Motifs
ISSN : 2726-0399

9 | 2025
Trouble on Screen

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https://lodelpreprod.univ-rennes2.fr/motifs/index.php?id=1137

DOI : 10.56078/motifs.1137

Référence électronique
Patrick Adamson, « Trouble on the Historical Frontier: Will Rogers' *Two Wagons—Both Covered* (1924) », *Motifs* [En ligne], 9 | 2025, mis en ligne le 25 février 2025, consulté le 03 novembre 2026. URL : https://lodelpreprod.univ-rennes2.fr/motifs/index.php?id=1137

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PLAN

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TEXTE

1 The concluding sequence of *Two Wagons—Both Covered* (Rob Wagner, 1924), co-written by and starring Will Rogers, sees a pioneer party newly arrived on Californian soil ambushed by a band of "Escrow Indians." At first, they circle their victims, encroaching behind a camouflage of leaves and branches (Fig. 1), before they lower their disguises to reveal white faces and tailored suits. The attackers are not Native Americans, protective of a land invaded, but real estate agents determined to profit off one. In return for their wagons, possessions, and livestock, the settlers receive scraps of paper, deeds for unseen properties that even the realtors' boosterist rhetoric can scarcely redeem: "between the mountains and the sea—swept by ocean breezes—hot an' cold folding doors—gas, sewers an' 5 cent carfare" (Fig. 2). The nation's imagined forefathers have arrived in the West expecting an untamed land of promise, only to find that it is not merely barren but already taken. And in an ironic turn, its reputed tamers, emboldened by unchecked individualism, beget a new chaos.

Fig. 1 "Escrow Indians" in…


Fig. 1 "Escrow Indians" in…

Fig. 2. … and out of camouflage in *Two Wagons—Both Covered*.


Fig. 2. … and out of camouflage in Two Wagons—Both Covered.

2 Deployed here is an Indian ambush trope closely associated with both cinematic Western narratives and the era's dominant ideas about American historical progress. At its heart is a conflict foundational to genre and nation alike, between expansionist pioneers and the forces of indigenous resistance. But here, with its traditional racial dynamic reversed—white landholders advancing *as*, rather than being menaced *by*, the encircling "Indians"—the connection between this familiar iconographic shape and the course of history it implies comes into question. Racing across the continent to the Promised Land, reaching the end of the trail, the heroes find a West "civilized" only in the sense that it is now a site for exploitation and capitalist greed.

3 Above all else, however, the incident at hand is most obviously, and quite simply, a dramatic situation made funny. It is an assault treated with neither the solemnity of traditional historical discourse nor the sincerity of the typical sagebrush melodrama.[1] With risible pioneers and incongruous white "Indians," its re-enactment of the westering experience is an eminently flawed, inauthentic one. And yet, it is because of these flaws—its inability to sincerely recreate a convincing past, or at least, treat it with the reverence traditionally accorded history—that this comedy of frontier life works as a parody. Through its absurd, yet tellingly familiar, gesture at the most orthodox of American stories, it reflects upon, self-consciously invites comparison with, and ultimately troubles a far more assured set of "truth" claims—those of the object of its ridicule: the historical Western film.

4 *Two Wagons* is not concerned with just any Western. In fact, it is a parody of the most celebrated historical film of its day. Released the previous year, Paramount's landmark epic of the Oregon Trail pioneers *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923) was then ranked by many as the most admirable thing to have come out of Hollywood in its short history — "the picture event of a decade," according to *Variety*: "Not since *The Birth of a Nation* has there been

a screen offering so universally heralded by press and public" (27). Among reviewers, it was declared "the first great picture to bring home to us the history of our own country" (Alison Smith 54) and "the great American picture," a "screen history" that marked "a tremendous leap forward in the progress of this art and this industry" ("Illustrated" 913).

5 An archetype for a new kind of large-form historical film, endorsed by Hollywood's advocates and critics alike, *The Covered Wagon* inaugurated a series of prestige Westerns that, cumulatively speaking, proposed to use cinema, a medium celebrated for its privileged bond to reality, to tell the foundational story of the United States—that of the nineteenth-century frontier. In line with the dominant historiographical tendency of the era, they presented it as the site in which a nation and its people had been made (Etulain 42). Titles such as *North of 36* (Irvin Willat, 1924), *The Iron Horse* (John Ford, 1924), *The Pony Express* (James Cruze, 1925), and *The Vanishing American* (George B. Seitz, 1925) were hailed for the rare "authenticity" they brought to interpreting the United States' constructive Old West period—a heritage of westbound pioneers and doomed Indians, transcontinental railroads and new trails of human commerce.

6 In the years to come, James Cruze's dramatic recreation of life on the Oregon Trail would assume a central role in most genealogies of not only its genre, but American cinema as a whole, as evidence of a scandal-beset Hollywood moving in a promising new direction: one of popular edification through legitimate historical representation, and *American* historical representation in particular (Hampton 338-340, Messel 222-223). "To Utopia in the Covered Wagon," declared noted pioneer of English-language film theory Vachel Lindsay, arguing that only through cinema could the diverse, multilingual populace of the present hope to witness and learn from its forebears' most admirable collective accomplishments (336, 363-364). The epic Western's moving "truths," written in a visual language *all* could apparently understand, were to elevate, unify, and Americanise. During a period in which immigration, urbanisation, and industrialisation called for modern, affirmative forms of social cohesion, *The Covered Wagon*'s screen history of the pioneers offered a singularly timely, persuasive, and wide-reaching delineation of America's collective identity.

