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THE EVOLUTION OF THE WESTERN *GENRE* RESULTING FROM SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE USA

Introduction

This article examines the development of the western *genre* at various stages of American history. The introduction defines the *genre* and describes its essential elements and characters: Native Americans, cowboys, women and so on. The article comprises four parts describing four exemplars covering distinct historical periods of westerns. Analysis begins with the times of World War II (*Stagecoach*), continues with the 1950s (*High Noon*), then the 1970s (*Little Big Man*) and finally touches on the 1990s (*Dances with Wolves*). The stereotypical image of the Indians from the first westerns was one of savage beasts attacking for no apparent reason. The white 'civilised' world was always better than the wilderness associated with Native Americans. Cowboys and the US Army were ultimately victorious in every encounter. As American society changed, the western reflected this transformation. Therefore the way in which the characters were presented changed as well. It is particularly visible in the case of Native Americans who, in times when the philosophy of political correctness dominates, are no longer cruel savages but likeable characters exterminated by white colonists.

For almost three centuries the movement westwards was the fundamental process in the history of the United States. Western films define the early days of the expansive American frontier (the borderline between civilization and the wilderness). They are one of the oldest, most enduring and flexible *genres*. This indigenous American art form focuses on the frontier West that existed in North America. The western film *genre* often portrays the conquest of the wilderness and the subordination of nature, in the name of civilization, or the confiscation of the territorial rights of the original inhabitants of the frontier. The idea of the far West still stirs the imagination of the American people and many of the frontier values became national values. Furthermore, the frontier

has been perceived by Americans as an ideal expression of the equality of opportunity.

The basic themes of westerns include conflicts between white pioneers and Native Americans as well as between cattle ranchers and fence-building farmers. Specific settings include lonely isolated forts, ranch houses, the isolated homestead, breathtaking settings and open landscapes, the saloon, the jail, the livery stable, the small-town main street, or small frontier towns that are forming at the edges of civilization. They may even include Native American sites or villages. Other iconic elements in westerns include the hanging tree, horses, spurs, saddles, lassos and Colt .45's, canteens, stagecoaches and distinctive western clothing (denims, chaps, boots, etc.).

Usually, the central plot of the western film is maintaining law and order on the frontier. It is normally rooted in a conflict – good vs. bad, virtue vs. evil, settlers vs. Native Americans. Often the hero of a western meets his opposite ‘double,’ a mirror of his own evil side that he has to destroy. Western heroes are often ranchers, army officers, cowboys, territorial marshals, or skilled gunfighters. They are normally masculine persons of integrity – courageous, moral, and self-sufficient, maverick characters. The Western hero usually stands alone and faces danger on his own. In many ways, the cowboy of the Old West was the American version of the Japanese samurai warrior, or the Arthurian knight of medieval times. A mythical western hero was acting as a noble knight in shining leather in its tale of good vs. evil. They were all bound by legal codes of behavior, ethics, justice, courage, honor and chivalry.

Western films have also been called the horse opera, or the cowboy picture. This *genre* was glorifying the fast-fading values of the mythical West. Over time, westerns have been redefined, reinvented and expanded, dismissed and rediscovered. In the late 60s and early 70s revisionist westerns that questioned the elements of the classic westerns appeared.

A Classic Western: *Stagecoach* (1939)

Stagecoach (1939) is a classic Western directed by John Ford. It was his first sound western. The script was written by Dudley Nichols, from the story *The Stage to Lordsburg* by Ernest Haycox. The film describes a stagecoach journey across Apache country. It includes action/chase sequences and presents the beautiful expanses of Monument Valley. This new kind of western with epic scope had a formative influence on all future westerns, by concentrating on the film's characters. The movie portrays representatives of various social classes, including a sheriff, a cowardly driver, and the passengers: a drunken doctor, a whiskey drummer, an unscrupulous bank executive, a prostitute with a heart of gold, a pregnant lady and a gambler. The characters thought to be respectable

turn out to be cowards and frauds, while the outcasts provide flashes of nobility. As Andre Bazin noticed:

[Stagecoach] demonstrates that a prostitute can be more respectable than the narrow-minded people who drove her out of town and just as respectable as an officer's wife; the dissolute gambler knows how to die with all the dignity of an aristocrat; that an alcoholic doctor can practice his profession with competence and devotion, that an outlaw who is being sought for payment of past and possibly future debts can show loyalty, generosity, courage, and refinement, whereas a banker of considerable standing and reputation runs off with the cashbox. (2004:146–147)

