**Souvenirs of the Apocalypse: Guns as Authenticating Props**

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Seventeen people died in the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018. A week later Donald Trump blamed movies and video games for creating the violent culture that led to the shooting, saying: “I don’t know what this does to a young kid’s mind, somebody growing up and forming and looking at videos where people are just being blown away left and right ... the level of craziness and viciousness in the movies, I think we have to look at that too.” Trump’s remarks are in sync with the NRA’s take after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012. As a means of explaining the killings, Wayne LaPierre called the movie business “a callous, corrupt and corrupting shadow industry that sells, and sows, violence against its own people.” He pointed to “blood-soaked slasher films like *American Psycho* and *Natural Born Killers* that are aired like propaganda loops.”

And yet, in 2013 the NRA’s magazine *The American Rifleman* ran a story about the “top ten coolest gun movies.” Some of these, like *The Alamo* (1960), draw on Western themes and celebrate the survivor who uses his gun for masculine adventure. Others, like *Terminator* and *Red Dawn*, imagine an alternate dystopic future in which guns are the only means to survive against hostile foes. *Zombieland* and *Tremors* stray into fantasy, imagining monstrous enemies that threaten all of civilization. *Road Warrior* celebrates the violent vigilante, scraping out an existence in a dismal post-apocalyptic future. All celebrate the manly pluck of the shooter who knows when to kill and doesn’t hesitate. These are films about winning with guns. Clearly there is some inconsistency in the NRA’s views about movies and guns.

Part of the problem is definitional: The way that one understands broad terms like “violence” and “media” largely shapes the outcome of one’s analysis. As David Trend points out in his book *The Myth of Media Violence*, it’s not much of a stretch to say that the Bible is a form of “media” that is “violent.” War monuments are “violent.” Films like *Schindler’s List* (1993) and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) are “violent.” Even Disney’s *The Lion King* is “violent” (4). Media violence, Trend proposes, is “one of the most widely discussed yet least understood issues of our time” (12). In the United States, there are about 37,000 deaths per year from guns, and mass shootings happen at the rate of one or more per day (Dunbar-Ortiz 20). Violent media are not irrelevant in this dangerous equation, but they can hardly be seen as directly causative—especially if we can’t agree on what makes media “violent” in the first place. The issue is far too complex to boil down to a simple cause-and-effect arrangement. However, if we shift from conversations about broad categories like “media” and “violence,” we can ask more nuanced questions about what guns and violent movies might have in common. That is, what broader culture might they both participate in? I argue here that the gun can be viewed as a deadly prop in a mythological construct that is bigger than individual gun-owners, bigger than the movies they watch, and even bigger than the guns themselves.

In its hybrid form, what I call the cowboy apocalypse is a complete mythic story arc. It is about America’s beginnings, but it is also about the whole world’s imminent ending. Those who survive the violent transformation of the world will do so by a combination of grit, individualism, and violence—and often with the liberal use of guns. The cowboy apocalypse suggests that there is a simple solution to complex global problems: Violently wipe the slate clean, it says, and let the survivors demonstrate their mettle on a refreshed frontier. The messiah in a cowboy apocalypse doesn’t save the world; he just saves *his* world. He performs salvation on a local level: he protects only his family and those he deems worthy.

Certainly not all gun owners engage with the myth of the cowboy apocalypse, but those who do perform a kind of quasi-religious activity with the gun as a sacramental prop. What is revealed in the cowboy apocalypse is a shift from present reality to a new reality – an *other*-time and *other*-space in the imminent future – where things will be more to the cowboy messiah’s liking. This imagined future is not otherworldly or heavenly, but right here on earth. The myth shows up in the movies, but it also shows up in a host of interrelated media, including books, television shows, films, video games and moving from the screen into everyday life in gun shows, zombie fandom activities like alternate-reality games, and the rhetoric of real-life groups like the NRA, which has moved in recent years to explicit storytelling of the “good guy with a gun” who violently defeats “evil.” The cowboy apocalypse borrows from myths of the Wild West, blending them with myths of a post-apocalyptic future, resulting in a future vision of chaos that is resolved through gun violence in a refreshed frontier.

