

UPDATED PREVIOUS CASE STUDY FOR GENRES CHAPTER: THE WESTERN

More Westerns* have been produced than any other kind of US studio film. Their images and landscapes have become a naturalised part of fashion (think of jeans, boots, hats, denim), advertising (especially as the setting for car ads; and for guns, in the US), popular music, even US political rhetoric.

They seem a good area to test out your understandings of the issues raised by theories of genre.

Applying ‘repertoires of elements’ to Westerns

Like any genre, the Western is not composed of *fixed* plots, locations, characters, etc., which are all the same. It consists instead of repertoires, or shifting collections of elements and expectations.

These generic elements and expectations are sometimes compared to the imaginary grids we put over stars in the night sky to produce *constellations*. If you know how to perceive these groups of stars in patterns—for example ‘the Plough’—then you’ll see them, even though they may be overlapped by other stars, and though they mark *humanly-invented* boundaries rather than given ones.

This arguably resembles the ways that marketing and other discourses try to ‘fix’ what are actually very fluid and mixed generic elements in most films.

ACTIVITY 1

Two recent examples: *Brokeback Mountain* (US 2005) and *A History of Violence* (US 2005).

Which elements in either of these could be argued to:

- belong to the Western
- be out of place in a Western
- belong to other genres?

Would you say that either film is a hybrid (a genre film produced by the fusion of different genres, such as musical horror, or comedy SF)?

Did you think of *Brokeback Mountain* as a western?

What different connotations were offered by the description ‘gay cowboy story’?

Nevertheless there are *typical* or often repeated film elements which signify ‘the Western’, even in a movie which is tricky to classify, such as *A History of Violence*.

Typical **narrative** patterns begin with an act of violence (a shooting, or raid) as disruption to a status quo or initial equilibrium. This sets in flow events often focused on **ideological themes** such as conflicts around law and order, especially as these involve questions of gender (perhaps in the form of ‘protecting the women’) or of nationhood entwined with ethnicity (‘America’ usually defined and defended against ‘the Indians’).

The enigmas of the narrative will rarely be, as in a detective film, a matter of ‘Who did it?’ but more likely ‘How will he/they take revenge?’

Typical narrative situations along the way might be

- the conflict between two kinds of women (‘saloon –girl’ and ‘school marm’) for the hero

- the letter from far away, and perhaps also from the past, which arrives and, as it's read, prompts a flashback to the writer's situation (*The Searchers*, *Brokeback Mountain*)
- the climactic 'shoot out' in public, on the street, and so on.

Pacifist discourses occasionally exist –for example in *Shane* (US 1953) through the mother's and indeed Shane's anxieties about her young son modelling himself on the gunfighter. But they will usually be narratively obliterated by a major generic drive of the Western, which is to end up in a morally and aesthetically satisfying shoot-out. See *Unforgiven* (US 1992) for a recent Western which tries to complicate this narrative set-up.

In the area of the **audio-visual**, typical historical time and costume for the Western often stretch from 1840 to 1890 or so, while the location can be almost anywhere – except for East Coast city streets (where investment decisions on 'the West', property ownership, speculation, etc. would have been taken. *Heaven's Gate* (US 1980) addresses this connection).

Also part of the audio-visual is the presence of certain **stars**, such as Clint Eastwood or John Wayne, strongly associated with the genre, its terse-lipped dialogue and male-dominated acting styles.

Familiar objects accruing resonance (sometimes called iconography) in Westerns include, unsurprisingly, guns, hats, shirts, saloon bars, boots, and horses.

The overall 'look' of the genre has often been 'high, wide and handsome', employing CinemaScope or other widescreen formats, sometimes using deep-focus lenses, and a golden-tinted Technicolour look – all of which help to display to advantage the landscape, which acts almost like another character. It's often used as a reinforcing element to a story constructed as 'heroic' (though is also sometimes used as ironic counterpoint).

This heroism is partly offered by music, which for Westerns is often a combination of 'military' or 'state occasion' rhythms, instruments and chords (as in the 'New World' Symphony by Dvorak) with the gentler sounds which signify 'campfire', and perhaps the voices and slightly melancholy melodies reminiscent of the related country music genre.

