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Genre in Warner Brothers' *The Charge  
of the Light Brigade*

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## **The Continuity of Forms: Myth and Genre in Warner Brothers' *The Charge of the Light Brigade***

THE CONCEPTS OF MYTH AND GENRE refer us to the continuities we perceive in the development of the various arts, professions, disciplines, and institutions that give culture its form. *Myth* has to do with the continuity of meanings: the transmission from generation to generation of a characteristic ideology or system of beliefs and values, embodied in a continuously evolving set of narrative fictions and a language of symbols. *Genre* has to do with the continuity of forms: the persistence and development, from generation to generation, of particular ways of telling or transmitting stories, making symbols, structuring systems of representation. The concept of myth directs our attention toward the ways in which our material and social history shapes our cultural productions. It highlights those aspects of our fictions and ceremonies that represent and preserve bits of history, transforming them into fictive resolutions of real ideological dilemmas. The concept of genre directs our attention toward the internal processes that shape the formal structures of our cultural productions, suggesting that such forms have a life and logic of their own, which is given direction by artists and producers. Since each is a historical phenomenon, myths and genres also rise and fall in cultural favor: new myths or variants succeed older ones, as the material and ideological basis of the culture changes; and genre succeeds genre, form succeeds form, medium succeeds medium as the forms of social life and communication are steadily transformed.<sup>1</sup>

Most students of cinematic form, whether formalist or mythographic, have recognized that the "classic Hollywood cinema" produced in America has been characterized as much by its adherence to generic story forms as by typical styles of cinematography, editing, and direction; the worldwide influence of Hollywood movies has given these American genre properties a nearly universal currency. David Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film* treats genre as one of the basic tropes of film narration, a practice with well-understood rules that has predictable effects on narrative whenever it is deployed. Bordwell sees genre effects as the encoding of what may be a rather complex framework of understandings in a set of simple visual signs. By playing with or against these understandings the filmmaker can create and manipulate climates of expectation, build or explode sus-

pense, establish a context in which the audience recognizes when it needs to suspend disbelief, bridge a discontinuity, or judge the plausibility of a motive.<sup>2</sup> These “understandings” are in fact the product of empirical experience: the filmmaker’s and the audience’s continuously developing acquaintance with the storytelling practices. At this date our understanding has been formed by the repeated association of image and story form in movie after movie, year after year, and for us genre forms appear as properties ready to hand, part of a trans-historical “grammar of tropes” that informs our verbal culture. But we should not let the tropic form in which genre now appears obscure the historical and contingent sources from which it arises.<sup>3</sup>

The specific forms that we identify as movie genres emerged during the 1930s, when the modern studio system was established, and they achieved their characteristic forms during the period of studio dominance in movie production, between 1935 and 1955. The corporate consolidation of the studios during the 1930s, the growth of their market, and the economics of scale that the studios made possible pointed the industry toward the mass production and marketing of great numbers of films; this in turn maximized the benefits inherent in the systematic repetition of successful productions and formulas. At the least, such repetition enabled the studios to reuse such properties as sets and costumes, but at the highest level of profitability, repetition allowed them fully and efficiently to exploit the popular recognition of consistent screen personae and story types. This tendency to repeat and reproduce successful films became basic to the film industry during the 1930s, and it remains the motor that drives the creation of genres in movies and television.<sup>4</sup>

Although the scale and complexity of the movie industry’s corporate organization and its production and distribution processes represent a new stage of development, its history is nonetheless continuous with that of earlier forms of mass media. The story forms we identify with movie genres are genetically related to the mythic traditions and formal conventions of nineteenth-century literary culture. Indeed, long before movies became a viable commercial medium, the publishers of American popular literature had discovered that they could most profitably exploit a mass market by producing and reproducing great numbers of stories in each of several distinct and specialized genres, which shifted with the interests and concerns of a large and ramified audience. Thus the “genre map” of nineteenth-century popular literature was dynamic and changeable. Certain story types (like the pirate adventure or frontier romance) had a perennial appeal, which could be sustained with occasional revisions to keep the references and settings timely. Other genres appeared in response to particular issues, events, or enthusiasms, and after a more or less brief career fell into neglect. Still others arose in response to major transformations of American life, and gained a permanent place in the literary landscape—for example, the various types of science fiction, the urban rags-to-riches fable, or the hard-boiled detective story.<sup>5</sup>

The early generic patterns in movie making owed something to these literary sources, as the early popularity of Westerns, pirate stories, and Horatio Alger-like portrayals of street urchins attests. However, movie genres cannot usefully be categorized according to purely narrative formulas. Movies are above all a visual medium, and pictorial elements play the central role in the processes of perception and recall that allow the viewer to construe a single film. Movies make sense by placing viewers in a visible landscape, whose topography is readily understood and vivid enough to be easily recalled: a landscape that contains a densely imagined pseudoculture, with its characteristic architecture and rules of work and play, its systems of hegemony and legitimacy, its folkways—all of which are *observed* as they might be on an anthropological field trip, as smiles, winks, sharings of food and drink and jokes, bits of deference and hauteur.

Through frequent usage, some visualized settings become powerfully identified with a particular type of story; they become a “mythic space” whose geography is entirely identified with and determined by the symbolic codes and narrative conventions of a certain story formula. The mean streets of gangster movies, the Los Angeles of private-eye movies, the shaded drives of Andy Hardy’s Middle-American small town, the false-front saloons and board sidewalks of the Western are places as instantly familiar to us, as recognizable and as dense with memory and meaning, as streets we grew up on; and we know that they mean, on some level, to be representations of places that historically existed. Yet they are also never-never-lands, whose special rules and meanings and teleology have more to do with genre conventions, myths, and ideologies than with historical representation. Above all, when we (as viewers) are presented with images of that space, we recognize it as the site of a certain set of possible adventures, engaging a characteristic set of issues and a relatively predictable cast of characters.<sup>6</sup>

Thus when we analyze a film in terms of myth and genre, we need to see it as a complex event in a continuous historical chain—or rather as a moment of intersection in which several related streams of historical continuity are braided together, interacting and exerting pressure on each other: the histories of American mythology, and of the literary genres that codified and propagated its terms; the history of American ideology, and of the political crises that evoked and shaped that ideology; the history of the movie industry as a peculiar “producing community,” and of the generic forms that industry promulgated and developed. I want to describe this interaction not only as a process shaping a work of art but as the historical scene in which culture is made and continually reworked—in which myth modifies generic codes and practices, and formal practice shapes the expression of mythic concern.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to ground this description in a particular case of genre creation, Warner Brothers’ 1936 production *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, directed by Michael Curtiz and starring Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland.<sup>8</sup> The central point of this interpretive exercise is not merely to demonstrate the complexity of

a work of popular or mass culture but to show how responsive such works (and their makers) are to both the traditional understandings and concerns of the culture and the demands of the historical moment. The “success” of such productions hinges on this kind of responsiveness, which allows the work to function as a direct application of mythic language to the resolution of a present crisis of ideology. The conclusion will outline the subsequent history of the *Light Brigade*/Victorian Empire formula, to show how the dialectic between received forms and new ideological concerns has continued to shape both the development of the genre and the symbolism of politics.

