

# Western Myth

Gordana Smudja

The Drama Artists' Association of Serbia, Serbia

## Abstract

*Necessary feedback in understanding the phenomenon of westerns is certainly the social background that is closely related to the myth of westerns from its beginnings until the decline of westerns in the seventies. America, as we see it in westerns, is a picture of a mass exodus of people who wanted more, often those for whom the old homeland had become cramped and insufficient. It is in this environment that we see the heroes of the Western empowered in the desire for individualization. In the USA, the western used to be a large part of the entire production, and its popularity was transferred to other continents (Europe, Australia and Asia). An interesting fact is that the western myth does not have its beginnings in western films, although they are not only his strongest and most persistent accomplices but also the strongest populist weapon for telling folk legends such as the ones about Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday or Billy the Kid who become the heroes of these legends.*

*Even before the invention of cinema and Porter's The Great Train Robbery (1903), considered by many to be the first western film, Western literature was represented, but in the form of cheap books glorifying groups of conquerors of distant wilderness. However, what the heroes of the western persistently carry with them from the old homeland are the laws. They try to turn their new environment into a socially organized one, to turn the "desert into a flower".*

**Keywords:** Western, Hero, Revenge, Stranger, Industrialization

## Introduction

As a rule, a culture is defined by large movements. Necessary feedback in understanding the western phenomenon is certainly the social and social background that is closely related to the western myth from its beginnings until the decline of the western in the 1970s.

Historical, political, social and religious moments played a crucial role in the creation and survival of Westerns in the form in which we experience them today. America, as we see it in Westerns, is a picture of a mass exodus of people who wanted more, often those for whom the old homeland has become narrow and insufficient. What bound all colonists from Europe in their desire for a new, large, unfettered space were the changes taking place in Europe at that time: economic changes would cause an increase in violence, which would again lead to a complete change in lifestyle. From agrarian and feudal structures, the economy moved towards mercantile and up to early capitalism.

Perhaps it is precisely in this kind of environment that we see the hero of the western strengthened in his desire for individualization.

## The origin of the genre

Along with melodrama, comedy and fantasy film, the western is one of the oldest genres, and in the USA the western used to be a large part of the entire production, and its popularity was transferred to other continents (Europe, Australia and America).

It is also an interesting fact that the western myth does not have its beginnings in western films, although they are not only its strongest and most persistent accomplices, but also the strongest populist weapon for presenting folk legends such as those about Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, or Billy the Kid who become the heroes of those legends. Even before the invention of the cinematograph and Porter's film "The Great Train Robbery" (1903), which many consider to be the first western film, western literature was represented, but in the form of cheap books glorifying groups of conquerors of the distant wilderness.

## The archetypal connection

Legends, as a rule, enter the national consciousness with incredible speed. Western heroes become people with whose glorification national consciousness and struggle for survival get motivation.

However, what the heroes of Westerns persistently carry with them from their old homeland are laws. They strive to turn their new environment into a socially organized one. They want to turn the "desert into a flower".

As a rule, the time of action of westerns is between 1850 and 1900. It was the time of the gold rush in California and the Dakotas, the time of the construction of the transcontinental railroad, industrial wars, the fight for the remaining pastures...

Western is a causal connection of three elements, which are especially clearly visible in John Ford's film "My Dear Clementine":

1. the content pattern of popular literature of the nineteenth century, which includes a hero, a heroine, and a villain;
2. study of the history of the West and
3. motive, i.e. dramaturgical structure of revenge.

The cold environment in which we find the heroes of Westerns makes people feel the need to unite according to the principle of tribal communities. They bring with them new laws that they establish themselves and never break them because that would

be a sin. Some of those unwritten but highly respected laws and moral norms are:

- the father, as the strongest, oldest and most experienced, is in charge;
- the brother must always go with the brother, and the wife with the husband;
- an old and weak father can “beat” sons who are in full strength, but he will never allow someone else to do it.

In the western, the dominant character is the character of the stranger who represents a potential danger to the lives of others who avoid and fear him from the beginning. It is necessary to find out what the foreigner's aspirations are.

It is likely that what made the Western such a popular form is the idea that it is possible to find oneself with the heroes of the Western in a new wild environment waiting to be tamed, and also the desire of people to find themselves in another world where it is possible to start from the beginning, to start searching for one's own identity again, and again in a world ruled by strong laws that cannot be easily shaken. People needed to have their own asylum, a place where they would feel completely safe, and such a place was successfully simulated for them in Western movies.

