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Lonely Are the Brave: New Routes through the Postwar Western

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Abstract:

The Western has been seen as a key genre for understanding both the American national character and the particulars of Hollywood, but there are now very few contemporary studies of this once foundational genre. The articles in this Special Issue, coming out of the *Lonely Are the Brave* conference of 2021, aim to revisit the Western, and the post-war Western specifically, in order to revive scholarship surrounding these texts, to interrogate existing models of understanding the history of the genre, and to examine how the genre treats ideas connected to time and its passing as attached to the American west and its depictions on-screen.

Keywords: Westerns, genre, post-war American culture, revisionist, the West, time

This special edition of the *European Journal of American Culture*, responding to the *Lonely Are the Brave* conference (2021) hosted by the University of East Anglia, aims to revisit the Western genre and its attendant texts, periods and critical terms. The Western was once seen as a key genre for understanding both Hollywood and the culture of the United States more broadly, but studies of the genre are now few and far between (Corkin 2004; Carter 2014; Nelson 2015; Wallin and Godfrey 2019). Significantly still, most scholarship on the Western does not actually focus on the whole generic corpus of the Western so

much as it addresses a particular cohort of pictures from the 1950s and 1960s, a period that was seen at the time as a major departure from earlier eras (see Bazin 1971a, 1971b; Cawelti 1970, 1976; Kitses 1969; Maltby 1995; Schatz 1981; Wright 1975). These pictures were set apart from the Westerns of the past through processes of promotion and aesthetic epitomization, consciously seen as working to ‘upscale’ the genre, with many pictures being labelled prestige films that were presented as sombre, significant, ‘Class A productions’. While later critics would stress the mythic qualities of these films, publicity at the time often stressed their realism, their psychological complexity, and their social commentary, which was often achieved through an implied distinction from the Westerns produced before the Second World War. Furthermore, despite the association with conservative stars such as John Wayne, many of these films were made by liberal, and even leftist filmmakers (see, e.g. [Krutnik et al. 2007](#); [Buhle and Wagner 2015](#); [Boddy 1998](#)). Indeed, the post-war period saw those on the left, right and centre all style themselves as anti-totalitarian, and the Western’s association with frontier myth and manifest destiny was conveniently used to justify or criticize, depending on who was using it, America’s Cold War-era imperialism and domestic policy. In other words, while the mid-1960s has been framed as a turning point in the Western, which marks the transition from the classic to the revisionist picture,

there are obvious contradictions and points of interference within this interpretation.

The Western it seems (even in its lulls and pauses), is, and has always been, in a constant process of revision: it has balanced hindsight with foresight, its evolutionary process one of constant cumulation rather than a sequence of singular lurches in one direction or another. If the Western has been seen as the urtext for interpreting the American character, this model of interpretation has stuck stubbornly to specific labels and this limited period of supposed 'upscaling' and 'revision'; far less time has been spent on considering Westerns other to, or before or after this mid-century locus, or pictures that blur temporal, social and political lines, when actually there are and were constant competing claims on both the West, and the Western that followed and re-iterated it. This edition seeks to open up this mid-century cohort of pictures to new approaches, stepping away from traditional classifications of the Western centred around the 'classic' and 'anti-classic' binary, and towards an approach that generates a more gradational and concomitant understanding. The edition also aims to work outwards from this supposed 'centre' to draw new conclusions about pictures (and other media and iterations of the West) that both preceded and came after it, and to consider wider aspects of the frontier and the genre that have had nominal coverage in film and Western studies so far.

The articles included in this special edition all, in their own way, produce new modes of thinking about the Western genre and its substructures. All, significantly, address the notion of ‘time’ as attached to Westerns and the way time passes (or does not) in the genre; they also explore the signifiers of its passing; who, or what, passes with it; the way Western characters and viewers experience time; and the longer-term effects of its passing in relation to the frontier and to American culture. They suggest that, rather than a binary ‘this’ and then ‘that’ in Westerns, the process the genre undergoes is more akin to a (slow and not always monodirectional) maturation or ‘adultification’ (reflected also in the move from Production Code to age ratings system and the commercial shift from melodrama directed at a family or ‘undifferentiated’ audience to a ‘differentiated’ youth-driven [typically male] audience in this period that, ironically, contributed to more ‘mature’ or ‘authentic’ fare and the escalation of the genre – see [Klinger 1994](#); [Maltby 1995](#)). This was, though, a process that kept youth and future generations very much in sight (distilled most clearly in Joey Starrett’s gazing after the eponymous Shane in George Steven’s 1953 picture and the sky going dark on this gaze at the film’s close). The articles here also speak to the genre’s concern with the meaning and manifestation of modernity and ‘types’ of civilization, not just of a spatial kind; they cover the ways in which frontier modernity (innately connected to time

here), as depicted in or through the Western, tentatively accommodated then ejected certain types or peoples or used static 'stock characters' to house far more progressive, if fleeting, ideas and representations; or enmeshed the concrete with the psychological and utilized myth much older than that of Turner and the frontier to produce ways of presenting and interpreting human experience in modern cinematic terms. They also consider how Westerns depicted societal transition, and how this was not a linear or straightforward process, even in classic Westerns, but one of sustained negotiation, incorporation and sometimes regression.

