

Trespassing the Visual: The Rhetorical Nature of Constructing Identities and Supplementing Différance in *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*¹

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Decade after decade, West after West, this rebirth of American society has gone on, has left its traces behind it, and has reacted on the East. The history of our political institutions, our democracy, is not a history of imitation, of simple borrowing; it is a history of the evolution and adaptation of organs in response to changed environment, a history of the origin of new political species. In this sense, therefore, the West has been a constructive force of the highest significance in our life.

-Frederick Jackson Turner²

The turn of the century provided new and, no doubt, unsettling developments for the country. Due to the rapid settling and urbanization of the West, in 1891 the U.S. Census Bureau's declared the American frontier "closed".³ In turn, in the words of Lewis Mumford, "metropolitanism" stood for a "reaction against the uncouth and barren countryside", rather than a production of the "individualistic, self-assertive American pioneer" (16-17).

Cities showed promise for entrepreneurial endeavors. Fast machines made for quick manufacturing, turning opportunities for individual efforts into "a collective enterprise of mass production" (Dorsey 1). Still, many feared that these technologies and the societal transformations they helped usher in would cause social dysfunction and instability in the character of the average American. Mumford concluded that civilization increasingly busied itself with distractions rather than fashioning "instruments which would help us to mold it creatively a little nearer to humane hopes and desires" (9). Leroy Dorsey, citing the work of Jackson Lears, highlights the mental and physical effects of the industrial life, pointing out the "nervous illness" of the time (Dorsey 2). Lears, elaborating on Beard's notion, argued that while Americans were "tortured by indecision and doubt," the neurasthenic "seemed a

pathetic descendant of the iron-willed Americans who had cleared forests, drained swamps, and subdued a continent” (Lears 50). According to this diagnosis—and the fear that accompanied it—compared to his rugged and resilient predecessor, the modern American was a weak shadow of his/her former self. Inundated with exposure to fast information in a rapidly changing society, Americans had simply lost the ability to slow down.

What some saw as over-sophistication and feminization was suggested to be a product of industrialized life. This was seen as causing a number of medical drawbacks, to include (presumably) sexual dysfunction that led to a social anxiety over “fears of a decline in masculinity among American men” (Dorsey 1). To put it another way, the old American distrusted “the thinker” and saw him as “non-productive”:

The pioneer must almost of necessity hate the thinker, even when he does not despise thought in itself, because the thinker is a liability to a community that can afford only assets; he is non-productive in himself and a dangerously subversive example to others. (Stearns 136)

This struggle for an American identity at the turn of the century was heightened by the increased waves of immigrants entering the country, further complicating an understanding of what unique characteristics constituted the nation’s own. Frederic C. Howe outlined the paradox this way:

But the free lands were all gone about 1890. The Western drift of peoples, which had been in movement since the earliest times, came to an end. Population closed in on the Pacific. Cities grew with unprecedented rapidity. Factories needed men. Employers looked to Europe.... The aliens were mixed to prevent them organizing. Wages were temporarily at least forced down. For some years our immigration policy was shaped by the big industrials who combined with the steamship companies to induce immigration. (343)

The result of these changes was a country fraught with tension and overworked to the point of exhaustion. There was a constant concern that greed would erase the hard-won skills and maturation offered by frontier life—a concern frequently voiced by Theodore Roosevelt as part of his nationalist rhetoric. Dorsey, for example, points to one of Roosevelt’s speeches in 1899 (“The Strenuous Life”) in which the leader sounded alarm about America’s lost connection to its heritage. Roosevelt reveled in nostalgia, cherishing “how the pioneers fought against impossible odds to tame a savage wilderness” (Dorsey 5). It was clear that men and women were now made equal in terms of intellectual pursuits; however, the “phenomenon is not a sharing but a capitulation. The men have been feminized” (Stearns 143). The new direction of a modern and fast-paced America threatened to erode ideals that Americans had held on to for decades.

During this period, film technology played a significant role in entertaining and educating the American public, which resulted in a growing category of new “dramatic” ethnographic films, with narratives that focused on the struggles of indigenous people and harsh weather conditions of uncertain environments. As such, adventurers began to utilize

mobile technologies, such as portable and lightweight filming equipment, on explorations which provided the sensation of “crossing borders,” an experience of exploring other worlds that realistically would be more difficult to access for the everyday citizen. While some of these romanticized epics of the East failed at the box office, such as Edward Curtis’s *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914), the success of films like Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) prompted Hollywood’s involvement in the financing of Flaherty’s *Moana* (1926), and a fully approved script for Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *Chang* (1927) (Ruby 1-2). Of course, this includes the exotic drama, *King Kong* (1933), which sensationalizes the monster as the “postcolonial Other” (Rony 15).