## Italo western

The worldwide popularity of westerns influenced Europe.

In Germany, there is an interest in the western film, but the western conventions of the genre will quickly be exhausted on German soil in adventure and action films. However, with the popularity of Karl May and the films of Harold Reinl, westerns also manage to fill the box office in Germany.

The American western inspired the film all over the world: France, Japan, India, Mexico, the Soviet Union, Sweden, Brazil, Czechoslovakia, and even Yugoslavia had their “pretenders” to the throne of the immortal myth.

The reasons for the appearance of such films are twofold:

1. the dominance of the American western on the world market, and at the same time the growth of interest in it outside the USA and
2. the knowledge that the Americans shoot numerous films in European locations (Spain, Yugoslavia) that successfully simulate the space of the American Northwest made the consumer countries (Italy and Germany) realize that it is more profitable for them to take over the production of such films themselves.

Some basic characteristics of this subgenre are differences in relation to the American Western:

- The story is set on the Texas-Mexico border dominated by unscrupulous Mexican bandits;
- The base is a desert;

- Historical circumstances are civil war or its consequences;
- The hero (who, especially in Leone's case, looks like an anti-hero, i.e. a good guy versus a bad guy) is a mysterious gunman, often without a name (“My Name Is Nobody”, Tonino Valeri) and almost regularly unshaven;
- Frequent elements of the action are violence, rape and torture. In Italian westerns, torture and brutality are enjoyed, killing is cold-blooded, and the acrobatic tricks of the heroes of these films gave a touch of frivolity;
- Negative people, especially if they are Mexican, often “grin” loudly and for no reason;
- Close-up shots and long views into the distance prevail;
- Climax and final showdown is often reduced to absurdity;

Many famous American B-actors considered going to Europe as a possibility in order to become Italian Western stars, and many European actors became stars precisely because of their roles in films of this genre, where they were usually signed under pseudonyms.

Most Spaghetti Westerns, however, did not venture beyond being interesting, action-packed films that would appeal to movie fans of the time.

## Group psychology and the imposition of role models

What primarily characterizes a Western situation is an individual or a group, in which the figure of the leader is dominant, who comes into conflict with one or a group of villains. The dramaturgy of the election is also important for the western story. Heroic figures often perform an action that MUST change the life of the whole environment. The hero, on the other hand, does only what he wants and is not forced to do anything except the orthodox moral norm that he has set for himself somewhere. The hero chooses whether to kill or not, take revenge or forgive and spare someone's life. Since there are no criteria, they set them for themselves and choose the path between good and evil.

Along with the constant questioning of moral norms comes a „black and white“ picture of reality and the environment, which is reinforced by the existential problem - the struggle for survival.

And if in American westerns that image is “black and white”, analogously in Italian westerns it is “grey”.

What marked the Italian film at the end of the sixties was the appearance of “spaghetti westerns”. Italo-westerns were created under the powerful jurisdiction of director Sergio Leone. In fact, his entire oeuvre shows a great fascination with this genre. Leone made all his spaghetti westerns according to the postulates of the American western. In this way, some of the main determinants of this genre became artistically transformed property of Italian western authors. Spaghetti Western is a rare example of

the triumph of style over substance. By style here we don't mean a replica, two, something that looks artistically valuable and fun. In Italian Westerns, the style results from the creation of a new art (not only a genre, because composer Ennio Morricone plays an important role in Leone's films) by carefully studying the old, in this case "extinct" genre known as the American Western. This genre received its complete reconstruction in a truly exploratory manner. The point of the whole story about the birth of a new genre lies in the fact that non-Americans and non-Westerners wanted to get closer to their own romantic (and what else it would be) image and idea of the West. Directors and entire film crews who often didn't even know English shot their westerns in Italy and Spain.

The choice made by the hero of traditional Westerns is imposed as the supreme principle that further guides the environment. And whether the hero chooses evil or good, the change his decision brings with him is always positive (the goal is always achieved and always fair). What cannot be allowed to the hero in the western is cunning and ugliness. Cunning is the wrong definition of the hero because it calls into question his motives, which are called into question by this physical feature (doubt arises). Cunning, too, should not distinguish a true Western hero because it greatly diminishes his victory.

