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# A Cultural and Social History on the Role of Film and Societal Trends: A Case Study of the Outlaw Jesse James

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A Cultural and Social History on the Role of Film and Societal Trends:  
A Case Study of the Outlaw Jesse James

An Honors Thesis  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements of the Course  
HONS 398H. Research Professional Seminar (1 hour)

By April Mae Grube

March 14, 2012

A Cultural and Social History on the Role of Films and Societal Trends:  
A Case Study of the Outlaw Jesse James

The study of history through film has typically been reserved for History Channel, Discovery Channel, National Geographic, or PBS documentaries and mini-series. Even then the biases, endorsements, and bibliographies of those films must be scrutinized and fully understood before any form of historical legitimacy can be accredited to them. The importance of historical accuracy in film is undeniable and this is the reason for a near complete lack of attention to theatre, fiction, and “based-on-a-true-story” film. Hollywood’s version of reality and history is known for being highly aggrandized and unrealistic, focusing on the money to be made from eliciting the audience’s emotional response rather than the accuracy of the information displayed. However, there is a growing belief that even Hollywood can contribute to historical study. Despite the over-done special effects and larger-than-life personalities, the overarching themes and treatment of characters and situations is a vital window into the mentality of the time. Reflected in popular culture are the beliefs, aspirations, and biases of the generation to which it caters. Because of this, a study of film can be exceedingly beneficial for those who wish to study major trends in social history.

In order for historians to trace societal trends in film, they would need to focus on a specific character, event, or ideal and assess how treatment has changed through the decades. For this reason, the object of the historian’s research must be seen pervasively in film and literature so that an accurate picture is understood and treatment can be viewed within the context of reality. In order

to fully understand the shifting opinions and the reasons behind those changes, the individual must have a long history of interpretation. For these reasons, Jesse James is an ideal candidate for evaluation. The notoriety he achieved throughout his lifetime is almost unequaled by any other Western outlaw. James has become an American tradition that changes to suit the hopes and prejudices of the generation. While historians know virtually every detail of James' life, he continues to be a figure cloaked in ambiguity, leading to his popularity as a vigilante hero or outlaw. A study of four films - *Jesse James* (1939), *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), *The Last Days of Frank and Jesse James* (1986), and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) – will show that the way in which James' character is treated rests heavily on the public mood of the time.

To fully understand the implications one can draw from the study of film, it is necessary to begin by evaluating the drawbacks and benefits of using film as primary source material in a cultural and social historical study. “High thought” historians<sup>1</sup> have denigrated film since the second decade of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Initially, these “high historians” believed that film should only be judged aesthetically, as one would view a piece of art.<sup>3</sup> The fact that films helped shape the individual, while at the same time coinciding with the sentiments of the masses, caused many critics to develop a fear of the power of film.<sup>4</sup> As the popularity of film and its characters increased, the appeal it held for youth paralleled the power that dime novels had maintained until this new medium invaded popular culture. Intellectuals who feared the tendency for films to maintain stereotypes called for censorship

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<sup>1</sup> The term “high thought” historian is used to describe an older breed of historian who believed in the potential for complete objectivity in the study and interpretation of history. Because of the modern popularity of more relativist historical study, the existence of “high historians” is uncommon and the term is rarely used in the historical field anymore.

<sup>2</sup> Michael T. Isenberg, “A Relationship of Constrained Anxiety: Historians and Film,” *The History Teacher* 6, no. 4 (Aug 1973): 554.

<sup>3</sup> Historians insisted that because of its popularity, film was unfit for the kind of study that more traditional modes of history required. It was the very fact that film had been so readily accepted into the popular culture that more prominent individuals considered it “beneath” them.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 560.

to prevent them from growing into adulthood with such untruths.

When it became clear that the popularity of film had come to stay, the “high historians” began to set limits on which films were acceptable as historical pieces and which were purely entertainment. Even newsreels came under fire as historians questioned the way in which the footage was edited. Historians understood that film editors sought to present a news story in a certain light, depending on whom they worked for and their own biases, and they feared that even the seemingly harmless act of compiling the film compromised its “absolute authenticity.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, every film was brought into question – who made it, who edited it, where their funding came from, who their audience was, and what was the social climate in which a film would achieve popularity.

The problem of profit is one of the biggest discredits to the study of film in history. Due to the fact that film studios are businesses, it is no secret that their main object is to make money. To achieve profit the studios need the financial support of their customers. Therefore, it is in their best interest to create films that appeal to the audience rather than ones that portray history accurately. While the two are not mutually exclusive, when they do not coincide, the audience’s demands typically influence the film. Thus, it is impossible to trust historical films because their depiction has been influenced by the public mood.

In more recent years, Robert Brustein has done extensive research on “the New Hollywood.” While clearly defined characters, which connoted tranquility, characterized the original Hollywood film, Brustein believes that a new form of realist film has taken over Hollywood. Similar to the “Old Hollywood,” this realist film is not necessarily devoted to the reality of an individual or event. Instead, concerned with more harsh truths, its main purpose is to jolt the audience by

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<sup>5</sup> John E. O’Connor, “Historians and Film: Some Problems and Prospects,” *The History Teacher* 6, no. 4 (Aug. 1973): 551.

showing the complexity of life.<sup>6</sup> As is typical of the film business, this new realist style is directed at youth and “angsty” teenagers. In place of the perfect hero stands the “anti-hero” – an individual who is complex and unreadable.<sup>7</sup> Thus, even in Hollywood’s attempt at realism, films continue to fall short of the high standard of historical analysis required by modern historians.

