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Matthew Carter

### Personalising the Apocalypse: Frontier Mythology and Genre Hybridity in *Maggie*

An independent US-Swiss co-production released by Lionsgate Films and Roadside Attractions, *Maggie* (2015) is the debut feature of British director Henry Hobson and American screenwriter John Scott<sup>3</sup>. Marketed as a post-apocalyptic Horror drama, the film appears most obviously as a zombie-apocalypse film. It is set in the present day United States during a global outbreak of a supernatural virus that, over a period of around six to eight weeks, transforms the infected living into the cannibalistic undead. This moment is called “the turn”. In order to combat this virus, authorities have placed urban centres under strict curfew with martial law in effect. Armed police units patrol the city streets, round up any infected, and take them to quarantine wards overflowing with victims undergoing incurable necrosis who are euthanized once their terrible transformation is complete.

Its focus on an unusually drawn-out process in-between living and undead notwithstanding, this premise would be familiar enough to those even with little more than a passing acquaintance with this *en vogue* area of global popular culture. It soon becomes apparent, however, that *Maggie* differs markedly from other, more traditional zombie-apocalypse films. The film blends recognisable elements from several mainstream genres and, though largely conforming to the well-known conventions of the so-called classical realism one associates with these genres, echoes some of the alternative narrative strategies traditionally associated with independent American and European cinemas. These include occasions of non-linear and insular storytelling, oblique framing, a generally slow pace, and an overall audio-visual style that places heavy emphasis on mood, symbolism, and non-diegetic sound to tell its story. Within this differentiation, the film opens itself up to some rather unexpected readings.

Although rich with interpretive possibilities, all worthy of analysis, this article shall touch on a less overt, some might even say fringe aspect of *Maggie*'s narrative; namely, its engagement with a number of aspects of America's frontier mythology. This might seem a strange connection to make at first since the frontier myth as a popular cultural referent is most often associated with the Hollywood Western, and the Western is clearly not *Maggie*'s most recognisable narrative schema. However, it is important to point out that the myth's association with the Western, while historically dominant, is far from exclusive, and it would be a mistake to regard the one as synonymous with the other. It would also be a mistake to

deny the myth's links to other film genres that have less overt connections and, furthermore, would preclude the potential and related connections that exist between interconnected categories of films that, on the surface, seem to have little to do with one another. This is especially so in a film as "genre confused" as *Maggie*.

To be clear, this article does not claim *Maggie* to be a Western, at least not in any traditional sense that we might understand it. Rather, it interprets *Maggie* as a part of a more general trend in contemporary cinema typified by the hybridisation of the codes and conventions of numerous genres and subgenres; especially, but not exclusively, those that bring an international perspective to bear on traditional genre categories. In the case of *Maggie*, the hybridisation of numerous genres works to undermine audience expectations through a process of inversion and deconstruction that reconfigures the erstwhile familiarity of the zombie-apocalypse's popular-cultural terrain. In short, despite its central premise being a familiar one, this article asserts that *Maggie* is *not* simply another essay on the well-trodden genre path of post-apocalypse.

Before considering *Maggie* directly, it is first necessary to create a suitable context within which to situate the film's reconfiguration of the zombie-apocalypse and, moreover, to justify the counter-conventional claim that it engages, however sub-textually, with key aspects of frontier mythology and the Western. This involves an expository outlining of some of the deep structures of the myth, both as a cultural-ideological force in American society and in its relation to the numerous film genres where its symbolic language finds popular expression. Imbricated into this outline are certain presuppositions about the transnational and hybrid nature of, especially, contemporary film genres that also requires some explication.

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As one of the United States' most pervasive cultural narratives, the frontier myth is a central, if distorting, factor in the formation of its "national identity". It also provides a prism through which non-Americans view the US and its cultural institutions. Its structuring influence is apparent in the broad, global sweep of American culture: its society, history, politics, economics, and in the dominant ideologies that underpin its overall belief systems. Considering the myth's ubiquitous nature in American society, it should hardly come as a surprise that the equally ubiquitous products of its popular culture industries – chiefly, but not exclusively, Hollywood – all, to greater or lesser extents bear the traces of its influence. At this level it is therefore quite possible to observe in numerous film genres the presence and influence of the myth.

