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# The Fate of the American Western Film<sup>1</sup>

Cheli Reutter

If asked to name one great American Western film actor, most Americans would promptly reply, "John Wayne." Henry Fonda and Clint Eastwood may receive notable second mentions within certain constituencies, but names like Mario van Peebles and Sharon Stone would seldom be proffered, despite the fact that both have starred in high-budget American Western films produced within the last decade. In the year 2001 John Wayne's name still remains curiously synonymous with the Western film genre. John Wayne is *the* Western cowboy.

Of course it wasn't always this way. John Wayne, whose major film career included *Red River* (1948), *Big Jake* (1971), and approximately 150 others, was by no means the first popular Western film hero. The American Western, a century-old popular film genre which blazed the trail for narrative film, offered its first outlaw hero in 1903: actor Gilbert M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson in Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*. What John Wayne's career does do is circumscribe the Western's so-called "classic" era.<sup>2</sup> And while John Wayne is no longer with us, his shadow lingers long. This classic Western film hero looms larger than life, filling the screen both in the literal sense of cinematographic technique and in the ideological sense of encoding an American hegemony theory.

The concern of this article, then, will be with whether the Western film genre can continue into the twenty-first century with no one single actor or actress to fill the legendary cowboy boots. We may have become aware in recent years of a veritable dust storm of new Westerns, including *Unforgiven* (1992), *Posse* (1993), *The Quick and the Dead* (1995), *Wild, Wild West* (1999), and *Shanghai Noon* (2000). The new Westerns, as ideologically motivated as the old, may certainly deserve our attention for the various political

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Stanley Corkin for his generous help with this project.

<sup>2</sup> John Wayne's first major role was in John Ford's *Stagecoach* in 1939. The friendship between John Ford and John Wayne continued for many years, during which time John Wayne remained Ford's top choice for lead actor.

challenges they pose, but the question remains whether they are sufficiently popular or ideologically cohesive enough to replace the old myths engendered by the classic Westerns.

### Features, Functions, and Origins of the American Western Film

In order to begin to answer this question, we must delve into the questions of what the Western film genre is (formally and historically), and what it does (ideologically). The Western film can be characterized by an assemblage of features including Western landscapes, shoot-outs, cowboy hats, saloons, gambling, horses, train hopping, rustic architecture, and pastiche folk music. The geographic and temporal settings of the Western (on the American frontier, generally some time between the end of the Civil War and the frontier's conceptual closing) appear to literalize an ideological preoccupation with American nation building.

The American Western film is, first and foremost, an American foundation myth. The Western does for the American foundation myth what stories of colonial or nineteenth-century New England simply could not, for the reason that the Western mythically narrates the *completion* of America. Michael Coyne writes that

The proposition implicit in the narrative unfolding on [Hollywood's] screen was that had [the Civil War] (or a likeness thereof) not occurred in the nation's idealized past, the United States would not have become a nation truly dedicated to progress or, indeed, the great world power of the audience's own era. This foundation myth suggests that the *Republic* was conceived in Philadelphia in 1776; the *United States* was finally born of the Civil War, but *America*, creature of mythic heritage, came of age amidst flying lead on countless dusty Main Streets. (9)

Coyne's distinction between "the United States" – associated with history, specifically as a product of the Civil War – and "America" – associated with "mythic heritage" – is acute. What he doesn't fully explicate is that the Civil War and its aftermath on the one hand and westward expansion on the other are both events which really happened, and, moreover, that these events were in fact not consecutive, but contiguous. Both were facets of the same national crisis. However, war between the states and a historically troubled resolution of this war would have to be difficult for nationalists to reckon with; hence the need to navigate mythically. Undoubtedly it would be easier to divorce the often obviously unjustifiable occurrences of Reconstruction and Post-

Reconstruction from an idealized Western landscape, and to create the illusion that the latter was the moral solution to the former problem. The idealized frontier of the Western film is a place where Civil War veterans unite for a common purpose and against a common enemy. Consider for instance *The Undefeated* (1969), wherein the cowboy heroes are former Civil War veterans from both Yankee and Rebel camps who together defeat the Mexicans. The myth engendered is that after the Civil War, strife is no longer Northern versus Southern, nor Black versus white, but instead Eastern versus Western, and especially "American" versus "foreign."

