Have gun, will travel:

The myth of the frontier in the Hollywood Western

John Springhall

Newspaper editor **(bit player): 'This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, we print the legend'.**
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance **(dir. John Ford, 1962).**

Gil Westrum **(Randolph Scott): 'You know what's on the back of a poor man when he dies? The clothes of pride. And they are not a bit warmer to him dead than they were when he was alive. Is that all you want, Steve?'**
Steve Judd **(Joel McCrea): 'All I want is to enter my house justified'.**
Ride the High Country
[a.k.a. ***Guns in the Afternoon***]
(dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1962)>

J. W. Grant **(Ralph Bellamy): 'You bastard!'**
Henry 'Rico' Fardan **(Lee Marvin): 'Yes, sir. In my case an accident of birth. But you, you're a self-made man.'**
The Professionals
(dir. Richard Brooks, 1966).[1]

Lee Marvin, Lee Van Cleef, John Wayne and Strother Martin on the set of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* directed and produced by John Ford.
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The Western movies that from around 1910 until the 1960s made up at least a fifth of all the American film titles on general release signified escapist entertainment for British audiences: an alluring vision of vast open spaces, of cowboys on horseback outlined against an imposing landscape. For Americans themselves, the Western signified their own turbulent frontier history west of the Mississippi in the immediate post-Civil War years or the quarter of a century roughly from 1865 to 1890 – occasionally extended to the coming of the motor car before 1910. Within this vast output of movies (over 7,000 Westerns in all) there are huge variations, both in the subject matter of the films – cattle-ranchers versus farmers, wagon train journeys, railroad-building, fighting Indians, sheriff versus gunfighter – and in their overall quality. For someone who, like the author, was a schoolboy in the 1950s, the Western has an undeniable appeal, allowing the cinemagoer to interrogate, from youth to maturity, definitions of masculinity, concepts of genre, authorship of movies, historical verisimilitude, and even a code of morality.[2]

The origins of the Western

The Wild West show such as that of Buffalo Bill, out of which the parameters of the Western movie emerged, was at its most commercial during the 1880s, marking the emergence of 'frontier anxiety', feelings aroused in those who believed that the western frontier was closing or had already closed – as the U. S. Census Bureau officially declared in 1890. Associated with the Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) and his seminal 1893 address to the American Historical Association on 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', there was a growing perception that free land, or the stages of social evolution on a frontier line continually moving westward, had hitherto determined the course of American history. Usage of the word 'frontier' rather obscured

