

Violence in Western Movies

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DEGREE THESIS	
Arcada	
Degree Programme:	Media Culture
Identification number:	
Author:	Kaisa Pääkkö
Title:	Violence in Western Movies
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Commissioned by:	
<p>Abstract:</p> <p>The aim of this thesis is to determine how violence is used in films of the Western genre. The focus is on the importance of violence as a structuring element in narratives typical of the genre, a device for characterization and as a signifying agent of morality or ideology. The basis of the thesis is the assumption that violence is a defining and integral part of Western stories and that, as the genre has developed, the way that violence is depicted stylistically and utilized as a plot device has changed over time, consequently altering the messages conveyed by the films. The method used to answer the questions posed in the thesis is to research relevant background information – the history of the genre, the function of violence in film – about the genre and then analyzing two films, <i>The Tin Star</i> and <i>Unforgiven</i>, on that foundation. As one of the films is a traditional Western, from an era with more stringent regulation of depictions of violence, and the other a revisionist Western from a quarter of a century later, they serve to exemplify the drastic changes in the genre. The conclusions drawn from the analysis largely support the suppositions of the thesis, as violence is shown to be a crucial element in both films, albeit with distinct differences in the values imparted by them. Both films demonstrate the way violence is used to shape Western stories and characters, but the positive portrayal of heroes wielding violence for the good of community in <i>The Tin Star</i> is starkly contrasted with the desolate, purposeless killing in <i>Unforgiven</i>.</p>	
Keywords:	Film, genre, Western, violence, <i>The Tin Star</i> (1957), <i>Unforgiven</i> (1992)
Number of pages:	43
Language:	English
Date of acceptance:	

EXAMENSARBETE	
Arcada	
Utbildningsprogram:	Mediekultur
Identifikationsnummer:	
Författare:	Kaisa Pääkkö
Arbetets namn:	Violence in Western Movies
Handledare (Arcada):	Kauko Lindfors
Uppdragsgivare:	
<p>Sammandrag:</p> <p>Syftet av detta examensarbete är att undersöka hur våld används i filmer av Western genren. Fokuset ligger på betydelsen av våld som ett strukturerande element i berättelser som är typiska för genren, ett verktyg för karakterisering och som betecknande av moral eller ideologi. Grunden för avhandlingen är antagandet att våld är en avgörande och väsentlig del av Western berättelser och att när genren har utvecklats, har det sätt som våld skildrats på stilistiskt och utnyttjats som en del av intrigen förändrats över tid, så har även meddelanden som förmedlas av filmerna ändrats. Den metod som används för att besvara de frågor som ställs i avhandlingen är att undersöka relevant bakgrundsinformation – historien, funktionen av våld i film - om genren och sedan analysera två filmer, The Tin Star och Unforgiven, från den grunden. Eftersom en av filmerna är en traditionell Western, från en tid med strängare reglering av våldsskildringar, och den andra en revisionistisk Western från ett kvarts sekel senare, de tjänar att exemplifiera de drastiska förändringarna i genren. De slutsatser som dragits från analysen stöder i stort sett antagandena i avhandlingen, eftersom våld har visat sig vara en avgörande faktor i båda filmerna, om än med tydliga skillnader i värdena som kommuniceras i dem. Båda filmerna visar hur våldet används för att forma Western berättelser och karaktärer, men den positiva bild av hjältar som använder våld till samhällets godo i The Tin Star står i rak kontrast till det obarmhärtiga och meningslösa dödandet i Unforgiven.</p>	
Nyckelord:	film, genre, våld, western, The Tin Star (1957), Unforgiven (1992)
Sidantal:	43
Språk:	engelska
Datum för godkännande:	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES.....	6
1.2 LIMITATIONS AND MATERIAL.....	6
1.3 METHOD AND THEORY.....	7
2. BACKGROUND.....	8
2.1 DEFINING THE WESTERN GENRE.....	8
2.2 PREHISTORY OF THE WESTERN.....	10
2.3 HISTORY OF WESTERN CINEMA.....	13
2.4 HISTORY OF VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN.....	17
2.4.1 <i>Function of Violence in Western.....</i>	<i>19</i>
3. THE FILMS.....	20
3.1 ANALYSIS.....	21
4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION.....	39
LIST OF REFERENCES.....	42

1 INTRODUCTION

It would not be too bold to claim, that throughout the nearly 120 years of cinema, no genre has meant as much as the Western only to then be so wholly denounced and discarded. Which is not to deny that Westerns have their faults, but their affect on the world's most influential national film industry is equally undeniable.

