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## **Outlaw Trails: New Routes through the Postwar Western**

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The western was once seen as a key genre for understanding US culture (Lewis, 1955; Marx, 1964; Smith 1950), but studies of the western film have significantly fallen off since the 1970s (for significant exceptions, see Corkin, 2004; Lusted 2003; Nelson, 2015). However, even during the period of highest productivity, most work on the western did not actually focus on the whole generic corpus of the genre (see Buscombe 1970; Cawelti, 1971 and 1976; Kitses, 1969; Schatz, 1981; Tudor, 1974; Wright, 1975). Instead, the focus was on a particular cohort of pictures largely from the 1950s through to the 1960s, a period that some critics note was actually a major departure from earlier eras (see Bazin, 1971; Fenin and Everson, 1973; Neale, 2000; Stanfield, 2001 and 2002). In other words, there is often a confusion between the western as a genre and the postwar western as a specific moment in the history of that genre.

It is also significant that this period is precisely the one in which American Studies as a discipline emerged; this was an era in which this area of study was actively promoted by the US government around the world in order to extol the virtues of US culture. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the postwar western interrogated a series of questions about the history of this particular culture, given the centrality of the west to claims about its value (or its flaws). However, earlier periods of the genre were very different. For example, while *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is often identified as the first film western, it was unlikely to have been perceived as a historical narrative of nation building on its original release given that it was advertised as a "faithful duplication of the genuine 'Hold-ups' made famous by various outlaw bands in the far West", events such an infamous train robbery in August 1900 by Butch Cassidy and his gang and others like those reported in September

1903, a month before the film's shooting began (Musser, 1991: 257). The film was, at the time, presented as a record of contemporary events rather than as a picture that documented the past. Even by the 1930s, many westerns were not particularly interested in narratives of nation building and had other preoccupations. For example, *The Phantom Empire*, a western serial from 1935, features Gene Autry singing songs; performing stunts with horses; fighting a technologically advanced civilisation who live 20,000 feet under the western landscape; and dealing with a series of hair-raising cliff-hangers, such as escaping from a crashing plane – not entirely the 'standard' set of western iconographies.

Even 1939, the year that is often seen as the (re)birth of the genre, can be understood very differently from many classic accounts. For a start, it was less a rebirth (the genre was very much alive throughout the 1930s) than a move upmarket, i.e. it was a shift away from the stuff of cheap serials and the poverty row productions of Monogram and Republic, and into the markets that were dominated by the major studios, who targeted their films at affluent middle-class viewers. Furthermore, this middle-class audience was understood as being a family audience, in which women were the primary decision makers when it came to choosing what (and what not) to see. It was therefore a period in which the genre was being converted from lowbrow entertainment into something that could be presented as more highbrow, serious, and significant. 1939 even marked the approaching 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the frontier in 1890, and the major studios will have expected these films to cash-in on this event.

Furthermore, during this period, trains and new highways were also opening the west up to tourism, and the dude ranch became a place where both men and women went to act out fantasies of western life (Borne, 1983; and Johnson, 2012). In 1939, then, while almost every major studio produced a

western,<sup>1</sup> MGM also released one its most glamorous features, *The Women*. In this film, a significant portion of the narrative follows its central female character and her girlfriends spending time on a dude ranch, which is clearly presented as a place of glamorous, and specifically female, tourism.

It may not be a surprise, then, that of the ten western releases from the big eight studios in 1939, half featured female stars at the top of the bill – i.e., above the male lead – Barbara Stanwyck in *Union Pacific*; Claudette Colbert in *Drums Along the Mohawk*; Claire Trevor in *Allegheny Uprising*; Claire Trevor again in *Stagecoach*; and Marlene Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again*. In addition, another western from a major studio (*Let Freedom Ring*) was a vehicle for Nelson Eddy, an opera singer whose primary audience was understood as being primarily made up of women; and yet another featured the double act of Errol Flynn and Olivia De Havilland (who were often seen together as appealing to a female viewer and, in the same year, appeared alongside one of the major stars of the woman's film, Bette Davis, in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*).

