In Focus: The Western—An Overview

The Western has left an indelible mark on the world. Thanks to Hollywood, virtually everyone knows the ingredients of the Western--the lassos and the Colt .45s; the long-horned steers and the hanging trees; the stagecoaches and the Stetson hats; the outlaws and the lawmen; the gamblers and the gunfighters. And virtually everyone knows the settings of the Western--the red rock monoliths of Monument Valley; the jagged, snow-capped peaks of the Teton Range; the treeless expanses of the prairie. The iconography of the Western is the largest and richest of all the film genres, and Hollywood has burned it into the minds of moviegoers from Dodge City to Timbuktu.

Part of the allure of the Western was its very simplicity. As critic Richard Schickel said, because "everyone wore a six-shooter, complex moral conflicts could be plausibly resolved in clear, clean violent action" (BFI, pg. 11). This decisiveness allowed the West to take on mythical dimensions, to become a place where great legends could be born. These myths and legends were embodied by Western heroes such as Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill Cody, Calamity Jane, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid.

Equally important, especially in the first half of the 20th Century, was the immediacy of the American West. When Hollywood first set up shop, the last great frontier was so close at hand that gunslingers/lawmen like Wyatt Earp drifted to Hollywood to serve as consultants on movie sets. This closeness to the West made the Western myths tangible and all the more powerful.

At the heart of the Western, and not to be underestimated, was physical action--runaway stagecoaches, Indian raids, bank holdups, posse pursuits, and cattle stampedes. The Western resolved its conflicts through violent brawls and gunplay, reestablishing the moral order with an exhilarating BANG! during the final reel.

Hollywood sold its stories about the West to an eager American public, providing us with a wide range of Westerns, from the series Westerns of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers with their clean-cut stars, fun-loving sidekicks, and guitar strumming singalongs to the obsessed, revenge bent heroes of Anthony Mann's majestic '50s Westerns.

The Western provided infinite variety on a relatively small stable of situations and plots, with conflicts often growing out of several archetypal situations: ranchers vs. farmers (Shane and Man Without a Star), Indians vs. settlers (The Searchers and Hondo), and outlaws vs. civilization (My Darling Clementine and High Noon). Robert Warshow in his influential essay "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner" described the Western as "an art form for connoisseurs, where the spectator derives his pleasure from the appreciation of minor variations within the working out of a pre-established order" (Warshow, pg. 66).

Many filmmakers felt at ease with the Western and made their best movies within the genre. In a short speech before the Director's Guild, director John Ford (who had directed movies from many different
genres) went on record as saying, "My name's John Ford. I make Westerns." Directors such as Ford, Budd Boetticher, Anthony Mann, and Sam Peckinpah excelled at prying unsuspected complexities and ironies out of the well-worn stories of the American West. As a result, in John Ford's *The Searchers* we have much more than a simple quest to find a young girl kidnapped by Indians; we have the story of a quest that will never end, for the story's hero, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), can never become part of the civilization he strives to restore. And in Anthony Mann's *The Naked Spur*, we have much more than the simple story of a bounty hunter (Jimmy Stewart) bringing home a body; we have a story where vengeance and self-destruction are intertwined. "He's not a man. He's a sack of money."

Some actors became closely identified with the Western, including Tom Mix, W.S. Hart, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and Audie Murphy—but for many people, no one epitomized the Western like John Wayne. With a towering stature and a steely gaze, Wayne dominated his movies like a national monument dominates the land. His image has worked its way into the American consciousness as a metaphor for America itself, its strength, its determination, and its reliability. A quick survey of his movies—from *Stagecoach* to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*—is very nearly a list of the greatest Westerns ever made. While Wayne owns the top echelon by himself, a host of other actors have made powerful contributions to the genre, including Henry Fonda, James Stewart, Gary Cooper, Joel McCrea, Randolph Scott, and Clint Eastwood.

Hollywood fed us a steady diet of Western myths, legends, and heroes for over five decades. And in the process, the Western myth engulfed American popular culture—from clothes (denim jackets, jeans, and cowboy boots) to children's toys (cap guns, rubber-tipped arrows, and tom toms). Its lexicon entered our language ("round up," "hog-tied" and "bury the hatchet"). The Western held our interest (with only minor lapses) until post-war cynicism ate away at the American psyche and we started doubting the heroes of the West. Gradually then the West began to fade away, struggling in spasms of violence in *The Wild Bunch* and the Spaghetti Westerns of Italy, until the Western hardly seemed relevant anymore. And not until the '90s arrived (with films such as *Dances With Wolves* and *Unforgiven*) did it seem possible that the Western could survive in any form other than dewy-eyed nostalgia.

