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Postmodern Storytelling in Traditional Popular Genres

Gore Verbinski's Movies as Reflections on Narrative Patterns

(Edited version before layout)

Hollywood in general and Disney in particular are experts in storytelling. Who else would know better how to use narrative patterns and strategies? This is nothing new. But times have changed, and some traditional popular genres have run out of fashion. Or have they not?

The adventure novel is a genre that gained its popularity in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, it was replaced by the adventure movie. But at the turn to the twenty-first century no one was interested in pirate movies or the like any more. Their peak had been reached long ago (in the case of the pirate genre around the 1950s with films such as The Sea Hawk, Against All Flags, or The Crimson Pirate). That is, until Jack Sparrow, Elizabeth Swan, and William Turner came along and conquered the screen! Gore Verbinski's trilogy Pirates of the Caribbean (2003) was a huge commercial success. What is more important, it was a modernization of the genre--these movies combined the more or less realistic pirate genre with the fantastic. Apart from the suspense, mystery, comic relief, action, and great actors--Hollywood stars--these blockbusters of the new century provide, they are first and foremost cleverly constructed. They do not simply tell their stories. Instead, they reflect on storytelling at the same time. They reflect on what storytelling is, on its purpose, and on the crucial topics it consists of. Furthermore, they contain considerations about how the narrative is structured, under what

circumstances it is being performed, and how other people might already have told a similar story, albeit in a different way.

Pirates of the Caribbean can be read in various ways. First, it appears to be a commentary on the rise of globalized capitalism and its consequences. At the same time, it debates pivotal aspects of traditional storytelling (and/or narrative culture) that are used in order to depict the variety of possible perspectives and ways of narrating. For instance, the characters discuss narrative topoi (the damsel in distress) and basic themes (the dichotomy of good and evil, divine providence versus human cleverness, blasphemous use of the Bible); rhetorical devices (tragic irony, literal versus figurative use of speech); the truth of different versions of the same story; the existence of different names for the same mythological beast; and the destructive impact of capitalism on the belief in mythological creatures: “The immaterial has become . . . immaterial” (27:50–27:57), says materialist Lord Cutler Beckett of the East India Trading Company to the mythic miscreant Davy Jones, in the third part of the series, At World’s End.

In this paper, I will concentrate on Verbinski’s first reshaping of the western. I focus on his movie Rango (2011) and its particular use of the widespread hero pattern--which has been studied mainly by ethnologists (regarding mythic, legendary, and historical heroes, cf. the survey presented by Katalin Horn and the anthology edited by Robert A. Segal). It is, however, also common in Hollywood movies, not only since Hollywood development executive Christopher Vogler adapted Joseph Campbell’s popular mythological inquiry The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949) for screenwriters in the mid-1980s (elaborated and published years later, in 1992; cf. also Vogler’s analysis of recent Hollywood movies in the third edition, 2007).

Rango was produced in the early years of Barack Obama’s presidency in the United States of America. Whether this was intentional or purely coincidental, the film can also be read as a commentary to this president and his ambition to be regarded as a savior and a national hero.

In the last section I shall discuss Verbinski's Lone Ranger (2013), another western that deals with the concept of the hero and is meant to be read as a postcolonial rewriting of American history. On the one hand, Lone Ranger shows how the Western wilderness was sacrificed to progress, implying ruthless commercial exploitation, and imperial attitudes, implying hegemonic supremacy at all cost. On the other hand, it reflects upon the impact of popular culture on the knowledge and thinking of the individual. As a means of deconstruction, the movie makes use of an unreliable narrator, in duplicate ways.

Rango (2011) as a Commentary on the Myth of the Hero

Rango--Rango--Rango--Rango, the mariachi group sings and thereby reveals from the beginning of the movie that the audience is about to follow the story of a hero: We are gathered here today to immortalize in song the life and untimely death of a great legend. So sit back and relax and enjoy your low-calorie popcorn and assorted confections while we tell you the strange and bewildering tale of a hero who has yet to enter his own story (0:53–1:33). The narrative structure is given--the hero is to be rendered immortal by their song. He is already a legend, but now, in the story within the story, he is to be turned into a myth.

