2014 Vol 14 Issue No. 1 — The Other Western

> EDITORIAL

For much of its history as a film genre, the Western has been most closely associated with America and with Hollywood cinema. As one of the first film genres to emerge in Hollywood's silent era, the Western operated as a key environment for the development of cinematic techniques, film style, characterization and mise-en-scène. Its setting in the American West has likewise funded the development of the genre. As Jim Kitses notes, "American frontier life provides the milieu and *mores* of the western, its wild bunch of cowboys, its straggling towns and mountain scenery" (8). But the American context has provided more than just a geographical setting for the Western; it provides a historical frame for the Western – the period leading up to and beyond the civil war (1861-65) to the "closing" of the frontier roughly around 1890 – and in turn this historical frame, with its wagon trains west, cattle-drives and completion of the trans-continental railroad, inflects the Western with cultural, economic and ideological purpose.

The three main phases of the American Western – the early silent Western with its stark characterizations of good and evil, the classical Western with its magnificent scenery and more nuanced explorations of character, and the revisionist Western with its counter-culture politics and contrition towards colonial violence – give us a kind of "dramatic arc" via which we can view the development of the *use* the Western has been put to in the U.S. That is, what develops and changes over these phases is the political and ideological function of the Western; in the early Westerns and in many classical Westerns the genre was used as a mechanism of national identity and mythography, a means of seemingly justifying the territorial expansion and subjugation of Indigenous peoples that characterized America's colonial period. In the revisionist phase, however, it is precisely this justification of colonial violence which is questioned, and the Western becomes a means through which to re-assess American history, and even to allegorise contemporary issues, to do with the Cold War or American foreign policy for example (see Corkin).

In this sense, the Western can be understood as a kind of *medium*, a vehicle which may be co-opted for a range of different purposes. Jim Kitses argues that the Western genre has operated as a structural set of possibilities for thematic development: "the model we must hold before us is of a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous

world of historical material shot through with archetypal elements which are themselves ever in flux" (19).

It is this fertility of the Western, its thematic openness and recombinative structure, that has allowed it to break free of its purely American context. Thus Christopher Frayling writes that "after the 'rules' of the Italian Western genre had been established … a group of writers … managed to *use* the genre for overtly political purposes, manipulating audience expectations while putting over their ideas about American interventionism, particularly the role of the CIA in Latin America" (62). Further, the Italian Western is generally understood to have developed on the back of the highly successful West German Westerns, first produced by production company Constantin and director Harald Reinl in the early 1960s (Frayling 103).

These films, based on Karl May's *Winnetou* novels from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were romanticized fantasies of Western life and reflected the German "hobbyist" movement's obsession with all things "Indianer." Commentators on the hobbyist movement, the West German *Winnetou* films and their East German DEFA *Indianerfilme* counterparts, have read this culture as an historical substitution, where "der Indianer" operates as a fantasized projection of a lost German *tribal* identity that has been obscured by the 20th century's more problematic relation to the notion of "the folk" (Lutz 172-3; see also Gemünden).

Approached in this fashion, the Western can be seen as a cultural "space" which may take the American West as an iconographic and thematic referent but which applies these iconographies and themes to a vast range of purposes and contexts. Thus not only do we have East and West German Westerns from the 1960s and '70s (the "Sauerkraut Westerns"), and Italian and Spanish "Spaghetti" Westerns, but we can also observe:

- Polish Westerns (e.g *Lemonade Joe*, 1964, dir. Oldrich Lipský; *Dead Man's Bounty*, 2006, dir. Piotr Uklanski), and a distinctly Polish contribution to film poster design (see Mulroy).
- The French *Lucky Luke* comic series, which in turn has spawned numerous films and television series – see Pellegrin, this issue.
- Australian Westerns; a long tradition of bushranger films, plus contemporary revisionist Westerns – see Cooke, this issue.
- The Western genre employed throughout Asia – for example as postmodern Japanese Westerns (*Sukiyaki Western Django*, 2007, dir. Takashi Miike) or as melodramatic Thai Westerns (*Tears of the Black Tiger*, 2000, dir. Wisit Sasanatieng).

- The incorporation of Western iconographies and themes into African cinema as a critique of globalization (e.g. *Bamako*, 2006, dir. Abderrahmane Sissako; *Hyenas*, 1992, dir. Djibril Diop Mambety).
- The subversion of Western iconographies and racial representations by First Nations artists, such as the work of Canada's Stephen Foster and Kent Monkman (and his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testicle).
- Indian Westerns which re-purpose the Spaghetti Western (e.g. *Sholay*, 1975, dir. Ramesh Sippy) – see Mukherjee, this issue.