In those cases where the female star was billed above the leading man, the films often explicitly presented the male hero as an erotic object for the consumption of the female lead. As Stanwyck's Mollie sighs, in *Union Pacific*, after she watches Joel McCrae's Jeff defeat a thug, "Glory, what a man!" While this gaze might be adoring in this particular picture, the essays collected in this special issue all look at the west through different eyes or from different perspectives, repositioning and rerouting characters and viewers through less familiar landscapes within the genre and its production. For example, the first article, by Menendez-Otero, examines John Ford's cavalry films but not from the perspective of the US. Instead, the piece frames these films within the context of Franco's Spain

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<sup>1</sup> MGM, *Let Freedom Ring*; Paramount, *Union Pacific*; Fox *Jesse James* and *Drums Along the Mohawk*; Warners made *Dodge City* and *The Oklahoma Kid*; RKO *Allegheny Uprising*; UA, *Stagecoach*; and Universal, *Destry Rides Again*

and examines the ways in which they were promoted and exhibited within that context. In the process, it demonstrates that the differing success of these three films was a result of the changing relationship between Spain and the US during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The next two essays explore two different films that both focus on Asian Americans within the west (*Walk Like a Dragon* 1960; and *The Seven Faces of Dr Lao* 1964), both of which might seem a little early given that the supposedly self-conscious period of the western was usually associated with the mid to late 1960s. However, if Asian Americans were central in building the west, even if they have often been excluded from later accounts of that history, this erasure has never been total, and their presence has been repeatedly reasserted in a variety of different ways, as these two articles establish. Of course, these representations were not all the same – nor were they necessarily radical – and Gates' essay on *Walk Like a Dragon* not only explores the different ways in which film and television represented Asian Americans within the west during this period, but also demonstrates that the film is best understood in terms of cinematic responses to the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, rather than as a part of the self-conscious phase of the genre's development. Alternatively, Lomax's article on *The Seven Faces of Dr Lao* examines a fantasy film, set in the wild west, where its Asian American character transforms the town but specifically *not* through the methods of the traditional western hero. The film works around a series of reversals, particularly in relation to racial stereotypes, and it views the western through the lens of science fiction and fantasy, and particularly the progressive science fiction and fantasy of the film's screenwriter, the author Charles Beaumont.

Finally, the last two essays by Wright and Konkle examine actresses with both star power and strong associations with the western, despite the fact that the genre is normally seen as a male-centric one. While Wright's article concentrates on Jane Russell, Konkle's explores Marilyn Monroe's association with the western; and both essays investigate the complex performances of gender in the

genre: while Russell often plays a glamorous figure who is tougher than most of the males that surround her, Monroe is frequently and contrastingly a domesticating presence within her films. Indeed, if the western male is often seen as a figure of rugged independence, postwar westerns could also present their distance from and resistance to the domestic as a liability rather than a virtue. The eponymous gunfighter in *Shane* longs to give up his guns and settle down, while (in *The Searchers*) Ethan's refusal to surrender his guns at the end of the Civil War has not only resulted in him losing the woman that he loves but, like several of Wayne's other characters in the period (particularly Dunston in *Red River*), the absence of a domesticating presence in his life is presented as psychologically destabilizing and, in the end, ostracizing. As Fen (the woman that Dunston loves) puts it, shortly before she dies: "you need what a woman can give you to do what you have to do ... Listen with your head and your heart, too. The sun only shines half the time, Tom; the other half is night." As this makes clear, themes of doubleness and duality play throughout the film, and frequently suggest a need for give-and-take, and for balance. Wright and Konkle's articles examine how Russell and Monroe's presence in the genre encapsulates and complicates these patterns, as well as considering how the star power and personas of these two actresses in the mid-20th century interacted with the western genre.