The use of cinema as an expansive (yet limited) visual technological border drew clear distinctions largely between the Western Self and the Eastern Other, through the ability to produce and preserve “an image of the primitive that is still with us, and still immensely powerful and seductive” (Torgovnick 3). These displays performed important work in a national debate between forces that made competing claims to know the authentic American self and its necessary course of action in light of the changes and challenges presented to the country. Many desired a return to traditional values and to the treacherous terrain of the frontier in order to forge a more adventurous and self-reliant self. Others emulated the direction personified by Henry Ford and the industrialists: embracing the future and “reconciling their traditions and values” with changes in “the economy, politics, technology, and culture” (Shindo 1).

To satisfy this desire, Westerners turned to forms of visual culture not only for entertainment purposes, but, to educate themselves about the indigenous Other. As Fatimah Tobing Rony notes, “...cinema has been a primary means through which race and gender are visualized as natural categories; cinema has been the site of intersection between anthropology, popular culture, and the constructions of nation and empire” (8-9). On the one hand, depictions of the indigenous facilitated a comparison of the modern advancements of the Westerner against a purportedly backwards Other, ensuring a common discourse of American superiority and accomplishment. On the other hand, for some the representation of indigenous figures highlighted a universal similarity among peoples.

This essay explores how and to what extent the ethnographic film, *Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life* (1926), rhetorically constructs conceptions of American national identity as a gendered performative, a response to the concern over becoming “feminine,” through city life and technology. For the film, the notion of the “technological border” is significant because the virtual/cinematic border crossing by the engaged viewer, while appearing harmless in its actions, accents the Westerner’s disembodied voyeurism as a volitional act of Eurocentric privilege. While the film’s Eurocentric framing is important, I am more concerned with the extent to which the viewer, from a safe distance, is able to claim a sense of cultural superiority without necessarily performing “Americanism.” Thus, this essay offers an exploration of this historical moment to better understand the material consequences of these new technologies— especially in relation to the production of national identity as a learned commodity.

The film follows American filmmakers Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison, as they travel with the Bakhtiari tribe (Iran) through unbearable weather conditions during their migration efforts. Experiencing the restlessness of stateside living, the Americans shared a mutual desire for adventure and found that making a dramatic cinematic travelogue about the struggle for existence between the nomad and nature would be just that conquest (Maghsoudlou 153-154). The film documents 50,000 tribesmen and 50,000 animals traveling in dangerous environments, such as crossing the roaring waters of the Karun River and climbing rigged snow and ice-covered mountains to lead their flock to graze in greener pastures. What piqued the filmmakers' interest in the migration is the extent to which the Bakhtiari tribe faced unspeakable elemental forces during these migrations, just to turn around and do the same over again, once resources in that hospitable region became depleted and the land became uninhabitable (Maghsoudlou 156).

In general, there were mixed reviews from the American public after the film's release, although many found the film to be a cinematic masterpiece. For example, John Finley, Associate Editor of the *New York Times* and President of *American Geographical Society* noted, "The pictured story of the primitive trek for grass in the 20th century is an amazing one. It is a story that has an epic quality and a memory of the nomadic period in our own civilization" (as quoted by Maghsoudlou 269). Similarly, Gilbert Grosvenor, President of the *National Geographical Society* commented, "From the point of view of our society's fundamental objects, a diffusion of geographical knowledge, this picture has extraordinary value, while from the view point of entertainment it also possesses striking qualities" (as quoted by Maghsoudlou 269). These comments regarding *Grass's* authenticity indicated that film technology stood as a valuable vehicle for which knowledge could be acquired from the outside world to learn about others from a safe distance. Of course this is not to say that the film was considered to be a positive representation of the Bakhtiara tribe on international screens. Bahman Maghsoudlou notes, "[t]he film depicted the tribesmen carrying their rifles with them everywhere they went" ... "the emphasis on pastoral life was contraindicative to the modernist view of the country Reza Shah wished to promote" (266). Consequently, Reza Shan banned screening of the film in Iran because of the policy regarding tribe disarmament, as he did not want others to assume that he supported the tribe's desire to carry arms. In 1931 the National Iranian Oil Company screened *Grass* for the first time in Iran for employees who, like some of the American audiences, responded with mixed reviews (Maghsoudlou 267).

Representations of nation and self in visual culture have often sat at the nexus of manufacturing collective identification and deserve our greater attention (Edensor 2002). While it would no doubt be a worthy study to consider the accuracy and effect of indigenous representations on indigenous peoples, with this article I am concerned with the extent to which such representations manufacture the notion of a gendered American national identity, rather than indigenous identity politics. Contextualizing these accounts within historical situations, I examine the importance of the Other as an "object" that is paradoxically both excluded from, yet integral to, the rhetoric of nationalism.

