

THE EUROPEAN WESTERN

Walter Przybylowski

The Western film has long been considered by scholars and film enthusiasts to be a distinctly American genre. Its themes originate in America's own violent, exciting, and complicated past. For many years, Hollywood sold images of hard men fighting savages on the plains to the worldwide public; by ignoring the more complicated aspects of the "how the west was won" and the true nature of colonist/native relations, filmmakers were able to reap great financial and professional rewards. The huge success of John Ford's film *Stagecoach* brought about countless imitations that led to the genre playing in a sort of loop reinforcing the same myths and ideas in different films. John Ford's influential masterpiece *Stagecoach*, set the rules for next few decades of American Westerns. After the success of German Westerns in the 1950s, though, a new take on Westerns was ushered in by other European countries. Leading the charge in the Euro-Western were the Italians, whose cynical, often politically-charged Westerns forever left an impact on the face of cinema. Europeans, particularly the Italians, challenged the dominant film conventions of an American-based genre by complicating the morality of the characters, blurring the lines between good and evil, and complicating the narrative, visual, and aural structures of Westerns. In this way, the genre motifs that *Stagecoach* initiated are explored in the European Westerns of the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s, yet with a striking difference in style. Specifically, Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* broke many of the rules set up by the Hollywood Western and in the process created a new visual language for the Western. Deconstructing key scenes from this film reveals the demythologization at work in many of the Euro-Westerns, which led to a genre enriched by its presentation of a more complicated American West.

Stagecoach, released in 1939, is a perfect example of almost all the visual and plot motifs that would populate "classic" Hollywood Westerns for next few decades. The story concerns a group of people attempting to cross a stretch of land made dangerous by Indians on the warpath, while remaining confined for the majority of the movie inside a stagecoach. Little effort is made to develop the characters of the Indians, who appear mainly as a narrative device, adversaries that the heroes must overcome in order to maintain their peaceful existence. This plot, with minor

changes, could be used as a general description for countless Westerns. In his book *Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western*, author Michael Coyne explains the significance of *Stagecoach* to the Western genre and its influence in solidifying the genre's archetypes.

[I]t was *Stagecoach* which. . . redefined the contours of the myth. The good outlaw, the whore with a heart of gold, the Madonna/Magdalene dichotomy between opposing female leads, the drunken philosopher, the last-minute cavalry rescue, the lonely walk down Main Street—all became stereotypes from *Stagecoach's* archetypes. *Stagecoach* quickly became the model against which other "A" Westerns would be measured. (18-19)

Coyne is not exaggerating when he calls it "the model": in fact, all of these stereotypes and classic predicaments became a sort of checklist of things the viewer expected to see. This reliance on a preconceived way to sell the public Western films—where you could always tell the good from the bad, and knew before the film ended how each character would end up—led to certain genre expectations that the directors of the Euro-Westerns would later knowingly reconfigure. Pauline Kael wrote in her book *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, "The original *Stagecoach* had a mixture of reverie and reverence about the American past that made the picture seem almost folk art; we wanted to believe in it even if we didn't" (Kael 52).

There seemed to be a need not just in Americans but in most citizens of the world to believe that there was a great untamed land out there just waiting to be cultivated. More importantly, as Kael points out, Americans wanted to believe that this was how the west was won, the very myth that Europeans later debunked through parody and subversive filmmaking techniques. According to Theresa Harlan, author of works on Native American art, the myth is based in the need to make the erasure of American Indians more palatable to early Christian settlers. In her article "Adjusting the Focus for a n Indigenous Presence," Harlan writes that

Eurocentric frontier ideology and the representations of indigenous people it produced were used to convince many American settlers that indigenous people were incapable of discerning the difference between a presumed civilized existence and their own "primitive" state. (6)

This myth had its genesis long before the advent of motion pictures, a myth that supposed the building of America was a wholly righteous endeavor wherein the land

was free for the taking. It is easy to see why the effort to dehumanize the Native Americans took place; by presenting them as little better than wild animals, the people settling the land would feel less guilt in their erasure. Early frontier representations of Native Americans were the well from which the Hollywood Western drew inspiration, and through this process, continued to legitimize the Western myth. So while *Stagecoach* "redefined the contours of the myth" with its high level of technical skill and artistry, it failed to engage the darker cultural issues that complete the American West. As Rick Worland and Edward Countryman deftly point out, "[I]and, social forces and problems defined in academic terms . . . do not offer promising material for Hollywood screenplays" (182). What the success of *Stagecoach* afforded Hollywood was a template on how to make money through the Western genre, and as Countryman and Worland note, Hollywood was not about to engage notions of true land ownership or moral responsibility for Native American mistreatments. In his book *The Invention of the Western Film*, Scott Simon observes that "*Stagecoach* is the single Western from before the war regularly called 'classic' by critics" (Simon 194). For this reason, a strong grasp of the film's system is imperative in order to truly understand its influence.

