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Melenia Arouh

1

It is often said that the Western film is dead. This might mean a plethora of things, depending on who is making the morbid pronouncement. For producers, it means that the superhero-loving-audience is not interested anymore; for culture critics, it means that the colonial myth of the West has lost its allure; and for film scholars it means that the genre is going through the downward slope of its evolutionary cycle. But, surprisingly enough, this state of fatality is not new; apparently the genre has been meeting its maker since the 1950s. Yet, for a genre six feet underground, this remains a very active type of film both in theory and practice. Westerns are still being made today (*The Proposition* (2005), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), *True Grit* (2010), *Django Unchained* (2012)), the myth of the Westerner still haunts Hollywood masculinity (for example, the hero of *American Sniper* (2014) fills the boots of a contemporary Westerner), and theorists are still preoccupied with the legacy, past, and present, of these films. Within this very active context two new books, Neil Campbell's *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* and Matthew Carter's *Myth of the Westerner: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative* offer different perspectives and most interesting reflections on this dead-alive genre. These are definitely not obituaries of the genre. These are insightful analyses of a kind of cinema that is still very much present and often defies narrow categorizations.

2

Matthew Carter's highly argumentative book, closely examines the driving assumption of the study of Western films today. He notices that film scholars traditionally draw a line between "classical" westerns, which are ideologically conservative and perpetuate the myth of the frontier, and "revisionist" (post) westerns, which begin in the 1960s and are considered a critique or even exposé of this very myth. It is argued that post 1960, and beginning with the film *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), the genre becomes self-conscious, reflecting a shift in the cultural attitudes of the time. Specifically, "such films consciously raised issues concerning their own status as Westerns, their own historical role in the construction of erroneous cultural attitudes and beliefs, and the nature of their relation to the myth of the West and towards contemporary events" (116). Their purpose then, is to question the founding myths of the American nation and the role of the Western in the shaping of these.

3

For Carter, however, this distinction is too neat to hold the whole truth of the genre. His aim is "to offer a series of alternative arguments towards such popular interpretations of the Western...to question the professed aesthetic and ideological-mythological functions of the introspective categories: "'classical', 'revisionist', and 'post'...[These] do not speak for the whole genre, and are inadequate terms for establishing a generic blueprint by which one can place films chronologically" (4). And indeed, throughout his book he refuses to accept monolithic categories of film with standard codes, and in his pursuit reveals the complexities of the genre and the missed insights of the dominant theoretical schemata.

4

Carter's investigation begins with the cultural, historical, and political premises upon which the Western film relies on. For instance, the raw material of the Western is the conquering of the Far West. These films are traditionally set between 1865-1890, and narrate historical events such as the end of the civil war, the Indian wars, the construction of the railway and the mining camps, and the rise of the farmer. Along such historical moments Carter places, first, the figure of William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) examining the ways in which his entertainment shows elevated the status of the cowboy -who went from a marginal, possibly insignificant figure to a symbol of the frontier. Second, the work of historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner in many ways "established the West as the crucible where America's exceptionalist mission...was played out" (11-12), placing Anglo-Americans at the centre of the most essential narrative of the nation whilst ignoring the reality of the racial 'melting pot' of the time. It was Turner's thesis that Theodore Roosevelt would use to talk to the nation, forging the "frontier thesis" as a national mission, as "Manifest Destiny," and transforming the cowboy to a national emblem, a positive social symbol of masculine ethos in a time of instability.

5

The usual argument here is that the classical Westerns establish and support this narrative, whereas the revisionist Westerners question and critique it. Specifically “it is said that a mood of disillusionment afflicts the evolution of the Western. This development apparently came to dominate Hollywood film production as a whole by the late 1960s. The reasons posited for this are largely cultural” (31). The assumption here is that genres reflect their contemporary social or cultural values –so the Westerns of the 60s reflect the disillusionment of the American society with the Vietnam War and as a result communicate darker or anti-colonial messages. Indeed, for many theorists Vietnam killed the Western film.

6

Carter, however, wishes to maintain that this disillusionment was present much earlier on. For example, *Shane* (1952) is often considered the *locus classicus* of the genre, since it touches upon all the standard conventions of the genre: the myth of the frontier, the hero’s moral code, the necessary (but morally justified) violence, and the wilderness-civilization antinomy. A classical reading of the film would note the character of Shane, a mysterious and iconic drifter who protects a seemingly innocent homesteading community from various forces of evil. Whereas Shane had initially given up his gun for the plough, duty and justice call him back to action and he answers willingly. Shane will defend the community with a violence that carries a moral force “an unavoidable and noble defence of the values of American civilisation” and at the end he will head off into the sunset all by his lonesome (37). One can see the magnitude of this interpretation: this moral force, for Carter, becomes the narrative equivalent of American foreign policy “the United States justifies its politically sanctioned violence by referral to this notion. It makes its military aggression different to that of other nations, rendering it exceptional within the concept of the national character” (37). And so in *Shane* the hero has a god-given right/mission to ‘civilise’ this wilderness.

