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978-0-521-55581-4 - The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century

Scott Simmon

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The Invention of the Western Film

A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century

The Invention of the Western Film ranges across literature, visual arts, social history, ideology, and legend to provide, for the first time, an in-depth exploration of the early Western, from short kinetoscopes of the 1890s through the “classic” features of the 1940s. By examining the American Indian’s rise and demise during the silent era, the interplay between A- and B-Westerns of the 1930s, and film noir–influenced Westerns of the 1940s, Scott Simmon’s pioneering study silhouettes the genre’s evolution against a myriad of cultural forces. This lively, encyclopedic book revitalizes familiar Western icons John Wayne and John Ford, and recovers forgotten masterworks from the Western film’s formative years.

Scott Simmon is Professor of English and Codirector of the Film Studies program at the University of California, Davis. He curated the DVD sets *Treasures from American Film Archives* and the forthcoming *Saving the Silents* for the National Film Preservation Foundation, and reconstructed the landmark early features *Within Our Gates* and *Where Are My Children?* for the Library of Congress. His writings include books on film preservation and on directors King Vidor and D. W. Griffith.

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**A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE GENRE'S
FIRST HALF-CENTURY**

SCOTT SIMMON

University of California, Davis



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*Once again,
for Annette.*



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Preface: The Western and the West

I am genuine white . . . and I am willing to own that my people have many ways, of which, as an honest man, I can't approve. It is one of their customs to write in books what they have done and seen, instead of telling them in their villages, where the lie can be given to the face of a cowardly boaster. . . .

Natty Bumppo ("Hawk-eye") in James Fenimore Cooper's
The Last of the Mohicans (1826)¹

Before the Western came the West, although their relationship has its chronological twists. Consider a couple of incidents, from near the start and end of the brief historical era that most inspires the Western film.

In 1849 Kit Carson was searching through New Mexico for a white woman taken captive by the Jicarilla Apaches, a certain Mrs. J. M. White. Locating their camp, he noticed among the debris an abandoned book, which turned out to be a novel about the scouting exploits of Kit Carson, probably one published the same year titled *Kit Carson: Prince of the Gold Hunters*. As it happened, the real Carson could not match the skills of his fictional double, and Mrs. White was found dead. He long remained troubled by the thought that she must have been given hope in her captivity by reading this Western "in which I was made a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundred."²

In 1890 the Teton Sioux leader Sitting Bull was shot by deputized native police as he was escorted from his cabin on the Standing Rock Reservation in South Dakota. (His killing during the "Ghost Dance" spiritual revival further roiled the atmosphere that led the U.S. Cavalry toward the Wounded Knee massacre of two hundred Sioux in South Dakota two weeks later.) Witnesses to Sitting Bull's death reported that

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during the melee his favorite horse, apparently confused by the smoke and gunfire, sat back on its haunches, proffered a front hoof to “shake,” and then performed a routine of tricks learned during Sitting Bull’s season with Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West show.³

Sitting Bull’s horse and “Death Cabin” reappear in history three years later, on display in Buffalo Bill’s new show, which was set up just outside the grounds of Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition. A celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of America’s “discovery,” this 1893 exposition is also remembered now as the venue for the American Historical Association conference where Frederick Jackson Turner gave his influential talk on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which lamented the “closing” of the frontier West.⁴ The Western film might be said to open the following year with such Edison Company titles as *Sioux Ghost Dance* (1894). If there is a strict chronology here, it is not without ironies.

You can’t spend much time even in the contemporary West without encountering such grimly absurdist moments where the history of the West and the invented Western conjoin to bite back. I’m reminded of being jostled from predawn sleep while traveling cross-country by Greyhound bus in the 1980s as we pulled into a breakfast stop on an Osage reservation in Oklahoma. “HOME OF F-TROOP” read the unpromising sign over the restaurant and souvenir shop, in reference to the even-then long-canceled ABC television sitcom about cavalry-and-Indian shenanigans. Through groggy half-consciousness we ordered our ham and eggs from sullen Native American teenagers outfitted in nineteenth-century U.S. Cavalry uniforms. Though this wasn’t like finding Jews in SS uniforms staffing some Auschwitz McDonald’s, it had just enough echoes to jolt us awake.

