he murders the old widow so he can escape under cover of her clothes. By altering this folktale in such drastic fashion, Kaufman creates an image of Jesse as a hysterical, psychopathic, cross-dressing maniac who cares solely about his own survival.

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*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* was a failure at the box office. After nearly a month of exhibition the film had brought in only \$136,713. Universal hoped to boost sales by making the release into a twin-bill, adding the film *Taking Off* to the exhibition. Still, the film did poorly. Much of the failure can be attributed to Universal Studios, which handled the film irresponsibly, waiting several years after

the final cut to release it. When it was finally released, the film received little advertisement and no pre-release press screening. As one reviewer aptly summarized, Universal's poor handling of *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* allowed other revisionist Westerns to "steal its thunder."<sup>87</sup> Westerns like *The Wild Bunch*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) did remarkably well at the box office. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* came along in 1972 when fascination with revisionism was waning. By 1972 the Western, in general, was beginning its recession into the furthest depths of the motion picture industry, replaced by more modern, "law and order" detective and police films, like the Dirty Harry series, which could better respond to changing social and political circumstances.<sup>88</sup>

Despite its poor showing at the box office, critics respected the film. The *New York Times* called it a "lovely, odd sort of middle Western" in which "the places and people look right and the talk is not the slave of melodrama." Philip French, a scholar of the Western and critic for *Sight and Sound*, commented that the film has "enough individuality and feeling for the medium to make one look forward with quite high expectations to the director's next films." Jay Cocks wrote for *Time* magazine, "For all its flaws, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* is the kind of first movie so rich in texture and invention that we can look forward to a lot more from Philip Kaufman." *The New Yorker* called it a "beautiful, simple film about gaudiness and hope." Richard Schickel, critic for *Life* magazine commented, "The film has about it a

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<sup>87</sup> Chagollan, "The Road Less Taken," p. 31.

<sup>88</sup> Lenihan, *Showdown*, pp. 165-70. *Dirty Harry*, released in 1971, inspired three sequels: *Magnum Force* (1973), *The Enforcer* (1976), and *Sudden Impact* (1983).

wonderfully fresh air.” Critics were clearly pleased that the film did not fall into the same blind adoration for Jesse James as its predecessors. It was, they felt, the right time to question, even attack, the standing of one of the country’s most mythical figures.<sup>89</sup>

The events surrounding the production of the film, both political and artistic made the revision a possibility. The socio-political environment in the late 1960s made the sacred institutions of American society—government, corporations, the military, universities—susceptible targets of critical suspicion. Jesse James, an American legend and integral part of the country’s folklore, was worthy of the same suspicion. The motion picture industry continued to change, permitting more sex and violence in American films and allowing a young crop of independent filmmakers to force their way into the industry and tread on what had heretofore been uncharted territory. The Western revised itself, figuring out new ways to respond to changes in the socio-political environment and the motion picture industry. Westerns in the late 1960s tested the limits of how far the genre could go—with unprecedented levels of sex, violence, and profanity—before audiences would abandon the myths of the Old West. Many Western filmmakers attempted to create a sense of moral ambiguity around even the most violent and murderous characters. Writer/director Philip Kaufman brought his own unique vision to the Western artform and the history of Jesse James’ life; his decision to *demystify* the James legend, an established part of

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<sup>89</sup> Vincent Camby, “Screen: Last Ride for Jesse and Boys,” *New York Times*, 15 June 1972, 47:1; Philip French, “*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*,” *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1973/74, p. 55; Jay Cocks, “Made of Myth,” *Time*, 10 July 1972, pp. 68-9; “Outlaws or heroes?” *The New Yorker*, 24 June 1972, pp. 68-9; Richard Schickel, “Critics Roundup,” *Life*, 16 June 1972, p. 26.

the Western canon, while *glorifying* technological progress and the civilizing effects of modernity, another established part of the Western canon, adds a distinctive blend of pessimism and optimism rarely found in Westerns made during the late 1960s. His desire to expose the “false celluloid hero” behind Jesse James led him to create the most detestable film image of the outlaw moviegoers had ever seen.