Gary Cooper in the 1952 film *High Noon*.
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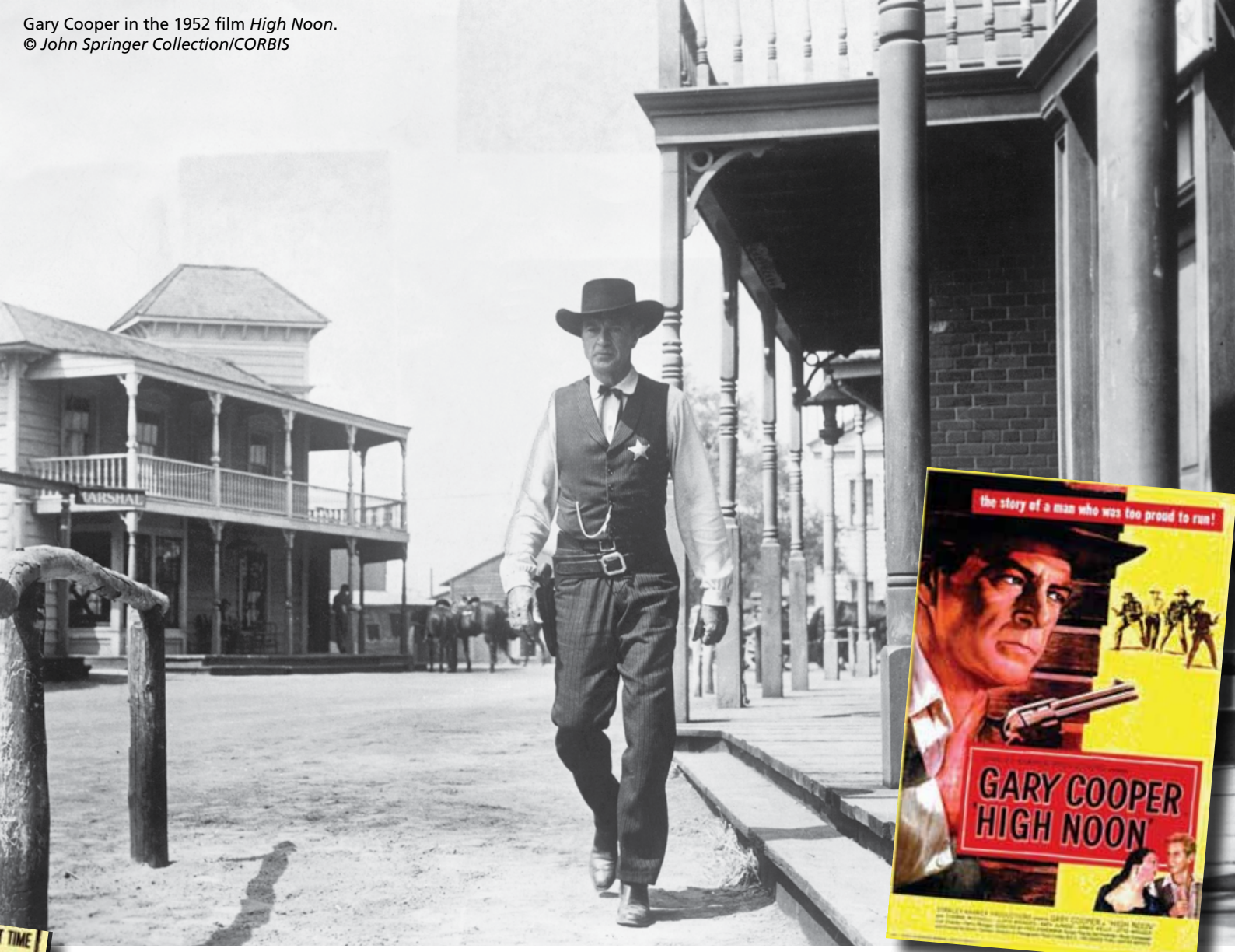
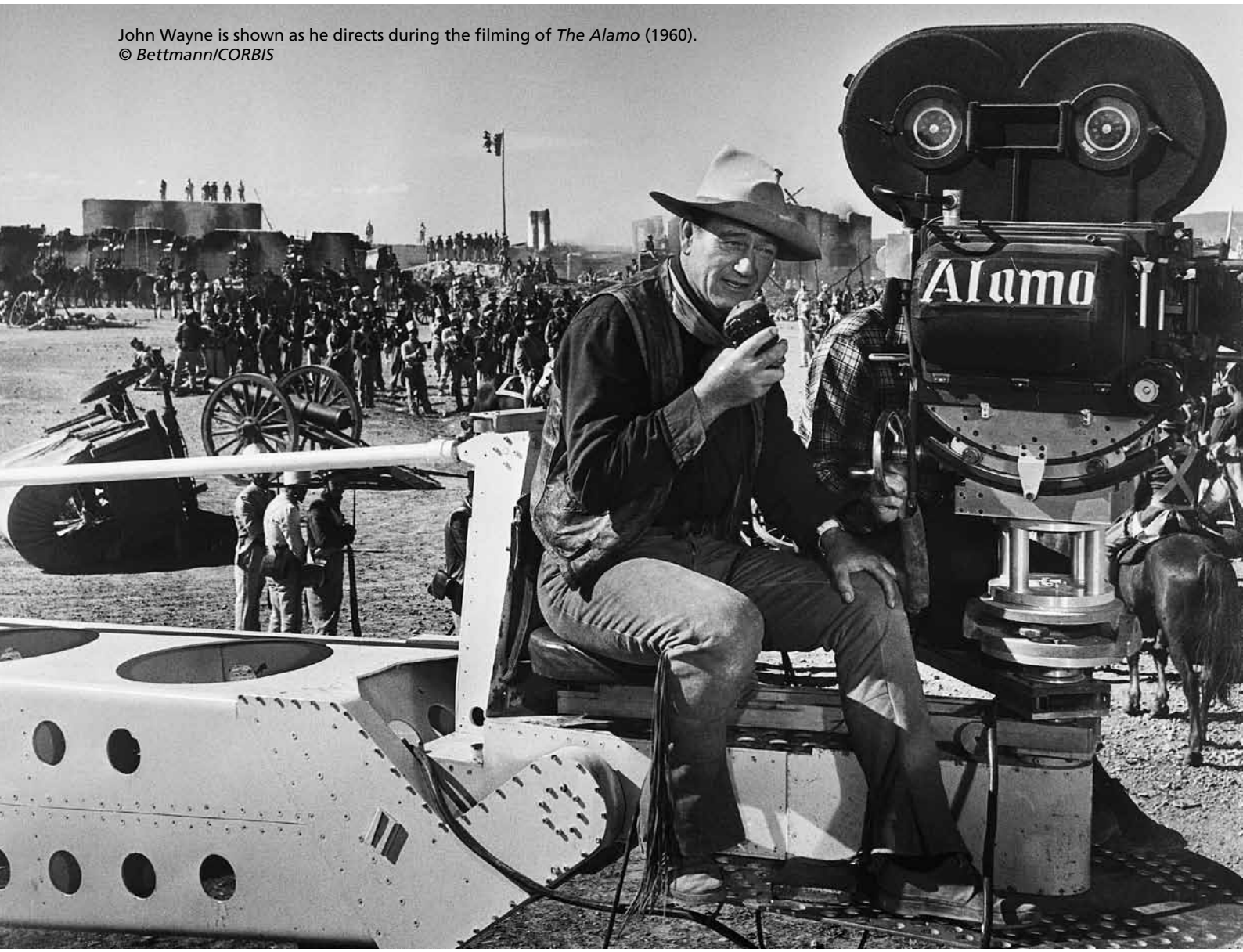


