The Ever-Growing Ogre': The Railroad vs. Progress in Henry King's Jesse James

Hervé Mayer

The "Ever-growing Ogre": The Railroad vs. Progress in Henry King's *Jesse James* (1939)[*]

Hervé MAYER
Université Montpellier III Paul Valéry

In a number of western classics, trains convey the ideas of progress and civilization through a wild continent, and in the process, the construction of the railroad has become a synecdoche for the construction of the American nation.[1] Yet, few films seem to acknowledge and truly exploit the structural contradictions underlying the celebration of technological and social progress on the one hand, and the idealization of the primitive and independent way of life of the West on the other. And even fewer films of Hollywood's classical period use trains to challenge and/or criticize the dominant narrative of nation-building through continental conquest and technological progress.

Jesse James (1939), directed for 20th Century Fox by Henry King, is the first western to be rooted in the opposition between farming communities and the American railroads. In the wake of the Great Depression, when the nation seemed divided along economic lines, *Jesse James* — together with its legendary popular hero, a bandit battling against the banks and railroads — explores the consequences that an earlier national crisis, the Civil War, had inflicted on rural America. Among the westerns released in the late 1930s, King's film is not the only one using the blank space of the West to explore sectional conflicts inherited from the Civil War, but it remains remarkable for its indictment of an economic *system* traditionally associated with progress, whose embodiment is a powerful railroad company.

This article proposes an analysis of the railroad in *Jesse James* as a major, yet incomplete, inversion of conventional western narratives of progress. It explores the film's use of trains as ideological signifiers of systemic corruption in the political context of the late thirties, a time when many Americans were disillusioned with the benefits of industrial capitalism. It shows that the film's mostly critical depiction of the railroad industry is the result of interaction between different traditions of populism, drawn from its southern political agenda and generic identity as a western. The analysis of this interplay is one of the main contributions of this article. I intend to demonstrate that *Jesse James*'s western setting allowed for a nationalization of sectional concerns that brought about a new populist trend in the western genre, which presented industrial progress as a threat to democracy, and embraced instead an agrarian ideal of progress inspired by Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Jackson Turner.

From Jesse James to *Jesse James*

Jesse James was an ex-Confederate from the border state of Missouri who believed in

[*] To cite this article: Hervé Mayer, "The 'Ever-Growing Ogre': The Railroad vs. Progress in Henry King's *Jesse James* (1939)", in Taïna Tuhkunen ed., "Railway and Locomotive Language in Film", *Film Journal*, 3 (2016). URL: http://filmjournal.org/fj3-mayer.

[1] For further development on such meanings of the railroad in westerns, see the article by Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard in the present issue.

slavery and in the rights of the states. He started robbing banks, then trains, mostly for profit. With the assistance of local newspapers and supporters of the guerilla fighters in the South, James consciously turned his criminal record into a story of chivalrous resistance against oppression, in a manner similar to Thomas Dixon's later glorification of the Ku Klux Klan in *The Clansman* (1905). In *Inside War*, historian Michael Fellman asserts that such a glorification initially served a strictly sectional political agenda: the ennoblement of guerilla resistance to Reconstruction in the South by an association of its most famous figures with mythic outlaws such as Robin Hood:

> James was the most famous American noble outlaw, and by extension, what justified him served in addition as *ex post facto* justification for all the guerillas. The popular creation of the noble guerilla overlapped the creation of the legendary Jesse James.[2]

But the national conflicts of the ensuing "Gilded Age"[3] helped turn the southern rebel into an archetype of the populist outlaw in late nineteenth-century dime novels and popular fiction. By the time of his death in 1882, he had become the hero of a "national myth of resistance"[4] to political and economic oppression. In particular, the action that came to crystallize his popular resistance to tyranny was his fight against the railroad, an industry developed both during the Reconstruction era and the Gilded Age that was dominated by Northern capital and marred by corruption and speculation at the expense of small landowners. Consequently, while transcontinental trains were celebrated in the eastern and western press, and later in western films, they were rejected culturally, and sometimes physically, first in the rural South, then by a growing number of populist movements throughout the country.

The 1930s was a propitious time for screenwriter Nunnally Johnson, producer Darryl Zanuck and director Henry King to revive this folk hero in a prime production. Just as in the Gilded Age, the development of financial capitalism and technological innovation, perceived as progress in the 1920s, turned into an oppressive machine after the Wall Street Crash. In the context of the 1930s, Jesse James's fight against the railroad could serve as an embodiment of popular empowerment against the destructive forces of progress. As Walter Coppedge writes:

> In 1938-39, as the country was recovering from a Depression perceived by many to have been created by ruthless individualism and the greed of large corporations, those forces were once again suspect.[5]

The ambiguous glorification of outlaw characters had flourished in the popular press of the thirties, and contemporary criminal figures like John Dillinger, a gangster and bank robber in the Depression-era United States, had already entered popular culture as noble crusaders against an undemocratic and corrupt economic system. But they were too close in time and

[2] Michael Fellman, *Inside War: the Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 260.