These exclusivities only apply to American Westerns. As Leone's view of the Far West is different, we often find his hero in situations that he gets out of with his cunning and thoughtfulness. Leone's hero works exclusively for himself, for money, and does not hesitate to plot or lie.

The Western hero must become a winner: in a small environment, it is clearer who is the best, and there is a radical opposition between good and evil. In this regard, the Western hero is usually strong and dexterous in order to survive in a harsh world, he is calm because he often has the opportunity to make important decisions that will greatly affect the environment (there is a sense of responsibility) and he is always proud and in fact, it is the secret of his success.

In films of Sergio Leone, the hero wins if he manages to win the money. Leone sees the West as a place of only the rich are powerful, and he thoughtfully builds his heroes in relation to that vision. On the way to money, everything is allowed for the hero. Also, we can no longer speak of inviolable dignity and pride that is impossible to shake. We get an anticipation of this western feature in the first spaghetti western, Leone's "For a Fistful of Dollars", where the hero at the very beginning, after entering a small town on the border, meets a gang of disreputable Mexicans who welcome him with burst fire and injure his mule. Clint Eastwood, as "Nameless", runs away, grabs the pole with his hands and remains hanging on it while he lets the frightened mule run away. The scene of the meeting with the owner of the inn, in front of which "Nameless" hangs, is very comical. There is no Western dignity: "Nameless" hangs on the crossbar, the owner of the inn goes to the window, looks confused at the newcomer who utters a short "Hello!", gets off the crossbar and enters the bar.

Only later, the "Man with no name" goes to the bandits with a proposal to apologize to his mule, which they do not want. This scene is not primarily a scene where the hero will regain his dignity. In it, "Nameless" will convince us of his skill in handling a gun and gain our trust. Furthermore, everything is forgiven to him. We take for granted that he came to San Miguel for money, but he is not the one who attacked. In San Miguel, he was welcomed by worse than him, and thus he enters the film as better than them.

The antagonist cannot win primarily because he has less motivation. His main trait is physical (he's usually very fit) and he doesn't fight with full confidence unlike the protagonist.

In Leone's "For a Fistful of Dollars" the heroes are indeed very skilled. Through the story, the innkeeper will introduce "Nameless" to the city and its inhabitants. A certain Ramon, who is in charge of the town, is constantly mentioned with, not so much respect, as appreciation and fear. Several times, "Nameless" will hear that Ramon is the strongest, the most powerful, the most skilled. Nevertheless, city bosses from both families live in a matriarchy, indicated in several places. Before all important moments, they consult with their wives who actually run the whole game. This motif is very skillfully woven through this film by Leone, and it is in the background, but very clear. This much trust in women leads to (un)confidence in one's own strength. Members of the Baxter and Rojas families are scared before the fight and need women to compensate for their insecurities. Unlike them, the "Man with no name" is sure of himself and his victory to such an extent that it sometimes makes us wonder where such self-confidence comes from, being a foreigner.

The protagonist of the American Western must win: he must carry the halo of victory, because evil must be destroyed, and even more than that – humiliated. If the hero physically dies at the end of the fight, it is his idea that must win a clear victory.

On this long journey towards his goal, which he will always reach, the protagonist starts from his own striving towards the goal (positive) until the final denouement when good and evil will clash once again, decisively.

In Italo-Westerns, which are a variation on the theme of the classic Western, even a new vision of the West, the hero is always the winner if he wins money or gold. The question arises: what will money or gold do to the hero, and what will he use it for? The answer lies in the fact that his desire (for gold/money) is no longer invisible, symbolic. Money helps him materialize his aspirations and make them tangible in the new (material) world. As money is a reflection of power, by acquiring all the city's money, he will become the most powerful.

Money is indicated in the titles of two films of Leone's trilogy ("For a Fistful of Dollars" and "For a Few Dollars More"), and in the film "Good, Bad and The Ugly", 1966, the motive of the fight is gold. And again, we ask why?