It is difficult, from this geographical and temporal distance, to imagine the importance Westerns used to have both for Hollywood and for their viewers. Already in 1910 as many as 21% of titles produced in the US were Westerns, and that percentage did not fluctuate much until the decline of the genre that began in the late 1950s (see Buscombe 1988:39 and :48), and some 7000 films were produced during the 20th century (Buscombe 2006:23f). Due to their ubiquitous presence over so many decades they became interwoven with American culture at large in a unique way, and though new releases are few and far between these days, their impact can still be seen in other films, in language and even politics.

It is because of this special place the Western holds in film history, and consequently the cultural history of the 20th century, that it is an appropriate genre to study further. There are many intriguing aspects of Westerns that are worth a closer look, but the focus for this thesis will be on a particular convention that runs right through the history of the genre and is one of its defining and crucial clichés; violence. As Richard Slotkin writes in the BFI Companion to the Western (ed. Buscombe 1988:233):

Since both form and ideology require that the essential conflicts be resolved in a violent confrontation, it may be said that the irreducible core of the Western story-line is to provide a rationalizing framework which will explain and perhaps justify a spectacular act of violence.

And as another writer points out; “Whenever someone dies in a Western one must ask: why? The reason invariably has to do with the ideological prescription embodied and illustrated in the film.” (Tuska 1985:230)

The use of violence in the films that will be analysed for this thesis is very telling. Points of interest will be who dies, who kills and how, and why the stories unfold as they do, in an attempt to learn

something about the narrative structures of Westerns from 1939 onward. From this it should be possible to explicate what the ideological prescriptions mentioned in the above quote actually are.

The other angle of approach in this thesis is to view the genre via the changes that it has gone through. Writing in 1998 Jim Kitses (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:19) suggested that, while there has long been a strain of Westerns that question and attempt to reshape both the genre itself and perceptions of the historical era it draws its subject matter from, revisionist films ought to be recognized as “a discrete, dominant type” as they “can be seen now to make up the primary focus of the genre”. On that basis one would expect Westerns from different decades to show these developments.

1.1 Research questions and hypotheses

The relevant questions for this research can be formulated as follows: What is the role of violence in the narrative of, and the values espoused by, Westerns? And how has that role changed over time?

My hypotheses are:

- That violence is an integral part of Westerns, perhaps even one of the defining elements
- Violence is used to convey moral values and ideology in the films
- The way violence is portrayed in the genre has changed as the public's sensibilities have changed
- As the portrayal of violence has changed, so has the ideology behind it

1.2 Limitations and material

In spite of the broad and rich history of Westerns, or in fact because of it, it would not be possible to delve into it in its entirety in the scope of this thesis. Therefore the extent of the research will be limited by certain imposed restrictions.

Due to difficulty in accessing them, no Westerns from the silent era could be included, nor any B-Westerns. As there was a slump in the production of A-Westerns in the 1930's, all the films

considered for use in this research are from the time following the turning point of 1939. The boom in Westerns signalled by that year will be addressed in the second chapter.

As the sheer quantity of Western films in existence, even excluding everything prior to the 40's, is so extensive, the focus of the thesis will be on a specific variant. There are certain characters, plots and settings that crop up repeatedly in this genre. For instance, the stranger-gunfighter, who saves a community and usually makes it possible for civilization to progress in the way that the audience knows it did. Films of this type, when made as classical Westerns, generally exhibit a more or less formulaic story of a conflict spiralling into an eruption of violence, thus making them fertile and highly relevant subject matter.

To illustrate the changes in the genre, from the days of its 'golden age' to the post revisionist era, I will compare and contrast two films; *The Tin Star* (1957) and *Unforgiven* (1991). These films share many key elements but handle them very differently, and should therefore provide a good example of the developments in Westerns.