*The Charge of the Light Brigade* is not by any means a “great” artistic movie, a milestone in the history of cinematic technique, nor even a superior example of “classic Hollywood” film narrative. It is in many ways a typical product of the industry—a “big picture,” one of several released by Warners in any given year whose use of glamorous star-celebrities, expensive production values and marketing program were designed to attract attention and arouse excited anticipation in the public. The film was a success by the industry’s own calculation of box office returns, though it broke no records in that regard. Its highest accolade was the studio’s decision to repeat its success by featuring Flynn and de Havilland in a series of films more or less similar in kind, and by the rapid spread through the industry of enthusiasm for adventure films similarly set in the African and Asian outposts of Victorian-era European empires. Thus the film’s achievement was “generic” rather than individual: it set the pattern for a successful formula, and it began the process by which Hollywood created the Victorian Empire as a “mythic space.”

The making of *Light Brigade* involved a series of choices that had the effect of *creating* what later producers and audiences could perceive as a genre. *Light Brigade* began with the premise of a story and a manner of treatment, and in that sense it is distinctly a genre film rather than a movie conceived as the pet project of an authoring director or producer, or as a star vehicle. Flynn and de Havilland had starred together the previous year in *Captain Blood*, but they were barely established as players of the first rank, and it was not yet clear just what their screen personae would or could be. When Warners chose to cast them as principals in the *Light Brigade* story, it moved deliberately to establish both the fact and the specific form of their stardom.<sup>9</sup>

At this time the only genre-like category that the studio employed to frame this kind of film was “action adventure,” a category large enough to include a feature Western, a war film like *Dawn Patrol*, a historical costume drama like *Light Brigade*, or a fantasy like *Thief of Baghdad*. The crucial choice was the decision to imitate a certain type of story—to make a film that would exploit and exceed the success of Paramount’s *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, which had done extremely well at

the box office in 1935. The success of *Charge of the Light Brigade*, in turn, generated a wave of imitations, and these imitations first explored, and finally constituted, a distinct family or genre of films whose characteristics were clear enough to be used by producers as a way of defining the market for new productions.<sup>10</sup>

*Lives of a Bengal Lancer* was set during a fictional but supposedly prototypical native uprising against the Northwest Frontier of India just before the Great War. It tells the story of three young officers in a British regiment, defending India against the machinations of the Russians and the rebelliousness of Moslem hill tribesmen. Although the fanaticism, treachery, and elegance of the evil khan mark him as a stereotypical oriental villain, the movie itself is naturalistic and at times even documentary in style. It emphasizes the unglamorous, workaday side of imperial service. Battle sequences employ modern weaponry and tactics, which evoke newsreel imagery; scenes of cavalry drill have the air of travelogue. This mixture of authentic and exotic elements supports the essentially romantic premises of the story that this naturalistic film has to tell, of heroic self-sacrifice for the sake of personal honor, of loyalty to friends, regiment, and empire.<sup>11</sup>

To top *Lancer*, Warner Brothers aimed at a production in which everything would be bigger, more spectacular, more glamorous. It would feature the newly fledged romantic stars Flynn and de Havilland, and deploy all of Warners' substantial resources for costuming, set design, and spectacular outdoor action. The success of *Lancer* would be evoked and annexed to *Light Brigade* by the use of echoes and repetitions: India as a setting and defense of the empire as a theme, a suave and diabolical Moslem hill chieftain as villain (with Russian support), a Lancers regiment for the hero to serve in, the plot formula of brother officers who submerge their rivalry in an act of heroic sacrifice in battle. However, each of these elements would be aggrandized in *Light Brigade*. The male rivalry and camaraderie of *Lancer* would become a full-blown romantic love triangle setting brother against brother. Where *Lancer* emphasized the obscurity and isolation of modern imperial service, *Light Brigade* would explicitly link events on the border to a historical confrontation of the Great Powers that culminated in the Crimean War.

Warners went all out for glamor—glamorous costumes and lavish production values, hugeness of scale. To “justify” this sort of glamor they required a story of comparable magnificence and prestige, rich in overtones of significance, freighted with “import” of some kind—a story with *historical* glamor. Distance in time creates the possibility of romance, and makes romantic heroism plausible. *Bengal Lancer's* references to the Great War, and the use of modern battle gear, give the action a newsreel immediacy, but the *Light Brigade's* historical setting allows costuming to combine both authenticity and splendor.<sup>12</sup>

But there is a larger concept of “historical glamor” at work here, one that taps sources of appeal deeper than those addressed by costume and special effects. What really *justifies* the spectacular treatment is the mythological prestige of the

event—its having already become (through the schoolroom’s adoption of the Tennyson poem) a part of the basic vocabulary of literary culture and popular history. History in this mode—“History” with a capital *H*—must always feel and look larger and more important than the history that is documented by journalism, which comes to us as fragments of a story, its symbolism half-formed or unresolved. Signification of this melodramatic and mythic kind is the essence of historical glamor, giving an event something like “star quality.”

The final cavalry charge had just that sort of star quality. Its presence transformed the movie from an action picture to a historical epic. It promised both lavish spectacle and action on the grandest scale, and it justified an extravagant outlay for production. Such attention to details was needed to provide an illusion of authenticity for a version of history that would inevitably draw fire from British critics for its utter disregard of the essential facts of the Battle of Balaklava. The film begins with a rolling title that asserts (more elaborately than usual) the historicity of the story that follows. Studio designers fussed over details of costume and equipment, using the resources of a large research department to guarantee the accuracy of pictured details. The charge itself was staged beautifully and expensively, at high cost in money and horses’ lives and hospital bills for stunt men. But it was also designed and executed with authenticity: horse cavalry was still an arm of military service in 1936, and Warners made good use of technical advisors in organizing the charge and in drilling the extras and stunt men who would execute it.<sup>13</sup>

Once “The Charge” had been conceived it necessarily became the centerpiece of the production and the primary objective of its narrative. The story had of course to display the romantic screen personae of its stars, and it had to incorporate those elements of the *Bengal Lancer* setting whose appeal Warners wanted to exploit. But whatever else it might do, the plotted narrative had to provide an adequate rationale for the ultimate charge. The event itself, as mythologized by Tennyson, offered an opening for creative invention because it contained an apparent mystery: Who was the “someone” who had “blundered”? What *was* the “reason why” that the soldiers never bothered to ask? Can so much really have occurred for so little reason? Although these questions have particular force in the case of the Charge of the Light Brigade, they are also variants of a more general process through which cultures translate historical fact into ideology and mythology—a process visible in the mythologization of events like the Pilgrims’ Landing at Plymouth Rock, Custer’s Last Stand, the Alamo, and Pearl Harbor. In all those historical events that signify mythically to us we perceive a gap or dissonance between the mere facts of the case and the power and complexity of its possible meanings. Faced with that gap we suspect—and suspecting, we project—the idea of a secret history, in which the events and the meanings are fully equal to each other.