These typical features represent the very broad predictability of the genre. But what about differences? A mature genre such as this includes huge numbers of 'exceptions', mixings and crossovers with other genres. Some celebrated Westerns such as *High Noon* (US 1952) and *Hud* (1963) have been in black and white. There have been 'singing cowboys' in the 1930s and 1940s. More recent Westerns, partly targeting a female audience, have centred on female heroes, such as *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (US 1994) or *The Ballad of Little Jo* (US 1993). Interestingly, once this happens, the narratives often take on a very different shape, much less focused on the climactic male violent shootout.

Sometimes, for experienced audiences, the smallest changes can signal connections to contemporary issues. *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (US 1976) was one of the first Westerns to call Native American characters 'guerrillas'. The brutal treatment of Native American guerrilla characters in *Ulzana's Raid* (US 1972) was also taken by many to refer to US involvement in Vietnam.

Let's look at a famous example of the Western genre.

Example 1: The Searchers (US 1956)

If you have not seen *The Searchers*, here is a synopsis:

Title: *Texas 1868* (i.e. three years after the end of the Civil War around slavery).

Ethan Edwards/John Wayne returns to his brother Aaron's home, evasive about what he has been doing in the intervening years. While he is out with a posse to investigate the presence of 'marauding Indians', the homestead is attacked. Aaron and his wife and son are killed, and their two daughters abducted by the Comanches. Ethan and his adoptive nephew Martin pursue Scar and his Comanche band for several years, Martin becoming increasingly worried that Ethan's desire for revenge will mean the death of his niece Debbie, whom Ethan sees as polluted and no longer related 'by blood' by having become one of Scar's squaws. Helped, albeit incompetently, by the US cavalry, the two attack the Comanche camp where Scar is first killed by Martin and then scalped by Ethan. Ethan pursues Debbie but instead of killing her takes her home, though he himself returns to his solitary wanderings.

Comment on repetition and difference of elements

When you have seen the movie, you will realise how much this verbal account reduces its rich meanings and processes (as with many films. See the *Psycho* case study on this website, or the *CSI: Miami* synopsis in the 4th edition, or the synopsis of another Western: *Unforgiven* [US 1992] if you know it).

Let's look at its 'repetitions' and 'differences' in more detail. In many ways the film does seem to contain the 'stock' or 'classic' (depending on your valuation of the genre) elements of the Western. These include:

narrative

- centred around a strong and violent male, played by Western star John Wayne
- initiated by an act of violence against that male, or those close to him
- shaped by revenge, ending in a bloody but visually compelling climactic shoot-out, plus a final brief, more domestically centred but less compelling coda, or final short section.

ideological themes such as

- the defence of 'America' (imaged through a virtuous group associated with the frontier) against the 'Other' (here in the form of Comanches)

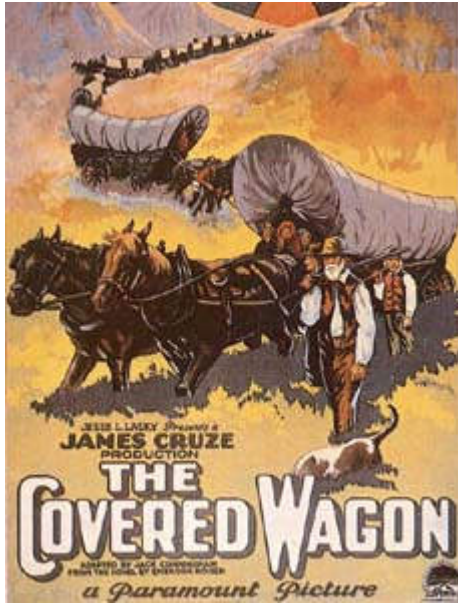


Figure 1: A poster for a classic early Western of 1923, illustrating the close connection between the ‘frontier’ myths of expansive white US identity and this genre. Paramount publicity poster. Out of copyright.

The thrill of ‘imagining that moment on the brink of making a society’ (Dyer: 33) is often evoked by US politicians, notably George W. Bush. A key phrase is ‘Manifest Destiny’, coined in 1845 by John L. Sullivan who wrote of ‘our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.’ (quoted in Dyer: 33)

ACTIVITY 2: Enter ‘Bush + manifest destiny’ into your favourite search engine to explore the contemporary re-use of this concept.

- gender assumptions, here both the ‘unspeakable’ acts the Comanches are constructed as perpetrating on ‘white women’, and the confinement of those women to the home and domestic sphere, while men inhabit the film/genre’s central area of the exciting but dangerous wilderness

- questions of law and order, especially in the conflicts between Ethan and other characters (such as Martin Pawley/Jeff Hunter and Rev. Clayton/Ward Bond) about how far he should go in his pursuit of vengeance.