**Beginnings**

The era of the American West lasted from about 1850 to 1900, when the country was expanding at a staggering rate. Settlers trudged West on the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails, cattle empires sprang from the prairies, cow towns grew around railroad stations, and legendary cattle drives cut great swaths across the plains. This time period provided the raw material for the Western.

Back on the East Coast, dime novels about the West flooded newsstands and bookstores, spreading the legendary feats of real life characters such as Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickok, and Jesse James. Artists Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, Frederick Remington and Charles Russell captured this world on canvas, emphasizing epic mountain vistas, valiant cavalry actions, and noble Indians. Wild West Shows featuring Indian war dances, stagecoach chases, and authentic frontiersmen (such as Buffalo Bill Cody) packed in audiences and even toured Europe.

Onto this world, the early filmmakers turned their cameras. Thomas Edison produced several short films that plainly and simply showed Indians and cowboys at work and play. These minute long movies that played in Mutoscope and Kinetoscope peep-show viewers were the beginning of the West on film. In 1898, the Edison Company recorded the first Western dramas. *Cripple Creek Bar Room* shows several prospectors slogging down beers until they get drunk and thrown out of the bar, and *Poker at Dawson City* shows a game of five-card stud that ends in a brawl.
One of the most famous films of early cinema followed in 1903, *The Great Train Robbery*. Directed by Edwin S. Porter, it featured a train holdup, a posse pursuit, and a shoot out. Most notably the film featured one of the earliest recorded instances of parallel editing, as the outlaws flight is intercut with the posse's formation and pursuit.

*The Great Train Robbery* had no heroes, but one member of its cast, Gilbert M. Anderson, would soon become one of the great silent Western stars. Between 1908 and 1916, he churned out dozens of Westerns every year for the Essanay Company, featuring himself as Broncho Billy. He usually played a good badman, outfitted in wide chaps, leather gauntlets, and a ten-gallon hat. He lacked good riding skills, but his aw-shucks charm won him a loyal following. In addition, while most film companies shot their Westerns in New Jersey and New York, Anderson took his units to Colorado and California, allowing him to add some impressive scenery to his horse operas.

Anderson's main competition came from directors Thomas Ince and D.W. Griffith. With the services of the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and Wild West Show at his disposal, Ince created an efficient assembly line process at Inceville (as the studios of Bison Company become known), frequently building entire films around Indian characters. Working at Biograph, D.W. Griffith created several Westerns that show his developing facility for editing and pictorial composition. In *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1914), for example, Griffith creates a strong sense of tension during an Indian attack by cross-cutting between Indian attackers, a family hiding inside their cabin, and the cavalry riding to the rescue.

A veteran of Ince's Westerns, William S. Hart was one of the few Western stars who actually knew the West. As a result, his towns are dead ringers for photographs of actual Western streets, complete with tattered, ramshackle buildings and dust that hovers in the air. Playing a good badman who adheres to an ironclad code of honor, Hart's status soared after films such as *Hell's Hinges* and *The Narrow Trail* (both 1917), and he became one of the biggest stars in Hollywood. With the rise of the flamboyantly dressed fancy cowboys of the '20s, however, Hart's movies fell out of style. In 1925 he made one last movie, *Tumbleweeds* (widely regarded as his masterpiece) and retired.

Tom Mix was one of the fancy cowboys and his movies were pure fantasy. He drew his inspiration from the circus and Wild West Show, so his movies featured plenty of horse riding stunts, lassoing tricks, and broad comedy. He played an uncomplicated guardian of the prairie who didn't smoke or cuss. With a wide popularity that eventually eclipsed William S. Hart's, Tom Mix became the model for countless B Western stars in the 1930s and '40s.

Other Western stars of this period included Harry Carey, Hoot Gibson, Buck Jones, Tim McCoy, and Ken Maynard. Carey played Cheyenne Harry (a good badman) in a series of movies for Universal, some directed by John Ford. Gibson developed a slow, deliberate style of comedy. He never carried a gun and his films featured little physical action. Jones and McCoy played serious cow pokes in the W.S. Hart tradition. Maynard played a friendly, colorful hero who excelled at horsemanship and blushed in the presence of women.