[3] The expression coined by Mark Twain designates the historical period from the end of the Reconstruction in 1877 to the beginning of the Populist Era in 1901, a period characterized by a combination of rapid industrial development, political corruption and growing economic inequalities. A pun on the familiar expression "Golden Age", it suggested the idea of conspicuous wealth masking large-scale poverty.

[4] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 137.

[5] Walter Coppedge, *Henry King's America* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1986), 107.

therefore, though potentially profitable, politically dangerous for studios struggling with the restrictions of the Motion Picture Production Code.[6] An industry-wide agreement *not* to make films on Dillinger had been reached,[7] and Jesse James came as a perfect cultural substitute to express and channel popular resentments.

Jesse James's involvement with wider political and social concerns was not an exception in the films of the late 1930s. During that period, as Peter Stanfield claims in the conclusion to his analysis of 1930s westerns, politics was never disconnected from entertainment: "[l]ate 1930s westerns were deliberately 'double-coded': received both as harmless entertainment and as engaged on a political, social and cultural front."[8] The fact that *Jesse James* developed a political discourse critical of America's undemocratic subjection to big business was not uncommon. Neither was the fact that it focused on the railroad as the embodiment of these undemocratic forces: of all the characterizations of these "forces imperiling the common man [in the westerns of the late 1930s] it is the railroad — 'Hell on wheels that claims a man's life for every day of the year' (*Union Pacific* [Cecil B. DeMille, 1939]) — that offers the primary threat."[9] Stanfield demonstrates that such characterization was largely inspired by the B-westerns so popular in that decade and often noted for their critical stance on capitalism.[10] Yet through its release in January 1939, *Jesse James* transferred those concerns to the A-western and set the trend for big budget productions. Its bleak depiction of the railroad as a tyrannical organization went much further than any other contemporary film: "Where *Dodge City* [Michael Curtiz, 1939] sees railroads as progressive and corruption as the work of criminal interlopers, *Jesse James* sees the railroad itself as corrupt and its building as a criminal invasion of an agrarian community."[11] In terms of its politics, *Jesse James* offers the most radical perspective of its time on the political and economic conflicts that followed the Great Depression.

Despite initial doubts expressed by producer Darryl Zanuck over the potential success

[6] Article I of the particular applications in the principles of plot of the Code recommended that "the presentation of crimes against the law, human or divine […] must not throw sympathy with the criminal as against the law, nor with the crime as against those who punish it." Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, website of the University of Colorado: http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/film/productcode.pdf. Last consulted: 06/08/2015. The historical setting of the James' story seemed a safer treatment of the same subject, although Zanuck and King would still have to struggle with that article of the Code.

[7] Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s: the Lost Trail* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 184.

[8] Ibid., 225.

[9] Ibid., 214.

[10] In that respect, films starring singing cowboys Roy Rogers and Gene Autry stand out particularly. If their characters often stand up for the common man, they even go to Washington as western congressmen in, respectively, *Under the Western Stars* (Joe Kane, 1938) and *Rovin' Tumbleweeds* (George Sherman, 1939) to address the woes of the Depression.

[11] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 296. In *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, 1939), the corruption conveyed by the railroad is the result of evil individuals like Jeff Surrett (Bruce Cabott), while the railroad itself is presented, in the words of Colonel Dodge (Henry O'Neill), as "a symbol of America's future. Progress. Iron men and iron horses. You can't beat them." In *Union Pacific*, the evil individual is banker Barrows (Henry Kolker) who conspires against the railroad for self-enrichment, but Doctor Harkness' speech (Stanley Andrews, uncredited) at Promontory Point prays for God "to confirm the unity of our country as this railroad unites the two great oceans of the world."

of the film,[12] *Jesse James* was eventually conceived as a quality film for 20th Century Fox with the rising stars Henry Fonda and Tyrone Power as the brothers Frank and Jesse James.[13] The film's total budget was approximately 1.2 million dollars, a figure comparable to the estimated 1 million dollars for Paramount's railroad epic *Union Pacific*. Filmed almost entirely on location in Pineville, Missouri, and the surrounding Ozark mountains, it was shot with meticulous attention to historical details, and careful recreation of costumes, settings and props of the period. The Victorian-era locomotive was found on an Arkansas railroad siding and completely restored along with the cars in Meinhardt, Missouri, for the St. Louis railway station and train robbery sequences.[14] The effort and money invested in the film made *Jesse James* "up to the time that it was made, […] the most ambitious production ever undertaken in this country outside of Hollywood."[15] The result was both a critical and a box-office success. *Variety* welcomed it as "one of the smash hits and top money pictures of the present year."[16] The *Motion Picture Almanac* for 1940-1941 ranked it in its list of All-Time Best Sellers. It was so successful that it triggered a wave of sequels and imitations produced by 20th Century Fox and other studios, including *The Return of Frank James* (Fritz Lang, 1940), *Belle Starr — The Bandit Queen* (Irving Cummings, 1941) or *Billy the Kid* (David Miller, 1941), and it even generated what Richard Slotkin called "a Jesse James 'canon' […] in which themes, figures, scenes, and characters clearly derived from King's original treatment were continually varied, reprised, and reinterpreted."[17]

The railroad as villain

In this epic drama, the railroad is repeatedly presented as the main enemy. Right from the opening titles, the train is viewed as a threat to the pastoral stability of small farming communities. The title cards read:

> (1) After the tragic war between the states, America turned to the winning of the West. The symbol of this era was the trans-continental railroads.
>
> (2) The advance of the railroads was, in some cases, predatory and unscrupulous. Whole communities found themselves victimized by an ever-growing ogre – the Iron Horse.
>
> (3) It was this uncertain and lawless age that gave to the world, for good or ill, its most famous outlaws, the brothers Frank and Jesse James.