Other materials referenced in this thesis are a variety of literary sources. Some are concerned with Westerns specifically, some with film in general.

1.3 Method and theory

The second chapter of the thesis will consist of information about the Western genre and about violence in Westerns and in film in general in order to provide some background. This will be followed by an analysis of the two films mentioned above, with a focus on violence and narrative.

As articulated by Andersson & Hedling (1999:7) there is no one valid way of analysing a film, but rather a variety of approaches one can choose from according to what is appropriate for the task at hand. For the purposes of this thesis the methodology will inevitably be qualitative in nature, as the analyses will depend largely on individual observations and interpretations, not quantifiable data. Naturally, one can not in earnest assume that of all the information in a film, whether visual, aural

or contextual, all individual viewers would notice the same exact things in the same way.

There are a myriad of things to observe in a film, from the tiniest details to the overarching themes, and many theorists have proposed ways of classifying and prioritizing the information received by a spectator. These concepts include fabula, syuzhet and style, as explained by David Bordwell (1995:49-53). Simply put the syuzhet is the plot of the film, the actual presentation of information on the screen, the style refers to the “cinematic devices” used and the fabula is the story that results from the two. The story, of course, includes information that is not explicitly shown in the film itself, as the spectator can infer e.g. a backstory of the characters. In the analysis the fabula and syuzhet will be referred to as story and plot.

Another concept that may be useful is the division of the fabula into diegetic and nondiegetic elements. The diegetic elements are sounds, sights and any other information that a spectator can regard as being *part of* the story world, whereas the nondiegetic elements are *about* the story world and only presented to the spectators and none of the characters. (Branigan, 1996:35)

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Defining the Western genre

What is generally meant by genres, when speaking of film, is different types or categories of films, defined based on common elements. For instance themes, settings or typical plot devices can be taken to signify genre adherence. As Barry Keith Grant states in a quote used by Peter von Bagh (2009:12), what is crucial to the emergence and continued existence of a genre is a familiarity developed through repetition.

According to Rick Altman (2002:80f) genres have their origins in cycles of films that share some similarity, that become so popular that their type becomes a staple for the production company in question. As other producers rush to capitalize on a current cycle the genre is established and becomes fixed through this industrial imitating (Altman 2002:151). This certainly applies to

Westerns, as will be made clear in the section on the history of Westerns.

But what is it that makes Westerns a discrete genre? The conventions that Jim Kitses mentions are history, themes, archetype and icons – meaning that Westerns are set in a certain time period, portraying certain recurring and pervading ideas, some of which are represented in a way that, through repetition, acquire a symbolic meaning and value. (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:67)

Many who have attempted to define the Western have posited quite strict boundaries regarding temporal and geographical setting. For instance a Western must be set between 1865-1890 – the quarter century between the end of the American Civil War and the massacre of the Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee, marking the end of the American Indian war. A Western must also be set west of the Mississippi north of the Rio Grande and south of the 49th parallel.(e.g. Bagh 2009:22 and French 2005:13). However, many concessions are usually made to include films set in other parts of the US and Mexico, and actually, there are many films that are considered Westerns but are set during the first half of the 19th century. So called post-Westerns or modern Westerns can be set in any period up to the present day.

A characteristic list of typical settings, plots or situations depicted in Westerns is to be found in *The American West in Film* (Tuska 1985:24-38), comprised of only seven variations:

1. The pioneer achievement story
2. Picaresque wanderers and searchers
3. The ranch story/town Western
4. The justice/revenge theme
5. The Indian story
6. The outlaw story
7. The law man story

The list is in part characteristic because of its shortcomings, principally that in reading it it is

immediately clear that there are other variations and combinations. This supports Altman's point that while critics like to emphasize pure genres, studios like to mix things up (2002:173). He further asserts that genres never cease evolving (2002:91).

In view of these differing perceptions of genres as simultaneously mutable and immutable, another of his statements emerges as particularly salient. He describes genres as discourses between studios, audiences and other parties (Altman 2002:150), thus highlighting their function as descriptors. A genre is a blueprint, a structure, a name tag and an agreement, and the concept is only useful as long as it remains consistent from makers and distributors to the audience (Altman 2002:26).