So what stimulated the development of the Western mode into my country's leading foundation myth? Stanley Corkin has argued persuasively that the Cold War provoked the salvation of the Western film from cinematic obscurity and the development of the Western into a full-scale "A" film genre. However, as historian Patricia Limerick has pointed out, attempts to debunk the Western's foundation myth have preoccupied historians for as long as filmmakers have actively tried to promote it (see Limerick 17-32). Furthermore, the Western was a popular *literary* form almost a century before the Cold War began, and prior to the conceptual closing of the frontier called for by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893.

James Fenimore Cooper has often been cited by film scholars, including John Cawelti, as the first Western writer. Certainly the *Leatherstocking* tales do feature many proto-Western elements. It was during the Civil War, however, when the popular literary form now known as the Western dime novel spread like fire on a battlefield, and then blazed in literary infamy through the Reconstruction era. Authors of dime Westerns, whose frontiers have been filtered through contemporary rather than retrospective lenses, chose wisely to invest in the *logic* of the gold standard (to borrow Walter Benn Michaels' term) rather than prospecting for actual gold. The Western dime novel may be considered the popular ideological manifestation of the material preoccupation. Authorship became alchemy as real backbreaking labor was transformed into fictional half-dime treasures.

It is in chests containing such treasures where guilty pleasure may be found. The crudely-written but action-packed adventure stories found in the Western dime novels may actually be enjoyable to some among us, at least when not read closely or carefully. (If Jane Tompkins can write a homage to Louis L'Amour's *Hondo* and the eight-pound slabs of cow meat served therein, it may not be so unreasonable for others of us to relish the leaner dime Western fare). One might find oneself laughing over the vile details of citified Eastern gentlemen or spying with bated breath over the shoulder of a

poker player. My favorite novel in this genre is Edward Wheeler's *Deadwood Dick: the Prince of the Road*. The verve of the outlaw hero of this tale is matched only by that of the indispensably astute sharp-shooting heroine, Calamity Jane. This woman, who could swear any man under the table, certainly opens real possibilities for women to expand their vocabularies even if not their position in society.

However, this enticing characterization cannot outweigh the fact that the deliciously racy tale romanticizes the invasion of the sacred hunting ground of the Sioux Indian. Subsequent to a US government expedition's discovery of gold on this territory in 1874, my country violated its own treaty as well as the Sioux tribal rights guaranteed therein. It is in such manner that, with nary a mention of African-Americans (who in fact formed a major subject of the discourse on race at the time), the racially-other becomes "foreign" and dispossessed of land and rights with moral aplomb.

### The Classic Western Film

From the end of World War II to the early 1960s, at least two or three "A" Westerns were produced a year, many of which rapidly attained classic status. During this classic era and the approximately fourteen years afterward, the idealized *national* frontier (and, as Corkin notes, the racist and masculinist hierarchies created thereupon) clearly come to represent the idealized *post-national* frontier. If Turner's thesis marked the closing of the American frontier, it coincidentally opened the door for global politics. The last of the cowboys, then, blaze a trail to a global marketplace, where they and their progeny still – shall we say? – call the shots.

The metaphorical comparisons between national politics and the US's role in the global politics of the Cold War are easy to negotiate, given the entrenchment of the national frontier myth itself in both literature and early film. In Corkin's words, "Post-World War II westerns [. . .] provided a conceptual bridge between frontier mythology and Cold War imperatives" (70).

The classic Western film, temporally removed from the events it purports to narrate, injects the American foundation myth with a force legendary as well as global. The legendary power of the Western film derived from the myth that the story has been handed down by the Western villagers for generations, and is typically signified cinematographically by pages of manuscript unfolding on the screen before us. Meanwhile, the popularity of American Westerns in Western Europe beginning in the 1940s and mush-

rooming in the 60s with the so-called "spaghetti Westerns" may suggest some modicum of international acceptance of the ideology of classic Western.

