

The Trapper: a Hollywood Ghost

On Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant*

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We should not be misled by the *The Revenant*'s hyperrealism: Iñárritu's film is a brilliant filmmaker's ego trip more than it is an accurate depiction of the trapper's role in conquering the American West. Despite its meticulous reconstruction of living conditions at the time, the film is teeming with clichés and approximations.

The Revenant: in terms of the history of the Western, Alejandro González Iñárritu's film is aptly titled. By recreating a story of survival, that of Hugh Glass, an unfortunate member of a fur trade expedition on the Missouri in 1823, the Mexican director renews a genre in decline (the Western) while also bringing a cinematographic ghost back to life: the trapper in the American West. The adventures of hunters in the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains spanned from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, reaching their peak with the rendezvous system – fur meetings drawing several hundred White men and Indians to a chosen spot in the mountains every summer. This long period offers historical material with a wealth of dramatic potential: wild animal attacks, skirmishes with American Indians, rivalry between fur companies, the cult of firearms, the clash of cultures, exotic romance, the mixing of cultures, etc. Overshadowed by cowboys, cavalry, and stagecoaches, the trapper or mountain man – and more broadly the '*coureur de bois*'¹ – is nonetheless a minor figure in the Western.

Trapper films or 'Conradian' Westerns

In fact, the western genre really came into its own depicting a later period, between 1865 and 1890 which was, strictly speaking, the time of the 'conquest of the West'. The 'Manifest Destiny' of the Western was to show history in the making; the history of the Frontier and the inexorable construction of a nation (the United States) destined to stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific.² This reassuring horizon was the backdrop to a whole range of necessary figures: the sheriff fighting the gangster, opulent ranchers fighting small farmers, Bluecoats fighting Indians, etc.³

¹ The French term '*coureur de bois*' (literally, woodrunner) is used generically to refer to the Euro-Americans who collected furs in Indian land, whether by trading or by hunting. See Gilles Havard, *Histoire des coureurs de bois, Amérique du Nord, 1600-1840* (Les Indes Savantes, 2016) and Robert Vézina, 'Un jargon presque barbare', *Le lexique des voyageurs et coureurs de bois francophones* (forthcoming).

² In 1845, journalist John O'Sullivan wrote that Americans had the 'manifest destiny' 'allotted by providence' to 'overspread the continent'.

³ See for example Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, *Western(s)* (Klincksieck: 2007).



Clark Gable (Flint Mitchell), María Elena Marqués (Kamiah) and their mixed-race child in *Across the Wide Missouri* (1951).

If the world of trappers has such a small foothold in Hollywood imaginations, this is firstly because it reveals a less edifying side to the Frontier, a more ill-defined, mixed space with a more uncertain future. Unlike the farmer or the cowboy, the mountain man seems to be a default pioneer, a useless and unreasonable adventurer travelling the length and breadth of the wilderness without settling down, putting up fences, or working the land. Compared to the traditional Western hero, his allegiances are less clear-cut, his identity more unstable, to the extent that he might even disappear into Indian country, sometimes in order to find a new lease of life. The history of trappers therefore maps imperfectly onto the pre-constructed (teleological) narrative about the conquest of the West.⁴ To take up the expression neatly coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, reader of *Heart of Darkness*, these men belong to the ‘Conradian’ period in American history: ‘the depth of which varies from several decades to several centuries, during which indigenous cultures and those of the invaders or colonisers co-existed, creating sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile relationships, and when the fate of the former was not yet definitively sealed’.⁵

Trapper films – few and far between, and of varying quality – have enjoyed two periods of relative success, sometimes described as progressive in terms of representations of American Indians. In the early 1950s, the golden age of the Western, two very similar films were released one after another: *Across the Wide Missouri* by William Wellman (1951) and *The Big Sky* by Howard Hawks (1952). The first, inspired by a historical book by Bernard De Voto (1947), shows a brigade of hunters in Blackfoot country in 1829-1830. The second, based on the novel of the same name by A. B. Guthrie Jr (1947), is set in 1832 and shows the world of the Missouri boatmen, which it films almost ethnographically (French language, navigation difficulties, use of oars, poles, and towlines, etc.). The plots of both films focus on the archetypal figure of the ‘Indian princess’, in both cases the daughter of a Blackfoot

⁴ Although Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett embody the quintessential figure of the trapper in the American imagination (they became popularised on screen in the 1950s and 1960s), they are part of the history of the East of the continent.

