Western (genre) [http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/41275]

The Western is a fiction genre seen in film, television, radio, literature, painting and other visual arts. Westerns are devoted to telling stories set primarily in the later half of the 19th century in what became the Western United States (known as the American Old West or Wild West), but also in Western Canada, Mexico (“The Wild Bunch”, “Vera Cruz”), Alaska (“The Far Country”, “North to Alaska”) and even Australia (“Quigley Down Under”, “The Proposition”). Some Westerns are set as early as the Battle of the Alamo in 1836 but most are set between the end of the American Civil War and the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, though there are several "late Westerns" (e.g., “The Wild Bunch” and “100 Rifles”) set as late as the Mexican Revolution in 1913. There are also a number of films about Western-type characters in contemporary settings where they don't fit in, such as "Junior Bonner" set in the 1970s, and "Down in the Valley" and "The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada" in the 21st Century.

Westerns often portray how primitive and obsolete ways of life confronted modern technological or social changes. This may be depicted by showing conflict between natives and settlers or U.S. Cavalry, or by showing ranchers being threatened by the onset of the Industrial Revolution. American Westerns of the 1940s and 1950s emphasise the values of honor and sacrifice. Westerns from the 1960s and 1970s often have more pessimistic view, glorifying a rebellious anti-hero and highlighting the cynicism, brutality and inequality of the American West.

Themes

The Western genre, particularly in films, 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 Western depicts a society organised around codes of honor, rather than the law, in which persons have no social order larger than their immediate peers, family, or perhaps themselves alone. The popular perception of the Western [this entire section largely summarises the analysis of Kim Newman: "Wild West Movies"] is a story that centres on the life of a semi-nomadic wanderer, usually a cowboy or a gunfighter.

In some ways, such protagonists could be considered the literary descendants of the knight errant which stood at the center of an earlier extensive genre. Like the cowboy or gunfighter of the Western, the knight errant of the earlier European tales and poetry was wandering from place to place on his horse, fighting villains of various kinds and bound to no fixed social structures but only to his own innate code of honour. And like knights errant, the heroes of Westerns frequently rescue damsels in distress.

The technology of the era — such as the telegraph, printing press, and railroad — may be evident, usually symbolising the imminent end of the frontier. In some "late Westerns", such as "The Wild Bunch", the motor car and even the aeroplane are referenced. Weapons technology is very evident and a recurring theme is the merit of the latest piece of "hardware", be it a repeating rifle produced by the Winchester Repeating Arms Company or a Colt Single Action Army handgun. Dynamite also features somewhat, both as a blasting agent and as a weapon, and to a lesser extent the Gatling gun.

The Western takes these elements and uses them to tell simple morality tales, usually set against the spectacular scenery of the American West. Westerns often stress the harshness of the wilderness and frequently set the action in a desert-like landscape. Specific settings include isolated forts, ranches and homesteads; the Native American village; or the small frontier town with its saloon, general store, livery stable and jailhouse. Apart from the wilderness, it is usually the saloon that emphasises that this is the "Wild West": it is the place to go for music (raucous piano playing), girls (often prostitutes), gambling (draw poker or five card stud), drinking (beer or whiskey), brawling and shooting. In some Westerns, where "civilisation" has arrived, the town has a church and a school; in others, where frontier rules still hold sway, it is, as Sergio Leone said, "where life has no value".
Film

Characteristics

Most of the characteristics of Westerns were part of 19th century popular Western literature and were firmly in place before film became a popular art form. [Henry Nash Smith, "Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth", Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1950.] Referred to as "dumbo's" in film industry headlines, Western films commonly feature as their protagonists stock characters such as cowboys, gunslingers, and bounty hunters, often depicted as semi-nomadic wanderers who wear Stetson hats, bandannas, spurs, and buckskins, use revolvers or rifles as everyday tools of survival, and ride between dusty towns and cattle ranches on faithful steeds.

The films often depict conflicts with Native Americans. While early ethnocentric Westerns frequently portray the "Injuns" as dishonorable villains, the later more culturally neutral Westerns give the natives more sympathetic treatment. Other recurring themes of Westerns include Western treks and groups of bandits terrorising small towns such as in "The Magnificent Seven".