The fear that films can cause violent behavior can be traced to film’s very beginnings. The Hays Code, instituted in the 1930s, forbid films’ portrayal of murder and “brutality” or “gruesomeness,” but allowed shooting if it was handled with “good taste.” Before the code had much effect, Methodists R. G. Burnett and E. D. Martell pointed to “juvenile crime” as being “directly inspired” by violent films, marking the movies as a “dread menace to civilization” (11). They claimed that the cinema was “fast sapping the people’s sense of moral values” (14). These old complaints aren’t so different from the new claims made by Trump and the NRA. And they still fail to account for the complexity of gun violence in America.

Trend points out that worries about violence often accompany new forms of media. In 1895, the Lumière brothers released the short documentary film *The Arrival of a Train*. After the screening, apocryphal accounts appeared that audience members started from their seats at the realistic representation of the train barreling at them. As game theorist Jane McGonigal notes, these accounts of panic helped to “define film as a dangerously immersive medium, capable of seducing rational audience members into foolish belief and producing an astonishing incapacity to distinguish the imaginary from the real.” McGonigal draws a distinction between this early audience’s playful “astonishment” and an unlikely “actual belief” that the train was careening into the theater. She suggests that contemporary worries about video games are similarly overstated.[[1]](#footnote-1) Players and viewers, she says, understand that films and games aren’t “real” and thus, no harm can come from playfully immersing oneself within them. McGonigal doesn’t discuss what she means by the term “real,” except to imply that players and viewers know it when they see it.

But how does the mediation of “reality” impact people’s engagement with “real” material things offscreen? Nuance about such questions become essential when considering gun violence and the movies, if only for the simple reason that movies are produced from harmless beams of light and guns shoot actual bullets. If there is a mechanism by which the immaterial meaningfully shapes our relationship to the material, it is worth thinking about. And religion, as a category often concerned with precisely this process, is a helpful place to start.

For Birgit Meyer, religion is all about mediation. Religion, she says, can be approached as a “set of human ideas and practices with regard to another, non-empirical sphere—a beyond—which can only be rendered tangible through mediation, and thus requires some sort of [tangible] media.” She invites us to think about media as “material harbingers of a professed beyond conventionally referred to as spirits, gods, demons, ghosts, or God” (“Religion as Mediation” [6]). Meyer explicitly includes “all kinds of stuff” as mediators: things like “bones, plants, [and other] objects” that can operate as “transmitters” that connect between the “here and now” and a “beyond” ([7]). Meyer considers all sorts of media that “generate presence in the framework of an authorized cosmological order” (334). She calls these mediators “sensational forms,” and says that they have two purposes: to shape religious mediation and to create “sacred surplus” as they point to something greater beyond themselves. Meyer proposes that otherworldly realms are *made* real by our active engagement with the media that we believe can access those spaces. It’s not hard to see how this theory might be applied to the mediated manifestation of the cowboy apocalypse, which is made real by fans’ engagement with the media, events, stories and ritual objects that evoke it—including the gun.

Meyer refers to the religious qualities of images that “re-present” and thereby also “somehow render present—what is invisible and absent through a performative act” (334). Religious seeing is a kind of mediation that makes the thing, or place, to which a “sensational form” points seem real. Sensational forms “direct those who partake in them how to proceed” with performance, and they “make present what they mediate” (338). They both evoke and authenticate otherworldly spaces. To interact with sensational forms is not, then, just to receive mediation from the otherworldly space toward which they gesture—but also to be invited to participate in the translation of the invisible into the visible as the sensational form is activated (346). In other words, the person engaged with a “sensational form” helps to realize the object’s imaginal power through the desire of their belief commitment. Types of mediating sensational forms can include texts, images, films, and even—as I suggest here—material objects like guns.