⁵ Cl. Lévi-Strauss, *L’Homme*, 1986, 26 (99), p. 144.

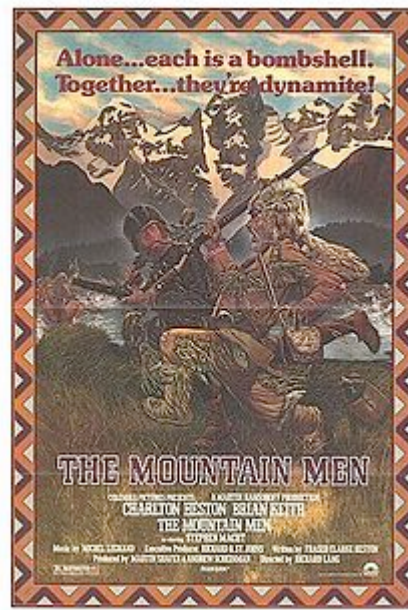
Chief whom the heroes return to her tribe to benefit their own transactions. Through the inevitable desire she inspires, this beautiful nymph encourages the trappers to discover the Indian world and despite being far from self-evident (language barrier, jealousies, etc.) ‘inter-racial’ love is described as a possibility. That being said, the trappers are still framed more as builders of the West than as renegades or ‘White Indians’.

The second period was the 1970s, when Hollywood studios tapped into the blooming counterculture movement and opened up to more radical readings of the founding myths of the West. The wilderness was described as a lost paradise or the locus for the dissolution of Western civilisation. The Hugh Glass saga saw its first film, *Man in the Wilderness* (1971), an original and little-known Western by Richard C. Sarafian, shot in northern Spain. The hero, Zachary Bass, was played by Richard Harris who had already played a European ensnared in Indian country in *A Man Called Horse* (1970). However, before *The Revenant*, the most emblematic trapper film was still Sydney Pollack’s *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972). Partly inspired by the story of a real mountain hunter (John Johnson), this environmentally-friendly ‘rite-of-passage’ Western was a bitter-sweet chronicle of the world *before* the conquest of the West – the story takes place in the late 1840s, when beaver trapping was breathing its dying breath and the rendezvous era was over. However, despite the violence of this mountain world, Pollack did not film it like the first act in an inevitable conquest (or only barely). It was a world in its own right, with its own rhythms, its unwavering seasons, and its intangible social rules. As a seasoned trapper warned, in the mountain you cannot cheat nature or the norms and taboos of the American Indians: ‘Mountain’s got its own ways’.



Robert Redford (J. Johnson) and Joaquín Martínez (Paints His Shirt Red) smoking the peace pipe in a scene from *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972).

Two other 1970s productions explored the world of trappers: the mini-series *Centennial* (1978) based on James A. Michener’s novel, which offers an original picture of the origins of the West (the first episode takes us back to Saint-Louis before Lewis and Clark, in 1795); and Richard Lang’s B movie, *The Mountain Men* (1980), which recounted the adventures of two old trappers in the same picaresque vein as *Jeremiah Johnson*. Incidentally, *The Mountain Men* also recounts the end of an era (in 1838, the price of beaver collapsed and the rendezvous lost their shine), while borrowing from some canonical Rocky folklore, particularly Colter’s run (a narrative device already used in *Across the Wide Missouri*, in which an American Indian war party ritualistically hunts down a lone trapper) and Hugh Glass’s epic.



American poster for *The Mountain Men*, with Charlton Heston and Brian Keith (1980).

***The Revenant*: between history and legend**

The Revenant is a disguised remake of *Man in the Wilderness*, already tormented and contemplative in style.⁶ It also echoes the narrative framework of *Jeremiah Johnson*: loss of loved ones, desire for revenge, an ‘American Indian’ ending in which the cycle of revenge is brought to a close. But given its critical and, above all, incredible commercial success (more than 500 million dollars in the box office to date, for a budget of 135 million), Iñárritu’s work is maybe not just another trapper film in Hollywood. In point of fact, it is a particularly powerful tool for retranscribing and therefore interpreting the past – that of the American West.

