

THE MYTH OF THE COWBOY

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INTRODUCTION

America has been present in my life ever since my early childhood.¹ My parents both spent a year in the United States as high school exchange students in 1958/59 (Mom in West Hartford, CT, Dad in Sturgis, SD) and have maintained close ties to their host-families and friends from that time. As the exchange year was a pivotal experience in their growing up my parents shared numerous memories and experiences from that time with my sister and me. We also had visitors from the U.S. on a regular basis and at age 14 I spent my summer vacation with my mom's former host-family in Massachusetts and Maine.

My dad's 'America' was more present through books and stories about the West. Having lived in the Black Hills my dad learned about the troubled history of the region and the animosity between those who settled the West and those who had already been living there.

My interest in America was further fueled through watching German-made Wildwest movies based on Karl May's books *Winnetou* and *Old Shatterhand*. After a troublesome first meeting Winnetou, an Apache chief, and Old Shatterhand, a German-American surveyor, become blood brothers and together live through many 'good wins-over-evil' adventures before Winnetou is murdered. The German writer Karl May, who can be considered the Louis L'Amour of

¹ Although politically incorrect, I am using the term America to talk about the United States of America rather than the American continent.

Europe (Krinsky, 1999), only visited the U.S. once in 1908 and never traveled further west than Buffalo, NY. Nonetheless his novels are a mixture of thorough research and lots of imagination. His books on the American West, which were first published in 1892, and even more so the later film versions, provided many German-speaking Europeans with the basic stories of the Cowboy culture and the American West.

In my family's strong ties to America I witnessed an unquestionable love for this country. Now, my own experiences with the people and the land have been the wellspring of personal emotional bonds. The contrast between my positive experience of this culture and its more cautious assessment by the average European has sparked a desire in me for exploring the people and the land more thoroughly in order to understand America more deeply.

Having lived in New York City for six months and having traveled the country for two months in 1997, the wish to live in rural rather than in urban America strongly influenced my decision to come to ISU for graduate education. My belief was that I would find the more genuine America away from the metropolitan areas or the coasts. Being aware of America's diversity and the fact that the big cities and the coastal regions are as much a part of America as the rural small towns I was nonetheless searching for a distinctive Americanness, notions that differentiate America from other countries, aspects that give hints to the ideas which America is based on and which as such are part of the Americans' cultural subconsciousness. I was searching for Americana.

The Search

My search first led me to explore Kentuckiana, a campground near Hopedale, Illinois, which features a live Saturday night country music show, the Kentuckiana Opry. The spirit of this place and the people, who live and work there, immediately intrigued me. The core values of this close-knit community of working class people revolve around family and community as a source of strength for the individual and as a means of delineating oneself from mainstream society. The campground owners, campers, and musicians share the desire to safeguard themselves from outside influences, the belief in self-reliance and industriousness for one's own benefit as well as the community's, and the strong inclination to portray themselves as living a model American life in a model American community. In 2004 and 2005 I produced *Kentuckiana*, a 50 minutes long documentary movie on the country music opry and the campground. I taped the Saturday night country music shows of the house band and conducted interviews with the family, who owns the place, band members, and campers. Through the filmic exploration of Kentuckiana I realized how family and small community values, self-reliance, industriousness, engagement, and patriotism merge into a culture of American 'down-homeness' or American country culture. The community's strong appreciation of country music can be seen as an expression, a perpetuation, and a reinforcement of these values.

Inspired by my experience in Kentuckiana I started photographing the non- or semi-commercial, amateur country music scene of Central Illinois. I visited performances of senior musicians hosting jam sessions for predominantly

senior citizens in small-town cafes, American Legions, VFWs (Veterans of Foreign Wars), and Eagle and Moose Clubs. Furthermore, I attended shows organized by the Illinois Country Music Association whose main purpose is the support and promotion of young talent.

In the process of filming *Kentuckiana* and photographing the Central Illinois country music scene it has become apparent to me that country music is one of the means by which country culture and the values tied to the image of the cowboy are perpetuated. Richard Shusterman (1999) states that country culture tries to resist the dull, corporate, white-collar establishment and “by invoking the cowboy image of rebellious rugged individualism ... country music can project an image that is traditional, white, and all-American, yet also attractively distinctive and not blandly conformist” (p. 222).

The next step in my search was my own exploration of the West. Because my first trip west in 1997 had included the common tourist stops at national parks and other more frequented sites of the country I was eager to get deeper beneath the surface and to more sincerely explore the people and the land. This meant visiting with local people and staying on campgrounds rather than in motels, driving my Chevrolet G20 van (nicknamed ‘Ol’ Mighty One’) instead of a small car, and driving the small highways with just a notion of schedule and stops rather than traveling according to a fixed itinerary. My recent travels, which have taken me to South Dakota, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Texas, repeatedly induced a sensation of awe for the land within me: amazement

for its beauty, respect for its wildness and expansiveness, and a sense of personal insignificance combined with inspiration and energy.