The narrative frame set by the opening titles is threefold. The first title card introduces the historical, post-Civil War period, as well as the national mood of the era, the "winning of the

[12] Zanuck believed that the story of the Southern rebel turned outlaw would be successful only in "Tennessee, southern Illinois, and Arkansas and Missouri, a few places like that." Quoted in Coppedge, *Henry King's America*, 94.
[13] It is Henry King who noticed Tyrone Power and gave him his first major role in *Lloyd's of London* (Henry King, 1936). *Jesse James* would prove a turning point in the early career of both actors. It revealed in Power a potential for action that would lead him to star in many swashbucklers, westerns and war films and it established Fonda's persona as a populist hero, a type of role he would immediately play again in *Young Mister Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939), *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940), and *The Return of Frank James* (Fritz Lang, 1941).
[14] Coppedge, *Henry King's America*, 95.
[15] Ibid., 108.
[16] *Variety*, January 10, 1939. *Jesse James* file from the Margaret Herrick Library Core Collections, Los Angeles.
[17] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 301-302.

West", before linking this jingoistic expression[18] to its commonly acknowledged symbol since John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924): the building of the Transcontinental Railroad. This first title sums up the message of *The Iron Horse* which was to be repeated at the beginning of *Dodge City* and *Union Pacific*: the resolution of sectional divisions, the rise of a nation-continent and the completion of continental conquest are all bound to the building of a railway from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. The presence of a southern euphemism for the Civil War, "war between the States",[19] and the plural form of "railroads" nevertheless suggest the deviation of the story from the first transcontinental railroad of westerns to a somewhat southward turn.

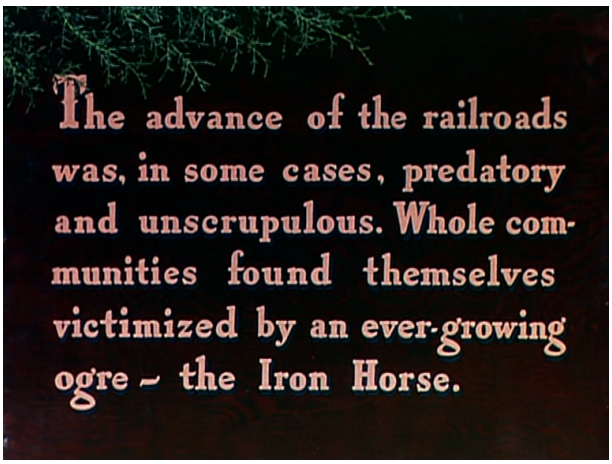

Figure 1: The unprogressive railroad

This new direction is stated in the second title card (see figure 1). With forceful metaphors, it sheds a bleaker light on the alleged instrument of national progress. The words "predatory and unscrupulous" immediately evoke the Spenserian laws and moral corruption of the big business organizations controlling the railroad. The expression "ever-growing ogre" arouses a nightmarish vision of the train as an insatiable monster feeding on human flesh, the victims being entire "communities", the basic social fabric of rural America. Thus, fifteen years after *The Iron Horse*, ~~the~~ 20th Century Fox resuscitated "the Iron Horse" as a threatening beast. Johnson's final script initially planned the opening titles to be "SUPERIMPOSED on railroad building SHOTS from THE IRON HORSE;"[20] these shots of Ford's epic western are absent from the finished film because they would have given railroads

[18] The expression comes from Theodore Roosevelt's historical saga, *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896), which celebrated "the advance of American civilization at the cost of savagery" on the North-American continent. In Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West Vol. I* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), xii.

[19] "Civil War" evokes a war within a nation, whereas the expression "War between the States" – first used by the supporters of the Lost Cause in the South, before being accepted nationwide by the turn of the twentieth century – implies a plurality of sovereign belligerents. It thus embraces the States' rights perspective on the conflict used by Southern States to justify secession in the first place. The expression "War Between the States" was also used in the opening titles of *Union Pacific*. *Dodge City*, while having an ex-Confederate soldier as hero, nevertheless prefers the expression "Civil War".

[20] Nunnally Johnson, "Final Script," June 1, 1938, 1. Consulted in the Performing Arts Special Collections of the Young Research Library at University of California, Los Angeles. The intended effect was likely to increase historical authenticity by using these shots as pseudo-documentary footage. *The Iron Horse* itself had been sold as a historical document to its audiences in 1924.

precisely the sort of glorified treatment that Henry King wished to challenge. The third title mentions an age that is "lawless and uncertain", not due to the absence of civilization and its leading agent, the railroad, but precisely *because* of the undesired penetration of the railroad in the already established and peaceful community of Frank and Jesse James. In other words, the advance of the railroad does not result in the eventual victory of peace and order but is the agent of their destruction.