While “high thought” intelligentsia are highly critical of the benefits of film in historical study, others see the prospects of historical films. Such proponents insist that film must be understood as a “complex cultural and ideological construction” that reveals something about the culture it was created for and yet also molds the self-image of individuals and even nations.<sup>8</sup> Films can be used as “cultural documents”<sup>9</sup> because they speak both implicitly and explicitly to the concerns and presuppositions of their moment of production. No matter how one does history, whether written or filmed, it will never be completely accurate – it will always have elements of personal interpretation. Historians, however, should not fall into historical relativism. Instead, this fact must be acknowledged for the true value of film to be seen.

Still another group of historical film proponents insist that to ignore the influence that film has over the youth is to forsake the possibility of many students coming to the study of history through film. In fact, many historians acknowledge the visual and media-focus of young people today and employ film in their classrooms in the hopes of piquing interest in more in-depth historical study.<sup>10</sup> These professors implement the same level of historical critique used on traditional mediums of history – “the process of verification, substantiation and arriving at

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Brustein, “The New Hollywood: Myth and Anti-Myth,” *Film Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1959): 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on film as cultural documents, Lawrence Levine, et al; “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences,” *American Historical Review* 97 (Dec. 1992): 1369-99.

<sup>10</sup> O’Connor, “Historians and Film,” 546.

reasonable conclusions.”<sup>11</sup> They express hopes that a deep interest in the past will be fostered in a way that is congenial to both the modern sensibility and traditional intellectual systems that define the meaning and purpose of history.<sup>12</sup> They continue to attract in the groups of young learners who have grown up surrounded by media and who were amateur film critics before they were teenagers.

In spite of all the problems with the use of film in historical study, it is impossible to ignore the fact that because films entertain, they have great value.<sup>13</sup> Film is a source of history due to its relationship with the societies that produced and consumed it; films had to be immediately comprehensible and acceptable to those who watched. Thus, they became unwitting social and political analyses of the time. A film that is clearly opinionated does not act as a detriment to historical study; instead, it shows the popular memory of the time. To show a film that is unbiased yet lacks a specific point of view is meaningless to those who consume it. In order to say that one understands the past, it must mean more than the simple traces of the past that historians call data and facts. Otherwise, chronicles would be sufficient. Understanding has more to do with how those traces are put together in order for them to mean something to the people of today.<sup>14</sup> Just as narratives relate not just the facts, but tell a pervading storyline that had meaning to the current situation, so films can be viewed as the successors to oral history: both create a poetic relationship between the past and the present.

For historians to leave films out of the historical equation is to ignore the way in which a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 548.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England: Longman Publishing, 2006), 3.

<sup>13</sup> The question of what makes people laugh, cry, forget their troubles; what they believe about the past; the stereotypes they adhered to and the prejudices they maintained – all of these can be answered by the changing tastes in movie fare from decade to decade and year to year, which help historians understand changing values and concerns of society over time.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenstone, *History on Film*, 155.

majority of the population understands the people and events that comprise their history.<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that historians ignore the old forms of history<sup>16</sup> in order to accommodate the young raised on film history, for film adds to the “language in which the past can speak.”<sup>17</sup> While film is not history in its traditional sense, it is a form of history nonetheless because of its intimate connection with popular memory. One must apply the same questions and skepticism as in the study of any other historical document – filtering through the information and recreating the true past based on one’s understanding of both the surface content and its deeper, implied meanings.<sup>18</sup> There is no question that “radical in its implications is the investigation of how a visual medium, subject to the conventions of drama and fiction, might be used as a serious vehicle for thinking about our relationship to the past.”<sup>19</sup> But it is evident that to ignore the benefits that film brings to the study of history would be to the detriment of the field of cultural, social, and intellectual analysis.

In the study of Jesse James, one must acknowledge the source of his popularity. Although there were numerous Western outlaws in America’s history, James’ name was common in nearly every household, for his daring and troublesome life personified the status quo of the American West. Born in September 1847, Jesse Woodson James was the son of a preacher in Missouri who moved west, leaving his family behind, and never returned. James grew up on a small farm in Clay County; he was known as a genial, affectionate, hardworking boy.<sup>20</sup> The James family lived in relative ambiguity until the Civil War. At sixteen, Jesse joined Quantrill’s soldiers with his brother

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Older forms of history tended to believe in the potential of knowing the objective truth about an event, individual, or situation.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>18</sup> John E. O’Connor and Martin A Jackson, eds., *American History/ American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (New York: Ungar, 1979), xviii.

<sup>19</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Triplett, *The Life, Times, and Treacherous Death of Jesse James* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1970), 2.

Frank and the James brothers gained notoriety.<sup>21</sup> There is uncertainty why Jesse left home to join the army. Some reports insist that it was due to the atrocities committed against Missouri farmers by Northerners, while others claim it was mistreatment by the railroad that pushed Jesse into the war.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the case, both James brothers participated in the Centralia Massacre (1864) in which over 125 unarmed Union soldiers were brutally killed; for many, this event marks the beginning of Jesse's bloody career.

