How the West Was Won:

An Investigation of the Rise and Evolution of the Cowboy as an American Popular Culture Icon

Few things appear more American than the cowboy. Known the world over as an American icon, the cowboy has been transformed from a simple wage earner to an undeniable hero within American popular culture. Beginning almost immediately after the American Civil War, America’s love affair with the cowboy has lasted nearly one hundred and fifty years, suggesting that it will not fade away anytime soon. Yet, why was the cowboy chosen to be America’s symbol? Before one can understand why popular culture settled on the cowboy as its hero, one must determine how this adoration began and, more importantly, how it has changed over the last century and a half.

Shortly after the Civil War ended, private investors and cattle companies alike began to take advantage of the grassy plains that the dwindling number of bison had abandoned. These investors and companies “hired cowboys to tend and herd cattle on their ranges and drive them to railhead markets,” which frequently kept them away from their home ranches.¹ The freedom that resulted from the cowboys’ treks across the open country embodied many of the pillars of the American Dream. While he was obligated to complete his individual commitments, the cowboy could come and go as he pleased after each job. Relying solely on skill and experience, a young man could quickly advance through the ranks and become a successful cowboy, quite

unlike his contemporaries in more educated professions. Finally, although there was some hierarchical structure built into the cowboy lifestyle, there was relatively little compared to the industrial and business class professions of the time. Essentially, in relation to many of his peers, the cowboy appeared free and, if he was courageous and willing, highly able to succeed. After examining these details, it is no surprise that the genre that is now known as the Western quickly became “especially popular with male spectators, particularly boys,” that saw the cowboy as the epitome of freedom and masculinity.2

Or rather, that is what popular culture during the late nineteenth century decided the cowboy’s job entailed. In reality, “there was little in their jobs that reached heroic dimensions. Cowboys were hired hands who tended cattle, worked long hours, and received minimal pay.”3 Although this idea conflicts with the popular culture image of the American cowboy, life on the trail from Texas north was rather dull. For instance, the cowboy, typically seen as a gunslinger, generally carried a gun “to kill snakes and other ‘varmints’ [sic] as well as to celebrate the end of trail drives.”4 From the beginning, the 1865-1890 era cowboy has been romanticized and many of these details fell by the wayside, yet it is quite important to notice what the American public was willing to disregard in order to maintain this image.

While many argue that the romance associated with the cowboy comes from the lifestyle on the open range, others believe that the cowboy’s mystique is derived from an ability to act as a vigilante. Americans “firmly believe in the rule of the law,” yet acknowledge that this sometimes hinders the ability to do what is right and virtuous.5 The popular culture cowboy, however, is able to act outside the law and do whatever it takes in order to restore and maintain

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order. Commonly, he “defies the authority of human law to act in accord with a higher moral law.” The cowboy will commit the ultimate sin of murder in order to save a damsel in distress or, perhaps, even a whole town, which is something that few other professions during the nineteenth century would have allowed an individual to do, even if only fictitiously.

Whether the draw came from the pursuit of the American Dream or the longing for vigilante justice, popular culture took the cowboy as an icon and ran with it. By 1883, Buffalo Bill Cody had established The Wild West, “a circuslike combination of pageantry and parades, feats of skill and daring, and ‘authentic’ reenactments of frontier events,’ which created a cowboy that “his audience could envy and emulate and hold in their imaginations.” Creating one of the first commercialized views of the cowboy, William Cody succeeded in his goal of “crafting an image of the cowboy as a good, decent fellow, but it was Erastus Beadle, the successful publisher of mass-circulation ‘dime novels,’ who made the cowboy’s life exciting enough to sustain the public’s attention.”8 Although Cody himself had been serialized in hundreds of pulp stories, it was his main attraction, William Levi “Buck” Taylor, who ultimately gained unprecedented success. Not surprising, however, the ropes and cows that gave Taylor his initial stardom with Cody

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6 Ibid.
altogether disappeared from his stories and were replaced with revolvers and desperadoes; he had been reimagined as “a mounted fighter.”

These Western pulp stories even continued to flourish through the Great Depression. “Most of them cost only ten cents and were cheap entertainment. [True] cowboys tended to pass them around until the pages were torn apart.” As one might expect, these “penny dreadfuls” were the turn of the century equivalent to the modern action thriller and “were rapidly and poorly written.” It was not until 1902, when Owen Wister published *The Virginian*, that the genre gained an ounce of credibility. Although he was as strong and deadly as his predecessors, the Virginian, Wister’s protagonist, “was often silent and essentially mysterious.” By creating the prototypical cowboy, Wister forged “a model for the thousands of fictional cowboys” that followed the Virginian. Wister cleared the way for a number of writers, such as Andy Adams, who ventured outside of the now traditional mold of the stoic cowboy by focusing on emotion and reality. These writers, however, were quickly overshadowed.

