James Fenimore Cooper as a Western Author and the 1920 Film Adaptation of *The Last of the Mohicans* *

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Abstract
The article explores the cultural relocation of James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* in the 1920 film adaptation made by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown. The article argues that the cultural relocation was affected by the rising popularity of the western and also by the progressivist ethos of the 1920s. It is revealed that while some features of the western are already present in the novel, other features were added by the film-makers to bring the structure closer to that of a western.

Keywords
James Fenimore Cooper; *The Last of the Mohicans*; film adaptation; western; Gérard Genette; Maurice Tourneur; Clarence Brown; Native Americans; gender

1. Cooper as the Founding Father of the Western

James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) is considered by many critics to be the father of the western.[1] With his pentalogy *The Leatherstocking Tales* he established typical motifs, themes, situations, characters, conflicts and even their resolutions. Even though his most successful and most frequently adapted novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), is not a western but a historical romance, the important film adaptations in 1920, 1936 and 1992 tried to bring it closer to the western genre. In this article I will focus on the 1920 film because it is the first significant film adaptation of Cooper's novel and can still be considered as an artistic accomplishment.

One of the first to trace Cooper's influence on the western was Henry Nash Smith. He focused primarily on the development of the conception of the protagonist of the western in connection with the change of setting. Smith explains that Cooper's Natty Bumppo (Leatherstocking) is the prototype of the western hero. Smith demonstrates the development of Natty Bumppo's

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1. For a summary of criticism on Cooper's contribution to the western, see Edward Harris, "Cooper on Film," *James Fenimore Cooper Society Miscellaneous Papers—Electronic Series*, no. 2, *James Fenimore Cooper Society Website*, accessed January 10, 2013, http://external.oneonta.edu/cooper/drama/film.html.

character through the example of Charles Averill's Kit Carson in *The Prince of the Gold Hunters* (1849).[2] Carson looks like the young Natty Bumppo:

> [He is] made younger, mounted on a horse, and given an appreciably greater degree of self-assurance. Gone is the humility of the former servant, but gone also is the power to commune with nature. The Wild Western hero has been secularized . . . and magnified. He no longer looks to God through nature, for nature is no longer benign: its symbols are the wolves and the prairie fire. The scene has been shifted from the deep fertile forests east of the Mississippi to the barren plains.[3]

In sum, what Carson gained in youthful appearance and greater self-assurance, he lost in humility, spirituality and wisdom. This transformation of Natty Bumppo already contains most of the typical traits of the western hero. The change of landscape from the forest to the barren plains also helps set the stage for the film western. The landscape of the barren plains becomes a structural feature and shapes the human character. As Smith puts it, the dreary landscape "throws the hero back in upon himself and accentuates his terrible and sublime isolation. He is an anarchic and self-contained atom—hardly even a monad—alone in a hostile, or at best a neutral, universe."[4] Smith's rather overdramatic thesis about the fundamental isolation of the western hero needs a revision that I offer later in my analysis.

Another influential American critic who acknowledged Cooper's founding contribution to the western was Leslie Fiedler. In his *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Fiedler argues that Cooper "invented" the western—he created "the prototype of all cowboy-and-Indian romances, the first embodiment of the ritual drama played out to this day in television fantasies called *Gunsmoke* or *Wyatt Earp*."[5] The hero of this ritual drama is a man on the run:

> Ever since, the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid "civilization," which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility.[6]

Cooper's important contribution to the origin of the western is also acknowledged by John G. Cawelti, who proposes a thesis very similar to that of Fiedler. Cawelti attributes to Cooper the foundation of the frontier "anti-myth" that forms a structural part of the genre. This anti-myth opposes the "epic of the pioneers and the 'Winning of the West'" and gives an account of "the hero's flight from civilization, which he comes to recognize as totally

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2. The full title is *Kit Carson, The Prince of the Gold Hunters; or, The Adventures of the Sacramento. A Tale of the New Eldorado, Founded on Actual Facts*.
3. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 89.
4. Smith, *Virgin Land*, 89.
5. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), 186.
6. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, xx–xxi.

destructive of nature and spirit."[7] A typical western protagonist is, like Natty Bumppo, therefore anti-intellectual and with little or no education, relies on his practical experience and inborn common sense, and is endowed with great physical prowess.

The flight from civilization, or, more exactly, from the society of settlements and cities, does not mean that such a protagonist is stripped of all the norms and values of his native culture; some essential links and bonds remain. As a result, he is often caught up in a set of contradictory impulses; by helping the agents of social progress he helps install a social order that will have no place for him and make him a relic if he does not adapt.