Rango is directed by Gore Verbinski, based on a script by John Logan, and produced for Paramount by Nickelodeon Movies, Blind Wink, and GK Films. In its plot, it is an animated movie for the whole family. Its cast consists of a number of humanized desert animals in the western United States, and the film can be seen as a postmodern western full of wit and humorous allusions (in text, characters, pictures, and music) to the genre defined by movies such as Fred Zinnemann's High Noon (1952) and, in the 1960s, Sergio Leone's so-called spaghetti westerns A Fistful of Dollars (Per un pugno di dollari, 1964), The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo, 1966), or Once Upon a Time in the West (C'era una volta il West,

1968). Rango further incorporates numerous cross-references to other films: As in Roman Polanski's Chinatown (1974), the plot deals with the dispute over water; dressed in his red Hawaiian shirt, Rango accidentally meets Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo (in an equally red shirt) from Terry Gilliam's movie Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas (1998), and like the protagonists in this movie (or rather the novel by Hunter S. Thompson on which it is based), Rango undertakes "a savage journey to the heart of the American dream" (Thompson).

The story is set simultaneously in the age of pioneers and on the highway of the present time; from the backwater town Dirt in the middle of the Mojave desert, which genre-typically consists of a saloon, a bank, a prison, and other common Western ingredients, it is only a short distance to present-day Las Vegas. Moreover, the political theme of the story plays on a topic that is bound to become even more urgent in the future: the global struggle for water. F. Göttler, in his review in the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung, observes that by the end of the film, times and eras are blurred and a variety of genres blend into each other to such an extent that a sense of apocalypse is added to the imagery of the old West. When Dirt's mayor is eventually exposed as treacherous and corrupt, the film takes a similar stance: One day soon, all this is going to fade into myth, the frontier town, the lawmen, the gunslinger. There's just no place for them anymore. We're civilized now (1:11:10–1:11:19). In a highly entertaining and cleverly composed manner, Rango uncovers the constructed nature of the myth of the hero--an age-old story we all know from the cinema as well as from real life, history, and politics, as Göttler concludes. Based on these arguments, the general audience will read the movie as a commentary on the myth of the hero in general. It will also be read in terms of its reference and regress to this myth as it occurs in current US history.

The story of Rango centers on a male lizard--a wannabe hero who has left the terrarium in search of his own identity, and whose adventurous journey has landed him in the western city of

Dirt. Prior to his voyage, however, he spends his time inside the glass case he calls home devoted to cultivating skills in dramatic arts--a fact that can again be seen as one of the typically self-referential moments used in postmodern animation films (cf. Frizzoni). Using the utensils found in the terrarium, he regularly directs and performs plays in which the protagonist is bound to be recognized as a hero: I'm the guy, the protagonist, the hero. Every story needs a hero (0:2:56–0:3:00). He could be anyone--the sea captain returning from a mighty voyage; or the rogue anthropologist, battling pythons down in the Congo; or, in the field of romance, he could be the greatest lover the world has ever known!

Unfortunately, he soon realizes that a hero's journey requires something more: Conflict! The hero cannot exist in a vacuum! What our story needs is an ironic, unexpected event that will propel the hero into conflict! (0:4:29–0:4:36). And sure enough, such an event occurs. The pickup truck transporting the terrarium has an accident, and the--up to this point nameless--lizard is catapulted onto a highway in the middle of the desert. On the spot, the lizard then learns a great deal more about heroic tales through an armadillo that takes on the function of a mentor and tells the protagonist about its quest leading to the Spirit of the West with fortune on its side: The Spirit of the West, amigo. The one. They say he rides an alabaster carriage with golden guardians to protect him. [. . .] I must get to the other side. [. . .] It's not so easy as it looks. [. . .] The path to knowledge is fraught with consequence. [. . .] Destiny, she is kind to you. [. . .] We all have our journeys to make! I will see you on the other side (0:6:47–0:9:39). On its way through the desert and to Dirt, a city increasingly afflicted by water shortage, the lizard additionally learns the importance of adaptation (in other words, mimicry), which further prepares the hero for survival "through the day and for eternity" (cf. Hügel and Schönfelder).