Its Indian chase sequence across flats was thrilling, and it had a decisive quote to end it: *Saved from the blessings of civilization.*

*More recently, in fact, critics and scholars have come to see Stagecoach in far more objective and complex terms with regard to changes not only in the Western at the time but also in the Hollywood film industry at large (Schatz 2003:21). Stagecoach, in its days, was more often characterized as a melodrama than as a Western. On the whole the roles of women in Stagecoach, and in John Ford's films in general, seem much more conventional than in the Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s (Garbowski 2006:65). In the course of the journey two women achieve a new perspective on their personal qualities. However, neither Dallas nor Lucy has much in common with the heroic leading women of such films as *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) or *Now, Voyager* (1942), women who are passionately committed to their quests for selfhood. (Rothman 2003:158)*

The first image of an Apache Indian in John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) follows a reaction shot from the whiskey salesman Peacock, as he spots Yakima, the station-keeper Chris's wife. He warns everyone else that she is *a savage!* and Chris replies jokingly that *she is a little bit savage, I think.* He also allows that she is for him a kind of security, since having an Apache wife means the *Apaches don't bother me.* These people have had to calculate their relationships for both pleasure and safety. This scene illustrates how quickly and superficially determinations about others are made here. And especially subject to this quick judgment are the Indians, whom, the film emphasizes, most of the whites know only by reputation or general appearance. The play of racial representation and judgment or misjudgment echoes a number of instances of problematic racial representation in Ford's films, while it also points towards his larger concern with the nature of civilization, particularly its fear of the other, its hardly repressed sense that even *a little bit savage*, usually seems far too excessive for American tastes. (Telotte 2003:113)

The movie is an allegory of American history of the period before and after World War II. It presents the formative period of the American nation, their values and ideals (Gołębiowski 2004:413). *Stagecoach* symbolizes the civilized

society meeting the ‘others.’ Ford elaborates on people’s behaviour in stress conditions resulting from entering the unknown environment and the war path. Native Americans symbolize enemies, threat, danger, the ‘others.’ A group of people drawn from all classes present a metaphor of American society – that rides on the stagecoach in the hostile environment facing the attack of wild savages. The movie is an allegory of World War II with the main theme – the besieged condition of civilization.

More Classic Westerns: *High Noon* (1952)

High Noon (1952) was director Fred Zinnemann's only western. It is a classic, dramatic morality tale of an abandoned lawman, carefully filmed in ‘real-time.’ The minimalist script written by Carl Foreman (who was blacklisted during the 50s' anti-Communist hearings) was a political allegory of the 1950s McCarthyism. Gary Cooper played the part of just-married (to Grace Kelly), small-town Marshal Kane who heroically stood up to four, gunslinging killers without assistance from the townsfolk that he had defended for his entire career. This paralleled the historical incident of the early 50s' *House Committee on Un-American Activities*' witch-hunt for Communists in Hollywood, and indicted those who deserted their friends.¹ *High Noon* is an anti-HUAC allegory.

Will Kane (Gary Cooper), the Marshal of Hadleyville, Kansas, has just married a pacifist Quaker Amy (Grace Kelly) and is preparing to move away to become a storekeeper. Then, however, the town learns that a psychopathic criminal Frank Miller is due to arrive on the noon train and his gang is waiting for him at the station. The worried townspeople encourage Kane to leave to defuse Miller’s desire for revenge. Only his former lover, an implied madam named Helen Ramírez (Katy Jurado) supports him. His wife threatens to leave on the noon train without him if he stays, but he stubbornly refuses to give in. Amy chooses her husband’s life over her religious beliefs and shoots one of the gunmen and then helps her husband to kill Miller. In front of the cowardly townspeople who have come out of hiding, Kane throws his Marshal’s Star in the dirt and leaves town with his wife.