The Hollywood Western evoked audience response in a variety of ways, and especially through the use of visual and musical elements. The musical themes that underscore the actions of characters can be as powerful as their visual representation on screen. In his essay "Appearances," John Berger writes that "when photographs are used with words; they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion" (91). This method can be employed to legitimize any agenda the photographer might have, yet this same theory can also be applied to a musical score and how it compliments the scene of a film. What Berger is talking about in his essay is simple manipulation, and the Hollywood Western exploited audience's emotions in a movie using similar techniques. Deborah Bright argues that "the Western, created a public taste for spectacular scenery used as a backdrop for thrilling dramas" (129); her observation of the spectacular scenic aspects of a Western is important to not since the Euro-Western will not utilize the same spectacular scenery to film their dramas. *Stagecoach* offers an opportunity to deconstruct the ways in which Hollywood craftsman used setting and music to emphasize certain myths they wished to convey

In *Stagecoach*, an Apache does not appear until more than halfway through the movie, but whenever one is mentioned, the soundtrack fills with sinister and

foreboding drumbeats. The first sighting of Indians is a scene without dialogue where the camera pans between the stagecoach crossing through the land and Apaches watching from afar. The music that accompanies this scene is particularly telling, since as the camera pans between stagecoach and Apaches, the music shifts in tone dramatically from a pleasant melody to a score filled with dread. The intention of such a scene is to enhance the viewer's sympathy for the travelers while at the same time creating a fear of the Apaches. When the heroes shoot and kill the Apaches, the viewer has already been subjected to specific film techniques to give the stagecoach riders moral certitude in their annihilation. To emphasize this point, the music swells victoriously every time an Apache is shown falling from a horse. This kind of score is powerful stuff to accompany an image and does its best to tell the viewers how they should react. Scott Simon writes, "[p]lacing Indians on the Plains warpath becomes an increasingly perfunctory action device" (81). The classic Western has no other real need for the Indian, which can stand in for any minority, because other than being a menace that will eventually be thwarted, the role of the Indians in the Western was limited. However, when Europe starts to make Westerns the line of moral certitude will become less distinct.

In her essay "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography," Deborah Bright argues that landscape photography has reinforced certain formulaic myths of the landscape, and the same can be said of the Hollywood Western during the 40s and 50s. For example, in *Stagecoach*, when the stagecoach finally sets out for its destination through Apache territory, a fence is juxtaposed against the vast wide-open country in the foreground. The meaning is clear—the stagecoach is leaving civilized society to venture into the wilds of the West, and music swells as the coach crosses into that vast landscape. Ford uses landscape in this way to engender in the audience the desired response of elation and longing for a time gone past, where there was land free for the taking and there was plenty to go around. Yet Bright suggests, that "[i]f we are to redeem landscape photography from its narrow self-reflexive project, why not openly question the assumptions about nature and culture that it has traditionally served and use our practice instead to criticize them?" (141). It is interesting to look at Bright's solution for this problem, as this is exactly what Europeans, and Italians in particular, seem to have done with the Western. Since the Western genre had for decades been the province of American film-makers, when Europeans started to make their own

Westerns, Bright's hypothesis becomes relevant. Europeans will take advantage of their outsider status in relation to an American genre by openly questioning the myths that have been established by *Stagecoach* and its cinematic brethren. In the meantime, for the next few decades, Hollywood continued to produce Westerns with the basic characteristics introduced in *Stagecoach*.

Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* is a superior example of a European artist's take on the art form of the American Western. The title alone signals the element of storytelling: in a sublime stroke of titling, Leone makes the connection between Western films and fairy tales, and announces that the genre myths that *Stagecoach* propped up for audiences to revel in will now be questioned. In his book *Spaghetti Westerns*, Christopher Frayling observes that "*Once Upon a Time* is concerned with the 'language' and 'syntax' of the Western. . . an unmasking or 'display' of the terminology of the genre" (213). The "plot" of the film is flimsy, with several of the classic Western motifs intertwined into a sort of dreamy view of the American Western. The revenge plot is supplied by Charles Bronson's character Harmonica, with Henry Fonda playing the lowdown gunfighter trying to become a legitimate business man, a classic trope of countless Westerns. Claudia Cardinale is the "whore" who is trying to make good and put her past behind her. All of these standard Western types are integrated into the "Iron Horse" plotline, wherein the coming of the railroad signifies great changes in the West. Frayling explains the Italian Western use of stereotypes as "used to explore frontier history and the dreams embodied in it" (194). The similarities to American Westerns, on paper at least, seem to be so great as to be almost a copy of what was already done in Hollywood, but a closer look at European Westerns and at this film in particular, shows that Leone is consciously setting up the stereotypes. After all, he needs to work within the genre's language if he is to adequately challenge it.