But the *Charge of the Light Brigade* is a British myth, a British historical mys-

tery. Why should an American audience in 1936 interest itself in the question? To put the question another way, what kind of answer would a group of American movie makers find plausible to explain and justify such a catastrophe? It is a given of this kind of movie—which is very serious about heroism and history—that the “reason why” (when we discover it) will actually be a *good* and important one. So much “production” could not be devoted merely to repeating the notion that “someone had blundered.” The movie’s answer would have to be equal to the mystery. Visualized and personified heroes and villains would have to replace the faceless blundering “someone,” to give the “reasons” a proper and visible human face. Errol Flynn would inevitably lead the Charge of the Light Brigade, and he would have to have a good reason for doing so. Yet his reason would have to be of a kind that requires a historical cover-up, a privileged truth withheld even from Tennyson, not to mention the nineteenth-century British public (though it can be revealed to the modern American movie audience)—a reason, therefore, that appeals to a higher authority than the law.

To provide that kind of “reason why,” to invent a plausible secret history, the production team had two primary resources that it shared with its audience: the heritage of traditional American myths—particularly the myths of Indian warfare associated with “the Frontier”—which were embodied in folklore, popular history, and literature; and the battery of current political and social concerns as formulated by contemporary politicians and mass-media journalism. The use of these mythic structures and familiar narrative formulas would serve to Americanize the story at the most basic level, while allusions to current politics would make the old story seem timely.

The corporate working groups that developed story ideas and scripts for the studios were professionally committed to a continual ransacking of popular history and literature in the search for story material. Their understanding of American mythology had an analytical sophistication that might almost be termed academic. With the assistance of the studio research department, they could go as deeply as they needed into either the historical or the literary archives. And they interpreted this information as a critic might, looking for recurrent and appealing themes, albeit with the intention of reproducing and exploiting those themes rather than offering discursive criticism. If the studio researchers interpreted the Charge of the Light Brigade as an Indian war story, they had historical and mythographic warrant for doing so. The battle had been strongly associated with Custer’s Last Stand in popular history and literature since the first journalistic accounts of the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876, and the appealing logic of that connection is attested by Warners’ further development of the association, culminating in the Custer biography *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), which also starred Flynn and de Havilland.<sup>14</sup> What linked the two stories initially was the common theme of a military catastrophe, perhaps a result of orders misconceived or misconstrued, that nonetheless displayed the heroic virtues of a sacri-

ficial patriotism. Moreover, the wars in which these battles occurred were conceived as struggles between societies representing different social orders and stages of civilization—the “progressive” English or Americans against the regressive or primitive Russians or Amerindians.

This parallelism with the Frontier Myth may have suggested the imaginative leap by which Warner Brothers’ writers connected the *Bengal Lancer* premise to the idea of a Charge of the Light Brigade spectacular—it is not clear from the studio correspondence which idea came first, but in any case the effect of the mythic parallel is to make that leap plausible. The symbols and stories of the Myth of the Frontier are culturally empowered because they have been accepted as figures that provide a perfectly adequate explanation of the process, direction, and (above all) meaning of American history. From an American point of view, the motives of racial pride that drive frontiersmen to sacrifice themselves in an Indian war make a *better* explanation of the Light Brigade’s heroic sacrifice than the unreasoning obedience to orders that Tennyson celebrates.

And it is the American point of view that shapes the movie. The story is transformed from a fable of Great Power rivalry (with overtones of ethnic difference), class distinction, and military incompetence—the standard British treatment of the battle from 1854 down to Tony Richardson’s film of 1966—to a tale of explicitly racial warfare on the frontier of the empire.<sup>15</sup> Although the mythological prestige of the story is certified in the movie through frequent allusions to the eternally anthologized Tennyson poem, the real myth-historical roots of the Warner Brothers film are entirely American. The quotations are merely costuming devices, like the authentic replicas of gear and weaponry the actors use.

The movie transfers us to a mythical borderland on the Northwest Frontier of India, where the 27th Lancers confront the Surat Khan, emir of Suristan and its wild Moslem tribesmen. Somehow the events occurring in this frontier district are going to explain the otherwise inexplicable catastrophe of Balaklava—a catastrophe occurring in a European war between the Great Powers.

Suristan is a Ruritanian rendering of Afghanistan. Although the tribesmen are bearded and turbaned savages who act like Hollywood Comanches, the emir lives in a place whose scale and oriental splendor would be more appropriate to the caliph’s palace in *Thief of Baghdad* (1940) or Kublai Khan’s in *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938). The emir has been educated in England, and has the speech and manners of a gentleman; yet, as he himself smugly admits, he has the love of cruelty and blood sport that is innate to his “ancient race.” A British diplomat, escorted by a company of Lancers under the command of Captain Geoffrey Vickers (Flynn) has come to inform the Surat Khan that the British government will be discontinuing his annual subsidy. Surat Khan will respond by making a secret alliance with the Russian czar and plotting an uprising of the hill tribes against the Lancers’ garrison at Chukoti.

The opening scenes reveal a sharp division on the British side between the

politicians—a set of elderly and effete armchair warriors—and the soldiers, particularly Vickers, who is not only brave but also a realist who knows the enemy well. He and the khan are old acquaintances, hunters of great skill, and during the course of a hunt Vickers earns the khan's gratitude by saving him from a leopard attack with a superb shot.

Surat Khan, egged on by a Russian military advisor who is a Stalin look-alike, attacks the Chukoti garrison while most of the regiment is on maneuvers, and when the colonel surrenders on promise of safe conduct, the khan orders a horrific massacre of the men, women, and little children of the garrison, complete with implications of rape, mutilation, and torture. Vickers rescues Elsa Campbell (de Havilland)—his colonel's daughter, who is also his fiancé—from the massacre, but he succeeds only because he is spared by the khan's order, who thus repays the debt of savage honor he owes Vickers for saving him from the leopard. Although the British defeat the Suristanis and hound the khan out of India, the massacre remains a scar on the regimental psyche, and Vickers is almost ready to protest the command's transfer to the Crimea until he discovers that Surat Khan has gone to Russia and is in the Crimea with his former advisor, Count Volonoff.

And *here* is the reason why: Vickers learns that Surat Khan is actually on Balaklava Heights; he forges his commander's signature to change a retreat order into a suicidal attack, and sends a belated warning to the commander so that he can use the attack as a diversion. He then leads the charge in person crying, "Onward, men, onward!"—an oddly formal and stagey choice of words to yell from the back of a galloping horse when a simple "Charge!" would do. But this is merely another of those double-action authenticating devices, like doing research to get the costumes right so that we will accept the movie's inaccurate versions of both history and geography. We are asked to think that somehow these words have been reported to Tennyson for use as an authenticating touch in his poem, but of course it is the Tennyson quotation that assures the audience that it is beholding "History."

In the final scene, we learn how and why the secret history has been concealed from us and rendered mysterious. Sir Charles Macefield—the army chief of staff and the most "military" of the political officers—decides to burn Vickers' confession, because it would taint the public memory of heroism by linking it with an illegal, albeit noble act. Macefield knows that in the absence of the confession the Charge of the Light Brigade will appear to be a blunder, and he himself will be blamed for it, but this noble fib is as close as a political officer can come to partnership in Vickers' heroic transgression.