The film's opening sequences immediately illustrate the "predatory and unscrupulous" methods of the railroad industry, as railroad men in dark suits are shown forcing one farmer after another to sell out to the St. Louis Midland railroad so the company can start laying tracks across their properties. Barshee (Brian Donlevy), the leading railroad agent, swindles two families out of their lands, by trickery and physical force, in a manner that echoes the injustices of the Great Depression. Indeed, the quasi-documentary treatment of the families, and namely that of the two barefooted children clinging to the plain dress of their mother holding a baby (see figure 2), recalls the poignant, today nearly iconic photographs of the rural poor taken by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans for the Farm Security Administration (FSA)[21] that started circulating in American magazines and newspapers in the latter part of the 1930s. At the film's release, such imagery inevitably triggered memories of the real injustice experienced by displaced, poverty-stricken people.

Figure 2: Iconography of the Great Depression, the common man against big business

Barshee is initially the most powerful embodiment of the evil of the railroad. An unscrupulous crook who dons the fancy three-piece suit and drives the four-wheel buggy of an arrogant businessman, he quickly reveals the degree of his villainy by causing the death of Frank and Jesse's mother, Mrs. Samuels (Jane Darwell). Attacking this "central symbol of Christianity and of the values of harmony and decency represented by the family",[22] Barshee shatters family bonds and desecrates an icon of Christian virtue, leading Jesse to call for revenge: "I hate the railroads, and when I hate, I've gotta do something about it." Jesse's ensuing resistance, though criminal, is morally vindicated and the character becomes a figure encapsulating some of America's frustrations in the 1930s.

However, evil individuals are a source of lesser concern compared to the threat

[21] Part of F. D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" policy, FSA was a federal agency set up to help poor rural Americans who were uprooted from their farms during the Great Depression.
[22] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 297.

represented by the railroad industry. The film manages to broaden its political criticism to an entire system by making villainous characters the instruments of a corporate will. As Walter Coppedge demonstrates, it is "the oppressive power of the *railroad* [that] is graphically demonstrated. The railroad is a force which destroys community, dispossesses owners of their rights, and threatens the bonds of family."[23] A script analysis of villainous characters like Barshee reveals that this systemic dimension of evil was strengthened from preproduction to film. Before the opening sequences of the film, a scene was planned in which Barshee was to say to his associates: "The road allows us ten dollars an acre… so the cheaper we buy it, the more we make."[24] The immediate effect of this scene would have been to deflect the blame from the system by making the individual the principal source of greed. In the final film, nothing dissociates Barshee's methods from those of the company. As for the other important evil figure, the cowardly and treacherous president of the railroad company, Mr. McCoy (Donald Meek), his will as president *is* that of the company. Depicted as "an annoying small man" in the final script,[25] he embodies an inglorious version of the robber baron targeted by the popular press of the Gilded Age: an untrustworthy and tyrannical railroad tycoon who has no qualms about breaking his word, manipulating the law, and inciting violence against his opponents (he wants Jesse to "hang" for his deeds and the Marshal and his deputies "to shoot first and ask questions later"). If he is a villain, it is less as an individual than as a representative of an entire exploitative economic system that the film calls "the railroad", a vague expression encompassing not only the St. Louis Midland company, but also a whole industry, and "behind [it], nameless corporations and banks."[26] The fact that this expression is generally used by trust-worthy figures of authority, such as editor Major Rufus Cobb (Henry Hull) and the minister who marries Jesse and Zerelda Cobb (Nancy Kelly), further legitimizes the condemnation.[27]

The systemic nature of evil in *Jesse James* is particularly clear in the film's departure from the western narrative when treating Jesse's showdown with Barshee. Within the traditional structure of the western, where evil tends to be embodied in individual characters, the showdown constitutes a concluding resolution to ideological tensions played out in the film, as the hero eventually eliminates the threat to progress and civilization. In *Jesse James*, the erasure of the villain occurs only seventeen minutes into the film, corresponding thus to an opening act that introduces us to the main ideological tension of the narrative: Jesse's resistance against a legal, yet oppressive industry. The shot following Barshee's death is a poster from the St. Louis Midland railroad offering a reward for information leading to the arrest of Jesse, now referred to as "a murderer". In other words, Barshee's death is the birth of Jesse's career as an outlaw hero.

Populism, the Lost Cause, and trains

[23] Coppedge, *Henry King's America*, 103. Emphasis mine.
[24] Johnson, "Final Script," 4.
[25] Ibid., 36.
[26] Coppedge, *Henry King's America*, 105.
[27] The minister, amidst the acquiescent "Amens" of the congregation, blames the "dad-swinged railroad" for "swindle[ing] [him] out of [his] home" and the "goldanged railroad" for "hornswoggl[ing]" him. If the gravity of the situation is softened by the folksy quaintness of the dialogue, the religious leader and the community he speaks for unambiguously incriminate a whole economic system for their plight.