As well, we find several of the associated codes and conventions of the Western appearing in other ‘established’ genre forms and styles: the Comedy, the War film, and the Musical, as well as the Gangster film and other correlatives such as urban and rural crime thrillers and *film noir*. This has always been the case, of course, but most notably of late are discussions of Horror and Science Fiction as genres where the frontier myth finds popular-cultural expression and where one can identify the existence of tropes traditionally associated with the Western. The converse is also apparent with the codes and conventions of Horror and Science Fiction filtering more and more into the Western. This conflation has produced some curious and, often, postmodern generic hybrids that are in keeping with the complex dynamics of contemporary film genres, and which engage with the myth’s major tenets in a multitude of ways.

Although seemingly more pronounced of late, genre hybrids are hardly a new phenomenon. Indeed, one of the main flashpoints among film genre theorists has been the tendency to classify groups of films according to particular frameworks of shared aesthetic objectives, subject matter, or stylistic techniques. Speaking about Hollywood genres, where the notion of uncontested categories is most often asserted, some film scholars maintain that hybridity has always been a determining characteristic. For instance, Steve Neale has long held this position (2000: 249-51) and Janet Staiger argues that “Hollywood films have never been ‘pure’ – that is, easily arranged into categories” (1997: 185). Rick Altman goes as far as to say that it “is simply not possible to describe Hollywood cinema accurately without the ability to account for the numerous films that innovate by combining the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another” (1984: 12). As an illustration, he considers Science Fiction: “Initially defined only by a relatively stable science fiction semantics, the genre began borrowing the syntactic relationships previously established in the horror film, only to move in recent years increasingly toward the syntax of the western” (13).

With the common understanding of the Western’s ‘evolution’ as a genre in mind, Richard Maltby suggests that this perceived overlap in Hollywood genres aligns with a period starting in the 1970s when the Western, for so long viewed “as an arena in which Americans examine the relationship between individual and society and the tension between individual and community priorities ... ceased to function fluently as a vehicle for American culture” (2003: 92, 108). Because of this, he suggests that frontier-informed “stories of civilization’s conflict with savagery ... migrated to other generic fields such as science fiction and horror movies” (108). Richard Slotkin argues that this ‘migration’ was due in large part to the “ideological disarray of the post-Vietnam decade” (1992: 626). Assuming the political-

allegorical function of the Western, Slotkin observes that it was during this period that the genre lost its position as the predominant articulator of the frontier myth. Importantly though, for him, the displacement of the Western “from its place on the genre map did not entail the disappearance of those underlying structures of myth and ideology that had given the genre its cultural force” (633). Instead, “those structures were abstracted from the elaborately historicized context of the Western and parcelled out among genres” such as Science Fiction, Horror, and so-called “urban vigilante” dramas. Slotkin suggests that the urban vigilante dramas and the “slasher” variant of the Horror genre especially worked to “*invert* the Myth of the Frontier that had informed the Western” (635). In these categories, he writes, “the flow of aggressive power runs in the opposite direction, with the civilized world threatened with subjugation to or colonization by the forces of darkness” (635).

Recent studies of frontier-informed Westerns have continued to focus on the related phenomena of genre hybridity and myth inversion. For example, Marek Paryz argues that the contemporary Western, increasingly affiliated “with the various genres of the broadly defined fantastic, especially the supernatural horror and science fiction”, displays a “critical awareness” characterized “by fear and disillusionment. Therefore the combination of the Western and the genres of the fantastic often serves to problematize the issues of ideology present in a given film” (2015: 8, 9).

In this respect, it is important to note that although they also have their own generic histories, zombie-apocalypse films share affinity with the Western, since they originally derive from Horror and Science Fiction, and as far as they engage with the traditional notion of the frontier as a violent world in which individuals and communities struggle (often with each other) to overcome the external threat of savage agents in a hostile wilderness. The key difference being that, like the urban vigilante dramas and Horror variants to which Slotkin refers, the zombie-apocalypse incorporates the myth only to reverse its tenets. Instead of telling stories of the emergence of civilization through the “domestication of the wilderness”, they pose terrifying scenarios of atavistic regression. In the zombie-apocalypse, the natural or, rather, supernatural reclaims culture and civilization reverts to savagery.