Thus the charge turns out not to have been a blunder at all. It is justified by two very good, albeit totally imaginary, reasons: a tactical one, by which the fatal charge becomes a successful military diversion; and a mythic or spiritual one, based upon the American myth-ideology of Indian warfare, whose values place the imperative of consummating a racial revenge or rescue ahead of obedience

to military orders or political law. And it is the American audience's privilege to be privy to those reasons, to be deemed capable of understanding the spirit of these pseudo-events, while the 1854 British public imagined in the film is presented as unable to see the spirit of justice behind the fractured letter of the law.

Just as the mythic content of the story is continuous with American mythological tradition, so too the formal narrative design of *Charge of the Light Brigade* is based on structural principles developed in the nineteenth-century novel. The movie's narrative conforms to the pattern that has been called "classical Hollywood narration," one of the characteristic features of which is the parallel development of a historical or public theme with a private or family crisis. This parallelism implies a dialectic between public and private worlds that is at least interpretive and potentially deterministic; that is, the private events may be seen as symbolic microcosms that suggest the meaning of the public events, or the private events may actually be seen as causing the public events.<sup>16</sup>

But this narrative structure is identical with that of the "historical romance"—a novelistic genre developed by James Fenimore Cooper and Walter Scott in the first decades of the nineteenth century and brought to artistic maturity in works like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Zola's *Le Debacle*, and Frank Norris's *The Octopus*.<sup>17</sup> In both the novelistic and the cinematic versions of the historical romance a public event of historical significance unfolds in parallel with a private drama of romance and family. In both forms this parallelism is used to suggest that the private drama is (symbolically, at least) a hidden "cause" of the historical event, and that its special terms and politics are the key to understanding the secret history. Thus the historical romance genre (both literary and cinematic) projects a fiction of historical explanation, which both reflects and may also constitute a public mythology. Indeed, Cooper's historical romances established the formal conventions through which the American "Myth of the Frontier" found literary and historiographical expression.

The "secret history" part of *Light Brigade*—the Indian part—closely resembles the classic Indian war novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, the centerpiece of which is the massacre of Fort William Henry led by a vengeful Indian fanatic in alliance with a European general. In both stories, world and class politics are treated through the metaphor of racial conflict beyond the borders and amplified by a sexual politics that divides civilization into a female "heart"—moved by sentiment and naive idealism—and a hard masculine "head," moved by soldierly realism.

Cooper's method in the historical romances is to create a genetic myth, one that "accounts for" the fundamental ideological and social oppositions dividing the society of Jacksonian America by projecting them backward into a fictionalized past. His first essay in the form, *The Pioneers* (1823), projects the Jacksonian conflict between the old landholding gentry and the rising classes of ambitious farmers and mechanics back into the era of the French Revolution and the struggle between Federalists and Jeffersonians for economic power and ideolog-

ical hegemony. The plot allows Cooper to explore the consequences of different rationales for establishing political and economic order, from the conservative doctrines of class privilege and deference on one extreme to anarchic economic competition on the other. He establishes a framework for judging these alternatives by invoking two historical parallels: a more ancient and basic opposition between the original right of primitive proprietors (Indians) and the “moral right” of the progressive white farmers who displace and exterminate them; and a prophetic or future-oriented opposition, exemplified by the French Revolution, in which class competition produces a social war of extermination.

In his second novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Cooper builds upon his original insights and formal devices—in effect, taking the first deliberate step to creating a genre or tradition. The result is a work that is formally clearer, with a more fully articulated symbolism, and a more elegant or economical way of integrating historical and mythic analogies with the central plot. Cooper recognizes that the racial opposition of whites and Indians is (for an American) the most basic and definitive of historical tropes—that the ideological justification of American history hinges on the Indian question. His story amplifies this basic imagery systematically, using white/Indian opposition as the key to interpreting other fundamental oppositions: the opposition between “hard” and “soft” understandings of social and class questions, embodied in the gendered contrast of masculine and feminine ways of thinking about Indian wars, and the class opposition between master and slave (or ruler and subordinate).

These oppositions are united in the characters whose interactions form the plot. The group covers a spectrum of possible racial/cultural compromises, ranging from embodiments of racial purity at both the white and the Indian extremes, and gender purity at masculine and feminine extremes, through characters who mix various elements of gender and race—Indians who acquire white sensibilities, white men raised as Indians, and one woman (Cora Munro) who is both a racial hybrid (Negro and white) and a gender hybrid (female sex, “masculine” courage and rationality).

The hero of the Cooper novel is Hawkeye, a white man who knows Indians so well that he can almost pass for one. He is the man who stands between the opposed worlds of red and white, savagery and civilization, and interprets one to the other. In a sense he is the voice of cultural liberalism: he seeks to understand the cultural Other on his own terms, which we recognize as the beginning of tolerance. But in a situation of cultural conflict he is also the most effective of civilization’s soldiers, since he knows how to think and fight like an Indian, to turn their methods against them. His soldierly identity signals that below the aura of liberal tolerance lies the implicit assumption that cultures and races that differ must come into violent conflict. At the root of this hero’s wisdom is his knowledge of the vast gulf that separates the cultures of East and West and/or the dark races and the light. Hawkeye knows that the races have different “gifts,” that those of

the Other are for cruelty and treachery as well as a peculiar honor—that the worst mistake one can make is to treat Them as if they were just like Us. But because he is an outsider, because he goes beyond the laws and codes of regular society, he is never heeded until it is too late.<sup>18</sup>

Although he is an aristocrat, Vickers in *Light Brigade* is also the man who knows Indians. He is benevolently paternal to the Sepoy families in the garrison. At one point he saves his men from ambush by disguising himself as a Suristani—and is nearly shot by his own men, who take him for an enemy. The massacre of Chukoti occurs because the regular army will not heed his advice to drop diplomacy and make a preemptive strike against the khan, and because his colonel will not listen when Vickers warns him not to trust the khan's promise of safe passage if he surrenders. Like Hawkeye, Vickers is not (in this movie) the hero who wins the hand of the leading lady. He is the supreme rescuer of female captives, but is too devoted to manly battle and to the dark knowledge of savagery to make a civilized husband; and though he saves the leading lady from the massacre, he loses her love to his somewhat effete brother, who serves in the political department.

In both novel and film the unfolding of the plot that joins these characters converts them into mythic integers in a historico-political allegory, which asserts that none of the crucial oppositions can endure compromise: racial warfare must end in the extermination of one race or the other; the conflict of gendered ideologies must yield to the hegemony of soldierly reason, or suffer ruinous defeat and disorder under the guidance of female passion and unworldliness. Thus the “private affairs” plot of the historical romance interprets and explains the deepest meanings and processes of history, constituting itself as a “secret history” hidden within the facts the public knows. *Last of the Mohicans* explains the politics of Indian removal (and Negro slavery) by making an allegory of the massacre of Fort William Henry—the massacre is the result of Indians acting up to their racial gifts and white men denying theirs—and it resolves the historical problem symbolized by the massacre by inventing a series of captivities and rescues through which the disrupted boundaries of gender and race are finally restored. Similarly, *Light Brigade* explains the suicidal charge by inventing the Chukoti massacre—an invention that allows the movie to annex the literary and cinematic tradition of the Frontier Myth as its pseudohistorical core. It can then explain the massacre by inventing a “secret history” or romance plot, which interprets historical forces in terms of race and gender.