Early Westerns were mostly filmed in the studio, just like other early Hollywood films, but when location shooting became more common from the 1930s, producers of Westerns used desolate corners of New Mexico, California, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, Kansas, Texas, Colorado or Wyoming. While many Westerns were filmed in California and Arizona, most of them depicted Texas. Productions were also filmed on location at movie ranches.

Often, the vast landscape becomes more than a vivid backdrop; it becomes a character in the film. After the early 1950s, various wide screen formats such as cinemascope (1953) and VistaVision used the expanded width of the screen to display spectacular Western landscapes. John Ford's use of Monument Valley as an expressive landscape in his films from "Stagecoach" (1939) to "Cheyenne Autumn" (1965) "present us with a mythic vision of the plains and deserts of the American West, embodied most memorably in Monument Valley, with its buttes and mesas that tower above the men on horseback, whether they be settlers, soldiers, or Native Americans". [Peter Cowie, see below]

Westerns often stress the harshness of the wilderness and frequently set the action in a desert-like landscape with isolated forts, ranches, homesteads, Native American villages, and small frontier towns. Wild west towns often have a saloon, general store, livery stable and jailhouse. Many films focus on the conflicts between the settled townspeople and farmers (the epitome of "civilisation") as against the free-ranging cattle herders opposed to fencing the land (epitomising "nature").

Western films, until recent times, had many anachronisms, particularly the firearms. Winchester 1892-model rifles were frequently used in films set in the 1870s. Since the late 1960s, however, films have shown more of the wide variety of period-appropriate arms used during the 1870s. For example, Arthur Hunnicutt carries a revolving rifle during part of "El Dorado" (1967) and Lee Van Cleef is equipped with a veritable arsenal of frontier firearms in "For A Few Dollars More" (1965).

ubgeneres

The Western genre itself has sub-genres, such as the epic Western, the shoot 'em up, singing cowboy Westerns, and a few comedy Westerns. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Western was re-invented with the revisionist Western.

;Classical Westerns: The first Western film was the 1903 film "The Great Train Robbery", a silent film directed by Edwin S. Porter and starring Broncho Billy Anderson. The film's popularity opened the door for Anderson to become the screen's first cowboy star, making several hundred Western film shorts. So popular was the genre that he soon had competition in the form of William S. Hart. The Golden Age of the
Western film is epitomised by the work of two directors: John Ford (who often used John Wayne for lead roles) and Howard Hawks.

Spaghetti Westerns: During the 1960s and 1970s, a revival of the Western emerged in Italy with the "Spaghetti Westerns" or "Italo-Westerns". Many of these films are low-budget affairs, shot in locations (for example, the Spanish desert region of Almería) chosen for their inexpensive crew and production costs as well as their similarity to landscapes of the Southwestern United States. Spaghetti Westerns were characterised by the presence of more action and violence than the Hollywood Westerns.

The films directed by Sergio Leone have a parodic dimension (the strange opening scene of "Once Upon a Time in the West" being a reversal of Fred Zinnemann's "High Noon" opening scene) which gave them a different tone to the Hollywood Westerns. Charles Bronson, Lee van Cleef and Clint Eastwood became famous by starring in Spaghetti Westerns, although they were also to provide a showcase for other noted actors such as Jason Robards, James Coburn, Klaus Kinski and Henry Fonda.

Osterns: Eastern-European-produced Westerns were popular in Communist Eastern European countries, and were a particular favorite of Joseph Stalin. "Red Western" or "Ostern" films usually portrayed the American Indians sympathetically, as oppressed people fighting for their rights, in contrast to American Westerns of the time, which frequently portrayed the Indians as villains. They frequently featured Gypsies or Turkic people in the role of the Indians, due to the shortage of authentic Indians in Eastern Europe.

Gojko Mitić portrayed righteous, kind hearted and charming Indian chiefs ("Die Söhne der großen Bärin" directed by Josef Mach). He became honorary chief of the tribe of Sioux when he visited the United States of America in the 1990s and the television crew accompanying him showed the tribe one of his films. American actor and singer Dean Reed, an expatriate who lived in East Germany, also starred in several films.

