

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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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 to revise our understanding of the Western of this period, and to add to our knowledge of the genre as a whole.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements	3
Illustrations.....	5
Introduction	8
1 The Scattered Formula in Western Movie Criticism.....	18
Revisionism and Western movie criticism	20
The problematic confluence of genre methodologies.....	36
The revisionist Western in context.....	46
Loading the canon	55
2 Critique and Convention I: Soldiers and Indians	60
<i>Soldier Blue</i>	61
Opposing stereotypes.....	71
Contrasting pedigrees	78
The crying Indian	103
3 Critique and Convention II: Heroes and Legends	111
<i>The Culpepper Cattle Co.</i>	112
Ersatz Earps and a dirty Doc	119
The bad man from Missouri and other last rebels.....	132
Altman's useful idiots	152
4 Popularity and Preponderance I: A Conflict of Visions.....	160
<i>The Wild Bunch</i>	161
The way it is	175
Bias and box office.....	190
The last hard men	203
5 Popularity and Preponderance II: The Duke.....	215
<i>Chisum</i>	216
Godfather of the West	230
The last shootist extant.....	254
The Western hero fights on.....	268
6 To the 80s, and Beyond!	276
<i>The Long Riders</i>	277
"The Hollywood Western Rides into Favor Again"	284
Blame the Russians	295
Conclusion	302
Filmography.....	305
Bibliography	313

Illustrations

Promotional posters for <i>Soldier Blue</i> (1970).....	63
Opening title from <i>Soldier Blue</i>	64
The climactic massacre in <i>Soldier Blue</i>	65
Soldiers celebrate following their “victory” over the Cheyenne in <i>Soldier Blue</i>	70
Apache barbarity in <i>Ulzana’s Raid</i> (1972)	72
The many faces of Jack Crabb in <i>Little Big Man</i> (1970).....	75
Top: Joe Knox prepares to reveal his “badly battered sword of justice” in <i>The Great Scout and Cathouse Thursday</i> (1976); bottom: Dingus contends with the amorous overtures of his Indian wife in <i>Dirty Dingus Magee</i> (1970).....	79
Opening titles from <i>A Man Called Horse</i> (1970).....	87
The Vow to the Sun ritual in <i>A Man Called Horse</i>	90
The Battle of Washita in <i>Little Big Man</i>	97
Sunshine dies in the Battle of Washita, <i>Little Big Man</i>	99
Promotional poster for <i>Little Big Man</i>	100
“The Crying Indian” 1971 Keep America Beautiful PSA	105
The Crying Indian is “Back by Popular Neglect” in 1998.....	107
Promotional poster for <i>A Man Called Horse</i>	109
Ride to the rescue in <i>The Culpepper Cattle Co.</i> (1972)	113
Ben drops his pistol to the ground at the end of <i>The Culpepper Cattle Co.</i> , mirroring the conclusion of <i>High Noon</i> (1952).....	115
Billy flounders in the mud in <i>Dirty Little Billy</i> (1972).....	118
Opening title from <i>Hour of the Gun</i> (1967).....	123
<i>Doc</i> (1971) promotional poster	127
The train robbery in <i>Jesse James</i> (1939).....	135
The train robbery in <i>The Missouri Breaks</i> (1976)	136
Hiding in the hay in <i>Jesse James</i> and <i>The Missouri Breaks</i>	137

Sequences from <i>Jesse James</i> incorporated into <i>The True Story of Jesse James</i> (1957)	140
Promotional poster for <i>The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid</i> (1972)	142
Jesse and Frank James discover Cole Younger's discarded bank robbery plan in <i>The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid</i>	143
Wales and "Bloody Bill" Anderson in <i>The Outlaw Josey Wales</i> (1976).....	146
Wales and Ten Bears in <i>The Outlaw Josey Wales</i>	150
Cody looks out on the world beyond the walls of his Wild West show in <i>Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson</i> (1976)	153
Snowfall optical effect in <i>McCabe & Mrs. Miller</i>	157
Opening titles of <i>The Wild Bunch</i> (1969)	162
Illustrated title sequences in <i>El Dorado</i> (1967), <i>The Scalphunters</i> (1968), <i>Paint Your Wagon</i> (1969) and <i>The Culpepper Cattle Co.</i>	164
Opening shot of <i>The Wild Bunch</i> (1969)	165
Slow motion cinematography used in <i>The Hired Hand</i> (1971) and <i>Bite the Bullet (1975)</i>	169
<i>Hannie Caulder</i> (1971)	170
The hero meets his savage double in <i>The Searchers</i> (1956)	180
Earp and Holliday mirror each other in <i>Gunfight at OK Corral</i> (1957).....	181
Earp's reflection in <i>Doc</i> (1971).....	182
Top: <i>My Darling Clementine</i> (1946); bottom: <i>Death of a Gunfighter</i> (1969).....	184
Opening words from <i>The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean</i> (1972)	188
Opening shots from <i>The Train Robbers</i> (1973)	208
Top: <i>Once Upon a Time in the West</i> (1969); bottom: <i>The Train Robbers</i>	209
Waiting on a train: <i>High Noon</i> and <i>Once Upon a Time in the West</i>	210
Opening credits of <i>Chisum</i> (1970)	218
White Buffalo in <i>Chisum</i>	221

Dan Nodeen (Christopher George) in <i>Chisum</i>	228
Modern science and culture, from the opening credits of <i>Big Jake</i> (1971)	234
Life in the West, from the opening credits of <i>Big Jake</i>	235
Robbers, make believe and real, in <i>Big Jake</i>	237
Jacob McCandles is introduced in <i>Big Jake</i>	241
Top: <i>The Wild Bunch</i> ; bottom: <i>The Great Train Robbery</i> (1903).....	242
The history of J.B. Books in <i>The Shootist</i> (1976).....	259
Alternate promotional poster for <i>Doc</i>	261
The death of J.B. Books in <i>The Shootist</i>	267
Cowboy (Keith Carradine) in <i>McCabe & Mrs. Miller</i>	270
Young Gunfighter (Keith Carradine) in <i>A Gunfight</i> (1971).....	271
The raid goes wrong in <i>The Long Riders</i> (1980)	279
Escape from Northfield in <i>The Long Riders</i>	280
Bob Ford (Nicholas Guest) in <i>The Long Riders</i>	281
Minimal exposition in <i>The Long Riders</i>	282
Woody in <i>Toy Story 2</i> (1999).....	295
<i>Four Feathers Falls</i> (1960) and “Woody’s Roundup”	296