The opening scene of *Once Upon a Time* runs roughly ten minutes, and provides an introduction to many of the aesthetic and ideological changes made by the European Western. During the whole ten-minute opening, the viewer will quickly notice how little dialogue is spoken, a happy circumstance of post-synchronization and country-specific dubbing that resulted in a reliance on strong visual storytelling. As a matter of fact, it would be hard to designate any one language as the correct language for a Euro-Western, but English would be the best choice, for even those in the cast who could not speak English would sometimes

mouth the words in English. Financial reasons led to English being the default language for most Euro-Westerns since it produced the largest market and consequently, the greatest monetary rewards. However, the use of post-synchronization has an unsettling effect on any viewer used to the polished soundtracks of a Hollywood film. When viewers experience a post-synchronized film, the response is a distancing from the material; certain players in the film match the words coming out of their mouths better than others, so the movie takes on a surreal edge. This visual touch perfectly compliments Leone's goal—to divorce the reality of the West from the myths encouraged by American Westerns.

During the opening of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the viewer is given a kind of audio and visual *tour de force* of Euro-Western aesthetics. Leone introduces three gunmen in typical Italian Western style, with the first presented by a cut to a dusty boot-heel from which the camera slowly pans up until it reaches the top of his cowboy hat. During this pan, the cowboy's gear and its authenticity—a major aspect of the Italian Western—can be taken in by the audience. Closer examination of the genre would show that many Euro-Westerns use this tactic; Felix Morrow confirms that there is more to this aesthetic than pure fetishistic touches:

[e]xtreme realism of bodies (hairy, greasy, foul-smelling), clothes or objects (including mania for weapons) in Italian films is above all intended to compensate for the complete fraud of the space and origins. The green pastures, farms and cattle of American Westerns are replaced by large, deserted canyons. (32)

Morrow suggests that realism of set dressing and costuming, this hyper-realistic attention to weaponry found in Euro-Westerns, specifically Italian Westerns, is there to distract the viewer from the unreality of the landscape. In the opening scene, the other two gunfighters are introduced by a camera panning across the room, allowing characters to materialize seemingly out of nowhere. Roger Ebert notes that Leone

established a rule that he follows throughout. . . that the ability to see is limited by the sides of the frame. At important moments in the film, what the camera cannot see, the characters cannot see, and that gives Leone the freedom to surprise us with entrances that cannot be explained by the practical geography of his shots. (Ebert)

It is these aesthetic touches created to compensate for a fraudulent landscape that ushered in a new visual language for the Western.

The opening of *Once Upon a Time in the West* undercuts any preconceived notion of how to film a Western, and as Frayling points out, this is exactly Leone's intention: "[t]he Director had obviously enjoyed dilating the audience's sense of time, exploiting, in his ostentatious way, the rhetoric of the Western, and dwelling on the tiniest details to fulfill his intention" (197). By using jarring edits with amplified sounds, Leone informs the viewer that not only has he seen all the popular Hollywood Westerns, but is purposely not going to give the audience that kind of Western. The opening ten minutes would be considered needlessly long in a typical Hollywood Western, but Leone is not making a copy of a Hollywood Western, and the length of such scenes allows for more meditation on the styling of the genre. In fact, it is this reliance on the audience's previously established knowledge of Westerns that allows Euro-Westerns to subvert the genre. Barry Langford, writing for *Film History*, claims that

Once Upon a Time strips bare the form's claims on historical verisimilitude and pushes its innately ritualized and stylized aspects to near-parodic extremes that evacuate the film of narrative credibility and psychological realism alike, to the point where we become fundamentally aware only of the pre-given structural relations between narrative "actants" or functions. (31).