While such political-allegorical and ideological approaches can be illuminating, it is important to bear in mind that not all films engage with their generic materials in the same way. Developmental symbiosis is one of the ways in which genres work at multiple levels, not only in relation to socio-historic or ideological specificity. It offers flexibility, spurs innovation, and maintains audience appeal and commercial viability through what Maltby calls the film industry’s “system of regulated difference” (2003: 92). To this end, Neale

observes that genres are not “closed and continuous” but rather “intermittent systems” (2000: 211). He argues the need to recognise “the transience of genres, to deprive them of eternal or essential features, and to conceive these features instead as both historically provisional and empirically diverse” (217). Therefore, “the repertoire of generic convention available at any one point in time is always in-play rather than simply *re-played*” (219). As such, Maltby suggests that at any time “an individual movie may be seen as crystallizing the forms and meanings of the genre as a whole [...] historical shifts in ideological and stylistic fashion make it difficult to speak for long about any single movie as definitive of its genre” (92). Furthermore, while “generic features make it possible for us to account for the connections we make between one movie and another”, this is less because of their “similarities” than because “of the differences between them, and the extent to which they play with existing conventions” (92-3).

The related understanding between film-texts mean that it is quite common for films to challenge their own generic conventions and undermine audience expectations by borrowing conventions from other genres, inverting them, and even doing away with certain expected iconographic elements or narrative themes to replace them with others or even abandon them altogether. The consequence of all this is an extremely porous genre map.

Adding to this porosity is the global character of contemporary cinema. This is certainly the case with the Western. Although the genre is believed to be, in the words of Jim Kitses, “one of America’s grandest inventions” (2004: 1), decades of transnational appropriations of the Western by non-American filmmakers, as well as the contrariwise influence of these ‘foreign’ filmmakers and their methods on Hollywood’s own output, somewhat dilute this assertion of national ownership. When this is combined with the hybrid nature of a great deal of post-millennial production, both inside and outside of Hollywood, that fuse the Western with Horror and Science Fiction, not only is it difficult to speak any longer of the Western as specifically American, it is difficult to speak of the Western as specifically *Western*.

Of course, similar can be said of the zombie-apocalypse. The common claim, as reiterated by Kyle William Bishop, that the zombie is “a fundamentally *American* creation” (2010: 12) is largely based on George A. Romero’s urtext, *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968). A low budget ‘indie’ Horror-Science Fiction hybrid largely accredited with establishing the zombie’s flesh-eating credentials and apocalyptic connotations, *The Night of the Living Dead* brought the zombie-apocalypse into the popular American consciousness. While certainly a useful point of critical departure – the zombie’s origins in Haitian *vodou*

and Romero's own acknowledged debt to Richard Matheson's 1954 novel, *I am Legend*, notwithstanding – the international appropriation of the zombie-apocalypse by filmmakers following Romero's lead make it difficult to speak of it now in purely national terms.

Additionally, the familiar scenarios of hordes of flesh-eating undead ghouls threatening to destroy civilization that have established themselves within the international popular-cultural landscape owe more to elements of the Science Fiction and Horror genres than to quasi-racist depictions of *vodou* mysticism. The modern zombie-apocalypse, according to Karolina Slotwinska, is largely secular and is enveloped in an “epistemological shroud” whereby the zombie is understood in terms of contagion, “in other words a biopolitical danger befitting the age of transnational politics” (2015: 155-6). Like the undead plague itself, the zombie-apocalypse has proliferated in independent films, mainstream cinema, television series, and video games, becoming a truly global phenomenon. Thus, we can situate *Maggie*'s narrative setting in present-day America within the broader popular-cultural context of the global apocalypse, what the film fittingly refers to as a “worldwide outbreak” of the “necroambulist virus epidemic”.