By the end of the 1860s, Frank and Jesse James had formed a notorious gang of outlaws with the Younger brothers, neighbors from Clay County. Over the next several years, the gang worked in seven states, robbing banks, railroads, and stagecoaches. At the height of their career, Southern sympathizers and American Nationalists praised Jesse as a former Confederate soldier opposing the villainy of the North.<sup>23</sup> The most interesting part about the James-Younger gang was their animosity. Because officials were unable to obtain accurate descriptions of the members, Frank and Jesse lived in relative peace under pseudonyms. Jesse was even married and baptized into the Kearney Baptist Church under the alias "Thomas Howard."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, disaster struck the James gang in 1876 when they attempted to rob the Northfield Bank in Minnesota. Caught in an ambush, with most of their gang wounded, captured, or killed, Frank and Jesse barely escaped with their lives. Over the next couple of years, Jesse made several attempts to regain his former notoriety, but his age, paranoia, and disintegrating gang kept him from reaching another peak in his career. By 1882 the reward for Jesse James, dead or alive, was \$10,000; this proved too tempting an offer for Charlie and Bob Ford, two members of Jesse's gang. After making a deal with Governor

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<sup>21</sup> A gang of "bushwhackers" or guerilla soldiers, led by William Quantrill (1837-1865), who fought for the rebel cause throughout the Civil War.

<sup>22</sup> Buck Rainey, *Western Gunslingers in Fact and on Film: Hollywood's Famous Lawmen and Outlaws* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 1998), 57.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

Crittendon, Bob Ford shot Jesse in the back on April 3, 1882.

This brief overview of the outlaw's life shows the complexities of his struggles and the actors who furthered his career. Much of James' appeal comes from the fact that his story takes place in the "wild" West during a time when America was struggling to expand and strong young men and women were forming lives in the wilderness. In Jesse's story Americans see the history of their own country portrayed; it appeals to their nationalistic pride.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Classic Western tale's morals are always set in a conflict of good versus evil, typically within a Christian society. Just as in Jesse's story, what is just does not always coincide with the law and thus the classic Western hero must commit "crimes" in order to bring about justice for those who have been ill-treated.<sup>26</sup> Thus, James' parallel with the classic Western tale is clearly seen and his popularity as a dime-novel hero is better understood. Furthermore, the typical James' story, divided into clearly good and bad actors, can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the atrocities of the Civil War – when brothers were pitted against one another.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, James' story aligns with another classic form of story telling. In Jesse James the traditional storyline of a Greek Tragedy is clearly seen. Jesse, the hero, is forced into a condition that "fate" brought upon him (the Civil War); his darker side rises to the surface and he is unable to surmount his faults until a significant event forces him to make a choice, and this choice inevitably leads to his demise. Thus, with the combination of an ancient storyline, fulfilled in the more modern, Western theme, Jesse James' life creates the perfect combination for the American folklorist. Such a riveting yet ambiguous tale came to play a central role in American legend.

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<sup>25</sup> Frederick Elkin, "The Psychological Appeal of the Hollywood Western," *Journal of Educational History* 24, no. 2 (Oct. 1950): 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 241.

Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of James' popularity has to do with the "Lost Cause" tradition, promoted by Southerners after their defeat in the Civil War as a type of revisionist history, a way of vindicating the Confederate generation. Southern pride and honor had been dealt a fatal blow when Lee surrendered to Grant in 1865, and their attempt to recover their dignity in the aftermath of the war and Reconstruction pushed them to seek examples of classic Southern heroism. Jesse James' struggle for right against might perfectly characterized the kind of spirit that the South hoped to regain. This fascination with James acted as a catalyst to his legend as a vigilante hero.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, there can be no doubt as to the reasons behind James' prevalence in film. Since the creation of narrative motion pictures in the 1890s, Jesse James has been re-interpreted in more than forty films in which he is a main character. In other films, he appears in a subplot or in a cameo role. The first film, *The James Boys in Missouri*, was produced in 1908 – not thirty years after James' death – and the most recent adaptation, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, premiered in 2007, almost one hundred years later. It is this breadth of treatment that makes Jesse James the ideal object for the study of the development of a character over time.

Even more interesting than his prevalence in film are the many interpretations that James' character has undergone. This can be attributed, in part, to the fact that there is no definitive evidence as to why Jesse left his farm to join the War. While it is known that he fled to follow his brother after a severe beating from "outsiders" attempting to seize the family farm, it is not known if it was railroad prospectors or Union soldiers who acted as the catalyst in James' outlaw life. There are accounts of both, but the most commonly held belief is that Jesse and his family were attacked

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<sup>28</sup> For more information pertaining to the Lost Cause tradition, see David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); *American Experience: Jesse James*, a PBS Documentary, 2005; Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of the Confederate Culture* (Tampa, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); and T.J. Stiles, *Jesse James: Last Rebel of The Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

by “home guards,” men who ravished the border states as opportunists raiding the homes of those whose men had gone to war.<sup>29</sup> Because this ambiguity remains, how a Jesse James film begins is usually a clear indication as to how James will be portrayed throughout the film. If the opening scene portrays him as being attacked by the vindictive railroad prospectors, it is understood that Jesse will become a man striving for justice throughout his career. Likewise, if it begins with Union soldiers, it can be assumed that the beatings he received as a young man awakened his “thirst for human gore.”<sup>30</sup>

With this in mind, this paper now turns to the depictions of James throughout four films chosen to portray the development of his persona over 130 years. While many films are similar in their treatment, it should be noted that the development of the legend of Jesse James has evolved gradually. The four films chosen are significant in that they offer completely different interpretations of the man. Similarly, as time has passed, James has become less accessible as a character, even as his treatment has grown more complex.