Included in the staggering litany of classic Westerns are *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Red River* (1948), and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). In these films, the cowboy heroes' soundly "American" identity is achieved in contradistinction to that of either "foreigners" or mainstream whites whose patriotic loyalty is held in question. In many cases the triumph of the American cowboy is a blatantly racialized paradigm. In many others the cowboy hero may rest his boot on white men who seem unwilling to recognize what has been termed "the American way."

In *My Darling Clementine*, Wyatt Earp, new in Tombstone, drags an Indian out of the saloon by his hair, crying, "Indian, get out of town and stay out." This is a pivotal moment for the townspeople, whose sympathies and admiration crystallize into a determination to name Wyatt Earp the new marshal of the town. However, Earp at first is unwilling to accept the position. It is not until a clan of vicious white boys (the Clantons, the entrenched and ruthless "clan" of the "town") make their natures all too well known to Earp that Earp puts on the marshal's badge and deputizes his remaining brothers. "The American way," it would appear, celebrates both racial purging and the establishment of a new order through violent confrontation.

Howard Hawks' celebrated classic *Red River* is sober in its tone, especially in contrast to the often-silly *My Darling Clementine*, and not surprisingly illustrates the terms of American hegemony with greater vehemence. In this film, "foreign" men, non-patriotic white men, and white women alike are all ruthlessly struck down. Critical considerations of the dual-natured cowboy hero notwithstanding,<sup>3</sup> we know that Dunson is supposed to be considered the cowboy hero, and can easily predict that he and his adopted son will both prevail. An early confrontation between Dunson and the Mexican Don Diego during which all lands North of the Rio Grand become US territory allegorizes uncritically the unapologetic manner in which the US acquired Mexican territories. A later scene featuring the seizure of several hundred head of the Mexican's cattle for the drive likewise depicts the shameless nature of such international "transference" – this time of capital rather than land – from Mexico to the US.

A masculinist agenda for post-War America is also celebrated in this film. *Red River* opens with Fen, Dunson's lover, begging him to take her

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<sup>3</sup> Coyne for instance places *Red River* in a category he names "Odyssey Westerns," which as he says "accentuate personal traits and neuroses" (7).



with him when he leaves the wagon train to blaze his own trail, but Dunson insists that the Wild West is "no place for a woman." He and his friend Groot leave the wagon train, and it is subsequently attacked and burned to the ground by Indians.

In the next scene, a young boy, babbling like an idiot and leading a cow, approaches Dunson's wagon. The boy has apparently lost his mother in the attack, but Dunson's merciless treatment of the boy (quite literally slapping him around a few times) suggests what real American men are supposed to be made of (and it isn't nostalgic recollection of feminine influence). It is only when the boy vigorously defends both his gun and his cow from Dunson's attempts to seize them that Dunson tells Groot cheerfully, "He'll do."

In this film too it becomes abundantly clear that human sacrifice is a feature vital to the function of the American Western film. Dunson's lover is only the first of several sacrificial victims. Susan Mizruchi describes the ideological uses of sacrifice as follows:

Sacrificial categories tended to oppose . . . the interests of "strangers" – immigrants or other sorts of transforming or transformative groups, understood as productive of political instability – dangerous to the welfare of "neighbors." These groups might include groups as formerly familiar as the American working class . . . and women . . . The category "stranger" could also apply to those as relentlessly "alien" as Blacks . . . It was no accident that sacrificial thinking seemed to coalesce around these groups, which were often perceived as vehicles of modern change. (7)

What she finds for American literary realism and sociology clearly also applies to Western films. No trope is as effective as the sacrifice motif at separating out the legitimate from the illegitimate or de-legitimated.

In *Red River*, the sacrifice of the de-legitimated man is served up with as little sentiment as that of the disenfranchised woman. The end of World War II saw the return home of hundreds of men and the undermining of a female-dominated work force. President Truman's subsequent post-war plan for the conversion of the US's economy from military to civilian included the draft of strikers into the US army, wherein they would be subject to disciplinary measures should they risk further disobedience. This plan is given sanction by Hawk's film, in which Dunson, after recruiting a team of post-Civil-war men, puts down a populist complaint from a working class American in the most unapologetic manner: with a gun.