The Western received a push for respectability with *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and *The Iron Horse* (1924). *The Covered Wagon* is an epic saga of wagons west on the Oregon Trail, featuring set-pieces such as a river crossing with 400 wagons. The movie was a great box-office success and spawned several more feature-length Westerns. *The Iron Horse* offered superior filmmaking in its story of the building of the transcontinental railroad. Director John Ford enlivened the proceedings with exciting action sequences and vivid details of everyday life.

As the sound era approached, however, audiences dwindled, and the studios slashed the production of Westerns. *Photoplay* magazine declared the Western "motion picture heroes have slunk away into the brush, never to return."
But the Western gradually fought back. Early sound Westerns such as *In Old Arizona* (1928) and *The Virginian* (1929) were noted for their use of realistic sounds—the roar of the locomotive, the creaking of floorboards, and the swing of the saloon doors. And they contained lively dialogue, such as "When you call me that, smile!"

In 1930 Fox and MGM each released wide-screen Westerns. Starring a young John Wayne, Fox's *The Big Trail* captured realistic shots of wagons floating across swollen rivers and being raised over steep cliffs. MGM's *Billy the Kid* served up a faithful recreation of outlaw life in New Mexico. These tales, however, arrived at the beginning of the depression, when audiences were looking for escapism not hardship. In addition, exhibitors refused to install new wide-screen projection equipment. (They had only just installed sound systems.) As a result, the movies flopped at the box office. John Wayne reverted to B Westerns and wasn't seen in another major studio production for nearly a decade.

A tale of the great Oklahoma land rush, *Cimarron* was released in 1931, and it won the Academy Award for Best Picture, a feat unequaled by any other Western for 60 years. *Cimarron*'s impact on the industry was negligible, for few feature-length Westerns followed in its wake. By the mid '30s, the Western had been almost completely turned over to the Poverty Row studios.

**The B Western**

As the major studios turned to producing double bills in the '30s, a need developed for producing inexpensive co-features. Hollywood created the series Western to fill this need. As a result, most studios signed one or more cowboy stars to provide up to eight Westerns per year. By 1932 most big silent Western stars were reestablished in series of their own. In addition, new stars such as John Wayne and Randolph Scott emerged.

The series Western was a brazenly formulaic production, with plots motivated by straightforward villainy. Fist fights, chases, and shoot outs flourished. Stories usually revolved around the ranch, where range wars and greedy land grabbers lurked. Dialogue was quick and to the point. Type casting abounded so that audiences knew immediately who was good and who was evil. A man's best friend was often his horse. Occasionally a hero might have a romantic interest, but the love would be completely chaste. In fact the hero would never straight out declare his love or intentions, but only through oblique references might he suggest he'd be coming around courtin'.

This period marked the beginning of the B Western's reign, a period that was "a paradise for those who cared little for the poetry of Ford or the dedicated realism of Hart. . . . It was a great time for those people who couldn't get enough of nonstop galloping horses, crackling six-guns, and the unique sound of the impact of fist on chin" (Eversen, pg. 143). Matinee performances played to theaters packed with children who urged on the heroes by screaming and throwing popcorn. Evening performances were no less hectic, as wise-cracking adults delighted in mocking the heroes and their endeavors.

Hollywood studios perfected the assembly line process and cranked out B Westerns in astonishing numbers. (B Westerns were shot quickly, often in 5 days or less for as little as $10,000.) Republic Studios, founded by Herbert J. Yates in 1935 from a group of studios teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, produced more B Westerns than any other studio. Compared to their competitors, Republic's production values were high, featuring razor-sharp cinematography, thrilling stunt work by the legendary Yakima Canutt, and stirring musical scores.

Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were the major Western stars during Republic's reign. Autry, a veteran country-and-western singer, had already starred in Mascot's bizarre Western/science fiction serial, *The Phantom Empire*. In 1935 Republic gave him a series of his own. His first Western, *Tumbling*
*Tumbleweeds*, established the model for future singing cowboy Westerns, featuring no less than six songs. Autry, however, still needed some seasoning, especially his acting and horse riding abilities. But soon enough, an agreeable formula developed with Autry as the warm and friendly hero of the cowboys. His personality never acquired much color (some people say he was bland), but he exuded a knightly demeanor that Western fans loved. When trouble came to the range, he urged everyone to stick together no matter what the bank or the landowners threatened. His films took place in a world precariously balanced between the old West and the modern world, featuring (often in the same movie) runaway stagecoaches, barroom brawls, high powered cars, army tanks, and airplanes. Autry became not only the biggest moneymaking Western hero but one of the top ranking Hollywood stars overall.