At the beginning of the film, Frank and Jesse are no more than "peaceful farmers thrust into outlawry by the violence of the railroad."[28] The final script introduces Jesse as:

> "a cool, young man, not aggressive but without any fear whatsoever. Let alone, he would probably have developed into nothing worse than a tough young farmer, stubborn for his rights, uncompromising in his differences, but as well within the law as he felt the law had a right to demand."[29]

This characterization of a simple but strong-armed and hard-headed farmer whose Lockean attachment to democratic principles (the rule of law) is based on feeling rather than on reason matches the perfect image of the mythical yeoman farmer celebrated by Thomas Jefferson as the backbone of an agrarian American republic. The struggle of the Jameses to protect a rural community of farmers therefore resonates with national cultural traditions one can trace back to the Anti-Federalists and Democratic political movements of the early nineteenth-century. But it also represents a form of populism whose origins are markedly sectional: the Farmers' Alliances born in the South and West and their conversion into a People's Party in the late nineteenth century. Particularly popular in these sectional movements, the Jesse James legend never abandoned its southern origins when it grew with these movements to national clout, even when pictured in national cinema. Like several other westerns of the late thirties, *Jesse James* is more preoccupied by issues of sectional divisions than by national construction:

> Rather than replay epic stories of the winning of the West (as exemplified in films such as *The Covered Wagon* [James Cruze, 1923] and *The Big Trail* [Raoul Walsh, 1930]), A-feature westerns of 1939-41 invoke frontier mythology with a view to recasting it in terms of the fissures represented by the Civil War.[30]

In *Jesse James*, this concern becomes a decidedly southern form of provincial resentment, popular rebelliousness and rejection of outsiders which determines the depiction of the railroad.

Strikingly, the depiction of the railroad as a threat to the rural community is embedded in an anti-progressive tradition which is resolutely southern. In his seminal work, *The Mind of the South* (1941), Wilbur Cash defines this tradition as a form of resistance to industrial progress associated with northern capital and industries.[31] Such a resistance historically condemned the South to a "regressive agricultural, social, economic and political system."[32] The representation of railroads as a threat to progress in *Jesse James* thus finds its roots in a southern viewpoint on a fundamentally alien technology, owned and controlled by the North, and imposed upon the agricultural society of the South. Accordingly, *Jesse James* can be read as the expression of a fairly traditional tension between the industrial North and the far more agricultural South.

The train in Henry King's *Jesse James* is thus, almost inevitably, associated with the North and the Union. Not only are Barshee and Mr. McCoy as unscrupulous, arrogant, and

[28] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 299.
[29] Johnson, "Final Script," 9.
[30] Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s*, 197.
[31] Wilbur Joseph Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941).
[32] Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s*, 202.

wealthy as any carpetbagger in the southern imagination,[33] but the official ceremony inaugurating the new line in St. Louis strongly associates the train, the railroad company and the industry with the Union. Two elements prevail in this scene: the company name and the Union flag. While the St. Louis Midland dominates the gathering, its name written on the train station and on the departing train, banners displaying the colors of the Union also decorate the train (figure 3). In front of a buoyant crowd, the railroad executives are having an official picture taken, while a band is playing "a martial air",[34] actually a well-known Union battle song called the "Battle-Cry of Freedom".

Figure 3: The Union train

The presence of the Union flag in a Missouri town is all the more symbolic. Missouri was a border state during the Civil War and entered the Reconstruction era torn by a fierce guerilla that opposed former Confederates like Jesse James to supporters of the Union. The scene of the ceremony therefore dramatizes a double invasion into Jesse James territory; the railroad industry and the Union government are but one and the same evil.[35]

Despite its southern content, *Jesse James* was written, produced and marketed as a western. Bearing in mind the forms and the ideological structure of the western, the political perspective of Nunnally Johnson and Henry King — both of whom were Southerners — is channeled and partially altered so as to become part of a master narrative of the nation. Through a process similar to other westerns of the late 1930s, the South is "eventually included in the Union. […] Conflicts are, then, determined by a symbolic North/South divide where the West provides the space in which the Union can be reunited."[36] The generic identity of the film as a western recasts Jesse's opposition to the railroad within a wider national discourse on the very meaning of the word "progress," to the point that the film's

[33] "Carpetbagger" is a derogatory term used by Southerners to designate Northerners that came south after the Civil War to administrate the reconstruction of the region. The association of railroad officials with carpetbaggers is even more explicit in *The Return of Frank James*, in which the post-Civil War subtext and pro-Southern perspective are openly developed. The trial of Frank for the robbery of McCoy's money becomes a restaging of the Civil War.

[34] Johnson, "Final Script," 36.

[35] Numerous elements besides the train hark back to a southern perspective on Reconstruction history: martial law enforced by Union troops or the solidarity of citizens, press and local authority against oppressive intruders.

[36] Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s*, 206.

rejection of industrial development is ultimately bound to the ideology of the frontier, the structuring mythology of the western.