Audio-visually it works with the familiar elements of Monument Valley and other grand desert settings. Though the shots of Monument Valley are particularly spectacular, and composed in very ‘painterly’ ways, the mixture of long shots and close-ups is typical of many Westerns, and works in combination with the kinds of music and voices described above.

Guns, boots, shirts, tasselled jackets and the accoutrements of the horses also provide familiar visual and indeed aural elements. Some have entered other popular forms, such as country music and the dress of some gay and lesbian subcultures.

Yet simply listing elements to tick them off against an imaginary list of components of ‘the ideal Western’ is not only boring, but does not begin to explore the different ways those elements can be combined or *articulated* together differently. Nor, when the movie is

considered in detail, can the neat listing of elements explain how it actually moves and 'works'.

Articulation in such contexts involves a play on both senses of the word: articulate as in 'speak' or even 'make clear', and also articulate as in 'articulated lorry', where there is a sense of different parts being combined in particular ways in order to move together.

Ethnicity

Take, for example, the treatment of 'Indian' or Native American characters here. The conventions of many Westerns are bound up with the mythologies and brutal practices that confirmed white America's 'destiny': the right to drive out and even exterminate the original inhabitants of the continent. The Native Americans are often represented as marauding, directionless savages, with very little access to soundtrack, culture or good sense. Likewise Hispanics are often grossly stereotyped as lazy, shifty, untrustworthy and cowardly.

By contrast the white Americans are often filmed so as to evoke in full the visceral excitement of surging, expansive movement—chases, galloping on horseback, surging through a grand, open landscape, and, of course, heading west, across that land they saw as God-given, across to the final frontier on the west coast.

ACTIVITY 3

Compile a list of the names of SUVs (Sports Utility Vehicles), the big, jeep-like vehicles which dominate so many city streets.

Do any names have resonances not only of the Western, but of its 'wildest' parts (e.g. Cherokee, TomTom, Frontier, Silverado, Bronco, Trailblazer...)?

ACTIVITY 4

The next time you see a 'classic' non-silent Western (i.e. produced between c.1930 and c.1960), make notes on how Native Americans are represented in it. Look at the following points:

- How much access are they given to soundtrack and dialogue?
- Is there sub-titling when they are signified as speaking their own language, so as to give the viewers access to them as thinking beings?
- Are they given full characterisation? Or set up as minor, highly stereotyped figures?
- If characterised, along what lines? Rational? Honourable? Intelligent? Attractive? Worthy opponents?
- Or 'deserving' their fate? deceitful? primitive?
- Is the audience invited to identify with them in any way -- by means of camera positioning, plot construction, casting through stars, etc?

ACTIVITY 5

Before going on to consider Ethan/Wayne's role, make notes on the rest of the film. Consider how far you think it challenges conventional representations of the Native Americans, and indeed Hispanics, using the list from Activity 3.

An element which some critics have focused on is the casting of Scar, and his visually thrilling first appearance in the film.

Q: How might this audio-visual element undercut the narrative role of the Comanches elsewhere in the film?

Ethan/Wayne is certainly a Proppian hero figure, via both the narrative/audio-visual structures which centre on him, and by the casting of a major star in the role. But the character has been called an 'anti-hero' and is *partly* criticised as racist, with Wayne's acting style much less genial than in some earlier films. Ethan is antagonistic to his companion, Martin, on the grounds of Martin's mixed race, and he expresses so much knowledge and hatred of the Comanches that some critics have suggested a fascination bordering on obsession with them, describing Scar as 'like a crazy mirror of Ethan's desires' (McBride and Wilmington 1974)

***The Searchers*: genre, authorship and industry**

A familiar way of dismissing genre products is to argue that the 'good' ones are only ever made by remarkably gifted authors who have struggled successfully *against* genre conventions. John Ford was one of the first beneficiaries of this position. Certainly he had such a long track record in the Western that changes in his own work and in the genre are almost impossible to disentangle. A synopsis emphasising an authorship frame might begin:

Ethan/Wayne return to his brother's house in 1868. Neither cavalry officer nor community leader, possibly a criminal, he is John Ford's first anti-hero. A suppressed love is implied between Ethan and his brother's wife – unthinkable in earlier Ford – but brother, wife and son are killed.
(Slightly adapted from Buscombe 1988)

Such an approach underestimates industrial contributions, like the 'stock company' which Ford gathered around him (actors, writers, etc.). Other determinants (rather than just one man's input) further account for the film's 'differences' from a supposed norm. For example, it was produced by one of the independent production companies – C.V. Whitney Pictures Inc. – becoming more common in 1950s Hollywood as a response to economic uncertainty and the competition from TV in the late 1940s.