As these collected articles demonstrate, then, even those elements that are usually seen as being marginalized by the genre are actually powerfully constitutive (at least in the postwar period). For example, while the majority of westerns during the 1950s and 1960s were male-centred narratives, their dramas were often about the male hero's relationship to domestic space. Consequently, whether a narrative ultimately demanded that the hero reject domesticity, or that he embrace it, the domestic is absolutely central to these narratives. Similarly, the figure of the Native American is a central figure within the postwar western but operates as more than simply a synonym for the savage wilderness that is tamed by the forces of civilisation. Although, as stated, many critics present the late 1960s as a self-conscious moment when westerns became more sympathetic to the treatment of

Native Americans, these claims tend to homogenize earlier representations of the Native American and even ignore the self-conscious, and even critical, accounts of westward expansion present in earlier moments of the genre's history (Gallagher 2012). Ford, for example, is often used as an example of changing attitudes in the 1960s but his own 1948 western, *Fort Apache*, clearly presents its Native Americans as victims of white aggression, and almost every review at the time made explicit mention of this feature. As the *New York Times* put it, the film was distinguished by a "new and maturing view point": it stated that "[f]or here it is not the 'heathen Indian' who is the 'heavy' of the piece but a hard-bitten Army colonel, blind through ignorance and a passion for revenge" (Crowther, 1948). Nor was this film an anomaly: numerous westerns of the 1950s framed racism towards Native Americans as being a significant social problem within the history of the west (see for example *Broken Arrow* (1950); *Seminole* (1953); *Broken Lance* (1954); *Apache* (1954); and even *The Searchers* (1956)).

In other words, the western has never represented just one position and has never been told from one viewpoint. Throughout its history, the western has been made by filmmakers from all sides of US politics (see, for example, Krutnik, Neale, Neve and Stanfield, 2007; Buhle and Wagner, 2015; and Boddy, 1998, who makes a similar point about the television western of the period). Indeed, the postwar period was one in which those on the left, right and centre all framed themselves as guardians of liberty who were opposed to totalitarianism; in this context, while some westerns affirmed the doctrine of manifest destiny in ways that justified the worst examples of Cold War expansionism, others covertly opposed 'the blessing of civilisation', or reinterpreted it along the lines of the popular front against fascism during the 1940s, when the left campaigned for the US to act as a champion of liberation around the world.

In fact, the western has recently come back into contemporary political discourse in interesting ways. While Ronald Reagan and others on the US right had appropriated the western for their own ends

during the 1980s, in 2007, John Fogerty wrote “Gunslinger”, in which he imagined the Republican Party as a gang of outlaws and called for an Obama-like hero to take them on. Even Obama himself has drawn on the western to champion a collectivist spirit, or at least an image of democratic fairness; and he has done so in order to recast Donald Trump, not as the heir to the western hero, but its anti-thesis, a spoiled and self-interested bully, or modern Rufus Ryker:

I think about the classic male hero in American culture when you and I were growing up: the John Waynes, the Gary Coopers, the Jimmy Stewarts, the Clint Eastwoods, for that matter. There was a code ... the code of masculinity that I grew up with that harkens back to the '30s and '40s and before that. There's a notion that a man is true to his word, that he takes responsibility, that he doesn't complain, that he isn't a bully—in fact he defends the vulnerable against bullies. And so even if you are someone who is annoyed by wokeness and political correctness and wants men to be men again and is tired about everyone complaining about the patriarchy, I thought that the model wouldn't be Richie Rich—the complaining, lying, doesn't-take-responsibility-for-anything type of figure. (Barack Obama, quoted in Goldberg, 2020)

The western, then, as the articles here all speak to both individually and collectively, does not offer one essential narrative of US identity (just as US culture does not actually generate one homogenous reading of the western genre) but many; the western has instead been appropriated in different ways, at different times and with very different purposes throughout its history, a mode that will no doubt continue as the genre and its diverse constituent elements continue.

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