In trying to ascertain which components make up the structure of a Western Tuska has found that they are “perhaps best derived from exemplary works” (1985:13). And, perhaps, for the purposes of this thesis the genre may be allowed to reveal itself via the films chosen to exemplify it in the third chapter.

2.2 Prehistory of the Western

In their essay *Six Creeds That Won the West* (1980), Durgnat & Simmon propound that Westerns have always “staked their claim as symbols, sometimes even documents, of American history” (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:69). They then continue by pointing out that, in spite of these claims, a more genuine interest in historical accuracy has only recently gained traction in the genre.

Durgnat & Simmon also ruminate on how interchangeably the words “history” and “myth” have been used by some when discussing Westerns. Where myths have been presented as facts, unpleasant facts have been dismissed as harmless myths, and so “Westerns, far from being apolitical and non-historical, are myths in the sense of being saturated with ideologies and assumptions” (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:69). Tangentially, as Altman (2002:41) indicates in his writing on genres, unlike films that stand alone, genre films tend to utilize “intertextual references” extensively and Westerns can therefore be considered re-enactments of other Westerns more than of the history of the American West.

The reasons for the confusion over Westerns as ahistorical, and yet of historical value, is elucidated by Harry Schein in a section of his 1954 essay *Den olympiske cowboyen*, quoted in *Westerns* (French 2005:95)

[...] White America is no older than Gutenberg. It achieved economic and consequently cultural independence (an essential prerequisite for a mythology of its own) about the same time as the novel made its artistic breakthrough and started reaching a public. It is no coincidence that James Fenimore Cooper is America's first original contributor to literature. It is just as natural that the cinema embraced the Western from the start. In less than a lifetime of one generation it has developed from something seemingly insignificant to a tightly designed mythology following its own laws, to become the young America's own folklore.

By the time the first Westerns were produced the history of the frontier had already been fictionalized in literature and theatre, and it was this tradition that was reproduced in cinema. Tuska (1985:263f) questions whether it would even be possible to make a historically accurate film about the American West that would still be recognisable as a Western, as the tradition has been so deeply rooted in myth for centuries.

The first captivity narratives were written and published in the 16th century (Buscombe 1988:18) providing both the settlers and European readers with tales of exotic adventures. These were followed by very popular publications of travelogues of explorers and mountain men. Paintings of the majestic vistas and savage natives of the New World were also sold far and wide.

The germinal figure of the Western as a genre in literature is usually considered to be James Fenimore Cooper (cp Bagh 2002:28), whose *Leatherstocking* series were published between 1823-1841 but set in the mid to late 18th century. The main character of the series was Natty Bumppo, a trapper and hunter known variously as Hawkeye, Deerslayer and Leatherstocking. It is interesting that even in these early days of the genre an elegiac strain was present in Cooper's writing (French 2005:82), a mourning for a lost wilderness and way of life pushed aside by an encroaching society. This nostalgia for the frontier as a place and time perpetually between two states - between desert and garden, wilderness and civilization – is a constantly recurring theme in the Western.

Another feature of the *Leatherstocking* books that was to be found in much of later literature and cinema was the way in which Native Americans were depicted. They are divided into distinctly

good and bad Indians, a dichotomy that is found throughout the genre, even as recently as *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Bad Indians are shown to be murderous savages and unyieldingly hostile towards the Whites. Good Indians on the other hand are usually depicted as noble savages, civilized to some degree (as defined by European/American standards) and stoically resigned to their role as The Vanishing Americans (Buscombe 2006:141). In Cooper's most famous novel *The Last of the Mohicans* the bad Indians are exemplified by Magua and the good by Leatherstocking's friend Chingachgook and his son Uncas. Likewise in *Dances with Wolves*, in spite of its reputation as a progressive Western, the sympathetic Sioux stand in stark contrast with the fearsome Pawnees.

