

An Investigation into the Core Traits of the Western Genre

Colin Bergen

Introduction:

Overview

The Western Genre has been a part of film for almost as long as the medium has existed. Having been previously conceived as an American genre for literature and art, the Western was readily translatable into the new format and it arguably became Cinema's first recognizable genre (Prince 243-244). In fact, one of the early landmarks in the form, Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film, *The Great Train Robbery*, is recognized as a Western. Since then hundreds of films have been added to the genre, and with each iteration the Western genre evolves as new elements are introduced, evaluated, and reconciled with those that were previously a part of it. Theorists have been able to agree on a general set of elements characteristic to the western; however, as the genre has moved outside of American borders, a new dimension has been added to this discussion: differing cultural traditions. The Western has been regarded historically as "national" genre, exclusive to the American context, but ever since the Italian Western was recognized as part of the genre, this understanding has become complicated. These new westerns - the "Spaghetti Westerns" - contained elements familiar with the American concept, such as the desert setting, small town, and rugged clothing, but they also brought in pieces from Italian tradition, including "commedia dell'arte" (Landy 218). Other similar instances emerged, such as the "Manchurian Western", which drew upon a distinctly Korean context while borrowing familiar elements of the American Western. Naturally, this internationalization has prompted a key question about the overarching genre label: what traits, if any, unify these culturally diverse films under one label?

State of Research

As research stands now, there is a consensus as to the *presence* of commonalities, and theorists have attempted to outline definitive elements of the genre. One such theorist, Douglas Pye, asserts that the Western is defined by its adherence to myth, whether it be biblical or American folklore, and its emphasis on themes of conflict, such as that between the wilderness and civilization, garden and desert, the gun and the bible, etc. (Pye 242-244). These elements are said to inform the romantic narratives and iconography typically present in the genre. Theorists have also generally agreed that the Western is capable of being translated into differing sets of cultural contexts and traditions. Hye Seung Chung demonstrated one instance with the Korean Western, as both it and its American counterpart are centralized on turbulent, multicultural zones of transition which are doomed to be overtaken by civilization (71-83). In light of this capability, theorists have made an effort to broaden the criteria for the genre. Paul Dampier, for example, divorces the overall genre from the American context and asserts that the Western is composed of "cross-cultural conflict and violent coexistence", which is manifested in its frontier imagery (Dampier 4). Unfortunately, Genre Studies scholars have neglected to compare individual semantic and syntactic elements based on their importance to the genre's labeling, and as such there is yet to be an adequate breakdown of what traits must remain for a film to be a "Western"

(American or otherwise). Without a list of indispensable traits, the Western runs the risk of becoming an arbitrary label; one that can be applied to films that merely possess a “sense” of what a western is rather than any empirical basis. This could reflect poorly on the legitimacy of genre studies, and thus I intend to resolve this issue by determining a narrower basis of semantic and syntactic traits with which genre theorists may be able to universally judge candidates of the western upon.

Proposal

My proposal to resolve this issue is to initiate a project to explore what semantic and syntactic elements have remained intrinsic to Westerns worldwide. What I mean by “semantics” and “syntactics” are the terms defined by theorist Rick Altman, who refers to semantics as being the pieces that compose the film while syntax is how these pieces are arranged (Altman 32). In other words, I will be treating traits such as clothing, characters, settings, and music as semantics while regarding the (typically thematic) relationship between those elements as syntactics. My goal is to see if any of these traits persist throughout all international installments, which will indicate if there can be an immutable core to the genre. Unfortunately, since there have been so many films under the genre name, I will be forced to limit my investigation to only a sample of films for this project.

