

An analysis of Sergio Leone's portrayal of the death of the old American west and the death of the American western genre of cinema in *Once Upon a Time in the West*

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**Extended Essay
Film**

Abstract

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968) is considered by many, including myself, to be among the best Westerns ever made. Stylistically, it is evidence of Italian director Sergio Leone at his best as his sweeping wide shots, extreme close-ups and music cues by Ennio Morricone are breathtaking to behold. Though he uses the filmic style that made his previous films so unique, the thematic elements are completely new.

In this film, he focuses on a theme that is familiar to the Western genre by exploring the impact of technological advancements, represented by the railroads, on the American Old West. Unlike most entries in the genre, though, he does not celebrate the emergence of modern America but rather presents it in a cynical light. This theme was always fascinating to me, but upon watching the film a few more times I realized that Leone was not just showing the birth of today's America but was paralleling the death of the Old West with the death of the beloved classic Western genre. Though his film is cynical, he still manages to celebrate the great Westerns that he has loved his entire life by infusing his movie with countless film references and homages.

This research paper investigates the significance of Leone's film and its themes by dissecting two of his major techniques: using the death of the Old West (the internal theme) to represent the death of Western cinema (the external theme) and his use of film references and homages to eulogize the great American genre.

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Introduction

Understanding the extent of the impact of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* on the old American Western first requires some important context. By the early 1960s, the traditional American Western was virtually dead. That is not to say that Westerns were no longer being made as the emergence of television resulted in the popularity of TV Westerns rising exponentially from 1955 and well into the 1960s (TIME, 2010). However, the Western films that basically defined American cinema for the first half of the 20th century were becoming more and more obscure as years passed. Pauline Kael, one of the most lauded and outspoken film critics at the time, said in 1961 that the genre had become "an almost static pictorial genre, a devitalized, dehydrated form which is 'enriched' with pastoral beauty and evocative nostalgia for a simple, heroic way of life... We'll be lulled to sleep in the 'affectionate', 'pure', 'authentic' scenery of the West..., or, for a change, we'll be clobbered by messages in 'mature' Westerns" (Frayling, 2006, p.39). In short, Western movies were being made but their quality was in rapid decline and great ones like those made by John Ford, Howard Hawks, George Stevens and Nicholas Ray (to name a few that Leone considered to be the greats) were virtually non-existent.

This was obviously a major concern to Sergio Leone who grew up watching great American Westerns religiously, looking up to the heroes they depicted and worshipping the directors who made them. He shared the same sentiments as Kael but did not allow the genre to die completely. In 1964 he made a Western of his own called *A Fistful of Dollars*, a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961), followed by *For a Few Dollars More* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* over the next two years, all three of which together form the Dollars Trilogy. The release of these movies marked a significant turning point for cinema as Leone managed to "not only reinvent the Italian Western but also reinvent *the* Western" (Arick, 2007). Italians had made Westerns in the past but they were nothing more than recreations of American films with dialogue spoken in Italian (Frayling, 2007). Leone's films, on the other hand, were so thematically and stylistically unique that they spawned an entirely new sub-genre called the Spaghetti Western (Italians prefer to call it Italo-Westerns or Euro-Westerns) (Frayling, 2009). As a result, Leone is recognized as one of the most innovative directors of the 20th century.

However, despite the success of his Dollars Trilogy, he remained cynical towards the current state of the Western. The golden era of cowboy films as he once knew and loved it was over in his mind. With his next film, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), he decided against "'lying bare' or redefining the genre from its base" (Frayling, 2006, p. 194) as he did before by introducing new themes and style. He decided instead to make a Western that would explore the death of the great American Old West, a frequently used theme in American cinema in the past, and show it in a different light than usual by paralleling it with the death of the great traditional American Western. In essence, his

film is a long awaited eulogy to the genre that meant so much to him and countless others.

The intent of this essay is to explore how Leone managed to mourn the golden era of American Westerns that I also have loved since childhood by, first, using the death of the Old West at the hands of advancing technology as a metaphor for the death of the great American Western and, second, simultaneously celebrating his favorites of the genre through many homages.

