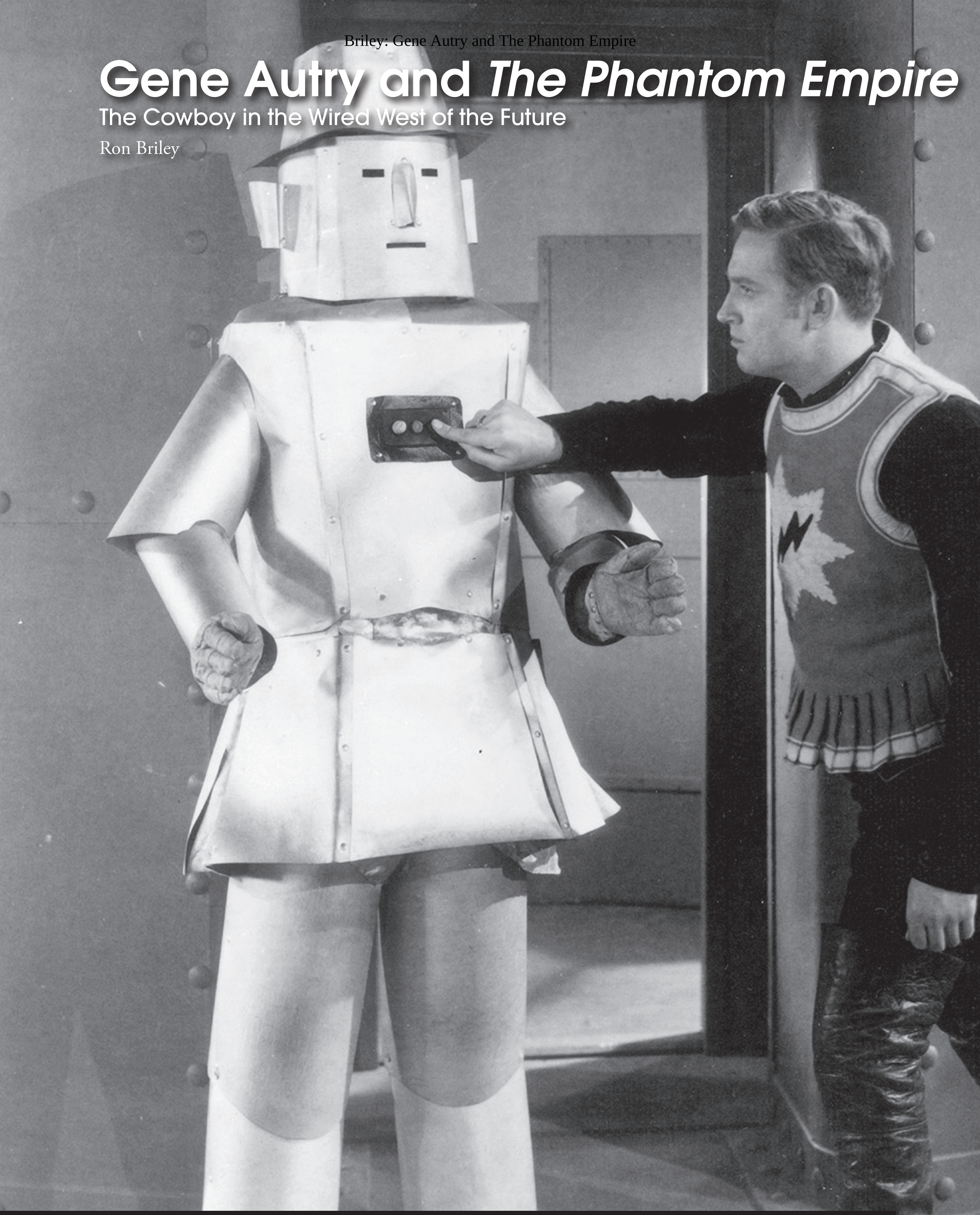
Gene Autry and *The Phantom Empire*

The Cowboy in the Wired West of the Future

Ron Briley



Gene Autry attempts to control a Muranian robot while being stalked by rebel forces.
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(1935):