Their “popularity was usurped by a succession of huge-hatted, handsome cowboys,” all of whom appeared on film. Although Thomas Edison was the first when he released “The Great Train Robbery” in 1903, a plethora of others soon began releasing Western films. “Prior to 1907, no such genre existed,” making it ambiguous as to what should have been classified under this genre previously. By 1909, however, “American manufacturers had turned it into the nation’s leading film type,” creating a dramatic increase in the demand of Western films

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9 Ibid.
11 Ibid, 244.
12 Martin, 34.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid, 35.
15 Smith, 21.
produced and an escalation in the popularity of their stars.\textsuperscript{16} As the 1910s moved on, the early motion picture companies lost their prominence as the “independent motion-picture companies [were] more willing to invest in longer and more expensive films.”\textsuperscript{17} With the ever growing number of production companies, it became seemingly apparent that the number of “Cowboy and Indian” movies and “Shoot ‘em Ups” that could be produced was innumerable, ostensibly giving birth to the penny dreadful’s film cousin, the B-Western.

The B-Western evolved out of the public’s need to see new western films. Starring Buck Jones, Harry Carey, Ken Maynard, Hoot Gibson, Bob Steele, or one of the many other western heroes of the time interchangeably, “the difference [between films] would be mainly a difference of style: more or less stunt riding, more or less flamboyance in dress and equipment, more or less tolerance of drinking and gambling, more or less humor.”\textsuperscript{18} The difference certainly did not lie within the plot. In every film, there was always “a hero, a heroine, and a villain, all following their customary patterns of behavior.”\textsuperscript{19}

When sound was introduced into these films, a new generation of stars followed, yet innovation did not. William Boyd (Hopalong Cassidy), Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers appeared at this time, making the western hero appear even more wholesome. These new heroes never drank, smoked, or gambled, seldom used the six-shooters they carried nearly everywhere, rarely kissed their love interests, and generally managed to work in some original “cowboy songs”, which were

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 39.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 63.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 137.
ready for sale.20 During this period, Westerns became so commonplace and predictable that seven template scripts, with as few as three steps, were released and widely used to create B-Western plots.21

Although these Westerns were prepackaged like they never had been before, the 1930s signified the first great shift in the Western genre, as it truly began to reflect the society for the first time. Hollywood began to produce gangster films and sexually suggestive comedies en masse during this period, and many religious groups threatened to boycott cinemas as a whole if these films were not cleaned up.22 In response, Hollywood’s producers set up a bureau that was intended to review scripts and films before they were released, regulating “nudity, profanity, white slavery, miscegenation, ‘excessive and lustful kissing,’ and ‘scenes of passion’ that ‘stimulate the lower and baser element.’ It also forbade Hollywood from glorifying crime or adultery.”23 While this caused some genres, like the growing gangster film, to all but disappear for decades, the Western became stronger and gained more support as it continued to take a strong, moralized approach to creating films. While firmer morals may have already been the direction that it was heading, modeling the Western after popular culture’s social consciousness in the 1930s set a precedent that the genre has followed since.

Continuing to adapt to America’s changing values, B-Westerns had a whole new goal by the end of the 1930s. With World War II beginning to rage across Europe, the American government was doing its best to maintain its pacifistic isolationism and stay out of the war and, as a result, most B-Westerns did their best to push those goals onto the general public. Heroes, like Ken Maynard, generally “fought to maintain neutrality laws by preventing important war-

20 Ibid.
21 Ibid, 139-142.
23 Ibid.
related materials from being smuggled out of the country." 24 Just as the country was split between isolationism and entering the war, so was the B-Western. Another set of actors, Gene Autry being the most famous, aimed at protecting the United States by urging "military preparedness." 25 Although these Westerns did not directly compete against each other, except in the box office, these two vastly different frames of mind, portrayed in something as simple as the 1930s B-Western, go a long way in showing how truly divided the country was over entering the war.