The Death of the Old West Representing the Death of the Western

Leone uses many techniques throughout the film in order to convey the death of the Old American West as a result of advancing technology. His intention behind doing so is to place it in direct comparison with the death of the old Westerns he adores dearly. One of his most effective techniques is his use of visual motifs. Central to all of them is the main motif of the movie: the railroad system. This is established immediately as the opening sequence takes place at a train station. In the scene, Leone shows the train arriving using a low angle shot (the camera is placed on the track and facing up) that is completely filled with a view of the underside of the rapid train as it slows down, accompanied by the blistering sound of its whistle and screeching tires. Leone, with this short, explosive shot, reveals to the audience the domination of the train. Shortly after, when the train leaves and Harmonica is revealed to have gotten off the train, there is a wide shot of him

centered in the midground of the frame with the railway track in the foreground at the bottom of the frame (Morsella & Leone, 1968). It is, again, Leone emphasizing the major presence of the railroad in the film. Its dominant presence is never less emphasized all throughout the picture as it is here in the beginning. Leone frequently shows the railway system being built by a myriad of workers, which is his way of constantly reminding the audience of how much the system is invading the West. This motif represents how technology is rapidly evolving the Old West into a new, capitalist America where the cowboy heroes and traditions cannot, and will not, survive. As a lover of those heroes and traditions, Leone seems to portray the West as *devolving* at the hands of the burgeoning railway system. At the end of a scene in the middle of the film, there is a wide shot showing a train slowly moving forwards (away from the camera) while several men ride their horses right by its left going in the same direction. As the train begins to pick up speed and starts blowing more smoke, it fills the entire left side of the shot with dust, thus completely hiding the men from the camera while the train is still clearly visible in the background of the shot as it moves further and further away (Morsella & Leone, 1968). Though this particular shot lasts no more than five seconds, to me it reveals the theme of the movie simply and perfectly. The image of the train obscuring any visible sign of the cowboys represents developing technology obscuring the Old West. By directly comparing this internal theme of the movie with the context of the time period in which the movie was made and incorporating myriad homages, Leone conveys the external theme of how the era of great American Western films has come to an end as cinema continues to develop.

Leone deliberately uses his characters to represent different figures of traditional American Westerns and show what kind of impact the booming railroad system has on them. Harmonica, Cheyenne and Frank, the three main cowboy characters, are portrayed as members of an "ancient race" as they struggle to survive in the ever changing Western world most. These men live by their superior abilities to use their guns and horses, both of which, as the film shows, are becoming less and less important in the developing new world. Frank is the main villain of the film and resembles the bad guys that are staples in the Western genre. A killer and a bandit, he is, like all Western villains, seemingly only motivated by acquiring more money and power than he can handle. Realizing that there will be no better source of revenue than the burgeoning railroad system, he plans to eventually take over the position of Morton, a head of the railway. The fact that he is calculating how to survive in the New America makes him the only one of the three main cowboys that tries to adapt to the change. However, Frank is never able to adhere to the reality that in capitalist society the dollar holds much more power than the gun. Morton tells him "there are many things you'll never understand...there are many kinds of weapons. And the only one that can stop [the gun] is [money]" (Morsella & Leone, 1968). Frank later tells Harmonica, the man who has been pursuing him, "now I understand why [I can never be like Morton]. Wouldn't have bothered him, knowing you were around alive somewhere" (Morsella & Leone, 1968). In this instance, Frank represents the impossibility of the characteristics and instincts that define a man of the Old West (such as the ones that cannot allow Frank to live without settling the score with an enemy) to exist in a world where power is defined by money rather than physical prowess.

Leone magnifies this point by presenting it through Cheyenne and Harmonica as well. These two characters, the heroes of the movie, show clear disdain towards the railroads as Frank does but, unlike him, they never consider it as anything more than a tool at their disposal. Specifically, the only instances when Cheyenne is associated with the technology is when he sits on the roof or holds on to the underside of a train to eventually ambush it by climbing through its windows in order to rescue the captured Harmonica. Harmonica is only associated with the technology when he is held in a carriage by Morton or when he is keeping an eye on Frank from the train to eventually get his revenge (Frayling, 2006, p.195). In short, Cheyenne and Harmonica keep their distance from the railroad if they can help it. By the end of the film, Frank is killed by Harmonica and Cheyenne by Morton, making Harmonica the only cowboy character to live. However, he is purposeless after finally getting revenge and rides off alone into the wild West at the end of the film. The fates of these three characters ultimately reveals that the archetypal Hollywood Western cowboy characters that audiences so dearly love (Cheyenne and Harmonica) and love to hate (Frank) have no place whatsoever in modern America, no matter if they try to adapt to it as Frank does or distance themselves from it as Cheyenne and Harmonica do. The same applies to classic American Western films as well as it simply cannot keep up with the ever advancing cinema. This reality clearly depresses Leone greatly and is the reason for the pessimistic tone of his film.

