'Demythologizing' Hollywood Western: E. L. Doctorow's Welcome to Hard Times

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> We are born, so to speak, provisionally, it
> doesn't matter where. It is only gradually that we
> compose within ourselves our true place of origin so
> that we may be born there retrospectively and each
> day more definitely.
>
> Rainer Maria Rilke

Abstract: This study is an attempt to shed light on the hollywoodization of the myth of the Frontier — a seminal one in constructing American history and identity — and E. L. Doctorow's take on it in his *Welcome to Hard Times*. Considering ideas regarding the importance of cinema in creating a simulated and hypereal world as well as the 1960s counter-culture, the writers try to demonstrate the way one of the major writers of postmodern fiction aspires to challenge, parody and demythologize this central myth and its Hollywood versions. Central to the discussion is how Doctorow foregrounds the very complexity of this 'demythologizing' venture.

Keywords: E. L. Doctorow, *Welcome to Hard Times*, hollywoodization, the myth of the Frontier, postmodern fiction, parody

Western as a genre

"A deserted street in the Old West; Two men at opposite ends of town step out from the board walk and face each other. Their hands suspended above the six-guns strapped to their hips, they walk forward, coldly eying each other. "That's far enough," one shouts, and then they stand. There is complete silence, and no movements; then they go for their guns, shots ring out, and a man lies dead. Curious townspeople now appear to gawk at the body…" This is how the film scholar Jim Kitses opens his book *The Western*. The above scene is certainly one of the most familiar scenes of the Western movies, which in their most basic definition are described as the ones set in American Frontier between "the mid 1800s and the early 1900s" and involve mythical conventions and dramatic conflicts like the clash between "forces of good and evil, man and nature, law and anarchy" (Turner 218). Gunfighters, invincible hero, tough Indians, "selfless sheriff or marshal who brings law and order to the wilderness" (O'Conner & Rollins 20), cowboys, townspeople, bars and saloons, open flats and prairies and etc. are all some of the most recurring motifs and features of the

Westerns. According to Camilla Fojas, by its very name, Western is a genre of "western expansionism and of a manifest destiny west of the Mississippi River" (27). As for its mythic aspect, Jim Kitses considers Western as a "racist, male chauvinistic, nationalistic myth" (329). Similarly, Alexandra Keller defines it as a genre whose cultural meanings oscillate between myth and history (225).

Some scholars believe that romance — in particular the 19th century pulp novel and the romance of the valiant knight saving a damsel from evil forces — is the basic tradition from which Western has sprung. These scholars assume James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1857) and his *Leather stocking Tales* as one of the originators of this genre. However, Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan believe that the films have expanded on "established Aristotelian narrative divisions in turn, introducing new genres within literature, such as the Western, thrillers, horrors, and Gangster genres" (7). Kitses considers the Western and the Gangster films as Hollywood's greatest inventions (338). Anyway, what is of great importance today is the essential role of these mythical movies and Hollywood in general, in reflecting the dominant ideologies and shaping American culture. As Bryan Rommel-Ruiz affirms, "as a genre steeped in American myth, history, and ideology, Hollywood's Western has shaped American culture ... and has been a cultural lens for Americans to understand their history and national character in" (105).

Fredrick Jackson Turner on the myth of the Frontier

Historically speaking, as most scholars have mentioned, the idea of an earthly paradise has occupied the old nations' imagination even before America had been discovered. Quoting an optimistic poem on America as the garden of earth by Michael Drayton, Kay House explains:

> As we well know, the gales were less merry and the landings less
> frolic than Drayton expected, but the idea of America as "earth's only
> paradise" endured in spite of actual experience. America was actually a
> cultural invention long before it was an actuality. (11-12)

Neil Campbell also believes that "the American West has always been, by the very nature of its mythic representation […] a simulation reproducing images conforming to some already defined, but possibly non-existent, sense of Westness" (qtd. in Handley and Lewis 1). This is reminiscent of Baudrillard's ideas on simulation and hyperreality. According to

Baudrillard, "in our era of high-tech simulation, as we are buried under images, efforts to give or take meaning from history are deeply problematic. Images stand in for the reality now […] we do not know the real, but the appearances behind which it hides and are experienced as being more real than any reality" (qtd. in Coulter 12-14). Of course, this also shows the importance and the need of myth in every culture to emphasize distinctiveness and the national identity. As for America, from the time pioneers ventured west, Americans valorized a sacred mythos, connecting the American national identity to the history of the American Frontier, one that was reified in the mass culture, initially with popular fictions and eventually with films like Michael Mann's optimistic *Last of the Mohicans* (Rommel-Ruiz 129-130), and also films in which these pioneers sought to bring the benefits of civilization to the colonized indigenous people as a duty and as the "white man's burden", like John Ford's classic Westerns after the war about taming the land and exterminating savage elements, either Indians or the outlaws, who threatened the well-being of the settlers (O' Conner and Rollins 26). Hence, Americans have been growing up with this popular myth in the movies.