However, even in this film, the *pivotal* sacrifice is conceived in the conventionally affective sense as the giving up of a cherished object for the greater good of the community. Most often in Western films, the pivotal sac-

rifice is that of a "good" man whose weak nature makes him (as Mizruchi says) "dangerous to the welfare of neighbors." The sentimental sacrifice in the Western typically revolves around the association of the victim-to-be with the largest "formerly familiar" group: women. Indeed this is the case in *Red River*. Dan Latimer is a sweet young fellow who stutters. His motives for going on the drive include the acquisition of a house and a pair of red shoes for his wife. It is this feminine-associated and effeminate young man who is (predictably) killed in a stampede caused by another cattle driver's fatal error.<sup>4</sup>

*My Darling Clementine*'s pivotal sentimental sacrifice is the young boy, James Earp. In the beginning campfire scene, the other brothers tell him he is a good cook and he will one day be as good as Maw. The camera angles in on the silver necklace around his neck, which he intends for his girl friend back home. The murder of James becomes the impetus for Wyatt Earp's stand against the Clantons and henceforth the triumph of a new American order.

Meanwhile, the necklace, the symbol of the pivotal sacrifice, reappears to become the catalyst for the film's denouement. By association with it, two other beloved but dangerous characters, Chihuahua and Doc Holliday, are likewise sacrificed. Chihuahua cheats on Doc with Billy Clanton, and wears the necklace Billy gives her, unaware of its symbolic origin. Chihuahua, whose race and sexuality together mark her as an especial threat, is then sacrificed to both Billy's gun-slinging viciousness and Doc's surgical incompetence. Doc Holliday himself is sacrificed indirectly to his drunken and womanizing dissipation.

The classic Western is of course not categorically opposed to femininity; rather, it simply wishes to control and subject it. In both *Red River* and *My Darling Clementine*, femininity is once again sanctioned after the threat of feminine sexual contamination has been purged. In *Red River*, Matt is told in the end by Dunson, "You'd better marry that girl," meaning Tess Millay, even though Dunson himself had gazed upon the smoke of his own beloved's remains without emotion. Similarly, in *My Darling Clementine*, Clementine Carter, Doc Holliday's pure Eastern belle, resolves after the death of her beloved to remain in Tombstone to open a school. The same pattern of a sanctified pure white femininity prevailing in the end after an artful purge of sexual threat continues in Western films produced after the end of the West-

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<sup>4</sup> In *Lonesome Dove*, a revitalized traditional Western television miniseries from the new Western era, a sweet young Irish boy named Sean O'Brian is similarly disposed of.



ern's classic era and before the bicentennial. Examples include *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969) and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972).

### The Second Wave

The period between the end of World War II and the early sixties is indisputably the Western's most significant period, in terms of sheer volume of production if not also (according to most film critics) in quality. In the years between 1964 (*Cheyenne Autumn*) and 1976 (*The Shootist*), the number of Western films produced each year had dwindled from an average of three or four to an average of one or two. Films from this second wave of box-office-hit Westerns are generally less serious than classic Westerns, and tend to be peppered with humor that reflects a formal self-consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The second wave also aimed for a more diverse audience and employed a wider variety of cinematographic techniques. So-called "spaghetti Westerns," Vietnam Westerns, spoofy Westerns like *Big Jake* (1971), and Western parodies like Andy Warhol's gay parody *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968) all made their debut during the Western's second wave.

Perhaps the advent of the Civil Rights movement, the shock of President John F. Kennedy's assassination or the US's involvement in Vietnam coerced Hollywood to recognize unrest well within the borders of contemporary America. Whatever the reason, the Western film did alter. At the very least, Western films from the second wave had to negotiate the possibility of an audience dubious of the frontier myth and its contemporary metaphors. Some films, like *Cheyenne Autumn*, attempt, however patronizingly, to consider peoples whose rights had in fact been trampled during westward expansion. Others, like *Big Jake* (1971) and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972), acknowledge that modernity is here and now, but still console us with the friendly ghosts of an allegedly noble cowboy past.