The distinction between a hero and an adventurer is not always clear-cut. Certain traits of the adventurer can easily be applied to the construction of heroes. The status of an adventurer has

repeatedly been attested to the Italian national hero Garibaldi, for example, because of his guerrilla warfare: fighting in South America and Europe, taking part in civil wars and revolutions, leading free corps, and so on. (cf. Hausmann 1985 and 2008). The adventurer is usually thrown into an unknown and/or dangerous situation through no fault of his own. While he is not seeking out dangerous situations, he responds to them with agility. According to Georg Simmel, the adventure brings with it the allure of the conquest and the swift grasp of an opportunity (101). As Hügel (2003) emphasizes in this context, the adventurer depends highly on this moment, as it enables the realization of his personal struggle as well as survival strategies, so that he can be able to live according to his own rules in a world dominated by him, yet from which he nevertheless remains estranged and merely appropriates it by means of mimicry (93).

The protagonist of Rango acts accordingly. Upon his arrival in Dirt, he immediately adapts to the new situation and fully seizes the opportunity presented by giving himself a resonant name and adopting an adequate, albeit invented, identity. He answers the questions who he is and where he came from with an aggressive tone as well as an attitude and posture that forcefully demand authority. Me? I'm from the West. Out there, beyond the horizon. Past the sunset. The Far West. Yeah, that's right, hombres. The place I come from, we kill a man before breakfast just to work up an appetite. Then we salt him, and we pepper him. Then we braise him in clarified butter. And then we eat him. [. . .] Hell, I seen things make a grown man lose control of his glandular functions! [. . .] It'll change a man. Oh, yeah. [. . .] I am not from around these parts. You might say I'm from everywhere there's trouble brewing and hell waiting to be raised. You might say I'm what hell's already raised up. Name's Rango (0:22:18–0:23:18).

The freshly baptized Rango is now also in the possession of a heroic past, as he boastfully constructs his own image as the gunslinger who had killed the bandit brothers Jenkins, seven in one strike--a motif that is well known from the Grimm folktale "The Valiant Little Tailor"--with

a single bullet. Rango thus delineates his own plot, which eventually amounts to the idea that hope springs from the lie. The people believe his story, and their hope of being rescued from dying of thirst in the corrupt city is directed at him: It's about time we had a hero around here (0:32:42–0:32:44) is a sentiment soon widely spread among the population, following the idea that the hero is the one who saves us (cf. Hügel and Schönfelder). Bear in mind, however, that by the time Arminius--also known as Herman the Cherusci--became known as a hero among the Germans, he had already been dead for over a thousand years (see Münkler; Losemann). And when the French received the prophecy of a young girl becoming their savior, Joan of Arc had not even been born yet. As she grew up, however, she soon accepted the role charged with the yearnings and hopes of the society she arrived in (see Trom 136–40; Tanz). Her example, just as the stories of other actual heroes and (more seldom) heroines, illustrates how such characters are constructed by projections as well as well-known patterns of hero biographies (see Horn; Segal), and to what extent their self-construction adds to the image. Eric Hobsbawm observes a general desire to create connections between the current time and bygone epochs and historical figures, to construct links to mythical times and characters. The continuity with the historic past referred to often turns out to be artificial. Napoleon, for example, through paintings, created images of himself among the likes of Hannibal, conqueror of the Alps (Jacques-Louis David, Bonaparte franchissant le Grand-Saint-Bernard, 1800), and Roman commander (Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, Triomphe de Bonaparte ou la Paix, before 1801). Hitler, on the other hand, liked to see himself as a medieval knight of an order (as he was depicted by Hubert Lanzinger in his painting Der Bannerträger, 1934/36). Heroic role models such as these are attested a certain charismatic authority, in the sense of Max Weber, and their newly attained authority is derived from previous, potentially alleged, heroic deeds, as opposed to contemporary sociopolitical structures. Such hero constructions thus belong to the so-called invented traditions, which, according to Hobsbawm,