7

For Carter, however, this is but one interpretation and he attempts to trace the ambiguities left untouched here. These ambiguities, for example, include the presentation of the hero. Shane, for Carter, is not a simple character to interpret. He is never really accepted in the community, always an outsider, alienated, and often accused. It makes sense then that he leaves at the end, since he was never really comfortable there and for Carter the reasons why require explication. Carter wishes to maintain that Shane is presented as a violent outlaw much more than a romantic hero drawn out of nostalgia. At the same time, the issue of violence is not that straight forward. The homesteader community is already comfortable with violence, way before Shane activates his moral force. In this way, how the settlers are to be considered harbingers of civilisation is questioned. What Carter seems to want to maintain is not so much that the classical reading is false, but

that as a reading it ignores the complexities of the narrative, forcing upon the film a pre-determined proposition. It should be noted that Carter finds many of the arguments about the Western forced and often “suggestive of an (unconscious) ideological correlation between producers of popular culture, policy makers in the United States and historical events” (127).

8

Carter continues his counter analysis by considering the representations of the Indians as savages in Westerns. Customarily in classical Westerns the Indians form a clear racial “Other,” becoming “either representations of that otherness that the dominant culture both needs and fears, or else...metaphors for that within themselves that they wish to repress” (80). Westerns deal in many ways with this “Other,” most notably through the so-called “captivity narratives” of the frontier. These seem to represent a very popular fantasy of the time, where the European settlers projected onto the Indians their own latent desires, namely to live free from society and religion. As such the Indian way of life becomes alluring and in these narratives the captives willingly convert, abandoning their own ways of life. So in these stories destroying the Indian becomes the destruction of these desires, an exorcism of the id, a last stand for their souls.

9

The film that is held as an archetype of this narrative, full with racial stereotypes and “Manifest Destiny” white supremacy, is John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). In this quite anti-Indian film we see the search for a missing child, who is now grown and assimilated to the Comanche culture. Although Carter does acknowledge the racial stereotypes on display here, he notices further complex representations. He writes that the Anglo-Americans in the film are not presented in a straightforward racial manner that clearly separates the “Us” from the “Other.” For Carter, “in highlighting the interlaced cultural, economic and sexual interactions between Anglos, Mexican and Native Americans along the borderlands, *The Searchers* highlights white hypocrisy in its hero’s assertion of superior self-righteousness based on racial purity. *The Searchers* disabuses us of the myth that such concrete distinctions could be made between races, certainly not at this late stage of the history of the American West” (88). Racially impure, neither side represents half of a clear binary between good and evil. Both sides seem to be contributing to the violence and massacre, the human cost of settling this “free” land becoming painfully clear as the narrative progresses. For Carter such an interpretation shows that Anglo-American civilisation is very much flawed and ignoble –a critique more common in revisionist Westerns. If such a reading is true, then Carter is right to point out that separating the classical from the revisionist Western is not such an easy task, since traces of critique exist in the canon of classical westerns.

10

In a quite powerful turn, that grounds much of his argument, Carter turns his attention to Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992) –a film

often celebrated as a revisionist triumph. In this film Eastwood revisits his own myth as lone gunman in the iconic Sergio Leone's films – the films that gifted him his star persona in Hollywood. In *Unforgiven*, however, he plays an old, out of shape hero (shoots and misses, can't always mount his horse). His image seems to be under attack, questioned. For Carter, however, this is not a true criticism of his character, since his lack of readiness serves to urge the audience to desire the return of the real hero, the gunfighter: a longing for the return of the uber-masculine, past Eastwood that can deal with the events of the narrative successfully. And indeed by the end of the film his masculinity is restored as he kills off all his enemies with ease – his mythic status redeemed and cemented. As an audience we are never asked to scrutinize our fascination with his masculine ethos or his violence, but to long for it and celebrate its return. As a result, the classical agenda is reinforced and not subverted since the hero does not undermine his legend.