Once America did enter the war, "the majority of B-Westerns ignored war themes and offered audiences escapist entertainment that featured traditional cowboy heroes fighting recognizable villains in an Old West setting." 26 In general, the producers of these films did their best to create an escape for the American people and generally strayed from war-like topics, yet there were instances when they found it appropriate to deviate from this principle. Some films "contained only casual references," like the displaying of signs promoting War Bonds, even though the films were generally set on the Frontier, and others used "Hitler-like villains [who] exercised dictatorial control over Frontier towns." 27 Typically these B-Westerns aimed at entertainment and little else.

Only ever reaching about a dozen, there was a strain of wartime B-Westerns that did incorporate plots revolving around the war. These Westerns did not feature combat, instead their heroes "sought out saboteurs, encouraged women to get involved in the war effort, worried about war production, and modeled rationing practices." 28 Most definitely American propaganda at its

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 199.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
finest, these films were intended to inspire patriotism and deliver very basic wartime information to "young adolescents, particularly young males." Differing little from their predecessors, these B-Westerns showed the public's unease during World War II and its need for heroes and patriots, abroad and at home.

While the B-Western covered the silver screen during the 1940s, the western genre began to take hold in the world of the radio as well. By 1940, Gene Autry had his own radio show, Melody Ranch. Similarly, Roy Rogers had The Roy Rogers Show by 1944 and William Boyd began the radio version of Hopalong Cassidy in 1950. While these radio broadcasts varied between musical variety shows and dramatic western adventure series, they still portrayed the wholesome values that had become associated with the "sing-along" Westerns of the 1930s. This continuing moralization can be seen through the creation of Gene Autry's "Cowboy Code," which gave his listeners ten simple instructions on how to obey their parents, respect the law, and tolerate all types of people under the disguise of being a necessity for a cowboy. Although these radio broadcasts created another vehicle for the cowboy to be seen, revered, and emulated by the public, especially young boys, the content of the radio show did not differ much from

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29 Ibid.
31 Raymond E. White, King of the Cowboys, Queen of the West (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 26.
the B-Westerns of the 1930s.

Similar in content, the main difference between the “sing-along” films and the radio broadcast came with serialization. In the case of Roy Rogers, for instance, his theme song, “Happy Trails,” is immediately recognizable, even today. In turn, it became one of the most popular and recognizable portions of the show, leaving the audience with something familiar and fun at the end of each broadcast to encourage them to tune in next time. Another aspect that came with this serialization was advertising. Acting as one of the biggest opportunities to advertise to the children that listened to these Western radio broadcasts, brands like Quaker Oats, in the case of The Roy Rogers Show, offered special giveaways, where listeners could receive prizes like “Roy Rogers cowboy boots, watches, cameras, binoculars, record albums, coloring sets, and large four-color posters of Roy Rogers and Trigger” for simply sending a proof of purchase and a small fee to the sponsor. With similar themes and advertisements, other Western radio broadcasts followed suit, gaining a regular audience and remaining quite popular through the 1950s.

Following similar formulas, a number of the western-genre radio broadcast stars created television shows. Of the three stars discussed above, William Boyd was the first to make it onto the small screen, beginning his television career in 1948, preceding his jump into radio. Using his syndicated films as a launching pad, there was very little difference between Hopalong Cassidy’s films, television shows, and radio broadcasts. The Gene Autry Show began in 1950 and was shown in highly episodic thirty minute “films,” which differed from the continuing plot arcs of his radio show, yet each “show ha[d] Gene’s trademark mixture of action, comedy, and

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34 White, 36.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid, 37.
singing,” which made it a hit among children.38 Rogers and his wife, Dale Evans, followed the trend and started The Roy Rogers Show in 1951, which introduced them “to a new generation of fans and a marketing bonanza for their products.”39 This new medium provided a new surge in the fan base for the Western genre, as did the initial entrance into radio, even if it was composed mostly of children.

Considering only the endeavors made by Autry, Boyd, and Rogers into radio and television, little growth in the genre occurred between 1930 and 1955. The three kept their highly moralized characters and Autry and Rogers kept producing songs to accompany their lessons. A number of other shows, such as The Lone Ranger, followed similar moralized, action filled approaches, but continued to do little to advance the genre.40 It was ultimately the drama that helped the Western progress over radio and television. Gunsmoke, “often referred to as the medium’s first ‘adult Western,’” aired on the radio from 1952-1961 and on television from 1955-1975. Unlike any of the shows listed above, Gunsmoke “often concentrated on character relationships and tense psychological drama,” instead of the traditional “thundering herds of cattle, and massed charges by ‘Indians’ or the United States Cavalry.”41 Similarly, Bonanza, which aired on television only from 1959-1973, was aimed at reaching a broader audience, as its “action characteristics catered to a more traditional audience for Westerns, while dramatic issues and family values expanded the show’s popularity to a more general audience.”42 Although Gunsmoke and Bonanza, with their dramatic successors, managed to bring about a new side of

39 White, 86.
the Western on television, they, as Autry, Boyd, and Rogers had already done, were merely attempting to repeat the success that the Western had found in film.