Unfortunately for this research, the 1908 silent film, *The James Boys of Missouri*<sup>31</sup> is no longer extant due to improper storage and care. While this earliest rendering of James’ life would have provided an interesting starting point (as many of those alive when James was assassinated in 1882 would still have been living at the time of the movie’s production), the film will not be considered in this paper.

The 1939 film *Jesse James* gives the first glimpse into the sentiment attached to the James story in the early part of the twentieth century. The film begins with railroad prospectors traveling

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<sup>29</sup> Triplett, *The Life*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Filmed in Berrien Springs, Michigan by Essanay Film Studios and directed by Gilbert M. “Broncho Billy” Anderson.

the Missouri countryside, swindling “oppressed farmers” out of their land. The posse who work for the railroad companies victimize old men and single mothers, tricking them out of their land for a fraction of its worth. The first minutes of the film create animosity between the audience and these men before the plight of the James family has even begun. The first time Jesse appears on screen the audience sees an attractive young man.<sup>32</sup> Tall, dark, and handsome, with bright blue eyes and a willing smile, he is working diligently on the family farm. He is exceedingly friendly to the railroad posse; with classic Southern hospitality, Jesse directs them toward the house for refreshments and conversation with his mother. Clearly, this is not a young man who has been tainted by the Civil War.

When the men reach the house, the audience is introduced to Zee James, Jesse’s nonsense mother. In spite of the men’s smooth speech, she refuses to sell her land without first speaking to a lawyer. When the men begin to hassle the elderly woman, Frank (and Jesse who has suddenly appeared from the fields) forcefully remove them from their land. As the railroad men leave with threats and curses, Jesse and Frank summon their neighbors. Once gathered at the James’ farm, their main concern is to find someone who knows the law and how to protect their rights. However, the men’s hope of going to the law with their complaints is dashed when the railroad men return with the sheriff. While Jesse and Frank quickly escape into hiding, the posse murders their mother.<sup>33</sup> It is after this that Jesse decides to work outside the law for the sake of justice and retribution.

The film then fast-forwards to when the railroad is completed. As the train pulls out of the Liberty station, the audience watches as Jesse jumps on and forces the engineer to stop the train.

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<sup>32</sup> *Jesse James*, directed by Henry King, Twentieth Century Fox, 1939.

<sup>33</sup> A highly romanticized event. While a group of men did raid the James Farm looking for the brothers, their mother was not killed in this event. However, she did lose her arm in the explosion and Frank and Jesse’s half brother, Archie, was killed.

Once it is stopped, the rest of the gang joins Jesse and proceed to rob the passengers. But these thieves are different. They call for cash only, refuse jewelry from women, and say “please” and “thank you” to all who give. They yell, “Don’t forget to sue the railroad for everything you give us! It’s responsible.”<sup>34</sup> Their object is to retaliate against the injustices of the railroad, not their personal gain. No one is injured and no one is handled rudely. The audience sees the same friendly, outgoing young man from the beginning of the film when Jesse secretly meets with his girl, Zee. It is clear that the two are madly in love, but she is troubled by his way of life, fearing not just for his safety but also for his soul. Zee acknowledges the justice that he is administering; yet she begs him to put an end to it so that it does not get into his blood. She entreats him to turn himself in so that they can be together and live honestly. Jesse agrees to do so and after being promised a light sentence, he hopes to return to an agrarian life.

When the young couple marries (just before Jesse goes to the sheriff), they fear the congregation will harm them because of who Jesse is. However, when the preacher learns Jesse’s name, he praises his criminal acts, vindicating him in the name of God and the poor farmers who have suffered at the hands of the railroad. Thus, the audience is again reminded of the justice of Jesse’s deeds. His Robin Hood persona is perpetuated by the gratitude the downtrodden pay him. Because he turns himself in, Jesse is seen as a hero or martyr. Unfortunately, he is doomed to face more injustice at the hands of the law and the railroad companies. Refusing to allow Jesse to escape with a light sentence, the president of the railroad company calls for James’ execution. The railroad’s atrocities stand in stark contrast to the goodness of Jesse’s character.

After a cunning plan of Frank’s frees Jesse from the jailhouse, the viewers watch as Jesse and Zee attempt to live normal lives while he continues his outlaw career. For a time they maintain their

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 22:29.

loving marriage. But when Zee gives birth to their son, she packs up and returns to Liberty.<sup>35</sup> This devastating loss and his refusal to follow her changes Jesse. A montage of scenes displays his criminal spree over the next five years.<sup>36</sup> The clean-shaven, bright-eyed young man is gone. In his place is a bitter, unkempt man with a brooding mien who treats his gang with contempt. Even his brother Frank becomes his enemy as the “blackness” of his greed engulfs his soul. When his gang criticizes the poorly planned Northfield job, he slaps one and calls them all cowards. Only through Frank’s support and heavy coaxing can Jesse convince the men to do the Northfield robbery.

After Northfield, Jesse barely escapes with his life. Although seriously injured, he makes his way home to Zee where he discovers the futility of his life. The two are reconciled as Jesse asks if they can start over in California as soon as he recovers.