The success of Autry produced many singing imitators, including Tex Ritter, Bob Baker, and Dick Foran. But the only one to match, or even come close to Autry was his stablemate at Republic, Roy Rogers. Whereas Autry was likeable but colorless, Rogers was loaded with charisma. After Gene Autry joined the Armed Forces during WWII, Republic pushed Rogers as "King of the Cowboys." For twelve consecutive years he became the number one box-office Western star. The early Rogers Westerns, which first appeared in 1938, had flair and style and benefitted from the comedy relief of George "Gabby" Hayes. They usually took place in the Old West, co-starred his horse Trigger, and featured plenty of action. By the early '40s his films had become structured around musical routines, and the settings had become modern. The songs became mildly spectacular production numbers with Rogers and heroine Dale Evans garishly outfitted and the Sons of Pioneers dressed like a Broadway chorus line. Westerns such as *Idaho* and *The Cowboy and the Senorita* could be more honestly labeled musicals. When Willim Witney became Rogers' regular director in 1946, action was again stressed at the expense of music, and Rogers, now more simply attired, was often featured in surprisingly blunt fistfights.

William Boyd as Hopalong Cassidy offered Autry and Rogers their biggest competition. A former DeMille leading man from the silent period, Boyd carried the refined elegant air of the gentleman, a far cry from the salty old-timer in Clarence E. Mulford's books, upon which the movies were based. Boyd cleaned up the Hopalong character and eliminated the limp (after the first movie). The series established a formula where the pacing began deliberately and then gradually increased until it was time for a huge shootout, often involving several posses that join together and ride to the rescue.

Other important B Western stars of the '30s and '40s included George O'Brien, Bill Elliott, Tex Ritter, Charles Starrett, Tim Holt, and Johnny Mack Brown. O'Brien (who starred in Ford's *The Iron Horse*) was a rugged and muscular actor with superior acting skills. Elliott played a modestly attired hero who wore his guns with handles forward in their holsters. Ritter played a singing cowboy in the Gene Autry mold. Starrett played the Zorro-like Durango Kid. Tim Holt played a boyish hero for RKO. He also provided excellent supporting performances in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *My Darling Clementine*. Brown played Nevada John McKenzie in a long series of Westerns at Monogram.

Receiving much less attention but playing an equally important role were directors such as William Witney and Joseph H. Lewis. Witney saw ways to improve action scenes by fragmenting the action into short individual shots, instead of long single takes as was typical in most B Western fight scenes. As a result, the action scenes in his films frequently pack a strong punch. Joseph H. Lewis (who achieved cult status with his film noir classic *Gun Crazy*) broke up the frame by shooting through wagon wheels and dropping the camera to knee level. His inventive uses of cinematography made his Westerns seem fresh and exciting even when the stories and characters were unexceptional.

The Golden Age of the B Western lasted until the late '40s, when budget constraints started to affect the product. Even the slick Republic B Westerns looked drab. Part of the problem was the studios had been forced to divest themselves of their theaters. Without an instant market for their product, the B Westerns would have to be sold on their own merits. (As a result, production budgets were slashed.) Another part of the problem, however, was the studios saw the B Westerns as simply a product for a relatively unsophisticated audience and then merely recycled the same stale old plots and action scenes in movie after movie. As the '50s approached, rarely did imagination make any imprint in the B Westerns. The typical story featured a fistfight, a chase, and a shootout, and the formula rarely varied.
Meanwhile, television was beginning to have an effect on the theaters. By the early '50s, Boyd, Autry, and Rogers had all moved their operations to television, although Autry and Rogers still made occasional features. With a growing number of television Westerns--including *Cisco Kid, The Adventures of Wild Bill Hickok, The Lone Ranger, and Death Valley Days*--many moviegoers chose to stay at home. Gradually the theaters stopped booking B Westerns. By 1954 the series Western--like the stagecoach and the covered wagon--was a relic of the past.

### The Rise of the Feature Western

Throughout most of the '30s, Hollywood provided few feature Westerns. Among the exceptions were *The Plainsman* and *Wells Fargo*. But then suddenly in 1939, with World War II developing in Europe, Hollywood turned out a spate of Westerns, including *Union Pacific, Jesse James, Stagecoach, Dodge City, and Destry Rides Again*. *Stagecoach* marked John Wayne's return to the "A" Western and firmly established him as a major star. John Ford even gave Wayne the type of on-screen entrance usually reserved for only the biggest stars: the camera zooms from a medium shot to a close-up of Wayne's face. *Stagecoach* is an exciting tale of pursuit across hostile Indian territory, filmed with visual poetry by John Ford. Andre Bazin described *Stagecoach* as "the ideal example of the maturity of the style brought to classic perfection" (Bazin, pg. 149). Although *Stagecoach* was a standout critically, it did only middling box-office business.