Cooper was followed by many more writers setting their stories on the frontier. Apart from serious literary endeavours there were also the wildly popular dime novels that later inspired many B-Westerns. They also helped individuals such as Wild Bill Hickock, Buffalo Bill and Jesse James gain fame and notoriety. (Buscombe 1988:19f)

In the latter part of the 19th century Bret Harte wrote stories of a more documentarian leaning, combined with a touch of sentimentality foreshadowing the film of John Ford (von Bagh 2002:28). But one of the most important literary contributions to the genre was Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), which predicted the centrality of the cowboy character in films from the silent era onward. And the story itself was adapted to the screen a number of times (Buscombe 1988:240).

Aside from literature, the Western tradition was also influenced by other art forms, notably the stage plays and Wild West shows. There were many popular plays in the late 19th and early 20th centuries set in the West, some of them drawing huge crowds by providing visual spectacles. There were action oriented plays that would stage such elaborate set pieces like “horse-riding, gunfights, fires and even train crashes”. (Buscombe 1988:20)

Landscape photography and paintings had already established the look of the Western terrain in the minds of Eastern Americans and Europeans by the end of the 19th century. And painters like Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, who focused more on people and animals caught in motion, were part of setting the conventions of how cowboys, Indians, horses and cattle were visually represented. (Buscombe 1988:20)

2.3 History of Western Cinema

Due to this wealth of artistic and folkloric tradition established well before its advent, it is hardly surprising that cinema showed an interest in Westerns from its earliest beginnings. As Buscombe (1988:21) puts it; “by the time cinema was ready to be born, a repertoire of available forms and formats” had already been fashioned. Kitses (1969, in ed. .Kitses & Rickman 1998:62) posits that this “complex inheritance meant that from the outset the Western could be many things”.

It is an oft repeated, albeit oft contested, factoid that Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* is the first Western ever made (Buscombe 1988:22). The first Westerns were shot in the Eastern US, but from 1907 onwards the success of the Selig company's Colorado based productions encouraged film-makers to venture West (Buscombe 1995, in ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:115).

Audiences responded well to the authentic locations and it soon became a big selling point, giving the American production companies an important edge over their European competitors in the Western genre (Buscombe 1995, in ed. Kitses & Rickmann 1998:116). So successful were they, that access to appropriate locations, and an abundance of cowboys and ranch hands suitable for work as extras and trick riders, was one of the reasons the production companies came to be centred in California, and for a long time the steady market share of the series Westerns was the bedrock of Hollywood (Buscombe 1988:35).

As mentioned in chapter 2.1 genres develop through a series of film cycles aimed at making money, the types of films that do well enough will continue to be made while others will not. Sporadically producers will decide to experiment with the formula, and if these attempts pay off it will either spawn a new cycle or become a part of the regular formula.

It was this form of cinematic Darwinism that shaped the Western in its early years. There were some films starring Native Americans, but they did not last. There was a cycle of films set in Mexico and starring Mexicans, but that was also not to be. The Westerns with all Black casts were not much more successful. Nor did Westerns focusing on romance fare well in the long run.

One of the first strike gold was Gilbert Anderson, who decided to adapt a Bret Harte story by Peter Kyne to the screen in 1910. In it he played a Good Badman who mends his ways in order to help a sick child. One of the outcomes of the film's popularity was that Anderson ended up making nearly 500 one- and two-reelers directing and acting as the character *Broncho Billy* (Hitt 1990:180f). Other consequences were the induction of the "cowboy as rolling stone" into the permanent set of Western characters, as it was shown to be an ideal guise for series heroes (Buscombe 1988:25).

By 1920 Anderson had already been sidelined by other cycles and developments; the Western had found its more mature facet and feature length films had become the norm (Buscombe 1988:25). The next big star whose influence on the genre can still be felt was William S. Hart, who was born at the close of the Civil War and was thus personally connected to the Westerns depicted. In the films he directed and starred in between 1914-1925, he endeavoured to show a more authentic West than the antics of Broncho Billy and his ilk could convey (Buscombe 1988:348f).

Hart was another Good Badman, often playing an outlaw who in the end is redeemed by the love of a good woman. Thus he enforced the position of this type of character in the genre, but also added his own variation. The men he played were serious and mature, always prepared to shoulder whatever burden was placed on them, and he was a precursor of such stars as John Wayne and Randolph Scott. His films tended to have a sense of nostalgia, perhaps understandable in the works of someone who had experienced the time of the frontier first hand, but this wistfulness became an enduring element of the genre. (von Bagh 2009:23ff)

As the 20's came to an end the transition to sound caused some upheaval in the production of Westerns. The genre relied heavily on outdoor locations and shots with lots of movement and the new equipment was simply not suitable for these purposes (cp Cook 1990:275-278).