similarities between the conquest of the American West and the global processes of European imperial expansion elsewhere. In any case, the area where white domination or settlement had not yet been achieved was nearly gone and a belief was growing that its disappearance would somehow change the nature of American society.[3]

Belief that the frontier was about to close may also have created a nostalgic mood that encouraged many Americans to wonder what they had missed by not making the journey West when the opportunity was still there. At the same time, displaying Native Americans in the Wild West arena and in subsequent movies as vanquished foes demonstrated to audiences that the fight for the Plains was over and had ended in victory for their civilised white invaders. Why else would reservation Lakota and Sioux agree to appear in fabricated or 'inverted conquest' narratives of Native American aggression and brave white resistance? Further, because white American racial strengths were seen as frontier virtues (the bronzed, manly cowboy), historians have argued that Buffalo Bill's open-air show gave expression to communal anxieties over the decay of white masculinity, together with fears of the new mass immigration from mainly Catholic southern and eastern Europe undermining the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant republic. These anxieties could also be seen as part of a gathering cultural reaction against the cult of domesticity, or the virtues of home and woman, in contemporary American society. Displays of horse-riding and fast-shooting in Wild West shows and – following 'Bronco Billy' Anderson in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) – by the cowboy stars of silent era movies (W. S. Hart, Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson), reassured largely white male audiences that assertive frontier virtues had not been entirely extinguished.[4]

Many Westerns, especially those produced in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, were cheaply made B-features (with exceptions like *The Big Trail* [1930], *Stagecoach* [1939], and *Duel in the Sun* [1945]), designed for the bottom-half of a double bill, or else formulaic series Westerns made by specialist units, featuring such as Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers, targeted at audiences either of children or those attending America's small rural cinemas. The 1950s eventually saw the Western become a critically well-received and reliable A-feature staple showing at the local Odeon, with auteur-directed movies such as *The Gunfighter* (dir. Henry King, 1950), *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), *The Man from Laramie* (Anthony Mann, 1955), *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (John Sturges, 1956), *The Big Country* (William Wyler, 1958), and *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959).