The gun, then, could be added to Meyer’s collection of sensational forms that mediate. When perceived within the cowboy apocalypse, the gun is a bridge between our contemporary world and a world “beyond” that is not so much *spatially* apart as *chronologically* apart from our own world. As a sensational form, the gun gestures toward a future, post-apocalyptic time when the cowboy messiah will again roam a refreshed frontier, ready to shoot any hostile foes who get in his way. The material gun in this hyper-activated sensational form actually *reassures* the believer that the apocalypse is on the horizon. This helps to explain why some gun enthusiasts hoard bullets; each pile of ammunition signals future “bad guys” who will be taken down in the transition to a refreshed future.

In this way, the relationship between the gun violence and gun movies can be seen as subtler and much more troubling. The cowboy apocalypse is a wider gesture than any single iteration. It is a mythic narrative tapped into by not just the traditional Western film, the Western novel, television shows, and newer films with a cowboy messiah theme. The cowboy apocalypse can even be evoked by vigilantes who fire at people on American streets inspired by the desire to play the role of the gun-toting, tough, willing-to-shoot “good guy” they know from movies like *Road Warrior* or *Die Hard.* To act with self-conviction against a perceived enemy is to tap into the post-apocalyptic world beyond, heralding a future that the well-poised gun will help to instigate. For the cowboy messiah, the gun is not just a totem for Wild West fandom but also a ritual object gesturing toward a desired post-apocalyptic future. In the cowboy apocalypse, the gun survives the apocalyptic transition and functions as a tool of societal rebuilding in the ideological mold of the believer. The gun is a promise of the power to force one’s enemies from life to death, and to circumscribe a violent perimeter around the believer’s perpetually threatened person. No wonder this story animates a whole swath of xenophobic believers who wish for a “return” to an American frontier that never really was.

The gun becomes a talisman that can enact the very future the cowboy messiah desires. To aim the gun at those who stand between our world and the world to come is to perform ritual desire for annihilation of the present, to force oneself into a fantasy future in which only one’s own self-determined sense of “justice” matters. Such ideology is dangerous in a world where white supremacy goes largely unchecked and guns become the easy means to express one’s own predetermined—and typically uncritical—recognition of “evil” in the people around us. To shoot *now* is to bring us closer to *then*. In this apocalyptic perspective, we are temporarily stuck in chaos before the steadying of society in a forced return to the glorious frontier. For these self-proclaimed messiahs, to return to the frontier is to make things “great” again. The cowboy messiah and his gun herald an imminent return to the mythic values of the Wild West, when whomever was most willing to shoot could determine what was “just.” The gun is a prop—not just for particular films, but for the overarching mythic narrative of the cowboy apocalypse.

John Wayne’s favorite movie gun was actually a working Colt revolver that he owned. Wayne’s guns are now on display at the National Cowboy Museum in Oklahoma City, but fans can also buy replicas of the guns. Cimarron Firearms advertises a replica of “the most recognizable six gun in western movie history” that is “copied in every detail from Duke's own Colt,” complete with a “trail worn, plain finish, with the bluing worn completely off, just like the gun JW packed when taming the silver screen.”[[2]](#footnote-2) To hold John Wayne’s gun—or a replica of it—is to imagine oneself transported to both the mythic cowboy past and, for some, the cowboy apocalypse of the future.

A few years ago, the NRA National Firearms Museum had a display called “Hollywood Guns,” featuring over a hundred weapons from films like *Dirty Harry*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Dark Knight*. In an NRA video about the display, the curator Phil Schreier says that gun enthusiasts who come to visit the museum will see “some of the firearms that we've fallen in love with in our youth and our adulthood, wishing that we too could be like our matinee idols."[[3]](#footnote-3) To imagine oneself holding the actual movie gun is to imagine oneself a hero. Stephen Hunter recommends gun fans visit the museum to see the gun vault which was, for him, “like going to Valhalla without the inconvenience of having to die first.” At one point during his tour, Hunter has a “moment of minor triumph” when he takes a “suppressed MAC-10 off a table and, in my imagination at least, dispatched a 32-round burst at various enemies of the state and the person.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He sees the gun as the means to transform himself into the fearless hero who destroys his foes. This view may be at work too for those concealed weapon holders who, says Angela Stroud, use their guns to “feel that they are safe in a world that they perceive is increasingly dangerous.” For these people, she says, concealed carry licenses “confirm that they are one of the good guys, a status that is about much more than not breaking the law” (Stroud, 6).