7 By comparison, the frontier spectacle of *Two Wagons* is neither persuasive nor momentous. It is "bad" history, and yet, in its being so, it is a noteworthy challenge to not only the era's dominant idealisms about historical practice and Western cinema, but also the national story they together served. Transposed into the comic mode, it offers something less *historical* than *counter-historical*. This study examines the silent-era epic Western parody on the basis that it *does not* propose to capture "authentic" frontier scenes nor to present an alternative account of westward migration. It aspires to be implausible and disorderly, yet for it, a tacit reminder of the past's ultimate unknowability. Adopting a style laced with irony, it casts the epic Western's new approach to screen history as one unduly sanitized and self-satisfied: overblown tributes to pioneer heroism are exaggerated to the point of ridicule; majestic restagings of documented scenes are belittled; and prideful national teleologies are upended. At bottom, the film unsettles the epic Western's most fundamental premises and assumptions: it highlights the dangers of making rigid assertions about history's meaning and direction by ridiculing a film that, for doing just that, was consistently cited as the foremost evidence of Hollywood taking on a new, prosocial role in American society.

8 For all that inflated, self-congratulatory visions of national-historical process brought middlebrow legitimacy to the Western, they also evidently made it ripe for deflation. By the end of 1923 alone, the short comedies *The Uncovered Wagon* (J.A. Howe, 1923), *The Covered Push-Cart* (Paul Terry, 1923), and *The Covered Schooner* (Harry Edwards, 1923) were all in distribution (though the latter sends up Paramount's then-most-acclaimed landmark in name only). Then, in 1924, came *Two Wagons*. A two-reeler from Hal Roach Studios, co-written by and starring the "all-American" political humorist Rogers, it proved a hit of unexpected scale. Trade papers reported "house record" multi-week screening runs, accompanied by promotional campaigns of "feature proportions" ("Tried" 37). Declared to be "an unprecedented occurrence in the realm of short subjects" and "a two-mile advance in short comedies," its popular success—which included a seven week stay as the feature presentation at the Miller Theatre, Los Angeles—drew notice even from writers who typically overlooked short subjects (Agnes Smith 55).

9 As with any parody, *Two Wagons*'s success clearly depended upon the cultural knowledge of its audience. It demanded what might be thought of as a double vision—a recognition of simultaneous familiarity and difference, of operating both inside and outside—one that is fundamental to the appeal of *Two Wagons*, and not simply on account of its being a parody. Enormously popular as the "serious" historical epic burlesqued by it was, its star and co-writer was, in fact, even more of a household name in 1920s America. And when he came to opine on his nation's Western heritage, he did so on terms akin to those of his chosen form: as an embodiment of both familiarity and difference, an insider and outsider.

10 As Daniel Heath Justice writes in his literary history of the Cherokee Nation, *Our Fire Survives the Storm*: "There has been no single Cherokee who influenced the world like Will Rogers, 'The Cherokee Kid.' He was the unofficial voice of the idealized United States, a man who gently but firmly held a mirror up to the American public and teased its excesses and failings while celebrating its virtues" (119). Belying the dominant perception of his homespun public persona, Rogers was a cowboy *and* an Indian—and one of the most influential voices in the United States of the 1920s and 30s. Born in Indian Territory in 1879 to prominent members of the Cherokee Nation, he became a naturalized American via the Curtis Act in 1898. By the 1920s, Rogers was, at once, recognized as an authority on all things Western, and a proud, vocal Cherokee with a unique platform for sending them up. Despite coming from a marginalized community, his commentary not only *spoke to* but was *heard in* the very heart of American political life. As a friend to presidents and a patriotic "unofficial ambassador" for the nation, he was unusually well placed to ridicule a power in which he was, in no small way, embedded—and he did so though an unassuming "All-American" brand of humor, targeting the beneficiaries of wealth and privilege in a manner that saw him embraced as a voice of the people (Justice 124). The folksy populist humor and common-sense philosophizing of this rope-twirler turned actor, writer, and radio commentator found an estimated audience of forty million by the time of his death in 1935 (Velikova 83).

11 Accordingly, rather than using traditional realist strategies to critique the nostalgic "content" of the myth, *Two Wagons* finds Rogers

adopting, while crucially problematizing, the appearance of a notedly "American" form of historicizing. As a quintessentially mainstream public figure whose satirical commentary on the day's events found favor across the political divisions of the United States, he revises and critiques the national orthodoxy *from within*, by advancing the alternative, ironic type of historical representation seen in the opening example—disjunctive and unreliable, not natural, inevitable, or truthful. The trappings of the "serious" historical Western appear, but through a lens of scrutiny that exposes the incongruities and hypocrisies of "civilizing" rhetoric and action, along with the privileged claims to "authenticity" so often ascribed to the film medium. Troubled under the guise of humor, common settings and conventions become a site for their own negation. And disorder, reflexivity, and slapstick violence—not destiny—are identified as the forces impelling the pioneers and their nation westward.

Comedy, History, Counter-History

12 If the Western's epic incarnation represents a *historical* turn for its genre, its parodies offer a *counter-historical* alternative. *Two Wagons* is no rival account of frontier life, told via the unproblematic linkage of Western form and content that saw films like *The Covered Wagon* deemed so self-evidently "authentic." Instead, in the name of comedy, it exaggerates and inverts the powerful rhetorical maneuvers of screen "truth," denaturalizing the work of representing history in the epic's sweeping, totalizing terms. Drawing popular attention to the fallibility, mutability, and, above all, textuality of conventional narratives, it separates past and presentation—providing no answers, but problematizing, and thus inviting inquiry into, historical representation itself.