In the closing scene, Jesse is well again and the family is happily packing.<sup>37</sup> They speak of making honest money and living in peace. Even when Bob and Charlie Ford give Jesse a lead on an easy job they could pull, Jesse resists the temptation for the sake of his family. He sends the brothers away and calls Zee downstairs to tell her they are leaving that afternoon. Just when he makes his decision to live a reformed life, he is shot from behind. The film ends with his eulogy, a speech that sums up the spirit of Jesse and the duality of his character:

There is no question. Jesse was an outlaw, a bandit, a criminal. 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’s because he was bold and lawless, like all of us like to be sometimes. Maybe it’s because we understand a little that he wasn’t altogether to blame for what his times made him.<sup>38</sup>

The 1939 Jesse James was a victim of his times, a hardworking man who struggled against the injustices of railroad tycoons and unlawful lawmen. The crimes he committed are portrayed as

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 1:01:55.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 1:09:10.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 1:36:29.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 1:44:05.

deserving in light of the atrocities committed against him. Jesse was justified in his actions against the unjust laws and men who brutalized the oppressed, until his actions became vengeful and malicious. As soon as he lost sight of his purpose, he lost himself, becoming a common criminal. Yet when he understands the value of an honest life, he recants. Through the goodness of Zee, he is given a second chance and dies a redeemed man. Instead, evil rests solely on Bob Ford's shoulders. As the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ditty, "The Ballad of Jesse James," states: "the dirty little coward who shot down Mr. Howard, has laid poor Jesse in his grave."<sup>39</sup> Thus Jesse was a man who was led astray by the difficulties of his time and the cruelty of others.

Almost twenty years later, another Jesse James film, *The True Story of Jesse James*, was billed as "The real story, really told for the first time!"<sup>40</sup> The title, "*True Story*," implies that all the previous versions were false. Yet the 1939 and 1957 films contain almost all of the same crucial events in James' life so a plot overview is unnecessary. However, these scenes are portrayed in a completely different light, demonstrating that the same events can be considered tragic or comic, depending on the historian's choice of plot structure.<sup>41</sup> The variant interpretations of events remind one of the ambiguous nature of the James story.

From the opening scene of the disastrous Northfield robbery, the audience is left wondering, "who is Jesse James?" is directed towards the audience. A newspaper clerk who wants to publish James' obituary asks the editor if he should use the story blaming the Civil War or if he should take the Robin Hood stance. The editor simply asks, "What makes him Jesse James?"<sup>42</sup> Within a few minutes, the townsmen who have been chasing the outlaws catch up with the Younger brothers who were prominent members of the James Gang. When asked where Jesse was hiding, Cole Younger

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<sup>39</sup> Unknown, "The Ballad of Jesse James," circa 1924.

<sup>40</sup> *The True Story of Jesse James*, directed by Nicholas Ray, Twentieth Century Fox, 1957.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Anderson, "Jesse James, The Bourgeois Bandit: The Transformation of a Popular Hero," *Cinema Journal* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1979): 43.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Ray, *True Story of Jesse James*, 5:44.

smilingly replies, “Who is Jesse James?”<sup>43</sup> Clearly, the overarching theme of the 1957 James film is the question of who Jesse is and what made him that way. When James is finally introduced, the audience has already formed an opinion with the townspeople against Jesse rather than for the outlaw himself. Even when James’ character is introduced, he is shown as harried, angry, and distraught over the outcome of the robbery, blaming other members of the gang for its failure.<sup>44</sup>

Because the 1957 film begins near the end of Jesse’s career, flashbacks are used to show the major events in his life. At first Jesse’s elderly, sick mother tells the story of her son’s difficult life<sup>45</sup> and insists that it was the Yankees who drove Jesse to crime.<sup>46</sup> The scene shows Jesse – tall, blonde, and brooding – being interrogated by Yankee soldiers about the whereabouts of his brother Frank. When Jesse refuses to respond, a traitorous neighbor beats Jesse until his back is bloody. Still, Jesse remains silent, protecting his brother.<sup>47</sup> As soon as the men leave, Jesse joins his brother in the Confederate Army. This scene creates the impression that if it had not been for the attack on his home, Jesse might not have joined the rebels in the Civil War, and thus would have remained the gentle, Christian boy his mother describes.

Blame for Jesse’s turn to criminality is placed on the North when Yankee soldiers wound him two weeks after the war ends, when he attempts to surrender.<sup>48</sup> As Jesse recovers, he claims that all he wants is for things to be “nice,” but that he has a hard time thinking about the future when all he knows is the past.<sup>49</sup> A short montage of events depicts Jesse and Frank working diligently on their farm to restore it to pre-war production and the baptism of Jesse and Zee. Both

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 14:03.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 14:03.

<sup>45</sup> The fact that their mother is alive at the time of the Northfield robbery already proves that this film may be more accurate than the 1939 one, wherein she was unrealistically murdered early on.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 15:45.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 22:03.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 22:14.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 25:56.

boys work to get their lives back in order when Northern sympathizers attack their farm, set fire to their crops, and murder a farm hand. This causes Jesse to lament, “Isn’t the war over? Why do they [the Yankees] keep fighting?”<sup>50</sup> This continued Northern aggression forces him to call the neighbors and suggest robbing a Northern bank for retribution’s sake. Frank must convince the neighbors to follow Jesse’s plan. But Cole Younger states that he would expect such a plan from Jesse, but never from Frank.<sup>51</sup> This seems to imply that, despite the goodness the audience has seen in Jesse, a latent element of criminality exists in him. This contradicts the argument of the 1957 film that Jesse would have been a good man had it not been for the evils of the North and the horrors of the Civil War.