Some famous guns used in the movies have been auctioned, like the Beretta M92F used by John McClane (Bruce Willis) in *Die Hard*, which was sold on ebay with bidding started at $20,000. Fans have also bought a prop pulse rifle used in *Aliens* (1986); a shotgun used in *Terminator*; and the pistol used by Agent Smith in *The Matrix*.[[5]](#footnote-5) For those who can’t afford actual props, there are numerous companies providing movie “replica guns” for a few hundred dollars that emulate guns from “your favorite movies and TV shows over the past 40 years.” They promise that by owning the right gun, fans can “relive the days of Wyatt Earp, Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickok, Pat Garrett, Billy the Kid and countless other western heroes and legends.”

We can see a similar kind of prop fandom in the reenactment of historic battles using replica guns. Fans dress as trappers or cowboys and reimagine frontier life as “mountain men.” They reimagine the Wild West, wearing chaps and boots while shooting at cardboard Indians. Jimmy Taylor has engaged in extensive study of such live action “cowboy clubs,” interviewing gun owners and exploring their commitment to the group gun experiences (35). Thousands of Americans collect antique weapons, replicas, and memorabilia, with intense fandoms devoted to specific wars, types of weapons, or time periods. For fans, gun replicas are a means of accessing the idealized past, and a means of imagining themselves within it.

Matt Hills studies the prop replicas produced by fans of mediated story worlds. Once incarnated, he says, a prop occupies “an interspace between materiality and what might be termed soul.” For Hills, props “convey a sense of boundary crossing” and sit at the junction between fictional and real. Thus, props can be quasi-sacramental, functioning as material bridges between the world as we know it and the world the fan longs for. In 1997, Charlton Heston called the gun an “extraordinary symbolic tool standing for the full measure of human dignity and liberty,” pointing to the “smoking muskets” of the “ragtag rebels” who fought for American independence (202-203). To NRA members, of course, guns are “the fundamental symbol of what makes this country great” (Davidson 43). Guns often symbolize “the pioneering spirit, the love of liberty, individualism, and self-reliance” of early Americans (Dizard, et al 7). Drawing on this symbolism, Osha Gray Davidson says that the gun has the ability of “mystically linking owners to their ancestors, and even more important, to our collective American forefathers” (44). Guns are material embodiments of an imagined, otherworldly space and time, bringing these imaginary spaces to life while bridging the here and the beyond.

Ian Peters looks at the related prop category of “feelies,” which consist of those factory-produced objects that are included in collector’s box sets. Feelies, Peter says, operate as “media paratexts” in that they are “both extensions of and separate from the games or worlds that inspired them.” Players can hold such an object and enjoy it “in the physical realm exactly as a character in the virtual realm can.” Peters proposes that these kinds of objects are “power objects” that offer a “tangible link” to the fictional world and also make those who possess them feel special, especially if they spent a lot of money or effort to acquire them (Peters). Being able to physically handle the objects allows players to “extend or re-create the same narratives,” or even to create new ones. In the cowboy apocalypse, the gun can work as a feelie, allowing the fan to hold the gun as material evidence of a revered mythic past and a desired future in their hands. Again, the reference point—the wished-for world to come—is not just a filmic space, but the larger myth beyond of a cowboy-inspired post-apocalyptic future.