It is thus this global and contemporary Western that this issue of *Transformations* is designed to explore – through both analyses of the international spread and re-use of the Western, and also through contemporary re-readings of classic Westerns, which look again at the thematic and cinematographic innovations that underpinned the development of the Western during its most prolific period.

The issue begins with Chelsea Wessels' discussion of transnationality and translation in relation to two films that relate to but depart from the Spaghetti Western tradition: Mario Camus' 1970 *La Collera del Vento* (aka *Revenge of Trinity*) and Álex de la Iglesia's 2002 film *800 Bullets*. Wessels argues that, in different ways, both of these films take up the legacy of the Spaghetti Western but do so in response to quite different national contexts and issues; in *Revenge of Trinity*, the film co-opts the "Trinity" series of Spaghetti Westerns in order to depict a peasant uprising in Andalusia; in *800 Bullets*, the Spanish contribution to what is frequently thought of as an Italian genre is foregrounded through setting the film in a Spanish "Wild West" film set that now operates as a tourist location. Wessels uses the notion of translation to show how the Western as an economic and cultural entity crosses national borders and circulates as a transnational entity.

The Spaghetti Western tradition is again invoked in Madhuja Mukherjee's discussion of Ramesh Sippy's 1975 epic *Sholay*, a film which in its visual aesthetics, soundtrack and gangster/revenge theme represents an explicit hybridization of the Spaghetti Western with the concerns of post-Independence India. Through an intricate visual and cultural analysis of the film and its contexts of production, Mukherjee demonstrates how Sholay must be understood as a transcultural phenomenon that transcends its appropriation of Western codes in order to speak directly to the complex dynamics of India's political situation, in the 1970s, as a post-colonial nation.

Grayson Cooke's article, "Whither the Australian Western? Performing Genre and the Archive in *Outback and Beyond*," looks at the instantiation of the Western within the Australian context. Beginning with an exploration of the early Bushranger films, which are often

understood as a uniquely Australian form of the Western which developed simultaneously with the Hollywood Western during the silent era, the paper examines the relative failure of Australian cinema to develop the Bushranger genre into a large-scale *tradition* of the Western. This examination is conducted in order to set the scene for an analysis of a live performance project, *Outback and Beyond*, produced by Cooke and sound-artist Mike Cooper. This project seeks to produce a "live Australian Western" out of archival footage of the Australian outback from the National Film and Sound Archive. Cooke discusses the project as an attempt to translate the iconography of the Western into an Australian context, and in so doing re-shape the historical consciousness and national identities that arise from archival records.

Still within the Pacific, Sarina Pearson examines the fascinating story of Samoan writer John Kneubuhl, and his contribution as a writer for the 1960s sci-fi/Western TV series *The Wild, Wild West*. Kneubuhl was responsible for conceiving of one of the series' villains, Miguelito Loveless, whom Pearson describes as "three feet ten inches of postcolonial malevolence." In this paper, Pearson examines the Miguelito Loveless character within the context of Kneubuhl's cross-cultural upbringing in Samoa as the child of Samoan and American-German parents, and the popularity of Hollywood Westerns in the 1950s Pacific. She argues that Loveless operates as a kind of postcolonial revenge fantasy, a vehicle for Kneubuhl to address both his own status as a doubly displaced *'afakasi* at the heart of the American media machine, and the colonial and imperial powers that structured the experience of life in the Pacific in the middle of the 20th century.

All of the previous papers explore, in different ways, how the Western interacts with national identities – at stake is the question of the *power* that arises from loading up a genre with the capacity to relate to the complex question of national identity. But individual power, and thus individual violence, is also a key aspect of the Western, and it this question of the violence of the individual – the power to kill – that Annick Pellegrin addresses in her paper on the French comic book series *Lucky Luke*. In this paper, Pellegrin explores the origins of the injunction placed on Lucky Luke's character that he can never be seen to kill. The plot of James Huth's 2009 film adaptation of *Lucky Luke* revolves around Lucky Luke's inability to kill, and explains it by reference to a vow Luke made upon the murder of his parents when a child. However, Pellegrin sources a quite different root for this injunction; the 1949 passing of a law preventing publications for children depicting any criminal acts that "could demoralise children or young people." Interestingly, as Pellegrin argues, this law was less about public morality and more about market protectionism, and was intended to stem the flow of violent American comics into the French market. Hence the underlying irony of this transnational phenomenon: a non-violent *French* Western that stems from the authors' love of *American*

Westerns, operates according to the dictates of a law against the violence of American entertainment.

