Revision and Regeneration in the American Western, 1969-1980

Submitted by Andrew Patrick Nelson to the University of Exeter as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English (August 2010)

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I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

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Abstract

This is an analysis of the Western genre between 1969 and 1980, a period characterized by the release of a select number of “revisionist” Westerns like *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Little Big Man* (1970) and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971). Made by filmmakers associated with the Hollywood Renaissance, these Westerns are celebrated for openly critiquing the ethos of the mythic American West and appropriating the genre’s conventions for social commentary. This study argues that the veneration of this canon of films has resulted in a distorted and incomplete picture of the Western at the time, which has consequences for cultural histories that read Westerns as a reflection of American society. Drawing on an extensive viewing of Westerns released in and around the period in question, this project seeks to uncover the complexity and multiplicity of the Western of the time. It reconsiders the genre’s relationship with American history and politics, including the plight of the American Indian and America’s military involvement in Vietnam; examines the changing representations of frontier heroes Wyatt Earp and Jesse James; draws attention to a number of neglected or misinterpreted movies and trends, including the later Westerns of actor John Wayne; and dispels the idea that the disastrous *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) was responsible for “killing” the Western. These analyses reveal not only connections between canonical and lesser-known works, but also continuities between these and older Westerns – an ongoing, cyclical process of regeneration that transcends established divisions in the genre’s history. In doing so, the project works revise our understanding of the Western of this period, and to add to our knowledge of the genre as a whole.
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my gratitude to Steve Neale for agreeing to supervise this project and helping me in countless ways to drive it along the trail. The University of Exeter was a convivial place to study, thanks in large measure to the friendly and supportive faculty and staff of the Department of English and the Bill Douglas Centre for the Study of Cinema and Popular Culture. The Department of English awarded me a scholarship and three small research grants, for which I am also grateful. Finally, I would like to sincerely thank my family for their continued love and support, in particular my wife Leah, who rides shotgun with me on the stagecoach of life.
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