The biggest box-office returns went to the stories of outlaws--*Jesse James* and *Dodge City*. *Jesse James* established the badman biography as a major Western type and paved the way for films about the Daltons, the Youngers, Billy the Kid, and the James brothers. *Dodge City* established the town-taming Western, filled with brawling, expansive action, including a climactic fight aboard a burning train.

The Westerns of 1939 may simply have been a sign of the times: war was approaching and feelings of patriotism were on the rise. The Westerns helped the country as a whole look at the nation's history while we prepared to send men into battle. With themes such as "Winning the West" taking hold in the genre, the Western celebrated American values, and films such as *Virginia City, Santa Fe Trail* and *They Died With Their Boots On* soon appeared.

But as the war years wore on, Hollywood turned to new, less optimistic material. With *The Ox-Bow Incident*, a powerful attack on lynching parties, social themes came to the Western. And with Howard Hughes' *The Outlaw*, a censorship storm erupted over the movie's sexual content. A Maryland judge who banned the film described Jane Russell's breasts as hanging over the picture "like a thunderstorm spread over a landscape." Posters advertised "Action! Thrills!! Sensations!!! Primitive Love!!!!" *Duel in the Sun* followed in a similar vein. As David O. Selznick's attempt to create a Western version of *Gone With the Wind*, *Duel in the Sun* provided a sweaty eroticism, painted in throbbing tones of red and orange by director King Vidor and cinematographer Lee Garmes. It's a tale of mad, sadistic love told between cracks of thunder and evangelistic sermons. Critics simply labeled it "Lust in the Dust."


As America's interest in psychology grew, Western heroes and villains continued to grow in complexity until they weren't that easy to tell apart anymore. Howard Hawks's *Red River* is a classic movie from this period. John Wayne plays Tom Dunson, a tough authoritarian cattle rancher who barks out orders and refuses to take anyone's advice. After his adopted son (played by Montgomery Clift) takes control of a
cattle drive away from him, Dunson becomes insane with anger and leads a posse of hired thugs to retake the cattle drive. *Red River* is a stunning Western, filled with brilliant characterizations and powered by a taut, unnerving tension as Wayne and Clift struggle for control of the herd.

Optimism hadn't completely disappeared from the Western after WWII, as evidenced by the work of John Ford. His *My Darling Clementine* (1946) builds relentlessly toward the Gunfight at the OK Corral (with Henry Fonda as Wyatt Earp, Victor Mature as Doc Holliday, and Walter Brennan as Old Man Clanton), but the movie's overwhelming concern is the effect of civilization on the frontier, which Ford paints in wholly positive terms (as embodied by the sweet innocence of Cathy Downs as Clementine). But even Ford wasn't completely immune from America's darkening attitudes. In *Fort Apache*, for example, (the first film in Ford's magnificent trilogy of cavalry Westerns) Henry Fonda plays an arrogant, Indian-hating lieutenant who leads his troops on an unwarranted attack. After he and his troops are annihilated, his second-in-command (John Wayne) obscures the truth so that the cavalry's name isn't smeared--and in the process makes Fonda into a hero. Told against the stark beauty of Monument Valley, *Fort Apache* presents an enthusiastic portrait of cavalry life, but this enthusiasm is tempered by undercurrents of dissatisfaction with the men we call heroes.

**The Western Matures**

In the '50s as the Cold War developed and the Korean War intensified, America looked to the nation's past for guidance. The traditional values of the Western provided prime material for this political climate and the Western exploded in popularity. However, the audiences now were more sophisticated and demanded more complex themes and subject matter than the simple horse operas of the past.

With these developments, the Western began to reexamine how Hollywood depicted Indians. Movies appeared such as *Broken Arrow, Across the Wide Missouri*, and *Devil's Doorway* (all 1950). The achievements of these movies now seem somewhat limited--featuring white performers in the Indian roles and regularly killing off the Indian women who dare to become involved with white men----but at the time, they served an important role in opening the eyes of America to the great injustice done the Indians.