This book has been written on the far edge of the West – in San Francisco, four blocks from the eighteenth-century Franciscan Catholic outpost, Mission Dolores. For film fans like myself, this is where Jimmy Stewart tracks Kim Novak to “Carlotta Valdez’s” grave in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*; but as the bronze plaque on the adobe wall of the mission graveyard reminds tourists, the spot also memorializes “CALIFORNIA’S APOSTLE, PADRE JUNÍPERO SERRA,” who initiated the mission system that brought forced labor, intractable laws, and fatal diseases to the region’s natives. California is, after all, where recent historians of the West feel the least compunction in labeling the treatment of Native Americans “genocide.”⁵

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At the outset then, writing a history of the Western film in the twenty-first century means acknowledging the competing appeals of Hollywood entertainment, historical evidence, and evolving ethics, as well as balancing the mortal seriousness against the crazy comedy inherent in both the West and the Western. There are a number of ways to write about the relationship between the Western film and the West, each full of compromises, and it's worth quickly laying out the options and the choices upon which I've settled.

It has been tempting for books about the Western to scold films for their evident failure to reproduce history with any accuracy. The very titles of *There Must Be a Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and Reality* and *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill: A Layman's Guide to History and the Western Film* suggest that this can be accomplished with some wit, although other writers about the Western film – Ward Churchill and Jon Tuska, for instance – go straight to outrage over Hollywood's distortions of history.⁶ The opposite tactic is the one that Jane Tompkins announces in her pithy *West of Everything* when she says that “The Western doesn't have anything to do with the West as such,” or that Peter French implies in his *Cowboy Metaphysics* when he says in frustration about the accuracy of Western films, “Did it really happen that way? Who cares? . . . I don't.” While this certainly simplifies the problems of writing about Westerns, it may make things a bit too easy on us all. My feeling is that Janet Walker in her anthology *Westerns: Films through History* has it about right when she points out that Western films also include historical interpretation among their other traits.⁷ The films, that is, offer up arguments through narrative about America and its history, and if we must judge them, it would be less for accuracy than coherency. My sense too is that we need to *start* from acknowledgment of the genre's racism, rather than arriving at it as if it were a discovery.

I've found that admitting that I'm writing about Western movies can be an excellent conversation stopper. After the pause, responses are usually along the lines of, “Do you *like* Westerns?” – asked in a tone conveying that the questioner quite sensibly hates them. I've inadvertently become something of an expert on the range of reasons why people – OK, why women especially – have come to avoid Westerns, but the reasons might be said to fall broadly into two categories: (1) dislike of the retrograde cultural attitudes carried by Western films, not only their treatment of non-European races but also their ways of representing gender; and (2) dislike of the tedious repetitiousness of the tales

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told over and over again. Admittedly, these are two formidable reasons, and yet these very traits of Westerns may turn out to provide opportunities for thinking about the genre and for structuring a study of it – or so I have tried to redeploy them here.

First, all of that cultural baggage carried by Western films should allow them to be unpacked through a cultural history, by which I mean examining film aesthetics within a wide context of literature and visual arts, of social histories of the eras depicted and of the years when the films were produced, and of the ideologies propounded by the films. Westerns have always felt free to express their belief in America and have been permitted to speak about religion and politics in ways generally forbidden Hollywood genres set in the contemporary world. Second, the repetitiousness of the stories told within Westerns means that it should be possible to place a limited number of films and filmmakers at the center of our investigations and, by spinning short connections to related films and figures, still arrive at a relatively full genre history within a reasonable length. The compromise is that there will be gaps in the history, but I've opted for this structure over any complete chronology, which in any case soon gets defeated by the sheer number of Western films. (Jon Tuska reports that he's seen eight thousand.)⁸ The Western's notoriously limited repertoire of character types, situations, locations, props, and actors can make the films appear "all the same," but it also allows the debates carried on through the films to be more transparent than within more flexible Hollywood genres. In a sense, each significant Western sums up the genre as it exists to that point, makes new arguments, and by its unconvincing and unresolved spots leaves questions for other films to answer. We'll try to tune into this cultural dialogue.