13 Nevertheless, avowedly non-realist histories have not always been valued by scholars. For all that postmodernism has, in the past half-century, challenged the dominant idealisms of the historical profession—emphasizing the subjective, constructed nature of all narratives about the past—historical films in the comic key have generally received little attention. Their extravagances are scarcely considered

to be in accord with the rational asceticism of legitimate historiography.

14 Only in the twenty-first century, and under an expanded sense of what constitutes historical thinking, has there been substantial recognition of their potential. In the introduction to his 2011 edited collection *Historical Comedy on Screen*, Hannu Salmi notes that even the thriving, often innovative field of historical film research remains "generally humorless": "It is assumed that one must reverentially bow down one's head before history, be serious and defer to the past, allowing it to speak with a voice of its own" (14)—something he links to the empiricist's intended elision of their own involvement in meaning production. To warrant "serious study," historical films should avoid reflecting on the surface of their primary illusion: a coherent, veracious, unified past (14). Comic counter-histories like *Two Wagons* tend to do the very opposite, reflexively placing acknowledgement of their subjective narrative processes at the center of their text.

15 Oppositions between "serious" and "comic" are not entirely unhelpful, however. The rupture between the hegemonic frontier thesis and its relatively minor humorous antithesis can point to fissures in the consensus, even where that consensus has been potently articulated. With filmgoers' responses rarely finding their way into written record, it is appealing to assume that the descendants of the lionized pioneers did not critically engage with their day's dominant narratives as we do today. Such complexities and discrepancies in reception *can* be traced to some degree is in the parody, which exploits the familiar and mobilizes an awareness of both text and hypotext at once. Recognizing this intertextual play is particularly significant where history is involved, for it creates a sense of interpretive provisionality. Traditional screen histories are closed stories that aim for an impression of fidelity to historical reality, clearly defined in spatio-temporal terms and illusory in their avoidance of anachronism or reference to cinematic apparatus. Historical comedies emphasize these same elements to hyper-visible and disruptive effect, revealing their narrative processes to the spectator in the expectation that they will take pleasure in seeing these alternative "truths" exposed and the text's illusion of a past reality undone.

16 Perhaps the most pertinent articulation of this idea, at least where *Two Wagons* is concerned, is one little discussed in the nascent scholarship on historical comedy films. In her 1991 collection *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Carolyn Walker Bynum calls for historians to adopt a "comic" mode when writing and acknowledge "history's artifice, risks, and incompletion":

> A comic stance knows there is, in actuality, no ending (happy or otherwise)—that doing history is, for the historian, telling a story that could be told in another way. For this reason, a comic stance welcomes voices hithertofore left outside, not to absorb or mute them but allow them to object and contradict. Its goal is the pluralist, not the total. It embraces the partial as partial. And, in such historical writing as in the best comedy, the author is also a character. Authorial presence and authorial asides are therefore welcome; methodological musing—even polemic—is a part of, not substitute, for doing history. (23-25)

17 Comic stances, by Bynum's reading, present an antidote to prescriptive interpretations and determinism. Rigid connections between retrospective depictions and the "real" past are dissolved by a mode of address which confounds claims to authority and neutrality. Assertions of closure are tempered by the very uncertainty that empirical methods look to remove.

18 As illustrated by the opening example, the "Escrow Indian" attack, Rogers adopts a comic stance in parodying *The Covered Wagon*. Operating without recourse to scholarly standards, his images of the ridiculous evoke the dominant practices of the frontier filmmaker and historian, but are characterized by narration that is candid about its attendant relativity, subjectivity, and epistemological limitations. The result is firmly in line with Marcia Landy's definition of *counter-history*: "an escape from formal history to a world of affect, invention, memory, art, reflection, and action" that confounds established ideas about history's proper form to, instead, caricature and puncture dominant representations (xi). Assuming an "active and irreverent position for the reader and viewer," it poses a self-conscious challenge to its "serious" counterpart's cogent, self-contained narratives and grand epochal "truths" (x).

19 By re-presenting familiar situations for incongruous and humorous effect, *Two Wagons* undermines the confident assertions of "authenticity" that had seen *The Covered Wagon* acclaimed as an exemplar for Hollywood historical filmmaking, opening the decisive conclusions of the US foundation myth to multiplicity and alternative perspectives. Through laughter and critical reflection, it highlights something that the majority of treatments of the Western past overlooked: that it was far from linear, often chaotic, and ultimately unknowable.

Re-presenting the Frontier

20 Released half a decade before its star's talkie heyday, *Two Wagons—Both Covered* represents a relative footnote in Will Rogers' film career, the two-reel product of a brief and comparatively unremarkable collaboration with Hal Roach Studios. Oklahoma-born Rogers was synonymous with the West from the early 1910s, thanks to appearances as an expert rope-twirler and rider in Wild West shows, vaudeville, and, most famously, the Ziegfeld Follies of 1917. That said, by the time of his Ziegfeld appearance, he had become as known for his humorous dialogue and homespun "everyman" philosophy as he was for his roping skills. Delivered on stage, screen, and radio, Rogers' amusing anecdotes and commentaries made a strong appeal to what was regarded as a distinctly American brand of "common sense" and saw him quickly elevated in the popular consciousness to the position of a national sage-humorist: "the court jester of the United States" (O'Brien 91). While a friend to the powerful, even those in the nation's highest office, his privileges as such a "court jester" emboldened him to ridicule them freely and often.