produce and symbolize a consensual and collective identity. They are part of the “emotional groundwork” of nations studied by Etienne François und Hagen Schulze, and the “imagined communities” as postulated by Benedict Anderson. Regardless of factual inequality and exploitation, such communities seem selfless and are therefore entitled to demand sacrifices--more on this aspect further down.

Let us return to Rango, whose potential to function as a role model or template for identification is clearly recognized by both the population and the mayor: You see them, Mr. Rango? All my friends and neighbors? It's a hard life here. Very hard. Do you know how they make it through each and every day? They believe. They believe it's going to be better. [. . .] They believe against all odds and all evidence that tomorrow will be better than today. People have to believe in something. Right now, they believe in you. [. . .] Your destiny awaits. People have to believe in something (0:34:56–0:35:41). Rango is thus promptly appointed sheriff of Dirt.

A common aspect of the construction of a hero emphasizes the idea of being the chosen one--with allusion to the concepts of fate and divine fulfillment (as, for example, is depicted in Eugene Thirion's painting Jeanne d'Arc (1876), the uniqueness of the current period, the opportunity that is to be seized in order to improve or diminish horrendous conditions, and the plea to the community for the assistance of all and readiness to sacrifice in the name of a better future. The mayor of Dirt seems to be aware of this pattern when he pleads to the public with regard to a newly introduced water ritual in the following manner: We have a newcomer amongst us today, my friends. A man I think needs little introduction to you, so bold has been his entry into our fair society. [. . .] The time has come, my friends. The time that was foretold! Every one of his subsequent slogans is henceforth greeted with a hearty Hallelujah! Hallelujah! He thus continues: The sacred time! [. . .] The time of destiny! [. . .] The time of deliverance! [. . .] He concludes with the grave postulation: Times will be tough from now on. Sacrifices will have to

be made (0:40:27–0:41:34). Following yet another populist speech of Rango's, who proceeds to conjure the unity of the people, the mayor alludes to the significance of hope--as he had already done vis-à-vis Rango.

Heroes are courageous and determined fighters--as seen in the Jeanne d'Arc monument on Place du Parvis at Reims or with Napoleon in the painting La bataille d'Austerlitz (1810) by François Pascal Simon Gérard. Heroes master challenges for which they are eventually awarded an almost godlike adoration, like in Andrea Appiani's painting Apoteosi di Napoleone (1807). Joan of Arc and Napoleon are really strong examples of this type of hero. The freshly emerged hero Rango wallows in his new role, and when the situation in Dirt threatens to become precarious, he bravely sets out to solve the water problem, armed with an entourage of followers and the enthusiastic battle call: Now we ride! (0:46:51–0:46:53). Sitting by the fireside in the evening, he tells them of the Spirit of the West and soon becomes tangled up in yet another lie when calling the menacing foe of the city, Rattlesnake Jake, his brother. He finally promises: Don't you all worry about a thing. Come tomorrow, we'll locate that water and return to a hero's welcome (0:55:49–0:55:54). One of Rango's followers then recites a prayer, thus perfecting the connection between Rango and the mythical Spirit of the West, an act that thoroughly elevates Rango to the role of a god-sent savior: Friends, before we bunk down I'd like us all to join hands for a moment, say a few words to the Spirit of the West. [. . .] Ain't always spoken rightly to you, Spirit of the West. But tonight I want to thank you for bringing Sheriff Rango into our lives. It's a hard life we got. Sometimes I don't know how we're gonna make it. But somehow, Sheriff Rango makes me think we will. We needed a brave man and you sent us one. Nice to have someone to believe in again. Thank you, Spirit of the West. Amen (0:55:55–0:56:36).