The implications of Leone's film, however, do not end there. The railway head Morton, despite being a minor character, is the center of the film's cynical attitude towards

capitalism. He cannot walk without support and this physical disability acts as a metaphor for his internal corruption and weakness. The *mise-en-scène*, or the design and direction of a shot including scenery and properties (Advameg, Inc., 2010), of the interior of the train carriage where Morton virtually resides include many elaborate expensive items all neatly organized. Leone never makes these valuable items the centerpieces of any shots but fills the backgrounds of his shots with them, including walls lined with shelves full of books, beautiful curtains, a mini chandelier, a desk with long featherpens and crystal bottles of alcohol. An elaborate metal structure protrudes from the ceiling for Morton to use to support himself as he walks around. Morton is hardly ever shown out of this carriage but when he is, he is shown dying or on his knees, completely vulnerable. His wellbeing thus literally relies completely on metal for walking support and also metaphorically for he is only worth as much as the power of his railway position and the money he makes from it. The tuberculosis infected Morton "represents an essential, but self-destroying, 'stage' in capitalist economic development" (Frayling, 2006, p.195) as, despite his death in the film, men like him will continue to strive in the business as long as the technology needs to fully develop. As Harmonica tells Frank, "other Mortons will be along, and they'll kill [our ancient race] off" (Morsella & Leone, 1968). In essence, Leone suggests the unruly transition from a society in which strong, manly gunfighters have the most power to one where weak businessmen with substantial money possess the most power.

The only character who manages to adapt and strive in the burgeoning new world is Jill. She is at no point shown as out of place in the new civilisation. In her entrance scene, she

is shown getting off the train and roaming the station among all the soldiers, relatives, cattle, Native Americans, and agricultural tools (Morsella & Leone, 1968). She is a girl of the city and looks right at home in a shot whose *mise-en-scène* shows the bringings of the technology of the railroad. By the end of the film, she assumes the position of mother to the railway gangs working on the station as she provides the workers with nourishments. In her final appearance in the film, the an overhead shot follows her as she moves among the workers, passes out water, smiles and talks to them (Morsella & Leone, 1968). At this moment she is, in essence, the mother of technological innovation and thus the mother of modern America. Jill is also the only character in the film who does not only fit into one Western stereotype but two. She is both the whore and the saint of the film, generally the two only positions female characters assume in movies of the genre (Neale, 2001, p.135). The fact that Jill is a hybrid of both is appropriate as she represents a new kind of Western character just as the railway represents a new era of technological advancement.

References to American Westerns

Once Upon a Time in the West elicits a grand feeling of nostalgia by constantly referencing popular Westerns from the past beloved by both Leone and his audience. He simultaneously infuses these references with motifs regarding both the death of the Old West and the death of the great Western genre. According to Sir Christopher Frayling, the most revered Spaghetti Western and Sergio Leone scholar, in his audio commentary track for the film, Leone, Dario Argento and Bernardo Bertolucci spent countless days

watching countless Westerns and they loved to infuse their first treatment for the movie with dozens of homages to the greats of the genre. They included more than thirty major references to popular titles that most audiences would recognize. Upon closer examination, Frayling has said that the film "is so crammed with 'quotes' from Hollywood Westerns that it is difficult to imagine how many more... could have fitted in" (2006, p.195). By infusing the film with so many homages both clear and obscure, Leone reminisces the golden age of Western cinema, which keeps *Once Upon a Time* from being helplessly cynical. Major references that are key to the film include *High Noon* (1952), *Shane* (1953), *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and John Ford's body of work.

The first clear reference Leone makes is to the famous Fred Zinnemann Western *High Noon*. The openings of Zinnemann and Leone's films depict three bandits at a station waiting for a train to arrive and both are visually very similar, particularly in terms of camera placement and *mise-en-scène*. For one, both scenes share a wide shot facing the back of the three bandits as they stand side-by-side next to the railway. Another deliberate similarity can be seen in the set decorations as Leone's scene includes a large water tank by the station that looks nearly identical to that of Zinnemann's scene (Zinnemann, 1952). Being that *High Noon* was a great commercial success, Leone likely evoked the atmosphere of that film effectively in his audience. He in turn manipulates the expectations for how the scene will carry out by making the events that occur different from those in Zinneman's picture. Specifically, whereas the opening train sequence of *High Noon* is a quick cutting montage of the bandits walking along the railway and the concerned faces of citizens of the town, all with an intense score that creates a feeling of

foreboding, as the train arrives right on schedule, in *Once Upon a Time* Leone's sequence is a slow, drawn out montage of the miniscule actions of the bandits as they wait for the delayed train with the only soundtrack being the amplified sounds of nature and machines nearby. By doing all of this, Leone establishes right away that his film is one that loves Westerns yet mourns them as well. The bandits want nothing but the train to arrive, and when it finally does, they end up dying. This parallels Leone's sentiments towards Western films of the time (they are seldom made, but when they are, they are horribly disappointing).