The Revenant is a historical fiction ‘based on a true story’, as the expression goes. In actual fact, we know very little about Hugh Glass.⁷ In 1823, he was an experienced hunter, aged around 40, who knew how to read and write (which set him apart from lots of other trappers) and he was said to have spent time living among the Pawnees. In the spring of that year, he answered an advert in the St. Louis Gazette looking for a hundred men ‘to ascend the River Missouri’ collecting pelts by trade or trap, for veteran fur trader Andrew Henry (older than in *The Revenant*) and the Lieutenant Governor of Missouri, William Ashley. However, the expedition suffered a terrible setback in early June, when several hundred Arikaras (generally called ‘Ris’ or ‘Rees’ by the French mountain men, who regularly shortened ethnonyms) launched a surprise attack leaving fifteen (and not thirty) trappers dead. Due to the Arikara threat, Henry and Ashley decided not to use the Missouri as their main avenue into the trapping ground and to travel by horse and land instead. This conflict was therefore a decisive turning point in the history of pelt gathering, as the famous rendezvous system (depicted in *Across the Wide Missouri*, *Centennial* and *The Mountain Men*) was born two years later in 1825.

⁶ Sarafian’s film was not mentioned by the promoters of Iñárritu’s film, including Iñárritu himself.

⁷ See John Myers Myers, *The Saga of Hugh Glass, Pirate, Pawnee and Mountain Man* (University of Nebraska Press: 1976); Jon T. Coleman, *Here Lies Hugh Glass: A Mountain Man, a Bear and the Rise of the American Nation* (Hill & Wang: 2012).

In August 1823, some of the thirty odd trappers under Andrew Henry's leadership tried to reach Fort Henry, at the mouth of the Yellowstone (Montana). This is when Glass, a member of that brigade, suffered an almost fatal attack by a female grizzly bear. Unable to move or even to speak, he was carried on a stretcher for several days but his companions were unable to heal him. John Fitzgerald and a certain 'Bridges', maybe Jim Bridger – who would become one of the most famous Rocky trappers in the 1830s and 1840s⁸ – agreed to stay with Glass until his imminent death, in exchange for payment. But the two trappers ended up abandoning their dying companion, taking all his survival material (rifle, knife, tomahawk, etc.) with them. Glass nevertheless managed to survive, crawling and living off berries, insects, and snakes. Once back on the Missouri, he was saved and healed by Sioux (a Pawnee in the film) and made his way 250 miles upstream to Fort Kiowa (or Fort Brazeau in South Dakota). He then travelled back in the other direction to Fort Henry, where he found young Bridger and contented himself with giving him a stern talking-to. Finally, he came face-to-face with Fitzgerald in June 1824 at another post, Fort Atkinson in Nebraska (in the film, 'Fort Kiowa' condenses three separate posts). However, once again, he exacted no revenge: Fitzgerald, who had recently enrolled in the American army, simply gave Glass his rifle, a symbol of his status as a hunter and his besmirched honour.

Although Glass – who died ten years later at the hands of Arikara warriors – was a real historical figure, his legend was pieced together from small parcels of information with varying degrees of authenticity. We cannot therefore hold it against Alejandro González Iñárritu that he embellished this semi-legendary material, which was inherently suited to being deformed and exaggerated. Hugh Glass's heroic adventure immediately became a renowned exploit in the trapper world, a tale told at night by the campfire to impress the tenderfeet. Glass, who would show off his scars, contributed to enrolling this narrative in local folklore. However, his odyssey also escaped him to some extent when it was first written up in a literary magazine in Philadelphia, in 1825 ('The Missouri Trapper'). In the years that followed, several written versions of this Missouri '*chanson de geste*' were published, giving it a national audience.

Since the seventeenth century, the theme of the bear attack has held a special place in the 'white' cynegetic folklore of North America. In the nineteenth century, the grizzly bear, with its strength and ferociousness, was the most powerful symbol of the wilderness that served as a backdrop to the invention – or the imagination – of the American nation. In the same period, Davy Crockett became known in Tennessee for his exploits as a bear killer (of black bears, more specifically, slightly less terrifying than grizzly bears). Like Crockett, albeit on a different scale, Glass became a celebrity in his lifetime and, in both cases, the myth obviously contributed widely to the history. In the following century, Glass's posterity included a poem by John G. Neihardt, *The Song of Hugh Glass* (1915), Frederick Manfred's novel *Lord Grizzly* (1954), the film *Man in the Wilderness* (1971), and finally Michael Punke's novel *The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge* (2002).