The Ostern genre developed in the Soviet Union as a home-grown counterpart to the American Western. Osterns are set in Central Asia or the Russian steppes during the post-revolutionary Russian Civil War. The historic setting of the Russian Civil War shared many of the iconic features of the Wild West: a romantic opposition of good and evil, a culture clash with occasionally hostile natives, horseback riding, trains, lawlessness, gunplay, and vast landscapes. The quintessential example of the Ostern is the cult film "The White Sun of the Desert".

Revisionist Western: In genre studies, films that change traditional elements of a genre are called "revisionist." After the early 1960s, many American film-makers began to question and change many traditional elements of Westerns. One major change was in the increasingly positive representation of Native Americans who had been treated as "savages" in earlier films ("Little Big Man"). Audiences were encouraged to question the simple hero-versus-villain dualism and the morality of using violence to test one's character or to prove oneself right.

Some recent Westerns give women more powerful roles. One of the earlier films that encompasses all these features was the 1956 adventure film "The Last Wagon" in which Richard Widmark played a white man raised by Commanches and persecuted by Whites, with Felicia Farr and Susan Kohner playing young women forced into leadership roles.

Acid Western: Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum refers to makeshift 1960s and 1970s genre called the acid Western, associated with Dennis Hopper, Jim McBride, and Rudy Wurlitzer, as well as films like Monte Hellman's "The Shooting", Alejandro Jodorowsky's bizarre experimental film "El Topo (The Mole)", and Robert Downey Sr.'s "Greaser's Palace". The 1970 film "El Topo" is an allegorical, cult Western and underground film about the eponymous character - a violent, black-clad gunfighter - and his quest for enlightenment. The film is filled with bizarre characters and occurrences, use of maimed and dwarf performers, and heavy doses of Christian symbolism and Eastern philosophy. Some spaghettis also
crossed over into the acid genre, such as Enzo G. Castellari’s mystical “Keoma” (released in 1976), a western reworking of Ingmar Bergman’s metaphysical “The Seventh Seal”.

More recent films include Alex Cox’s "Walker", and Jim Jarmusch’s “Dead Man”. Rosenbaum describes the “acid Western” as "formulating a chilling, savage frontier poetry to justify its hallucinated agenda." Ultimately, the "acid Western" expresses a counterculture sensibility to critique and replace capitalism with alternative forms of exchange.

Contemporary Westerns: Although these films have contemporary American settings, they utilise Old West themes and motifs (a rebellious anti-hero, open plains and desert landscapes, and gunfights). For the most part, they still take place in the American West and reveal the progression of the Old West mentality into the late twentieth century. This sub-genre often features Old West-type characters struggling with displacement in a "civilised" world that rejects their outdated brand of justice.

Examples include "Hud" starring Paul Newman (1963), Tommy Lee Jones' "The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada" (2005); Sam Peckinpah's "Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia" (1974); John Sayles’ "Lone Star" (1996); Robert Rodríguez’s "El Mariachi" (1992); Ang Lee's "Brokeback Mountain" (2005); Wim Wenders’ "Don't Come Knocking" (2005); and the Coen brothers’ Academy Award-winning "No Country For Old Men" (2007).

Science fiction Western: These films introduces science fiction themes or futuristic elements into a Western setting. Examples include "The Dark Tower series" by Stephen King, "Back to the Future Part III", "Westworld", and "Wild Wild West". This style is distinguished from space Westerns, such as "Serenity" or "BraveStarr", which introduce Western elements into a science fiction backdrop.

Curry Western: The ever-popular spaghetti westerns laid the place for "Sholay” first in line for a line of Indian westerns, affectionately called curry westerns.

Genre studies

In the 1960s academic and critical attention to cinema as a legitimate art form emerged. With the increased attention, film theory was developed to attempt to understand the significance of film. From this environment emerged (in conjunction with the literary movement) an enclave of critical studies called genre studies. This was primarily a semantic and structuralist approach to understanding how similar films convey meaning.

Long derided for its simplistic morality, the Western film genre came to be seen instead as a series of conventions and codes that acted as a short-hand communication methods with the audience. For example, a hero wears a white hat, while the villain wears a black hat; when two men face each other down a deserted street, there will be a showdown; cattlemen and ranchers are loners, while townsfolk are family and community-minded, etc. All Western films can be read as a series of codes and the variations on those codes.

