

The Influence of the American Western

Outline Timetable

10.30 Introductory session: Kitses and Wright: Myths and Legends

11.15 Screening: *Shane*

13.15 Lunch

14.00 Discussion of the film, investigation of the 'classical' Western and the transitions of the 1950s

15.15 Short Break

15.30 Westerns after 1960

16.30 Close

Background to the day

The objective of the Day School is to explore the Western as a Hollywood film genre and to identify those elements in the genre repertoire that might be seen to have universal appeal. Further, we will attempt to identify what might have attracted audiences outside the US towards the genre and why overseas filmmakers might attempt 'local' Westerns or adapt Western narratives for local genres.

This will necessitate study of classic and revisionist Hollywood Westerns in the first instance. If the day is thought to be successful we may then go on to look at Westerns outside Hollywood in a future event.

Western beginnings

Film studies has struggled since the early 1970s to define genre as a critical tool but the concept of a 'repertoire of elements', a fluid and dynamic grouping of characteristics of various kinds, now seems to be widely accepted. Repertoires overlap and morph, they are absorbent and they 'bleed' in the constantly shifting imagination of filmmakers, audiences and critics/scholars – but enough remains stable to make study worthwhile.

When did the concept of the 'Western' first begin to take shape? James Fenimore Cooper wrote his best-known novel *The Last of the Mohicans* in 1826 when the 'frontier' was only just beginning to be opened up and narratives about the 'wild' and

contact with what would later be called 'Native Americans' was still largely 'East of the Mississippi'. Yet already, following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the US was expanding West of the Mississippi. *The Revenant* is the latest Western to be widely seen, set in the Upper Missouri River region in the early 1820s.

Cooper's 'Leatherstocking Tales' and his hero Natty Bumpo were the first popular representations of the American frontier to sell across the world (i.e. mainly in Western Europe and Russia) but earlier fictions about 'capture by Indians' had been in circulation since at least the 16th century.

Myth and legend

During the 19th century in the US, 'frontier tales' became more popular in novels and cheaper publications, alongside fine art representations and theatrical shows. Eventually the successors of Natty Bumpo emerged as 'real' Western heroes who then became fictionalised and re-packaged as part of the urbanised, industrial popular entertainment of the late 19th century. The most famous of these was 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West', the travelling circus which began in 1883 and continued for thirty years. Ed Buscombe (1988) points out that Cooper's Natty Bumpo was to some extent modelled on the 'real' Western hero Daniel Boone; William Cody was following this principle by more or less accepting the fictionalising of himself as Buffalo Bill. Jesse James and Billy the Kid were similarly 'real' historical figures who became mythologised as Western 'heroes'.

The stories and the characters of dime novels and stage plays soon made their way into cinema. Buscombe argues that representations of the West in early cinema predate *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and by the late 1910s had become a genre staple. The frontier itself had barely 'closed' at this point and 'real' Western characters like Wyatt Earp were employed as Hollywood 'consultants'.

The Western became arguably the 'biggest' genre in numbers of films made over the next 100 years (leaving aside broader categories like 'drama' or 'comedy'). In industrial terms, Westerns were split between cheap 'B' pictures and serials and the more expensive 'A' features. The latter briefly flourished in the 1920s and early 1930s and reached their peak in

the 1940s and 1950s. The 1960s and 1970s were a period of 'revision' and since then the genre has been much less prolific. 'B' Westerns remained important up until the early 1950s when they transferred to television. At one point in 1959, 48 Western shows/series were on air on US TV. (See Weddle 1996: 133)

During the whole of this history, Hollywood (the major studios and the 'B' producers) represented frontier life in terms of its **myths** rather than the realities of everyday life on the plains, in the mountains or the deserts. The myths were so powerful and so deeply inculcated in American culture that they became, in a sense, more important than the history. Scholars have argued that 'national myths' embody the values and beliefs of any society and the importance of the Western is its ability to create film narratives from such myths. This has often been exemplified by the scene in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). This film exposes the 'true story' of how a small-town lawyer defeated a local outlaw and as a result gained election and eventually a seat in the US Senate. In reality, the outlaw was killed by another gunslinger. But when the local newspaper editor hears the story he doesn't want to print it. He explains: "When the fact becomes legend, print the legend."

In the 1970s two structuralist critics approached the myths of the Western in different ways, although they drew on similar theoretical works. In *Horizons West* (1969) Jim Kitses explored Westerns via a set of 'antimonies' or 'binary oppositions' which became very influential (see Fig 1 opposite). He chose as his case study the Western films of three Hollywood directors (the concept of 'film authorship' was still an important part of film studies at this time): Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher and Sam Peckinpah. In *Sixguns & Society*, (1975) Will Wright studied Westerns in terms of four 'themes' or plots which he fashioned from the seven basic Western plots which have been attributed to the Western pulp novelist and screenwriter Frank Gruber (1902-69):

1. Union Pacific story. The plot concerns construction of a railroad, a telegraph line, or some other type of modern technology or transportation. Wagon train stories fall into this category.
2. Ranch story. The plot concerns threats to the ranch from rustlers or large landowners attempting to force out the proper owners.