MATERIALIZING THE NATIONAL IMAGINARY: THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE WESTERNER IN AMERICAN VISUAL CULTURE

New attention to film technology as a visual methodological form created discursive representations of other cultures. Such films and their representations held a seductive appeal for audiences facing an otherwise dreary and alienating city life or an increasingly dilapidated rural community. For a modest cost and even less effort, these films offered encounters with other cultures to outsiders without the need for audiences to travel elsewhere. In order to understand *Grass* and the importance of the technological border rhetorics the film establishes, we need to review the 1920s ethnographic film and the sub-genre's romantic depictions of uncharted lands and indigenous people.

Rhetorical scholars, such as Lester Olson, have become increasingly interested in the ways in which the visual presents "visual evidence" of the past and present (Olson 2). Visuality plays a powerful role in how we understand national historical accounts, more so now as we move towards an increasingly visual society. With these new insights, visual studies emerged as a mechanism of understanding public discourse and changes in American culture. This is especially true when the visual register involves a display of widely different cultures.

Motion picture technology, then, becomes a valuable asset for educational endeavors, as those technologies document and display "anthropological" findings to the public. While the purpose of gathering visual data has often been described as bringing the exotic home (Balikci 41), the use of film technology as a "flexible" tool for ethnography exploration during this period is still highly debatable (Hastrup 14). For many anthropologists, cultural preservation through film technology became problematic in itself because of the high expectations for production (MacDougall 420). These films were now trying to meet the growing expectations of an evolving "Hollywood" drama audience, which problematized authenticity because of over-stylized representations. This called into question the financial viability of such films because of distance and environmental conditions for filmmakers. On the other hand, Deborah Poole suggests that film technology can be used in productive ways to talk more broadly about otherness (162).

The West overseeing and governing a colonized space and its inhabitants now did not take as much effort as once imagined (Said 95), as Hollywood became the official storyteller of other nations, both for Americans and even the nations themselves (Shochat and Stam 36). From the identification point being the Westerner to the use of the camera as an instrument of authority, the (re) presentation of land in *Grass* brings to mind the land conquests that comprised so much of the colonial era. Shochat and Stam call this technological authority, a language which is "inscribed within the play of power, languages are caught up in artificial hierarchies rooted in cultural hegemonies and political oppression" (36). Of course, this recalls the large body of scholarship in postcolonial studies, such as the work of Edward Said (1974), Gayatri Spivak (1999, 2012), Homi Bhabha (1984, 1994, 2013),

and Leela Gandhi (2007), which analyzes the ways Western subjects are understood in opposition to the supposedly exotic Other of the “Orient.”

As the pioneer era drew to a close, ethnographic films turned towards the romantic origins of colonial cinema: “the chronicles of travelers, the political or idealistic visions of the documentary filmmakers, and the occasional forays of anthropologists whose major commitment was the other methods” (MacDougall 116). For some time, the genre was able to get by without the state-of-the-art technology or a great deal of sophistication “if filmmakers could successfully convince the public that their films offered, instead, compellingly authentic (and the more exotic the better) reality to paying customers” (Benelli 182). However, with the changing nature of the American audience, it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep their attention. From the more notable scientific uses of the travelogue era before the 1920s, ethnographic films moved towards romantic depictions of filmmaking. As a result, the once brief forms used for scientific discovery became an outlet for longer, more cinematically sophisticated and dramatic depictions of subjects, such as “the happy primitive” (Bruner 158).

Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), for example, was one of the era’s first films that “strikingly demonstrated the commercial viability of documentaries about exotic cultures and locales” (Benelli 182). Subsequent to *Nanook’s* success, films that followed the same commercial model banked on tapping into western curiosity about the unknown. It is hardly surprising, then, that in addition to the seductive lure of the exotic, Hollywood marketed ethnographic films as prime opportunities to witness depictions of bare-breasted women and violence (Benelli 182). Despite their grounding in often laudable scientific and cultural ambitions, ethnographic films constantly struggled, as Alison Griffiths puts it, with their status as “films that trade on notions of ethnographic objectivity while responding to the commercial imperatives of a burgeoning film industry” and uses of a country’s “colonial propaganda” (282-283). As a result, at times filmmakers had to face decisions regarding balancing representations of authenticity and keeping an audience engaged even through dramatic means. Regardless of the outdated cultural information and practices depicted in some of these films, the dramatic nature of the storyline at times took precedence over cultural accuracy.

THE FRONTIER, EXPLORATION, AND THE OTHER

Through the following textual analysis, I identify ways in which *Grass* implicitly invites viewers to reflect on their identity through a framework that insists on indigenous figures as a foil against which to measure oneself. In order to make that claim, I pay attention to the relationship between Harrison, the Bakhtiari tribe and their relationship to nature, as well as Cooper and Schoedsack, to understand the extent to which the construction of masculinity and femininity participate in fashioning a particular understanding of American national identity. Lastly, I consider the film’s depiction of Cooper and Schoedsack’s actions as rather effortless attempts at making the journey ultimately a reaffirmation of a sense of American exceptionalism, after stepping away from the communal constraints of society.

Land: Woman vs. Nature.