Unlike radio and television, the postwar era brought about a resurgence in Westerns in terms of major motion pictures. “From 1947 to 1950 Westerns made up about 30 percent of the total output of major Hollywood studios,” making it the leading genre of the time. As a result of the postwar “gloom and ‘psychology’” that entered into cinema, however, three new elements, “sex, neuroses, and a racial conscious,” were brought into the mix. Although all three elements had existed at some level in Westerns previously, they had never been “integral parts of the simple and uncomplicated Western tradition,” yet “it was not long before they came together to produce an entirely new kind of Western.” Just as the social conditions of World War II caused all three of these elements to come into question in reality, the social consciousness of the postwar era could no longer believe in a world where they remained completely unchallenged in fiction, thus causing the Western to question them as well.

John Ford, rightfully regarded as the founding father of modern Westerns, was one of the first major directors to successfully incorporate some of these new elements, even if it was done only subtly. Throughout his career, “Ford directed some 160 films, including two-reelers, shorts and features, of which perhaps a third, approximately fifty-five, were Westerns.” Ford released his earliest work, *Straight Shooting* (1917), in the silent era, but he did not reach critically acclaimed success until his first sound Western, *Stagecoach* (1939), which featured a young John

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46 Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 27.
Wayne. His second postwar film, *Fort Apache* (1948), however, was the first film in which he managed to infuse the topics of sexuality, neuroses, and racial identity.

In *Fort Apache*, Ford changes the names and the setting, but aims to retell the allegorical “legend of Col. George Armstrong Custer,” who was “ambitious for fame and glory” in his military career, but was thwarted by American Indians he was trying to overpower.⁴⁷ Replacing the cowboy with the frontier military officer in this film, Ford is able to successfully paint a picture of a frontier society, where the character interaction is actually quite complex. Lt Col Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda) is full of ironies in this film. For instance, he admonishes a subordinate officer in the beginning of the film for not being familiar with Robert E. Lee’s paper on “the trap,” yet it was the Apache’s trap that “turns out to be the instrument of Thursday’s doom.”⁴⁸ Thursday’s arrogance and neurosis “is seen in virtually every situation the film,” and Ford uses them as elements of plot to add a layer of characterization to his lead role.⁴⁹

Starring opposite Fonda, however, is John Wayne, who plays the much more humble character of Capt Kirby York. While York is constantly ignored and dismissed by Thursday, he bends “the truth to enhance Thursday’s posthumous reputation to imply that what is crucial is the institution of the cavalry and not the success or failure of any individual officer” when questioned by the media after Thursday’s death.⁵⁰ While the overwhelming majority of

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⁴⁷ William T. Pilkington et al., *Western Movies* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 43.
⁴⁸ Ibid, 44.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Ibid, 45.
Westerns prior to *Fort Apache* place the success or failure of the film’s mission (e.g. saving the damsel, stopping the desperadoes, etc.) on either a single character or a small group. Up until this point, little consideration had been given to large groups, such as the cavalry, which played a major role in the real west, as films could appear more epic with a single protagonist. As it had generally been portrayed as an “undifferentiated collective *deus ex machina*” previous to *Fort Apache*, Ford wanted to use the cavalry “to show how life, both institutional and personal, was really lived on a frontier outpost.” While it was far from being one of the Revisionist Westerns that appear in the decades following this film, Ford certainly did manage to skew the typical Western to reflect a slightly more accurate picture of existence in the west.

Although Ford was able to portray western life with a bit more innovation and accuracy than his predecessors, and his own earlier works, the most original piece of this film is Ford’s “Indian.” Continuing to seek a more realistic view of the past, Ford depicts the Apaches as “human beings who have legitimate complaints against white society,” rather than “evil savages bent on thievery and killing.” By allowing Cochise, the Apache Chief, to be a fair and understanding man, Ford took on what André Bazin called “the beginning of [the] political rehabilitation of the Indian,” marking the beginning of another step of cinematic evolution. Subtly, John Ford managed to make a huge impact on the Western genre with *Fort Apache*. For the first time, a director sought reality over sensationalism and gave Indians a place in film as people rather savages, beginning a trend that would turn the genre upside down.