But the evocation of a mythic past does not exhaust the historical referents of the historical romance. In such works the past is reenvisioned to serve as an allegory of contemporary political and social concerns. Cooper and Scott use incidents from their society's past to symbolize conflicts of power and value prevalent during their own times, between landed gentry and ambitious yeomen, old proprietors and new, traditional aristocracies and upstart elites. Their works project

back into a fictionalized past the forms of present conflicts, suggesting that their novels are uncovering the germs of modern social problems and offering as a model for our imitation the heroism through which our ancestors resolved their crises.<sup>19</sup>

This is true of the cinematic historical romance as well, and, in the studios, analysis of the possible effects of politically suggestive material on both domestic box office and foreign distribution was carefully and self-consciously done at different stages of the corporate process.<sup>20</sup> The devices that enabled *Light Brigade* to speak to a 1936 audience were consciously invented and deployed cautiously. The figure of the Russian advisor, and the premise that the Frontier massacre is causally related to a war between the Great Powers, binds the Frontier romance metaphorically to the politics of Europe between the two world wars. This contemporary reference lends the movie the power of fictive relevance, and it enlarges the film's basis of historical reference, justifying the heavy weight of signification it places on events in another time, concerning another nation. The years 1935–36 saw the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, Hitler's remilitarization of Germany, and the beginning of Nazi expansionism in Europe. Yet it was by no means clear in 1936 that the enemy of the West in the next war would be the fascists. Stalinist Russia, then entering the time of the Great Purge and heavily engaged in Spain, was a likely candidate, and bolshevism was the preferred enemy for many Western conservatives (and remained so even after the war with Germany was actually engaged). Thus the explanatory fiction offered by the movie can be read not only as a rendering of the historical past but also as a use of a mythologized past to interpret a present crisis. At the same time, the displacement of the crisis into "history" clouds the allegory and evades the danger of offending any of the movie's potential European audience.

*Light Brigade* unites and reconciles its diverse ideological concerns and its mixture of real and imaginary politics through its narrative, rather than through any sort of discursive logic—although argumentative and explanatory discourse occurs frequently enough. The predicted and predictable narrational drive that moves everything toward the mayhem of the final charge suggests the operation of a force of historical determinism, through which white triumphs over non-white, freedom over tyranny, and justice over crime. Those characters who speak for or embody this force, in whatever degree, appear insightful and heroic, and it is interesting that on this score the hero Vickers is closer in thought to the savage Surat Khan than to his military and political superiors—this is very much in the Cooper tradition.

But the second element of narration—the parallel between public history and "secret history" or private romance—is equally authoritative in providing an interpretive framework for the film's resolution of its many problems. In fact, the romance plot provides a symbolic language that extends and elaborates the

simple categories of the conflict between khan and cavalryman into a comprehensive statement of values that fully explains the “secret history” of the fatal charge.

These forces are symbolized in terms of race and especially gender. Civilization—the regiment—is divided into two orders: the political, represented as fatuous, incompetent, unrealistic, and effeminate (or at least effete); and the military, which is sharp-eyed, clear-headed, skilled, realistic, and virile. This political division is echoed in the sexual politics of the army wives and daughters. Elsa (de Havilland), the colonel’s lovely daughter, is engaged to Vickers, but she has fallen in love with his brother Perry (Patric Knowles), a soldier who has been “seconded to the political branch.” This love triangle breaches the solidarity first of the family, setting brother against brother and father against child, then of the army itself. It is important to the film’s ideology that the erring brother is a political, and that he appeals to the female nature. Colonel Campbell can’t understand how Elsa can prefer the political brother to Vickers, and though Elsa’s lines invoke the supreme ideological trope of Hollywood cinema—true love—the audience is meant to share Campbell’s view: the brother is played like a prettily carved piece of wood, his lines are throwaways, his passionate glances verge on the effeminate, while Vickers is virile, direct, funny, clear-eyed, gallant, and (above all) the *star*—Flynn had been de Havilland’s leading man once before. I think we are meant to understand that her choice is both womanly and foolish, and this is because the movie wishes to link the politics of appeasement and unpreparedness for war with effeminacy.

The point is visualized at a grand ball in Calcutta, at which Surat Khan appears with his Russian advisor. Here public and private or secret history, the language of the political allegory, and the key value-giving terms of race and gender, are merged both visually and in dialogue. The scene juxtaposes (or intercuts) three parallel narratives, each of which develops a variation of the common theme, pitting military and masculine reason and toughmindedness against the divisive sentimentality and passion of women and oriental despots. The exposition of the love triangle between Elsa and the Vickers brothers is framed on the one hand by the “serious” political intrigues of the khan, the Russians, and the British government, and on the other by a domestic comedy involving General and Lady Warrenton—a gossipy, bossy, nagging wife who overrules the general by fussing about his health. (The general will avenge and transcend the shame of being so henpecked by dying in the Charge of the Light Brigade.)

The ball is immediately preceded by a military conference at which Sir Charles Macefield defines the political situation and admonishes General Warrenton and Colonel Campbell that “we must maintain the peace at any price.” On this classic formulation of the doctrine of appeasement, the scene dissolves to the announcement of guests at the ball, and we see Campbell and Warrenton again, this time dancing attendance on Lady Warrenton, who tyrannizes over them both

with her prattling, henpecking, and matchmaking. The physical arrangement of these three characters exactly parallels that of the conference in Macefield's office. Visual parallelism of this kind achieves some of the effect of verbal metaphor in establishing the story's thematics. Here it suggests that Macefield and Lady Warrenton, masculine commander and fluff-headed woman, are alternative representations of the political order that the soldiers serve. Such arrangements of characters in the screen space are not fortuitous but become the basis of a systematic development of triadic character groups, linked to each other by an elaborately choreographed pattern of movement. Throughout most of the ball sequence characters appear in groups of three involving a figure of authority and two rivals.<sup>21</sup> These triadic groupings define different aspects of social order—the political, the domestic, the romantic—each of which has clear and stable conventions of hierarchy and behavior. (Vickers tests the boundaries of these conventional triadic orders by moving between them, by making a “fourth” when triadic arrangements are the norm—no one of these “normal” frames can contain him.)

The camera then pans to the dance floor, where we see the love triangle taking shape as the two Vickers brothers alternately partner their beloved Elsa: romantic love is a dance, formal and frivolous, in which soldiers subjugate bravery to mere gallantry.