Of great influence on all these mythical-ideological discourses and their fundamental role in American national self-definition and on America's historiography in general, was Fredrick Jackson Turner's notion of the history of westward expansion as the history of America's democracy and individualism; "taming the harsh and unforgiving western landscape, western settlers ultimately succeeded civilizing American west, bringing it into modern America" (Rommel-Ruiz 80). In his lecture at the 1893 World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago, Turner emphasized the significance of the Frontier in American history and stimulated historians, writers and moviemakers, ever since, to mythologize American values in their narratives. He also shifted the point of the reference of the U.S history from the original East Coast settlement with their European roots to the all-American West Frontier which signified the North American difference from Europe as well as its independence from colonial forefathers (Camilla Fojas 27). As O'Conner and Rollins explain, in Turner's speech, the old world's aristocratic pretensions and the cultural assumptions that immigrants brought with them were irrelevant on the Frontier (2). In that lecture Turner asserted that "the existence of an area of free land […] and the advance of the American settlement westward, explains America's [today] development" (qtd in Camilla Fojas 27). These also lead to the famous American dream and the prophecy on America as a paradise where, according to

Turner, "ethnic differences paled on the Frontier, where people survived on the basis of their wits and their willingness to work hard" (qtd. in O'Conner and Rollins 6).

Realizing, as Turner had argued, that the West was such a central force in America's life, Hollywood producers used it as a backdrop for a myriad of movies (ibid). Turner's influence has been so great that since 1988, TNT (Turner Network Television) has been producing Westerns that are truly representative of the genre and are to "emphasize the genre's close association with American history and Western symbolism" (Pierson 283). The TV series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998) is one of the famous productions of TNT.

Hollywood and the myth of the Frontier

According to Alexandra Keller, one of the most "camouflaged components" of the Westerns is their aspiration not simply to represent history, but to write it depending on contemporary politics and events (252). Therefore, historical theorization is what occurs besides the claimed historical representation in cinematic texts. Roland Barthes also sees this kind of mythologization as ideological, and believes that myths can hide the ideological function of the signs by naturalizing them. Hence, Barthes calls myths "the depoliticized speech" of the contemporary era (Barthes 142). As Rommel-Ruiz points out, American Western has always been a way in which Americans engaged their past to understand their present condition and the future possibilities; thus, the history they see on movies says more about their contemporary situation than the past as it actually happened (105-130). Gene YoungBlood foresees the future influence and power of cinema so much as to replace spoken and written language as a central form of communication, and wryly asserts that "through the art of cinema we shall create heaven right here on earth" (qtd. in Sklar 315-17). The process of hollywoodization − Hollywood as the big mythmaking company − in directing the minds, in popularizing certain conceptions of history and 'values', has become a salient feature of contemporary culture.

According to Gerry Coutler (in an article on Baudrillard, Hollywood, and history), "filmmakers are now more powerful than the best historians […] and cinema is more important than the best written histories in terms of its reach and impact on consciousness" (4). Baudrillard's theories on cinema are very much related to hollywoodization and historiography. As a matter of fact, Baudrillard frequently refers to film and cinema in his writings and has been well aware of cinema's mythical influences. For him cinema and the

moving pictures represent pathways of the "Americanization of the world" (Coutler 11). He assumes the obsession of our age to be the "blurring of the real and the virtual" (as he explains discussing the movie *The Matrix*); he claims that "reality is also disappearing at the hands of cinema" (qtd. in Coutler 11). "Our understanding of history," Baudrillard avers, "is increasingly divorced from the 'historical real' and cinema plays an important role in replacing it with, at best, an 'invocation of resemblance' —a kind of hyper-resemblance" (ibid). Taking holocaust as an example, he argues that the majority of people recognize it through films such as *Schindler's List*. In general, Baudrillard believes that cinema has a "profound effect on our perception of people and things, and of time, too" (ibid 12). He later condemns cinematic pretensions of reality to be "paranoid" and "terrorist vision" the kind of which no other culture but America ever "displayed toward its signs" (ibid 10). Elsewhere, he asks: "Nazism, the concentration camps or Hiroshima… did they really exist? What makes it logically possible is media's way of replacing any event, history and idea with another" (Baudrillard 91).