'The flavour will be relished by your patrons satiated with the mediocrities of television.'
(Warner's campaign book to exhibitors of *The Searchers*)

The film company marketed the film massively, as the start of 'The American Series' of films about American history, and categorised it not as a Western (which was then still a despised genre) but as a drama. C.V. Whitney Pictures also emphasised its desire to make 'art' and 'finer entertainment', which perhaps enabled/necessitated a certain difference in the film's treatment of established elements, and the use of such high status workers as Max Steiner, whose musical score is key to the film's sweeping power. Also part of this competitive 'difference' was the decision to make it in the, then new, VistaVision screen format, an impetus to the film's spectacular use of landscape.

When the film came out, however, some puzzlement was expressed at Ethan/Wayne's character. Some critics seemed to be struggling to describe attitudes (racist) outside the political vocabulary which they had to hand at the time. Henderson (1985) has argued that we need to explore the film's *historical context* to understand its resonances for some 1956 US audiences. It's an adaptation of a novel (written by Alan LeMay) published in 1954. During the time the screenplay was being written, an important event in the Civil Rights struggles of Afro-Americans was taking place, the so-called 'Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka'

decision, in which black students won the right to the same education as whites. Implementation was postponed for a year, and during 1954-5 there were heated debates and massive resistance in the southern states. These involved fears of intermarriage in a continent where twenty-nine states still had statutes forbidding it.

Henderson argues that, certainly for US audiences, these heated debates would have resonated in the film, and are emphasised in the change from novel to screenplay. Examples include: an extended conflict between Martha and Ethan over the importance of Debbie's 'blood' (i.e. white race); the fact that in the novel Martin is '100% white' so there is no question of conflict with Ethan on the grounds of race. He suggests that it is a film about 'black-white' relations in the year 1956 via a story of 'red-white' relations.

ACTIVITY 6

View *The Searchers* with Henderson's suggestion in mind.

How does it affect your understanding of it?

Does it seem a convincing suggestion?

If so, could it be 'proved' or 'investigated'? How?

UPDATE 7 Sept 06 : At a recent screening in Monument Valley itself, Alex Cox reported that 'the organisers of the screening made up two posters, both depicting Wayne's face: one says "Soldier, Lover, Uncle, Hero", the other, "Bigot, Racist, Killer... Hero...".'

What does modern America make of *The Searchers*? Every town of the old west has sent kids – poor whites, poor Indians – to the Iraq war. Each town has a sign welcoming the kids back, or mourning the one who died. Each town has a video store, full of western DVDs, *The Searchers* often prominently displayed.

Example 2: A sub-genre, history and industry: 'spaghetti Westerns'

These films were made in the 1960s as co-productions between US companies with tax money to gain by European production, and Italian companies with a large home market of avid cinemagoers, which TV had not yet fully reached. Several differences are again made possible by such a production context:

Because they were shot in Europe (mostly Italy and Spain), the unique Monument Valley, with its heroic connotations of moral testing and extreme possibilities of danger and ambush, was not a feasible location. Often much more bleached-out desert locations were used, crucially shifting the genre away from celebration of a specifically US landscape.

Because they were initially low-budget Italian productions, and extras cost dear, massive 'Indian' attacks were not possible, but then neither was the insulting treatment of such characters common in Westerns. Massed Mexican armies and associated demeaning stereotyping were often used, however, though the new setting and casting meant it was harder perhaps for 'the Western' to stand in for all of the Americas, north and south.



Figure 2: The highly stylised, O.T.T. appeal of parts of the ‘spaghetti Western’ sub-genre, here the setting for the climactic gunfight in *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*, which resembles a bull-ring, though one which is set, with grim humour, within a cemetery. © United Artists.

Sergio Leone, the director of several of these films, argued the importance of the experience of modern war for Italy and Spain, while US territory has never been occupied or invaded in modern times. This, he suggested, makes the Civil War narrative of a film like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (US 1966) engage with the degradations of occupation, and the grimly comic reversals of fortune in war in a way that US Westerns had never been able to.