When the expectations of the followers are finally disappointed, however, the hero loses his charisma--as it seems to have happened to Napoleon in Paul Delaroche's painting Napoléon

abdiquant à Fontainebleau (1840). Rango's mission ends in failure, and his repeated promise of hope peters out as the net of lies around Rattlesnake Jake is eventually exposed. I hear you been telling about how you killed all them Jenkins brothers. With one bullet, wasn't it? Ha ha. Isn't that right? All these good folks here believe your little stories, don't they? [. . .] Seems these folks trust you. They think you're gonna save their little town. They think you're gonna save their little souls! But we know better, don't we? So why don't you show your friends here what you're made of? Show them who you really are. [. . .] You didn't do any of them things you said, did you? You didn't kill them Jenkins brothers. You ain't even from the West! [. . .] All you've done is lie to these good people. You ain't nothing but a fake and a coward (1:15:02–1:16:34).

Defeated, Rango leaves town.

Eventually, he receives a second chance in an encounter with another mentor figure in the desert (a Man-With-No-Name-Clint-Eastwood-type with a Golf caddy and Oscar figures at the rear which he believes to incorporate the mythical Spirit of the West). He rebuilds Rango's by now disillusioned spirit by evoking the power of deeds: Doesn't matter what they call you. It's the deeds make the man (1:21:55–1:21:59). In response to Rango's demure stance that his friends may have believed in him but truly needed a kind of hero, he counters: Then be a hero. [. . .] Don't you see? It's not about you. It's about them. [. . .] Don't know that you got a choice, son. No man can walk out on his own story (1:22:07–1:22:37), thus referring not only to the demanded altruism of a hero, but also the potential predestination of his actions.

Rango thus decides to return, develops a plan, brings the water back to the town, defeats Jake as well as the mayor, and thereby rescues the city from the threat of doom. Rango becomes a heroic legend of which the choir--a mariachi band with a touch of ancient Greek tragedy--sings to this day: And so the lizard completes his journey from humble beginnings to the legend we sing of today. And although he is certain to die, perhaps from a household accident, which account for

65 percent of all unnatural deaths, the people of the village will always remember the name of the one who saved them.--Rango! (1:36:24–1:36:46). These are the closing words of the film's cinema version.

In order to win over the American population, in his famous speeches of January 8, 2008, in New Hampshire and November 4 of the same year in Chicago, Barack Obama used a kind of rhetoric that alludes to considerable background knowledge of how heroes are constructed. Among the civil-religious motives applied in his speeches (cf. Triendl) were hope, the will and the potential for change, the opportunity of the hour, the ideas of unity and consensus, and the necessity of deprivation and effort. Additionally, his message was anchored in the credo of the historical background of American pioneers and their independence, as well as the stylization of himself as a redeemer. Consider Obama's speech in New Hampshire, as candidate: "if we [. . .] challenge ourselves to reach for something better, there is no problem we cannot solve, there is no destiny that we cannot fulfill. [. . .] Yes, we can, to justice and equality. Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can. [. . .] And, together, we will begin the next great chapter in the American story, with three words that will ring from coast to coast, from sea to shining sea: Yes, we can." After the election victory, in his Chicago speech, he sounded both confident and demanding: "It's the answer that-- that led those who've been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day. [. . .] change has come to America. [. . .] we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime. [. . .] The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. [. . .] I promise you: We as a people will get there. [. . .] It can't happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice. [. . .] This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time [. . .] while we breathe, we hope. [. . .] we will

respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.” Parallel to these messianic messages, accompanied by cheers and applause, Obama cleverly pulled out all the stops of a political star and effectively marketed himself as an icon (and merchandising artifact). The central slogans--besides “Yes, we can”--were “The new hope” and “Change we can believe in,” closely linked with heroic imagery and language. His logo displayed a rising sun over the red and white stripes of the US flag.