Inquiries into the ways in which land and space are discursively utilized have become a central focus in the work of many rhetorical scholars, who look at national myths and narratives as a text to understand national identity. Land as setting, both as a rural and industrial space, is a very important part of how the audience understands the American subject and his relationship to the settled territory. As a wild and unsettled space, life on the frontier has been known to be a revitalization point for many men to build strength, character and self-confidence. As Frederic L. Paxson puts it: “Men still live whose characters have developed under its pressure” (3). The notion that the Westerners who survive the unforgiving terrains of the “frontier” are imagined to succeed at any challenge, however grave, is depicted through a gendered duality of sorts because now the American woman (Harrison) has entered the same space to challenge her male counterpart, both on screen and in the film industry. As noted by Bahman Maghsoudlou, Harrison’s feminine appearance did not directly align with the common conventions associated with such a dangerous exploration:

The part was also strangely assorted in personalities and appearance, Merian short and stubby, Schoedsack a towering giant with a lean face, long jaw and direct gaze, Marguerite smallish and chic in an outfit suitable for a European cruise rather than for a ride among the nomads. She was forty-four, albeit a glamorous forty-four, while the men were both thirty. They took to calling her “Maggie.” (159)

At the same time, Harrison became the first female documentary film producer because of her contributions and financial support of the production (Maghsoudlou 158).

What is interesting about the presence of landscape in *Grass* is that it plays as much of an important part in the film as the film’s characters do—in a sense, suturing the divide between man and woman, native and foreigner. The breathtaking setting and its native people, the can-do-ness and can-do-better-ness of the rugged westerners that defeated the unfamiliar are all part of a larger story—the story of American exceptionalism and the nation’s will to rise above any difficulties. For audiences lured into theaters on the promise of viewing distant and exotic lands, no doubt the enormity of the uncharted land in *Grass* would likely capture their attention and awe. As James McDaniel has put it, “what could be more recurrent in the American experience than the wish for new, uncharted territory?” (McDaniel 92). Rhetorically, the magnitude of land in *Grass* works to keep its audience interested, where the audience is “to engage it, and to act upon it; what consequences will weigh most heavily upon their prospective deliberation; what priorities will finally tip the balance in their judgment; and what appetitive attachments will need to be overcome for rational reflection to be feasible?” (Farrell 472). While in many cases we see Bakhtiari women tread equally the rough terrain, such as their climb up Zardeh Kuh with children strapped to their backs, the scope of this article considers the extent to which American identity is constructed through a secondary binary Other. The film offers two different depictions of gender. The presence of the Bakhtiari women, in *Grass*, like the Bakhtiari men, is depicted as part of a backdrop that sutures a narrative that defines American character. As for Harrison, even though she appears multiple times throughout the film, her presences is

no greater than the tribe as she too acts as part of the scenery which foregrounds the accomplishments of Cooper and Schoedsack over others.

Grass opens with an establishing wide angle shot of a flat, dry and dead landscape. Expansive in its appearance, the characteristics of the landscape are continuously changing with the progression of the film. The scope of the “bleak plains” is apparent as Harrison (the American female traveler) traveling by horse and buggy, disappears into the empty land trailing down long flat dirt roads leading to high rocky mountains at all corners of the unsettled earth. No civilization, or rather socio-technical organization, can be seen from this distance, and no end destination to where the group is heading. This overwhelming sense of emptiness—an absence of technology—is highlighted as the travelers attempt to find shelter from the violent ejaculations of a blinding desert storm with little refuge or obvious means of escape. Far off and distant, Harrison and her Turkish driver are barely recognizable— as they become part of the backdrop the landscape represents and controls. Given that the magnitude of the land “articulates a sense of scale and importance, however vague in a given case,” the size of the land becomes accountable for the symbolic significance of Harrison and her Turkish guide as pawns which depend on the elements around them to determine their next move towards survival (McDaniel 92).

Harrison, interestingly not labeled as an explorer but instead as a traveler, is constantly filmed throughout the journey. The fact that she makes the journey signals that, perhaps, she is a symbol of the “new woman” of the modern America, which was infiltrating the male dominated public sphere of the era. This underscores Charles Shindo’s point that “the increased opportunities brought about by the vote, education and jobs created a minority of American women looking to rebel against the Victorian morals of their mothers” (52). Harrison’s label as a traveler is problematic because the notion of exploration and the “explorer” became distinctive and popularized as a “consumer product of the early tourism and travel industries” (Craciun 30). While not necessarily holding the same credibility as other contemporaries in scientific fields, the act of exploration holds weight because of the quest to gain knowledge which is outside the scope of our own perceptions of human existence—contributions to society that could not come from someone labeled as a mere “traveler.”