In 2006 I produced *American Roadscapes*, composite images of photographs of distinct American landscapes taken from the van while driving. Each image contains up to 70 layered photographs, thus blurring details yet maintaining the distinct features of the land. The dreamy and sometimes mysterious quality of the resulting images is informative regarding the impressions they give of a particular landscape. They also induce a contemplative mood in which the viewer can bring in his own memories, knowledge, and feelings to the viewing experience. In accordance with Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis (1966), which states that the unique rugged American identity was formed in the process of the westward expansion, I believe to have felt and sensed how this land with all its opportunities and challenges can mold a man.² The vastness of the landscape continues to be beyond my grasp and triggers an instinct for further exploration in me. In this course of exploring I experience a trance that sets in while driving through the extensive landscape with its slowly changing character, many hours in one stretch, the cruise control set at constant speed. The exploring instinct and the trance, which is rarely possible to acquire while driving in Europe, enables an experience of the land that I have somehow linked to the westbound travel of the pioneers in their Conestoga wagons. I am well aware of the fact however, that

² Turner argues that in the process of westward expansion a new type of citizen was created who learned to tame the wild and on whom the wild bestowed strength and individuality.

their moving westward definitely was an act of exploring, but seldom of trance-like nature.

In late summer of 2006 on a trip to West Texas with Jason Reed and Ryan Sprott, locals to the region, my searching and exploring became more and more organized, focused, and thorough. Traveling roughly 700 miles through some thirteen counties we documented a region that can be considered one of America's last frontiers. While Jason and I documented with our cameras, Jason focusing on landscapes, I on portraits, Ryan collected oral histories. Exploring this area with two colleagues who know the region very well provided insights into the history, geography, and mythology of America that up to then had been beyond my grasp. West Texas is one of the regions where the profession of the American cowboy originated in the early 1800s. In what then was Northern Mexico including most of what is now the American Southwest, the American cowboy learned his skills from the 'charros' and 'vaqueros', the Mexican cowboys. Today West Texas is not only one of the least populated regions of the country, but also a wild and rugged land inhabited by eccentric and hardened people. In stark contrast to today's modernized world the expansiveness, remoteness, harshness, and desolation of the land are at the same time uninviting and intriguing, and the people who live in the region can be characterized by their distinct ability to survive and their open and independent personalities. As a result of our travels Jason and I produced a collaborative show, *West Texas Photographs*, consisting of eight landscapes and eight portraits. The show has been exhibited at the Transpace Gallery in Normal,

Illinois, and at the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts in San Angelo, Texas, in 2006 and 2007 respectively.

Upon my return from West Texas I learned about the Gay Rodeo Circuit.³ In a fascinating way, two, at first glance, rather incompatible cultures are brought together into a mix of serious rodeo competition, celebration of gay pride, and party weekend. I have since photographed the Windy City Rodeo of the Illinois Gay Rodeo Association in Crete, Illinois, in August 2006, the Show Me State Rodeo of the Missouri Gay Rodeo Association in Kansas City, Missouri, in September 2006, and the Big D Rodeo of the Texas Gay Rodeo Association in Dallas, Texas, in March 2007. Cowboy culture and gay culture share more than one might think. Both cultures celebrate the idea of freedom from societal rules and regulations and both buy into the wilderness archetype of a men-only society in harmony with nature – a man's life in a man's world with male camaraderie and machismo qualities. The signifiers of cowboy culture, the plaid or flannel shirt, jeans, and boots, are well accepted by society at large and are appropriated by gay culture to assert gayness while retaining a masculine connotation with society at large. (Fischer, 1977)

In spring 2007 I made two extensive trips to South Dakota and West Texas to further investigate the present day moldings of the cowboy. On my trip to the Black Hills region of South Dakota I stayed with Margie Jones, an equine veterinarian, whose inside knowledge of the ranching business strongly enriched

³ I owe special thanks to Doug Taylor, a friend of my landlords Gene Drager and Ardie Nowers, for introducing me to the gay rodeo scene. While not a horseman himself, Doug became attracted to the gay rodeo scene for its camaraderie and casual unpretentiousness.

my understanding of the life of the cowboy in today's modern society. She provided me with contacts to a wide range of cowboys of different levels of realness and seriousness ranging from the horse and cattle breeders on the ranches to the showmanship cowboys of the arenas and the Saturday night dress-up cowboys of the bars.

In West Texas Jason, Ryan and I further explored what Jason calls *La Ultima Frontera* (Reed, 2007) by photographing in Presidio County, the least densely populated county of Texas situated north of the Big Bend area bordering Mexico. With the help of Melba and XB Cox and Jason's parents-in-law I was able to, among other things, photographically document the daily life of ranchers, a high school rodeo in Fort Stockton, the proceedings of a livestock auction in San Angelo, the Star of Texas Fair and Rodeo in Austin, and an operation which herds and drives cattle with helicopters.⁴

In the following two chapters I will first provide the reader with a socio-historical outline of the emergence and the timeliness of the myth of the cowboy (chapter The Myth of the Cowboy) and then talk about my photographic project, the book *The Myth of the Cowboy*, in greater detail (chapter Discussion of My Photography).

⁴ We met Melba and XB Cox on our first trip to West Texas who were then featured in our show *West Texas Photographs*. XB and Melba are West Texans who has seen it all – from the open range to working fences to running their own ranch and to hitting oil. Today he and Melba, age 92 and 80, enjoy active retirement in San Angelo, Texas.