New Western (revisionist Western)

However, from 1960s on (era of postmodernism), the so-called "counterculture revolution", with its postmodern artistic and stylistic innovations and a general distrust towards grand narratives flourished. In the U.S, as Arthur Jaupaj notes, the rupture was caused by a mounting distrust towards the "official media and media-generated cultural images" (2). Raymond Federman, an American Postmodern writer and essayist, labels the 1960s the "era of suspicion and mistrust towards the popular mythology" (qtd in ibid). Jaupaj explains that the Western suffered the most due to its strict tendency towards the unsustainable mythology of the West. The main concern in dealing with the past and the Western mythology was actually the lack of a trustworthy historical reference and the "existence of simulacra" (copies without original as Baudrillard theorizes) (4). This decline in the traditional mythic Western genre was accompanied by the parodies of the genre, and other ways of its thematic distortions, bringing about a "growing uncertainty about American uniqueness and the especial place of the Western in establishing that uniqueness" (ibid 3).

Therefore, here came, in Jaupaj's words, "the success of New Western and new fiction of the 1960s, i.e., the artist-historian using interchangeably both facts and fiction, and thus, re-presenting more truthful alternative western histories" to awaken America from its

"mass media illusion and optimism" (3-4) and to provoke them to think more critically about history instead of being passive spectators. For instance, the historian Limerick, one of the critics of white man legends of taming the wilderness, has written extensively on the need to redefine the concepts of Frontier in professional works and in the public's imagination (Sultze 262).

Meanwhile, some filmmakers also went off their traditional path and created the "New Western" or the "self-conscious revisionist Western" so that Westerns of 1960s on displayed a cynicism toward the genre's clichés to the point that, as Keller notes, by 1980 the Western had become the "counter-Western" (255). Movies like Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), Kevin Costner's *Dances with the Wolves* (1990), and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) are notable examples. Apart from not meeting their viewers' expectations of Western's conventions, these movies also tried to give voice to the unvoiced Indians and portray them in a more positive way. According to Robert Sklar, these filmmakers claimed an "equal status for cinema with poetry, fiction and painting" in telling the truth (309), and thus tried to blur the distinction between the 'pop art' and the 'high art'. Nevertheless, as critics have noted, they were not very successful. In trying to give voice to the previously marginalized characters, for instance, most of them (e.g. *Dances with the Wolves*) portrayed one-dimensional characters who were still shown through the white protagonist's experience and were still considered as the "anti-thesis of the American civilization" (Rommel-Ruiz 122). In trying to contradict the myth of the frontier, also, as O'Conner and Rollins assert, "although its vision bleak, the Western after the 1960s still served as a canvas on which contemporary American issues could be engaged" (29); despite its attempts to reincribe American history, "the genre's conventions still remain entrenched in the American psyche" (15). This can be due to the same strong 'impact of cinema on consciousness.' In general, these Western parodies or revisions ultimately reinforce the genre through their inevitable acceptance of a certain set of shared codes and conventions even if they are being parodied or critiqued. As Cawelti explains, 'popular arts' are based on understood conventions, and it is the work of scholars to explore how they are applied and how they work (qtd. in O'Conner and Rollins 9).

Welcome to Hard Times and the Demythologization of the Western

As a writer of historical fictions who believes (as he once said on a TV program) that the writer's job is to "redefine the reality we live with and make it truer", and who has always

shown interest in rewriting the past (in works like *Ragtime*, *The Book of Daniel* and *Welcome to Hard Times*), E. L. Doctorow has created works that are fundamentally connected to American history and mythology. Of the movies made from two of his books (*Welcome to Hard Times* and *Ragtime*), he is dissatisfied with the first: "the people in the movie were very beautiful and wore color-coordinated costumes while the people in my book were poor, pock-marked and dirty" (Corry 1). His *Welcome to Hard Times*, the focus of our discussion, is an example of the demythologized and parodied Western fiction that undermines Turner's thesis of the Frontier and deconstructs Western conventions previously established by Hollywood. By reversing the expectations of the traditional Western and the West as the land of development and justice with essential themes such as "inevitability of progress, the virtues of capitalism, the necessity of law and…" (Keller 225), Doctorow parodies the genre's clichés in order to show that America's past might have been a sordid, corrupt and unheroic one with no such thing as cowboy honor and grace. However, as a self-conscious narrative, the novel also tries to suggest the subjectivity of history by depicting the impossibility of recording *exactly* what has happened due to the failure of the memory, language and other factors that point to the postmodern notion of lack of certitude about truth.