The road to authenticity

Taking up Hugh Glass's story – which clearly corresponds to the fascination of American (and other) audiences with the theme of survival in a hostile environment – the Mexican filmmaker has created a violent fable about America's origins, a fable haunted by death and the West's guilty conscience. He presents a primordial world in its twilight years,

⁸ In American popular culture, he is an ambiguous figure. The Nazi killer (Brad Pitt) in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) presents himself as a direct descendent of Jim Bridger, who was the quintessential Indian killer in Tarantino's eyes.

with roaming ghosts and skulls piled high. Glass, an elegiac and sentimental figure, the martyr of the Far West, is the perfect exemplar of this dramatizing of death, somewhere between a raw tale of survival and a familial quest with metaphysical undertones. In the hero's visions and wanderings, a mixed-race son (a teenager, named Hawk) is by his side along with his Pawnee mother, killed by an officer in the American army. Figments of the filmmaker's imagination, these two characters place the hero on the side of empathy with the Indian world, in contrast with the French Canadians and Fitzgerald, who embody the darkest side of colonisation.

The Revenant works like a universal but tormented celebration of family. A father's love, whispers Iñárritu, transcends cultures⁹: Glass maintains a spiritual link with his son, while Chief Elk Dog has only one aim (the only aim ever discernable among the Arikaras depicted) – finding his kidnapped daughter. Inventing the character of Hawk also served to legitimise the hero's irrepressible desire for revenge. Whereas in *Man in the Wilderness*, Richard Harris presents a sort of Far West hippy, both libertarian and charitable, in Iñárritu's film, on the contrary, redemption comes from bloodshed, from the virile fulfilment of a planned vendetta (albeit one that leaves a bitter taste and leads to an ambiguous form of liberation). In another place and time, the very virile Charles Bronson could easily have slipped into the shredded clothes of the Rocky trapper.

These narrative choices go hand-in-hand with geographical improvisations that paradoxically testify to a concern with hyperrealism. Whereas the 'real' Hugh Glass's long, difficult journey took place in the summer and in the Plains (South Dakota, the more peaceful landscapes of *Dances with Wolves*), Iñárritu chose a mountainous natural park in Alberta as the backdrop to his story, which he filmed in winter (shooting had to move to Patagonia after an early thaw in Canada). This choice was guided by both narrative concerns – emphasising the dramatic nature of the survival process, which is completely miraculous when you consider the effects of hypothermia – and aesthetic concerns – capturing the splendour of the wilderness as much as possible. It can also be seen as an understandable quest for authenticity. In the wake of Werner Herzog's feverish epics, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), the filmmaker wanted to make shooting into a truthful experience of the field; a space of performance, even. By putting the actors' bodies to the test, he wanted them to be faced with the harsh animal realities of the wilderness, and particularly with glacial temperatures reaching -30°C or -40°C – just like the trappers of yesteryear (relatively speaking!). This naturalist approach, aimed at generating empathy from an audience transformed into voyeurs, witnesses to a 'made in Hollywood' form of masochism, explains why Leonardo DiCaprio was awarded an Oscar for Best Actor, as his suffering onscreen was not always an act. *The Revenant* is above all the ego trip of a filmmaker looking to showcase his brio. However, the choice of shooting conditions, far from the subdued warmth of a studio, could also be seen as a social science approach – a little like the sailors who, aboard the *Hermione*, a replica of Lafayette's frigate, experience eighteenth century navigation conditions.

⁹ And extends beyond nature and culture too: the female grizzly bear who mutilates Glass, protecting her cubs, embodies maternal love.



Leonardo DiCaprio (Hugh Glass), on the verge of hypothermia, in *The Revenant* (2015).