THE MYTH OF THE COWBOY

Sissy: *Are you a real cowboy?*

Bud: *Depends on what you think a real cowboy is!*⁵

(Urban Cowboy, 1980)

“Cowboys have interested me since I was a child, not the real ones, of course, but the ones I invented for myself. The real thing might disappoint me terribly.”

(Hustvedt, 2003, p. 67)

Already before, but even more so after Frederick Jackson Turner (1966) first talked about his frontier thesis in 1893 in a speech to the American Historical Association during the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, historians have been in controversy over the history of the West.⁶

Ray Allen Billington (1973) attributes the success of Turner’s thesis in the academic as well as the public realms to its optimism:

“The frontier was disappearing, but the pioneer experience had bred into Americans not only value judgments and beliefs that elevated them above lesser peoples, but a hardihood and an aggressive spirit that would allow

⁵ This is the start of Sissy’s and Bud’s conversation when they first meet at Gilley’s Bar. As it turns out her criterion for ‘real’ is to know how to dance two-step.

⁶ The thesis states that the frontier experience has shaped the American people and character. The experience of continually turning untamed wilderness into a place for civilized society furnished the opportunity for “breaking the bonds of custom, offering new experiences, calling out new institutions and activities” (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/TURNER/home.html>); accessed Jan, 2007) and attributed to American exceptionalism.

them to protect their way of life and thought against hostile forces. ...

Whatever the results of the closing of the frontier, Americans had been so endowed by their triumph over wilderness that they could fashion a new civilization, embodying the best of their pioneer days, but benefiting from new industrialism. Turner's theories ... gave substance to folk myths that satisfied the need of Americans for a rose-tinted view of the future."

(Billington, 1973, p. 39)⁷

The critics of Turner's thesis claim that his happy Hollywood-esque settlement saga gives us only half of the story. The westward movement was not only characterized by the anticipation of the new life in which the hardship of meeting and overcoming the challenges of wilderness and forming new communities was rewarded with a truly American character, an ideal society, and golden sunsets. Patricia Limerick (1987) points out that the frontier thesis not only ignores important characters, Native Americans, women, Hispanics, and African Americans, but also leaves out important events and details: broken dreams, victimized people, and a spoiled environment.

"This tale has unquestionable power and influence but bears little resemblance to the events of the Western past. The myth has the undeniable charm of simplicity. Simplicity, alas, is the only quality that can

⁷ The line that represented the frontier steadily moved westward from the first federal census in 1790. The number of two inhabitants per square mile was used as a cut-off number to separate settled from unsettled regions. The census of 1890 showed that settlement had reached the pacific coast and unsettled regions represented isolated pieces of land rather than a frontier line. Thus the superintendent of the census in 1890 proposed that the idea of a frontier line was outdated. A comparison of the 1890 and 1990 census maps shows a striking similarity of the regions with settlement of less than two people per square mile. (Duncan, 2000)

be found in the actual story of the American West.” (Limerick, 1987, p. 323)

Recognizing the importance of the shift from myth to reality, Larry McMurtry (1990) nonetheless critiques revisionist historians, the harshest of Turner’s critics, for not incorporating people’s imagination into their theories.

“[Revisionist Studies] ... rarely do justice to the quality of imagination that constitutes part of the truth. They may be accurate about the experience, but they simply ignore the emotions and imaginings that impelled western settlers despite their experience. ... Fantasy provided part of the fiber that helped to survive the severities that the land put them to.” (McMurtry, 1990, p. 37)

While McMurtry stresses the importance of the imagination of the people who participated in the frontier experience Dayton Duncan (2000) emphasizes the following:

“... the frontier West is still the repository of many of the stereotypes associated with what defines (and sells) America ... : plenty of open spaces, small-community values, and the rugged personality symbolized in visual shorthand by a cowboy and a horse. It is a repository of many of our national myths and dreams about who we really are and what we stand for.” (Duncan, 2000, p. 289)

Will Wright (1975) points out that especially today we must consider the West as a historical force rather than a historical fact:

“While other societies reaffirm themselves through religious rituals and traditional observances, we seem to accomplish this, at least in part, through a return to faith in the land of the West. In fact, it seems this land has become our tradition – a tradition based not on the West itself but on the myth of the West.” (Wright, 1975, p. 24)

A Modern Functional Myth

David Hamilton Murdoch (2001) argues that the myth of the cowboy and the West is neither a creation myth in line with the great stories of tribal or ancient cultures explaining how the world got to be the way it is, nor does it bear its meaning in guiding ritualistic and everyday behavior within the American society through expressing, enhancing, and codifying shared beliefs. Murdoch draws on Levy Strauss’ idea of the importance of myths “as a way of dealing with conflicts the society produces for its members” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 15) to explain the myth’s contemporary importance and implications.

Murdoch suggests that the force of the myth was born at the end of the 19th century when the ideas on which America was founded clashed with how the country had developed and what it had become.⁸ He further states that this conflict coincided with the closing of the frontier and the end of the cattle drives and that these two events provided even more fuel for the growth of the myth.