This temporary lull in production turned in to a decade long slump as the pressure exerted by the depression took its toll. Series Westerns continued to be fairly secure investments, but A-Westerns were considered too risky, which wasn't helped by two expensive failures right at the start of the 30's; *The Big Trail* and *Cimarron* (Buscombe 1988:41, 43). As a result only 5 % of all Westerns

produced between 1930 and 1941 were A-features (Buscombe 1988:39).

The year 1939 brought about a change in this state of affairs, as it saw the release of the hugely successful *Stagecoach*, *Destry Rides Again* and *Jesse James*. More triumphs in the Western arena followed already the next year with films like *The Westerner* and *Western Union*. (Bazin 1955, in ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:49)

Andre Bazin speculated in his 1955 essay *The Evolution of the Western* that this renewed interest in the genre was due to pre-war nationalism in the US (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:49). The war years have also been associated with a general darkening of the mood in cinema, most notable in the cycle of noir films of this era. This trend is also found in Westerns, that had begun “grow up” (Buscombe 1988:44).

Two of the films that exemplify this maturing of the genre are *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1942) and *The Outlaw* (1940, released 1943). The former introduced social criticism to the Western, as well as fallible heroes who are not immune to the corrupting influence of an iniquitous community. It centres around a lynching that may or may not be justified, and it has some commonalities with courtroom dramas. *The Outlaw's* contribution to the genre was simply an overt eroticism. (Buscombe 1988:42ff)

Many films in the 40's attempted to portray characters with greater psychological depth, which was connected to a Freudian influence also seen in other genres at the time. This created a type of Western that was not only more complex, but frequently featured heroes with complexes. Troubled characters of this variety became more and more common in the 50's, all be it in a subdued form. (see von Bagh 2009:179, Buscombe 1988:44)

Not everyone welcomed these new developments. Andre Bazin, writing in 1955, felt that the new Westerns of the 50's were overreaching themselves. According to him the films he dubbed “superwesterns” were too focused on aesthetics, morals, politics etc, that is to say, things that do not fall within the remit of the traditional Western. (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:51)

For many others the 50's are the pinnacle of achievements in the genre, and it is considered the last decade of the Western's golden age. It was also a time for even greater changes.

One such change signalled by the 50's was in the way Native American's were represented, not a thorough sea change but a noticeable improvement none the less. *Broken Arrow* (1954) by Delmer Daves is invariably mentioned as the first pro-Indian film since the silent era, and after it found success others followed along similar lines. To a modern viewer these films may not seem very progressive, but at the time they caused quite a stir. (von Bagh 2009:250ff)

The 50's also saw the demise of the B-Western as the film considered to be the last series Western was released in 1954. Television Westerns quickly took their place to an extent, and briefly dominated the ratings in the US. But even the A-Western began to lose its audience by the end of the decade; their percentage of all films made in Hollywood sank from 27% in 1953 to 9% in 1963. (Buscombe 1988:46-48)

While the Westerns decreased in number the elegiac vein, that had been present in the genre since before the advent of cinema, became more noticeable. Films such as John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) not only conveyed a faint impression of this wistfulness, but centred the story around the passing of the old West. But, then, the old guard of Western stars all passed the age of sixty during the 60's, a decade of social upheaval and the birth of a new youth culture. So it is perhaps not surprising that the genre was losing its previously dedicated following and the makers were not exactly on the cutting edge of modern life.

Which is not to say that the Western just laid down and died. With the changing winds of the 60's also came a shift towards revisionism, where both the history of the US and the past of the genre itself was put under questioning. Much of this focused on the way Native Americans had been treated, but many such films managed to seem more anti-establishment than pro-Indian. This is surely fitting for a time of counter culture and anti-war agitation, but it did once again leave Native Americans as mere plot devices just as surely as they had been as whooping savages.