Alongside big-budgeted Westerns, such as *Fort Apache*, a plethora of B-Westerns were released during the 1940s. At the turn of the decade, however, the long standing B-Western came to a relative end. With the film industry having to battle the encroachments of the newly

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51 Ibid, 47.
52 Ibid, 48.
popular television, “...studios turned toward large-scale, wide-screen, star-studded products.”

The B-Western, which was “unable to withstand such formidable competition, found new life on television.” As stars like those listed previously, Autry, Boyd, and Rogers, found new life in television, the Western film grew and took on a more profound role as budgets became larger and audiences expected more.

Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon* (1952) did not disappoint. Choosing once again to represent the cowboy through another role present in frontier life, a sheriff this time, Zinnemann uses Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) to entrench the “...image of the noble yet violent cowboy in the public’s imagination.” Acting as the “archetypal lawman who, against all odds, defends the townspeople and the principle of virtue” against a gang of wrongdoers, Kane is able to save himself, his new bride, and the town he swore to protect from certain death and destruction. Unlike so many Westerns before, including major films and B-Westerns alike, Kane throws down his badge and abandons the town after he saves it.

Regarded as one the original anti-Westerns, the majority of *High Noon*’s significance lies underneath the surface. Carl Foreman, the film’s author, asserted several years after the film had run its course that it was “an investigation of fear as it affects the

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54 Ibid.
55 Martin, 284.
56 Ibid.
57 *High Noon*, directed by Fred Zinnemann (1952; Burbank, CA).
community rather than one individual."58 This seems only appropriate, due to the fact that while *High Noon* was being filmed, Foreman was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and eventually blacklisted in Hollywood. Before *High Noon*, the townspeople had always been a backdrop for the cowboy hero, but when they were brought to the forefront, "it was not a pretty sight."59 Fearing for their lives, the townspeople abandoned Kane for a variety of reasons that all equaled cowardice, allowing the obvious reflection of McCarthyism to shine through this film. As Kane and his wife are left alone to fight the film's antagonists, "they no longer commit themselves to society because they discover that their personal and social values (love, honor, courage, conviction, sincerity) exist outside the social group."60 Protesting the Red Scare through film, Kane ultimately shows that "strong individuals" did not need to negotiate with a society whose authority is "illegitimate," just as Foreman failed to submit to the prosecution that he was facing in reality.61

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s the traditional Western continued to evolve and bring in elements of reality and criticism that had not appeared in the genre before, shown in such films as *Shane* (1953), *Run of the Arrow* (1957), and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). During this period, however, a number of more conventional Westerns also appeared. The man responsible for many of these films, and their predecessors, was none other than John Wayne. Wayne, née Marion Morrison, "personifies Western heroism."62 His long career, which spanned from the 1920s to the 1970s, made his work look easy.63 Easy because it looked real, or at least possible, since Wayne aimed to look like what he called "a more normal kind of fella," one that

58 Pilkington, 54.
59 Ibid, 55.
61 Ibid.
62 McDonald, 109.
63 Ibid.
was a “rough, lusty, wild [guy] who can change into [a hero] for the cause of liberty.”64 While Wayne had a rough start to his career, unable to find work acting outside of B-Westerns during the Great Depression, he made nearly 100 major motion pictures between 1940 and his death in 1979.65 His success started “with John Ford and Stagecoach (1939),” continued in later films under the direction of Ford and Howard Hawks, and ended under his own production company, Batjac.66 As America’s “cowboy,” John Wayne was an integral part in the development of the Western, both as an actor and as a director.

Wayne’s biggest contribution to the Western, however, was his own image. His characters often “exude this vision of heroism.”67 Even during his early career, while he was stuck in B-Westerns, “Wayne attempted to give the ticket buyer his money’s worth by presenting the cowboy, or Westerner, with realism and virility.”68 Quickly dismissing the styles of his film industry peers, Wayne chose to wear more realistic cowboy garb, often sporting “dusty, even frayed, jeans and shirts, and kerchiefs” and finishing his look with “the more practical darker hat that real men wore,” instead of the white hat that was frequently required of the “good guy.”69 Wayne fought more realistically too, frequently using unfair tactics, since “real fighting is always done in anger and its goal is survival.”70 Wayne also

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64 Martin, 292.
65 McDonald, 116.
66 Ibid, 118-119.
67 Corkin, 28.
68 McDonald, 122.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
used weapons more practically, shooting from ambushes, avoiding shoot outs, using rifles and shotguns, and avoiding shooting altogether when possible by using cunning or grit.\footnote{Ibid.} If anyone can be credited for bringing the Western back towards reality after the glitz and glam of the 1930s took its toll on the genre, it is John Wayne. He may not have been overly concerned with enhancing the genre as an art form, but “the Duke” was concerned with portraying the west, and more importantly, westerners, accurately in his films.