What were the ideas America was founded on and what has it become?

The idea of and struggle for a new society with a special mission began with the

⁸ Murdoch talks about the force of the myth that was born at the end of the 19th century rather than the myth itself, which was born as early as the first settlers wondered what was out there in the vast unknown expanse of land towards the west.

Puritans' drive to escape the "cyclic rise and fall of all previous societies in history" (Murdoch, 2001, p. 17) by promising God to keep the newly established society simple and pure. This belief found its way into the politics of the nation's founders. In contrast to the Old World's decadent and immoral societies infested with privileges and class-distinction, America was based on "its great experiment in republican government" (Murdoch, 2001, p. 17). Murdoch further explains that it was not sufficient for the success of the "Republic of Virtue" (2001, p. 17) to be based on pious intentions and a constitution, but that "fortunately providence has endowed the United States with a fail-safe factor – an empty continent" (2001, p. 17). The empty land provided the opportunity of westward expansion "as a means of relief from poverty and unemployment" and the prospect of "independence for whoever could seize and use it" (Smith, 1950, p. 234). In his speech at the opening of the exhibition *The American Cowboy* organized by the Library of Congress in 1983 Ronald Reagan elaborated that taking advantage of this opportunity meant to take on the challenge of taming the potentially abundant wilderness and that

"this immense challenge was not met by society as a whole, nor by corporate enterprise, nor least by government: the West was won by individuals. ... The pressures of frontier life imposed the need for co-operation within the communities, but to a degree of the individual's choosing and within a milieu of equality. ... Thus democracy was reborn again and again on the frontier ... and became indelibly printed on the national consciousness." (Murdoch, 2001, p. 2)

In this line of thought the empty land also constituted a moral and spiritual resource as taking on the challenges of taming the wilderness develops the pristine virtues of man, on which a simple and pure society can thrive. “Thus from the beginning of the new nation an extraordinary complex of ideas about the West was imbedded in nineteenth-century Americans’ thinking about themselves and their future.”⁹ (Murdoch, 2001, p. 19)

By the end of the 19th century, when the land was gone and the cattle drives were over, America had developed into an industrial economy. This rapid growth of manufacturing and corporate enterprises, the increase in population, the steady influx of immigrants, the decline in availability of land, and the growth of metropolitan areas resulted in social frictions due to unequal distribution of wealth. Murdoch argues that despite these problems being normal for any modern society in the process of becoming an urban-industrial nation, America, the Republic of Virtue, was stuck with its previously delineated value system. Many Americans were longing for another America where life was simple, pure, and free and where one could escape the problem-stricken America by moving West – but the West, or what the West was thought to be, was gone.

Within this dilemma America could have either stuck to its roots and rejected a future of urban-industrial prosperity with all the disadvantages it had in the light of the ideas of purity and simplicity or discarded its roots and advanced on a journey into economic growth with a changed set of beliefs. Murdoch points

⁹ Ideas rooted in agricultural idealism, self-reliant individualism, and grassroots democracy.

out that nations do not “usually junk their value system with a shrug of the shoulders, nor give up economic growth by choice” (2001, p. 21).

The solution for this dilemma was to close the gap by strengthening the myth that revolves around the West – “the West of the imagination” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 21).

The West never was the land of easily harvested bounty. Those who conquered and tamed the West only did so by working hard, taking risks, and accepting sacrifices. In the course of doing so, they destroyed not only much of the land but also its original human and animal inhabitants. The cowboy was an overworked and badly paid wage laborer with a slim likelihood of having a regular social and family life. In retrospect, the conquest of the West and the life of the Cowboy were elevated into an inspiring, dramatic and romantic tale in order to put up with the challenges of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

How does this myth, the dream of the West as a place of freedom and opportunity, maintain its power and draw today? Why are bars full of patrons on mechanical bull night? Why can companies like Chevrolet successfully promote their products by using images of Cowboys and the West? Why does dude-ranch tourism thrive? Why are cowboy metaphors a viable means of reifying a political message?¹⁰

According to Murdoch the emergence of the myth coincided with the rise of the mass media. The myth “proved a marketable commodity in the most market-oriented society in the world” (Murdoch, 2001, p. 118). The market and

¹⁰ On loosing the majority in the House and Congress in the 2006 mid-term elections George W. Bush remarked, “This ain’t my first rodeo!”

Hollywood especially took advantage and thus the myth was commercially reinforced for decades.

What made and makes the myth so easily to be marketed that its appeal works within and outside of America?

America is a relatively young nation. Compared to other nations America's history is short and Americans come from very diverse backgrounds. The resulting lack of commonly shared traditions fueled a need for heroes, legends, and roots. Robert Athearn (1986) suggests that in the search for identity "with so little in common, our people have reached out for something – anything – to bind them together" (1986, p. 272). With the nation so young the Western experience was not so far off. Our great-grandparents might have been part of it. This experience, "the ordeal in the wilderness created the American, we believe: free-thinking, open, tough, optimistic, self reliant" (Athearn, 1986, p. 273).