The Western of the 60's was also more international than it had previously been. With both American and Italian films being inspired by Japanese Samurai films, and the Italian Westerns in turn inspiring American Westerns, the genre was clearly no longer tied to the culture of a specific time and place. And, while this development hastened the decline of the traditional Westerns, it did reinvigorate the genre through new variations and cycles. (Buscombe 1988:48ff)

But the draw of the Western had definitely weakened. Science Fiction offered new and exciting frontiers and a new type of action film offered more intense and, often literally, more explosive thrills, so Western continued to wane. By the eighties there were only a handful of new releases per year, and many declared the Western dead.

While the genre is undeniably diminished from its glory days, it is not the first time the death knells have been rung for the Western. Already in 1911, a year after the Western had attained a 21 % market share, one industry journalist declared the genre played out (Buscombe 1988:24). Such pronouncements been made periodically ever since, and yet the Western survives.

The Western will surely never again be a pillar of Hollywood the way it once was, but following the critically well received and very profitable hits of the early 1990's, *Dances with Wolves* and *Unforgiven*, the industry's faith in the genre was sufficiently restored to finance the occasional film. And even in the 21th century some directors have been roused to try their hand at adding to the frontier saga.

2.4 History of violence in the Western

Ever since the 1890s violence in cinema has been a hotly debated issue (Slocum in ed. Slocum, 2001:5). By the time the Hays Office was formed in 1922 American film-makers and distributors had already faced a number of attempts at censorship, and the Supreme Court had passed a ruling declaring that films were not protected as free speech by the First Amendment of the American constitution (Cook, 1990:229).

Initially the Hays Office (officially the MPPDA – the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) was a self-regulatory trade organization that only provided guidelines for the content of films and the conduct of their stars. But after intensified criticism following the addition of sound to cinema, and a cycle of very popular gangster films, the “draconian” Production Code came into effect in 1934 and remained in effect until the mid '50s. (Cook 1990:229 and 298n)

As many of the provisions of the Code were concerned with depictions of violence, its influence on Westerns was considerable. It was not until a series of undermining court rulings between 1952-1958, most notably films were declared as free speech, that these restrictions were discarded and eventually replaced by an age related ratings system in 1968 (Cook 1990:535n). This means that throughout the three decades widely referred to as the Western's golden age, 1939-1959, the stringent restrictions of the Code marked the development of the genre.

As Henry Bacon writes, “violence is often used as a central narrative element. It is the force that launches the events of the story, determines the plot twists, solves the problems that arise and releases tensions [set up during the story]” (2010:119). This is a very accurate description of the functions of violence in Westerns. So much so, that violence may in fact not be a central element of them, but the defining one. And as such any restrictions placed on this element of the films will unavoidably restrict the ability of film-makers to utilize the Western genre framework to its full potential.

Devin McKinney, referenced by Bacon (2010:120n), divides violence into two variants; strong and weak. Strong violence encompasses acts that are shown to cause severe, if not necessarily realistic damage, whereas weak acts of violence does not really show the consequences of the acts and thus does not invoke very strong emotional responses. Bacon posits that weak violence may “exploit a fantasy of invulnerability” (2010:121).

Due to the restrictions of the Production Code one would expect pre '60s Westerns to utilize these variants of violence differently than later examples of the genre. Certainly the lack of blood in older Westerns is rather conspicuous to modern viewers, but completely in line with a strict reverence for the integrity of the human body written into the Code (Bacon 2010:129).

A change came in the late '60s with films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Sam Peckinpah's Western *The Wild Bunch* (1969). These films, and the many derivative works that followed them, ushered in a new style and attitude of depicting violence. As Cook puts it the directors of these two films “insisted for the first time in American cinema that the human body is made of real flesh and blood”. (Cook 1990:884)

As the genre had always had a preoccupation with violence, and as producers were already aware of the success of Italian Sergio Leone's brutal take on Westerns, the frontier showcased in the '70s was considerably bloodier than that of previous decades. While violence had rarely been shown in classical Hollywood movies, and instead left for the spectator to imagine (Rothman in ed. Slocum, 2001:40), from the late '60s onward it was dwelt on and revelled in.