"For a few dollars more" gives us the answer to this question on the introductory board which reads:

»Where life had no value, death, sometimes, had its price. That is why the bounty killers appeared.«

We learn about how “life has no price” even earlier, the classic western hero rides a horse through the prairie towards the city. They shot him from a long distance for an unknown reason, he falls from his horse, and the horse runs away. It seems that with this scene, Leone wants to make it known that he is fully aware of how and why he killed the classic Western hero forever with the first film of his Italo-Western trilogy. The arrival of such a hero in Kamkara would be a complete anachronism. What would such a character do in a town with a bank and a train station? The Western code of honor no longer applies, people travel by train, and romance has no place in this harsh world. It is Leone’s West: he both loves it and hates it because it is not really him who killed the hero, but the train, the bank and the change of the value system: the most honorable is not the most respected but the one who is the richest. It is necessary to adapt. Leone adapts his hero to the new situation: at the end of the film, the character played by Eastwood leaves with a trailer full of dead (“Life has no value”), with money, therefore as a winner (“Death, sometimes, has its price.”).

Leone’s influence on other Italo-Western authors is also visible in the very titles of some of the Italo-Westerns that were created after Leone’s debut: “A river of dollars” (Italy 1966), “100,000 dollars for Ringo” (Italy 1966), “A few dollars for Django” (Italy 1968), “One silver dollar” (Italy/France 1965), “For a dollar in the teeth” (Italy/USA 1966), “10,000 dollars blood money” (Italy 1967) are just some titles that point to the importance of Leone’s perception of the West and its utility within the genre.

Eastwood as “Nameless” in “For a Few Dollars More” after counting the bodies, takes the money and walks off into the sunset. The end of the film “The Good, the Bad, the Evil” suggests the same thing: a man hangs from a tree with a noose around his neck, while coins lie beneath his feet. If he makes one sudden move, he will break his neck. The irony of the trilogy is that money often ends up with those who don’t know what to do with it, with those for whom it means nothing (literally here).

What characterizes the Western story as a whole is a solid narrative flow, direction from the shadows, so that the director would not be in a position to comment on the sharply polarized relationship between good and evil, which is not for comment, and a medium shot that will highlight the relationship between man and his rival, that is, man and nature. The camera is static because a moving one would act to reduce the strength of the relation, while a moving camera is only used for subjective shots or to follow a moving subject.

## A new value system

But with the arrival of trains in small American towns, every bit of land became populated. The villains are no longer robbers, but the owners of those same trains, banks, and city leaders. This is precisely the moment

on which the Italo-Western anti-hero was built. How to imagine the duel between good and evil when both have disappeared in their natural form, when it has even become impossible to distinguish what is what?

»Where life had no value, death, sometimes, had its price. That is why the bounty killers appeared.« is the tableau that opens the first Italian-Western, the film »For a Fistful of Dollars«, directed by Sergio Leone.

It seems that with this tableau, Leone wants to make it known that he is fully aware of how and why he killed the classic Western hero forever with the first film of his Italo-Western trilogy. It is necessary to either adapt or rebel.

Director Sergio Leone gives his vision of the West. He builds his West through violence and fear. The poetics of life in the fortified desert oases disappear. The law becomes a weapon in the hands of the strongest, the most vicious, and the most cynical.

As the early 1960s saw the American western slowly take on a fatality, pastoral idylls and romantic heroes were becoming a thing of the past. With the last film blockbusters of John Ford (“The Searchers”, 1956) and Howard Hawks (“Rio Bravo”, 1959), there was a magnificent farewell to John Wayne, the man who literally defined the Western hero.

Both films are flawless Westerns that survive in an era of filmmaking defined by:

- the conflict of unexplored nature and civilization;
- strong individualization and desire to gain freedom in new areas;
- by building society and in parallel with the evil forces that strive to destroy it;
- ultimate confrontations between good and evil (dueling).

Sergio Leone: “The Americans have always depicted the West in extremely romantic terms—with a horse that runs to his master’s whistle. They have never treated the West seriously, just as we have never treated ancient Rome seriously.”

Leone’s view of the West is much harsher, but very significant for the formation of the general picture of America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thanks to his films, the other side of the story was shown. Romance disappears, and brutal reality remains. It is up to audience to choose their viewing angle.

## And then the wild west end happened

Similar to the western that was created in its true homeland, in the West, and the “spaghetti western” that is. “Italo-Western” had a somewhat similar fate. The moment when the heroes of these films wished for more than what they really can, when they started to set their goals bigger than what they really need, and the directors of the films burned themselves out in introducing themes from politics, wars and civil strife, that moment is the western in its primeval form glorifying national legends died forever.

Only some directors will return to say something more about this inexhaustible theme of attempts at individualization in a cold environment, human life that increasingly becomes just a bare struggle for survival and ride off into the sunset in the rocky West of human dreams and new beginnings.

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