Besides the search for identity within America, many people of the new world feel a strong longing for a simpler and happier world – a world that provides a less mediated and more real experience, "a world of open spaces, simple choices, and problems solved by direct action" (Murdoch, 2001, p. 119). McMurtry (1990) asks whether a young cowboy who went up the trail with the first Texas herds in 1866 and was about middle-aged when going up for the last time around 1890 could have been happy selling insurance in the suburbs for the rest of his life. McMurtry also mentions his Dad who, having spent all his life in the range cattle industry, never considered it an industry or a job, but a calling.

“Ranching and cowboying and all that my father and thousands like him lived would soon end – and now it has. But not the yearning for it.” (McMurtry, 1990, p. 37)

If the frontier West is considered America’s national mythical story the cowboy has to be considered its lead character and as such he is as hard to define as the frontier. The mythical cowboy born through dime novels and shows like Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Extravaganza is the personification of the value-set and the spirit of the frontier. “The West (and the cowboy, we might add), the very words go straight to that place of the heart where Americans feel the spirit of pride in their Western heritage – the triumph of personal courage over any obstacle, whether nature or man.” (John Wayne, as cited in Dye, 2003, p. 6)

In this line of thought both the insurance salesman and the graduate student keep up and buy into the myth of the West and the cowboy, because “the factual frontier is gone, but the possibilities, the promise that it held, are very much alive in the national mind” (Athearn, 1986, p. 274).

DISCUSSION OF MY PHOTOGRAPHY

Underlying Motivations and Guidelines

Because I worked as a psychologist before pursuing my art degree my work is strongly influenced by the wish to understand the human being as a social animal. I am driven by the desire to experience and gain some understanding of people, cultures, and social themes that differ in varying degrees from my own cultural background.

My involvement with the medium of photography is much like the fascination photography sparked at the point of its invention. Given its supposed capacity for objectivity, accuracy of description, and implicit truthfulness I am intrigued by the medium's possibility for 'documenting' the social world.

When using photography as a "visual means to understand the workings of the world" (Becker, 1981, p. 9) one inescapably combines the practices and conventions of two different disciplines, social science and art. The social sciences aim at the discovery of truths about our world by posing hypotheses, testing and interpreting evidence, and drawing conclusions, which are then widely distributed through publication. By contrast, the fine arts strive for the expression of individual and unique visions that are transformed into original works of art that stand on their own. Since its invention photography has participated in various fields of the social sciences and the fine arts - portraiture,

social reform, anthropology, sociology, war, pornography, painting, etc. - and has been differently practiced and displayed according to the conventions of the specific field in which it has been used.

Rather than allow the balancing act between the conventions of social science and art limit and constrain me I try to maximize the potential of my work by combining practices and devices of both disciplines in a constructive and fruitful way, and thus strive for both social understanding and aesthetic pleasure.

Well aware that photography is not an objective medium, I nonetheless value its descriptive qualities. The oscillation in photography between objectivity and subjectivity, descriptiveness and interpretation, reality and fiction, provides the multi-faceted voice that is wholly appropriate to a body of work that addresses the vagaries of a social phenomenon.

Photographing and Relating

I am just as interested in the activity of photography as I am in the product. The camera allows me to enter and immerse myself in places and subcultures that would otherwise be nearly or totally inaccessible. The camera functions as an investigative tool and permits me to intensively look and stare at people, activities, and events. Using my eyes as “organs of asking” (Paul Valery, as cited in Berger, 2003, p. vii) the camera becomes the tool for asking. Photography affords me with the beautiful play between thoroughly scanning the environment with my bare eyes and intensively locking onto a person or scene when looking through the viewfinder of the camera. In both cases, the camera

provides permission for the intensity and longevity of the gaze and the opportunity for staring without being socially reprimanded.

As a photographer I inevitably am an intruder breaking social conventions. It thus is important for me to respectfully enter the environment of my subjects. I want to spend time and communicate with them in order to gain as much understanding as possible. I neither think much of hit-and-run methods of photography nor appreciate carefully staged and orchestrated imagery. As I do not have the illusion that I can make people forget about the presence of my camera I make a strong point of having a camera and being a photographer. The development of a relationship based on trust and reciprocity in which the people photographed feel comfortable with me and in front of my camera is pivotal to my photography. This requires that I am honest and clear about my function as a photographer within the given social interaction. The main person (or persons) depicted are always aware of my photographing and can at any point influence the interaction.

The process of photographically documenting involves relating to people as much as it does releasing the shutter. As I do not strive for staging my subjects according to personally preconceived ideas, relating to my subjects is fundamental to my understanding of what it actually is that I am photographing. Through an extended engagement with my subjects based on mutual exchange I can probe beneath the surface and avoid the clichés of portraiture. Besides gaining useful information on the social theme at hand, relating with my subjects lets me keep an open-minded focus on my subjects' realities rather than

narrowing myself to my own preconceived ideas. I start to realize how their realities resonate within myself and find points of connections, points of repulsion, and points of indifference. Thus the relationship to my subjects becomes a personal one, which ensures that the act of taking pictures turns into a mutual collaboration in which the person depicted gives as much to the photograph as I do.