Leone and other European filmmakers are asking the public to open their eyes, to not believe what is shown—up on a movie screen it is all make believe. "The representations [the camera] produces are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own. . . but the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register a truth" (Harlan 104). Euro-Westerns are attempting to take the camera's power away by parodying its effect. When Leone has characters magically appear in frame, or amplifies the squeaking of a door hinge on a soundtrack, he is ridiculing the basic laws that govern American Westerns. The opening can be read as a sort of primer for what is about to come for the rest of the film, and its power leaves viewers more attuned to what they are watching.

In *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Leone casts Henry Fonda, the quintessential good guy, memorable in classic Hollywood Westerns like *My Darling Clementine*, as the ruthless Frank, a rather despicable gunman shown murdering a small child early in the film. In an article on Italian Westerns for the *Saturday Evening Post*, reporter

William Price Fox quotes the comments of Italian director Maurizio Lucidi on the European perspective of the Western:

We're adding the Italian concept of realism to an old American myth, and its working. Look at Jesse James. In your country he's a saint. Over here we play him as a gangster. That's what he was. Europeans today are too sophisticated to believe in the honest gunman movie anymore. They want the truth and that's what we're giving them. (55).

A desire to complicate the good guy/bad guy model of Hollywood films is evident in this quote. Leone knew exactly what he was doing and his casting choices went a long way to confusing the audience's sympathies. For this reason, Fonda's entrance in the film is worth noting. The scene begins with a close-up of a shotgun barrel, which quickly explodes in a series of shots that establish a father and son out hunting by their homestead. Here, Leone starts to move the camera more, with pans from father to son and a crane shot of their house as the father and son return home. The landscape is Spain, doubling for the American West, and its dried-out, dust-bowl look strongly clashes with the open expanses of American Westerns. The *mise-en-scene* shows a family picnic table with an abundance of food: the family is about to celebrate something. Throughout this scene, crickets chirp on the soundtrack, until Leone abruptly cuts them off, the sudden silence quickly followed by close-ups of the uneasy faces of three family members. Leone is teasing the audience: he puts the crickets back on the soundtrack and things continue until out of nowhere we hear a gunshot. Its effect is strange because instead of the camera focusing on the target of the gunshot, it pans off to the sky, and for a moment the viewer thinks it is a hunter. This is followed by a close-up of the father's face, as he looks off to the distance, then is rattled when he sees his daughter grasping the air, obviously shot. Here Leone uses a startling shot in which the camera tracks the father as he as he runs toward his daughter and is quickly shot down.

The family has been murdered seemingly out of nowhere, with only a young boy remaining alive and confused. Then Leone gives us a long shot of men appearing out of dust-blown winds, from nearby brush. It is obvious to the viewer that these men are the killers, but we get no clear shot of their faces, instead long shots of their backs and an overhead shot as they converge on the young boy. During the family's massacre, there is no score, just the abstract brutality of the slayings. This is the moment when Leone introduces Henry Fonda; he starts with the camera on

the back of his Fonda's head and then does a slow track around until Fonda's face is visible. Now, audience members around the world would have a hard time believing Fonda was a killer of these innocent people. Through crosscutting between the young boy's confused face and Fonda's smiling eyes, Leone builds a doubt in the audience—maybe he will not kill the boy. Then the crosscutting is interrupted with a close-up of Fonda's large Colt coming out of its holster and Morricone's score, full of sadness, becomes audible. The audience's fears are realized: Fonda is indeed the killer. This scene is a clear parody of Hollywood casting stereotypes, and Leone toys with audience expectations by turning upside down the myth of the noble outlaw as portrayed by John Wayne in *Stagecoach*.

During the late 60s and the early 70s, Europe was at odds with many of America's foreign policies. Morrow confirms that "some Italian (and Spanish) directors nevertheless succeeded in dealing with a number of strongly political subjects during a period (1965-73) when American imperialism in Latin America and in Southeast Asia was showing itself to be particularly brutal" (33). The railroad baron in *Once Upon a Time in the West* bringing "civilization" to America by any means necessary, even at the cost of innocent lives, can easily be read as a critique of the sometimes-misguided ways Americans went about bringing their way of life to other countries. In the film, money is shown as the absolute corrupter, turning man against man, with the only loyalty not to the individual but to the individual with the most money. Frayling writes of "the creation of a pervading atmosphere of pessimism—the destruction of comfortable fictions, when faced with the objective realities of technological advance" (124). The advance of civilization is shown to have rather dubious merits in the Euro-Western; Morton, the railroad tycoon, is the bringer of civilization, usually a good thing in the classic Western genre. Civilization in the Hollywood Western meant doctors, schools, homes for everyone, but Europeans question *how* this civilization was built. Leone, in a telling quote, gives his perspective, "I see the history of the West as really the reign of violence by violence" (Frayling 134).