- 11 Carter's also examines the representations of femininity in this film. The established argument states that classical westerns minimise the role and agency of women in the West, whereas post-Westerns attempt to rectify this, becoming more politically correct as they go on. Carter, however, notices that the women in *Unforgiven* are either prostitutes (and active) or silent (and passive) placing the film firmly in the classical category. Even worse, the women in this film remain as silent as ever: "for all the narrative screen-time afforded women in *Unforgiven*, their voice remains surprisingly marginalised, silenced or... 're-appropriated' into the hegemonic culture of [the]...male-dominated power structure; their presence seeking to re-affirm rather than undermine masculinity and the mythology of redemptive violence" (138-139). Again, the film does not seem to question the myths or hierarchies of the classical films.

12

In the second part of the book, Carter wishes to determine the current value of the genre and further explicate the underlying complexities. To this end he turns his attention to contemporary Westerns, ones that truly revisit the classical tropes. But in a way, this discussion is fully realised in Neil Campbell's book, where the examination of post-Westerns becomes thorough and systematic.

13

Campbell's book is his third publication on the New West (*The Cultures of the American New West*, and *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*) and concludes his lengthy pursuit of the topic. His analysis here follows Deleuze's views about the collapse of America's greatest film genres during this post-war period and identifies "post-Westerns," as the Westerns made post 1945 – a good two decades earlier than the standard chronological mark mentioned by Carter.

14

He argues that by the 1970s the genre is completely transformed – losing its assumed purity and simplicity. In these post-Westerns there is

no nostalgia only a sense of loss and a sense of mourning established as the central mood of this new West. As if the wound of the past is made visible in these films. The old West is now gone having given way to a multicultural, globalised, urbanised, and militarized landscape. It has become a complex space with no clear lines. As such we are asked to question, revisit, reread, and as such disrupt and dislocate the tradition in Deleuzian terms. Whereas in the classical Westerns the themes of community, national identity, and resolution were central, in the post-Westerns the grand narrative once so popular is broken down to its pieces and the consequences of the once established norm are investigated without shades of nostalgia or mythologizing. And Carter's observation is very much validated here. Campbell, like most film scholars, attempts to neatly summarise each category: the classical westerns are about resolution, community, national identity, the past as knowable, and the dominance of the white male hero. Whereas the post (modern)-Westerns stress the provisional over the universal, the unfinished and not defined, questioning the grand narrative and hierarchies of these myths.

15

Having accepted this distinction (to a certain extent) as neat and true, Campbell proceeds to examine an impressive variety of post-Western texts and attempts to determine the cultural, political, and historical value of the genre today. He begins his thoughtful and thorough analysis with an examination of *The Lusty Men* (1952) and *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1954). Campbell argues that Nicholas Ray's *The Lusty Men* is slow paced and pensive, allowing time to reveal this world to the audience, and seemingly mixing violence and meditation (and Campbell links this discussion to Deleuze's notion of the shift during this period from "movement-image" to "time-image"). The film for Campbell engages with the classic tropes, by opening up with a rodeo parade, reminding the audience of the link between West and spectacle and an era bygone: "in the hands of Nicholas Ray, the past cannot disappear, for it problematizes the simplicity of regionally mythic narratives of the 'golden land' of frontier, unquestioned patriarchy, national masculinity, eternal 'natural' values, stable notions of home, and Anglo-Saxon centrality" (68). The protagonist is like a ghost himself, living in a landscape of fading memories of Western masculinity -the story of a violent man who wants to stop being violent. The protagonist in *Bad Day at Black Rock* follows a similar path trying "to reopen and reconnect this static western town to its past and to the world beyond, to give voice to the memories of the dead, and in so doing to return a repressed history" (89). Both films for Campbell are an attempt to live with the ghosts of the region and thus to rethink the present through the dead, by recognising the responsibility of living towards those gone, those present, and those to come.

16

Following this discussion of place and loss is an examination of the film *The Misfits* (1961) -the final screen appearance for both Clark Gable

and Marilyn Monroe. In the film, Monroe plays Roslyn, an eastern woman come West, who challenges the protagonist because she stands for emotion and affect, her face registering intense empathy and sentiment. She will become the moral barometer of the film, transforming along her way the male heroes, shifting their attitudes from the values of cowboy machismo to those of emotion. "Roslyn is constantly connected with the moon and sun and with an aversion to all forms of destruction and killing; it's her youthful enthusiasm driven by a desire to move on and to change her life that sparks responses in others where lives are already fixed and stale" (123). She has, for Campbell, a gift for life, awakening the men of this new West who seem lost, lonely, and numb. It is a child's innocence and perspective that stands at odds with her adult and feminine body, subjected throughout the film to the male gaze. But Campbell insists that it is the masculine image that is under scrutiny here as Roslyn establishes her values and breathes life to the landscape.