The Revenant offers an excellent reconstruction of everything relating to material culture: costumes, survival equipment, firearms, preparation of pelts, keelboats, small forts, American Indian villages, etc. The production team called on expertise from fur trade historians affiliated with the *Museum of the Fur Trade* (Nebraska) and the *Museum of the Mountain Man* (Wyoming). They also worked with linguists specialising in the related Pawnee and Arikara languages spoken by the film's American Indian protagonists. The use of native languages has become a requirement in Hollywood ever since *Dances with Wolves* in 1990 (despite the fact that specialists find the Pawnee language used in Kevin Costner's film laughable). The last remaining native speakers of Pawnee and Arikara disappeared at the turn of the 2000s, so *The Revenant's* producers consulted several linguists, including Douglas R. Parks,¹⁰ an anthropologist at Indiana University who has been studying these two languages for almost fifty years. As the film shows, the Arikaras and Pawnees were far from the most 'typical' Indians of the Plains; unlike the Sioux, for example, they were sedentary, agricultural peoples who lived in large earth lodges. For once in Hollywood, here the Pawnees are not restricted to their role as the villains of the Plains. Ultimately, though, we learn very little about the American Indians, who flit across the screen like shadows.

In general, *The Revenant* tells us more about our time than about that of the trappers. The West in 1823 (although it could have been another date, as the film provides no contextualisation) serves above all as the canvas for an eschatological painting of a fallen humanity, disseminating today's political correctness. The filmmaker's denunciation of a set of varied ills – unbridled capitalism, Western materialism, the corruption of money, the destruction of wildlife, the despoilment of the Indians, racism, and violence against women – comes at the price of several anachronisms. Of course, these ills were all present in the early nineteenth-century West, but they were far from the only regulating principles of the social worlds recreated in the film. Rape, for example, was not a trivialised act in the world of the mountain men, contrary to what the film suggests. When Euro-Americans in Indian country

¹⁰ With the help of Logan Sutton, who gave Leonardo DiCaprio pronunciation lessons (in Pawnee).

took up with Indian women, it was usually in the context of marriage. As for the piles of buffalo skulls filling Glass's guilty conscience, they reflect Buffalo Bill's years of extermination (the 1860s and 1870s) more than they reflect the 1820s.

The West: a French History

Despite its considerable sophistication, *The Revenant* also revives American popular culture's clichés about foreigners, with very little subtlety. Setting aside the Hollywood tradition of the French or Parisian 'bad guy'¹¹, more fundamentally, in Iñárritu's film, an old catalogue of stereotypes about French Canadians is at work. In the imaginary of the United States, the most noble ambassador of the 'white race', most likely to subdue savagery, could only ever be American (from Virginia, Kentucky, etc.). However, when it comes to representations of the West in the first half of the nineteenth century, this stereotype comes up against a sticking point, namely the historical and linguistic reality of the time: almost three quarters of fur company employees working in the Plains and the Rockies were French speakers.

Although in American memory, the most famous hunters of the West were Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, and Hugh Glass (all Americans), in the 1820s the most renowned hunter was in fact a Canadian named Etienne Provost (a toponym in Utah – the town of Provo – is named after him). A fur trade entrepreneur of the time called him, in French, '*l'âme des chasseurs des montagnes*' ('the soul of the mountain hunters'). Hugh Glass was even employed by Provost in 1824-1825. Incidentally, it is likely that the French term '*chasseur des montagnes*' (or the term *montagnard*) was adapted into Mountain Man or Mountaineer etc. in English, rather than the other way round. Similarly, many toponyms in the American West have French roots (or American Indian before that): in the early nineteenth century, people referred to the Côtes Noires and the Roche Jaune river, rather than the Black Hills and the Yellowstone. As the mini-series *Centennial* illustrated, the first hunters and traders of European origin in the Plains, from the late eighteenth century onwards, were French speakers. This French precedence, which throws a bit of a spanner in the works when it comes to the ideological driving force of Manifest Destiny (or the exceptional nature of the United States), might explain the low level of interest that American studios have shown in the trappers' 'multicultural' world. In this case, the Hollywood matrix has contributed to erasing the French memory of the American continent.