21 After making his debut in the 1918 Northwest drama *Laughing Bill Hyde* (Hobart Henley, 1918), Rogers would become a regular screen presence. In 1923, he embarked on a series of two-reelers at Roach's studio, in which he routinely sent up aspects of popular culture: cowboys William S. Hart and Tom Mix, along with Rudolph Valentino in *Uncensored Movies* (Roy Clements, 1923); and Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, and the Keystone Cops in *Big Moments from Little Pictures* (Roy Clements, 1924). The series was to prove short lived, however, with the lengthy intertitles required to convey

Rogers' wit proving a particular issue. Walter Kerr's seminal *Silent Clowns* offers a typical summation: "The credits read 'Titles by Will Rogers,' as indeed they should; whatever humor is in these films is both interpolated and verbal" (114).

22 On a basic level, the idea of a Western comedy would hardly have seemed novel to 1920s audiences, given the steady supply of such titles produced by the likes of Roach and Mack Sennett over the course of the preceding decade. Indeed, distinctions between the Western genre and the comic mode were arguably looser in Hollywood's silent era than any other time. Cowboy stars from the early Broncho Billy (Gilbert M. Anderson) through Tom Mix regularly starred in humorous productions. Moving in the opposite direction, Fairbanks, too, brought his exuberant athleticism and breezy light comedy to the frontier on several occasions, via titles such as *The Good Bad Man* (Allan Dwan, 1916), *The Half-Breed* (Allan Dwan, 1916), and *Wild and Woolly* (John Emerson, 1917).

23 But *Two Wagons* does not fit quite so comfortably within the silent-era comic Western corpus. Jean-Louis Leutrat, who has written extensively about the "alliance" between early frontier pictures and the comic tradition, divides 1920s Westerns into two types of work: the comedy-adjacent variety, of action, laughter, and "pure gestural expense," such as Mix's cowboy films; and the "realistic Western" that helped to sever the comedy–Western alliance—about past journeys over vast landscapes and masses "reaching a goal" (405). This latter variety, he notes, always advanced an "implicit discourse on the meaning of history" (405). As a topical parody short on slapstick and directly responsive to a pioneering epic that helped break this "alliance," Rogers' film instantiates a broader shift in frontier production.

24 Certainly, according to biographer Ben Yagoda, *Two Wagons* represents Rogers' conscious effort to move away from Roach's "knockabout" house style (206). Co-writer and director Robert Wagner's claim that theirs was the first complete script ever seen on the studio lot is almost certainly apocryphal, but this parody does adhere to the stylings of its hypotext in a pointedly meticulous fashion. It is this close resemblance, mobilizing the historical consciousness of its audience through recognition, that allows Rogers to develop perhaps his film's most striking counter-historical strategy: an ironic and

candid mode of narration, used here by a popular authority on the West to comment on and, so doing, unsettle its most elevated episodes, heroes, and chroniclers.

25 For its part, *The Covered Wagon* is a film that approaches the prevailing national mythology with an almost hagiographic reverence. The triumphalist rhetoric featured from the outset represents the germ of the period's dominant understanding of American development: that the modern nation and its people were direct products of the nineteenth-century frontier experience. Florid as it is in extending the 1840s Westport–Oregon trek into a transcontinental one in its opening intertitles—a journey that "bounded the United States of America with two Oceans"—*The Covered Wagon* sets out firmly in line with its era's frontier-historical orthodoxy: "The blood of America is the blood of pioneers—the blood of lion-hearted men and women who carved a splendid civilization out of an uncharted wilderness."

26 Rogers offers an imitation of this in accord with his cracker-barrel sense of humour. His *Two Wagons* invokes and adapts the same tenets of "serious" Hollywood historiography but pushes them yet further, making them hyper-visible. It, too, opens with teleological assertions about a nation in progress, made with the usual bombastic excess—only in this case, the hyperbole serves less to do a stirring theme justice than it does to draw attention to its conventionally vainglorious construction:

> Seventy-five years before wood alcohol and Fords civilized this country, pioneering was the chief industry. A little band of hardy pioneers (All pioneers were hardy) set out from what is now humorously called Hoboken, New Jersey.

27 By opening with a recognizable, yet atypically reflexive, preface, Rogers' vehicle fosters a critical response to the manner in which silent epic Westerns were generally historicized—defined not only by the scale of their vistas, but by their deliberate positioning as veraciously historiographical through textual inserts and, sometimes, quotations from known authorities. When adapted to introduce the dubious screen West of *Two Wagons*, these same elements appear laced with irony.

28 In a move that recalls Bynum's call for the author to be a character in their own history, Rogers himself is implicated in this early commentary on the rhetoric of frontier-historical representation, as the unreliable "expert" behind it. And from the film's opening, he constructs a mode of historicizing pointedly lacking in one of the most basic fundamentals of empirical practice: the historian's authority to determine the past's meaning. By affecting ignorance, he embraces, instead, partiality and incompleteness. With titles recalling the textual humour and parenthetical asides for which he was famous, Rogers is both *of* the diegesis and reflexively positioned as a commentator *on* it, as in the parenthetical aside: "(All pioneers were hardy)."