The inclusion of bizarre sounds as part of Morricone’s music, rather than the more usual music for heroics, and an extreme, comic-book approach to camera angles and framing, were also enjoyed by many as part of a sarcastic, modernising approach taken to the audio-visual traditions (and by implication the ‘all-American’ values) of the Western.

Representation and Westerns: gender and sexuality

The Western is often argued, through its representations of male and female characters, to have contributed to the strength of ideologies of gender. Certainly in its peak years, the 1940s and 1950s, it seems to have shaped the expectations of many viewers about ‘what a [white] man’s gotta do’ to be a Real Man. Young male audiences for such films, watching them regularly on cinema and then on TV screens, playing ‘cowboys and Indians’, being given toy guns, and being told ‘Big boys don’t cry’, have spoken and written of watching with great attentiveness the ways in which the cowboy conducted himself, his physical style, gestures, bearing and how that embodied lessons about ‘real’ and ‘inadequate’ masculinity.

‘I grew up watching westerns. At four I had a cowboy suit... and “playing cowboys” is a dominant memory from my early years. In the late 1950s as a middle-class boy living on the northern edge of London, I followed *The Lone Ranger*, *The Cisco Kid*, Matt Dillon, *Cheyenne* and the other serial westerns on the TV.... I absorbed their styles. For years their movements shaped my own. Not surprisingly, when later... I saw Jon Voight in *Midnight Cowboy* pose in front of a mirror in stetson and tasseled leather jacket, I recognised the gesture with a shock of embarrassment.’

(Pumphrey 1988)

Q: Is there any source of imagery which you think has replaced Westerns in such masculine ‘learning’ of how to become ‘a real man’? The gangster genre perhaps? Or sports images?

Generic elements which repeatedly staged such informal lessons in masculine style included:

- the long saloon bar along which insults can be traded
- the cool glances given and received, perhaps over a game of poker
- the emphasis on a strong male silence, often opposed to the probing of emotions or the desire for articulacy from the main woman character (dismissed as ‘gabbling’, etc.)
- usually, at narrative climax, the breaking of this ‘manly reserve’ allowing the eruption of an exciting and often intricately filmed violence.

Western heroes have usually restricted themselves to a pitifully narrow range of activities. They can’t daydream, or play the fool, or look at flowers, or cook... or ...make mistakes.’

(Tompkins 1992)



Figure 3: ‘In without knocking’ by Charles Russell, illustrates the dynamic yet destructive, sense of movement in images of appropriate male behaviour for the Western’s frontier towns. Amon Carter Museum. With permission.

Representation and Westerns: environmental awareness

A few years ago there might have been occasional complaints at the treatment of animals in Westerns—such as campaigns to stop stunts which might injure horses. But the rise of political movements for environmental awareness has made these parts of the film newly visible, just as happened with Civil Rights struggles and images of Native and Afro-Americans in them. For example, it has become much harder to ignore the final purpose of the cattle runs to the big slaughterhouses and refrigeration centres of the eastern cities. It is these which are celebrated in many Westerns, and which gave the cowboy his original work.

The Wild West of the cowboy began in 1866, when post-Civil War eastern cities’ demand for beef encouraged open-range Texas rangers to drive their herds north to the Kansas railheads. Falling profits, overgrazing, the advance of farmers fencing the land and the terrible winter of 1885-6 ended the open range as quickly as it had begun. During those 20 years the typical cowboy was no more than an uneducated young migrant Southerner, in a job that was always exhausting, monotonous and ill-paid.

(Murdoch 1985)

Nowadays we might also be aware of the urges to mastery, to power, speed and all its dubious excitements, which the Western offers. These of course exist in highly gendered and race-d forms (see SUV suggestions, Activity 3 above), and can be argued to build desires which may be fatal for our life on this planet. As Jane Tompkins (1992) points out, in Westerns the horse makes every man (or woman, sometimes) a master. It brings to the genre long-established resonances of chivalry, lordly privilege.

But it also feeds a longing for a different kind of pre-technological existence, with fantasies of bodily freedom, closeness to a more natural world, less consciousness of risk and complication. The problem is, as with many enjoyable media forms: at whose expense, and from whose position are such fantasies most often played out?

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*Like many writers we've given this a capital 'W' to distinguish it for the adjective for 'the western world' etc.

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