Indeed, the gender and sexual politics of the era were rife with upheaval. With the prevalence and success of many women’s movements, women gaining the right to vote and becoming active in politics, and with an increasing presence in the workplace, women began to redefine themselves outside of the private sphere (Dumenil 98). Finding a balance between “modern aggressiveness and traditional submissiveness” was hardly an easy task (Shindo 59). Shindo suggests that one way these implicit threats to men were contained was that the woman could appear in the same scene (for example, the workplace) and yet were imagined to be so eminently inferior in status and capability that they offered little in the way of a challenge to masculine authority. For the most part, these women did not come under public scrutiny because they posed no real threat to the established order; as such, they merely became more a part of it by taking on the economic role of worker along with the social role of wife and mother (Shindo 53).

Although it is possible to imagine a depiction in which women are placed on an equal footing to men in *Grass*, the film clearly positions her as less relevant: acting as a lesson for the less progressive audience by “putting her in her place,” forced to spend the film mixed in with the tribal family, children and animals. She blends into the scenery; rather than standing apart from the landscape, she becomes part of it. This is significant, as it can be seen as a taming of the role that women might have in the public sphere. Serving as an insignificant character in the film because of her passive and domesticated placement with the Other, Harrison matters because of what she is not. She can be capable like the Bakhtiari; however, the Westerner males will always be understood to be superior. The presence of land in this film is an extraordinary experience that reimagines vividly new frontiers (McDaniel 92), although now that the American woman is brave enough to face the same weathered extremities of her surrounding environment and succeed, her presence on the frontier becomes her own prison. These representations are contradictory, occasionally showing the land as alien and yet conquerable, women as both capable and secondary. The fact that these contradictory messages exist in the same space indexes not only the level of sophistication of gender and representational discourse at the time, but also exhibits the clear and felt need to adapt to increasingly progressive sentiments, while maintaining power structures.

Métis: the Other vs. Nature.

A feature of representation that many focused on during the colonial era was how indigenous peoples adapted to their environment. Looking at how civilized societies viewed these societies, Stanley Diamond notes:

“The fact (startling as it may seem to a civilized mentality) is that the majority of men for the greater portion of human history and pre-history have found Other societies economically, socially, and spiritually (or, as we would say, ideologically) viable” (205).

Put another way, the indigenous people’s natural instincts and skills possessed in their exotic and native land were frequently idealized and desired by many in the Western world. These abilities or traits are known as the Ancient Greek term *métis*, which is defined as animal-like, cunning instincts that enable the indigenous Other to survive in his surroundings.

Invoking the concept of *métis* in his studies of disability discourses, Jay Dolmage recalls the story of Hephaestus, the Greek God who embodied skill and wisdom, even though his body was disabled. While his physical being was broken, Hephaestus still possessed “the cunning intelligence needed to adapt to and intervene in a world of change and chance” (57). We can think about the representation of the indigenous Other in this same light. Because this representation offered possibilities to an America that, for some, was unsure of its future, *Grass* becomes an example of such rhetorics. While not disabled, the portrayal of the indigenous bodies commonly represented the native people as beastly savages who either adapted or died because of the changing and challenging environment. To witness the tribe hiking the mountain is incredible, but to watch them do it barefooted is incomprehensible. In this way, the tribe’s display of *métis* ensures that at the very least the

audience admired them and, more likely, wished they had the same abilities and fortitude.

When explaining the complexities of *métis*, Dolmage employs Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant's definition as "a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing" and a set of skills that are "complex but very coherent" and a "coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior" (61). The people who embody *métis* are those who are resourceful through their "experience acquired" (Dolmage 61). We should understand *métis*, then, not as a tool in and of itself, but as "multiple knowledges and literacies, and the cunning ability to utilize them" when encountered with multiple situations and "discursive environments" (63). Films like *Nanook of the North* (1922), where the representation of the Other, such as Nanook and his family, are portrayed as being so cunning as to outsmart the harsh weather of the Arctic, are one of many examples of how the West romanticized Others and their ability to adapt to whatever nature throws at them.

As a rhetorical strategy in *Grass*, the embodiment of *métis* is illustrated through the tribe's use of every "natural" material and would likely be a desirable "way of thinking" for the Westerner to survive in the same environment (Dolmage 63). Even after the deaths of many, the Bakhtiari continue to cross the Karun River through the terrible currents trying to save their livestock. From what is left of the tribe, some of the men are seen inflating goatskins as if they were balloons. The men gather the goatskins together in groups, creating large floating devices to fit nearly twenty people with plenty of room for the animals to travel across the dangerous water. Such technologies, while not advanced, were quickly acquired skills of the Other and were learned in order to survive. Like many of the animals that attempted to swim across the mouth of the river, the unbearable currents continued to swallow many of the members of the tribe and their animals. These skills are nothing new to the Bakhtiari, given that this migration is not their first. While seeming to demonstrate "cunning intelligence," however, the film portrays the tribe as animals that know their territory, never changing their habits or ways of traveling the land.