In 1950 the eight majors released a total of 61 Westerns, in 1961 the remaining seven made 22. Contributing to a decline in movie output, the 1959-60 season was the peak period for the TV Western with 48 series airing in the USA, including eight of TV's 10 top-rated shows (*Gunsmoke*, *Tales of Wells Fargo, Rawhide*, *Maverick*, *Have Gun: Will Travel, Wagon Train*, *Cheyenne*, *Bonanza*). Surprisingly perhaps, 26 cinema Westerns were produced in America as late as 1976, hardly suggestive of a genre in decline, but in the following year there would be only seven, followed by a continuing decline in the 80s and 90s – despite Westerns



John Wayne is shown as he directs during the filming of *The Alamo* (1960).
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of stature like Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* (1990) and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992). Regrettably, young audiences have now lost the ability to read or understand the basic conventions upon which the Western depends for narrative coherence.[5]

Critical approaches to the Western

It is quite possible to simplify the plot structure of nearly all Westerns made since the 1940s to exemplify, sometimes in combination, such basic narrative trajectories as: (a) the manly settling of scores/revenge motif; (b) the journey/odyssey undertaken in a hostile environment; (c) the town-taming sheriff/hired gun; (d) cavalry/settlers versus Indians; (e) the triumph of civilisation over a violent frontier. Key examples of each category would be: (a) *Nevada Smith*, *Valdez Is Coming*; (b) *Red River*, *The Naked Spur*; (c) *Warlock*, *Death of a Gunfighter*; (d) *A Distant Trumpet*, *Ulzana's Raid*; (e) *My Darling Clementine*, *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance*. The last two were directed by John (*The Grapes of Wrath*) Ford who also made what (in my view) is the supreme Western of all time, his masterpiece *The Searchers* (1956), a complex 'psychological' Western with elements of (a), (b) and (d). John Wayne plays racist former Civil War soldier Ethan Edwards seeking revenge on the Comanche who killed his brother's family by embarking on a five-year-long journey to rescue a surviving daughter from war-chief Scar (Henry Brandon). Mostly filmed in Arizona's Monument Valley, the reputation of this outstanding film (and its famous last shot) continues to grow.

That some of the above Westerns adopt certain genre conventions does not make them necessarily predictable or formulaic for, like other classical forms, the connoisseur can admire them for how well they manipulate audience expectations with, for example, unexpected variations in the climactic showdown (see the harpoon-wielding Sterling Hayden in *Terror in a Texas Town* (1958) and quarry Don Murray in *From Hell to Texas* (1958) reprieved by the remorseless R. G. Armstrong). Consequently, the Western movie now attracts more critical writing than ever, with the number of books on the genre published each year exceeding the number of Westerns released. Here the critical approach taken is not: (a) the Eurocentric mythic interpretation, classifying the chivalric cowboy (*Shane, Pale Rider*) as transposed knight or Greek hero, nor (b) the auteurist approach that prioritises notable directors of Westerns like John Ford, Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, John Sturges, Sam Peckinpah, or Clint Eastwood, as the primary creative force, certainly not (c) the structuralist approach evident in the 1970s with its emphasis on relating Western plots

to the prevalent American economic structure or to variations in coded forms of masculinity and the ethos of individualism.[6]