When Rango hit the theaters in 2011, scratches had already tainted the polish of Obama. He was accused of boasting and deceit--a messiah on the way down who desperately clung to the maintenance of his image in order to prepare the way for potential reelection in the upcoming presidential race. A caricature drawn by Michael Augsten in 2009 shows him bent over and burdened with a speech bubble filled with all the slogans and promises he had used--“Hope,” “Believe,” “Repair this world,” “End this war,” “Free this nation,” “Yes we can!”--and forcefully summoned him to--in his own campaign words--“Change!” At the low point of Rango’s career, the Spirit of the West advises him: “Then be a hero,” as if to encourage Obama--fully aware of the mechanisms of hero construction--to approach his goals more aggressively and thereby achieve them.

In the course of their “commodification” heroes are molded according to current needs, they fulfill different purposes under different circumstances and are therefore interpreted in different ways (see Marchal 13). They are adjusted and eventually become so abstract that their image, their name, their life, and their central messages mutate to nothing but the empty parasitical form that Roland Barthes described in his Mythologies (96–97). They are cited for the masses in a universally adaptable way. Gandhi, for example, was turned into a globally compatible icon in the course of a process of abstraction marked by secularization and Christianization (see Hefner; Markovits 13–39, 56–73). Similarly, Martin Luther King, who also

invoked Gandhi in his dictum “I have a dream” used in his famous speech of August 28, 1963, became a universally applicable icon of hope for a better future. In a Q&A session with high school students in 2009, Obama positioned himself in that tradition: “Gandhi, [. . .] He’s somebody I find a lot of inspiration in. He inspired Dr. (Martin Luther) King [. . .]. He ended up doing so much and changed the world just by the power of his ethics [. . .] [. . .] a lot of people are counting on me” (Associated Press).

Roland Barthes observed that the regression from meaning to form creates incontestable icons (97–98), one of which is Che Guevara. Michael Casey, a specialist in the field of global economics, in his book Che’s Afterlife (2009) about the international impact of Alberto Korda’s iconic image of Che Guevara, called him “the quintessential postmodern icon signifying anything to anyone and everything to everyone” (cited in Kakutani; on Che Guevara’s commodification see also Larson and Lizardo; Lahrem). This process is also reflected upon in Rango: The DVD contains special features such as an originally suggested ending that was eventually deleted for the cinema version of the film. The scene shows the saturated sheriff Rango in the now prospering, leisure- and consumption-oriented city of Dirt who is about to approach an incident that had occurred in an appropriately Western style. His wife Beans bids him goodbye in public and informs him that she has packed his lunch, reminds him not to forget his nose spray and body lotion, and reprimands him as follows: Now, honey, you come back with all your digits. And don’t go trying to be a hero. Slightly embarrassed he replies: Beans, you are missing the point. I got an image to protect now. The desert shrew then comments upon this final scene with the following words: Well, in order to satisfy the needs of the collective, the hero must abandon the self and solidify his image as an icon that will forever be remembered (Special Features, 0:10:09–0:10:46). This explanatory statement conclusively positions Rango as an analytically well-

founded product that reflects thoroughly upon cultural processes as well as narrative structures applied in popular forms of entertainment--a fact that once again speaks to their complexity.

Lone Ranger (2013), or: The Pioneers Deconstructed

Verbinski's latest film, Lone Ranger, is also set in the West and is rife with allusions to the West. The story begins in 1933, in San Francisco. The Golden Gate Bridge is not yet finished; one can only see the skeleton. With a bag full of roasted peanuts in his hand, a boy strolls into a fairground attraction: a western show. With his black mask and his big white cowboy hat, he obviously is a fan of the legendary Lone Ranger--the fictional hero of a popular radio show in the 1930s (and various adaptations during the time of the Great Depression, and later as well) who fought against injustice in the American Old West, together with Tonto, his Comanche companion. The iconic theme music was Rossini's overture to the opera Guillaume Tell (1829), also cited in Verbinski's film.