With this questioning approach toward the past, the Western began to depict a hardened, at times even bleak, view of the West. In *The Gunfighter* (1950), Gregory Peck plays gunfighter Jimmy Ringo. He's tired of being challenged by every cocky up-and-coming gunslinger, and he wants to retire. But a gunfighter can never really retire. There is always some young punk ready to take a chance and say he killed the great Jimmy Ringo. And in *High Noon* (1952), a certain moral decay crept into the American frontier, as Sheriff Will Kane (Gary Cooper) must plead for help from townsfolk before the noon train arrives and Frank Miller, a vengeance bent outlaw, comes gunning for him.

During the '50s, the Western's biggest competition came from the plethora of horse operas on television. As a result, Hollywood looked for ways to make their products even more attractive and entice audiences out of their living rooms and into the theaters. Color soon became an essential part of the Western. Wide-screen Westerns such as *Vera Cruz* and *Broken Lance* emphasized the majestic terrain of the West. Even 3-D came to the West in movies such as *Hondo* and *The Charge at Feather River*.

Director George Stevens, however, pushed the Western in a different direction with *Shane* in 1953. The most popular Western of the decade, *Shane* provided an aesthetic vision of the West, combined with a shocking portrayal of violence, as when Elisha Cook, Jr. is knocked backwards by a gun shot from Jack Palance. Some critics, however, attacked *Shane*. Andre Bazin claimed that other Westerns "extract explicit themes from implied myths" while Shane is all myth (Bazin, pg. 152). Robert Warshow said Alan
Ladd is an "aesthetic object" unlike Gary Cooper or Gregory Peck who "bear in their bodies and their faces mortality, limitation, the knowledge of good and evil" (Warshow, pg. 84).

For Westerns of this period, Bazin coined the term "super Western," meaning a Western "that would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence . . . in short some quality extrinsic to the genre and which is supposed to enrich it" (Bazin, pg. 151). In this view, *High Noon* injects the Western with a social critique of contemporary orientation and *Shane* self-consciously strives for the mythic.

Other directors were content to work within the conventions of the genre. Anthony Mann and Budd Boetticher were two such directors. They each made highly regarded Westerns in the '50s that are filled with reverence for the land and the decisions that men must make. Working with Jimmy Stewart and later Gary Cooper, Mann created a magnificent view of the West, tempered by the bitterness of his leading characters, in movies such as *Bend of the River*, *The Naked Spur*, *The Man From Laramie*, and *Man of the West*. Bazin said "Each of Mann's films reveals a touching frankness of attitude toward the Western, an effortless sincerity to get inside its themes and there bring to life appealing characters and to invent captivating situations." Bazin lauded Mann for "that feeling of the open air, which in his films seems to be the very soul of the Western" (Bazin, pg. 156). The same could be said of Boetticher's films (made in collaboration with producer Harry Joe Brown and writer Burt Kennedy), where Randolph Scott played a hero obsessed with revenge. This brilliant series of Westerns began with *Seven Men From Now* in 1956 and concluded with *Comanche Station* in 1960.

John Ford started the '50s with the optimistic and lyrical *Wagon Master*, but by the latter half of the decade a tone of desperation, anguish, and bitterness began to seep into his films. Whereas *Wagon Master* had endorsed civilization's encroachment upon the wilderness, *The Searchers* cast a questioning gaze upon the men we call heroes and the place that society reserves for them. Before *The Searchers*, Ford had never questioned the rituals of society, as he allows Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) to do in this film. While a funeral is in progress, Ethan mutters "Put an Amen on it" so that he can begin searching for his brother's kidnapped daughter. The land itself--the towering buttes and the scorched terrain of Monument Valley--echoes the absurdity of Ethan's never-ending quest. Occasionally his rage explodes, as when he madly slaughters buffalo. "They won't feed any Comanche this winter." As the film's justly famous final shot shows, Ethan will forever remain apart from society, forever to search.

Howard Hawks created *Rio Bravo* as a reaction against *High Noon*. He didn't believe a self-respecting sheriff would go running around town asking for help. Instead, John T. Chance (John Wayne) actually refuses help from townsfolk. With only a small group of men to help him, Sheriff Chance must remain holed up in the jail, waiting for the marshall to arrive and pick up the prisoner, while the prisoner's friends wait in the bar down the street.

As the '50s wore on, Westerns continued to twist and bend the genre and, in the process, challenged our conceptions of heroes and myths. As a result, they also shook the audience's faith in Hollywood to provide the simple yarns it was accustomed to receiving. "Once the man with the gun was given a psychological dimension and confronted with problems that couldn't be solved by the speed of his draw, the simple appeal of the Western was in doubt" (Hardy, xiv). For a country with a long standing love affair with guns, doubting the efficacy of firearms to bring us civilization meant the world was much too complicated a place for the Western heroes.