One important aspect of Frederick Jackson Turner's theory of the frontier is that it focuses on the West as a means to consolidate the various populist traditions of 19th-century America into a national narrative of progress. In an essay entitled "Contributions of the West to American Democracy", Turner brings together the populist figures of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, both from the South, and Northerner Abraham Lincoln by turning them into frontier heroes whose democratic feelings were born in the West.[37] In his essay "The Middle West", he further argues that populism is only the latest political expression of the democratic ideals of the pioneer farmer[38] whom he considered to be the standard-bearer of American democracy. Much like Jefferson, Turner expressed deep concerns about the future of that democracy once the frontier would be closed and pioneer farmers would have been turned into industrial workers. He feared that the progress of American civilization towards industrial capitalism might end up turning into an oppressive machine.

Just as Turner turned sectional expressions of populism into a national political tradition by grounding them in the West, *Jesse James* nationalizes its southern agenda using the form of the western. *Jesse James*'s western setting allows the film to blend its southern rejection of railroads into a national concern for the dangers of progress at a time when American audiences felt powerless against the giant mechanisms of capitalism. The shadow of Turner is present in *Jesse James* due to the film's concern not only for the railroad's invasion of southern territory, but also for its violation of the political rights of American citizens. The methods of corruption used by the railroad company have pervaded every seat of the state government. Jesse and Frank cannot bring their complaints to court because, as Major Cobb puts it bluntly:

> You ain't got a chance. The St. Louis Midland's got this whole state hogtied. They got the police, the courts, everything. A trial now would be a joke. The railroad has too much at stake to let two farmer boys bollix things up.

Not only is the state judicial system controlled, political state authorities are just as fettered by the railroad company. During the departure ceremony in St Louis, McCoy is shown shaking hands with the governor of Missouri. This complicity turns into corruption when the Governor declares martial law in Liberty County to guarantee Jesse's verdict and appoints a new judge for the case who, in the words of McCoy "is not so sentimental about train robbers." Eventually, the Governor promises "amnesty, a clean pardon, to any member of

[37] "[The West] gave to the world such types as the farmer Thomas Jefferson, with his Declaration of Independence, his statute for religious toleration, and his purchase of Louisiana. She gave us Andrew Jackson, that fierce Tennessee spirit who broke down the traditions of conservative rule, swept away the privacies and privileges of officialdom, and, like a Gothic leader, opened the temple of the nation to the populace. She gave us Abraham Lincoln, whose gaunt frontier form and gnarled, massive hand told of the conflict with the forest, whose grasp of the ax-handle of the pioneer was no firmer than his grasp of the helm of the ship of state as it breasted the seas of civil war." Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Henry Holt, 1921), 268.

[38] "The Farmers' Alliance and the Populist demand for government ownership of the railroad is a phase of the same effort of the pioneer farmer, on his latest frontier. […] Taken as a whole, Populism is a manifestation of the old pioneer ideals of the native American with the added element of increasing readiness to utilize the national government to effect its ends." Ibid., 148.

the James gang that will kill Jesse" which, as Major Cobb remarks, "makes the state a party to murder." The State of Missouri is thus deprived of its republican form of government by the interests of the railroad, industrial progress being exposed in its tyrannical tendencies. This populist version of frontier history inspired by Turner — with progress seen as undemocratic — makes *Jesse James* a turning point in the history of the genre.

Progress comes from the garden, not the machine

Although industrial progress brings tyranny to Liberty County (Missouri), the ideological structure of the western genre and the film's attachment to Turner's frontier theory make it impossible for *Jesse James* to abandon the idea of progress. Instead, an alternative conception of progress is upheld: that of individual socio-economic improvement.

Jesse James's own version of economic progress is clarified from the start through the characterization of the three successive farms Barshee comes to buy out. The first farm is an improved log cabin. The second farm is described as a "farmhouse"[39] in the script and suggests a wealthier household. The progression is even clearer in the third household headed by Mrs. Samuels, the only one described in detail in Johnson's script:

> FARMYARD
> Seated in a chair under an old tree, Mrs. Samuels is shelling butterbeans in her lap. The yard is a typical farmyard, with a grindstone, an iron triangle to ring for the dinner hour, a scythe against the house, etc. She smiles a greeting as Barshee drives up.[40]

The number of objects in the yard and the presence of food denote material comfort, as well as emotional harmony (the "iron triangle" evoking the union of the family "for the dinner hour"). The impression of comfort is conveyed primarily by the seemingly prosperous family farm (figure 4). As Richard Slotkin notes in *Gunfighter Nation*, the ordering of these three scenes spells out an alternative to industrial progress, Jesse's resistance to the railroad standing out as a defensive act regarding the belief in individual improvement against corporate usurpation:

> The narrative movement from the illiterate man's poor cabin, to the widow's slightly better cabin, to the Jameses' frame house suggests that the normal development for farms is that of progressive improvement, upward mobility. Its populism is really a defense of that American dream which culminates in the achievement of the middle-class home — which the railroad will destroy.[41]

[39] Johnson, "Final Script," 6.
[40] Ibid., 10.
[41] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 297.

Figure 4: The "middle-class" family farm

For all its criticism of technological progress, progress as an economic and moral value is not abandoned in *Jesse James*. But it is thematically and esthetically expressed in new ways.