17

The reality of this landscape that Roslyn enters is painted in very harsh (neorealist) colours. Commercialism reigns and honour and nobility have been replaced by market demands; a loss of authenticity. Everything now has a price: "a sense of ending that haunts the film as it reflects upon the tensions of a rural-urban split, the loss of the mythic West, economic shifts away from traditional jobs, a growth of technology and media culture, and the human consequences of such changes" (105). For Campbell, the film is rather pensive, creating spaces of absence and presence, past and present, letting the characters experience an almost existential angst in their effort to find themselves and one another. In more than one way, this film becomes a treatise about the West's past, real and filmic, and an imagining of what it means to live and love in a place that has lost its identity.

18

Campbell proceeds with his analysis in a chronological fashion, examining the films of Dennis Hopper *Easy Rider* (1969) and *The Last Movie* (1971) next. Both films aim to examine the cultural and political violence in mid 1960s America through the codes and conventions of the Western. Dennis Hopper is a very interesting figure here, having grown up in a farm in Kansas and having worked with many Western directors in his career (although aesthetically he relates more to pop art and abstract expressionism). Interestingly enough, and possibly in agreement with Carter, Campbell finds fault with *Easy Rider* (often considered a prime specimen of post-Westerns). He accuses Hopper of choosing to present a romantic, mythic West, a sublime space of nature, farmers, hippies, openness that becomes an escape to freedom, an escape to the "lost America." Having said that, he does admit that the film is more critical when looking at the bigotry of the South but still fails "to go far enough and...to expose the Western's dystopian heritage alongside its overly simplistic condemnation of the dark and brutal South" (144). He is, however, much more positive about *The Last Movie*, which he sees as a

commentary on Westerns, Hollywood, colonialism, and capitalism – in other words, a very standard post-Western point of view for Campbell.

19

Next Campbell examines two little known post-Westerns *The Exiles* (1961) and *Fat City* (1972). *The Exiles* is perhaps the most interesting case since it tells the story of one day in the life of urban Indians. The film opens with photographs of stereotypical images of Indians and moves the action to the city. We see a new western urban landscape where many Indians live, allowing the audience to think and engage with how “[t]he once nomadic life of one Indian warrior has become contained within a certain district of the city” (179). The film explores this new reality and lost territorial freedom in a neorealist fashion – in other words, by paying good and close attention to the details of the life and people, revealing the human condition.

20 Campbell next turns his attention to the work of other independent directors, the American John Sayles (*Lone Star* (1996), *Silver City* (2004)) and the German Wim Wenders (*Paris, Texas* (1984), *Don't Come Knocking* (2005)). In Sayles's films the West becomes a place of colonialism and violence, a place that cannot escape its past. As the *Lone Stars* tag line read: “John Sayles invites you to return to the scene of the crime.” According to Campbell revisiting the crime scene becomes an opportunity to question History: how it is written and passed down and the role of cultural memory. The protagonist seems to move between the official History and the memories and legends of people, revealing along the way alternative histories and identities. For example, in one scene in *Lone Star* the school board tries to determine how to teach the history of the place, how to remember the Alamo, since the US and Mexican versions are conflicting. What do we consider history and what propaganda?

21

In examining the westerns of Wim Wenders Campbell surmises the allure the American West holds for the German Wenders. He argues that “[i]n Wenders's films of the West and in those haunted by it, there is a perpetual and painful return to a parallel ‘secret heartache’ of broken lives, disrupted families, and the endless search of some sense of home, belonging, and tradition” (241). Campbell relates this to Germany's sense of loss post WWII, and the promise of the US West: “an alternative promise...of openness and mobility, of settlement and family, and of a landscape that seemed endlessly promising” (241). But his films are not really a glorification of the American Dream. Wenders remains critical, examining the legacy of the West in relation to his own sense of history. As Wenders himself states, “the American West belongs to everybody. It is almost a landscape outside of American...I felt the American West belonged to me as well” (242).

22

Campbell studies *Paris, Texas* along these lines. Noting the way Wenders's films present a changing West and how characters deal with the complex legacy and myths in an age of globalisation, fragmentation,

and loss. The story is the homecoming journey of a man, in which he has to confront his own past. And this for Campbell is indeed unique: the action hero returns to face the consequences of his actions, understanding their enormity and reevaluating the situation. Campbell concludes that "Wenders's post-Western (or ghost Western) cinema is haunted and haunting, reflecting on the anxieties and human costs of a mythic past and its consequences for the transnational generation that inherited its complex psychic landscape, while attempts, however tentatively, to present the possibility of recovery and reclamation through a recognition of loss, and a re-evaluation of home, the retrieval of family, and the memory of the power of images" (271).