In *Big Jake*, mainstream Americans are consoled with the notion that American hegemony prevails. Even though the film is set several generations

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<sup>5</sup> In classic Westerns such as *My Darling Clementine*, much is made of the cowboy code of honor where guns are concerned. The way to tell the cowboy heroes from the vicious brutes is by how fairly they murder. In the shoot-out between Bean and the ludicrously excessive albino "Bad Bob" in *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, the conventional cat-and-mouse game sets the stage for the shoot-out, but then Bean has no qualms about reappearing in the barn loft to shoot Bad Bob in the back. The effect is comical, as the look in Bad Bob's eyes as he falls seems to say, "That's not what they're supposed to do in Westerns."

after the Civil War, the McCandles estate appears as a plantation of the genteel South, only transported to a Southwestern terrain: Black mammies are joined by Mexican field hands to hover about in service of the mistress and the young masters. Moreover, viewers are instructed that American heroism is a matter of biological determinism. In this film, little Jake is rescued by his own legendary grandfather, believed to be long since dead. After the requisite gratuitous explosion of flying bullets, the boy in turn ties a tourniquet – all by himself – around his grandfather's wound, indicating that he has accepted the honor of his grandfather's legacy. Throughout the film the people who meet him tell Big Jake McCandles "I thought you was dead" – the humorously insidious repetition of which also functions to assure mainstream America that the spirit of legend is alive and well enough to lick his mod and smarty-pants son Michael.

*Judge Roy Bean* is more complex in its negotiation of this patriotic skepticism. Michael Coyne claims that *Judge Roy Bean* typifies the Western film's assertion of a "glib higher truth," but he is either too generous to the classic Western or unappreciative of the sophistication of this particular film. As Coyne notes, the film begins with the words "... Maybe this isn't the way it was ... it's the way it should have been." unfurling on the screen before the audience. Yes – maybe it didn't happen that a benighted outlaw sought asylum in East Texas, lived through a brutal and cowardly attempt on his life by vicious outlaws, served "justice", had the Bible read over the graves of the deceased, perused a conveniently-placed Texas law book, became beloved judge of whites and Mexicans alike, marshaled former outlaws of his own disposition, shackled up former prostitutes to said marshals in common-law marriage, tamed a bear, kept the most beautiful and coincidentally orphaned Mexican girl as his mistress, impregnated her, traveled East in search of the pure white female ideal, returned to find he had been overthrown by an Eastern lawyer and to watch his mistress die in childbirth, fled, and reappeared many years later to help his daughter, grown to womanhood now, destroy the modern hellhole that lawyer Gass had erected otherwise known as a gas station, then disappeared for once and for all.

"... Maybe," we're told, "this isn't the way it was ... ." The film allows the viewers' skepticism to permeate the material events of the foundation myth. But then we are told, "... It's the way it should have been. ... ." Apparently we dare not question the ideological principals. It *should* have been the case that a reformed, god-fearing, hard-drinking, and noose-happy lout came to power over a vast expanse of West Texas. It *should* have been the case that Maria Elena (not played, of course, by a Chicano actress, but by

Victoria Principal in her first major role) wanted to devote her life and commit her people to a man who will not marry her and instead hangs a poster of the white woman he idolizes in front of her face. It *should* have been the case that Roy Bean's ghost rides again to guide the old American spirits to victory over the encroachments of modernity, and it *should* be the case that his memory, preserved in a museum with his best friend and side-kick as curator, would be honored by the feminine ideal herself. The legend of old-style American masculinity – embodied (of course) in Bean's gun – is to be carried back to the world of the living by the undying and virtually unchanged ideal of pure femininity.

### The New Western Film

Except for a few so-called "bicentennial Westerns" in 1976, the Western film virtually disappeared in the early seventies. Moreover, in the bicentennial Western *The Shootist*, John Wayne plays a cowboy who has outlived his time and succumbs to cancer. The cowboy actor himself died of cancer in 1979. Many people assume that the actor followed the Western myth to the grave.