Methodology:

Method of Comparison

To determine if these constants exist, I will first develop a basis of collective traits from the “pure” films (that is, those that were made in America and have only the designation of “western”) which will then be sought for in “alternative” western films (which would be those “westerns” made outside of the U.S). I chose this mode of comparison because the Western has nigh-universally been believed by theorists to be an American tradition that was adopted by other nations. This assertion is most evidently present within the essays of Grayson Cooke, William McClain, Hye Seung Chung, who analyze the Australian, Spaghetti, and Manchurian Western respectively (Cooke 1-2, McClain 52-53, Chung 72). These films will be analyzed from Rick Altman’s “syntactic/semantic” viewpoint, which argues that both components are complimentary to each other and, as a result, must be addressed in tandem to prevent an interpretation of genre that is either too expansive (when focused on semantics) or too narrow (when focused on syntactical relationships) (Altman 33-34). With this approach, I will avoid compiling my observations under a fallacious pretense (for example, if I focused purely on semantics, my list could theoretically suggest that dusters, wide brimmed hats, and deserts are all necessary items for a film to be a Western; alternatively, if syntactics were my sole focus, I could end up suggesting that only films with a thematic conflict between wilderness and civilization could be accepted as Westerns). Altman’s approach also has the benefit of being widely acceptable in the genre studies community, as his theory has formed the basis of a multitude of genre theories including that of Hye Seung Chung, Janet Staiger, Grayson Cooke, and William McClain.

Subject Criterion

The films I choose for this assignment will be those that have branded themselves specifically as “westerns” so to avert, as much as possible, the folly of drawing objective commonalities from a subjectively chosen body of films (Staiger 205). As for the “pure” westerns, I will be looking at a limited set of American-made films that have achieved a “classic” status. Classic in this case is not referring to a specific time period; instead, it is referring to those films that have left a substantial impression on the genre’s identity. Said impression will be judged by a combination of Rotten Tomato scores (85% or higher,) IMDB scores (at least 7.5 out of 10 with a minimum vote count of 100,000), and the extent of critical evaluation (which is to the benefit of older films that have not received as much current attention but have nonetheless been routinely referenced in genre studies). For this category, I have chosen *Stagecoach* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Shane* (1953), *The Searchers* (1959), *The Magnificent 7* (1960), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Unforgiven* (1992), and *True Grit* (2010). These qualified films should establish a consistent basis of comparison that is representative of the American division as a whole. My selection of “alternative” films do not require such strict criteria, however I will clarify that I am referring to Westerns that have been *made* outside of the United States, not necessarily those whose settings take place in non-U.S countries. I will also be avoiding those films that are definitive generic hybrids (i.e “Musical Westerns”, “Noir Westerns”) since that is a subject warranting of a separate project. Westerns with a “Drama” or “Action” association will not be treated as hybrids, as both elements are already intimately associated with the standard Western. Additionally, I will be narrowing the films I consider to those that provide subtitles for the sake of my own comprehension of their content. I will also be excluding films that are made for television, so that I may avoid comparing works that were made for completely different formats. Though the list of films for this category is necessarily limited, I made sure that it was representative of a diverse range of countries. This list includes: *The Good, The Bad, and The Weird* (Korea, 2008), *Sukiyaki Western Django* (Japan 2007), *One Man’s Hero* (Mexico 1999), *A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines* (USSR, 1987), *China 9, Liberty 37* (Italy/Spain, 1978), *Der Scout* (German, 1983), and *The Tracker* (Australia, 2002). I limited my choices to those made after 1975 to keep this selection as relevant to our current time period as possible; unfortunately, I was not able to restrict my parameters any further because some countries (notably Russia and Italy) ceased to make Westerns before the 1990’s.

Viewing Practices

During each viewing of the “pure” film, I will be actively searching for semantic aspects of the film, each of which will be promptly recorded on either a notepad or digital document. The elements I will be specifically searching for are: setting, clothing, character types, items (weapons in particular), dialogue, soundtrack, and notable instances of cinematography (“notable” in this case referring to moments that deviate from classic CHC format, which indicates an attempt at a distinct effect possibly related specifically to its genre). After each viewing, I will then reflect upon the film and the relational significance between these observed semantics. My recognition of syntactical structures and semantic elements will be informed by Douglas Pye’s *The Western (Genre and Movies)* and Stephen Prince’s *The Western*, which both explain how various iconographic elements (the six guns, cattle rustlers, etc) are structured to portray specific thematic conflicts (such as wilderness vs civilization). I am confident in their observations due to their experience in the field, the breadth of their examples, and the fact that