In 1935, budding cowboy singing star Gene Autry appeared in the Mascot Pictures serial *The Phantom Empire*. The film offers a blending of the Western and science fiction genres, and Autry employs such modern devices as aircraft, radio, television, and even laser rays to protect Radio Ranch from the predatory designs of evil scientists and business interests seeking to exploit the radium deposits found in the subterranean city of Murania, located below the ranch. Autry is able to save the ranch from these threats, both alien and domestic, by completing his scheduled radio broadcasts. The premise of the film is that the Western environment may only be preserved through an adaptation to modernism, which will reduce regional isolationism and ensure the overall survival of the American West. Thus, as the protagonist of *The Phantom Empire* portraying himself, Autry appears as somewhat of a New Deal cowboy protecting the common people of the West from greedy outside business interests.[1]

In his post World War II career as an entertainer and entrepreneur, Autry maintained the Hollywood cowboy image he had successfully cultivated throughout the 1930s. However, he also developed a financial empire that played a significant role in the wiring of the West and its incorporation into the larger national community through film, music, radio, cable television, and ownership of baseball's California Angels. Born into poverty in rural north central Texas, the former railroad worker turned entertainment entrepreneur contributed to the wiring of the West, a region whose historical significance Autry celebrated with the founding of the Autry National Center of the American West and its mission statement of "connecting the past with the present to inform our shared future." Although he could not claim authorship for *The Phantom Empire*, the film nevertheless anticipates the type of technological modernization he envisioned that would alter the history of the American West, as well as the life of Autry himself.[2]

Born Orvon Gene Autry to Delbert and Elnora Ozmont Autry in a farmhouse near Tioga, Texas, on September 29, 1907, Autry would rise from humble beginnings to become the only entertainer with five stars on Hollywood's Walk of Fame—one each for radio, records, film, television, and live theatrical performance. Autry failed to form a close relationship with his father, a livestock dealer and tenant farmer whom his son described as "a foot-loose aimless man who loved people and animals and the smell of the good earth. He was uneducated and a casual provider, but he had a Western set of values."[3]

It is not quite clear as to which values Autry was referring in his autobiography, for following the death of Elnora in 1932 from pellagra, Delbert drifted apart from the family, and young Gene was the major breadwinner for his younger brother and two sisters. Following his high school graduation in 1925, Autry found employment with the St. Louis & Frisco Railroad, rising to the position of a telegraph operator. Even as a young man, Autry seemed to recognize the importance of wiring the West, especially the rural Texas and Oklahoma region in which he had grown up.[4] Autry also expressed an early appreciation for music. His paternal grandfather, a Baptist preacher, encouraged five year-old Gene to sing in the church choir, while his mother helped Gene learn to play a mail-order guitar.

In his autobiography, Autry claims that while still a young singing telegraph operator, a chance encounter with legendary humorist Will Rogers convinced Autry to try his luck with a recording career. Autry biographer Holly George-Warren, however, casts doubt on this story, which she asserts was merely an example of Autry acting as the "expert showman" in order to attract positive publicity.[5]

Regardless of whether a chance meeting with Will Rogers truly did inspire Autry to pursue a recording career, he did travel to New York City in 1929 to record several songs for Victor Records. Two years later, Autry scored a hit with "That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine" for the American Record Company, which marketed its recordings through the Sears and Roebuck chain. In 1932, Autry was a featured performer on the radio program "National Barn Dance," broadcasting from Chicago station WLS. American Record Company executive Arthur Satherly played a prominent role in creating Autry's image as the "Nation's Number One Singing Cowboy."[6]

Autry was initially hesitant about adopting the cowboy persona, since he wanted to be a singer of romantic ballads in the Rudy Vallee tradition. Autry associated being a cowboy with the difficult physical labor he had performed as a young man in rural Texas and Oklahoma. However, Satherly worked to convince Autry that the cowboy image would help boost his musical career. Country music scholar Bill Malone suggests that by exchanging the hillbilly persona for that of the cowboy, Autry and Satherly were tapping a powerful legacy in which the horseman "commanded mobility and power and stood as an irresistible symbol to workers and shopkeepers who possessed neither attribute."[7]