For reasons hinted above, it seems essential to begin with the "encounter" between Native and European worlds. I've gone back to uncover a new history of the rise and fall of the Indian in silent film, which, I'll argue, is a story more central to both film history and American culture than is the relatively familiar one about the origins of the movie cowboy. I've also tried to seek out places where the genre still surprises with its vitality, as within B-Westerns in the 1930s and film-noir-inflected Westerns in the 1940s. Beyond their loose chronology of moviemaking, the book's three parts survey the major narratives repeatedly told about the West, taking them up in the order they found prominence in Western history: the "encounter" in Part One, overland

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pioneering in Part Two, and the creation of community in Part Three. *The Invention of the Western Film* ends around the years when many histories of the genre begin. It has, however, seemed worth carrying certain topics beyond any strict chronological cutoff, and especially at the end of Part Three we'll trace the fate of "classic" Western principles through more recent decades.

If the West essentially preceded the Western, it now looks as if the West has also outlived the Western. The many premature obituaries for the Western film – the first few published in 1911 – might warn us off such a pronouncement, but the genre is beginning to feel clinically dead, especially if a living genre requires a critical mass of productions. One can still film a Western, just as one can still paint a fresco, but there's no denying that the active tradition, the community of artisans, and the receptive audience are gone. No Westerns were released theatrically in 2002, and the distinction of the most recent theatrical Western at the time I write – *Texas Rangers* (2001) – is to have the lowest per-screen box-office take in industry memory.⁹ If Westerns aren't dead, it is strange also that so many characters in the few recent ones prove to be dead men returning from beyond the grave (as in *Purgatory* [1999] and *South of Heaven, West of Hell* [2000]). One of the pleasures for me in returning to the earliest years of the Western film's invention – a word I choose for its implication that the genre grew from conscious choices more than collective myths – is immersion in an era when filmmakers were finding the force of visual language. And, yes, since you ask, I *do* like Westerns – for their love of the land, for their feeling for physicality, for their taut verbal wit, and for their unapologetic contentions.



I have been mulling over this book for longer than I'm willing to admit – long enough, I'm afraid, to have forgotten many of the acknowledgments due (but thanks to Clark Evans for companionship on that west-bound Greyhound). Initial promptings and inspiration came from the late Raymond Durgnat, the only genius I've known and one of the handful of distinctive writers about film. His ideas about Westerns, from our collaborations, remain everywhere throughout this book. I'm grateful to the Library of Congress and the Pacific Film Archive for allowing me to host retrospectives on the Western and to archivists at

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those institutions and at the Museum of Modern Art and the UCLA Film and Television Archive who arranged viewings of preserved films. Students at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of California, Davis, who groaned theatrically on hearing that their genre courses would be about Westerns, gave unexpected fun and encouragement. For finding space for drafts of my thoughts about Westerns, thanks to editors at *Film Comment*, *Films*, and *Literature/Film Quarterly*, and to Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman, editors of *The Western Reader*. For help with the photographic illustrations, I'm indebted to Patrick Loughney at the Library of Congress, Matt Severson at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Caroline Yeager at the George Eastman House, and David Wells at the National Film Preservation Foundation. At Cambridge University Press, Senior Editor Beatrice Rehl kept long faith, and the remarkable Michael Gnat again made the production process a pleasure.

This book is for Annette Melville, who, amazingly, is always ready to watch one more Western.