While John Wayne was making his mark in America, the 1960s brought about the first foreign attempts at the Western. During this time, two branches of what would eventually become known as the Revisionist Western began to sprout abroad. In the Soviet Union, having no parallel, eastern filmmakers began to produce Western genre films that would debase the traditional elements of the Western. These films from the Soviet Bloc are frequently referred to as “Osterns.” On the western side of the Iron Curtain, however, Italo-Westerns, nicknamed “Spaghetti Westerns,” began to emerge too. Although these films were often produced in Spain, due to its likeness to the American west, they were largely produced by Italians. Just as Westerns had been popular in America for nearly sixty years, both of these sub-genres were received quite well by their respective audiences.

While the Osterns, or Red Westerns, did not make it out of the Soviet Union until after the fall of communism, giving them little lasting fame, a few Spaghetti Westerns became quite popular in Italy, Europe, and America, and remain so today. Dozens of Spaghetti Westerns were released before Sergio Leone's \textit{A Fist Full of Dollars} (1964), which was followed by hundreds of more attempts, but it was “Leone’s Westerns that achieved international success and decisively broke the hold of American film-maker on America’s oldest and most traditional of
Clint Eastwood's character in Leone's "The Man With No Name" trilogy "epitomized the new amoral outlaw who was more brutal than ever, but who fought only to protect his own interests—not to avenge previous wrongs nor to defend anyone else," yet somehow maintained the role of the film's hero, or rather anti-hero. "Eastwood's outlaw never smiled, seldom spoke, and remained stoically separate from those he encountered. His survival was his only heroism, his refusal to subservient to anyone else his only code." Essentially, Eastwood's character became the lesser of the evils in Leone's films, only helping others through coincidence.

"No Name" shattered many of the preconceived notions of the Western. The practicality that John Wayne created in his films, focusing mainly around dress and behavior, paled in comparison to the gritty realism that Eastwood portrayed in his early films. The "cowboy code" does not exist for No Name, as he treats women as sex objects, draws first in firefights, and almost entirely ignores children. Further differing from Wayne, Eastwood's No Name was rather unpatriotic, failing to fight for the American Dream, which mirrored America's feelings of distrust surrounding the Vietnam War. While much of Eastwood's initial film success lay in America's hesitant acceptance of Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, popular culture truly latched on to him.

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72 Kitses, 249.
73 Martin, 316.
74 Ibid.
75 McDonald, 187.
76 Ibid, 188.
for his ability to play a new, atypical anti-hero, who lived by the gun.

As the Spaghetti Western, and more specifically Leone, went on to have a few more successes and failures, they were without Eastwood. Returning to American film as an international star, Eastwood continued to play characters that resembled No Name, helping to expand the Revisionist Western in America. Focusing on the reality of the true American west, Eastwood, as an actor, director, and producer, aimed to portray how “life in frontier America was really lived.” Although it was far from Gene Autry’s Cowboy Code, the west “did indeed have a code,” but until law enforcement and the justice system were solidly expanded into the west, “a man was often his own law when it came to defending himself and his property.” Although the Western was declining in popularity during the 1970s and 1980s, when Eastwood began to take more control, his films, from The Outlaw Josie Wales (1976) to Unforgiven (1992), have always brought in an audience and continued to further the genre. In his last Western, Unforgiven, Eastwood not only presents a glimpse at how sexist the west was and how impotent the law enforcement could be, but also demystifies the Western genre completely, leaving the viewer with the “definitive message that killing can never be honorable no matter how brave” and heroic it appears. Having helped to drastically reimagine the Western, Eastwood paraded the faults of the Old West, focusing on sexism and violence, leaving little left for the audience to praise other than those that truly survived in this era.

Including Eastwood’s efforts, nearly every Western that has been released in the last two decades has been revisionist in some way. Kevin Costner’s Dances with Wolves (1990), for instance, focuses on the relationship between a Union military officer stationed on the Great Plains...