High Noon is a portrait of a moral man who is opposed by his community, his friends, even his wife. The movie celebrated individuality and warned against the failed public morality. The hero fights the villains not for the sake of society

¹ HUAC (*House Committee on Un-American Activities*) was the result of the *Red Scare*. It opened hearings in 1947 and examined the motion picture industry for the influence of communism. Since they were photographed by newsreels and by the TV networks, they gained a lot of public interest. Cases of communism in Hollywood films were investigated and a blacklist consisting of the names of those suspected of being supporters of communism was compiled.

but out of his own sense of duty (Skwara 1985:43–47). The movie is an anti-triumphal portrayal of the man of conscience set against a society that refuses to speak out against injustice (in this case the blacklist.) While Cooper's Will Kane carries most of the symbolic and dramatic weight, Grace Kelly's Amy remains the character with the dilemma of conscience: she is the dedicated 'pacifist' who allows her pacifist conscience to abandon her human loyalties. In the end, however, abstract moral convictions must give way to real life. A pacifist, faced with her first real test, has just brought two men to their violent deaths and she leaves town with her man. Grace Kelly's naive Amy is no match for Katy Jurado's sensuous and knowing Helen. Her view of the world is untested. She resolves abstract moral dilemmas into real-life choices, and does what any real man or woman would do and chooses blood over the Bible. The dramatic appeal of *High Noon* is that even moral bravery must take on the form of external action. While *High Noon* was unique in its time for its inner tension, it still remained true to its action genre and resolved all conflict with that greatest of American magical symbols: the handgun.

High Noon certainly asks us, on a deep mythic level, to understand conflict and courage. History has shown that nonviolence and peacemaking are active social, political and certainly moral positions. They are played out in the larger context of these social and political arenas, in the community, and rarely through isolated action and certainly involve personal courage and moral qualities. Placing Amy's nonviolence within the Western myth where, by *genre* definition, personal violence is the only way to resolve moral issues, is ultimately rather unfair. Amy's dilemma is not that she is a moral person but that she is a fictional character: she faces a real, existential crisis in the Western town on the frontiers of reality. Here gunplay is the only means allowed to resolve conflict.

Zinnemann used the mythical background of the Old West to attack contemporary American values (especially during the period of blacklists). Criticism of the cowardly majority and contempt for intellectual conformism reflect the social reality of 1950s America. (Gołębiowski 2004:414)

Westerns of the 1970s: *Little Big Man* (1970)

Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970) is a fable about the expansion of the Old West from an adaptation of Thomas Berger's novel. Dustin Hoffman stars as Jack Crabb, the only white survivor of the Battle of *Little Big Horn* (also known as *Custer's Last Stand*), who is recounting the days of his younger years. He lived his life amongst white settlers and the Indians, yet was always on the fringes. Hoffman plays Jack from teen years into old age. His story is a fantastic one: captured by Indians as a boy, raised in the ways of the 'Human Beings' by paternal mentor *Old Lodge Skins*, accepting non-conformity and living

peacefully with nature. He constantly shuttles back and forth between the white and Indian worlds. Crabb apparently was adopted by Native Americans, adopted by Christian fanatics, was the fastest gun in the west, an honest businessman, a not so-honest businessman, a drunken slob, filthy rich. In the process, he befriends everyone from Wild Bill Hickock to George Armstrong Custer and is a gunslinger, a snake-oil salesman and an Army scout. Jack gets married to a Swedish woman but the Indians capture her. While searching for his wife Jack gets back to his Cheyenne family who treat him as a tribe member. Jack prefers life as a 'Human Being.' Each switch between the white and Indian reality deepen his isolation.

The movie has elements of both comedy and tragedy and exposes the lies of U.S. history via a tall tale. As some reviewers claim *Little Big Man* is very much *a bulletin of its time* (Ventura 2003) The film was released during the Vietnam War when the country was declining from Eisenhowerian optimism to Nixonian cynicism. The US expansionist policy in Indochina is analogous to the American settlement westwards. The cowboys fighting Indians symbolize American soldiers and the Viet Cong. However, it is no longer clear who represents the good guys. Penn used the *genre* as an area of protest against the U.S. expansion of the Old West.

Native Americans from the movie are no longer wild creatures but representatives of a noble race of peaceful and civilized people who are being systematically exterminated by the representatives of the US government (Gołębiowski 2004:415). The film's lack of respect for historical characters is presented with the embodiment of General Custer. Noteworthy for portraying Native Americans as the good guys and General Custer as the bad guy, *Little Big Man* is a reversal of earlier Hollywood standards. The parallels to U.S. Indochina policy are barely hidden. The most effective scene in *Little Big Man* is the *Washita River Massacre*, in which Custer's Cavalry kills an entire village, including women and children. This cruel scene evokes the American intensive phase of the Vietnam War – specifically the *My Lai Massacre*. Paralleling the Vietnam tragedy, the film demythologized the past and revealed acts of cruelty performed on ethnic Indians by US forces. It is an allegory about the bloody results of American imperialism.