After their first successful heist, Jesse marries Zee and takes her to a beautiful home, using his pseudonym Thomas Howard, and claiming that he works in banks and railroads. While in the 1939 film James is ostracized from society, in the 1957 one, he assimilates to it. His banditry has become his way of ensuring his family’s stability in a middle class society. Even as they discuss children and growing old, Jesse suddenly leaves Zee to rejoin his gang.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, the one-time robbery has become a continuing occurrence as the source of their income. However, Zee still insists that “There is no devil in Jesse’s heart. He is just a man who loves his family and his home. Whatever he’s done, he’s done for no other reason!”<sup>53</sup> Yet the film shows the acceleration of a downward spiral of Jesse’s criminal actions. Jesse begins taking pleasure in the status he has achieved as an outlaw. To further his Robin Hood legend, he gives a poor woman \$600 to pay her mortgage. However, when the man comes to collect the money, Jesse steals it back. Thus Jesse proves that, far from looking for justice and retribution, he is thriving on the persona he has created for himself, no matter how untrue it has become.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 32:49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 36:28.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 41:06.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 42:06.

The 1957 film, like the 1939 film, shows Jesse plunging deeper into greed and violence, while Frank remains the steady figure in the gang. He is the voice of restraint when Jesse wants to rob the Northfield bank, a job that no one is willing to attempt. While Frank and Jesse hide in a cave after the fiasco at Northfield, Jesse blames the outcome on the ill-preparation of the others. But Frank stands up to Jesse, insisting that everything had gone well for them when they had justice on their side, but now that Jesse cannot remember their purpose, everything has fallen apart. When Frank tells Jesse that he went into crime for the killing, Jesse retorts that he is proud of what he has done.<sup>54</sup> Because of Jesse's cruel treatment, Frank leaves to fend for himself, suggesting that Jesse watch his own back because he will not be there to protect him. Jesse barely escapes the band of men hunting for him and returns home seriously injured, longing to end his life as an outlaw. Much in the same way as in the 1939 film, Frank acts as the catalyst to Jesse's redemption.

Once again, Jesse is healed by Zee and the two talk about living in peace on a farm where they can spend the rest of their lives as they had planned when first married. When the Ford brothers call, Jesse and Zee are packing their belongings. In order to prove he has truly changed, Jesse removes his guns and hands them to Bob and Charlie Ford.<sup>55</sup> As in the 1939 film, Ford shoots Jesse as he turns to pack a picture. However, the 1957 film emphasizes the cowardice of the act as Ford leaves the house in triumph, shouting that he has killed Jesse James.<sup>56</sup> This is the first time that "The Ballad of Jesse James" is played in a film and it launches a trend that will be followed in the 1986 and 2007 adaptations.

In the 1957 film, the audience can see the early effects of what R. Philip Loy calls "the descent of the hero." He insists that after 1955, heroes, especially in Westerns, grew more complex

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 45:39.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 1:26:25.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 1:29:08.

– as external and internal forces affect the young hero.<sup>57</sup> Thus the Western hero is no longer considered superhuman or unique. The continuation of this descent is clearly seen in Jesse's character between the 1957 and 1986 films. While the 1957 film showed the formative elements of a complex hero, it still laid the blame for Jesse's downfall on the Yankees. By 1986, the need for an external force was not so keenly felt, and the audience is introduced to a completely different Jesse James than the legends had portrayed.

The 1986 film begins with Jesse's assassination on April 3, 1882. This film focuses on the years following 1877. There is no need for the classic retelling of Jesse's early career, for why Jesse became an outlaw is left open-ended as the narrator remarks that the brothers began robbing for reasons no one but they know.<sup>58</sup> All that matters for this film is the retelling of the last five years of Frank and Jesse's life. As in the earlier films, Frank acts as the steadying hand in Jesse's life. Johnny Cash plays an intelligent, peaceable, and agrarian man who wants nothing more than to plow his fields and read books. As the brothers attempt to live respectable lives, Frank stands as a foil to Jesse, who longs for the excitement of being an outlaw. This is clearly seen in his speculative gambling ventures with racing horses.<sup>59</sup>

While the audience sees Jesse as a family man early in the film, it quickly becomes evident that he is continuing to pursue his criminal career without the knowledge of his wife and brother.<sup>60</sup> When Jesse realizes that a nearby Yankee bank could easily be robbed, he convinces a hesitant Frank to join him one last time. The fact that Jesse wants to rob a Yankee bank is a clue that the film is taking the Civil War as the external cause in Jesse's life. However, Frank's rebuttal, "The further

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<sup>57</sup> R. Philip Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 36.

<sup>58</sup> *The Last Days of Frank and Jesse James*, directed by William Graham, Barnholtz Entertainment, 1986.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 10:32.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 16:35.

away that war gets the more glorious it looks to people,”<sup>61</sup> suggests that it is not the war itself, but the people who have made it so influential, and in Jesse’s case, used it to his personal advantage. This idea is reiterated later in the film when Frank insists that Jesse always had something in him that Frank did not: he actually enjoyed the killing and thieving.<sup>62</sup> It is this complexity of Jesse as a hero that is the main focus of the film. This blend of external and internal causes helps the audience understand the difficulty of conflating James into one legend or another, especially when the emphasis is placed on the internal causes in this film.