William Wyler's *The Big Country* plays to these concerns. Gregory Peck plays a representative of modern society who enters the West to make it respectable, to change its laws of honor. He is in opposition to a world that judges bravery by the willingness to fight--"He called you a liar." When the time finally comes for punches to be thrown, the camera pulls back, showing the fighters on a wide plain and emphasizing the futility of their action. The men get tired during the fight--rather quickly at that--scrambling in the dirt. "What did we prove, huh?"
To round out this era of the Western, John Ford gave us an introspective tale about the nature of Western myths, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and Sam Peckinpah gave us an elegiac tale of the passing of the Old West, *Ride the High Country*. Ford's film suggests we used men like Tom Doniphan (John Wayne) to tame the West, but we didn't give them a place after civilization was established. Like Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, Tom Doniphan never finds place in society. He never marries and he dies alone. And Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* shows the gap between the Old West (gloriously embodied by Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott) and the New West (which is filled with horseless carriages and white trash miners).

**The Western Loses Its Way**

In the '60s, the studios forgot about the lessons of Mann and Boetticher as size and scale ruled the day. The results provided us with all-star extravaganzas such as *The Alamo*, *How the West Was Won*, and *The Magnificent Seven*, where scale was measured in gargantuan terms.

With both stars and directors aging, the Western as a vital American genre, began to wither. After *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ford would direct only one more Western, *Cheyenne Autumn* in 1964. Hawks only seemed interested in turning out variations of the *Rio Bravo* story in *El Dorado* (1967) and *Rio Lobo* (1970). Delmer Daves (who had directed several fine Westerns, such as *Broken Arrow* and *Jubal*) opted for big screen soap operas. Boetticher left for Mexico. Mann left the Western for historical epics. With few new Western stars rising and Wayne, Fonda, and Stewart showing their years, the Western lacked vital new blood. At the same time, the modern-day Western appeared in ever increasing numbers, suggesting with staggering frankness (in *The Misfits* and *Lonely Are the Brave*) that the times had caught up with the American cowboy. With the number of Westerns released plunging as low as 11 in 1963 (compared to 90 in 1953), the Hollywood Western looked vulnerable.

The decisive new development took place not in the U.S. but in Italy, where Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood created the legendary man-with-no-name in a series of stylized Westerns—*A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Set in god-forsaken, dry-as-dirt Mexican villages, Leone's films bulge at the seams with unwashed, unshaven outlaws who swagger like Hercules while silently assessing every wallet in town. Eastwood turned his man-with-no-name character into a laconic angel of death. Twisting his shawl to reveal his holster and sucking on a blackened cheroot, he squinted from under his hat's black rim while Ennio Morricone's music cracked like a whip.

Toying with the conventions of the Western like a cat playing with a mouse, Leone stretched time to the absurdist degree. The opening sequence of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, nearly 15 minutes long, shows nothing more than three gunfighters waiting on a train, but it's one of the great sequences in the history of the Western.

Using the American Westerns *Vera Cruz* (Robert Aldrich's tale of greed and one-up-manship), *40 Guns* (Samuel Fuller's drama of stylistic hysterics, with Barbara Stanwyck leading an army of gunfighters), and *The Magnificent Seven* (which itself was a remake of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*) as a beginning point, the Europeans treated the Western's conventions with an absurdist exaggeration, in which the Western's traditional idealism was replaced by cynicism and materialism and near super human abilities. The Italian Westerns feature violence taken to parodic extremes. Later movies such as *My Name is Nobody* pushed even further, where Henry Fonda singlehandedly wipes out an entire army.

The only American filmmakers of this time competing with the Europeans were Monte Hellman and Sam Peckinpah. Hellman (collaborating with Jack Nicholson) produced two great existential Westerns, *The Shooting* and *Ride in the Whirlwind*. Peckinpah gave us *Major Dundee*, *The Wild Bunch*, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* remains the classic
American Western of the late '60s. Alternately reviled and praised for its blood splattered, slow-motion scenes of extreme violence, The Wild Bunch grabbed the attention of critics and audiences alike.