23

One of the most interesting parts of Campbell's book is the analysis of Donna Deitch (*Desert Hearts* (1985)) and Allison Anders's westerns (*Border Radio* (1987) and *Gas Food Lodging* (1991)). The inclusion of female *auteurs* in this male-centric film tradition is very welcome, and allows for further inspection of what Campbell understands as a post-Western, revisionist movement. For example, in *Desert Hearts* we see a Columbia University English Literature professor arriving at Reno (like the westerners of old) for a quick and easy divorce. In the course of the story unforeseen events transform her character. The implicit critique in the film is not only in terms of the lesbian love affair at the heart of the story, but of the role of women in general. For Campbell "within the mythic histories of the West this type of transformation was the domain of men; women's roles were more often than not limited to the archetypes of whore/angel, with little scope for radical difference or change" (281). But, of course, the lesbian romance is quite subversive as well, since it challenges standard notions of sexuality in the very heartland of American masculinity. At the same time, Deitch relies on visual cues used in heterosexual romance films to tell her story. So in a sense the film both presents the convention and also counters them in a very reflexive manner.

24

The final part of Campbell's book brings my discussion full circle to Carter. Both books choose to end their investigations with an analysis of *No Country for Old Men* (2007). This is certainly not a coincidence. The Coen brothers' film stands as one of the most popular examples of the post-Western tradition, a true example of looking back to the movie and actual history of the American West and trying to figure out the present through the past. For Campbell the protagonist of the film (played by Tommy Lee Jones) struggles to understand the changing West around him in a quiet and reflective manner, often looking back with nostalgia. The old West is gone, the pick-up truck replacing the horse, leaving the characters confused and disappointed, fractured and alienated. The only thing stable seems to be the natural landscape, which is slowly becoming urban itself. Within this changing world the hero cannot find, recognise or comprehend the world around him, "the traditional Western's man of

action has become static, cautious, and passive, much more of a ponderer...a doubter and thinker who realizes he does not choose to “be part of this world” of violence and misery” (340). For Campbell he has to learn to live beyond the “comforting illusion” of nostalgia and accept a more vulnerable way of being with others (maybe a call back to Roslyn’s new West).

25

Carter’s analysis pushes this interpretation further. He wishes to discuss the film’s ideological significance and how it could be seen as a critique of 21st century US foreign policy. For Carter the film becomes “a critique of the influence that the myth of the West holds over the socio-political trajectory of the present-day United States in its role as the world’s figurative lawman” (196). The New West present in this film stands as a failure of the promise of the domestication of the wilderness. The visual cues clearly suggest that this has not happened. It is certainly not a fine place to be in. Carter agrees with Campbell that the protagonist is passive and lacks agency, never seems in control, always trails behind the events, making the audience wonder how he, the Sheriff of this town, is going to deliver justice. Who is this hero that we believe will protect us and will guarantee justice and civilization? Instead of jumping into the action the hero pushes further and further away from the violence. Carter maintains that he “manages to transcend this fate by recognizing his own limitations as a lawman, and the realisation too that he is not a hero” (209).

26

Both writers notice that throughout the film the hero is juxtaposed (thematically and visually) with the villain (played by Javier Bardem). This is because the film acknowledges that the true Westerner has to be violent, know how to use the methods of the wilderness against itself –in other words, the hero and the villain are cut from the same cloth. The Sheriff, however, seems to recognise his inner savage and the fate that awaits him if enters this circle of violence –the archetypical trope of the Western. Carter argues that, unlike Eastwood’s protagonist in *Unforgiven*, the hero finally “accepts his own limitations and refuses to be defined by the cultural ‘mask’ that has shaped the attitudes of the past” (215). Hence, his retirement at the end of the narrative is not a defeat, but a choice not to return to the past. As such the past stops being a burden that invades the present and can now be viewed from a place of peace and survival. It should be noted that even here, in the vortex of revisionist critique, Carter does not forget his initial claim. He is careful enough to track the ways in which the film is not subversive enough (hence blurring the distinction between classical and post). For example, he notices that female characters are still marginalised and the villain is still ‘Other’ (a Mexican played by a Spaniard) whereas the hero is white, male, and Christian.

27

Both books succeed in covering much ground regarding the state of the genre. The investigations are thorough and manage to bring to the surface the complex history and present of this genre, and the ways film scholars have discussed these. It seems to me that we're still a long way away from hitting that last nail on the coffin of the Western. The discussion about frontier history, post-Westerns, and what lies beyond will haunt our genre explorations for some time.

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