The flight from civilization brings Natty Bumppo and his western followers closer to nature and confronts them with another culture—the Native American culture. According to Fiedler, it is the presence of the Indian that makes the western: "The heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape (by itself this produces only the Northern), but the encounter with the Indian, that utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home."[8] This encounter can take the form of friendship, as in the case of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, the last chief of the Mohicans, and/or open conflict. According to Richard Slotkin, "[t]he American must cross the border into 'Indian country' and experience a 'regression' to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the 'metropolis' can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted." The American Indian and the wilderness "also provide him with the new consciousness through which he will transform the world." The frontier heroes have to learn "to discipline or suppress the savage or 'dark' side of their own human nature."[9]

However, there are many westerns without American Indians, e.g., *High Noon* (1952) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). Jane Tompkins even goes as far as to assert that even though some American Indians may appear in the western, they play a very marginal and negligible role:

> The ones I saw functioned as props, bits of local color, textural effects. As people they had no existence. Quite often they filled the role of villains, predictably, driving the engine of the plot, threatening the wagon train, the stagecoach, the cavalry detachment—a particularly dangerous form of local wildlife. But there were no Indian characters, no individuals with a personal history and a point of view.[10]

It is obvious that sweeping generalizations often fall short of their objectives and the presence of the Indians, whether as friendly tutors in wilderness skills or resourceful enemies, is an important though not indispensable element of the western.

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7. John G. Cawelti, "Cooper and the Frontier Myth and Anti-Myth," in *James Fenimore Cooper: New Historical and Literary Contexts*, ed. W. M. Verhoeven (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 158.
8. Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), 20.
9. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 14.
10. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.

The flight from civilization, confrontation with a different culture and immersion in the wilderness foster a hybrid identity. And once again Natty Bumppo is the prototype of such characters in the western. His mixture of social codes is most clearly indicated by his clothes and his manners. He wears American Indian moccasins, leggings and a leather hunting jacket, but like a white man he wears a leather or fur cap on his head and carries a long rifle and no tomahawk. When in chapter 12 of the *Mohicans* he shouts during the battle against the enemy Indians, "Extarminate the varlets! no quarter to an accursed Mingo!"[11] and Mingo is for him a derogatory branding of all the Indians of the Iroquois language family, it is hard to tell whether his cry ventilates his white frontiersman's racism or tribal manners.

In spite of his occasional lapses into savagism, Natty, as a cultural hybrid, also retains some high moral principles and some polite manners from his native culture; this is exemplified in his rudiments of Christian ethics (pity, piety, humility) and in his Euro-American chivalrous attitude to women. Another sign of cultural difference is his rejection of the practice of scalping. Some of his manners can be classified as American, that is, related to the notion of the fundamental equality of men, for example, his lack of deferential manners towards his superiors in rank.[12]

While there is a general agreement about the pattern of experience that shapes the character of the western—the flight from civilization, confrontation with nature and a cultural other and hybrid identity—there is less agreement about another structural element—the loneliness of the western hero. For example, R. W. B. Lewis[13] and Cawelti stress the loneliness of the western hero, while Leslie Fiedler points out, following the lead of D. H. Lawrence,[14] that Natty Bumppo is not alone as he has his faithful friend Chingachgook:

> Natty Bumppo, the hunter and enemy of cities; and Chingachgook, nature's nobleman and Vanishing American . . . between them postulate a third myth, an archetypal relationship which also haunts the American psyche: two lonely men, one dark-skinned,

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11. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757*, ed. James A. Sappenfield and E. N. Feltskog, in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, ed. Blake Nevius (New York: Library of America, 1985), 1:598. Henceforth *Mohicans*.
12. "The most surprising peculiarity about the man himself, was the entire indifference with which he regarded all distinctions that did not depend on personal merit." James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pathfinder: or, The Inland Sea*, ed. Richard Dilworth Rust, in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, ed. Blake Nevius (New York: Library of America, 1985), 2:139.
13. "[A]n individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant, and self-propelling." R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 5.
14. Cf. "he dreamed a new human relationship. A stark, stripped human relationship of two men, deeper than the deeps of sex. Deeper than property, deeper than fatherhood, deeper than marriage, deeper than love. So deep that it is loveless. The stark, loveless, wordless unison of two men who have come to the bottom of themselves." D. H. Lawrence, "Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels," in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; London: Penguin Books, 1977), 59–60.

> one white, bend together over a carefully guarded fire in the virgin heart of the American wilderness; they have forsaken all others for the sake of the austere, almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love which binds them to each other and to the world of nature which they have preferred to civilization.[15]

To resolve the dispute is not easy. Natty Bumppo both is and is not alone. In *The Pioneers* (1823), for most of the time covered by the plot, he is not alone, but after the death of Chingachgook he chooses loneliness and social isolation. Natty Bumppo's final departure from Templeton and his disappearance in the woods in the West sets up the model of the lonely ranger as a knight errant who, having performed his task and having helped the community, rides off alone. In *The Prairie* (1827) a reverse strategy is used; Natty enters the plot as a solitary figure but ends up as a member of the Pawnee tribe. Nevertheless, in the last dramatic scene in the epilogue, the scene of his death, he once again goes away alone as he receives a summons from God. However, in the other novels of *The Leatherstocking Tales* Natty Bumppo is never really alone.