"I wanted to show what the hell it feels like to get shot," said Sam Peckinpah. The heroes of The Wild Bunch are aging outlaws who refuse to change, even if change means survival. The movie's slow-motion violence is undeniably brutal, but it allows the movie's over-the-hill heroes to end their lives with one final blast of glory. And thanks to the magisterial wide-screen images of cinematographer Lucien Ballard the film becomes a beautiful elegy for the Western itself.

Some good Westerns would still be made after The Wild Bunch, but much of the old spirit was gone. And the new Westerns, either opting for mud-and-rags realism or parodic excess, failed to find audiences—with one notable exception, the films of Clint Eastwood.

After his Spaghetti Westerns, Eastwood contributed two additional movies in the man-with-no-name mold, Hang 'em High and High Plains Drifter. These Westerns provided a particularly vicious brand of violence, as if to apologize for being Westerns. These films were box-office hits, but the strongest indication of the future came in Coogan's Bluff, where Clint Eastwood's Arizona deputy must go to New York to bring back an escaped killer. Transposing the man-with-no-name to modern times and giving him a respectable vocation, the stage was set for Eastwood to become Dirty Harry. After High Plains Drifter, Eastwood appeared in only two Westerns in the next twenty years.

As the '70s wore on, a group of revisionist Westerns appeared that stripped away the myths to reveal the muddy realities of life on the frontier, including Culpepper Cattle Co., Great Northfield Minnesota Raid, and The Long Riders. With these mud-and-rags Westerns, the genre's characteristic optimism turned into despair.

Everywhere, the theme of the death of the West took hold. Movies such as Tom Horn and The Shootist (John Wayne's final movie) played out the death of the gunfighter. Monte Walsh examines what happened to cowboys when their skills were superseded by technology: some drifted into crime; Monte Walsh himself (Lee Marvin) is offered a job as a circus performer. Turning the offer down, he comments: "I'm not gonna spit on my whole life." With The Ballad of Cable Hogue the hero dies beneath the wheels of an automobile, further symbolizing the death of the West.

But the death of the West wasn't simply figurative, for the filmmakers and stars were dying. Leaving us in the '70s were John Ford, Howard Hawks, Henry Hathaway, Henry King, Jacques Tourneur, Raoul Walsh, Delmer Daves, and King Vidor. John Wayne died in 1979 and with him a large part of America's faith in the Western. Without the participation of these old masters who really knew the West, the new movies become second hand stories, homages with little life or vitality of their own. And after Heaven's Gate (the most expensive movie of its time) failed miserably at the box office, Hollywood declared the Western to be box-office poison.

The Western Survives

The Western limped through the '80s with few hopes for recovery. Silverado (1985) attempted to pump up the old clichés and stock situations with rapid-fire editing, larger-than-life images, and a tongue-in-cheek attitude, but for all its verve, the movie wasn't genuine. Its well-rehearsed crescendos carried the aura of movie brats gussying up an old form. Audiences largely stayed away. Even Clint Eastwood's Pale Rider disappointed with its cloning of Shane. Young Guns strived to create a teenage audience for the Western by giving us Brat Pack alumni in Western garb. While modestly successful at the box office, Young Guns pointed down a dead end path.
As it struggled into the '90s, the Western finally discovered salvation in the form of Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves*. It packed in audiences and carted away the Academy Award for Best Picture. And soon afterwards, the TV mini-series *Lonesome Dove* (based on Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel) attracted a huge following. Eastwood's *Unforgiven* followed in 1992. It's a magnificent meditation on the Old West, filled with bitter ironies and brutal violence meted out by lawmen and outlaws alike. *Unforgiven* took home the Best Picture Academy Award in 1992.

A variety of Westerns then soon appeared, from *The Quick and the Dead*, an inspired but hyperactive fusion of horror movie sensibilities and Spaghetti Western situations, to *Posse*, a black Western with a rap soundtrack. The legendary Gunfight at the OK Corral provided the material for two movies, Lawrence Kasdan's ambitious but stodgy *Wyatt Earp* and George Cosmatos's intermittently dazzling *Tombstone*.

Even with the minor resurgence of the Western in the '90s, the Western exists in limbo. It still has the power to fan the sparks of imagination, but our distance from the West has weakened its authority. While the West once represented a simpler time in America's history, we now see that the power of the gun (as shown in *Unforgiven* and *Tombstone*) could make lawmen just as dangerous as the outlaws. And although justice may have been swift; it was not necessarily fair and at times it was absolutely deadly. As the myths and heroes of the American West fade away, the Western becomes just another genre, a genre that becomes more remote with each passing year.

*SOURCE*: http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue06/infocus/western.htm