Instead of associating progress with the machine, *Jesse James* connects it to America's sacred garden. While the railroad undoubtedly evokes a menacing machine, Jesse's struggle is rooted in a profound bond with his natural surroundings. His version of progress is intrinsically agrarian, and most of his power is drawn from the land. This is obvious from the start, when Jesse is first seen in the background of a full shot, clearing the forest with a scythe. A fence in the foreground occupies half of the frame, distancing the character from the road by which the railroad agents are to arrive and reinforcing his identification with the surrounding foliage. The next shots gradually close in on the man, but the foliage is still on screen, confirming the character's familiarity with nature.[42] The reverse shots on the approaching Barshee and his men are organized so as to establish a series of oppositions between the characters on the two sides of the fence (figure 5). Jesse's foreground is natural and somewhat dimly lit, suggesting the hero's purity but also his potential for dark deeds, while Barshee's background is brightly lit and factitious (suits, bowler hats, a fancy buggy), suggesting a form of corruption which no longer hesitates to act in bright sunlight, in the sight of the Law. The sequence discreetly establishes Jesse's power over the railroad, for the shot is composed so that an embedded frame of foliage seems to enclose the agents. Nature is not only an extension of the hero's charisma, but also his true ally.

[42] The shots progress from full to American to medium shot, as the hero gradually emerges from among the natural elements.

Figure 5: Jesse and nature dominate the railroad men

This power of nature over the railroad is developed further during the train robbery sequence. While "local people are powerless to redress their problems, which are the result of vicious and impersonal forces oblivious to the common good,"[43] Jesse becomes a symbol of the people's empowerment as he strikes at the materialization of these forces: the train. The robbery sequence "highlights Jesse's characteristics as a hero and a counterforce to the railroad"[44] by intensifying the formal elements of the previous reverse shot on Barshee. The opening shot of the sequence presents the same divided composition that opposes Jesse to the railroad (figure 6). The hero on horseback is now in the shadows of the forest overlooking the railway and the passing train in the moonlit background. In terms of composition, Jesse's power is here conveyed by his position at the center of a high-angle shot, but as already seen, an embedded frame of vegetation enclosing the railway is shown to further belittle Jesse's enemy. It is, indeed, as if nature extended Jesse's power over his mechanic nemesis.

Figure 6: Jesse and nature dominate the train

The ensuing tracking shot following the outlaw on top of the train emphasizes his animal-like agility, and reveals his understanding of the "iron ogre" (figure 7). The silhouette of the simple farmer walking along a railroad carriage in the darkness seems, in many a way,

[43] Coppedge, *Henry King's America*, 104.
[44] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 298.

the perfect manifestation of popular empowerment against the tyranny of big business. Henry King's aesthetic treatment of the train robbery is here so striking that it left its definite imprint on most later films on Jesse James.[45]

Figure 7: Jesse's secret power over the 'ogre'

The outlaw hero's intimacy with the American wilderness and his ability to draw power from primal forces are features that connect him intimately with the figure of the noble savage. Such primal connections are typical of western heroes, their mastery of the wilderness and its inhabitants being determined by the ability to learn from and emulate the Indian.[46] However, while a traditional western hero uses this knowledge to defend the cause of "civilization," King's Jesse James prefers using such knowledge to resist "development" and "progress". As a result, the rejection of the railroad within the generic frame of a western movie structurally situates the hero on the side of the Native American. In many ways, Jesse resonates with the heroes of 1920s Indian westerns, such as *The Vanishing American* (George B. Seitz, 1925) whose Native American characters are threatened by the seemingly irreversible growth of American civilization. Jesse's violent reaction to the "ever-growing ogre" is comparable to the Indian reaction to the plow in *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923), as they see it as a "monster weapon that will bury the buffalo, uproot the forest, and level the mountain." Despite the fact that Jesse fails to articulate similar kinds of ethnic and environmental concerns, the railroad represents the same invasion of a native community by forces of "civilization." The inversion of a narrative of progress thus comes with an inversion of the hero's structural position in the generic universe of the western.

Jesse's wildness and redemptive railroad technology

Although quite drastic in its depiction of the railroad as a systemic evil, Henry King's *Jesse James* does not pursue its critique of industrial progress down to its conclusion. Namely because Jesse's connection with nature gradually becomes a tragic descent into savagery which only female characters (or characters associated with the feminine) can

[45] *The True Story of Jesse James* (Nicholas Ray, 1957) features a remake of the scene, while the more recent *The Assassination of Jesse James* (Andrew Dominik, 2007) borrows its visuals and mood. *American Outlaws* (Les Mayfield, 2001) elaborates upon it for a long escape sequence.