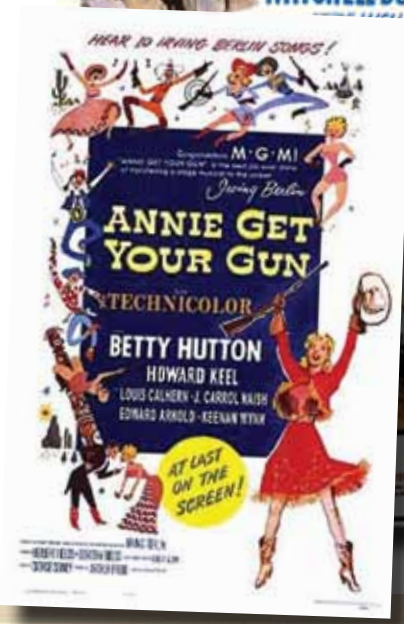
The main thrust of the interpretation proposed here follows (d) the political and allegorical school of Western analysis which argues that there is a basic correlation between Hollywood's romantic reconstruction of the Wild West and the socio-political setting of particular historical contexts in twentieth-century America. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin's monumental trilogy on the myth of the American frontier and regeneration through violence, in particular *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), goes even further to advance a grandiose macro-political thesis setting up the frontier and its various mythologies, in particular movie Westerns, as the principal dynamic ('myth expresses ideology') shaping twentieth-century America's history, culture, and politics, culminating in the tragic debacle of Vietnam. Hence he interprets Ford's *The Searchers* as a 'mythic Western fable' making a crucial connection between domestic racialist structures and the ideological premises of the new, 'counterinsurgency' phase of the Cold War. In addition, each chapter of British film historian Michael Coyne's erudite *The Crowded Prairie* (1997) – such as 'Receding Frontiers, Narrowing Options: *The Wild Bunch* [1969] and the Western in Richard Nixon's America' – looks at American national identity through an analysis of the social or political message underlying selected prestigious Westerns.[7]

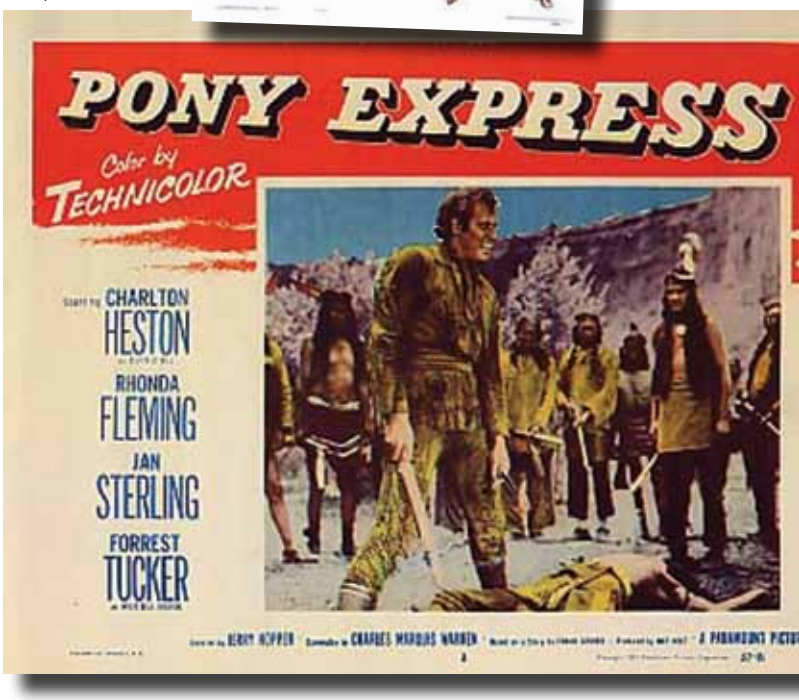
The Western as product of its times

Revisionist Westerns of the 1960s and 70s notwithstanding, Coyne does not shirk from confessing that the Western's 'overall thrust sanctified territorial expansion, justified dispossession of Indians, fuelled nostalgia for a largely mythicized past, exalted self-reliance and posited violence as the main solution to personal and societal problems'. The Hollywood Western also codified American identity as mainly white and male, accepted racial supremacy as uncontested, romanticised aggressive six-gun masculinity and, ultimately, favoured the cowboy's resistance to the trappings of a feminised civil society as the truest form of manhood. Politically, red men in the 1950s pro-Indian Western (*Broken Arrow*, *Devil's Doorway*) could be seen as surrogates for the black Civil Rights struggle, whilst anti-Indian Westerns (*Rio Grande*, *Arrowhead*) might be seen as disguised frontier equivalents of the supposed communist threat. Even the once taboo subject of miscegenation was broached in Westerns (*Flaming Star*, *The Indian Fighter*). Branded a 'red-hide nigger' in John Huston's *The Unforgiven* (1959), Rachel Zachary (Audrey Hepburn), on discovering she has been adopted, can now marry her white step-brother (Burt Lancaster). So, throughout the period of its greatest popularity, 'the Western held its authoritarian and libertarian components in productive tension'.[8]