Since the 1970s, the Western genre has been unraveled through a series of films that used the codes but primarily as a way of undermining them ("Little Big Man" and "Maverick" did this through comedy). Kevin Costner's "Dances with Wolves" actually resurrects all the original codes and conventions. "Unforgiven", written by David Webb Peoples and directed by Clint Eastwood, uses every one of the original conventions, only reverses the outcomes. Instead of dying bravely or stoically, characters whine, cry, and beg; instead of a hero saving the innocent, it is a villain who steps in to seek revenge.

One of the results of genre studies is that some have argued that "Westerns" need not take place in the American West or even in the 19th century, as the codes can be found in other types of films. For example, a very typical Western plot is that an eastern lawman heads west, where he matches wits and
trades bullets with a gang of outlaws and thugs, and is aided by a local lawman who is well-meaning but largely ineffective until a critical moment when he redeems himself by saving the hero's life. This description can be used to describe any number of Westerns, as well as the action film "Die Hard". "Hud", starring Paul Newman, and Akira Kurosawa's "Seven Samurai", are other frequently cited examples of films that do not take place in the American West but have many themes and characteristics common to Westerns. Likewise, films set in the old American West may not necessarily be considered "Westerns."

**Influences**

Many Western films after the mid-1950s were influenced by the Japanese samurai films of Akira Kurosawa. For instance "The Magnificent Seven" was a remake of Kurosawa's "Seven Samurai", and both "A Fistful of Dollars" and "Last Man Standing" were remakes of Kurosawa's "Yojimbo", which itself was inspired by "Red Harvest", an American detective novel by Dashiell Hammett. Kurosawa was influenced by American Westerns and was a fan of the genre, most especially John Ford. [Patrick Crogan. "[http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/00/9/kurosawa.html Translating Kurosawa]." "Senses of Cinema"]

Despite the Cold War, the Western was a strong influence on Eastern Bloc cinema, which had its own take on the genre, the so called "Red Western" or "Ostern". Generally these took two forms: either straight Westerns shot in the Eastern Bloc, or action films involving the Russian Revolution and civil war and the Basmachi rebellion in which Turkic peoples play a similar role to Mexicans in traditional Westerns.

An offshoot of the Western genre is the "post-apocalyptic" Western, in which a future society, struggling to rebuild after a major catastrophe, is portrayed in a manner very similar to the 19th century frontier. Examples include "The Postman" and the "Mad Max" series, and the computer game series "Fallout". Many elements of space travel series and films borrow extensively from the conventions of the Western genre. This is particularly the case in the space Western subgenre of science fiction. Peter Hyams' "Outland" transferred the plot of "High Noon" to interstellar space. Gene Roddenberry, the creator of the "Star Trek" series, once described his vision for the show as "Wagon Train" to the stars.

More recently, the space opera series "Firefly" used an explicitly Western theme for its portrayal of frontier worlds. Anime shows like "Cowboy Bebop", "Trigun" and "Outlaw Star" have been similar mixes of science fiction and Western elements. The science fiction Western can be seen as a subgenre of either Westerns or science fiction. Elements of Western films can be found also in some films belonging essentially to other genres. For example, "Kelly's Heroes" is a war film, but action and characters are Western-like. The British film "Zulu" set during the Anglo-Zulu War has sometimes been compared to a Western, even though it is set in South Africa.

The character played by Humphrey Bogart in film noir films such as "Casablanca", "To Have and Have Not" or "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" - an individual bound only by his own private code of honour - has a lot in common with the classic Western hero. In turn, the Western, has also explored noir elements, as with the film "Sugar Creek".

In many of Robert A. Heinlein's books, the settlement of other planets is depicted in ways explicitly modeled on American settlement of the West. For example, in his "Tunnel in the Sky" settlers set out to the planet "New Cannan", via an interstellar teleporter portal across the galaxy, in conestoga wagons, their captain sporting moustaches and a little goatee and riding a Palomino horse - with Heinlein explaining that the colonists would need to survive on their own for some years, so horses are more practical than machines.