Leone's critique of the civilization of the West becomes apparent in his depiction of Morton's demise in the movie. As Frank returns to Morton's train, wheezing and gasping resonates from the track, its life almost spent. In a long, one-take tracking shot, the camera is low to the ground, observing the side of the train as it pans along. The camera follows Frank as he looks for Morton and in the process,

wounded bodies in various death poses are revealed strewn about the ground. The connection of death with civilization makes it clear that Leone is not a believer in the myth that "free" land is necessarily free for the taking. Many people have died for this dream and there is nothing noble in their deaths. Frank finally finds Morton crawling along outside the train in mud, striving to reach a puddle; as he dies, the lapping waves of the ocean can be heard. What one wishes for and the reality of a situation are rarely in synch in Italian Westerns; Morton's pathetic death as he imagines the Pacific ocean can be seen as a critique of the genre's own reluctance to accept the socio-economic realities of the time

All of these aspects contribute to the idea that the concern of *Once Upon a Time*—and the Euro-Western in general—is to give voice to the perspective of the marginal characters, the section of the West rarely heard from. Native Americans, Mexicans, and the Chinese were rarely a position of significance in a Hollywood Western. In contrast, the character Harmonica pushes plot forward, with his need to avenge. Harmonica can be seen as either Mexican or Native American, though it matters little since his character stands in for all the racial stereotypes that populated the American Western genre. The movie's climactic duel involves Harmonica and Frank. Frank is clearly perplexed why this man wants to fight him, but his ego makes it impossible for him to refuse. They meet in an abandoned yard, with one character in the extreme foreground and the other in the extreme background, the difference between these two characters presented from both physical and ideological standpoints. Frank guns down settlers to make way for civilization, whereas Harmonica helps people to fend for themselves. Morricone's score dominates the soundtrack during this end scene, with a harmonica blaring away throughout. The costuming of Frank all in black and Harmonica all in white is an ironic throwback to classic Hollywood costuming, and also contributes to the concept of Harmonica prevailing over the racial stereotypes of American Westerns. Leone draws the scene for all its worth, with the camera circling Harmonica as Frank looks for a perfect point to start the duel. Harmonica never moves, his face steadily framed in a close-up, while there are mostly long shots of Frank, whose body language shows that he is uncertain about the outcome of this duel, while Harmonica knows the ending.

As the two seem about to draw, the camera pushes into Harmonica's eyes, and there is a flashback of a younger, more grizzled Frank walking toward the camera; in this moment, a distinct connection is made within the film of past and present.

Harmonica is a young boy forced to deal with the notion that his older brother is going to be hanged. Frank walks up to the struggling young boy and places a harmonica in his mouth, sealing his own destiny. This brutal scene is set in actual American locations and is taken directly from John Ford Westerns; Leone is literally bringing home the violence dealt to minorities in America's past. As soon as the brother is hung, the scene returns to the present, and the duel immediately takes place. Frank is shot through the heart and as he is shot, his face spins into a close up, and we see a look of utter disbelief. Frank asks Harmonica as he lies dying, "Who are you?" and at this moment, Frank has a harmonica shoved in his mouth. Only then does recognition play over Frank's face; as he falls to the ground in death, his face in close-up is a grotesque death-mask not unlike the massacred victims of Morton's train. The idea of past mistreatments coming back to haunt characters in the present is a clear attempt to deconstruct the idea that the settlers had a moral right to conquer indigenous people.

The tremendous success of *Stagecoach* was both a blessing and curse for the Western genre; without it, the genre would surely never have gained the success it did, but this success came with ideological and creative limitations. The popularity, and limitations, of the American Western may have inspired European directors to attempt something new with the genre, and unlike American filmmakers, they could look more objectively at our collective history and expose our myths. Leone's demythologization of the American Western has proved a valuable addition to the Western genre. As John Nudge, in his online article for *Images Journal*, writes, "[t]hough panned by US critics on its initial release, latter-day reviewers are finally giving this film its due and it is now considered a classic" ("Spaghetti Western"). At the time, it seemed as though Leone's movie proved too challenging for the critics of the era, but audiences responded to these movies, which gave a new perspective for the Western, and on the West. The effect of the Euro-Western can be seen in American cinemas as early as *The Wild Bunch* in 1969, and as recently as the attention in *Brokeback Mountain* to characters usually marginalized. In this way, Italian Westerns forced a new level of viewing of the Western tradition that made it impossible to ever return to the previous Hollywood model.

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