THE WILDERNESS

The Individual

freedom
honour
self-knowledge
integrity
self-interest
solipsism

Nature

purity
experience
empiricism
pragmatism
brutalization
savagery

The West

America
the frontier
equality
agrarianism
tradition
the past

CIVILIZATION

The Community

restriction
institutions
illusion
compromise
social responsibility
democracy

Culture

corruption
knowledge
legalism
idealism
refinement
humanity

The East

Europe
America
class
industrialism
change
the future

Fig 1: Kitses' binary oppositions

3. Empire story. The plot involves building a ranch or an oil empire from scratch, a rags-to-riches plot.
4. Revenge story. The plot often involves an elaborate chase and pursuit by a wronged individual, but it may also include elements of the classic mystery story.
5. Cavalry and Indian story. The plot revolves around "taming" the wilderness for white settlers.
6. Outlaw story. The outlaw gangs dominate the action.
7. Marshal story. The lawman and his challenges drive the plot.

Wright's four categories are:

1. The Classical Plot (e.g. *Shane*)
2. The Transition Theme (e.g. *Broken Arrow*)
3. The Vengeance Variation (e.g. *The Searchers*)
4. The Professional Plot (e.g. *The Wild Bunch*)

Neither Kitses nor Wright (nor Gruber) cover the whole range of possible stories and we will discuss some alternatives. Wright's 'Transition theme' refers specifically to a small group of films that in the early 1950s altered the relationship between the hero of the story and society in interesting ways and elements in these films would, in the 1960s, coalesce in the 'Professional Plot'.

Our first step is to recognise that **one** of the elements of the Western as a genre is that these

similar story structures recur across thousands of Hollywood Westerns and that what is at the heart of these structures, what creates the narrative 'drive' and the dramatic conflict is found in the tensions created by the binary oppositions set out by Kitses.

The central myth is about the closing of the frontier, the 'civilising' of the wilderness in the central period of expansion between 1865 and 1895. As Kitses demonstrates, the struggles over concepts of 'freedom', 'law', 'honour', 'equality', 'tradition' etc. go to the heart of the American experience. How can people live together in difficult circumstances?

For Wright, the relationships between 'hero', 'villain' and 'society/community' are key and it is the forced changes in these relationships which define the 'Transition' films and the later 'Professional' plots.

The 'Evolution' of the Western

In order to structure the day, we'll focus on what is perhaps the most important decade for the Western – the 1950s. At this point, some critics have argued, the Western had already become a 'mature' genre and though the number of Westerns produced was still very high, it declined steadily over the decade. It is significant that for Wright it was the 1950s that saw his two new categories with the emergence of the Transition and Professional plots. André Bazin saw the same development and he termed the prestigious 'A' Westerns of the early 1950s, 'superwesterns'. The two main culprits for him were *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953), both of which he thought strove too hard to 'add' to the classical purity of the genre. In the case of *Shane*, Bazin argued that the theme of the film was 'the Western as a genre'. Bazin died in 1958 and it is intriguing to imagine what he would have made of the revisionist Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s.

Extracts (we'll select from this list – we probably won't have time for all of them)

My Darling Clementine (John Ford 1946)

Red River (Howard Hawks 1948)

Broken Arrow (Delmer Daves 1950)

Johnny Guitar (Nicholas Ray 1954)

Man of the West (Anthony Mann 1958)

Ride Lonesome (Budd Boetticher 1959)

Fistful of Dollars (Sergio Leone 1964)

Major Dundee (Sam Peckinpah 1965)

Meek's Crossing (Kelly Reichardt 2010)

Shane (George Stevens 1953)

Based on a novel by Jack Schaefer, *Shane* tells a 'pure' Western genre story (Wright calls it **the** 'classical Western'.) A lone rider comes down from the mountains to a small homestead threatened by a rapacious landowner. Will the loner help the family? Will he have to see off the violent men who prey on honest families?

In an interesting piece included in the *The Movie Book of the Western* (eds. Ian Cameron and Doug Pye, Studio Vista 1996) Bob Baker in '*Shane Through Five Decades*' argues that the film has meant different things to audiences, scholars, critics and filmmakers over the years. He headlines each decade's response like this:

1953: Joe

1963: Joey

1973: Marian

1983: Ryker

1993: Shane

Perhaps in our discussion of the film we will recognise what these different responses might be?

Bibliography

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Bazin, André (1971) 'The Evolution of the Western' in *What is Cinema? Volume II*, transl by Hugh Gray, Berkeley: University of California Press
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