Stephen King's "The Dark Tower" is a series of seven books that meshes themes of Westerns, high fantasy, science fiction and horror. The protagonist Roland Deschain is a gunslinger whose image and personality are largely inspired by the "Man with No Name" from Sergio Leone's films. In addition, the superhero fantasy genre has been described as having been derived from the cowboy hero, only
powered up to omnipotence in a primarily urban setting. The Western genre has been parodied on a number of occasions, famous examples being "Support Your Local Sheriff!", "Cat Ballou", Mel Brooks's "Blazing Saddles", and "Rustler's Rhapsody".

George Lucas's "Star Wars" films use many elements of a Western, and Lucas has said he intended for "Star Wars" to revitalise cinematic mythology, a part the Western once held. The Jedi, who take their name from Jidaigeki, are modeled after samurai, showing the influence of Kurosawa. The character Han Solo dressed like an archetypal gunslinger, and the Mos Eisley Cantina is much like an Old West saloon.

Television

Television Westerns are a sub-genre of the Western, a genre of film, fiction, and drama in which stories are set primarily in the later half of the 19th century in the American Old West, Western Canada and Mexico during the period from about 1860 to the end of the so-called "Indian Wars." When television became popular in the late 1940s and 1950s, TV Westerns quickly became an audience favorite. A number of long-running TV Westerns became classics in their own right. Notable TV Westerns include "Gunsmoke", "The Lone Ranger", and "Bonanza".

The peak year for television Westerns was 1959, with 26 such shows airing during prime-time. Increasing costs of American television production led to most action half hour series vanishing in the early 1960s to be replaced by hour long television shows, increasingly in colour. [Kisseloff, J. (editor) "The Box: An Oral History of Television"] In the 1970s, new elements were incorporated into TV Westerns, such as crime drama and mystery whodunnit elements. Western shows from the 1970s included "McCloud", "Hec Ramsey", "Little House on the Prairie", and "Kung Fu". In the 1990s and 2000s, hour-long Westerns and slickly packaged made-for-TV movie Westerns were introduced. As well, new elements were once again added to the Western formula, such as the Western-science fiction show "Firefly", created by Joss Whedon in 2002. "Deadwood", which aired on HBO, was a critically-acclaimed Western series which aired from 2004 through 2006.

Literature

Western fiction is a genre of literature set in the American Old West between the years of 1860 and 1900. Well-known writers of Western fiction include Zane Grey from the early 1900s and Louis L'Amour from the mid 20th century. The genre peaked around the early 1960s, largely due to the popularity of televised Westerns such as "Bonanza". Readership began to drop off in the mid- to late 1970s and has reached a new low in the 2000s. Most bookstores, outside of a few Western states, only carry a small number of Western fiction books.

Literary forms that share similar themes include the gaucho literature of Argentina and tales of the European settlement of the Australian Outback.

Visual art

A number of visual artists focused their work on representations of the American Old West. American West-oriented art is sometimes referred to as "Western Art" by Americans. This relatively new category of art includes paintings, sculptures and sometimes Native American crafts. Initially, subjects included exploration of the Western states and cowboy themes. Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell are two artists who captured the "Wild West" on canvas. Some art museums and art collectors feature American Western Art.
The Western genre is also used in comic books, computer and video games and role playing games. In comics, the Western has been done straight, as in the classic comics of the late 1940s and early 1950s; in the 1990s and 2000s, the Western comic has been done in a more Weird West fashion, usually involving supernatural horror such as vampires and ghouls. In computer games, the Western genre is either straight Western or a Western-horror hybrid. Some Western themed-computer games include the 1970s game “The Oregon Trail”, the 1990s game “Outlaws” (a first-person shooter), and the 2000s-era “GUN”, “Red Dead Revolver” and Call of Juarez. Another game that falls into the space-western category is the 2000 game “Gunman Chronicles” in which you played a gunman, against an oppressive general who was robed in uniform much like that used during the civil war. Your enemies would include outlaws and bounty hunters armed with laser pistols and other weapons (as well as fighting aliens and even dinosaurs on some levels). One level took place on a desert planet, looking much like the old American west.