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*Maggie*'s is an extremely introverted narrative and focuses largely on the plight of an unremarkable Midwestern farming family, the Vogels. The eponymous Maggie (Abigail Breslin) is the teenage daughter of Wade (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and stepdaughter of Wade's second wife, Caroline (Joely Richardson), with whom he has two younger children, Molly and Bobby (Carsen and Aiden Flowers). As the film begins, Maggie is already infected with the necroambulist virus and, in order to protect her family from the threat she will soon pose, has fled her home and gone to Kansas City. Whilst there, she is apprehended by the authorities, rounded up along with a number of other infected people, and taken to the emergency wing of the city hospital. Wade, who we learn has been searching for her for the past two weeks, reunites with her there. Despite her infection, the ward supervisor allows Wade to take Maggie home with strict instructions, when the time comes, to “say your goodbyes” and take her straight to quarantine. From this point on, a handful of sequences notwithstanding, the film restricts itself to the confines of the Vogel farmstead and its immediate surroundings.

Until Maggie goes to quarantine, Wade and Caroline take the precautionary measure of sending Bobby and Molly to stay with their aunt. However, as the film progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Wade has no intention of surrendering Maggie to the authorities. Even witnessing first-hand the terrible effects of the turn on the family of his

neighbour, Bonnie (Rachel Whitman Groves) – who had kept her infected husband and daughter locked up in her house to hide them from the authorities – does not persuade him to do so. This puts Wade at odds with everyone around him, including local police officers Ray (Douglas M. Griffin) and Holt (J. D. Evermore) who, with the safety of both the Vogels and the wider community in mind, put increasing pressure on him to turn Maggie in. This creates the tension between “individual and community priorities” that Maltby suggested was so typical of the Western genre. After their final effort to get Wade to hand over Maggie ends with violence between Wade and Holt, Ray says to Wade with no small degree of disappointment, “You ain’t the only ones in this town.”

Wade’s hesitations are compounded by his friend, the sympathetic Dr. Vern Kaplan (Jodie Moore), who warns him of the horrors of quarantine and suggests Wade takes care of Maggie on his own terms and, pointing to Wade’s shotgun, to “make it quick”. Wade’s obstinacy eventually causes Caroline to walk out on him, stating of an increasingly degenerating and dangerous Maggie, “She’s not her anymore”. Now alone with the rapidly necrotizing mess that was once his daughter, Wade is forced to face the horrifying realisation that he must kill her. Unsurprisingly, he agonises over this most dreadful inversion of his patriarchal role until the last possible moment. Wade keeps his shotgun by his side resigned to using it against its traditional, mythic purpose as an instrument of familial defence. But, before it comes to that, Maggie, summoning the last vestiges of her ebbing humanity, climbs to the rooftop of the farmhouse early one morning and, just as dawn breaks, leaps to her death.

Upon its release, *Maggie* received mostly negative reviews by critics seemingly unwilling to engage positively with its atypical relationship to the zombie-apocalypse, much less its unusual style. Ed Gonzalez of *Slant* finds Hobson’s use of “erratically deployed visual and aural shorthand [for a] world gone agonisingly to seed” both “insipid” and “unforgivable”, concluding “[t]he film ... so desperately and catastrophically plods into unearned sentimentality [and] that its only claim to uniqueness becomes running the standard zombie narrative through a Hallmark-card filter” (“*Maggie*”). Dan Callahan of the *Wrap* also notes disparagingly on *Maggie*’s lack of action and expected socio-political commentary: “it becomes clear as it goes on that the film has no larger social or political point to make” (“*Maggie* Tribeca Review”). Kevin Jagernauth of *IndieWire* also observes that *Maggie* “is not your standard zombie movie” because it uses “zombie-ism as a metaphor for terminal illness” and is concerned “with what comes with the decision to take a life”. However, Jagernauth feels that, in the end, Hobson “leans heavily on mood, almost



to the point of redundancy”, and that this results in a “ponderous, sombre take on the genre that may leave those looking for a traditional horror flick disappointed” (“Tribeca Review”). Jordan Hoffman of the *Guardian* also anticipates probable negative audience response, writing that whilst Hobson’s “attempt to fuse dour indie drama with the tropes of dystopian fantasy” might endear him toward giving “the odd, small film *Maggie* all the points in the world for experimenting with genre-blending and subverting audience expectations,” in the end “there’s just too much about it that fails to connect.” He concludes by stating that “*Maggie* is lacking in action” and, in a sarcastic reference to the extremely popular AMC television series, *The Walking Dead* (2010- ), “as cinema it’s the hobbling dead” (“*Maggie* Review”).