The ellipses in the film *Dances with Wolves* are symptomatic of this. Although it is not a trapper film, Costner's fresco adopts a Conradian approach reminiscent of the 'cycle of savagery' of the 1970s: it depicts the imminent tragedy of the conquest of the Plains, while at the same time celebrating revitalising the self by returning to nature, embodied here by the 'good' Sioux 'savage'. However, this flamboyant evocation of the Frontier of *before* comes at the price of several historical ellipses. The audience is given the impression that Lieutenant Dunbar is almost the first White man to enter this region among the Sioux and the Pawnees (the story is set in 1863, in the middle of the American civil war). However, historically, the French-speaking *coureurs de bois* or "*voyageurs*" had been crossing the length and breadth of these spaces for more than a century. With the exception of the mention of a Spanish explorer's helmet, kept at the back of a tipi, this early part of the 'European' history of the West is completely written off by the Hollywood machine.

¹¹ For example, Mickael Lonsdale (*Moonraker*, 1979), Louis Jourdan (*Octopussy*, 1983), Lambert Wilson (*Matrix Reloaded*, 2003), Vincent Cassel (*Ocean's Twelve*, 2004), Mathieu Amalric (*Quantum of Solace*, 2008), etc.

Representations of French speakers

When filmmakers have chosen to represent French-speaking trappers, it has tended to be in subaltern, stereotypical roles, with a view to bolstering the civility and masculine glory of their American protagonists. In this respect, Westerns take up the legacy of a narrative tradition that goes back to the American tales of the first half of the nineteenth century, in which French-speaking fur traders and hunters are portrayed as depraved, turned savage, and lacking virility, with no historical depth. On screen, the French Canadian voyageur, often recognisable from his red hat or bandana, always lives in the shadows of the American hero. At best, he is cheerful, cowardly, and clumsy; at worst, he is depraved, libidinous, drunk, violent, and treacherous. That being said, each film sets its own tone.



Part of the crew of the Mandan, the boat in *The Big Sky* (1952). From left to right, Henri Letondal (Labadie), Dewey Martin (B. Caudill), Arthur Hunnicutt (Z. Calloway), Kirk Douglas (J. Deakins), Steven Geray (Jourdonnais) and boxing champion Buddy Bear (Romaine).

Made after the war, *Across the Wide Missouri* and *The Big Sky* are the films that are more sensitive to linguistic diversity and to the contingencies of mediation. In *Across the Wide Missouri*, the trapper and interpreter Pierre ‘La Framboise’, played by Franco-American Adolphe Menjou, speaks mainly in French. During a summer rendezvous, he exclaims ‘Vive la France’ in the middle of a drunken brawl (the director W. Wellman had fought in France in 1918 in the Lafayette Esquadrille) and, during Christmas celebrations, all the trappers, including the hero Flint Mitchell (Clark Gable), break into song with ‘*Alouette gentille Alouette, Alouette, je te plumerai!*’ Nevertheless, it is a Canadian who treacherously murders the old Blackfoot Chief. In *The Big Sky*, the two heroes from Kentucky, Boone¹² Caudill and Jim Deakins, board a boat captained by the ‘Frenchy’ trader Jourdonnais. The crew is entirely French-speaking, albeit bilingual, such as Labadie played by Quebecois actor Henri Letondal. The picture painted of the boatmen is sometimes affectionate (the bad guys in the film are English-speakers), but tainted with condescension. The narrator describes Jourdonnais as a

¹² Reference to the famous hunter Daniel Boone, one of the ‘founders’ of Kentucky at the end of the eighteenth century.

‘crazy Frenchman’ and, above all, the ‘French’ are shown to be less virile and resourceful than their American counterparts, who distinguish themselves with their superior use of a rifle and their erotic potential.

In *Jeremiah Johnson*, however, the trappers are all English-speaking, including Joseph Robidoux, a trader of French origin. As a comic device, one of Johnson’s companions communicates with the Flathead Chief Two-Tongues Lebeaux in French. This dialogue serves to underscore Johnson’s sense of being linguistically at sea, as he becomes the butt of amusing cultural mistakes. As for *The Mountain Men*, it gives little space to French speakers and only ever on a deprecatory mode: we encounter a greedy tradesman, Fontenelle, and a lecherous trapper with a foul mouth (*‘Sacré merde’*, *‘sale con’*, and other such insults) called La Bont.



Robert Conrad in the role of Pasquinel, among Pawnee Indians (first episode of *Centennial*, 1978).