29 In applying his characteristic observational humor to the products of present-day capitalism, Rogers queries the very civility of modern civilization. The mention of Ford motor cars is noteworthy, and not only because it recalls the punchline of many a gag: the notoriously unreliable "flivver" or Model T. Celebrated for his self-made wealth, ruggedly individualistic disdain for inherited privilege, and professed commitment to social improvement, Henry Ford was considered a thoroughly modern throwback to a more virtuous era—a modern-day pioneer, characterized by intellectuals including Walter Lippmann as a prescient captain of industry capable of inspiring democracy's continued advancement (Lewis 115-116). Here was a visionary able to commune with the masses and direct them towards greater, thoroughly American ideals—a purpose that resonated with Hollywood's advocates. To quote Gerald Stanley Lee, a key influence on Lindsay: "Mr. Ford is making the world a university. Ten thousand factories have gone to school and the streets are full of people learning. He has arrested the attention of us all" (120).

30 Much like *The Covered Wagon* itself, Ford's successes were recognized as modern but redolent in America's timeless pioneer values. Via this early-twentieth-century icon, *Two Wagons* opens with a rote summary of the nation's development, linking the vaunted individualists of two eras. But the chronology leading from pioneers to Fords appears as dubious as the very idea of a "wood alcohol"-made civilization—a clear jibe at another recent form of "progress": Prohibition. Risible as these suggestions are, they recall one of the era's most pervasive presentist tendencies: the commonplace idea that certain

prevailing values constituted the permanent moral and cultural code of the United States. What the simultaneous hardiness and civility of past American heroes and the achievements of a modern capitalist hero have in common is not immediately clear. In fact, surrounded by nonsense and "wood alcohol," it is made strikingly unclear.

31 Rogers goes on to further ridicule the teleological impulses of Paramount's epic by consistently drawing tenuous connections to contemporary American society in both its temporal and its spatial dimensions. The host film's heroic cavalcade departs from "Westport Landing, now Kansas City," an identification that implicates both the trail that extends westward and the future that arises from it. The comic train begins its trek in, to return to the opening titles, "what is now humorously called Hoboken." Immediately following this statement, a single wagon is introduced—dirty and framed against unremarkable, flat terrain: "Just across the river, behind that spotted oxen is the Woolworth Building and Grant's Tomb—What later disastrously turned out to be New York City." Extending the existing preoccupation with symbols of modern America, it is expressly stated that the heights of US civilization might be read, instead, as "humorous" or "disastrous" extensions of the prelapsarian frontier. Upon the party's later arrival in Nebraska, the teleological essentialism of pioneer narratives is taken to its thoroughly illogical conclusion: "Seven years before the birth of Bryan"—referring to the influential orator, Prohibition advocate, and three-time Democratic presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan, born in 1860.

32 As Simon Dentith observes: "One of the typical ways in which parody works is to seize on particular aspects of a manner or a style and exaggerate it to ludicrous effect" (32). Rogers does precisely this when approaching the deterministic doctrines of frontier historiography. Just as wood alcohol did not civilize the continent, pioneering was neither the nation's "chief industry" nor a precursor to Fordist mass production. Yet, the practice of hyperbolically imitating these characteristic stylings draws attention to the inflated place it holds in conventional narratives of the United States. *Two Wagons*' early intertitles delegitimize narration through adaptation. In their descriptions and depictions, playful hyperbole is combined with a critical interest in contemporary historiography's unexamined valorization of the pioneers as the basis for the achievements of the

present day. The canonizing modes of expression which give progressive understandings of American development their deterministic shape are brought forth, to be made blatantly and comically visible, transferring emphasis onto the oft-hidden imaginative figuration involved in giving the meaning.

33 Despite sharing many of its inspiration's basic semantic elements, *Two Wagons* differentiates itself via deficiency and discontinuity, eschewing authority in favor of critical distance. This can be seen in its treatment of *The Covered Wagon*'s most commented-upon motif – the eponymous wagon train's continual movement across the landscape, right to left (Fig. 3) – a spectacle of mass migration and expansion that some observers felt best demonstrated the inherent affinity between American history and the motion picture: the progress of the nation could be graphically figured, as a dynamic of geographical penetration and character-building negotiation, East to West (*Best* 75). For Lindsay, the basic west-going migration of *The Covered Wagon*'s pioneers represented the "hieroglyphics" of a cinematic United States, "a land of action, and a land of light": "All American history, past, present and to come, is a gigantic movie" (187). Lindsay's ideas were shared by many in Hollywood, who likewise claimed a significant, even singular, capacity for representing the progress of this New World civilization in its totality (Friedman 20). Here was a purportedly American historical idiom, untethered from linguistic divisions and vitalized by the ubiquity and reproducibility of the filmgoing experience.

34 When parodied in *Two Wagons*, this perspective reveals neither a wilderness untouched nor a train endless. They appear barren and insubstantial, respectively. Rogers essentializes and miniaturizes the epic Western's tumescent representation of imperial process and progress to the point of ridicule. *The Covered Wagon*'s "mightiest caravan that was ever to crawl across the Valley of the Platte" is downsized to "a little band," with the opening shots justifying the parody's title: this is an epic of two wagons and a few cows.

Fig. 3. Westward migration as depicted in *The Covered Wagon*.


Fig. 3. Westward migration as depicted in The Covered Wagon.

Fig. 4. Westward migration as depicted in Two Wagons—Both Covered.


Fig. 4. Westward migration as depicted in Two Wagons—Both Covered.