We then cut sharply to the entrance of Surat Khan and Volonoff, underlined by an oriental riff in the music; Vickers abandons the dance to warn Macefield, while his brother continues to dance yearningly with Elsa. The political brother romances the woman betrothed to the soldierly brother, while the latter does a man's work. The theme is reinforced by another interlude of the Warrentons and Colonel Campbell observing and commenting on the scene: the colonel disparages Perry as “a diplomat of sorts,” while Lady Warrenton makes a to-do about how passionately he looks at Elsa. Romance and the concerns of women are both tyrannical and ridiculous, but the comedy highlights an essentially serious conflict of values.

That conflict surfaces in the next two passages. We first see a long scene on the veranda during which Perry and Elsa declare their love and are interrupted by the colonel—who invokes his authority as both father and commander to order Perry away and persuades Elsa that it is foolish of her to obey a romantic impulse rather than keep her word to Vickers, who is after all such a splendid fellow. Perry, the colonel, and Elsa return to the ball, and we cut to Vickers as he courteously excuses himself from the conversation among Macefield, Volonoff, and the khan. The older men tease him about that lovely woman he is looking for—the woman, who we now know, has in effect betrayed his love.

The three men then turn to political matters. “In this treacherous world,” says Macefield, “it is difficult to know, which is friend and which is foe.” The line is made emphatic by its epigrammatic form—it sounds like Macefield is quoting a rhymed couplet. Although its literal reference is to politics, what we have

observed of the Vickers love triangle suggests that it is equally apropos as a metaphoric comment on romantic love. The khan's response to Macefield is also metaphoric, perhaps exemplifying the proverbial subtlety and indirection attributed to orientals in Hollywood movies. However, given the metaphorical character of the parallel narratives that shape this scene, his figurative style seems an appropriate one for the occasion, and his metaphor actually serves to clarify the meaning of the scenes we have been observing, by making an explicit allegory of the movie's implicit identification of romantics and politics. He says, "I sometimes think, Sir Charles, that a great government resembles a beautiful woman who, intoxicated with the power of her own beauty, is apt to withdraw from a sincere suitor the favors she has always granted; and when she finds that suitor consoles himself with another beauty she regrets her coldness . . . [and] changes her mind, before she has lost her suitor forever."

The aptness of the khan's equation of politics and romance is established by the juxtaposition of his conversation with those involving Elsa, Perry, and Colonel Campbell, on the one hand, and Lord and Lady Warrenton and Colonel Campbell, on the other. His words remind us of the triangle that hinges on Elsa and thereby serves to denigrate her, as well as women and romance in general, by linking them with the political style and motives of the khan. By the same token, the khan's politics are disparaged by their association with effeminacy, passion, inconstancy, and tyranny.

Macefield's response confirms the relevance of gender as a metaphor for politics, but it suggests that the khan has misunderstood its application: "The only great government with which I am acquainted is singularly masculine. It makes up its mind, and once having reached a decision adheres to it." From Macefield's perspective, the khan has made the mistake of projecting his "oriental" (and feminine) understanding of politics-as-romance onto the hardheaded, rational, masculine English government.

Macefield has clearly articulated an ideological standard by which the audience is to judge the actions of the contending parties. But the authority of Macefield's description is undermined by what the audience has been observing. The masculine and military order of the English is subverted from within by the regimen of women. The most apparent signs of this subversion are the elaborate display of deference to the "ladyship" and wifely authority of Lady Warrenton, and the rationalization of duplicity and betrayal that accompanies the idealized passion of "true love" embodied in Elsa. But with these images in mind, we retrospectively revalue the display of British diplomacy as we have seen it. Why have the British decided to cease paying Surat Khan? We are never given a reason, and as the crisis develops the decision looks more arbitrary, more like a fickle shift in "feminine" affection than a result of deliberate policy. The suggestion has more point if we remember that the diplomat who first informed the khan of the new policy was an effete and prissy old man, a sort of masculine Lady Warrenton. It

will require the Chukoti massacre to awaken the British to the consequences of allowing themselves to be ruled by the “female” niceties of diplomacy and conventional obedience to law, in turn requiring the heroic sacrifice of Vickers in the Charge of the Light Brigade to redeem racial and virile honor and effectively reestablish as governing doctrine the “masculine” principle of decisive action, whatever the cost.

It is worth noting the unintended irony of Macefield’s characterization of the British government as “singularly masculine”—an unthinkable line for a servant of Queen Victoria. But Macefield is only nominally a British Victorian; he is more accurately seen as the agent and voice of twentieth-century American sexual and international politics. Despite the pretense of historicity, the allusive language of the grand ball scene is designed to suggest that what is transpiring in the fictive 1854 on screen is a metaphorical rendering of forces shaping the world political crisis of 1936. The language of the film continually buttonholes us with the suggestion that we understand its narrative as a myth—a fable that represents and explains our own history.<sup>22</sup>

If we accept this suggestion, and agree that the fiction is a fair representation of the dynamics of “History,” then perhaps we in the audience should use the terms of this “secret history” to interpret the ideological debate over America’s world-political role—whether (and how) we should appease, ignore, or confront fascism (or communism). If we interpret that crisis in the same manner that we interpret the “historical” problem of the film, we would first identify the various parties, nations, and forces with the value-giving terms of race or ethnicity (savage/civilized, cruel/kind, fanatic/rational) and gender (effeminate/virile, weak/strong, political/military), and we would find implicit in these identifications an imperative for action since, as Geoffrey Vickers knows, there is only one way to deal with Surat Khan.

I have dealt at length with this film in order to show how deeply even the generic products of the Hollywood movie industry are enmeshed with the processes that shape culture and politics. Even where the ambition of the movie makers did not extend beyond a desire to imitate and exploit the most obvious cultural stereotypes, literary and filmic formulas, and images of current events, their work still engages and creatively restructures a wide range of cultural properties and concerns. Thus *Light Brigade* draws on and weaves together the race/gender symbolism of the Myth of the Frontier, and the progressive historiography derived from that myth; the traditions of American literary culture; and the iconography of contemporary politics.

The measure of the work’s success as an exercise in applied mythography lies in the history of its subsequent usage by the society. *The Charge of the Light Brigade* inaugurated both a tradition of generic practice among filmmakers and a distinc-

tive variation in American mythography. Hollywood's repetition of the *Light Brigade* formula created a new kind of "mythic space," similar to that of the epic Western but displaced to locales associated with the European empires of the Victorian era. Once incorporated into the language of popular symbols, the roles and scenarios associated with the "Victorian Empire Movie" became available as a mythic/ideological variant, supplementing the language and traditions of the Western, the crime film, and the combat film as a way of imagining moral, political, or social crises.