Christina Corfield's 'Modernity and the Pony Express Western' frames the Pony Express mail service as signifier of both an encroaching modernity and an anti-modernity in both frontier contexts and wider conceptualizations of technology and progress. Corfield traces the Pony Express throughout a variety of early to mid-twentieth-century Western films and TV shows, locating the Express as an image that straddles both past and future, but also as a symbol of an 'alternative' kind of technology and communication that warrants new investigation. If the Pony Express was one means of dealing with the scale of the American landscape, then David Melbye addresses, in 'Sisyphus on horseback: Landscape allegory in the postwar Western', the psychological function of Western landscapes and the ways in which landscape allegory

becomes both genre and ritual (and how genre becomes ritual). The Sisyphean nature of characters' interactions with frontier topography in the Western, and the nature of this movement (working against the landscape rather than merely through it) is traced across a variety of post-war Westerns in order to highlight the therapeutic nature of this allegory and the experiential and expressive potential of cinematic allegory within and beyond the Western.

This struggle with the landscape has often (if not exclusively) been posed in masculine terms and connected to how masculine figures in the genre have elided with the closing of the frontier, and to the cultural work the Western has been charged with undertaking. In ““What did we prove?”: William Wyler's *The Big Country* (1958) and the revisionism of Westerns’, Andrew Kinsella uses *The Big Country* as a case study through which to explore the tensions intrinsic to the way the Western has been styled as representing the fundamental nature of twentieth-century America and how this nature has necessarily transformed. Examining depictions of violence, masculinity and witnessing in particular, Kinsella further reflects on the inherent revisionism of the Western and the limits of traditional and delineated forms of classification in framing the genre's evolution. In ‘Sissies and lost pardners: Issues of masculinity and male queerness in the early Western’, Shane Brown takes us back to pre-production code Westerns by exploring the intersection of

queerness, comedy and the frontier as well as wider concerns in the early twentieth century surrounding the nature of American masculinity. Brown highlights that, while still relatively rare in the Western, some pre-code pictures did accommodate depictions of queerness and gender ambiguity (attached to the ‘Pansy’ and ‘Sissy’ character types in particular) in a way that later post-code and sound pictures simply did or could not. These figures are not simply ‘revisionist critiques’, then, but present different historical, earlier modes of masculinity that disrupt dominant generic expectations.

John Mitchell’s *Logan* (2017) and the lost object of masculinity, or the trouble with *Shane*’ examines the risks of nostalgia and idealization, and how the inclusion of Stevens’ picture in Mangold’s *Logan* both highlights how different masculinities are in tension and foreshadows the direction Mangold’s picture takes in its treatment of the patriarchal saviour. Mitchell connects the overlap of these two films and their reluctant ‘cowboy-hero’ figures to generational connections and divides, revealing that *Logan*, despite its elegiac tone, still tacitly affirms certain patriarchal and patrilineal archetypes in its examination of the limits of regeneration and its depiction of Wolverine as both living legend and dead man walking. Continuing with Western heroism’s relation to generational politics and the difficulties of real or analogous father–son relationships, Martin Holtz, in ‘Between reverence and rejection: Age and

youth in the Vietnam era Western’, explores how generational relationships are presented in Westerns, outlining the fissures that appear both between generations and generational ideology and interactions, tracing patterns of rebellion or admiration in regard to age and youth, and denunciation regarding the middle generation. Holtz embeds these models of veneration and resistance within wider patterns of Western self-reflection in order to locate ties between the Western and the American sociopolitical landscape at the end of this decade.

Finally, John Wills’s ‘Mechanisms of time in the video game Western from *Gun Fight* to *Red Dead Redemption 2*’ explores the most modern of iteration of the frontier, the video game Western, and the ways in which temporality and the experience of an ‘old world’ in-game frontier for the player has been managed and manipulated in increasingly innovative ways as the Western game developed. Wills connects these advances and interventions in game play to how we perceive the West itself, suggesting that the Western game is both disruptive *and* conservative in its treatment of frontier histories. Both individually and together, these articles provide new insights into the Western as freed from contextual and categorical silos and refresh the direction and terms of Western scholarship, highlighting old and new films and media for both old and new audiences.

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