Overwhelmingly, critics judged the film as, essentially, a pretentious bastardization of its supposed genre identity, a violation of what Kitses once described as the “classic structure of agreement between film and filmgoers, the institutional nature of genre that includes the audience as part of the system of production” (2004: 3).

However, a number of more nuanced reviews were written by critics who seemed more sympathetic to *Maggie*’s interpretive challenge. Guy Lodge of *Variety* writes that *Maggie* presents “zombiedom ... not as a monstrous or uncanny phenomenon, but as a wasteful terminal disease, leaving grievous heartache in its violent wake” (Film Review: *Maggie*). Relatedly, *Maggie*’s muting of the apocalyptic element of the zombie subgenre, the civilization-ending undead plague that typifies the vast majority of its output, is developed in positive terms by David Ehrlich of *Time Out*. He writes that the film “never allows its ghoulish window dressing to overwhelm the simple story of a father losing his oldest child”, with the zombies existing not as a “metaphor so much as a Trojan horse” for a “grim domestic drama” (“*Maggie*”). In a review for *IndieWire*, Eric Kohn also alludes to this when he writes “Hobson successfully applies the backdrop of a zombie apocalypse toward more personal goals.” This personal apocalypse focuses on Wade as an “even-tempered Midwestern farmer” facing “a far more daunting foe” than overwhelming hordes of the undead. This foe is, of course, the ultimate horror facing any father: “the imminent death of his daughter.” (“Tribeca Review”). Lodge concurs, stating that Hobson “keeps the backstory to a minimum” in order that “difficult interpersonal relationships take precedence over the bigger picture”. The film “holds back on political statements from voices of authority” and thereby “a world-threatening plague is viewed primarily in the context of its threat to the American family, with a father’s love for his daughter that cherished institute’s least breakable bond”. Again in concurrence with Kohn, Lodge feels that Hobson, along

with first-time screenwriter John Scott 3, “have convincingly constructed a middle-America that appears to be decaying in sympathy with Maggie and everyone else experiencing ‘the turn’”. Finally, Lodge argues that Maggie is “at once a heroine to be protected and a mutant threat to be destroyed”. He further argues, “Comparatively few [zombie] films have focused on the transitional space between” the living and the undead, and it is this “that makes the film *unique* within its grisly canon” (“Film Review: *Maggie*”).

Because of its virtually exclusive focus on the pain of an altogether ordinary family struggling to deal with the slow but inevitable death of one of its own, *Maggie* relegates the global dimensions of the virus to a backdrop, offering scant engagement with the sorts of socio-political commentaries that many have read into zombie-apocalypse films over the years. Instead, *Maggie* is concerned with a theme often lacking in the subgenre (outside of its increasingly characteristic parody): it humanises the infected. It does this with utter sobriety through its muted, focused drama of terminal illness. Following Maggie’s return home, scenes of fraught domesticity between the Vogels often feel more like gritty social-realist drama than they do Horror. Caroline’s inability to accept the situation and her pain that God “isn’t giving me any answers” tests her faith in ways hithertofore unimaginable: the fear that God has abandoned them. In other moments, otherwise harmless jokes about Caroline’s poor cooking become sorrowful rather than funny. Also, scenes between Maggie and her friend Allie (Raeden Greer) and between Maggie and another infected teenager, Trent (Bryce Romero) – with whom she has brief, doomed romantic involvement – are akin to teenage melodrama, but more tragic in this context than scary.