It is important to note that I am 'discovering' and 'finding' my pictures. The idea of 'finding' pictures and portraits is strongly tied to connecting to people. Rather than setting up a portrait session in which I orchestrate the props, backgrounds, and pose of the sitter, I spend time with my subjects in their personal and social setting. I find pictures within the flux of the activities we engage in together. I will interrupt the flow of events to ask the person to look into the camera (or in the case of a landscape or still life, take the time to compose, focus, and expose), but I exert no further influence on the situation. Thus the photographs arise out of commonly shared time and activities and are 'but' one outcome of the act of relating.

Intended Outcome

Upon exploring my encounters with the people and cultures, it is of importance to me to gain a give-and-take quality in which all contributing parties, including myself, give as much as they take. This rests on my firm belief that we gain understanding about the world we live in by comparing the varied understandings we have of reality through conversation and interaction. I am driven to these encounters by the realization that my knowledge about the world

is limited and my own reality is but a fraction of the world. The sharing of these different viewpoints with others will inevitably widen and deepen our understanding of the world.

By photographically documenting people, communities, and social themes at hand and gathering data by relating and personally communicating I create a knowledge base for my own understanding. Through photography I convey an understanding acquired by direct experience and exchange, to my audience who has not been afforded the privilege of first hand interaction. I intend my photographs, being but one of many interpretations of the documented people, community, or social theme, to be a starting point for debate and discussion. In addition I hope that my photographs will foster the understanding of the social world's complexity.

The Work

As my work is focused on the exploration of the social world and the conveying of my understanding to a larger audience with varying backgrounds I am less interested in the photograph as framed original or editioned print than in the photograph as a means of conveying and widely distributing information. I thus choose to 'exhibit' my photographs in the traditional format of social science photography, the book. The book can hold a collection of photographs, is ideally printed in large quantities, and distributed through the more democratic and less elitist venue of the bookstore rather than the art gallery. The book furthermore allows the combination of photographs with a substantial amount of writing, thus bringing together fine art practices with social science practices. This

combination of art and science, photographs and text, can stem from one person but will ideally utilize contributions of many fields.

My book *The Myth of the Cowboy* contains 78 titled photographs plus title and acknowledgement page. I rely on the conventions of art photography by creating meaning and personal stance by sequencing the pictures. I want the viewer to have a purely visual experience that works on an emotional rather than a cognitive level - this not being contradictory to my earlier remarks that I want the book to elicit debate and discussion. It is my belief that an emotional involvement does not hinder but rather foster the ensuing cognitive conversation.

The book, as edited presently, solely runs photographs with minimum text giving the photographs' titles. In the tradition of social documentary photography the factual titles inform the viewer about the person(s), event, place, and time of the photograph. In a published edition of the book I can envision socio-historical writing in a parallel chapter of the book to complement the photographs. Larry McMurtry would be my favorite writer of choice as he combines historical fact about the cowboy and the West with the importance of people's imagination of the myth in the creation of reality. I can see his writing and my photographs inform and feed off of each other in a way that would enrich my audience's experience.

In the case of adding text to the current untexted version of the book, the separation of text and photographs into different chapters is important as text often tends to dominate the reading of photographs. It is important to me that the photographs speak for themselves rather than becoming illustrations. The

photographs of the book are taken, edited, and sequenced to create a consistent whole that suggests specific readings. At the same time the photographs and the book are open-ended enough for the viewer to bring his/her own ideas to the photographs. In this way my and the viewer's understanding can complement each other.

The Book

The book's 78 photographs are roughly sequenced into four chapters - the working cowboy, signs and signifiers of the myth, the performance and dress-up cowboy, and the portraits. The chapters are not separate but linked through segues into one complete whole.

The book starts with two landscape pictures. *Along I-90, SD, 2007* depicts, in the distance, a metal cut-out of a native American party chasing a metal cut-out of a Conestoga wagon. *Pinto Canyon, TX, 2007* shows a lone gate and a building in the rugged landscape of West Texas. These two photographs set the scene and introduce the shifting between the 'authentic' and the 'mythic', the 'real' and the 'fake', 'folklore' and "fakelore"¹¹ (Dorson, 1959, p. 137).

The first chapter tells about the contemporary working cowboy and cowgirl and his/her environment. It pictures people who use the skills attributed to the cowboy. The portrayed individuals work with horses, cows, and other ranch animals as a means to make a living in two very distinct regions of America, western South Dakota and West Texas.

¹¹ In contrast to folklore, which are rich and vital products of the folk stemming from the folk, Dorson defines 'fakelore' as the cultural products that are close to the folk's mind and taste but that come into existence as a result of mass culture, technology, and consumerism.

As a segue into the second chapter, which explores the signs and signifiers of the myth, the photograph *Berne, SD, 2007*, depicting a small statue of a Native American on the lookout amidst the junk of an antique shop, introduces the mythic picture of the West drawn by white Americans. The following photograph, *Volunteer, SD, 2007*, shows a barren snow blown landscape with two abandoned houses. This photograph emphasizes the mystification and the feelings of loss that are inherent in the history of the West.