If friendship or companionship is one essential component of the concept of the protagonist of the western, it is necessary to add that this friendship can usually only flourish on neutral ground, outside both the protagonist's community and that of his companion. Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook generally operate outside American settlements, and when in *The Pathfinder* (1840) one part of the novel depicts Natty's courtship in an English military outpost, Chingachgook is discreetly removed and is kept outside in the woods. Even though it is evident that at one time or another both protagonists lived among their own people, Chingachgook among the Delawares and the Mohicans, and Natty working for the British army, the plots of the novels always tend to situate them outside their own native community.

The notion of the loneliness of western heroes can be challenged even further. Fiedler does not take into account the fact that the success of the heroic enterprise is not possible without some degree of intervention on the part of the community. In the *Mohicans* the antagonist Magua, the chief of the Hurons, can be defeated only with the aid of Chingachgook's lost tribesmen, the Delawares; in *The Prairie* their role is taken up by the Pawnees, and in *The Pathfinder* Natty and Chingachgook succeed with the help of a lake sailor, young Jasper. In *The Deerslayer* (1841), the last-minute rescue is provided by a unit of British infantry. Cooper's novels always present the fulfillment of a heroic task as a result of collective efforts.

So is the true western hero lonely or not? And is it possible to make any such broad generalizations? I propose the following compromise. Cooper's Natty Bumppo is generally not alone but Cooper has the ability to create powerful scenes of dramatic isolation. In these scenes he anticipated the trials of the protagonists of the western. However, the scenes of companionship and solidarity are of equally lasting importance.

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15. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 187.

The list of Cooper's contributions to the development of the western includes a variety of other narrative components. Among typical motifs are a last-minute rescue, kidnappings and the spectacular arrivals and final departures of the hero. In *The Prairie*, Cooper created an unforgettable entry of the hero, whose figure is shown looming against the horizon and fantastically magnified by means of an optical effect of the light.[16] As Harris points out, this image "is often duplicated in the Western film usually with the hero entering the scene of strife against a dramatic backdrop (John Wayne in *Stagecoach*; Alan Ladd's entrance in *Shane*; Clint Eastwood's appearing out of the smoke in *A Fistful of Dollars*). In the end of the film the Western hero is usually portrayed departing for the next frontier as did Leatherstocking."[17]

The motif of the last-minute rescue by the army was used by Cooper for the first time in his last novel of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, *The Deerslayer*, where the protagonists are saved from impending destruction by the timely arrival of a unit of the British army. This kind of resolution will resound in many scenes in westerns with the last-minute intervention of the U.S. Cavalry. Other classic motifs include the journey of a wagon train across the plains further to the West or an Indian attack on the fortified encampment of a group of settlers (in *The Prairie*).

The episodic structure of *The Last of the Mohicans*, conceived as a sequence of chases and pursuits, captivity and narrow escapes, including the reversals of roles, when the hunter becomes the hunted, inspired the authors of dime novels and, later on, also quality westerns. Cooper also popularized one type of romance plot and transformed it into a formula with wider cultural implications: the rescue of kidnapped ladies. In fact, it seems that Cooper could not imagine a story without this chivalrous motivation serving as a complication in the structure of the plot.

Last but not least, Cooper taught his followers a lesson he learned from Walter Scott, the art of the gradation of conflict. Exemplary cases can be found in *The Last of the Mohicans* and in *The Prairie*. In the former novel the ladies are saved three times, and each time it is more difficult than before. The last rescue requires nothing less than a full-scale battle between two Indian tribes.

Cooper also contributed to the typology of western characters. In *The Last of the Mohicans* Cooper canonized a contrastive typology of female characters. Even though Cooper did not invent the contrast between a fragile, mild golden-haired princess and a strong, passionate dark-haired *femme fatale* and only refashioned Walter Scott's typology from *Waverley* (1814) and *Ivanhoe* (1820), his reconfiguration went beyond Scott because in the character of Cora Munro he established the type of the tragic mulatto. This type is called "the dark sensual woman" by D. H. Lawrence and the soft golden-haired princess

16. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie: A Tale*, ed. James P. Elliott, in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, ed. Blake Nevius (New York: Library of America, 1985), 1:893.