In keeping with its tight dramatic focus on family dynamics, *Maggie* includes little of the action or visceral spectacle typical of other zombie-apocalypse films. This is to say there are no undead hordes laying siege to the Vogel farmstead, no last stands or brutal engagements featuring eviscerations and dismemberment. In fact, there is only one *bona fide* zombie attack throughout the whole film, occurring early on in the narrative at a petrol station when Wade and Maggie are returning home for the first time. The station forecourt is deserted, a slew of missing posters plastered to the wall of the station office, glanced at briefly by Wade, reminds the viewer of the apocalyptic context. Wade goes to the restroom out back as Maggie tries on sunglasses from a stand in the station shop. While there he encounters the former station manager, now fully necrotized, who immediately attacks him. After a brief struggle Wade breaks its neck and, breathing heavily, quickly walks back out into the shop and instructs an oblivious Maggie to “get in the truck”. The whole sequence is portrayed in rather muted fashion and is not in any way consequential, perhaps serving only

to foreshadow Maggie's fate, and the monster she will become. But the film allows nothing to interfere with the familial dynamics of its heartfelt, tragic story of a girl's slow degeneration from typical teenager into cannibalistic zombie.

*Maggie's* holding back from the totality of the zombie-apocalypse might just be its most radical inversion. The radio announcement at the start of the film states that, though "martial law is still in effect ... local and national governments are beginning to suppress the necroambulist virus epidemic" and that, "while citizens of inner cities and metropolitan areas remain hardest hit, through quick response and quarantine, weekly infection reports have dropped thirty percent." Though society has taken a huge hit, the virus has not eradicated civilization. Indeed, it is tentatively suggested that the worst has passed. But it is at this moment, when viewed in retrospect, that *Maggie* reveals itself. In a way, the survival of civilization is the bitterest pill to swallow. For, ironically enough, if civilization were to crumble, at least Maggie's death could be accounted for within the logic of global catastrophe. However, the Vogels will have to continue to exist within a civilization all the while suffering from the meaningless death of Maggie.

As previously mentioned, *Maggie* also lacks spectacle. For instance, we do not witness the zombie attack that caused Maggie's infection in real time. Instead, the film reveals it spasmodically through fractured flashbacks in her fevered dreams. Furthermore, when Wade and Maggie encounter Bonnie's escaped undead husband and daughter in the woods outside the farm, *Maggie* demonstrates the very opposite of what P. Ivan Young describes as "guiltless pleasure" in the "disposability" of zombies (2014: 58). Wade orders Maggie to go back to the house. As she leaves, he stands in hesitation and begs Bonnie's now necrotized husband to "please, say something", before striking him down with his wood axe. When this happens, the film cuts away from the blow, leaving us with Wade standing before the ghoul that was once Bonnie's daughter. She does not move and Wade moves forward to despatch her. However, as if anticipating the horror of this act, we cut away to a shot of Caroline comforting a distraught Maggie in the field adjacent to the woods. It is here that the film's sound takes precedence. The non-diegetic score builds up to an intense hum, a tone change laces over this, and concludes with an inhuman scream that echoes across the Vogel farmstead. The film denies us the spectacle. Replacing guiltless pleasure is a lamentation for the loss of the human that once was and a dreadful sense of anticipation for a similar fate awaiting the Vogels.

The way the virus is handled overall within the diegesis is particularly striking in this respect. Most zombie-apocalypse films offer at least a tenuous explanation for what caused

the initial outbreak. Typical examples include mutagenic gas, cosmic radiation, a vaccine gone wrong, and these are usually accompanied by initial disbelief at the plausibility of the unfolding catastrophe. In stark opposition to this, *Maggie* offers no explanation, tentative or otherwise, for the origins of the virus. Surprisingly, the obvious question – *how* can this be happening? – is not explored. To all intents and purposes, the veracity of the necroambulist virus is accepted within the convincing verisimilitude of the film as if it were as real as typhoid, malaria, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

In his review, Kohn further suggests that Hobson makes good use of employing landscape to the task of personalising the apocalypse. “The Midwestern cornfields,” he notes, “provide an effective minimalist setting that keeps the focus on the bleak tragedy at hand” (“Tribeca Review”). The film’s Midwestern setting is of course significant in terms of frontier mythology, becoming one of the quintessential frontier heartlands. Nor, in this regard, can we ignore Wade’s occupation as a farmer. In *Virgin Land* (1950), Henry Nash Smith studied the cultural power of the American West during the nineteenth century, when the frontier was being explored, conquered, and colonised under the auspices of Manifest Destiny. Smith informs us that the farmer was a seminal figure who, “armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plough”, became one of the heroes of frontier mythology (1970: 123).