The combination of forces working within the socio-political environment, the motion picture industry, the Western genre, along with the individual vision of Philip Kaufman make *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* the most inimitable movie about Jesse James to date.

## Conclusion

These three films about Jesse James provided avenues for neither catharsis nor escape. They were not detached from the world around them. Rather they were very much a product and reflection of the world in which they were made. Like literature, poetry, theatre, and other artforms, these films are cultural artifacts. They are celluloid remnants of twentieth-century America.

The only way to explain why three movies that purport to tell the “true” story of Jesse James’ life actually contain three very different versions of that life is to understand the artifactual significance of the films. Critics might dismiss the relationship between film and contemporary history and point merely to how these three films had different writers and directors. While this is true, and while Henry King, Nicholas Ray, and Philip Kaufman certainly left their unique imprints on the James legend, in no way can their contributions wholly explain the transformation the cinematic Jesse James underwent between 1939 and 1972. Only by incorporating socio-politics, film industry trends, and developments within the Western genre into the equation is it possible to understand the changing faces of Jesse James and the complexities that lie beneath what some misconstrue as catharsis.

Jesse James changed because the world around him changed. In the late 1930s, when Americans struggled through the aftershocks of the Depression and workers organized on unprecedented levels and the Communist party experienced a time of heightened popularity, Jesse James was portrayed as a victim of greedy capitalists, driven to outlawry by railroad barons so hungry for land and riches that they murdered his mother. In his attempts to rally the farmers to his cause, Jesse became a champion for local workers. In the mid-1950s, when the country was locked inside a Cold War with the Soviet Union and anti-communist fervor dominated the political scene, Jesse was no longer a victim of greedy capitalists; rather a combination of less political factors—the Civil War, uncaring adults, and weaknesses in Jesse's psyche—were responsible for his life of crime. In the late 1960s, when traditional American institutions and values came under attack, the legend of Jesse James received similar treatment. Rather than focus on the reasons for Jesse's outlawry as the other two films do, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* concentrates on de-bunking, even devilizing, the American legend. Jesse is less a victim and more a victimizer.

Yet contemporary social and political developments provide only part of the explanation for Jesse James' transformation. Developments within the motion picture industry are also responsible for the varying accounts of the outlaw's life. In the late-1930s the studio system dominated the industry and a strict Production Code governed all pictures released by the studios. In this environment, the studios released a rash of historically-based films that romanticized the American past. Thus in 1939

Jesse James is a romantic hero with dashing good looks, a clean mouth, and good manners. Despite being a train robber, he is not a violent person, nor is he driven by unbridled sexual desires. By the mid -1950s the studio system was collapsing and the Production Code was relaxed, as the industry recognized that teenagers formed an increasing percentage of the audience base. In 1957, then, *Jesse James* is a troubled youth driven to a life of crime, in part, by unsympathetic adults. He is more violent than he was in 1939, participating in more bank and train robberies and engaging in cold-blooded murder. Sexually, he is more passionate and aggressive. By the late 1960s the studio system had eroded and independent filmmakers dominated the industry; a more liberal rating system replaced the old Production Code; and the rising popularity of more risky European films forced American filmmakers to explore new realms of sex and violence. Thus *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* offers the most violent and sexually explicit portrayal of Jesse James' life. He is a ruthless killer who shoots six Union soldiers at point -blank range and even kills an old lady. He is propositioned to visit a prostitution house where the rest of the gang indulge in sex and experiment with drugs. Jesse's use of profanity is also an aspect of his character that does not appear in the other films and one that adds to his detestability.