The question of violence in the Western is again raised in Pete Falconer's article "The night-time town as an alternative space in the Western genre," which examines the function of violence in the Western in terms of night-time settings. Through an analysis of scenes in Hollywood Westerns including *Duel in the Sun*, *Pursued*, *Rio Bravo*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Falconer argues that a focus on night-time settings throws a different light on the function of violence in both classical and revisionist Westerns between the end of the Second World war and the early 1960s. Falconer's main argument is that the night-time town presents a different space from the day time town; a space "in which different values and assumptions obtain, where conventions of the day time world are corrupted or reflected more pessimistically." Gun fights in the night-time town do not take place according to the conventions of the duel, but involve deception, secretiveness and the breaching of the westerner's code of honour. Interestingly Falconer notes that in the night-time shoot out, the hero is passive rather than active and that "his advantage comes more from his surroundings than from himself." Indeed, in the night time shoot-out, a certain equality of chance prevails as each of the protagonists is reduced by the shadowy surroundings and by the suspension of the code of honour to opportunistic tactics in a ruthless fight to the death. In this case the hero becomes a much more "morally ambiguous character" than he is usually understood to be in the day time Western.

Helen Miller and Warwick Mules's article "Anthony Mann's Film Westerns: Mise-en-scène and the Total Image in *Bend of the River*" presents a detailed reading of one of Anthony Mann's key Westerns in terms of a mise-en-scène in which the action is configured directly into the landscape. Drawing on Jeanine Bassinger's concept of the total image, Miller and Mules argue that Mann's innovative deployment of mise-en-scène constitutes a modernist turn in the development of the Western. Unlike the classical Western, which presents a theatrical mise-en-scène where the action takes place as if on a stage, Mann's Westerns present the action as part of the unfolding of the film itself as a dynamic material becoming. The struggle of the characters is "a struggle with the resistive landscape as much as it is between men." Through extensive figural analysis of specific scenes, Miller and Mules "draw out the way mise-en-scène produces the meaning of the film through a dynamic interrelation of human and non-human things. This production is mythic in the sense that the quest for a New World is actively realised in the film's images through the landscape as an "event" of the film itself."

David Baker and Danielle Zuvela argue that the dominant critical modality for considering the feminine in Westerns has been in terms of a basic conceptual distinction between East and West/Civilisation and Nature (derived from the seminal work of Henry Nash Smith), with the

feminine tending to be placed squarely on the side of the East/Civilisation, resulting in a certain inflexibility in terms of analyses of gender in the Western genre. In order to develop a revision of these basic assumptions, the authors draw upon the work of Jane Tompkins in exploring the notion of female acquiescence and Joanna Hearne in exploring the notion of female circulation in the genre. Baker and Zuvela consider the relationship between female acquiescence and circulation in several early Anthony Mann Westerns in order to develop a mode of analysis which can overcome some of the inflexibility associated with earlier approaches, suggesting that although the feminine routinely crosses clearly and routinely demarcated boundaries, this 'transgressivity' in the Western film does not necessarily involve unsettling or deconstructing of boundaries.

Finally, Birgitta Frello develops an analysis of John Ford's seminal film *The Searchers* (1956) which focusses upon the often noted ambivalence of the main character Ethan Edwards (John Wayne). Frello suggests that although ambivalent, the point of view of the film remains fundamentally "white" because it at no point seriously questions the fundamental hierarchy between White and Indian. Using an analytics of hybridity, Frello explores the different forms of *blending* in the film, both legitimate and illegitimate, and in order to consider both the ways in which essentialised categories are destabilised and displaced as well as the ways in which blending determines the distribution of agency in the film. Frello warns, however, that transgressing the racial divide does not carry any specific meaning in itself, and any particular hybrid position being read as powerful, critical or vulnerable depends entirely upon its meaning in a given context.

Editorial: Grayson Cooke, Warwick Mules and David Baker

Works Cited

Corkin, Stanley. *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004.

Frayling, Christopher. *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Gemunden, Gerd. "Between Karl May and Karl Marx: the DEFA *Indianerfilme*." *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Projections, Encounters*. Eds. Collin G. Galloway, Gerd Gemünden & Susanne Zantrop. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 243-256.

Kitses, Jim. *Horizons West*. Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1969.

Lutz, Hartmut. "German Indianthusiasm: A Socially Constructed German National(ist) Myth." *Germans and Indians: Fantasies, Projections, Encounters*. Eds. Collin G. Galloway, Gerd

Gemünden & Susanne Zantrop. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 167-184.