17. Harris, "Cooper on Film." Harris refers to Natty's final departure in *The Pioneers*.

the White Lily, "the clinging, submissive little blonde, who is so 'pure.'"[18] Even though Lawrence's characterization does some injustice to the White Lily type, because even the frail Alice proves her courage and spirit more than once,[19] it found its way into the western and the dark-haired heroine became the Dance Hall Girl and the fragile blonde the Eastern School Marm.[20]

Like his great literary teacher Walter Scott, Cooper liked to employ comic characters in his historical romances. But in contrast to Scott, Cooper's comic characters come from a different class. While Walter Scott tends to use lower-class peasants or servants for this role, Cooper uses representatives of professions that are proverbial for their lack of practical skills—preachers, teachers of music, crazy natural scientists and simple-minded British sailors.[21]

Even though Cooper did not invent most of those, the narrative formulas and motifs and his mediation and his adaptations were of crucial importance for the western.

As Lee Clark Mitchell points out, the composition of Cooper's plot set up an example for the western, in terms of both its strongly visual style and its pattern.

> For improbable as Cooper's narratives were, the seductive lure that first hooked his readers was less a matter of plot than technique: a combination of frozen *tableaux vivants* and brisk cinematic action, of descriptive longeurs and narrative flashes.[22]

Mitchell argues that the narrative rhythm of Cooper's *Deerslayer*, consisting of three sequences, sets up a pattern for the western: "initial landscape description; followed by brief, sometimes violent action; followed in turn by the 'nattering' reconstruction and interpretation of Leatherstocking."[23] It is necessary to add that the descriptive passage does not include only a landscape description but often a long dialogue. A good example of such a narrative pattern is chapter 3 in *The Last of the Mohicans*, which introduces Natty Bumppo, alias Hawk-eye, and his two Mohican friends, Chingachgook and his son Uncas. The chapter opens with a landscape description, followed by quite a detailed description of Hawk-eye and Chingachgook, and then makes the reader an accidental eavesdropper, entering the scene in the middle of a conversation. The discussion of tribal history is interrupted first

18. D. H. Lawrence, "Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales," 64.

19. After Cora's rebuke that she judges Magua by the color of his skin, Alice is the first one to plunge headlong with her horse into the thicket at the edge of the wilderness, where Magua, the Huron villain, has found a path. See Cooper, *Mohicans*, 491–92. She would also rather die than gain her release from Huron captivity at the cost of making her half-sister Cora the wife of the savage Magua. See Cooper, *Mohicans*, 596.

20. See Harris, "Cooper on Film."

21. For a more detailed list of individual characters in Cooper's novels and in film westerns, see Harris, "Cooper on Film."

22. Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 30. Mitchell's italics.

23. Mitchell, *Westerns*, 40.

by the arrival of Uncas and, shortly afterwards, by a passing deer. After some preliminaries and a brief dispute as to the manner of killing the deer comes some very fast action. Uncas's arrow hits the deer but does not pin it down, and he has to confront the charging animal and finish it off with a knife.[24] Unlike the long hunt scene in the 1992 movie by Michael Mann, the action is a matter of seconds. Then follows the last sequence, a commentary by Hawk-eye, which is very brief; in the later books of *The Leatherstocking Tales* such comments and reflections are usually much longer.

Four out of five novels of *The Leatherstocking Tales* are set in the North-Eastern forests, and only *The Prairie* in the wide plains of the West. But the land proper of the western is the desert country of the South-West, the open landscape that is almost an opposite to the woodland. The land in the western is, as Tompkins put it, "a land defined by absence: of trees, of greenery, of houses, of the signs of civilization, above all, absence of water and shade."[25]

It is obvious that Cooper's forest landscapes could not serve as a model for the film western but the prairie could because it has some of the properties of the desert landscape in the western. It is described as an undulating, broken terrain, where riders are visible when riding on a ridge, but can quickly disappear from sight after reaching the bottom. The country is perceived as "a bleak and solitary place," with "meagre herbage" growing on a "hard and unyielding soil."[26] The landscape is monotonous: "From the summits of the swells, the eye became fatigued with the sameness and chilling dreariness of the landscape."[27] This hard, uninviting aspect of the landscape is quite important in the western. Nature does not seem to speak to the hero and loses its spiritual dimension; it is not a temple of God any more.