The overarching theme of the signs is melancholic remembrance. Within this theme the signs of the myth are used in varying functions. *Sanderson, TX, 2006*, *Comstock, TX, 2006*, and *Corn Palace, Mitchell, SD, 2007* among others show the signs as artistic decoration of public and private places. In *Lonnie Emmert, American Legion, Heyworth, IL, 2007* and the double portrait in which the man wears an Indian pattern shirt in *American Legion, Heyworth, IL, 2007* the signs function as personal adornment. The food signage in *Star of Texas Fair and Rodeo, Austin, TX, 2007* uses the signs of the myth for commercial advertising.

Most photographs of chapter two feature an apparent contrast between the myth of the cowboy and the contemporary Western environment. The second photograph in this chapter, *Sanderson, TX, 2006*, beautifully combines three contrasting layers. The adobe wall itself might very well be an old, genuine wall from the time when cowboys were still driving cows north, while the longhorns and the photographic memorabilia were most likely deliberately hung on the wall as melancholic decoration. The contemporary drop ceiling and

ceiling fan starkly contrast the two layers of realness and myth with a layer of present-day style.

Furthermore, the photographs of the second chapter are loosely organized in a timeline, depicting the aged signs and signifiers that imply the idea of genuineness (the adobe wall in *Sanderson, TX, 2006*; the longhorn skulls in *Comstock, TX, 2006*; the wagon wheels leaning against the antique shop in *San Angelo, TX, 2007*) before moving on to more contemporary and often more abstracted versions of cowboy signifiers (the obviously fake red wagon wheels on the dark wood facade of Saloon No.10 in *Deadwood, SD, 2007*; the abstracted longhorn skull on the dish towel in *The Reed's Kitchen, San Angelo, TX, 2006*).

Chapter two also touches on the appropriation of cowboy culture in the service of contemporary political agendas and the American idea of freedom by intertwining photographs in which cowboy signs are shown in combination with the flag and political slogans. The photograph *American Legion, Farmer City, IL, 2007* shows wooden guitars with flags and political slogans painted on them and the country singer Lonnie in *Lonnie Emmert, American Legion, Heyworth, IL, 2007* wears a shirt featuring a silver stars design.

The signs and signifiers, used in the various ways described above, take on a life of their own apart from the historical and sociological reality of the cowboy and thus function as the main means of perpetuating the myth.

The idealized drawing of a rodeo cowboy riding a bronco on the wooden wall in the photograph *Elk Creek Steakhouse, Rapid City, SD, 2007*, ironically

bucking into a trash can and juxtaposed by a handicapped parking sign, functions as a segue into the third chapter, which investigates contemporary performance and showmanship related to the cowboy. Spectacle and popular pastimes, rodeos and horseshows combine displays of traditional occupational skills with myth-related signs and signifiers.

Chapter three starts with a man on horseback carrying an American flag and ends with a woman on horseback carrying an American flag as well as wearing an American flag outfit. In connection with the photograph *Seven Downs Arena, Spearfish, SD, 2007* featuring a big American flag attached to the indoor wall, these three photographs suggest the extent to which the value set of cowboy culture overlaps with all-American ideals.

The photograph of the shiny orange boots, *High School Rodeo, Fort Stockton, TX, 2007*, stand out against the mud caked boots depicted in the photograph *Roger Blackmon's Boots, Rowden, TX, 2007* at beginning of the book. This symbolizes the contrast between showmanship and dress-up cowboy and the working cowboy.

Two small sets of three pictures each delineate the development of the cowboy and cowgirl from being introduced to horse riding and cowboy culture as young children (on horseback with dad as shown in the photograph with the little blond girl in the saddle with her dad in *Seven Downs Arena, Spearfish, SD, 2007*; and led and admired by mom in the photograph *Luke, Gordyville USA, Gifford, IL, 2007*) to winning prizes at horse shows or competing in 'rough stock' events at rodeos (the young woman posing with her horse in front of the photo backdrop

in *Star of Texas Fair and Rodeo, Austin, TX, 2007*; and the bull rider getting thrown over the horns of the bull in *Big D Rodeo, Texas Gay Rodeo Association, Dallas, TX, 2007*).

The third chapter also talks about the presence and influence of the cowboy myth throughout various social strata and groupings. Although cowboying is primarily regarded as male camaraderie, the myth encompasses people from all walks of life – the young, the senior, the rich, the modest, the family, the individual, the straight, the gay, the conservative, and the liberal. Cowboy culture is neither solely a rural culture nor specific to certain social groups or geographic regions of America, but enthuses and inspires people from diverging social, cultural, and national backgrounds.

The book culminates in the fourth chapter consisting of portraits of cowboys from all walks of life. While not claiming to be exhaustive, this chapter is meant to show a cross section of people who are or who identify themselves as cowboys and cowgirls to varying degrees. I intend the reader to study the portraits scrutinizing what the myth means and how the myth works within the minds of the persons portrayed. To what extent do the portrayed identify as cowboys and cowgirls and how and with which objectives do they use signs of cowboy culture?

The book ends with three charged pictures that emphasize the mythic status of cowboy culture. The third to last photograph of an African American and a Caucasian American cowboy in the trance of romantic dancing (*Windy City Rodeo, Illinois Gay Rodeo Association, Crete, IL, 2007*) questions the traditional

established view one final time. In the last two pictures, the shadow of a cowboy and his horse and the silhouette of a cowboy riding off into the sunset mirror the cut-outs from the very first photograph, calling attention to the mythic quality of the cowboy and the West. The graphic abstractions, devoid of any individual details of the original persons or objects of cut-outs, shadows, and silhouettes serve as spaces for the projection of our imagination.