Given the surrounding debates, it would hardly be surprising if the audience were impressed by the challenges the tribe faced in their migration. Indeed, were the tribe not able to demonstrate a certain level of flexibility and ingenuity in their response to unpredictability and inherent threat of the natural environment, they would almost certainly face death and the ruin of their people. Certainly, the tribe is fostered through its collective action to travel as one, like a pack of animals, rather than as individuals like the tribe's Western counterparts. The animals are massive in size and outnumber the tribe itself, yet the people seem to be able to account for each animal, one by one, as if they were one of their own. The aim of this section has been to read the rhetorical positioning of the Other as a figure that must adapt to fit his environment and to stage a contrast with the film's portrayal of the Westerner; thus, the latter figured as a subject capable not only of survival, but also of controlling the environment to fit his own ends.

Technological Borders: Différance through Supplementation.

Despite the fact that the overwhelming amount of screen time is afforded to the Bakhtiari and their quest, from the outset the explorers are in control of the environment, which is created through their technological prowess.

As such, through their control over the camera as the main source for which their Eurocentric dominance is created, the camera creates a border from which multiple binary possibilities emerge: while the film is a celebration of modern American masculinity, it is important to note that reaffirmation is only made possible through the trespassing of the dangerous terrain by the modern woman, a terrain where women have usually failed or remained secondary by comparison to their male-counterpart. As for the Bakhtiari themselves, the tribe's presence in the film is rhetorically significant, not because of their heroic conquest of harsh environmental elements, but instead, in the same way as Harrison's presence, the tribe's will to survive creates a space for Cooper and Shoedsack to demonstrate and celebrate their masculinity and their manifest destiny capabilities. Identification with certain characters is probably the most significant part of any narrative analysis because it keeps the audience connected to the important parts of the story (Paquette 22).

As we know from the popularity of ethnographic films like *Grass* in the era, indigenous people fascinated audiences, even though they are forced to occupy an inferior position. Of course, this recalls the large body of work in postcolonial studies that analyze the production of the Occident through its over-determined Oriental pair. Taking their cue from Homi Bhabha, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define ambivalence as a:

complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Rather than assuming that some colonized subjects are 'complicit' and some 'resistant', ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in a fluctuating relation within the colonial subject. (12)

Striking a note that accords with this analysis, these authors conclude by noting that this indigenous identity is "compelled to be ambivalent because it never really wants colonial subjects to be exact replicas of the colonizers—this would be too threatening" (Ashcroft et al. 12). Cooper and Schoedsack's relationship to their binary Other is one of occasional admiration, but was never to be understood as superior to their own capabilities. The filmmakers' great task was not only to film what the tribe experienced; "they wanted to go the hard way, the way the rank and file of the tribesmen went, and a way they were sure had never been traversed by anyone else from their part of the world" (Maghsoudlou 85).

Indeed, the Westerners' absence and what seems to be depicted as rather unchallenging attempts at making the journey suggests that the Westerner is exceptional once he steps away from the communal constraints of society. The Westerner's absence and reappearance in the film rhetorically illustrates that the indigenous people are no longer

needed, as the male Westerner is whole on his own. Through the documentation of the Westerners completing the journey, the film invites the audience to be the heroes that America thinks make the country stronger; the ones who must do the impossible in order to achieve strength and greatness. If we keep in mind Derrida's logic of the supplement,⁴ we can see how the Western men becoming “whole” in the film addresses the anxiety issue depicted and calls on the nation to “be whole.”

The logic of the supplement can be applied to one of the most obvious examples of Cooper and Schoedsack. Preceding the opening establishing shot of a spacious landscape, the Western explorers claim part of this “great migration” as their own. The film introduces “two men and a woman who sought and found the Forgotten People...,” with a caption below reminding the audience that the male explorers will be behind the cameras for the duration of the migration. Cooper and Schoedsack’s contributions to the film are evident to the audience, as both of the explorers are introduced first as key figures in the conception of the exploration and the filmmaking process in general. Cooper, with his explorer’s hat and pipe appears deep in thought, while Schoedsack never makes eye contact with the camera as he engages with Cooper’s plan. Both are engaged with the other, planning and charting the expedition—never interacting with the tribe. Both Cooper and Schoedsack are rakish in their appearance, as Harrison, alone in the next shot, is beautifully framed by illuminating light.⁵ This is the last time the audience will see Cooper and Schoedsack until the end of the journey. Despite the fact that the overwhelming amount of screen time is afforded to the indigenous people and their quest, it is clear from the outset that, as far as American audiences are concerned, the explorers are in control of the scene. They are the first figures seen in the film, they operate the camera, narrate the intertitles and, throughout the film, have a quiet, relaxed, and confident air about them.