In a diorama titled "The Noble Savage in His Natural Habitat," the boy sees the statuette of an old man in traditional "Indian" clothing. When this old man speaks to him the boy recognizes him as Tonto. With astonishment and growing interest the boy listens to the familiar story, now from the lips of the old Tonto. The existence of such a frame story and such a setting points out that Verbinski's movie is not just a repetition of the old story. It is a postcolonial rewriting not only of the fictional story but also of the history of the pioneers and the indigenous people of the West. The story within the story is set in 1869, in a fictitious Texas that represents all landscapes of the western genre. Whereas the film How the West Was Won (1962) showed great optimism in progress and celebrated the metamorphosis of the natural desert landscape in the West to an infrastructure that supports the industrial society and links urban centers, Verbinski's Lone Ranger tells the story of how the West was lost to imperialism: cold and blind

belief in progress, greed for material profit and the global reach of economic power, lacking a sense of law and guilt, plus widespread corruption lead to betrayal and hostile takeovers and make people stick to nothing.

In this amoral situation, a former Texas Ranger (Lone Ranger), refusing to use a pistol and willing to enforce law and order on the basis of John Locke's liberal and nonviolent thoughts, seems ridiculous. The word "future" spoken by the corrupt railway company manager sounds like mendacious propaganda. Against this background, Tonto's biography is shown in its tragic relief. When he was a child he had led two white men to a silver vein on his tribe's land--in order to get a silver pocket watch for himself. Soon their village had been destroyed and the end of their peaceful life had come. Since then Tonto has been an outcast, isolated from his tribe.

So the old man in the diorama tells his story. But why do we notice the boy's peanut bag in Tonto's account? Is that a director's mistake? Yet this simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous can be read in a different way. Who really is the narrator of this story? Out of whose perspective do we learn about the occurrences in the nineteenth century? If it were just Tonto's story, quite a few things would be inconsistent: The story aspires to approach American history in politically correct terms--so why are there so many stereotypes about indigenous people in Tonto's account? Why are there such clear markers of fictionality? The boy exposes the old man as an unreliable narrator. But this boy internalized the story of the lone Texas Ranger. And since the "noble savage" in the diorama reminds him of his favorite fictional protagonists, he imagines that Tonto finally tells him the story out of his perspective. Thus we also see it with the eyes of the boy seeking justice. But this innocent child is also an unreliable narrator. We take part in his interpretation of history, stimulated by popular culture, and mixing up diverse ready-made elements of the western genre. In the end, the story within the story ends with the death of the bad guys, but it is clear that progress and corruption can't be stopped. So, from now on, Tonto and the

Lone Ranger defend the law as outlaws (musically underlined by Rossini's overture to William Tell).

The frame story shows the boy leaving the tent with the western show. Meanwhile, the Golden Gate Bridge has been finished, about four years must have passed. In the nineteenth century, the railway linked the East with the West and thus was the bloody foundation stone of the history of white America's welfare. An illustrious symbol of technological progress during the first half of the twentieth century, the bridge closed the (economic) gap between North and South. In How the West Was Won the film ends with the eye of the camera passing through the Golden Gate Bridge--in order to reach distant shores. Verbinski's film stops right before the bridge. The imperialistic dream has come to its end: a different kind of progress, so to speak.

Gore Verbinski and his team deconstruct the western by means of the western; in the end we are overwhelmed by redundancy. As with Pirates of the Caribbean and Rango they again have a hand in the survival of the classic adventure film, even in times of action cinema.

The movies dealt with in this essay show great skill in the different ways of storytelling. In order to debate American history and American politics, they revert to a narrative repertoire that reaches from tragedy to the burlesque, and from classical hero patterns that were originally meant to stabilize to their recasting as postmodernist tools of unsettling.

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