Shifts within the Western genre also determined how Jesse was portrayed. *Jesse James* was an outlaw Western. Like other outlaw Westerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s, *Jesse James* borrows themes from the gangster films of the early 1930s; these films often focused on the career of a social outlaw driven to crime by

forces beyond his control--certainly Jesse's predicament in 1939. It was also common in outlaw Westerns for females to play the redemptive figure, a role filled by Jesse's mother and his wife. Lastly, outlaw Westerns explored the dark side of progress on the frontier, a theme embodied in the railroad's attempt to force the farmers off their land. The Western changed dramatically by 1957. While a few films like *High Noon* addressed the pressing political issues of the day, others avoided "political" Westerns in favor of a psychological approach. In *The True Story of Jesse James* pathological elements are emphasized at the expense of social and political causes for outlawry. Jesse becomes less of a romantic figure and certainly not the populist hero he was in 1939. He is a character trapped inside his own vanity, obsessed with enhancing his legend. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* is a strange combination of trends in early and late-1960s Westerns. The hero of the film, Cole Younger, represents the optimism and infatuation with progress and modernization that characterized many of the John Wayne Westerns of the early 1960s. Jesse, on the other hand, is forced to represent the pessimism characteristic of Westerns in the late 1960s; in his view, technological innovation and the encroachment of Yankee city-dwellers spell ruin for the frontier. Like Westerns of the late 1960s, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* also challenges accepted social orders by making the order of the gang, in many cases preferable to the order of law or church. It creates a sense of moral ambiguity that was common in many Westerns of the time.

Finally, there are the contributions of the filmmakers themselves, also influenced by the forces of history, if on a more personal level. Nunnally Johnson and

Henry King, both raised in small southern towns, maintained an affinity for small-town values. What they determined to be small-town values—marriage, family, community, good manners—became an integral part of Jesse’s life in 1939. Nicholas Ray brought a different touch to *The True Story of Jesse James* in 1957. His history as a radio programmer and his love for folk music resulted in a more folksy depiction of Jesse’s life, complete with folk ballads and tales like “Jesse James and the Poor Widow.” Ray’s interest in myth and legend also encouraged him to question the validity of the James legend. Philip Kaufman went a step further: not only did he question the legend, he spit in its face. Kaufman’s own interest in the James legend as a college student in Chicago and his captivation with the realism of the French and Italian New Wave film schools inspired him to present who he felt was the “real” Jesse James, a despicable cutthroat who Hollywood filmmakers had unjustly glorified for nearly fifty years.

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A natural question flows from the identification of these four forces: which is most influential? It is folly to assume that they can be divided into quarters and that each contributes equally. What force, then, is most responsible for Jesse’s diverse cinematic lives? On the surface, it appears that socio-politics turn the wheel. Social and political developments caused changes in the motion picture industry and the Western genre and also influenced the worldviews of filmmakers. For example, it is no coincidence that the lawsuit that brought down the studio system was filed in the late 1930s. Worker protests and unionization in the 1930s inspired the type of

organization in Hollywood--the Screen Actors Guild, Screen Writers Guild, and other unions--necessary to bring a lawsuit as potentially devastating as *United States v. Paramount Pictures*. The socio-political climate also influenced the Western genre. Westerns in the late 1960s adapted themselves to speak to the Vietnam War. Westerns in the mid-1950s spoke to political issues without speaking to them at all; the political climate at the time was not conducive to critical variations of the Western, so the genre moved in a more psychological direction. Just as socio-political issues affected the film industry and the Western genre, they also influenced the "vision" of filmmakers. Nicholas Ray came of age at a time--the 1930s--when the folk music scene was thriving. Ray fell in love with folk music and his work with the WPA only whetted his fascination. The passion he acquired for folklore in the 1930s carried over into his filmmaking in the 1950s.

It seems, then, that Jesse's transformation between 1939 and 1972 could be explained largely in terms of socio-political change. This rationalization is too simple, however. While the other three forces were influenced by socio-political change, what is important, and what both broadens and complicates the explanation of Jesse's transformation, is an understanding of the inter-relationships that developed between all four.