From the aerial shots of the massive river that put tribe’s members in danger, or the long shots of the never-ending steep and dangerous mountains that the tribe struggled to get across, the Westerners are shown completing the same journey but seemingly without struggle or harm. Once audiences realize from the final title screen that the Westerners themselves finished the trip, then what had originally been amazement at the feat achieved by the indigenous tribe’s people turns into national pride that their countrymen also accomplished the journey, seemingly without harm or effort. It is only in the last moments of the film that the audience is treated to the re-emergence of the Westerners. Following the tribe’s successful arrival in green pastures and as the film comes to a close, an intertitle notes that a local official certified that not only did they complete the journey, but that also they were the first Westerners to have done so. The final shot before the credits shows the certificate verifying the Westerner’s accomplishment. In the last moments of the film, this certified document reorients the logic of the film away from its primary romanticization of the indigenous Other and toward the audience’s likely amazed realization and affirmation that they are, in fact, superior to the others. Here, absence can be read as a moment of transcendence for the male explorers. Indeed, the filming of *Grass* was a technological achievement for Cooper and Schoedsack as the weight and bulkiness of the camera equipment and the continuous mobility of the tribe called for more spontaneous on-demand movement than the filmmakers had anticipated (Naficy 126). For example, during the

crossing of the Karun River some of Schoedsack's shots implied that he filmed as if he were in water, however, his skilled techniques came from filming on land with use of a six-inch lens "that he could swing in such a way as to make it look as if he were traveling along with his subjects" (Maghsoudlou 213).

In comparison, this resonates with James R. Andrews's discussion regarding American football and its many parallels to what some may consider "an American way of life." Here, Andrews looks to Paul Bryant's use of the aphorism "football is life" to rhetorically articulate how national narratives are taken up and enacted. For the athlete (character), certain values from American discourses (national narratives) are instantly applied to how and why they play—upholding a certain physical stamina, one which is needed to win, and the mind-set that is equipped to come up with strategies to display "determination, and occasionally heroic bursts of enthusiastic drive to reach his goal" (Andrews 316). The American hero knows that to "win is essential, and in this process he may feel compelled, at times, to gouge, kick, and even cheat" (Andrews 316). While this comparison is obviously gendered, it is clear that even American sports relish in the national residue of the mantra "to win is to be American." In many ways this story illustrates for us how the notion of Americanism is a social construct—a strategy. One must endure trauma and struggle before winning. It is here that the connection with the physical, the ability to endure harsh environments, and the rejection of leisurely activity are all forged as a strategic initiative to become more American.

I would not suggest that narrative analysis is essential for all rhetorical inquiry; rather, its parallel dynamics has the capacity to help us understand these national myths and their effects. While differences exist between narrative and mythic criticism, both rely on stories to produce the identification effect that we experience when encountering national discourses. With that in mind, the following resource provides examples from both narrative and mythic analysis in order to better understand the notion of American character.

Janice Rushing's "The Rhetoric of The American Western Myth," for example, looks at the re-emergence of the Western Myth and considers the fundamental values of the Western myth as based on a tension between what we consider to be an American ideal of individualism and how that individual deals with communal conformity after settlement (Rushing 19). Rushing speaks of an important "meeting point" between oppositions of the old frontier: savagery and civilization. It is here that we see the romanticized version of the ideal American subject, the "cowboy", in many ways the same ideal that raises its head in popular American culture today. This American hero, as William F. Lewis argues, is usually a dominant white male [who] rescues the country from a time of great trouble" (Lewis 281). While that can be said of the cowboys Rushing refers to, Lewis applies the myth to political leaders, such as U.S. Presidents. As Lewis states in his work on Reagan's rhetorical narratives, the President was (as any President would be) a dominant force in swaying the American public towards certain political and foreign policies. Lewis notes that Reagan does not just use storytelling as a "rhetorical device;" his messages were stories and his stories were packaged as messages (Lewis 281). Referring back to Rushing's essay, we can see how important this central American figure is in defining national discourses, as she argues that in order for this cowboy to survive in "the harshness and savagery of the frontier environment, he must

above all be a rugged individualist. However, in order to settle and civilize the frontier, he must continually face the demands of the community for cooperation and conformity” (Rushing 16). It is through Regan’s narratives about America’s greatness that the public is compelled to take part in that fantasy.

While Rushing discusses the importance of American figures, Dorsey and Harlow remind us of how the non-American also becomes a vital element in determining “Americanness.” America’s narratives have always suggested that as a people we have struggled with immigration because of the “threat” posed on the purity of the American race (Flores 362). However, we stick with these narratives to claim some sense of security in who we are. With the growing number of immigrants coming to America in the later part of the 19th century, Dorsey and Harlow look at how Theodore Roosevelt and his “alien rhetoric” introduced the non-American as the center of the Frontier Myth (Dorsey and Harlow 58). In his writings, Roosevelt asked that his readers would embrace immigration and remember the lessons of the frontier experience that so shaped settlers of early America; in adopting their personal qualities and moral values, both native and foreign-born could be melded into a singular group of people with the capacity to fulfill America’s destiny as a thriving and powerful nation (Dorsey and Harlow 58). Promoting the values of assimilation, Roosevelt argued that immigrants possessed the ability to fight both environmental and human evil, and that they had endured the “crucible that gave form and substance to the American nation” (Dorsey and Harlow 58). In the eyes of Roosevelt, immigrants were America’s destiny and the “true heroes of American history” (Dorsey and Harlow 58). It is here that Dorsey and Harlow argue that Roosevelt’s *The Winning of the West* tried to sway the audience towards a positive outlook on immigration.