Assuming the novel as a parody of Western, as does Jaroslav Kusnir, one is reminded of the importance of parody as an inevitable fate of any genre. According to Linda Hutcheon, "parody […] is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new work" (32). Or, as Brian McHale explains, "parody is a form of self-reflection and self-critique, a genre's way of thinking critically about itself" (qtd. in Kusnir 2).

Starting with the setting of the novel, in general, as most critics agree, one witnesses a quite traditional Western setting: flat, treeless Frontier with prairies till the horizon. "The town was the Dakota Territory, and on three sides … there is nothing but miles of flats" (*Welcome* 3). As Kusnir suggests, "depiction of landscape is used first to establish the genre's conditions and then to undermine them, this way, the author undermines the importance of its cultural value in formation of American cultural identity, suggesting the myth of American Frontier is only an illusion" (6). As with the Western movies, in the novel, Indian, mayor or sheriff, miners in hope of wealth, business men, railroads, saloons, etc. abound. However, they are all parodied. Blue is the anti-hero who is nothing like the Western movies invincible heroes. He is a coward, indecisive, and impotent mayor in face of the villain (the

Bad Man from Bodie). He is so timid that he chooses the drink instead of the weapon when he has the opportunity to kill the Bad Man. So are most of the other townspeople. When faced with the Bad Man, they prefer to be passive by-standers who encourage Molly, a woman, to go and kill him. In Molly's angry words: "Oh sure, sure! Christ that Bad Man's the only man in town! I can't believe it … using a lady, for God's sake, marching brave behind a lady's skirts!" (*Welcome* 16)

Molly, the female character of the novel is nothing like the traditional Western women, either. Despite the traditional Western movies women who are usually "confined to domesticity and are primarily shown in nurturing roles and as symbols of civilization" (Pierson 291), Molly is depicted as a revengeful, tough woman who stands for skepticism, desolation and violence rather than womanly kindness and nourishment. As Pierson explains, traditional male protagonists are men of few words and suspicious of language, and indeed men of action in contrast to the genre's woman characters who serve as teachers of language and culture (291). This is another convention reversed as the reader witnesses Molly more in silence and more of a 'man of action', teaching the boy, Jimmy, how to shoot, while Blue becomes the teacher of language and one whose favorite activity is jotting down the ledgers. John Bear, the Indian of the novel, is also, unlike the previous savage Indians, domesticated and silent and one who has nothing to do with the destruction of the town.

The note of skepticism in the title of the novel is very suggestive. An uncommon name for a Western town, Hard Times is also, as Kusnir mentions, an allusion to Dickens's novel, evoking the idea of social criticism. As Zar, the tradesman, the capitalist, puts it, "always a ghost city is one with a name full of promise. Is that not so? We must have care in our naming not to make that mistake" (*Welcome* 65). Indirectly commenting on Turner's ideas regarding westward expansion and cultural-economical progress and hallmarks of the American Dream, Doctorow's novel turns into a compelling parody. As the reader sees, most characters are immigrants coming to West, deceived by false Frontier myths of hope and progress. Blue, for instance, talks of his motivation of 'coming West':

> When I came West with the wagon, I was a young man with
> expectations … But in turn my expectations wore away…and I learned it
> was enough to stay alive. (*Welcome* 7)

His comment on Zar's idea of the West is a telling one:

> Zar: Blue, I came West from Vermont. They have trees in that country…water flows from the rocks… and if you're half a man you can make your life without too much trouble.
> Blue: that's what I once heard about this country. (*Welcome* 28)

All efforts made by the characters prove to be futile and the town is never really established. Thus, in contrast to an enduring theme of the Western films, here in Hard Times there is little hope for building a civilization. Neither is there any justice; evil is not punished nor good rewarded. Guns, anarchy and vengeance are the order of the day rather than law and justice in Hard Times. (Note the aptness of the title in this regard.) Ethnic differences have not vanished, as Turner claimed, and characters are labeled by their nationalities: the Russian for Zar, the China girl, the Indian for John Bear. Despite being depicted as harmless, the Indian is still treated as an outsider, an 'other.'