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Autry was able to transition rather easily from the singing cowboy of records and radio to an onscreen Western persona when he appeared in a square dance number for the Ken Maynard feature *In Old Santa Fe* (1934). Nat Levine, president of the low-budget Mascot Pictures, also cast Autry as an outlaw later that year in the Maynard serial *Mystery Mountain*. Autry was somewhat embarrassed with his performance in the serial, believing that his cowboy representation was more manufactured than real, despite having grown up around horses and cattle. Autry's square dance number in *Old Santa Fe*, however, was well received, and Levine sought new opportunities to employ the singing cowboy. When Levine quarreled with Maynard over the latter's drinking habits, Maynard left Mascot during preparation for *The Phantom Empire* serial. Levine responded by offering the lead role to the inexperienced Autry, who was unsure about his acting potential. Nevertheless, he signed an agreement with the film producer, providing Autry with a four-week exclusive contract at $100 per week to star in *The Phantom Empire*.[8]

Autry's transition from an extra to a leading man helped propel the singing cowboy genre into international prominence. Ken Maynard, and even John Wayne as the character Singing Randy,

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Lobby card for *The Phantom Empire*. Used by permission of the Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation

had incorporated music into the Western film hero persona, but it was through Autry that the singing cowboy emerged as a staple of Western films during the 1930s. Autry recognized the importance of the Western film genre in translating and mythologizing the frontier experience. These movies also played an essential role in addressing regional isolationism by making the Western narrative part of the American story—albeit often a narrow one focused upon white settlers, as New West historians have observed.[9]

In his autobiography, Autry acknowledges his debt to the celluloid cowboys who preceded him, including Bronco Billy Anderson, William S. Hart, Harry Carey, Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, Buck Jones, and Ken Maynard. However, Autry is rather humble regarding his contribution to the genre, describing the Western as "to movies what the sports page is to the daily newspaper: the best part of it. The toy department." On the other hand, Autry recognized that in the 56 films he made for Republic Pictures (which had absorbed Mascot), he often employed cunning rather than violence to combat unscrupulous businessmen intent upon exploiting Western resources. Thus, Autry suggested

> While my solutions were a little less complex than those offered by the FBI, and my methods a bit more direct, I played a kind of New Deal cowboy who never hesitated to tackle many of the same problems: the dust bowl, unemployment, or the harnessing of power. This may have contributed to my popularity with the 1930s audience.[10]

In his assessment of the importance of Hollywood Westerns to the film culture of the Depression era, Peter Stanfield agrees with Autry's conclusions. Rather than simply serving as escapist entertainment, Stanfield argues that the singing cowboy, as personified by Autry, represented a significant manifestation of issues between labor and capital during the turbulent 1930s. The low-budget Autry features were popular films with working-class audiences in small towns and rural areas, which were suffering the ravages of the Great Depression. At the same time, the often marginalized and maligned image of the Southern "hillbilly" was being replaced in country music with the more romantic and even at times glamorous figure of the singing cowboy. Stanfield concludes that Autry provided a bridge between the modern world of urban consumption and the premodern milieu of the Old West. Thus, the Autry matinee features contained elements of the Old West, such as the stagecoach and horse chase, juxtaposed with automobiles, airplanes, and radio. In the Autry films, the West was being wired into the modern world of the 1930s, but with a somewhat leftist political orientation. Stanfield asserts that the singing cowboy Western film serials of the decade, personified by Autry, represented

> men, women and children who frequented small town, rural and neighborhoodtheaters, working-class families who wanted a magical fairy tale transformation of familiar landscapes and characters. This is primarily the world that the series Westerns gave them, a world where conflicts between labour and capital areresolved in favor of the working man and woman.[11]

Stanfield's read on the Autry image has been echoed by Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner in their examination of Hollywood New Deal-era cinema. Buhle and Wagner maintain that early Western films depicted the conquest of the West by white settlers bringing civilization to the region. The Autry Westerns, however, borrowed from the New Deal, offering a more populist interpretation that "hinged upon the theft of the 'people's land' by the railroads, the bankers, and their criminal and/or political allies."[12]