[46] "He is most American, somehow, who knows Indians best." Armando Prats, *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 10.

allegedly stop. Initially supportive of her husband's fight against the railroad, Zerelda invites him to surrender before all that "shooting and robbing […] [gets] in [his] blood", warning her husband against transforming into "a wolf." The mention of blood suggests the fear of "a kind of racial degeneration toward savagery,"[47] while the comparison with a lone, predatory beast evokes the risk of isolation and violence. The animal eventually prevails in Jesse, and what used to be chivalrous resistance to oppression becomes criminal frenzy: "He ain't a knight any more, fighting a bad railroad", notes Marshal Wright (Randolph Scott), "he's a wild animal. You can't love him. Nobody can." Jesse's wildness turns him into "an embodiment of the principle of tyranny against which he rebelled"[48] when he finally expresses his autocratic fantasies: "I'll ride up the Capitol steps if I feel like it."

Oddly enough, the tyranny of the railroad industry is gradually superseded by a partial rehabilitation of railroad technology. The first step in that direction happens when Jesse's boy, now five years of age, plays with a wooden locomotive in Major Cobb's newspaper office. The scene foreshadows both the doom of Jesse's criminal career and the victory of the railroad. Technological innovation is now restaged as the inevitable course of historical progress, with the new generation and the railroad growing, so to speak, together in the future. Jesse's struggle is thus historicized and, with nobody to carry it on, might soon be part of the past.

At this point of the film, Jesse's acceptance of the railroad becomes the condition of his very redemption. The latter is suddenly within reach in the traditional form of a plan to move to California for a fresh start, paradoxically enough, using the train: "Get [the boy] ready. We're catching the afternoon train."[49] While the railroad as a system had been presented as the embodiment of tyranny, the train is now seen in the light of emancipative technology capable of opening to the possibility of regeneration. Presenting the railroad as a necessary means to achieve the mythic hope of renewal in the West "makes evident its historical necessity; another manifestation of the force which must sweep all before the path of its 'destiny' — Indians, agrarianism, and divisive animosities."[50] Progress, that sweeping force, is inevitable and the railroad cannot but be part of it. Jesse's need of the train to reach California channels the victory of the railroad into a "natural" course of development. What eventually surfaces is an "appeal […] to the might of the railroad industry — and by extension all industrial and business corporations — to treat fairly those with whom it deals"[51] as the technology itself is finally rehabilitated.

Conclusion

Henry King's *Jesse James* radically questions the progressive narrative associated with the railroad in westerns until 1939. Instead of using the railroad to express the conquest of the West and construction of the nation, the film uses it to reveal the political tensions, sometimes as violent as the conquest itself, underlying such a construction. The nation is not

[47] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 299.
[48] Ibid., 300.
[49] In the final shot with his wife, Jesse joyfully sings "Cos' we're going to California on the train this afternoon" according to the folksy melody of "O Susanna."
[50] Coppedge, *Henry King's America*, 106.
[51] Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s*, 215.

shown to be united against the wilderness, but deeply divided between defenders of rights and advocates of profit, farmers and industrialists, nature and machine, and, ultimately, the South and the North with the railroad serving as a structuring symbol. The rejection of the railroad as invasive and threatening to the rural community finds its root in a southern political tradition of which the figure of Jesse James was historically a part, and the depiction of the railroad in the film is thus the result of the southern identity of the character's legend. But the use of the western genre nationalizes both the hero and his struggle by association with expressions of populism that are considered typically American. Inspired by Jefferson's vision of an agrarian republic and consolidated by Turner's theory of the frontier, this national populist tradition is more directly concerned with the future of American democracy and considers industrial progress as a direct menace. By feeding on both fears, social and political, the railroad in *Jesse James* crystallizes the reconciliation of sectional and national populism.

Jesse James's southern content in a western form brings the film to explore the uncivilized aspects of industrial progress in an innovative way. The narrative is not one of territorial conquest but of territorial invasion. The hero is no bearer of civilization but an underdog who suffers from its advance. Nature is not a wilderness to tame but a sanctuary for resistance. Paradoxically enough, bringing the Lost Cause of the South together with the frontier myth of the western allowed for a critique of the imperial underpinnings of "that powerful mythology of triumphalist nationhood that I call the *Myth of Conquest*."[52] This had profound and long-lasting consequences on the western genre as a whole. It triggered a wave of films that would focus not on the confrontation of the nation with the Other on the frontier, but on the inner tensions attached to national construction, from Michael Curtiz's 1939 *Dodge City* to *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953). It inspired a number of westerns with good outlaws as heroes, from *Billy the Kid* (David Miller, 1941) to *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Clint Eastwood, 1976), not to mention the subsequent film versions of the legend of Jesse James. And finally, pro-Indian and revisionist westerns since the 1960s would recall the association of the railroad with tyranny and use it to criticize the American oppression of the native population. In *Cheyenne Autumn* (John Ford, 1964), the narrating voice compares "The long line of steel rails [to] the bars of a prison", and *Geronimo: An American Legend* (Walter Hill, 1993) ends with a reference to Holocaust trains: Geronimo and his people are packed in cattle wagons and deported to a reservation. Eventually, the themes, mood and forms of *Jesse James* would leave an imprint beyond the declining western genre after the 1960s. Once in the minority, the film's critical perspective on technological progress as an instrument of oppression has arguably become the norm since *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), with biotech corporations and formidable spaceships as "ever-growing ogres" of post-western American cinema.

[52] Armando Prats, *Invisible Natives*, 2.