35 Later, an intertitle announces that the caravan is now "[t]rudging over the Allegheny Mountains." It is not. Instead, it is shown crossing a flat prairie. "Two monotonous weeks later—Climbing Pikes Peak," then flashes across the screen to introduce an extreme long shot of more horizontal progress (Fig. 4). The juxtaposition between inflated rhetoric and action, effected by an overt reduction in scale and cost, is a primary strategy for generating laughter here, one that also highlights the power of nonsense for counter-historical expression. The contrast between what is seen and how it is described draws graphic attention to the mundanity of the past, onto which frontier historians and filmmakers have since retrospectively imposed an epic scale and sweeping order.

36 This is particularly significant where *Two Wagons* is concerned, in that writer-star Rogers consistently looks to move beyond merely exposing Western formula. Indeed, by stressing the limitations of its historical-representational strategies, he offers not only one of his day's most revealing critiques of the epic Western's venerated prosocial appeal, but a deflation of its sanitized and prideful arrogance. The narrator responsible for *Two Wagons* does so by being present within his own history, and not merely in terms of the titling. When Rogers interprets the frontier hero, his star persona is active in terms of both his script and his on-screen antics.

37 At the start of *The Covered Wagon*, the film's Missourian ex-army Major protagonist, Will Banion (J. Warren Kerrigan), is tasked with tending to "the loose stock in the rear" of the train. Before long, he makes a rightful ascent to lead the cavalcade in all but name. Yet, rather than the individual hero before a community, he remains always a benevolent deliverer amongst them. From within the train, he supports the national mission by assisting its germinal society through the perils of the wilderness. Even in the final scenes, when the hero is at the mercy of the villain's gun, it is only through the necessarily violent intervention of another—grizzled scout and comedy relief Bill Jackson (Ernest Torrence)—that he is spared and

left able to settle down with fellow romantic lead Molly Wingate (Lois Wilson) in Oregon, cradle of future democracy.

38 In *Two Wagons*, Rogers essays *both* Banion and Jackson. But he does so in a mock-heroic fashion, satirizing Cruze's wily pairing at their most sententious. Jackson is shown to be able to identify the Mississippi by smell alone, extending the cliché of the all-knowing scout beyond any reasonable credulity. For his part, "Will Bunian" appears as an Eastern dandy touristically living out his pioneering fantasies, akin to the cowboy-obsessed "dude" of earlier Western comedies, including Fairbanks' *Wild and Woolly*. The overall impression throughout the short is that of men indulging in a fantasy, of frontier grandstanding detached from the tenacity and reality of the living West. The chivalric constancy and lack of imposing physiognomy offered by Kerrigan's Banion—compared to most Western heroes, at least—is translated into effeminacy and ineptitude. Rogers' portrayal appropriates the ex-army major's dimensions and maps them onto the head of the "Palm Beach boys."

39 One of the most celebrated sequences of *The Covered Wagon* involves Banion leading a river crossing—a vital opportunity for the protagonist to demonstrate his mastery of the wilderness and his capacities as a natural leader. First, downriver at the North Fork of the Platte, he tests the water by leaping in on horseback. Upon their dependable guide finding it too deep to traverse, the party moves substantially upstream, and only then do they caulk their wagons for the famous crossing. In Rogers' film, the water likewise proves too deep, and Bunian's horse is drowned. He then declares: "It's all right boys. Caulk up the wagons and make ready. We'll cross at daybreak." They do, Bunian leading in his Yale swimsuit, in an act which, on one hand, confounds conventional cause-and-effect narration, but on the other, embodies the juxtapositional logic so central to Rogers' own ironic narration.

40 Throughout, Bunian and Jackson display little of the foresight of their inspirations, with their heroic qualities registering as distinctly affected. In anticipation of the "little band" beginning its trek, the tenderfoot is assigned a charge that reads near-identically to that of his "serious" counterpart: "Bunian, you will tend the loose stock in the rear." Only in this instance, the "loose stock" consists of a single cow—

and even this menial task requires more diligence than the comic cowboy can muster: a running gag across the film's prairie long shots sees Bunian racing between his cow and his love interest.

41 For her part, the analogue for Molly, played by Marie Mosquini, extends the symbolism associated with her character in *The Covered Wagon* to its heavy-handed conclusion. Knitting on the buckboard of her prairie schooner, framed halo-like by its canopy (Fig. 5), the hypotext's female lead is introduced in a well-known mid shot modelled on a 1921 painting by W. H. D. Koerner, *Madonna of the Prairie*—itself widely associated with Cruze's film and the Emerson Hough story on which it was based. Such an introduction posits Molly as a self-reliant Madonna, the matriarch of the westering civilisation. With the surroundings masked by the white schooner canopy, the pioneers' mission appears unchallenged. In *Two Wagons*, Mosquini remains positioned, *Madonna of the Prairie*-esque on the wagon for the entire first reel, as "proof that you can be a pioneer and still look like something" (Fig. 6).

Fig. 5. Lois Wilson Prairie Madonna.


Fig. 5. Lois Wilson Prairie Madonna.

Fig. 6. Marie Mosquini, Prairie Madonna.


Fig. 6. Marie Mosquini, Prairie Madonna.

42 Mosquini aside, most of the party are filthy and ill-mannered. They neither possess the high-minded infallibility of Cruze's heroes, nor warrant the sententiousness of his narrative. Masculine posturing reigns over sense: "All roosters! That's my idea of a good empire—no females," remarks Rogers' Jackson when called to intervene in a domestic dispute. The magnificent is reduced to the vulgar and misogynistic, in a transposition that accompanies the shift from ostentatious spectacle of epic cinema to the small form of the burlesque. Even the basic vocabulary used to justify the pioneer's pious moral drives is made hollow through nonsense: "I want to plow up California and sow it in something," reads one intertitle.