Lincoln Geraghty describes homemade props as “physical reminders of the visual experience on screen” (40). Geraghty considers this construction a kind of “nostalgia,” as fans “collect, salvage and reclaim from the past” in their “creation of a contemporary fan identity” (3). Nostalgia, in this sense, is not about living in the past, but about “creating a reflexive and tangible identity in the present” by materially manifesting objects from the screen (4). Replica guns, based on those used by fictional characters in favorite films for example, clearly fall into this category. To fashion a gun replica from a beloved post-apocalyptic film is to evoke the cowboy apocalypse, if one is also imagining oneself the hero who will enact a violent transformation from the unsatisfying present to a future in a refreshed, gun-mottled frontier. To wield an *actual* gun is to take this fantasy one step further, if one allows the weapon to certify the real possibility of that desired future coming into being. Such energies can fuel violent unrest, shaping it into a ritual performance in which to shoot is to be righteous. When racism is also involved, the combustibility is obvious.

Graeme Turner argues that the “fundamental attraction of film-going itself” is the “dreamlike separation from the everyday world” that film offers. But because film is based on the material things of the real world, there is never a perfect separation between onscreen and offscreen. This blending of the real world with the screened, imagined one creates a “blurring of boundaries between the imaginary and the real that is at the heart of the cinema experience” (Turner 147). Brent Plate agrees, saying that films don’t just “mimic” the real world, they “actively reshape elements of the lived world and twist them in new ways that are projected onscreen” (1). Much like ritual objects can connect believers with religiously informed supernatural worlds, props are gateways into the world of the movie or game, portals that seduce players and viewers by bridging the material and the immaterial, the ordinary with the extraordinary. Plate describes the “semi-permeable boundaries between the world-on-screen and the world-on-the-streets” (1). Here I am also interested in the permeable boundaries between our world and the imagined otherworldliness of the desired future projected in the myth of the cowboy apocalypse.

This slippage reflects the engagement between the cowboy apocalypse and its material manifestation in the fandoms devoted to it. Speaking of more traditional religious objects, Robert Orsi says that sacred souvenirs “come to stand for otherwise inaccessible places, times, experiences” (59). Ritual objects like sacraments promise contact with a greater reality by offering themselves up for immediate touch. They authenticate otherworldly spaces by gesturing toward them, by inciting in us a sense of yearning for the otherworldly spaces that they reference. The gun too can act as what Orsi calls a “capillary of presence,” filling the present moment with a deep experience of a desired time to come. For believers, the gun binds *now* with *then*, the undesirable present with a wished-for future. Like other ritual objects, the gun can bring the imaginary space of the cowboy apocalypse to life through a material instantiation that bridges the here with the beyond. We can even think of the post-apocalyptic future as a sort of “heavenly” space of desire, an earthly but perfectible realm that stands in contrast to the “chaos” and “oblivion” of our current lives. It is a seductive story, terrifying when also built on the racist myths of America’s frontier origins.

After the 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando Florida, LaPierre appeared on *Face the Nation*, and announced that without guns, Americans would soon be overwhelmed by immigrant “terrorists” who would attack churches and malls: “They’re coming ... And they’re going to try to kill us, and we need to be prepared. Let’s get the bad guys off the street, attack the terrorists and leave the good guys alone” (Raw Story). This dualism has racist American frontier roots, when new ideologically-informed science similarly presumed the “superiority” of white Americans over others and “lay the foundation for a campaign of expansion that, peppered with a sense of religious mission, transformed alien peoples—blacks, Native Americans, and Mexicans, primarily ...—into ‘barbarians’ and ‘savages’ whose only options were annihilation or conquest” (Hosley 50). The gun is at the heart of LaPierre’s apocalyptic story of good and evil, a proxy that speaks for its small messiahs in material form. Whether he draws on films, television, live gun shows, or self-reinforcing propaganda, LaPierre evokes the cowboy apocalypse with the gun as its most resonant prop. This is a hegemonic fantasy with teeth.

1. “A Real Little Game.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.impactguns.com/Revolvers/Cimarron-Rooster-Shooter-Colt-SAA-45LC-John-Wayne-Replica-844234108954-RS410/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.mediamatters.org/national-rifle-association/video-nra-blames-violent-films-mass-shootings-their-museum-features> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.americanrifleman.org/articles/2010/5/11/hollywood-guns-behind-the-curtain/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.thefirearmblog.com/blog/2017/06/28/hollywood-auction-ebay/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)