A historical account of the genre would begin with the perfection and refinement between 1936 and 1941 of a distinct genre of Victorian Empire movies—films like *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), *Drums* (1938), *The Light That Failed*, *Beau Geste*, and *Gunga Din* (1939). The genre conventions popularized in these movies were also available for use elsewhere, to aggrandize and enlarge the frame of reference of other kinds of adventure film. When the "big budget" Western was revived by the studios as a major category of production in 1939–41, the scenarios and star performers associated with Victorian Empire adventure were transferred to the terrain of the Western. The association enriched that genre with new suggestions of resemblance between the American past and the "world-historical" framework evoked by the Victorian Empire settings.<sup>23</sup>

The formula for these movies usually follows the pattern set down in *Charge of the Light Brigade*. The movie deals with a crisis in which civilization—symbolized by the Victorian Empire or its equivalent—is faced by a threat from an alliance between the opposite extremes of savage license and totalitarian authority. The "Victorian" or civilized order is usually embodied in a regiment or a military outpost, whose values are nominally those of a liberal and progressive imperium, supported by democratic popular enthusiasm, but whose heroes are warriors and whose politics are those of a justified and virile patriarchy, happily exercised over consenting white women and childlike brown races. If the defense of the outpost succeeds these people will continue to be uplifted by the labors of their progressive "defenders." A fanatical and perhaps even pseudomessianic chieftain is uniting the hill tribes against our regimental utopia, and the politicians in Whitehall or Washington are too corrupt, inept, or locked into bureaucratic red tape to do what needs to be done about it. There is often a foreign power or an evil empire (Russia, France, Germany, Imperial China, Mexico) working behind the scenes. As a result the army and civil service (wives and children included) and all the little brown people who depend upon "us" are in peril of actual massacre by the chieftain and his deluded barbarians. The only one who can save us is the hero, a soldier who knows the natives well enough almost (or actually) to pass for one—a man who straddles the border between savagery and civilization, fanaticism and religion, brown and white, them and us. And we *are* saved—though typically at the cost of the hero's sacrificial death, together with his picked band of men, in some heroic last stand or suicidal charge.

Since myth and genre are mutually reinforcing aspects of the same cultural process, the achievement of generic form also had (and has) mythographic connections and consequences. *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and the other similar movies of its kind served to establish the Victorian Empire as a metaphor for “the West” as led against “the East” by the United States after 1936. These movies mythologized—popularized and made intelligible in traditional terms—a major ideological shift in American politics, away from isolation and toward preparedness for engagement in the conflicts of Europe and the Far East. In *Light Brigade* the British-French alliance echoes the alliances of 1914 and 1936 against Germany, but it imaginatively opens that alliance to the possibility of a different enemy, an alliance between Russian bolshevism and oriental fanaticism aiming at destruction of the colonial powers. In the fictive landscape of Victorian Empire Hollywood movies, the British are also clearly surrogate or incipient Americans, especially those who act more like Leatherstocking than like Lord Raglan; so these movies have the interesting quality of appearing to predict, in 1936, the movement of America from naive neutral, to leader of the Western war against fascism, to the successor of British and French colonialism in the Third World.

Even when its form has become relatively well fixed, a genre remains responsive to the same kinds of cultural and political pressures that originally shaped it. Thus most movie genres do not enjoy a steady state of popularity or currency in the marketplace. Rather, as ideological issues change over time, different genres become more and less appealing and appropriate as ways of representing public concerns. During and just after the Second World War the genre waned in currency, although notable examples continued to be made (*Kim*, 1950; *King of the Khyber Rifles*, 1954). The West and World War II combat zones were the favored settings for action-adventure movies. But the genre experienced a resurgence during the period of the Kennedy/Johnson New Frontier, in films like John Wayne’s *The Alamo* (1960), *55 Days at Peking* (1962), *Zulu* and *Khartoum* (1964).<sup>24</sup> These films express the sense of Western and specifically of American beleaguement in the early 1960s: the sense that communism was expanding throughout the Third World at the expense of the United States and Europe. They represent a fictive working out of the premises of the policy of counterinsurgency, through which the Kennedy administration hoped to defeat wars of national liberation and create a New Frontier for American power.

This kind of film fell from favor with producers as the Vietnam War intensified, and there has been no clustering of productions comparable to the 1935–40 or 1958–66 period. Nonetheless, the formulae of the genre remain available to both filmmakers and general public. Filmmakers of a certain age and experience have these films as part of their working craft vocabulary; younger producers can and do draw on archival copies of prints in the search for material or manners of treatment. And television continually recycles old movies—morning, afternoon, and night. Once a genre has attained a broad enough level of cur-

rency, its terms are always more or less available as a device for representing and interpreting the concerns of the day—although circumstances may suggest more or less radical revisions in the specifics of imagery and reference.

The case of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) illustrates just how radical such revisions can be. Although it is science fiction, the movie has many of the essential features of the *Light Brigade* story, including: an oriental despot who is half savage and half aristocrat; a desert frontier world, which can also become a colonial paradise through the technical power of the soldier-colonists of the Enterprise and the Genesis project; a massacre, with tortures and murders that must be avenged; and a final battle that features a near suicidal “charge” by the Enterprise on Khan’s ship.<sup>25</sup>

The genre movie is thus not only a utilizer of extant mythology but remains part of the cultural process through which myth and ideology are revised, redirected, and even reinvented. Its terms remain continuous with the myth-generating processes of cultural life. Indeed, we recently passed through a moment in which the sharing of terms between the languages of political myth and movie-genre myth had been carried to a kind of extreme. Viewed as a media event, the Iran-Contra affair has all of the crucial genre elements and characters: the fanatical Ayatollah is our Surat Khan, whose terrorist agents hold our people captive and commit atrocious massacres; the shadow of the Russian bear looms at the Mad Mullah’s back. We know we must fight this menace and rescue our captives, but moral scruples, law, and military procedure frustrate attempts at direct action. Between the Congress (the “political branch”) and the enemy our hero stands embattled, and if he is Oliver North then he is recognizable as the Errol Flynn/Hawkeye character, “The Man Who Knows Indians” (*Newsweek* called him “a cowboy”) who will break laws and forge orders if necessary to achieve rescue and revenge. And then there is Reagan—who, after all, had played Flynn’s sidekick in *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), a Western that follows the *Light Brigade* formula closely—our Sir Charles Macefield: too old to do battle himself and officially required to support a “political” solution, but instinctively believing that against enemies whose very nature is fundamentally evil, the military solution is always the most “realistic” and “tough-minded” choice; who therefore moves without any cognitive dissonance from temporizing diplomatically and appeasing the enemy one moment, to appealing in the next to the hero’s desire to violently avenge and redeem his (and our nation’s) lost honor and “manhood”; who in the end suppresses or mystifies the truth to propagate a myth of heroism, and hopes to cover his own dishonor in its reflected glow.<sup>26</sup>

It is hard to say whether this real-political “remake” of *Charge of the Light Brigade* is the product of media story makers, using the language of movie genre to interpret events, or if this bloody and costly project was scenarized, cast, and directed by the veteran Warner Brothers performer who recently lived in the White House.