In short, the only positive Hollywood depiction of a French-speaking *voyageur* appears in *Centennial*. The Canadian hero Pasquinel is described as an intelligent, resourceful man of action. American actor Robert Conrad saw this as his best role ever, peppering his English with Gallicisms (*‘mon ami’*, etc.). We see him rowing while singing an old French song (*‘M’en revenant de la jolie Rochelle / J’ai rencontré trois jolies demoiselles (bis) / C’est l’aviron qui nous mène, qui nous mène / C’est l’aviron qui nous mène en haut!’*) and, in further testimony to the series’ sensitivity to America’s French past, composer John Addison even slipped a few notes of the French national anthem into his score.

Toussaint Charbonneau, a Hollywood *bad guy*

While creating stereotypes can encourage understanding of a historical period, when they slip into caricature, this becomes counter productive. Iñárritu and his co-screenwriter Mark L. Smith chose to revive the negative image of French Canadians in the character of Toussaint (played by French actor Fabrice Adde, whose Parisian accent will be disconcerting to Quebecois viewers), albeit adapting the stereotype to the current climate. The character in question is Toussaint Charbonneau, mainly known by Americans for having been one of the protagonists of Lewis and Clark’s expedition in the Rockies (1804-1806). Husband to the famous Shoshone Sacagawea (or Sakakawea), Charbonneau has a disastrous reputation in American popular culture: novels, films, and history books alike all depict him as a lout, who

lacked discipline and put up derisory obstacles to Anglo-Saxon expansion.¹³ His marked villainy – he is a drinker and a coward, turned savage, who views his wife as a slave – serves to better enhance the impeccable morals and courage of the Americans. Rudolph Maté's film *The Far Horizon* (1955) even goes so far as to invent a romance between Sacagawea (Donna Reed) and William Clark (Charlton Heston) who, unlike the hirsute and vindictive Canadian (Alan Reed), is a civiliser capable of true love.

It is therefore no surprise that, in *The Revenant*, the very same Charbonneau has the foulest role; the unscrupulous White man solely occupied with feasting and brutally violating women. Unlike Fitzgerald, whose infamy derives from psychological factors (he was scalped once and continues to act from fear), Toussaint's violence seems purely gratuitous. In this sense, he is as much of an exaggerated 'bad guy' as the Mexican characters often present in the Westerns of yesteryear (did Mexican Iñárritu remember this?). The 'real' Charbonneau, who was a protégé of William Clark's for many years and a precious interpreter for the American government, was in no way the villain depicted by *The Revenant*. Incidentally, he was one of Hugh Glass's companions and, in this sense, while the opposition between the 'French' and 'American' companies may serve the purposes of the plot, it certainly offers a poor reflection of the historical reality, because many French speakers worked for American 'bourgeois' (entrepreneurs).

Historians cannot fail to be struck by the sign '*On est tous des sauvages*' attached to the body of a hanged Indian at the entrance to the Canadian *coureurs de bois* camp. This sign echoes one put up by a late seventeenth-century French deserter in the south of the Great Lakes: '*Nous sommes tous sauvages*'. But it is taken up here in an outrageous reversal of its original meaning (and we have to wonder if the screenwriters even understood that?). When the original deserter claimed to be a 'savage', it was in defiance, because he had internalised colonial discourse about 'savagery' and was contesting legitimate (colonial) authority. His openly proclaimed transgression expressed a desire for freedom, a desire to overthrow hierarchies; it was the cry of a subordinate and ultimately a freethinker, in the seventeenth-century sense of the word (emancipated man). Quite the opposite, therefore, of the killers of Indians and rapists of women to be found in Toussaint's camp.

Of course, the sign in question – '*On est tous des sauvages*' – has broader scope, because it is intended to denounce Western violence as a whole. In front of Iñárritu's camera, Hugh Glass's epic tale becomes the almost timeless symptom of colonial predation and the violation of nature.

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¹³ See Laura Knowlton-Le Roux, 'Sacajawea vs. Charbonneau. Anti-French Sentiment in Lewis & Clark Expedition Fiction', *Transatlantica*, 1, 2006. See also Denis Vaugeois, *America*, Sillery, Septentrion, 2002.