The Westerners’ presence/absence duality in the film signifies a type of “higher power,” a transcendence that goes beyond anything the world can offer them. While Derrida has noted that interdependence contaminates all objects, this moment in the text is notable for its implicit assurance that the Westerner no longer requires his supplement. Of course, this sovereignty is a fantasy; the sense of “completeness” or “wholeness” is only something that is of the Western world’s imagination. I understand this supplement as a statement that devalues the importance of the Western male’s binary pairs: the indigenous Other and the American woman. There is nothing left for Western males to fear, which also means there is nothing left of interest to them.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this essay, I have argued that *Grass* speaks to American audiences facing an uncertain national future. Even more, I have suggested that the film offers insight into the American character that, in turn, would assure the country they were up to any challenge. With the nation’s varied transformations and their consequences for citizens bearing down on the country, the film enables a sense of national accomplishment among the audience. While American women’s visibility in the public sphere implies an equality of traits and abilities, the film likewise reassures its audience, in this case arguing that American women could become more engaged in public affairs, but remain productively at a second-tier status. In turn, *Grass* offers a story that demonstrates a dual masculinity for American

men. He is both rugged and strategic, capable of adapting any environment to suit his needs. Because of this, *Grass* pleases the Modern Man as well as the Explorer in the audience; despite a threat of Others, whether immigrants or women, men are assured that they retain the place of pride and supremacy.

A compelling case can be made that for all of the interesting lessons the film may communicate about the will and ingenuity of the indigenous people, it is first and foremost a film about Americans, their abilities and their status in the world. This binary draws clear distinctions between American men and women and how their identities ought to be performed, yet merges them, through the appearance of Harrison battling the same unchartered territories as her male traveling companions. As such, the notion of “trespassing borders” by definition is substantial because such cinematic simulations create an unauthorized viewing for which *difference*⁶ is possible, by redefining and reified identities as the American spectator accrues a type of disembodied superior attribute.

In other words, Harrison’s performance of masculinity on the “frontier” may appear to claim equality within what has largely been known as a male-dominated space, but instead this progressive narrative is undercut by the absence of Cooper and Schoedsack in the cinematic frame. Their absence becomes a point of comparison, making both Harrison and the Bakhtiari tribe occupy the same space of otherness through voyeuristic actions. When we consider the ways in which this relationship is illustrated in *Grass*, it is not surprising that the difference between Cooper and Schoedsack and Harrison and the Bakhtiari can be framed through the question “I am therefore you are?” (Said 31-32). This question represents a negation/lack by comparison—a framing that allows identities to form and emerge that praise the practices of Western civilization. Even political figures such as Kermit Roosevelt, the grandson to Theodore Roosevelt, remarked that *Grass* is “an amazing interesting picture portraying a unique experience on a trip that could only be undertaken by real adventurers possessed of courage and initiative” (as quoted by Maghsoudlou 269).

Grass becomes an important text because of its ambiguous nature about Americanism and how it is defined. For the new American subject, there is no need to look towards other worlds to know him. More than just exceptional figures, the Western males showed the audience that they are above the challenges of any environment. While *Grass* offers a story about America maintaining its position of power, even through times of anxiety, the film shows the audience that change is inevitable. Seasons come and go, and only the fit and clever societies survive. The journey the tribe takes to provide food for their livestock offers a new direction, an assurance for the American audience. From traveling up the steep mountains, to swimming across the dark trenches of the Karun River, the struggles of nature that the Bakhtiari face and yet manage to survive, become an image of hope for the American populous and are likely to encourage the audience to reconnect with America’s national core, that of a country which exhibits strength, humanity and sense of community. It is here, through this survival, that *Grass* helps its audience to rediscover a sense of self and nation, starting with the American’s relationship to the Other.

Notes

¹ This paper is derived from the author's Master's thesis (directed by William C. Trapani III).

² Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Problem of the West." *Atlantic Monthly* 78.September (1896): 289-97.1.

³ Leroy Dorsey cites The Census report originally quoted by Ray A. Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1971), 114.

⁴ For more on supplementation theory please see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, or Penelope Deutscher's book *How to Read Derrida*. Granta Publications, 2014.

⁵ For more on female objectification please see Laura Mulvey's work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, Edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Rutgers UP, 1997, pp. 438-48, or Ann E. Kaplan's book *Women & Film*. Routledge, 2013, p. 205.

⁶ For more on Derrida's notion of *différance* please see the edited volume by David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, *Derrida and Différance*. Northwestern University Press, 1988.

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