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77 Ibid, 190.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid, 191.
Plains and a tribe of Lakota Indians during the American Civil War. While the film portrays Lt Dunbar's (Kevin Costner) initial hesitance in trusting the tribe, it ultimately explores the complex society of the Lakota and how the two cultures could intermingle through Dunbar's and Stands With A Fist's (Mary McDonnell) love affair.\(^{81}\) Costner's film was not a traditional Western by any stretch, but it did portray a more accurate, although sensationalized in an anti-Western sort of way, look at how a single Union soldier may have survived on the Frontier.

Following *Dances with Wolves*, many recent Westerns, such as *The Missing* (2003) and *The Quick and the Dead* (1995), go a long way in forcing popular culture to look at gender and race issues in the Western with a new set of values, yet no recent film is more revisionist than the 2007 remake of *3:10 to Yuma*. Although the remake captures many of the same plot arcs as the 1957 film, it does so in a manner that destroys traditional Western myths at every turn. In the 2007 version, Dan Evans (Christian Bale) is forced to deliver outlaw Ben Wade (Russell Crowe) to the 3:10 train to Yuma Prison so that he can collect the reward in order to save his family's ranch. Trying to save his own skin and regain the respect of his sons, not help the greater good, Evans mounts up with the posse that the Pinkertons have created and heads towards the train.\(^{82}\)

Throughout the film, *3:10 to Yuma* attempts to shed traditional Western conventions by exposing the racial stereotypes that existed in the American west, such as portraying Mexicans as lawless banditos, Indians as territorial savages, and the Chinese as subservient laborers.\(^{83}\) Other facets of the Western were completely altered to destroy some of the Cowboy Code myths that exist about the west. Examples of this include Evans, the hero, and Wade, the villain, becoming friends, Evans completing his mission only to be shot, an entire town becoming lawless bounty hunters in order to collect the ransom that Wade's gang places on Evan's head, Wade killing his own gang.

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\(^{81}\) *Dances with Wolves*, directed by Kevin Costner (1990; Badlands National Park, SD).

\(^{82}\) *3:10 to Yuma*, directed by James Mangold (2007; Santa Fe, NM).

\(^{83}\) Ibid.
for murdering Evans, and Wade escaping from the train, which represents prison.\textsuperscript{84} Although emotionally hurt by the death of Evans, Wade, the villain, essentially escapes the movie’s plot unscathed, while the hero, Evans, loses his life, rewarded only with the fact that his wife and children would now have the means to support themselves. Aimed at portraying life as realistically as it could be rather than the pillars of a traditional Western, \textit{3:10 to Yuma} and its success, grossing over $53.5 million in its first month, shows that America no longer wants the traditional western.\textsuperscript{85}

Eastwood and Leone knew that people were ready for a more realistic Western as early as the 1960s. The trade off, however, is that the realism brings with it a hero, or anti-hero, that is “more violent than previous screen heroes.”\textsuperscript{86} While clear-cut heroes, such as Costner and Bale in their respective roles, still avoid violence, by the end of their mission, which generally coincides with the end of the film, there is always violence, usually in the form of self-defense, but violence nonetheless. Today, the Western film does not have room for the honorable code of Gene Autry, as cinematic heroes as a whole, for example heroes in \textit{The Dark Knight} (2008), \textit{Watchmen} (2009), \textit{Inglorious Basterds} (2009), and \textit{Star Trek} (2009), have taken a much darker, grittier path in general. While these new Westerns are darker, they are much more realistic and, with the major budgets that they operate under, are able to reach their goals of exposing and altering the perception of race, gender, class, etc. in the Western myth.

While the Western film has undergone a darkening that it may never be able to counteract, now that the genre has allowed its heroes to become villains, powerless, and/or failures on film, the traditional Western myth does still exist in other mediums. Where the dime novel left off, serious Western literature took over. Louis L’Amour wrote “about plain-speaking,
straight-shooting heroes of the old West” and did so in such a way that made America fall in love
with the cowboy all over again.87 Writing over eighty-five full-length novels during his career,
L’Amour helped to invigorate the genre using the style that
had originally made the dime novels so popular, yet with a
certain amount of realism that made his readers believe that the
stories were plausible.88 Although L’Amour died in 1988, his
works are still widely circulated and available in bookstores
online and across the country.89 While L’Amour achieved
great success in keeping the original pop culture cowboy alive,
he was not alone in his work, as other authors, such as Richard
Wheeler and Jack Schaeffer, achieved similar goals, though to a
lesser extent by all quantifiable means.