The West, Inside/Out

43 Though the invoked images and narratives of Western settlement are shifted into an alternative register, it remains the overwhelming *familiarity* of these elements that gives them their power. Rogers both accentuates and undermines familiar representations of the nation's white heritage. His two wagons inhabit a recognizable West, supported by heroic rhetoric and a visual impression of the era, but simultaneously unsettle it, grounding the conventionally elevated. As Linda Hutcheon writes of parody: "it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (11). In "getting" the references necessary for this type of humor, the movie-made historical consciousness of 1920s audiences was mobilized to subversive ends. To quote an exhibitor, A.D Brawner, of The Jewel theatre in Hooker, Oklahoma: "If you have run *The [Covered] Wagon*, this comedy will get extra business, but if you have not run *The Wagon* it will look like a piece of cheese. A good burlesque on *The Wagon*." ("What" 52).

44 At bottom, the film's reliance on intertextual comparisons with its hypotext granted it its appeal for those who acclaimed it while making it perplexing for those who did not.

45 In calling for this sort of double vision from its audience, the humor mirrors the identity of the humorist responsible for it. He is inside and out, marginal and central: *of* the diegesis and a commentator *on* it, a voice of the people *and* a renowned political player, an Indian *and* a cowboy. Though Rogers' acculturation to and association with white culture may have eased his acceptance as a popular hero, as a social commentator, his ties to Cherokee culture remained fundamental to how he presented himself (Ware 1). Brought together, these qualities gave rise to an uncontroversial brand of "everyman" humor that, at the same time, could be used to trouble the dominant way in which Americans saw themselves and their past.

46 Not simply antagonistic, Rogers' "All-American" Indian persona put him, to quote Justice, "in the ideal place to speak to" issues around identity and land: "as a light-skinned Cherokee well-loved in the United States, he was a stealth minority with access to a forum and a platform inaccessible to other Indians of his day" (124). Roumiana Velikova describes him working from a "position inherently antagon-

istic" to the nationwide and "predominantly non-Native audience that grew to love him": "He played on his audience's nativist prejudices and used American patriotic rhetoric successfully to reassert its very negation" (86). Joanna Hearne remarks similarly of his film work, that this Native American interloper "appropriated the conventions of mainstream Hollywood cinematic forms, subtly revising the genre (and the industry) from within" (124).

47 Next to his Irish and Scottish lines of descent, the acculturated, mixed-blood Rogers' Indian side—stereotypically associated with solemn, stoic restraint—has received scant attention (Velikova 83). That Cherokees were noted for their assimilation, and often regarded as less "Indian" than other Native Americans, certainly played a part (Justice 122). Yagoda, however, supposes that this, in fact, aided Rogers:

> Cherokees valued literacy, took 'white' names, owned slaves; they were widely considered the most 'civilized' of the Civilized Tribes. As such they—especially the mixed-bloods among them—had one foot each camp, the white and the red. They were mediators. In Rogers case, this revealed itself in a kind of dual consciousness he displayed all his life: the way he could be a hero to the forces of 'decency' and yet be a headliner in the all-but-pornographic *Ziegfeld Follies*, the way he could present himself as a mere comedian and yet be an extremely influential political voice in the country, the way he could take strong stands without, usually, offending those on the opposite side of the issue. (xii-xiii)

48 While, according to Jack and Anna Kilpatrick, "the whole world had [Cherokee humor] in the most characteristic form, and for many years, in Will Rogers" (123), the general obliviousness to its tribal specificity looks to have aided his mainstreaming. Delivered by an understated and endearingly unassuming character, beloved across the political spectrum, his commentary proved far less polarizing than might be expected given his subject matter. So it was that such contentious issues as Indian citizenship, the integration of Indian Territory into the state of Oklahoma, and the dissolution of tribal governments were all routinely addressed before his nationwide following (Velikova 86).

49 As, at once, a member of a marginalized group and a widely idolized media personality, Rogers poked fun at the excesses of his mainstream audiences and drew attention to his own complicated positionality with rare liberty. And for all that he was popularly associated with it, the West of history and legend was something he could present as an unattainable fiction, its rhetoric at odds with reality. Certainly, *Two Wagons* transforms the most established of American stories into one ripe for ridicule and, even, challenge. Via its nonsensical stylings, shaped by Rogers' patented combination of "common sense" philosophy and comedy, he makes laughable the self-seriousness with which historians and other cultural producers feted the nineteenth-century frontier past. In a notably irony-laden scene, one of the "stout-hearted" pioneers attempts to focus on a stereoscopic image of a mountainous Western idyll. He cannot, his inability to really "see" the full dimensions of the land of promise speaking to how the parody at hand took the aesthetic appeal of the frontier film—its rugged, expansive veneer—and made it appear fundamentally hollow, rupturing the past from the mediated modern-day illusion behind it.

50 With this in mind, it is worth revisiting the "Escrow Indian" attack with which this article opened. While its basic situation—arrival in the free land of the West—recalls the end of any number of pioneer narratives, the frontier of *Two Wagons* is shown to be distinctly unfree. Neither, however, is it "settled." The conventional culmination of Anglo-Saxon expansion over the landscape does not mark the birth of an exceptional society, but opens the region to corruption by white business and feverish, profoundly uncivilized land trading.

51 Writing as a naturalized American citizen—one whose native heritage long predated that which was centered by Anglo-American nativism—Rogers commented in an article published within three weeks of the film's release:

> There is a good deal in the papers of giving my native state of Oklahoma back to the Indians. Now I am a Cherokee Indian and very proud of it, but I doubt if you can get them to accept it—not in its present state.