Through his exploitation of the soil, he sowed of the seeds of American democracy. So powerful was this element of the myth that it gave rise in the popular imagination to the notion that America was the “Garden of the World” – a “master symbol [that] defined the promise of American life” with the farmer central to “a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase and blissful labor in the earth” (123). Opposing it was the counter myth of the “Great American Desert”, which the Garden “had to confront and overcome” (175). Accordingly, “with each surge of westward movement”, the Desert was supplanted by “American agrarianism” and “a new community came into being”, one devoted to “cultivating the earth” (123).

Thus inscribed, the frontier myth became an enormously powerful cultural narrative that served a nation obsessed with the belief in its own socio-economic, cultural, and spiritual renewal. *Maggie* responds to this agrarian aspect of the myth. The film’s initial radio broadcast announces that “the Department for Agriculture has found no solution for infected, dying crops”. Amid various wide shots of fields ablaze with dark smoke plumes filling the sky, we are informed that officials are “encouraging farmers to burn their crops in a desperate attempt to destroy what may be preventing growth”. This is coupled with scenes of urban

decay as Wade travels into Kansas City: overturned, burnt out cars, abandoned buildings scrawled with apocalyptic graffiti, etc. In such an environment, the mythic significance of the virtuous frontier farmer and of American agrarianism are brought to the fore. Although it doesn't question the traditional American values the myth maintains, when considered in this context, the image of Wade burning his own crops, his face captured in close up and lit through the night time darkness by the flames, is extremely poignant. The camera cuts back to a wide shot depicting Wade, silhouetted in front of the burning field as the non-diegetic music marries to the image, an image that exposes the precariousness of the Garden in the face of an external, apocalyptic threat: the Desert redivivus.

One cannot ignore the fact that Wade is played by Arnold Schwarzenegger. Although not directly associated with the Western, Schwarzenegger holds an incontrovertible status as a Hollywood star. His persona invokes very particular connotations that have their origins in the cultural-ideological sub-narratives developed from frontier mythology and depicted most directly in the Western: masculinity, Americanness, heroism, etc. In addition to *Maggie's* undermining of audience expectations through its complex inter-play of various generic and subgeneric conventions, its counter-intuitive use of its headline actor is an important point to note. Wade is not the hero. He is vulnerable. Reactive not proactive. It is Schwarzenegger's presence more than his performance that drives home the poignancy of the father, a monolithic figure, finally and abjectly unable to protect his daughter.

This moment is captured most directly in the film when, early one morning, Maggie walks toward an old swing near the house. The angle of the establishing shot is low to the ground with only the near grass in focus as Maggie enters the frame. Whilst sitting on the swing, the film cuts to a close up as she reaches down to pick something up from the ground. It is a small toy cavalry soldier. She stares at it intently before turning it upside down in her hand. An otherwise insignificant moment becomes imbued with significance if we consider its symbolism. There is no hero on horseback coming to save this family, this community. With a turn of the hand, *Maggie* has inverted the hero figure.

Specifically, it is *Maggie's* narrative focus on the dynamics of family life that draws its connection to the Western and the frontier myth. The setting, the Vogel farmstead itself, seems almost timeless in its composition and reminiscent of numerous Western settings, its dilapidation a metaphor for the decaying world around it. But the dramatic centre of the film is undoubtedly the father-daughter relationship of Wade and Maggie. A shared love for the memory of Wade's deceased first wife, Sarah, Maggie's biological mother, cements this bond. Sarah exists as an idealised female figure, a "redeeming feminine" of whom Maggie

and Wade speak very fondly, and who seems to still influence their actions and desires. When Maggie asks why her father was so determined to find her after she absconded, Wade replies affirmably, “I made a promise to your mother, that I would protect you”. The irony of this statement is not lost on the viewer. Protect her is the one thing Wade cannot do. As if to compound the futility of this statement, Maggie replies: “Yeah, but what if I hurt you?” And, as her father turns to leave, “You shouldn’t have brought me back.” This is another reminder of the threat Maggie now poses to the family, a corrosive, internal threat, an inversion of the mythic function of the child as symbolic of the future of civilization.