That Jesse’s character is due to his own choices rather than to fate or unfortunate circumstances is clearly seen in how unlikeable a person Kristofferson’s Jesse truly is. Portrayed as a money-hungry womanizer, Jesse fights over meaningless bets, drinks constantly, sleeps with his uncle’s wife, and moves his wife frequently when he fails to earn enough money to keep them stable. Yet while the audience tries to reconcile the legendary James with the man on screen, Jesse’s praises are sung by those he robs. Because of the attack on their mother and the murder of their younger half brother, Jesse and Frank have become martyrs to the people of Missouri. One man insists that he is proud to be robbed by a man like Jesse James.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, the audience is shown Jesse after the glory of his younger years, when his criminality was fueled by righteous revenge. But Frank suggests that his revenge has lost its pleasant taste and now Jesse’s has no bottom.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the audience sees the truth about the legend of Jesse James. No matter how justified he may have been in the beginning of his career, by the end of it, Jesse acted not for the sake of justice, but for his own glory and wealth.

When the film flashes forward to April 3, 1882, Jesse is in his home with the Ford brothers,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 17:59.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 1:05:16.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 1:03:00.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 1:04:54.

planning a robbery. While the previous films depicted the older Jesse in a state of redemption, the 1986 film depicts him as planning another heist. Consequently, the scene depicting his assassination is an awkward one. In the 1939 and 1957 films, Jesse's death was completely unexpected although the events leading up to it formed a natural progression. In the 1986 film, Jesse's decision to remove his guns is based on the hunch that his neighbors might see him wearing them. His move to dust the picture hanging over the fireplace is slow and deliberate, leaving the audience wondering if Jesse invited his own death.<sup>65</sup>

Yet unlike the previous films, this movie does not conclude with Jesse's death. Instead, it shows Frank's acquittal and the promise of a better life, even as Bob Ford fails to achieve the same fame and admiration that Jesse did. Ford's cowardice is highlighted when he attempts to create a theatre show depicting the events of April 3, but he is "boo-ed" off stage by his audiences.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, killing Jesse is not the way to gain public favor. Instead, Ford is despised until he himself is assassinated in a saloon in Colorado, with Frank looking on.

The 1986 film is convoluted with its paradoxes portraying the duality of Jesse's character. While he is shown as a dark, vengeful man, he is admired by those around him. Clearly, the external forces of the Civil War provide justification for his troubled character. This film accurately depicts the ambiguities in Jesse's story and ably portrays the difficulty of assessing the man and his motives. Furthermore, the film's attempt to complicate Jesse's character, rendering him indefinable, set the stage for the 2007 film, in which Jesse is almost unreadable.

This 2007 film is the most ambiguous depiction of Jesse thus far. Beginning near the end of Jesse's life, the narrator of the 2007 film describes Jesse's life in the past tense, almost as though he were a mythological creature. He talks of Jesse's younger years as a Southern loyalist and fighter in a

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 1:14:16.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 1:27:06.

Civil War that never ended.<sup>67</sup> But there are no flashbacks to an earlier time and no attempt to justify Jesse's current state of criminality. The audience simply sees Jesse through the disappointed eyes of Bob Ford, who had been an obsessive admirer of James since childhood. When Ford joins the James gang, Jesse has little more than a year of life left, and while it is clear that the peak of his career is over, Jesse maintains control over his gang through cold disdain masked with a cavalier attitude.

Unlike the previous films, the role of Frank James is greatly diminished. No longer is he the caring, steady support of his younger brother. Instead, Frank is shown as bitter and condescending towards Jesse. He longs for his days as an outlaw to be over and tries to convince Jesse to make each robbery the last one.<sup>68</sup> When it becomes clear to Frank that Jesse is unwilling to give up his career, Frank leaves the gang. While Frank had played a major role in the redemption of Jesse in the 1939, 1957, and 1986 films, his decision to leave implies the complete hopelessness of Jesse's situation. With the catalyst for his redemption removed, the audience observes Jesse's steady plunge into darkness and despair.

The most interesting element of character treatment employed in this film is the prolonged moments of silence. Jesse is a man of few words; he is quiet, somber, and solitary even with his gang around him.<sup>69</sup> With a brooding look, black clothes, and dark hair, there is something deeply troubling in Pitt's portrayal of Jesse. The most complex aspect of James is a tendency to swing from one mood to another. He is unpredictable, quick to anger and laugh, and is rather psychotic in his actions and words.<sup>70</sup> He is extremely superstitious and his unpredictable nature frightens his gang so

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<sup>67</sup> *Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, directed by Andrew Dominik, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 25:00.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 29:00.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 31:00. This episode is a good example of Jesse's mental issues. While talking calmly to Bob Ford, Jesse is playing with a couple of snakes, allowing them to slither up and down his arms and

much that many begin to desert him. But he never really lets them get away. Instead, Jesse drops by their homes to keep them on their toes and remind them of his power over them.<sup>71</sup> These visits, usually in the middle of the night, increase his gang's anxiety. As Jesse discovers untruths within his gang, paranoia sets in and he becomes even more unpredictable in his actions and moods.