Hence, in terms of another deeply embedded contradiction in American culture, *Observer* film critic Philip French distinguished in the early 1970s between Democratic or John F. Kennedy Westerns (*High Noon*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *Ride the High Country*) and Republican or Barry Goldwater Westerns, mostly starring John Wayne (*Rio Bravo*, *The Alamo*, *McClintock!*). The Kennedy Western would render the frontier past in a moderately realistic fashion, with an accent on the need for protective *community* activity. Native Americans and minorities would be viewed with sympathy and the hero would often renounce violence or have it forced upon him (*The Fastest Gun Alive*, *Death of a Gunfighter*). The Goldwater Western would be more warmly nostalgic, the Duke would be resolute and unswerving in his sense of duty, and emphasis would fall upon *individualism* and self-help. Cathartic violence would be seen as unavoidable and perhaps to be enjoyed, while there would be a somewhat patronising or hostile attitude towards Native Americans and ethnic minorities.[9]

Accordingly, to further clarify Westerns as part of America's mythic landscape, let us examine changing cinematic interpretations (for and against) of probably the world's most legendary Indian fighter, scout, and Western hero: William Frederick 'Buffalo Bill' Cody (1845-1917). For Hollywood representations of this iconic frontiersman have served, since and during the Second World War, to define shifting perceptions of heroism, showmanship, and the commercialised mythology of the Wild West. Director William Wellman's





celebratory wartime portrait of *Buffalo Bill* (1944), for example, features prominent B-Western star Joel McCrea as Bill Cody and Thomas Mitchell as dime novelist and long-barrelled six-gun inventor Ned Buntline (Edward Zane Carroll Judson). In an invented scene, the unassuming Cody, denounced as a fraud in the New York press after his stage appearances of the 1870s, is reduced to performing as a sharpshooter on a wooden horse in the Wonderland [Dime] Museum, until being rescued by his estranged Eastern wife (Maureen O'Hara). Promoted as an 'action-packed movie' that, during wartime, 'celebrates the rugged individualism of the man who represents the frontier spirit', *Buffalo Bill* is visually splendid in Technicolor but otherwise quite commonplace. Some years later, in the movie version of Irving Berlin's lively Broadway musical *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950), sharp-shooter Annie Oakley (Betty Hutton) performs for the Wild West show and an expansive Buffalo Bill (Louis Calhern) as she did in reality.[10]

Subsequently, the legendary Cody (Charlton Heston) featured in a disappointingly routine and fictitious recreation of his role with the *Pony Express* (1957), while his mentor Wild Bill Hickok (Jeff Corey) turned up in the bitterly satirical *Little Big Man* (1970). Cody reappeared, played by Paul Newman, in Robert Altman's *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976), then by Stephen Baldwin in TV's *The Young Riders* (1989) and, more convincingly, by Christopher Lloyd as a harassed showman in *Hidalgo* (2004). Increasingly, the Wild West show itself became 'a symbol of the misrepresentation and degradation of the frontier experience'. Significantly, acclaimed director Altman's iconoclastic but rather dull movie – a moralistic parable loosely based on Arthur Lee Kopit's play *Indians* (1968) – was the outcome of a cynical post-Vietnam and Watergate age, as well as of early 1970s Westerns (*Doc*, *Dirty Little Billy*) that sought to debunk the legendary heroes of the Wild West. Cody (Newman) is presented by Altman as a confidence man, a self-promoting drunk who exploits Native Americans, especially Sitting Bull, to boost his own reputation and make profits for the Wild West show. In reality, Cody did his best to negotiate the surrender to the military of his friend Sitting Bull who later willingly spent the 1885-86 season on the road with the travelling exhibition. Above all, on horseback and dressed in full buckskin regalia, Buffalo Bill was a 'magnificent showman' whose representation of the Wild West helped to shape one of the most popular of fictional, cinematic, and television genres.[11]