Leone's second elaborate reference is to the popular George Stevens film *Shane*. The audience is first introduced to the McBain family as the father, Brett, and his youngest son, Timmy, are hunting in the wild. A medium shot of young Timmy mimicking shooting at a flock of birds (finger pointed with his thumb up while screaming "bang bang bang!") is almost identical to a famous shot of young Joey pretending to shoot a moose in Stevens' film (1953). Leone's evocation of *Shane* leads the audience to be reminded by the ideal family portrayed in that film (and many others) as they watch the McBains preparing lunch. Thus, the McBain massacre becomes not only more shocking but also representative in a way of the death of the Old West in the film and American Westerns in real life (at that time). This would then prove to be Leone's bleakest way of revealing his themes. The funeral that takes place for the family shortly after Jill arrives at their home in Sweetwater is nearly identical in its shots and *mise-en-scène*. Leone's feelings at this point are that the same funeral could be held for his favorite genre of film.

Of all the homages to Westerns, one of the key ones is the one to *Johnny Guitar*, mostly with respect to the strong female character. In Nicholas Ray's film, Vienna is a woman who lives alone in the wild running a saloon and nurturing the nearby railway gang, just like Jill McBain (Yates & Ray, 1954). Furthermore, she is involved with several men in her life including Johnny Guitar who, like Harmonica, is well known for always being accompanied by a guitar. This is clearly a key reference point in *Once Upon a Time* since Jill is the central character of the entire film who represents the mother of new America. The two films differ, however, in their endings. Ray's film ends with the focus of the story on the love between Vienna and Guitar, whereas Leone's film changes the expectations of Harmonica and Jill being together by having him leave Jill and ride into the wild in a very *Shane*-like ending. Leone seems to be making the same point he stresses throughout by implying that though he loves *Johnny Guitar*, cowboys like the title character of that film have no place in a world of railroads (unlike the female character who ushers in development). This is another example of Leone explicitly referencing a popular film and, when the audience assumes what happens in the original picture will happen in this one, manipulating the expectations to reveal what is the reality of the West in his eyes.

Finally, a film infused with homages to the greatest of Western films cannot avoid referencing the most prolific Western director of all time, John Ford. Leone, like many, was a fanatic of Ford's films (Frayling, 2003) and references to them are omnipresent in *Once Upon a Time*. The most obvious one is the famous sequence in which a man (Sam) takes Jill to her home in Sweetwater via a buggy and through the beautiful landscape that

is Monument Valley. One of the staples of John Ford's films are sequences that take place in this setting and the scene in Leone's film is meant to evoke a deep nostalgic feeling in the audience who recognize the scenery completely. In the same way that Ford always "made use of Monument Valley with Loving care and exemplary rigour," (Leutrat & Liandrat-Guigues, 1998, p.167), Leone takes full advantage of his widescreen camera and provides some of the most breathtaking images in all of Western cinema. Shooting this scene was obviously a deeply personal moment for Leone as Christopher Frayling tells an anecdote of how during the on-location shoot, Leone recalled all of his favorite shots of the Valley in Ford's films including exactly where the camera was pointing. Even in this magnificent visual scene, Leone manages to inform the audience of the tension between the Old West and the New West when Sam runs right into the railway gangs, laughing as he does so. The nostalgia he infuses into the audience is thus very bittersweet as he does not allow anyone to forget about the technology that brought an end to these wonderful landscapes and the Old American West.

Conclusion

The number of Westerns made since the release of *Once Upon a Time in the West* have severely declined since the early 1970s (Neale, 2001, p.133) and rightfully so because Sergio Leone put the final nail in the classic American Western's coffin with a sweeping epic that manages to love the movies that it mourns. After watching the film countless times, listening to audio commentaries, reading film literature about Westerns, viewing documentaries and watching many classic American Westerns that *Once Upon a Time*

celebrates, I am deeply impressed by the ways in which Leone brought the American Western to its logical conclusion. One of the most famous lines of the film is "people like that have something inside... something to do with death" (Morsella & Leone, 1968), and this could unquestionably be applied to Leone. As the title of this essay suggests, his film is all about death: death of the Western society and the Western film genre, respectively. His film is a brilliant celebration of a time and a genre that amounted to nothing by 1968 and, today, simply remains a fairytale. That is to say, once upon a time there was the great Old American West, and once upon a time there was an era of great American western films. Once upon a time in the west.

Word Count: 3997

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