Through attacks on the logics of the world of westerns and Wild West mythology Penn contributed to the development of anti-western *genre* (Kolasińska-Pasterczyk 2007:188). The director focuses on the social and psychological alienation of individuals or groups different from the majority – the so called the 'others'. Penn always portrays the minority group – the 'others' in a positive way. They have to stand against the society that can solve its problems only through the means of force and violence. The unprovoked massacres of Indian villages, the cruelty and lack of any moral code or values of white soldiers, and the hopelessness and despair of Indians are the themes of the

movie. The main issue is the clash of cultures. The whites seem to be obsessed with their version of civilization and want to impose it upon everyone, even if that means destroying the unique Native American culture. However, the 'white world' seems to lose when compared with the 'red world.' Penn destroys the myths of legendary heroes of the Wild West. America is presented as a country in a state of value crisis.

The Decline of Westerns in the 1990s: *Dances with Wolves* (1990)

Dances with Wolves (1990) works on many levels. It is an adventure, a touching romance, and a stirring drama. The film is Kevin Costner's directorial debut, noted as one of the few westerns that cast Indians in acting roles, used *Lakota Sioux* subtitles, and viewed Native Americans in a sympathetic way and not as blood-thirsty savages. The film describes the relationship between a Civil War soldier and a band of *Sioux* Indians. It opens as Union lieutenant John W. Dunbar attempts to kill himself on a suicide mission, but instead becomes an unintentional hero. His actions lead to his reassignment to a remote post in South Dakota. The fort turns out to be deserted with broken down shacks in a bare valley. He stays there alone for months and his only companions are a friendly wolf that he names *Two Socks* and his faithful horse *Cisco*. Gradually, over time, he becomes comfortable with his peaceful surroundings. When the *Sioux* come, they are unfriendly and treat him with suspicion, even hostility. Dunbar behaves as he does towards the wolf, encouraging, gentle and patient. At first, there is mutual distrust, but, as Dunbar and the *Sioux* interact and begin to communicate (each learning a few words of the other's language), they form a bond. With every passing day, Dunbar finds himself more and more infatuated with the *Sioux* way of life.

Dances with Wolves contains several well-executed battle scenes but the most breathtaking sequence is the buffalo hunt. It is a high adrenaline sequence that marks the moment when Dunbar finally rejects his old culture to embrace his new way of life. Attracted by the natural simplicity of the *Sioux* lifestyle, he chooses to leave his former life behind to join them, taking on the name *Dances with Wolves*. What happens, through a series of incidents, is that Dunbar becomes accepted by the Indians and slowly integrates into their lives. This is a natural evolution, based on mutual respect. Even his love of *Stands With A Fist* (Mary McDonnell), a white woman captured by the tribe as a child, already a widow, takes time to grow. His peaceful existence is threatened, however, when Union soldiers arrive on the *Sioux* land.

Dances with Wolves reverses the traditional roles of cowboys and Indians (Berardnelli). Costner portrays the *Sioux* tribe in a positive way, contrary to their enemies, the *Pawnee*. The movie changes some conventions of the *genre*. Areas

that used to be presented in black and white symbolizing the good and the evil are shown in a more complex way. For example the American soldiers are not thoughtless brutes but imperfect human beings. Costner tried to make the film as authentic as possible and cast only Native Americans as Indians. The Sioux speak *Lakota* language and a full wolf is used for *Two Socks*.

Conclusion

The Western represents adventure, achievement, optimism for the future, the beauty of the land, and the courage of the individuals who won the land. The classic western can be an allegory of the fight between good and evil. American values – individualism, self-reliance and equality of opportunity – were all present in both the frontier life and westerns. Movie-makers used westerns to comment on historical and political events. The analysis of the historical background and the changes of the American society prove there is a connection between the society and the western. Along with the changes of American society the western *genre* underwent transformations as well. With the development of new perceptions some issues were presented in a different way. Especially the image of Native Americans was completely revised as Americans became more sensitive towards ethnic minorities – the ‘others.’ Behind the simple plot and the characters there is a hidden message. The function of the Western is to provide the vehicle for our dreams, since in most cases we have settled on our realities. (Fenin 1962:341)

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