Despite these claims for the historical relevancy of the Autry films, the singing cowboy is often dismissed in studies of the Western genre. For example, George N. Fenin and William K. Everson insist that it was difficult to take an Autry film seriously, writing that the cowboy star was "a weak and colorless actor, and only a passable action performer," but "he was a popular singer who had something new to offer to Westerns at a time when they were slipping back into the doldrums." Jon Tuska expanded upon the arguments of Fenin and Everson, raising questions as to whether Autry projected the masculinity required of a frontier Western hero. After all, veteran stuntman Yakima Canutt often doubled for Autry in his riding scenes, although the singer could certainly handle a horse and was later known for his show horse, Champion. Tuska complains, "Prior to Autry's arrival on the scene, Western heroes were customarily portrayed as being strong, capable, occasionally austere men, believable frontier types who might actually have undertaken many of the heroic exploits attributed to them by the scenarios. In Autry's case this was not so because, physically and dramatically, it could not be so."[13]

However, Peter Stanfield disagrees, asserting that such criticisms are superficial and miss the significance of Autry's films within the historical and cultural context of the 1930s. Stanfield insists that one must not ignore Autry's connection with a rural constituency battered by the forces of modernization, which forced many to abandon family farms in pursuit of employment in California or the nation's urban industrial centers. Stanfield concludes, "A less prejudiced view reveals that Autry's films were not just star vehicles, but also addressed the difficulties his audience confronted in making the socio-economic change from subsistence farming to a culture of consumption, from self-employment to industrial practices and wage dependency, from rural to urban living."[14]

In the convergence of frontier motifs with contemporary technology, the Autry Westerns represent a confrontation with modernity. The frontier is integrated into the modern world through the wiring of the West, represented by Autry as a radio, recording, and performance artist. Likewise, as a humble "everyman" of the West, the Autry film persona suggests that while modernity is indeed threatening, it is possible to confront and tame these elements of change with such traditional

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Western values as hard work, intelligence, honesty, tolerance, respect for others, patriotism, and aiding the less fortunate—essentially the values Autry espoused with his cowboy code.[15] Modernism would be challenged with cunning rather than the six-gun that the singing cowboy eschewed in his Western films.

Autry's cinematic engagement with modernity began with the integration of the Western and science fiction genres in *The Phantom Empire*, termed by Autry biographer Holly George-Warren as "the most unusual Western serial ever made."[16] The film supposedly was the brainchild of Mascot Pictures writer Wallace MacDonald, who was told by company president Ned Levine to provide a serial that would invade "unchartered realms of the imagination." While waiting for a tooth extraction in his dentist's office, MacDonald thumbed through a magazine feature on Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. While under anesthetic gas, the writer ostensibly envisioned the story of an advanced human race residing within a lost underground cavern empire named Murania whose existence is threatened by surface people. Levine bought the idea and tapped the inexperienced Autry to play the lead after Maynard departed the studio.[17]

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Working on a relatively lavish budget of $70,000 for the financially-strapped Mascot Pictures, *The Phantom Empire* was scheduled for 12 chapters with a running time of approximately 250 minutes. The assigned directors were Otto Brower and B. Reeves Eason. Brower was primarily a director of serial features, while Eason was a second-unit director renowned for his filming of the chariot race in the 1925 production of *Ben-Hur*. (In 1939, he orchestrated the famous Burning of Atlanta scene for *Gone With the Wind*.) Exterior Western scenes were shot in Los Angeles locations such as Angoura Ranch and Bronson Canyon in Griffith Park. Interior sets for Murania were constructed at the Mack Sennett Studios, while the modernist architecture of the Griffith Observatory was employed for the exterior shots of Murania. The robots featured in the film were primarily constructed of cardboard and used previously in the Joan Crawford and Clark Gable musical feature *Dancing Lady* (1933). *The Phantom Empire* co-starred Smiley Burnette and Peter Potter as Autry's comical sidekicks, Oscar and Pete. It also featured Frankie Darro and Betsy King Ross as the children of Autry's partner, Tom Baxter. The casting of Darrow is especially interesting, since the young man played prominent roles in significant Warner Brothers social problem films, such as *Mayor of Hell* (1933) and *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933). However, as Frankie Baxter, Darrow had lost much of the edge displayed in his earlier Depression-era films.[18]