In a naturalistic manner, characters are shown trying hard to survive against the harsh and 'unwelcoming' nature. Winters are deadening and freezing, summers scorching. Dirt, dust, heat, cold, and poverty are frequent images intimating the prevalent atmosphere of the novel ("There had to be an end to winter or an end to us all" (*Welcome* 112); "It was a worse dread to feel so lost on the earth. A live creature, in a lifeless land" (*Welcome* 108)). This bleak mood is well expressed in the following lines:

> Do you think, Mister, with all the settlement around you that you're freer than me to make your fate? … Your father's doing is in you, like his father's was in him and we can never start new, we take on all the burden; the only thing that grows is trouble, the disasters get bigger, that's all. (187)

Nevertheless, as many critics point out, all such narratives reinforce the Western genre in general, though in a new way, for, in the final analysis, they are all dependent on it to legitimate and authenticate themselves. One should not forget that one of the main

functions of parody, in general, is — as Cawelti and Turner, among others, have mentioned — to renew a genre in a different way after its exhaustion and predictability.

Still, Doctorow never claims to have distinguished the 'real West' from the 'fake West'. Writing conservatively, in a self-conscious metafictional style, Doctorow highlights the subjectivity and provisionality of history. In its self-reflexive spirit, the novel fits into "historiographic metafiction", that highlights, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, "the narrative nature of knowledge, be it historical or fictional" (qtd. in Jaupaj 4).

In portraying Blue as a historian who occasionally comments on how difficult it is to record history truthfully, and how doubtful he is about what he is writing — note phrases like "I guess," "maybe," "someone told me later," "I can't remember exactly" etc. — Doctorow "challenges Western epistemology and its certainty that we can find absolute historical knowledge about the past" (Rommel-Ruiz 122). Little by little Blue becomes mature enough to accept that there is a big difference between the past as lived and past as remembered, perceived, and jotted down in a narrative way. Here are some examples of this metafictionality and self-consciousness about the futility of efforts to record a genuine history due to different factors like limitations of memory, language and the evasive nature of truth in general:

> I am writing this and maybe it will be recovered and read; and I'll say now how I picture some reader, a gentleman in a stuffed chair … and a solid house around him and a whole city of store streets around the house_ a place like New York which Molly talked about… (*Welcome* 187)

> I've been trying to write what happened but it is hard, wishful work. Time is beginning to run out on me, and the form remembrance puts on things is making its own time and guiding my pen in ways I don't trust. (*Welcome* 149)

> I'm trying to put down what happened but the closer I've come in time, the less clear I am in my mind… I have the cold feeling that no matter how careful I've been, everything I've written doesn't tell how it was. It escapes me: like what happened is far below my understanding, below my sight. (*Welcome* 202-3)

> And now I've put down what happened… and it scares me more
> than death scares me that it may show the truth… does truth come in
> such scrawls, so bound by my limits? (*Welcome* 213)

According to Winfred Bevilacqua, Blue realizes that he had depicted the world of Hard Times the way he had wished it to be and that he had conceived of himself and the other townspeople in terms of the traditional conventions and ideologies of the Frontier tale (96). In this metafictional way, Doctorow apparently has accepted the inevitable narrativity of history; for him as an author, questioning and challenging the previous conceptions of the frontier seems to suffice.

As a postmodernist novel, *Welcome to Hard Time* seems to be an uncanny illustration – vis-à-vis the idea of the frontier in American history – of Baudrillard's poignant point about the dominant approach to history and meaning in the postmodern era:

> The revolution of our time is the uncertainty revolution… do we
> absolutely have to choose between meaning and non-meaning? But the
> point is precisely that we do not want to. The absence of meaning is
> intolerable, but it would be just as intolerable to see the world assume a
> definitive meaning. (qtd. in Coutler 15)

If Doctorow is interested in 'demythologizing' the myth of the West, he is also keen on foregrounding the very complexity of this venture as he is well aware of the contingency of his own position as a writer of fiction and of the fact that such 'demythologizing' is bound to be provisional.

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