Yet this terrorizing aspect of Jesse's character is questioned in the duality of his nature. While his actions are always frightful, his words, expressions, and moments of silent staring imply that in spite of his nastiness, there is an element of sadness within him. Jesse is, in fact, melancholy, always on the verge of tears. Near the end of his life, he wonders about the man who had gone so wrong, stating that he does not like what has become of him.<sup>72</sup> A scene at the Cummins farm exemplifies this inner struggle when a young boy refuses to give the whereabouts of a traitorous gang member and James tries to beat the answer out of him.<sup>73</sup> When the boy is finally able to escape Jesse's clutches, James slowly walks back to his horse, sobbing before he quickly mounts his horse and rides away.<sup>74</sup> This moment of weakness in Pitt's depiction of Jesse demonstrates the complexity of Jesse's character.

Further examples of Jesse's inner struggle are his inability to sleep and his tendency to stalk around his home in the middle of the night, talking to his gang about morbid things. Similarly, when Jesse awakens Charlie Ford to tell him that he murdered Ed Miller after an unfortunate visit, James seems troubled about the incident. He distances himself from it by saying, "Jesse shot and killed him. Jesse did."<sup>75</sup> His inability to take the blame shows a potentiality for remorse on Jesse's

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twist between his fingers. He talks soothingly to the creatures and kisses one lightly on the head before pulling out his knife and cutting their heads off. Even then, he keeps the lifeless bodies of the snakes wrapped around his fingers.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 56:25.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 1:58:46.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 59:04.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 1:01:55.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 1:24:55.

part and the audience struggles to reconcile the good Jesse with the bad. This continued duality is seen in his interactions with his gang and those he robs on one hand and how he interacts with his family on the other. When his wife and children are not around, he is a cold, hostile man. Yet at home he is a loving, playful husband and father, giving hugs and kisses to his wife and children.<sup>76</sup> Of all the films analyzed, it is the 2007 one that depicts the most intimate and caring relationship between Jesse and his family.

As with the 1986 film, the assassination scene in the 2007 film is forced and unnatural. Pitt seems to imply that Jesse knew what was about to happen to him because of the unnecessary removal of his gun belt and the moment of intense, silent contemplation before moving to dust the picture frame. The short walk to the fireplace looks more like slow motion footage of one heading to an execution.<sup>77</sup> Yet Jesse's actions show no hint of suspicion or concern although his face clearly displays his knowledge of the imminent event. As he stands on a chair to reach the picture and sees Ford's armed reflection in the glass, Jesse makes no move to protect himself. Instead, he simply closes his eyes as though accepting his fate.<sup>78</sup>

Unlike the 1939, 1957, and 1986 films, the 2007 one showed no public admiration for Jesse during his lifetime. Instead, the narrator comments that people no longer believed in the justice of Jesse's cause.<sup>79</sup> However, after his death, photos of Jesse's body sold for two dollars apiece and were placed in picture viewings next to the Sphinx and the catacombs in Rome.<sup>80</sup> Clearly, his status as an American hero did not rest on reality, but on what legend could make him. And whereas the 1986 film shows the audience booing the cowardice of Ford's crime, the 2007 film shows Ford being

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 1:47:57.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 2:11:50.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 2:12:47.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 1:36:15.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 2:16:51.

applauded for his theatrical rendition of the assassination.<sup>81</sup> Only one man yells that Ford is a coward.

Perhaps it was the cowardice of Bob Ford that enabled Jesse to become a true American hero. When an individual meets an unfortunate end, one cannot help but focus on the hardships in their lives. Jesse became much more likeable in his death than he would have become if he had been captured, tried, and hanged or lived the rest of his life terrorizing the American West. Ford's action played an undeniable role in the creation of Jesse James as a martyr in American history and perpetuated the legend that had already begun to take shape in James' youth.

In conclusion, every element of James' life can be reinterpreted to fit the biases, values, and aspirations of the audience, as seen in how the identical scenes in the 1939 and 1957 films received completely different depictions. Christopher Anderson insists, "The cultural appeal of the James story depends not upon a stable, ritualized meaning that can generate hegemonic consensus according to the demands of different historical conditions, but upon the polysemic aspects of the story."<sup>82</sup> Jesse became the symbol of what divided in the context of the Civil War, but in his death he became the symbol of what makes us all Americans. His role as an underdog appeals to the American sense of justice.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the growth of the idea that Jesse was more sinned against than sinning<sup>84</sup> helped to propagate the idea of Jesse James as a justified vigilante.

There can be no doubt that the primary cause for Jesse's enduring appeal is this ambiguity of the creation of his persona. James' ambiguity permits him to be remade for many generations yet to come.<sup>85</sup> Whatever the social needs of the time, James can personify the hero that is necessary to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 2:18:49.

<sup>82</sup> Anderson, 47.

<sup>83</sup> *American Experience: Jesse James*, a PBS Documentary, 2005.

<sup>84</sup> Film Review, *Time: The Weekly News Magazine*, January 23, 1939, 26.

<sup>85</sup> Anderson, 63.

inspire any group of people, whether that be as a handsome, vigilante hero who is redeemed a little too late, as in the 1939 film; as a young man who fights against injustice, longs to provide a stable home for his family, and does his best to assimilate into society, as in the 1957 film; as an over-the-hill criminal at the end of his career, struggling to hold on to the reputation he created for himself when he was young yet unable to do so because of his poor choices, as in the 1986 film; or as an indefinably complex man unable to continue the duality of his character, as in the 2007 film. How Jesse James will be presented in the future will depend on which ideology serves the social needs and aspirations of those in the twenty-first century.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America*, 204.

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