The eclectic *Phantom Empire* provided a box office success for Autry and Mascot. In his history of the movie serial, Raymond William Stedman describes *The Phantom Empire* as "undoubtedly the most unusual serial of the 1930s—and perhaps the entire sound era." Despite being so unconventional, the cross genres of science fiction and the Western certainly appealed to younger audiences. Science fiction magazines were popular at the newsstands during the Depression, and the box office success of *The Phantom Empire* was followed by the acclaimed space operas *Flash Gordon* (1936) and *Buck Rogers* (1939). Filmmakers such as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg were fascinated by the serials, and in the stark landscapes of *Star Wars* one may certainly perceive elements of the American frontier. In addition, Gene Roddenberry's Captain James T. Kirk of *Star Trek* is devoted to investigating space as the final frontier, while Sean Connery's 1981 feature *Outland* is a remake of *High Noon* (1952) set on a space station. Focusing on the strong cultural connections between the Western and science fiction genres, Carl Abbott writes in *The Western Historical Quarterly*, "Science fiction is a natural extension of Western discourse, reinscribing the hopes and fears that shaped stories of the nineteenth-and twentieth-century West onto settings that stretched even more broadly across space and more deeply into time."[19]

Thus, Autry's *Phantom Empire* tapped into concerns with modernity that continue to resonate, portraying ambiguous attitudes toward the promise of technology to better the quality of human life. While the personal computer liberates and fosters global communication, it also allows for the intrusion of the workspace into the home environment, demolishing the eight-hour day envisioned by labor leader Samuel Gompers. Robert Romanyshyn argues that technology tends to produce a sense of distance from matter as "a detachment from the everyday world we inhabit." In such classic films as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), the promise of a thoroughly technological world is interrogated, producing the prototype of a dystopian film and civilization. On the other hand, *The Phantom Empire* displays the incredible destructive potential of laser rays while also presenting a "radium reviver" that brings Autry back to life. The key for the Autry film seems to lie in assuring that the forces of modernity remain out of the hands of predatory interests and under the control of the common people, as exemplified by the plain-speaking and singing cowboy, Gene Autry.[20]

The Phantom Empire begins with an attack by bandits upon a stagecoach—a stereotypical opening for a Western film. The audience, however, quickly realizes that the attempted robbery is actually part of Gene Autry's daily broadcast from Radio Ranch, which the cowboy owns with partner Tom Baxter. Autry performs his songs "Uncle Noah's Ark" and "Silver-Haired Daddy" to the delight of the ranch guests, although it seems that not all of the visitors are there to enjoy the entertainment. A group of scientists and businessmen led by Professor Beetson (Frank Glendon) add a disturbing note of modernity when they arrive via a private airplane. Beetson and his cohorts are convinced that radium deposits at the ranch are worth a fortune, but first they must get rid of Autry, whose lease on the ranch depends upon his performing a daily live radio broadcast. The evil scientists attempt to kill Autry, but they also encounter the Thunder Riders from the subterranean empire of Murania whose underground empire is threatened by the surface conflict over Radio Ranch.[21]

The introductory chapter to the serial offers several themes familiar to Autry's rural and working-class audience. The singing cowboy could lose the ranch if he fails to deliver a broadcast. Depression-era farmers struggling to avoid foreclosure and laborers riding the rails in search of work certainly understood tenuous economic circumstances. Rather than bankers, this time the villains are scientists and mining engineers intent upon exploiting the Western environment in search of radium. Indeed, mineral extraction has played a significant and often tragic role in the history of the American West as Thomas G. Andrews outlines in his history of the Colorado coal fields, *Killing for Coal*.[22]

The collision between the traditional West and modern technology is also evident within the Muranian civilization. The Muranians are a lost tribe of humans who fled underground to escape the Ice Age. In their evolution, the Muranians have maintained their human form (and conveniently speak English), but they must employ breathing devices when above ground. The Muranians use horses for their surface transportation (hence, the Thunder Riders), but their subterranean empire is futuristic and technology-driven, with a high-speed elevator to transport expeditions to the surface. The advanced civilization is powered by radium, although the exploitation of human labor is avoided by relying upon robots for mining and assembly line work.