Where Cooper differs from the western is in the degree of affinity between the landscape and the protagonist. While in *The Prairie* nature is silent, Cooper's hero is not. Unlike a typical western hero, he talks a lot, even in situations in which he should remain silent. The western hero is generally a man of few words. Jane Tompkins, in her fine rumination on the role of silence in the western, points out: "Westerns distrust language. Time and again they set up situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real." She goes on to explain: "Westerns distrust language in part because language tends to be wielded most skillfully by people who possess a certain kind of power: class privilege, political clout, financial strength."[28]

The paradox is that even westerns cannot do without words, but as Tompkins correctly states, "[i]n fact, Westerns go in for their own special brand of the bon mot, seasoned with skepticism and fried to a turn."[29] But

24. See Cooper, *Mohicans*, 506–7.
25. Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 71.
26. Cooper, *The Prairie*, 889–90.
27. Cooper, *The Prairie*, 892.
28. Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 50–51.
29. Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 49.

even though the western heroes may speak, with a tendency to use a bon mot, the true meaning of the western is configured in action and a visual description that comes close, as Mitchell argues, to *tableaux vivants*, or a *frieze*.[30] The contrast between stillness and fast motion constitutes the peculiar narrative quality of the western.

Mitchell goes so far as to speculate about the moral of the silence of the landscape and men. The silent landscape is employed as a model of human conduct, as "a paradigm for male behavior, with even the power to enforce that ideal. It both assumes and compels the kind of quiet restraint men are expected to take—restraint effectively dramatized only in contrast with scenes of lack of restraint (impulsive action, unexpected noise)." Mitchell illustrates it by means of examples from *The Last of the Mohicans*, where Natty and the Mohicans are like statues made of stone.[31]

2. Film Adaptation as a Genre

One form of the after-life of a literary work is as a film adaptation. For many people a film adaptation remains the only opportunity to participate in the great dramas of fictional worlds because readers of fiction have always been a minority. This is also the fate of *The Last of the Mohicans*, a novel that is not so much read as known to a general audience through film adaptations; a novel whose substance, thinned to the implications of the title, lives on as a myth and as an idiom that has become part of both the English and Czech languages: the last Mohican designates any last dignified representative of a disappearing group or a mode of life.

The strategies used in the westernization of *The Last of the Mohicans* can be more fully revealed by means of a comparative analysis of the novel and its film adaptation. Even though Cooper's novel already has a number of typical features of the western, as shown above, the film adaptation adds a few more in order to make it appear more like a western.

My purpose is not to assess the degree of accuracy or faithfulness of the film adaptation. As Brian McFarlane points out, "[d]iscussion of adaptation has been bedevilled by the fidelity issue."[32] In fact, the readers go to see film adaptations not only because they want to see a faithful visualization of their mental images from the reading but also because they enjoy both the similarities and the differences. Linda Hutcheon explains: "Part of this pleasure . . . comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change."[33]

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30. See Mitchell, *Westerns*, 38.
31. Mitchell, *Westerns*, 38.
32. Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (1996; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 8.
33. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

I understand that literature and film are compatible only to a certain degree and film adaptations should be judged by film standards and not literary ones.[34] I am also aware of the fact that no transposition or translation of one form to another can be complete; there is always something that is lost or gained in the translation, not to mention the ambition of the authors of the adaptation to change, innovate and meet the demands of the day. And even if the authors of the adaptation lacked such an ambition, the translation into a different medium always takes place in a different social and cultural context, and the result is never a faithful translation. For this reason each adaptation involves not only a transposition of medium (from literature to film), but a process of cultural appropriation that I call *cultural relocation*. As Hutcheon says: "Because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change come corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories." In the process of "*transculturation* or *indigenization* across cultures, languages, and history, the meaning and impact of stories can change radically."[35] How extensive, then, is this cultural relocation, how much does it affect the thematic structure, considering the difference in the context for the reception of the story in 1920 to that of the 1820s, the transposition of the medium and its partial transmodalization[36] (a shift from a historical romance to a western)?

3. WESTERNIZATION IN THE 1920 FILM ADAPTATION OF *THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS*

Even though Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* contains many typical western features, it still lacks some. For a western, it lacks, for example, a number of topological elements: it was set in the wrong period (the 1750s), in the wrong place (the deep forests of the North-East), it does not offer spaces with riders materializing from the horizon, it has no sun-baked little towns with their topological facilities (saloon, brothel, church, shop, sheriff's office and prison, barber's and a few workshops), the horses in the novel are soon lost (no riders available) or are used only to carry the ladies, and of course the heroes carry no six-shooters. With the great boom of film westerns in the 1920s and 1930s it was nevertheless quite logical to make attempts at westernizing Cooper's most popular novel.

The first film adaptations were short, fifteen-minute one-reel silent films, one of them made by D. W. Griffith, one of the pioneer American film directors, and the author of the highly controversial film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The first significant silent feature film adaptation of the novel was made

34. See, for example, Jeffrey Walker, "Deconstructing an American Myth: Hollywood and *The Last of the Mohicans*," *Film & History* 23, nos. 1–4: 103–16.

35. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, xvi. Hutcheon's italics.