> When the white folks come in and took Oklahoma from us, they spoiled a mighty happy hunting ground, just to give Sinclair a racing ground, and Walton a barbecue (15).

52 *Two Wagons*' parodic juxtaposition of the lionized pioneer of myth and its laughable comic counterpart brings into focus their complicity in the ills of the society they created. It is specifically *through them* that the corrupt East they abandon and deride arrives in the West. Rogers seems to ask: is a "civilization" ushered in by "wood alcohol and Fords" truly one to be celebrated? Pressed to the Atlantic, the pioneers of *Two Wagons* can no longer look towards the prairies and forests to escape the discontent and competition of Eastern civilization. Instead, they are confronted with a chaos for which they themselves are responsible.

53 None of this is to say that thinking counter-historically necessarily means being wholly disabused of some misconception about the past. Given that its star's capacity for critical commentary owes to his uncontentious mainstream persona, it would be remiss to regard Rogers' parody as serving only to undermine. Presented is a version of the West strange and disturbing in its disorder and, still, always familiar. In adopting the trappings of America's frontier orthodoxy—the westering canopies, the causal connections, the rhetorical strategies—it might equally be read as extending, even de-alienating, them, bringing closer a history elsewhere monumental and antiquated.

Conclusion

54 A Hollywood comedy, *Two Wagons* promotes critical reflection on the processes and poetics of Hollywood histories, but through a mutually beneficial intertextual relationship. They share a common business interest, after all—that of a burgeoning, oft-challenged film industry. When Agnes Smith declared it a "covered masterpiece" in *Picture-Play Magazine*, she tellingly afforded credit to both creator *and* inspiration: "the burlesque of *The Covered Wagon* is a remarkable tribute to the Cruze film because only good things inspire good burlesques" (55). This simultaneous desire for independence and recognizability constitutes parody's greatest paradox. The very need

for a "knowing" viewership perversely extends the host film's reach. But this does not preclude critical inquiry, just as parody does not necessarily serve to destroy its host. In testifying to the presence of competing interests alongside, and even within, a text that promotes a dominant ideology, parody engenders a complication and expansion of its signifying field, and a productive one at that: it belies the concept of a definitive history and creates a space for multiplicity, unshackled from the single perspective of its host product.

55 The American counter-history of *Two Wagons* exemplifies this by troubling the nation's foundational story in what was seen to be its most authoritative screen telling, at once recalling and undermining familiar treatments of this heritage. Rogers' pioneers inhabit a recognizable West, an epochal illusion supported by visual and textual standards that they simultaneously unsettle, destabilizing the truth claims of cinematic medium and epic Western product alike. Irreverent and unreliable, it implicates its own representational failures within its critique. *Its* lack of mastery, *its* inability to represent a coherent model of historical process, problematizes easy explanation of the past.

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NOTES

1 The wagon train besieged by Indians was a common Western trope from the genre's earliest years, with the dramatic cavalry-led rescue in D.

W. Griffith's *The Last Drop of Water* (1911) being a famous early example.

RÉSUMÉS

English

When Paramount's *The Covered Wagon* was released in 1923, it inaugurated Hollywood's first significant cycle of epic Westerns. Moreover, for many observers, it heralded arguably *the* most decisive intervention yet in what was already a long-running debate about the film capital and its social influence. Against a backdrop of mainstream nativism and concerns about the perceived moral slippage of the Jazz Age, these prestige treatments of the nation's "defining" frontier history were not only credited with helping to revitalise a stagnant national genre but widely cited as singular evidence of cinema's exceptional Americanising potential. Yet, the inflated vision of national-historical process that brought middlebrow legitimacy to the Western also proved ripe for deflation. This paper examines how the era's dominant ideas about history and its direction were interrogated through cinema using the example of *Two Wagons—Both Covered* (1924), an epic Western parody by one of the most influential Native Americans of the day, Will Rogers, whose Cherokee identity is often overshadowed by his "All-American" screen persona. Made by a popular authority on all things "Western" and set within a recognisable screen West, this two-reel comedy appropriated Hollywood conventions to critique the genre and its worldview from within. At once an insider and an outsider, a cowboy and an Indian, Rogers uses humour to construct a *counter-history* that invites critical reflection on the basic racial and temporal assumptions of American nationalism.

Français

À sa sortie en 1923, *The Covered Wagon*, issu des studios Paramount, a inauguré le premier véritable cycle de Westerns hollywoodiens. Par ailleurs, pour de nombreux observateurs ce film catalysera le débat autour de l'influence sociale des films hollywoodiens. Dans un contexte de « nativisme » et de panique morale face aux excès du *Jazz Age*, ce genre de film prestige, qui met en scène l'histoire d'une Amérique qui se définit par sa conquête de la Frontière, servira non seulement à revigorer un genre flétrissant mais également à mettre en lumière la capacité du cinéma à « américaniser » son public. Mais cette vision légitimante (et boursouflée) du Western comme représentant l'histoire nationale (iste ?) sera vite mise en question. Dans son Western parodique, *Two Wagons — Both Covered* (1924) Will Rogers, acteur *all-American* par excellence aux origines Cherokee, s'approprie les conventions du genre afin de semer le trouble dans cette représentation exceptionnaliste de l'histoire états-unisienne par le biais de l'humour.

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Mots-clés
western, amérindien, histoire du cinéma, parodie

Keywords
western, native American, film history, parody

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