Conclusions

The American Western supplies a good test of cinema's capacity to sometimes mirror, contest, or even shape, our perception of the late-nineteenth century history of the American nation as one of coming to terms with a rapidly closing frontier. Equally, there is no shortage of movies about the modern-day cowboy made to feel out of place in a society without a Western frontier (*Lonely Are the Brave*, *The Misfits*, *The Electric Horseman*). Yet where there is a large helping of American history contained in pre-1970 Westerns, it is largely 'invented tradition' and tells us much about how Hollywood preferred to idealise frontier pioneers abruptly confronted by the advance of civilisation (*Davy Crockett*, *How the West was Won*). Contrast this with a more hard-headed academic reinterpretation of white America's relentless westward expansion, such as the revisionist New Western movement pioneered 25 years ago by Patricia Nelson Limerick.

Consequently, a national film history such as that signified by Hollywood no longer convinces solely as a succession of genius directors, movements, and masterpieces in a high art tradition, but instead requires what has been called 'a thick embedding in cultural history, production structures and the mass, popular experience of going to the movies'.[12]

Finally, why should you bother to search out on TV or DVD the small number of twenty-first century Westerns, however outstanding (*Open Range*, *Broken Trail*, *Seraphim Falls*, *Appaloosa*, *Meek's Cutoff*, plus remakes *3.10 to Yuma* and *True Grit*)? Perhaps because not only are such recent Westerns entertaining and *visually* striking, they are also by-products of, and perhaps exemplify, a post-2001 world of American paranoia in adjusting to the threat of domestic and external terrorism (*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, *Cowboys & Aliens*).

Further reading

For invaluable annotated listings see: Phil Hardy, *The Aurum Film Encyclopaedia: The Western* (Aurum Press, London [1983], 1991 edn.) and Edward Buscombe ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (Andre Deutsch/BFI, London [1988], 1993 edn.). For the general reader: Philip French, *Westerns* ([1973], 2005 edn.), Paul Simpson, *The Rough Guide to Westerns* (Rough Guides Ltd., London, 2006). For the specialist: Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prarie* (1997), Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (1969 [2004]), Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds., *The Movie Book of the Western* (Studio Vista, London, 1996).

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6. See: (a) André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Western' in Hugh Gray ed., Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Vol. II (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971), pp. 140-48, Kathryn C. Esselman, 'From Camelot to Monument Valley', in Jack Nachbar ed., *Focus on the Western* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1974), pp. 9-18; (b) Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (BFI Publishing, London [1969], 2004 edn.); (c) John G. Cawelti, *The Six Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green State University Press, Bowling Green, ID [1970], 1984 edn.), Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1975).
7. (d) Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (HarperPerennial, New York, 1993 edn.), pp. 461-473; Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., London, 1997).
8. Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, pp. 69-70, 3, 15.
9. Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre and Westerns Revisited* (Carcanet Press Ltd., Manchester [1973], 2005 edn.), pp. 16-17.
10. Pieter Geyl, *Napoleon: For and Against* (Peregrine Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, [1949] 1965 edn.); Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, pp. 115-119; sleeve text on *Buffalo Bill* [1944] DVD, Twentieth-Century Fox Studio Classics.
11. French, *Westerns*, p. 194; *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (dir. Robert Altman, 1976); Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, pp. 168-72; John Springhall, *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840 to 1940* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008), pp. 105-127; Christopher Corbett, *Orphans Preferred: The Twisted Truth and Lasting Legend of the Pony Express* (Broadway Books, New York, 2004), p. 151.
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