Television also managed to create another version of the
cowboy for popular culture. Much different than the gritty, realistic cowboy that appears in film
and the glamorous, heroic cowboys that literature presents, television shows the modern cowboy
as a blue-collar worker, but also a troublemaker. Beginning in the 1970s, with shows like The
Dukes of Hazzard, which aired from 1979-1985, the cowboy was super imposed over vigilantes
in all types of situations.90 Additionally, the cowboy music variety shows that stemmed out of
those made by Autry and Rogers in the 1950s lead to a symbiosis between the cowboy and what
would become country music. Although this has quite an impact on country music, on

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Blue Collar Comedy Tour and My Big Redneck Wedding air. This coalescence of the popular culture identity of the lower-middle class, the cowboy, and country music has created such a new, unique combination that it would be deserving of a study of its own.

Focusing simply on the cowboy’s influence in country music, however, it is astonishing how much the genre has changed over the last several decades. Although country music began with rockabilly influences, such as Elvis Presley, the western swing beat, epitomized by Jimmie Rivers, and the driving baseline of bluegrass, it quickly found its own sound. With performers, like Johnny Cash and June Carter leading the way, country music had little to do with the cowboy in its initial stages. By the late 1950s and into the 1960s, when musicians like Dolly Parton and Conway Twitty began to record their own #1 singles, country music had taken on a much more “twangy” sound and begun its relationship with the descendents of the cowboy variety shows. As it evolved through the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, the relationship between the cowboy and country music only became stronger. Today, the overwhelming majority of country music stars, especially the men, are often seen wearing cowboy hats and boot, even though they undoubtedly seldom step foot onto a ranch. This relationship is further shown through many of the recent country hits’ titles, such as Toby Keith’s “Should’ve Been a Cowboy” or Carrie Underwood’s “Cowboy Casanova.”

Toby Keith, courtesy esquire.com

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While the music is much more tailored to popular culture and focuses much less on the actual aspects of being a cowboy or having good morals, the contemporary country musician is, for all intents and purposes, the modern equivalent to the Gene Autry’s or Roy Roger’s singing cowboy. None of these stars, past or present, actually raise or herd cattle, at least not as their primary career, yet they all sing of the glory of the profession for marketing reasons.

Focusing on film, literature, television, or music, it is plain to see that the cowboy has infiltrated nearly every facet of popular culture. Although each medium has taken a different stance on how the cowboy should appear and be addressed, they all exalt him. Whether it is standing up for something, even if it is only for himself, as in film, acting as a pillar of virtue, as in literature, exercising vigilante justice, as seen on television, or even simply being sung about and glorified, as in country music, the cowboy continues to entertain and engage audiences through all mediums. Such adoration exists for the cowboy that he has been transposed into almost every genre. Examples, such as Police Inspector Harry Callahan in the Dirty Harry film series, Han Solo in the original Star Wars trilogy, and Captain James T. Kirk in the original Star Trek television series, exist across the board. In the world of sports, there is even the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys. Due to the overall success of the Western genre and the acceptance of the transposition of the cowboy into other genres, one can certainly make the claim that the cowboy is ubiquitous within American popular culture today.

UrbanDictionary.com, a website designed to record and convey the definitions of popular culture, has two primary definitions for “cowboy,” both of which truly show how the cowboy has evolved.\(^\text{94}\) The first focuses on the traditional depiction of the cowboy, especially on his evolution through film, defining him as “the ideal American figure because he comes packing

with two Colt .45 Revolvers, and a double barrel shotgun, plus a 1HP... Horse.\textsuperscript{95} The second definition seems to come from the evolution of the cowboy through country music, labeling the cowboy as a more civilized, refined character and defining him as "a cute farmer boy who knows how to treat a lady!"\textsuperscript{96} Either way a cowboy is defined, however, can be seen as true, since the cowboy has ultimately come to be defined by popular culture's perception of him.

Beginning as praise for an underappreciated occupation, one in which society could rest its hopes of the American Dream, and evolving alongside America's tastes and technology, popular culture's adoration of the cowboy has dramatically changed over the years. After examining how and why, however, it is easy to see why society chose the cowboy in the first place. Ultimately, the cowboy represents America. He is courageous when Americans are oppressed. He is patriotic when Americans support a war and critical when they do not. If he dies, he dies valiantly, but if he lives, he does so as a protector. Never truly having a base in reality, popular culture's cowboy was meant to be a hero. For nearly one hundred and fifty years, that is what he has been, but, more importantly, that is what he will continue to be as America and popular culture continue to grow and evolve.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
Bibliography

*3:10 to Yuma.* Directed by James Mangold. 2007; Santa Fe, NM.


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*High Noon.* Directed by Fred Zinneman. 1952; Burbank, CA.


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