## Notes

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1. Richard Slotkin, "Prologue to a Study of Myth and Genre in American Movies," *Prospects* 9 (1984): 407–32; *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York, 1985), 2.
2. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, Wis., 1985), 57–73.
3. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, chap. 2; Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre* (New York, 1974), 17–18.
4. Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York, 1986), chaps. 1 and 5, offers the best definition of genre. See also Slotkin, "Prologue," 412–16; *Fatal Environment*, 30–32.
5. John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago, 1976), chaps. 1 and 2 and pp. 139–61, 192–215; Albert Johannsen, *The House of Beadle and Adams and Its Dime and Nickel Novels: The Study of a Vanished Literature*, 3 vols. (Norman, Okla., 1950–62); Mary Noel, *Villains Galore . . . : The Heyday of the Popular Story Weekly* (New York, 1954); Tony Goodstone, *The Pulps: Fifty Years of American Pop Culture* (New York, 1970), viii–xvi, 1–2, 33–35, 45–46, 57–58, 131–33, 141–43, 165–67, 201–3, 227–37; Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 192–98, 203–7. I'm indebted to my colleague Michael Denning for sharing his ideas on dime novels with me and allowing me to read the MS of his forthcoming book on the subject, *Mechanic Accents*.
6. Genre and story form are not the only kinds of premise on which film production can be based. For a comparison between genre and "the star" as a premise for production see Slotkin, "Prologue," 417–19.
7. For the theoretical basis of this thesis, see Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1981), 7–8, 68, 72; Slotkin, "Prologue," 411–13; *Fatal Environment*, 30–32; Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York, 1983), esp. chap. 1.
8. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, Warner Brothers; director, Michael Curtiz; production supervisor, Sam Bischoff; screenplay by Michel Jacoby and Rowland Leigh (1936).
9. Rudy Behlmer, ed., *Inside Warner Brothers, 1935–1951* (New York, 1985), 28–31; Clive Hirschhorn, *The Warner Brothers Story* (New York, 1979), 82–171, and esp. 171; Ted Sennett, *Warner Brothers Presents: The Most Exciting Years, From "The Jazz Singer" to "White Heat"* (n.p., 1971), chap. 6.
10. Roger Dooley, *From Scarface to Scarlett: American Films in the 1930s* (New York, 1981), chap. 17; Behlmer, *Inside Warner Brothers*, 28–39; Hirschhorn, *Warner Brothers Story*, 82–83.
11. *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, Paramount Pictures; director, Henry Hathaway; producer, Louis D. Leighton; scenarists, Waldemar Young, John L. Balderston, Achmed Abdullah (1935); based on the autobiography of Major Francis C. P. Yeats-Brown, *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1930), which refers to events in India, 1907–13.
12. On Warner Brothers' production methods in general, and their historical pictures in particular, see Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London, 1983), chaps. 1–3, 12.
13. Behlmer, *Inside Warner Brothers*, 29; Hirschhorn, *Warner Brothers Story*, 171. The producers even used replicas of authentic period postage stamps, though these would not be visible on film, in order to foster a feeling for the project's authenticity among the cast and crew.

14. The Charge of the Light Brigade was the event to which Custer's contemporaries most often compared the Last Stand; Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 455.
15. Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Reason Why* (New York, 1960), 258–71.
16. See Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, esp. chap. 9, pp. 157–58 on “classical” film narration. Bordwell has many useful things to say on narrative theory in both literary and cinematic fiction; passim, but esp. 7–9, 18–20, 48–62.
17. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 82–86; Louise K. Barnett, *The Ignoble Savage: American Literary Racism, 1790–1890* (Westport, Conn., 1975); Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y., 1957), chap. 1; Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Donald Davie, *The Heyday of Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1961); and Harry E. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983).
18. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, chap. 5; “Introduction,” in James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans: A Tale of 1757* (New York, 1986), ix–xviii.
19. Slotkin, *Fatal Environment*, 19–20.
20. Roddick, *New Deal in Entertainment*, chaps. 2, 5, 8, 12, and pp. 249–54. See also Sinclair Lewis and Dore Schary, *Storm in the West* (New York, 1963), which gives the writers’ account of a 1943 project for a Western allegorizing the events leading up to World War II.
21. Macefield-Warrenton-Campbell give way to Lady Warrenton and the two officers; then the dance gives us Elsa, Perry, and Geoffrey; the khan enters with Volonoff, and Vickers brings Macefield to meet them (and some social byplay ensues by which Macefield tries to exclude the Russian from the triad of himself, the khan, and Vickers). The scene on the veranda involves Elsa, Perry, and Colonel Campbell, and when Elsa’s return to the ball summons Geoffrey to dance we are left with the final triad of Macefield, the khan, and Volonoff.
22. Roland Barthes, “Mythology Today,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), 124, speaks of the “buttonholing” character of myth; Northrop Frye, *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1973), 115, notes that myths are stories of which it is assumed that the reader himself is potentially the hero.
23. The two Westerns that fit the Victorian Empire model most directly were *Santa Fe Trail* (1940) and *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), both made by Warner Brothers and starring Flynn and de Havilland. Warners simply transferred the actors, properties, and mythographic pretensions of their earlier Flynn/de Havilland vehicles into the “mythic space” of the Western, without apology and without difficulty. Among postwar Westerns, John Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) is a sophisticated adaptation of the formula to the Western, which also incorporates elements of the World War II “combat movie.” Ford’s *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937) was an early (and original) variation of the *Light Brigade* formula.
24. To this list should be added a number of films whose setting predates the Victorian period but whose plots, situations, and characterizations conform in all crucial respects to this formula. Of particular interest is *El Cid* (1961), directed by Anthony Mann, in which the medieval hero defends a Spanish outpost in a “last stand” against an invasion of “African” Moslem fanatics. The hero is assisted by “friendly” Spanish Moslems (which suggests a racial/ethnic rather than religious basis of the war) and undermined by Spanish politicians, most notably a corrupt queen. The Cid is played by Charlton Heston, who played similar roles in both *55 Days at Peking* and *Khartoum*. *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) also shares many important features of the genre, though it

lacks a “last stand” or fatal charge—unless one considers the last, implicitly suicidal motorcycle ride of the defeated and despairing Lawrence as a peculiarly existential variant of “the charge.”

25. In a more general way, this type of movie also participates in the larger mythic tradition of captivity-and-rescue, which looks back as far as the Indian captivity narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the historical romances and dime novels of the nineteenth; and early twentieth-century movies like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919)—as well as ahead to movies like *Rio Grande* (1950), *The Searchers* (1956), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *Raid on Entebbe* (1976), and *Taxi Driver* (1976).
26. I have been following the journalistic treatments in *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the *New York Times* in addition to television coverage. It was Robert MacFarlane who praised North for having “preserved a semblance of manhood” in our foreign affairs by his efforts to support the Contras. See The National Security Archive, Scott Armstrong et al., *The Chronology: The Documented Day-by-Day Account of the Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Contras* (New York, 1987); Daniel K. Inouye et al., *The Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with the Minority View*, ed. John Brinkley and Stephen Engelberg (New York, 1988); John Tower et al., *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President’s Special Review Board* (New York, 1987); Peter Meyer, *Defiant Patriot: The Life and Exploits of Lt. Colonel Oliver L. North* (New York, 1987); Oliver L. North, *Taking the Stand: The Testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver L. North* (New York, 1987). The idea that movie making was the most important source of Reagan’s education, shaping his consciousness and values, is systematically argued in Michael Rogin, “Ronald Reagan,” *the Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, 1987), and Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home* (Garden City, N.Y., 1987), 1–6, 143–213.