However, those who pay attention to contemporary film productions must somehow reckon with a few dozen new Westerns beginning in the late 1980s, both at the theater and – more rarely – on television. The new Westerns can be roughly divided into two categories: the revitalized traditional Western and the revisionist Western. By far the greater number of new Westerns are revisionist, though some among these (*Unforgiven*, for instance) may bleed into the revitalized traditional Western category. The television miniseries *Lonesome Dove* (1989) prompted at least a few revitalized traditional Westerns, while clearly identifiable feminist Westerns, from *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) to *Painted Angels* (1998) have boosted the revisionist market.

One of the most striking of the revisionist Westerns is the African-American Western *Posse* (1993). This Western is ruthlessly faithful to the features of classic Westerns – the band of outlaw heroes, the sharp-shooting, the gambling, the sacrifice of a beloved but weak man, the railroad, the triumph of a certain moral order – while at the same time specifically devoting itself to an African-American constituency. For instance, the story is not ensconced between pages of text, but rather within the voice of the griot – the African story-teller – played with *éclat* by Woody Strode.

Yet more significantly, this film directly confronts the underlying assumptions of the very American foundation myth that the Western film dramatizes. Much of what was being obscured by the mythically forced separation of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction on one hand and frontier history on the other was indeed racial conflict and the racial hierarchies created between Black and white people in the aftermath of the war. In traditional Western formulations, Black people either disappear or hover about the margins. In *Posse*, we learn what a Western film might look like if Black people are re-imagined upon the legendary Western frontier. Never mind that the frontier was conceptually closed by 1893. Five years off the mark is but a trivial detail if one wants to use the Spanish-American War, not the aftermath of the Civil War, as the point of re-entry.

Meanwhile, the feminist revisionist Western put on a comparatively poor show. For example, one Hollywood feminist film commonly identified as Western by virtue of the sheer number of Western elements featured – namely, *Bad Girls* (1994) – might not be such. Even when three of the four cowboy heroines ride off into the sunset toward the Klondike, a true Western chord is not struck, because we know that, unlike in *Posse*, a new moral order has *not* prevailed in America. Whereas Jesse and his posse triumphed against the vicious whites of the neighboring village by getting the train rerouted through Freemanville, Anita and her friends never do have their homesteader's claim honored. A bag full of Western tricks is not enough if all the cowgirl posse can do is run away.

The revisionist Western faithful, however, may find refuge in *Shanghai Noon* (2000). *Shanghai Noon* is of course a perfect example of a Western parody, complete with the "Shanghai Kid" who tries to pass by the name of "John Wayne." We do need John Wayne, after all, to reinvigorate the new Western! We laugh our way through bubble baths and bar fights (and, all right, maybe even tear up in the scene where the disguised Chinese Princess is forced, together with numerous other imprisoned Chinese immigrants, to carry a rock-laden yoke on her shoulders). The simultaneous destabilization of racial hierarchies and pledge of allegiance to a different sort of America make this film succeed as a Western. This film may indeed be an Asian-American parody of a Western, but nevertheless the Western's aesthetic and indeed mythic imperatives are fulfilled.

## Conclusions

The timeline of the production of American Western films holds the probable answer to the question of the fate of the Western. The Western clearly originated as an American foundation myth, while the production of Western films boomed after World War II presumably as a response to the Cold War. The 60s brought with it the Civil Rights Movement and US involvement in Vietnam, and, with these, spoofy or contemporary twists on the classic Western film. John Wayne may have taken his last stand in 1976, but the Western film and John Wayne himself reappeared, even a generation later, and even if in surprisingly altered form. One may speculate that the production of revitalized traditional Westerns like the television series *Lonesome Dove* (1989) was motivated by baby boomer nostalgia for what once was (at least on the tube), but the impetus behind the larger body of new Westerns, the revisionist Western, defies explanation. And if the revisionist Western seems to play out toward the end of the 1990s with a slow-mo *Painted Angels* (1998) and a floppy *Wild, Wild West* (1999), Jackie Chan gives us confidence that the form may remain alive and kicking – and assuming John Wayne's name – for perhaps one more generation.



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