36. See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 278.

in 1920 by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown.[37] The next one, the compilation called *Leatherstocking*, made in 1924 by George B. Seitz, has not been preserved.[38] It was followed by a twelve-episode serial for children by Reeves Eason and Ford Beebe (Mascot Films, 1932), which took great liberties with the text, making all kinds of transpositions, from extensive cuts to numerous extensions by adding new characters, motifs and scenes.[39] The second major feature film adaptation came in 1936; the director was George B. Seitz and the script was attributed to Philip Dunne, even though the final version of the script was the result of a long series of rewritings by several scriptwriters.[40] The third major film adaptation was made by Michael Mann in 1992.

Tourneur and Brown's film *The Last of the Mohicans* is unique in many respects. It is a beautiful, artful production. It retains its charm even for the modern viewer. Most of it was filmed by Clarence Brown in the open air at spectacular locations such as Big Bear Lake and Yosemite Valley. The scenes were shot either early or late in the day in order to gain intensity and depth of light.[41]

The westernization is evident in minor transpositions, rather than in the major ones. I will therefore first focus on the major strategic changes dictated by the conventions of the popular historical romance, and then on the more subtle strategies of westernization.

3.1 The Transpositions within the Genre of the Historical Romance

The first important strategic move of the film-makers[42] was to follow the lead of the title and move Uncas to the center of the structure and make him the main protagonist, because the novel has no clear central protagonist and no less than three characters can compete for this position; besides Uncas, they are Duncan Heyward, a chivalrous and rich young American gentleman

37. Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown, dirs., *The Last of the Mohicans*, Associate Film Producers, 1920. Main actors Barbara Bedford (Cora), Lillian Hall (Alice), Wallace Beery (Magua), Albert Roscoe (Uncas), Henry Woodward (Heyward). Script by Robert Dillon. Cinematography by Philip R. Du Bois (as Philip R. Dubois) and Charles Van Enger. See IMDb, "The Last of the Mohicans (1920)," *IMDb* (Seattle, WA: IMDb.com, 2013), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0011387.

38. For more about this project see Walker, "Deconstructing an American Myth: Hollywood and *The Last of the Mohicans*," 103–16.

39. See Martin Barker and Roger Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 77–83.

40. For a detailed history of the genesis of the final script see Martin Barker and Roger Sabin, "A Very American Fable: The Making of a *Mohicans* Adaptation," in *Nineteenth-Century American Fiction on Screen*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9–28.

41. See Barker and Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans*, 66–67.

42. According to Barker and Sabin, the film is mainly the work of Brown, because Tourneur had an accident and was confined to bed and was only able to enter the production process in its last stages. Barker and Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans*, 66–67.

from Virginia, serving as an officer in the British army, and Hawk-eye (Natty Bumppo), a middle-aged military scout and hunter. The relocation of Uncas into the center of the plot demanded some modifications to the plot, sometimes even plot extensions (adding new scenes), and, at the same time, a reduction of the parts of the other two protagonists by means of trimmings and large-scale excisions.[43] Both Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook either tend to remain in the background or are often missing from the screen.

The general transposition from novel to film also allowed manipulation of the narrative mode (transformations of summaries to scenes, fillings of narrative gaps—ellipses), and deletions of descriptive segments. These will be dealt with later on.

3.2 THE AMPLIFICATION OF UNCAS

Amplification, as Gérard Genette points out, "is one of the basic resources of classical drama, especially of tragedy,"[44] and involves an elaboration of a dramatic situation, usually the tragic hero's dilemma or task. Genette explains that amplification "could least inaccurately be described as the obverse of a condensation."[45] If Uncas were to become the main protagonist of the film, he needed more interesting scenes than Cooper offered. The first type of plot extension aimed at reinforcing his action potential, while the second type built up his love interest.

The very first scene in the film is, in fact, a plot extension of the first kind and leads to one of the second kind. In this scene Chingachgook, Uncas's father, sends Uncas to Fort Edwards to warn General Webb against a forthcoming Huron attack. Besides increasing Uncas's importance as a bearer of hot news, this scene provides Uncas with his first opportunity to meet Cora, the older of the two sisters, in her own world. Cora watches Uncas with great interest and the romance can begin. The caption reads: "Her girlish fancy investing the young Chief with a halo of romance." Another caption offers her comment after Uncas leaves the room with General Webb: "Surely among his own people he is a prince."

Other plot extensions were invented to show Uncas in the role of a romantic lover. One such extension is the scene in the caves at the waterfalls, when Uncas keeps watch outside the entrance to the cave and Cora watches him; the title reads: "The bond of a common danger—drawing together these two, so widely separated by the mystery of birth." She even joins him and participates in the magic spectacle of nature. Uncas speaks up, even though the script wisely withholds what he actually says and gives only a very general

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43. Horak states that Hawk-eye originally had more space but his scenes were cut from the film during the last stages of editing. Jan-Christopher Horak, "Maurice Tourneur's Tragic Romance," in *The Classic American Novel and the Movies*, ed. Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977), 14–16.

44. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 262.

45. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 262.

summary: "simple words of a savage—yet revealing depth and imagination."[46] In the novel we find only a long admiring stare at Uncas of all the members of the travelling party, and when Cooper selects a single focalizing stare, it is, surprisingly, not that of Cora but of her younger sister Alice, who is, however, in love with the military officer Duncan Heyward, and Cora's comment is only a moral lesson, responding icily to Duncan Heyward's discriminating comment that they should not expect from Uncas more than virtue "according to the fashion of a savage": "Who, that looks at this creature of nature, remembers the shades of his skin!"[47]

Although the plot extensions were intended to establish Uncas as the main protagonist and make the romance between him and Cora plausible, the careful reader will discover a discrepancy between the plot and the textual commentary of the captions. In the film the script builds a love romance that cuts across the divisions of class and race but the captions and the visual stylizations strive to re-establish borders and differences, such as the primitive and the civilized, nature and culture, and white and non-white, and thus they, together with the visual aspect, sometimes undermine Uncas's amplification. The captions betray a slightly moralizing and patronizing undertone: Cora's "girlish fancy endows Uncas with an aura of romance." The commentary suggests that an adult or a male person should not be misled by romantic associations and should see in Uncas no more than a useful savage. Cora's comment about Uncas being a prince among his own people reveals both admiration and the recognition of a social gap; in her society Uncas is no prince but only a half-naked savage, an idea underlined by the dress code: unlike in the novel, in the film Uncas is naked to the waist and the camera often dwells on his naked body, not so much to admire it as to formally establish the cultural difference between being naked and being dressed. Since Uncas is only half-naked, he is presented as half-civilized. The difference between a savage and a civilized person is encoded not only visually but also linguistically; when Uncas speaks, he uses "the simple words of a *savage*" (my italics), as if savages were only able to speak in a simple manner. Another separating boundary is the racial difference ("mystery of origin").

The boundaries between the lovers can be overcome only in the unique and obviously temporary circumstantial context of *exotic adventure*, "the bond of a common danger," as one of the captions puts it, with the chilling implication being that under normal circumstances there would be little to attract two young people from such different cultural backgrounds to one another.

Popular culture is often full of submerged contradictions and is seldom an obedient tool of an official ideology. The viewer should take into consideration the subtle play of signification. Uncas is presented as a half-naked savage endowed with a primitive poetic gift and wisdom to represent the cultural other but he is played by an evidently white actor so as to allow a higher

46. See also Barker and Sabin, *The Lasting of the Mohicans*, 68.

47. Cooper, *Mohicans*, 529–30.

degree of identification with his romantic affair for a white audience. Thus he is both defamiliarized as the primitive other and familiarized as a smiling likable white man with a funny haircut, half-dressed as if he were on the way to or from a swimming pool.

3.3 The Westernization of Uncas

The associations with a prince and exotic culture indicate a relationship to a high chivalrous romance rather than to a western. But as the film was made in the period when film westerns were becoming popular, the makers of the film added some westernizing touches. The hero of the western is a man of two worlds, nature and civilization, and of two cultures, Native American and Euro-American. Like Natty Bumppo, he is a cultural hybrid. This notion finds its expression in several visual compositions in which Uncas is placed on the threshold of the outside and the inside. For instance, at the beginning, when he brings the news of the planned attack to General Webb, he remains standing in the doorway. Another similar composition appears in the episode at the Glenn Falls, when Uncas keeps a night watch while the party is hiding in the cave under the waterfalls; he stands straight at the irregular entrance of the cave, silhouetted against the light of the starry night.

Another major move towards the aesthetic of the western is the westernization of the landscape in the film. Even though the novel is set in the forests, the film picks open, sunlit spaces with sparse vegetation, making the countryside very much like the rocky semi-desert of the Southwest in classical westerns. The open bare space is a background against which the bodies of the actors stand out, while in the forest they would tend to melt into the background. Once again, this is a technique much used in western films.

Some features of the film, however, still do not meet the standards of the western. Uncas smiles too much and lacks the austerity of the American western hero. The climax, the duel with the chief villain, does not have the narrative pace of long pauses, suspension of time and quick resolution in the form of a brief outburst of violence. While in Cooper's novel Uncas's fight with Magua takes seconds and comes very close to the narrative pace of a western duel, the makers of the film could not resist the temptation to elevate the fight to a mythic scale and extended its duration into a long new sequence of action.

In spite of these transgressions against the conventions of the genre, it is quite evident that the form has been tailored to meet the needs of the western.