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Murania is ruled by the blonde-haired Queen Tika (Dorothy Christy), who, inexplicably, is the only female depicted among the Muranians. The lack of women provokes no comment from any character within the film, and viewers are left with a vague perception of a bee hive in which all members of the collective exist to serve their queen. Queen Tika demands obedience from her minions, and she is willing to execute those whose failings might endanger the empire. Through the use of a television screen, Queen Tika is able to observe life on the surface, and she condemns what she sees in the outside world. The images of twentieth-century life provided to Queen Tika on her television screen include bread lines and scenes of poverty, as well as violence amid the hectic pace of modern urban life. It is not an attractive picture, and many of Autry's rural fans would likely agree with Queen Tika's contempt for the state of America and the world in the mid 1930s. In fact, the growth of international tensions, along with the rise of fascism in Europe, made Americans increasingly afraid and insecure, so much

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Lobby card featuring Queen Tika of Murania. Used by permission of the Autry Qualified Interest Trust and the Autry Foundation

so that in 1938, amid the Munich crisis and Adolph Hitler's aggression toward Czechoslovakia, millions of Americans were easily convinced that the Orson Welles's radio broadcast *War of the Worlds* depicted an actual attack from Martian invaders.[23] There was, indeed, considerable unease and ambiguity regarding the promise of modernity in both American society and in *The Phantom Empire*.

After failing in their initial efforts to ambush Autry, Professor Beetson and his entourage frame the cowboy for the murder of his partner, Tom Baxter. Baxter's teenage children, Frankie and Betsy, believe in Autry's innocence, aiding in his escape from the authorities. Frankie, displaying little of the teen rebellion Darrow depicted in his earlier Warner Brothers films, is a junior scientist and uses his technical skills to hook up remote radio broadcasts, including one from the cockpit of an airplane, so that Autry may fulfill his radio contract even while he is a fugitive from the law. Frankie and Betsy also help Autry through their Junior Thunder Riders club, providing young audiences with some sense of empowerment during troubling times. Nevertheless, a healthy ambivalence regarding technology continues to permeate the film text as Frankie proclaims to Autry, "We've got to get you away from those scientists."[24]

Although saved from the clutches of the scientists and the law, Autry eventually is captured by the Muranians and forced to appear before Queen Tika. Utilizing her wireless radio and television technology, the queen reminds Autry of the problems in the outside world, describing surface people as "fools" who are always in too much of a hurry to enjoy life. She concludes that residents of Murania are "indeed fortunate" but must remain vigilant against external threats whether posed by scientists or cowboys. She asserts, "We can never allow Murania to become desecrated by the presence of the surface people. Our lives are serene, our minds are superior, our accomplishments greater." Autry appears nonplussed by the technological achievements of Muranian civilization, offering a retort that embraces the frontier environment of the American West. In reply to the queen's question, "How do you like our world?" Autry replies, "Well, I think the dampness and dead air of your land is more suited to rats and moles…My business is singing. I sing about horses and sunshine and the plains…Well, how can anybody sing about these things here? Kinda makes you feel good to sing, you know."[25] Autry's comment might well resonate with an audience in transition from an agrarian environment to the uncertainties of an industrial and urban future, and, like Autry, they might find solace in a song evoking the life on the land left behind.