all of the theories I have read regarding the Western have recognized the same details. There will be two viewings to each film, which will allow me to ensure I did not overlook any vital items. The first viewing will have greater emphasis on imagery, soundtrack, and plot recognition while the second will be focused on symbolism and examples of cinematographic technique. My observations from each film will then be compared, and the traits that appear in all of the films will be the ones compiled into a master list which will then be used during the viewing of “alternative films”. I will initially use the same method of note-taking for this division of Westerns; however, after the universal traits of “alternative” films have been compiled into a list of their own, said list will be compared to the one for “pure” films. If the lists share any traits, they will be organized into a final document which will inform my conclusion.

Implications:

The Effect on Genre Theory

This project will ultimately determine if there are irremovable elements from the Western. Should this be the case, genre theorists would finally have a clear basis to establish agreeable boundaries for the Western. New candidates for the genre could be judged based on criterion derived from this project’s findings, which would make the process of assigning categorizations to films easier and ensure that the genre is not rendered meaningless through too many questionable inclusions. Additionally, the investigation into the theoretical core of this genre could lead to similar analyses of other genres. Should they yield positive results, there could be a more refined stratification for genres overall; consequently, films that do not fit within the new definitions of these genres could theoretically be organized into brand new categorizations.

If my findings indicate that there are no semantics or syntactics that are necessary to the Western branding, then it will be evident that a broadened definition will have to suffice. This conclusion would imply that genres are not tethered to a specific core and that another approach to categorization will need to be taken. Perhaps a film will need to be judged on its quantity of generic traits (but if so, how many would suffice?), or perhaps designations will have to be dictated by popular conception, which would preserve the current fluidity of these categories.

Another potential result could be a discussion over the value of genre refinement. My concern over the arbitration of the genre still stands, but there is also a legitimate argument against the institution of stricter parameters. Dampier and McClain suggest that such restraints could prevent the genres continual evolution, and the Western could fall into irrelevancy as a result (Dampier 4, McClain 62-63). My findings could lend itself to this discussion by indicating if any core parameters exist at all, which would help indicate whether or not a counter argument to Dampier and McClain has any defensible basis.

Concessions:

It needs to be said that whatever is discovered in this project may be isolated solely to the Western Genre. Genres have been previously conceived on a variety of bases, including emotional effect and iconography, and thus what is determined about the Western may not be applicable across all genres. Additionally, it is possible that this combination of chosen films will

produce a rare conclusion. This project should therefore be considered as just a starting place for a greater collaborative analysis. It will be necessary to examine different groupings of Western films as well as differing genres to see if a core can be established for each case.

Unfortunately, subjectivity could not be completely removed from this project. I still had to decide what factors indicated an “impactful” movie, to judge if a particular American Western was worthy to consider despite what score it may have received, and to select a body of films I felt was representative of the division of the genre and its (inter)national context. Furthermore, I will have to discern significant semantic and syntactic traits in my viewings, which means I could miss items that arguably should have been considered. Such instances of subjectivity are unavoidable in this field of study, since it inherently revolves around the interpretation of an art form; however, this should not diminish the potential significance of this project’s results. I set my parameters to prevent a deliberate selection of commonalities, and my sample is diverse enough (either chronologically or culturally) to make any prevailing similarity notable

Conclusion:

A genre must be defined by something consistent. Horror must provoke the reaction of its namesake; Science Fiction must address the possible future. Without these identifiers there can be no clear division between genres, and the Western is no exception. As the genre becomes increasingly blended with the perspectives of the current era and the international world, it becomes more important than ever before that the genre remain definable. The commonalities my project could discover may provide the means of preserving the Western, or, at the very least, whether they exist would indicate if a flexible approach is necessary to the genre at this stage.

Citations

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