Sarah’s mythic role as a structuring absence is also manifested in the flower garden Wade shows Maggie when they are alone together. “Before you ran off, you said I should plant some daisies in mom’s garden. That they would grow. So, I planted some” he proclaims and, with arms extended to encompass the blooming flowers, “when we came back, this was here.” The bizarre phenomenon of blooming flowers in a world in which crops are otherwise “infected” and “dying” is suggestive of the fact that both Maggie and Wade are desperately clinging to some sense of mythic purity, of the Garden that the ‘innocent’ daisies perhaps symbolize. Finally, the bond with the deceased mother is eternally affirmed moments before Maggie commits suicide. As she leaps from the roof, she closes her eyes and the film shows a sequence of temporally disjointed images: Sarah’s smiling face, a daisy in the foreground with an out-of-focus (presumably) Maggie as a child dancing in the background and, as she falls, an image of her holding her mother’s hand before a final fade to white.

\* \* \*

The dilution of its ostensible zombie-apocalypse credentials certainly makes *Maggie* a film of its time and opens it up to a multitude of unconventional interpretations. Taking just one such interpretation, this article claimed *Maggie* to be an example, a result if you will, of the hybridization characteristic of contemporary cinema, a hybridization that renders the alignment of a particular film with a stable, definitive genre category problematic. This is not to be understood in negative terms. That is to say, confused with some kind of postmodern ‘flat lining’ in which everything means everything and, ultimately, means nothing. The lack of obligation of a filmmaker to align his or her film with one category over another does not mean that genre conventions are irrelevant, not does it necessarily mean that the film ‘fails’ in some profound way. For, in referencing the Western and its related frontier mythology in the way that it does, *Maggie* demonstrates the adaptability and continued relevance of both in relation to the complex dynamics of contemporary global film genres. It is within *this* context

that *Maggie* references the Western and, in so doing, highlights the continuing influence of frontier mythology in contemporary popular culture.

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Abstract:

An independent US-Swiss co-production released by Lionsgate Films and Roadside Attractions, *Maggie* (2015) is marketed as a post-apocalyptic Horror drama and appears most obviously as a zombie-apocalypse film. It soon becomes apparent, however, that *Maggie* differs markedly from other, more traditional zombie-apocalypse films. It blends recognisable elements from several mainstream genres and, though largely conforming to the well-known conventions of so-called classical realism, echoes some of the alternative narrative strategies traditionally associated with independent American and European cinemas.

Although rich with interpretive possibilities, this article shall touch on a less overt, some might even say fringe aspect of *Maggie*'s narrative; namely, its engagement with a number of aspects of America's frontier mythology. This might seem a strange connection to make at first since the frontier myth as a popular cultural referent is most often associated with the Hollywood Western, and the Western is clearly not *Maggie*'s most recognisable narrative schema. However, the myth's association with the Western, while historically dominant, is far from exclusive and it would also be a mistake to deny the myth's links to other film genres through the related connections that exist between categories of films that, on the surface, seem to have little to do with one another. This is especially so in a film as "genre confused" as *Maggie*.



To be clear, this article does not claim *Maggie* to be a Western, at least not in any traditional sense that we might understand it. Rather, it interprets *Maggie* as a part of a more general trend in contemporary cinema typified by the hybridisation of the codes and conventions of numerous genres and subgenres; especially, but not exclusively, those that bring an international perspective to bear on traditional genre categories. In the case of *Maggie*, this works to undermine audience expectations through a process of inversion and deconstruction that reconfigures the erstwhile familiarity of the zombie-apocalypse's popular-cultural terrain. For, in referencing the Western and its related frontier mythology in the way that it does, *Maggie* demonstrates the adaptability and continued relevance of both in relation to the complex dynamics of contemporary global film genres. It is within *this* context that *Maggie* references the Western and, in so doing, highlights the continuing influence of frontier mythology in contemporary popular culture.