Queen Tika, however, is not impressed with Autry's ode to the power of song, and she orders his execution. Fortunately for Autry, his life is saved by Lord High Chancellor Argo (Wheeler Oakman) who is plotting a revolt against the queen. As a result, Autry becomes caught up in the conflict between the queen and rebel forces. At one point Autry is killed, only to be resurrected in the "reviving chamber" by the queen, who hopes the cowboy will reveal the identities of rebel leaders. The metaphysical implications of Autry's rising from the dead might have been too esoteric for most audiences. So, these deeper issues are not explored in the film. Nevertheless, elements of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are incorporated into *The Phantom Empire's* conclusion.

The implications of the Frankenstein myth are quite evident in *The Phantom Empire*, and it seems safe to assume that these perceptions resonated with viewers in a world drifting toward global conflict with dictators and military regimes promising security through territorial expansion.

After numerous cliffhanger escapes, Autry finally decides to aid the queen against the rebels taking over the empire. She pledges to spare the surface people and Radio Ranch from any of the rockets that the rebels are threatening to deploy. Although Queen Tika becomes a beautiful damsel in distress for Autry to rescue, there is only the slightest hint of any romantic attachment. In the final analysis, Autry also is ambivalent about supporting the rebel forces. After all, patriotism was one of the cardinal principles of Autry's cowboy code, while revolutionaries and subversion in the 1930s were usually associated with communism. While Autry's fans were willing to embrace Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, revolution was another thing altogether.

Alas, Autry proves unable to save the queen. In his haste to kill Autry, Arco unleashes a new weapon—the atom-smashing ray—over which he is unable to assert control, and the weapon of mass destruction begins to devastate Murania. Autry pleads with the queen to flee with him to the safety of the surface. She refuses, insisting that she disdains the poor quality of life on the surface and must stay with her people. As the Muranian civilization collapses, Autry is aided in his escape by Frankie and Betsy, as well as comical sidekicks Oscar and Pete, who have followed Autry into the subterranean world. In fact, Oscar and Pete even disguise themselves as robots to help Autry, displaying considerable more ingenuity than one might have imagined from the film's earlier comic scenes. Accordingly, Autry is no superhero, and his salvation is forged by common working people such as those who comprised the audience for his Western adventures. While Gene and his friends escape and the surface remains safe from attack, the people of Murania are destroyed by the weapons that their technologically-advanced civilization has created.

The implications of the *Frankenstein* myth are quite evident in *The Phantom Empire*, and it seems safe to assume that these perceptions resonated with viewers in a world drifting toward global conflict with dictators and military regimes promising security through territorial expansion. Furthermore, new technologies made it possible for planes to rain destruction from the skies, and civilian populations removed from the battlefield were no longer safe. The 1930s were a time in which common citizens grappled with the implications of harnessing the power of atomic energy. The peaceful possibilities of such an energy supply are evident in the moving sidewalks and elevators of Murania, which are perceived in the film text as the products of an advanced civilization dependent upon considerable "radio activity." However, in the final analysis, the Muranians' reliance upon radium leads them to construct a weapon that proves to be their ultimate undoing. It is difficult not to think of the film's foreshadowing of World War II scientific research and development of the atomic bomb—a weapon which assured victory in the global conflict but contributed to fears of nuclear annihilation during the much longer Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union. It is also worth noting that most of the research for the atomic bomb took place near Los Alamos, New Mexico—an isolated frontier landscape favored by Robert Oppenheimer and not unlike that depicted on Autry's Radio Ranch. Similar to the Muranians, American scientists created a super weapon capable of destroying civilization in the classic *Frankenstein* scenario depicted in *The Phantom Empire*.[26]

Nevertheless, the Autry feature indicates a degree of ambivalence regarding the promise of technology. While futuristic weapons destroy Murania, Autry depends upon modern communication devices to clear his name. Eschewing tools of violence such as the gun, Autry relies upon his cunning to combat the scientists who remain a threat to Radio Ranch. After escaping from Murania, the cowboy is still wanted for the murder of Tom Baxter, but Frankie helps Autry prepare a television broadcast in which he tricks Professor Beetson into admitting that he was responsible for killing Autry's partner. Watching this broadcast is the sheriff, who immediately places Beetson under arrest. The fact that surveillance technology might be employed to spy upon citizens rather than apprehend criminals seemed oblivious to the New Deal cowboy. Although commercial television did not exist in the mid 1930s, *The Phantom Empire* embraces the revolutionary potential of this communication tool through which Autry's fans would welcome the singing cowboy into their homes in the 1950s and 1960s.[27]