As a large number of my photographs are portraits I want to specify my ideas about and practices of portraiture.

Portraiture

While the book includes landscapes, still lives, and architecture, it culminates in a series of portraits. This is done intentionally. I am very much drawn to photography as a tool for portraying society. August Sander's idea of photographically investigating and understanding society through the genre of portraiture has strongly influenced how I portray 'the cowboy'. It is important to note that I do not want my portraits to be seen as types. What I take from Sander is the thorough investigation of social strata through portraiture. I do not strive to set up a taxonomy as Sander did, but I am nonetheless continuously exploring the cultural group of the cowboy. While the viewer may consider the social group, he/she should predominantly view the portraits as individuals. I am interested in the question of how the single individual is influenced by the cultural myth and I want the viewer to study a person's face and body for significant signs of character and emotions as well as personality and gesture.

Although I am attracted to the visual pleasure of an interesting face, a telling posture, or an intriguing costume, I want to go beyond beautifully composing the surface of a person (Richard Avedon's *American West*, 1985, comes to mind). I am also not interested in intruding so far as to see something where our morals would force us to look away (Diane Arbus or Bruce Davidson come to mind in this respect).

In portraying people from societal and cultural backgrounds that differ from my own I am portraying The Other. In the long and uneasy history of photography in portraying The Other, the question of power has been crucial. The camera cannot be objective although it often is perceived to be. The camera as a tool for fixing the image of a person, which can be and often is mistaken for an objective representation, inevitably tips the imbalance of power. In order to counteract this imbalance it is important to me to build a connection with my subjects that is based on equality and mutual respect. I relate to the people I photograph in order to allow for a direct and personal encounter to happen between the subject and me.

In contrast to the photographers mentioned above, I want to bridge the connection I have made with my subjects and I want the viewer to take part in this connection. I focus on allowing the viewer to become involved in something personal having happened between the portrayed person and me.

I facilitate this with photographic technique, yet more so through the relations I build with my subjects. My portraits stem from commonly shared time and activities within the everyday life of the persons I portray. I do not use

artificial set-ups nor do I direct the person or stage an event. I take portraits at the normal conversational distance using a wide-angle to normal focal length lens (24mm to a maximum of 50mm). This way I do not only mimic the human vision but also include a good amount of environment in the portrait. The viewer should thus experience the person's presence as if he/she were with this person. Furthermore, I have my subjects look directly into the camera, respectively at me and the viewer, in order to initiate a direct connection between the person portrayed and the viewer. I also want the subject to have a command in how they approach and look at me, respectively the viewer.

The genuine interest I have in and the trust I build with my subjects are of key importance in creating a platform for exchange on which my subjects and I reveal something of ourselves to each other. Through photographic technique I capture the intimate quality of this opening up and hope for the viewer to take part in it.

CONCLUSION

Photographing the cowboy has allowed me to travel to numerous regions of the U.S., all of which differ greatly in their landscape, climate, people, and history. Nonetheless the myth of the cowboy can be found in all of these places. As much as the historical facts of the era of the cowboy have been simplified and imbued with nostalgic ideas the draw of the myth is growing rather than diminishing.

Today we experience the world mediated rather than direct, life becomes more global and less local, news are replaced by infotainment, and the differentiation between the real and the virtual as well as reality and fiction gets blurred.

In such times the myth of the cowboy, ironically a fiction in itself, stands for a simpler life. Its main character, the cowboy, is an individual who sticks out from the masses by being in control of his life and having direct influence on the world around him. He and his time have come to signify the basic American values of individualism, self-reliance, and independence from forces uncontrollable by the individual. As has been shown in the book the enticement of the myth of the cowboy penetrates various regions and societal subcultures within America. The appeal of the myth and its value set has crossed cultural and national borders. While America is entitled to declare the history of the cowboy as its own the

cowboy of the imagination has turned into a role model and a hero of multicultural and international caliber.

Although my graduate studies at Illinois State University have come to an end I intend to continue my search for the cowboy. Besides further investigating the American cowboy I can envision myself documenting cowboy culture in my country of origin, Austria, as well as broadening the investigation from the predominantly featured white, male, middle-class cowboy to a wider variety of race, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, introducing Native American and Mexican issues would enlarge the overall picture and understanding with historically important aspects.

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LIST OF CD-ROM CONTENTS

CD-Rom: *The Myth of the Cowboy*
contains the two following folders:

Folder 1: *Book The Myth of the Cowboy in Web-based Format*

This folder contains a flash based website that features all 80 pages and 78 titled photographs of the book in consecutive order.

Open the file 'index.html' in your Internet browser (Internet Explorer, Netscape, Opera, Mozilla Firefox, Safari).

Folder 2: *Show Installation Pictures*

This folder contains two pictures of the book *The Myth of the Cowboy* and two pictures of the installation of the thesis show at Transpace Gallery, exhibited May 2nd to May 8th, 2007.