3.4 The Transvaluation

How much do these changes in the film adaptation reconfigure the thematic structure of the film and produce a new cultural relocation? Here Gérard Genette's theory of adaptation can be helpful with its concepts of transmotivation and transvaluation. Transmotivation is defined by Genette as "one motivation displacing another,"[48] in other words, inventing new

48. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 270.

motives for a character's conduct. Transmotivation often goes hand in hand with character transvaluation. This sort of transformation can, according to Genette, be positive (revaluation), negative (devaluation), or the synthesis of both that Genette, somewhat confusingly, again calls transvaluation.[49]

There are no major transmotivations and transvaluations as regards the plot and characters. However, some minor transvaluations are worth discussing. So far I have focused mainly on the minor and partial transvaluations of Uncas, strengthening his chivalrous role and at the same time making him more like a western hero. Some minor transvaluations also concern the Native Americans and the women characters.

The progressivism of the film is felt not only in the amplification of Uncas but also in the conception of the massacre of the British committed by the Hurons. The violence of the massacre is not suppressed but the responsibility is shifted to the white traders who sold rum to the Hurons. On the other hand, in spite of these progressive aspects the script is not sensitive enough to Cooper's quite open-minded understanding of the system of justice among the Native Americans. Cooper's ability to perceive the problem of justice from at least two sides is evident in the trial scene in the Delaware village when Tamenund, the ancient Delaware patriarch, is to pass judgment on the white captives. In Cooper's novel Tamenund's judgment concerning the fate of Cora and Alice respects Native American customs and understanding of justice. Alice is allowed to stay with Duncan because he won her through the right of conquest (he managed to set her free from Huron captivity). The case of Cora is different; she is ordered to leave with Magua because he entrusted the Delawares with keeping her, and he has the right to claim his property back. The honor of the Delawares compels them to respect his claim. Such a logic may have seemed too incomprehensible for the general audience and thus the judgment of Tamenund in the film follows the natural law. Tamenund respects Uncas's claim to Cora and gives Magua Alice instead of her.

Surprisingly, a more radical transvaluation concerns the role of women in the film. In the film Cora assumes a more active role. First, there is more space for her love interest and from the very beginning Cora takes the initiative. She begins to romanticize Uncas as a prince among his own people (a statement missing from the novel), she accepts his polite courtship, most clearly expressed in her gesture of acceptance of an offered coat that she had refused to take from the hands of the villain Captain Randolph, and she even hides Uncas when Randolph sends a search party looking for the intruder into her room.

Another extension and transvaluation is found during the battle at the Glenn Falls. Instead of hiding deep in the cave, as Cooper's heroines did, Cora is seen in the line of battle, and helps load the rifles. She is the one who discovers they have run out of gunpowder. In the film she also does what in Cooper's novel remains only a possibility, when after Tamenund's judgment she offers herself in exchange for Alice's freedom, and goes away

49. See Genette, *Palimpsests*, 343.

with Magua. Further, the film script allows her to do something a lady in Cooper's fiction would never do; she actively makes an attempt to escape from her captivity. Her attempt leads to a large and important plot extension, in fact a new dramatic sequence, when she is hunted by Magua. When she is cornered at the edge of a cliff, she still manages to hold him off by her threat to jump down if he comes a step closer. When, exhausted, Cora falls asleep and Magua grasps her hand, she slips across the cliff and only Magua's hand stops her from falling. At this unfortunate moment Uncas appears, and a dramatic reversal occurs. When Cora finds out about Uncas she starts to struggle for life, and now it is she who is holding Magua's hand. Magua briefly considers the dilemma and then with a demonic grin he cuts her fingers loose and lets her fall into the pit. This sequence of action again reinforces the active character of Cora.

In sum, the transmotivation and transvaluation proved to be only partial. All the cuts or extensions were aimed at reinforcing the existing potential for action of Uncas and his lover Cora, and depicted the romance that Cooper only hinted at in his novel. While some of the extensions and cuts were intended to enhance the chivalrous romance, the visual compositions of key scenes tried to bring the form closer to the western. The progressive transvaluation of female and Native American characters gave more space to them and showed them as being more active and self-reliant than in Cooper's novel.

4. Conclusion

Even though Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans* displays a number of structural features of the western, it still lacks some. For this reason Tourneur and Brown's film adaptation of the novel, responding to the rising popularity of the film western, made a number of changes to bring the narrative structure closer to that of the western. Among the most important changes in the narrative technique was the amplification of Uncas by means of plot extensions and the manipulation of the perspective, the conception of Uncas as a cultural hybrid, and the visual presentation of the landscape as an open stage. The changes were influenced by the progressivism of the postwar era and included not only the amplification of Uncas but also a transvaluation of the female characters towards greater activity and independence.

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