The dualistic potential for technology to destroy civilization while at the same time increasing the quality of everyday life is displayed by the fate of Murania. Although an action serial aimed at young audiences in small-town America, *The Phantom Empire* nevertheless tapped into widespread insecurities regarding modernity. Ultimately, the easygoing Autry is able to save the surface people from the most dangerous implications of technology, while embracing such aspects of the modern world as recorded sound, radio, and even television, which wired the West and connected it to the outside world. As juxtaposed in the Autry films, the airplane might be replacing the horse, but audiences dispossessed of their rural roots could retain a nostalgic connection with the past through the magic of music, radio, and television—the elements of technology embraced by Autry that would make him a multi-millionaire in the entertainment and recording business.

The Phantom Empire introduced aspects of the Autry singing cowboy persona that would resonate well beyond the confines of the Mascot serial. Autry went on to star in 89 feature films for Republic Pictures and Columbia Pictures, many of which featured the conflict between the old and modern Westerns, which the cowboy usually reconciled with a song. In the post-World War II period, Autry transferred his successful formula from the silver screen to the family television with his Flying A Pictures produced *Gene Autry Show*. In addition, his weekly CBS Radio show–*Melody Ranch*–aired from 1940 to 1956. Meanwhile, Autry's wise business investments provided the capital for his acquisition of cable television stations, as well as the California Angels.

Like many migrants from Texas and Oklahoma, Autry found prosperity and security in southern California. The Old West was gone, but a country music scene flourished in California.[28] However, as the descendants of the Dust Bowl migrants moved into the suburbs of the state, they, similar to Autry, tended to abandon their New Deal liberalism and embrace the more conservative politics of another entertainer, Ronald Reagan—seemingly afraid that their prosperity was fragile and threatened by new waves of immigrants and modernization.[29]

Confronted with the growing urbanization and internationalization of the region, Autry sought to preserve the mythic and historic West and give something back to the community

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through a Western Heritage Museum. However, for many troubled Americans during the 1930s, Autry provided both hope and nostalgia through his singing cowboy persona launched in the science fiction Western, *The Phantom Empire*. In his autobiography, Autry acknowledged his role in the wiring of the West, asserting that

> On the whole my life has been favored by friendly winds. I watched, and was part of, the development of talking pictures, the heyday of radio, the birth and incredible growth of television. I saw country music leap out of haylofts and honky tonks and become a new national religion. I had the best of two eras—mine and the one I re-created on the movie screen.[30]

Threatened by the forces of modernity, Autry's fans found relief in the wiring of the West facilitated by their singing film hero. Likewise, Autry discovered wealth in the modernist Western motif launched by *The Phantom Empire*, all inspired by the anesthetic administered to writer Wallace MacDonald. ★

Notes

1 *The Phantom Empire*, directed by Otto Brower and B. Reeves Eason (Tulsa, Oklahoma: VCI Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

2 Autry National Center, Mission Statement, http://www.autrynationalcenter.org/about.pha

3 Gene Autry with Mickey Herskowitz, *Back in the Saddle Again* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1978), 4.

4 Ibid., 2.

5 Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36.

6 For the relationship between Autry and Arthur Satherly see George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1*, 63-70.

7 Douglas B. Green, "The Singing Cowboy: An American Dream," *Journal of Country Music*, 7 (May 1978), 15; and Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 90.

8 George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1*, 130-131.

9 For more on "New West" history, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); and Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

10 Autry, *Back in the Saddle Again*, 41, 53.

11 Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood Westerns and the 1930s: The Lost Trail* (Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 60, 72, 115.

12 Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's Favorite Movies* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 135.

13 George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, T*he Western: From Silents to the Seventies* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 214; and Jon Tuska, *The Vanishing Legion: A History of Mascot Pictures*, 1927-35 (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1982), 162.

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