Each film provides numerous examples of the inter-connected nature of the four forces. While the socio-political environment helped make Jesse James a populist hero in 1939, the motion picture industry, in turn, determined the extent to which filmmakers could allegorize that socio-political environment. The strict

Production Code of the industry and its fascination with films that glorified the American past limited filmmakers' abilities to address controversial issues. In this case, the motion picture industry attempted to influence the socio-political climate by presenting movie-goers a glorified version of American history, one that industry executives believed Americans needed and enjoyed in the late 1930s. An interesting relationship also developed between genre and filmmaker in *Jesse James*. In 1939 Henry King worked in a new and developing sub-genre, the outlaw Western. King borrowed themes and emphases from other genres, like the gangster films of the early-1930s, as well as from "B" Westerns. Yet King was not a slave to genre. His individuality pushed the Western in new directions. His "vision" of Jesse James' life inspired a rash of imitators and prompted later filmmakers, like Ray and Kaufman, to respond to his use of the Western and his portrayal of Jesse James' life.

Similar inter-relationships transpired in *The True Story of Jesse James*. In the 1950s the motion picture industry responded to societal fears of increased juvenile delinquency with a flood of films about discontented youths. *The True Story of Jesse James* was very much a part of this response, but like other juvenile delinquency films of the day, it was more than simply a reflection of a social issue. The motion picture industry and filmmakers of the time tried to affect social change by providing solutions to the problem. *The True Story of Jesse James* found answers for delinquency in uncaring and materialistic adults; it is a perfect example of films not just addressing social issues but providing answers for them as well. Another inter-relationship developed between Nicholas Ray and the Western. While Ray adopted

genre techniques from psychological Westerns of the day, he also pushed the genre in new directions. He was the first filmmaker to question the validity of the James legend. His willingness to take on some of the lesser-known, darker sides of Jesse's life laid the groundwork for Philip Kaufman's brutal demystification in the late 1960s.

*The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* also illustrates the interconnected nature of the four forces. Westerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s not only commented on contemporary political issues but used the genre's allegorical qualities to criticize and provide answers for social problems. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* both responds to and provides solutions for the Vietnam War. In making the self-proclaimed peace advocate, Cole Younger, the hero and the war-obsessed lunatic, Jesse James, the villain, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* concludes that the forces of peace are on the right side of the war, while the "hawks" are merely disillusioned maniacs. Again, here is an example of a film not simply responding to political issues but providing solutions for them. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* also provides interesting insight into the relationship between filmmakers and the motion picture industry. Changes in the industry, namely the breakdown of the studio system, allowed independent filmmakers more leverage. New filmmakers, in turn, forced the industry in new and riskier directions. Whereas in the 1930s the studio system dictated to filmmakers what types of pictures would be produced, in the 1960s the roles were reversed and independent filmmakers determined the direction

of the industry. This change is central to Jesse's transformation between 1939 and 1972.

Thus a simple explanation that relates Jesse's transformation to social and political change does not suffice. While these three films reflect social and political change, their treatments of the past are much more complicated. They are the result of a complex, inter-related network in which changes in one force often affected changes in another. It is far more beneficial to explore the inter-related nature of the network than it is to single out one all-determinative force. Only then can we understand how history is used in the movies, only then do we see the tangled web of history that hides behind the screen legend, Jesse James.

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In the end, which version of Jesse James' life are we to believe? Was he the romantic populist hero of 1939? Was he the psychologically troubled youth of 1957? Or was he the hysterical, raving, war-obsessed lunatic of 1972? To quibble with such questions is to miss the point. Rather than rely on movies for accurate history or, even worse, chastise them for their *inaccuracies*, historians would do better to understand them as artifacts, as an alternative lense through which to view the past. What we learn about Jesse James in these films is not as significant as what we can uncover about America in the twentieth century. There is history in the movies. There are truths behind the lies.

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## **Biography**

Clint Loftin was born in Lawrenceville, Georgia on September 8, 1974. He graduated from Berkmar High School in 1993. He attended the University of Georgia and graduated in 1997 with a degree in Social Science Education. He enrolled in the History Department at the University of Maine in 1998 with the hope of obtaining a Master's degree. Mr. Loftin chose to concentrate in twentieth-century American history, more specifically he developed an interest in how history has been presented in various forms of popular culture throughout the twentieth century.

After receiving his degree, Mr. Loftin will pursue a teaching career and leave open the possibility of freelance writing. He urges all future History students to contemplate ways in which credible history can be brought to the masses. He is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in History from the University of Maine in May, 2000.