This change was spurred on by the kind of audience responses the new films were met with. In test viewings *The Wild Bunch* was negatively received by about 60% of audiences, but of the 20% who enjoyed the film a majority were of the highly sought after segment of 17-25 year old viewers (Bacon 2010:133). In the hopes of cashing in on the trend the studios churned out cycles of ultra violent Westerns, horror films and films of the new action genre, the latter slowly pushing aside Westerns. The result of the proliferation of action films only served to amplify the vogue for violent films. As Marsha Kinder points out about the “hyperviolent” films of the '90s, *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), “they show that violence has become synonymous with action, making its antonym not peace but boredom” (in ed. Slocum, 2001:77).

2.4.1 Function of Violence in Western

A common narrative device in films, and ubiquitous in Westerns, is to justify any acts of violence perpetrated by the characters signified as 'good guys', and thus justify set piece action sequences, by making sure the audience is on their side. As Henry Bacon puts it (2010:121) film-makers like to appeal to a more primal sense of justice, one that the spectators can safely indulge in through films. This is in line with the ways that Bacon posits are the most typically used to justify violence in

narratives; revenge, punishment, restoring a just and lawful state, and resorting to violence as a means to prevent a greater evil (Bacon 2010:145). It is these actions that are the source of cathartic release at the climax of the films, that resolves any dramatic conflicts set up by the story.

Robert Warshaw, writing in 1954, described some of the genre conventions that governed how the inevitable violent resolution would come about. In order to appeal to audiences the Western hero must be seen to be “on the side of justice and order”, even though ,according to Warshaw, fighting for these things is not really what he is for. Rather, he fights for honour simply for the sake of fighting for it because that is all he exists for. Which is why he follows the rules of combat even if it means prolonging the conflict and seemingly risk losing. (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:38)

Naturally, by following rules like never shooting first and always facing one's opponents eye to eye, the narratives of Westerns can stretch some quite thin plots into 90 minute features without needing any other explanation than the character of the hero. This pattern may later have been one of the reasons behind the decline of the genre once action films began to gain popularity, as this new genre with equally thin plots often provided audiences with the thrills of gunfights and explosions right from the opening scenes. Later Westerns tried to compete of course, but is a Western still a Western if it doesn't follow the typical pattern of building up tension through conflict and making the audience wait for the violent climax?

3 The Films

The Tin Star

Director Anthony Mann has been considered one of the directors responsible for changing the Western into a more serious genre with adult themes, and less of an idealized stage for epic heroism. His films have been labelled demythologizing, much in the vein of *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *The Gunfighter* and *High Noon*. (Cook 1990:511ff)

Mann made several Westerns during the 1950s, just on the verge of the changes that would hit the

genre in the following two decades, one of which is *The Tin Star* from 1957. It tells the story of bounty hunter Morgan Hickman, played by Henry Fonda, who rides into a frontier town and helps a fledgling sheriff called Ben Owens, played by Anthony Perkins, take control of both his life and the unruly elements of the town. He also takes up with a widowed mother by the name of Nona Mayfield, played by Betsy Palmer, who is ostracised by the rest of the town because of her half Native American son Kip.

Unforgiven

In contrast to Mann's film, which is still firmly a traditional Western in spite of elements considered modern at the time of its release, *Unforgiven* is very much a revisionist Western. Directed by Clint Eastwood and released in 1992, it is brutal and violent, and takes a very iconoclastic approach to the Western hero.

Unforgiven tells the story of Will Munny, played by Eastwood, a thief and killer who has seemingly been reformed by the influence of his wife. At the start of the film his wife has already passed away and he is left looking after his two children on his own, and unsuccessfully keeping pigs. Once he is approached by the young Schofield Kid, played by Jaimz Woolvett, who needs a partner for a paid killing, he slowly turns back into his old self. The two men are joined by Munny's old friend Ned Logan, played by Morgan Freeman, who has also given up his old criminal ways years before.

The two cowboys with a price on their heads are guilty of mutilating a prostitute in the dismal little town of Big Whiskey, which is run by an autocratic sheriff known as Little Bill Daggett, played by Gene Hackman. Little Bill dislikes bounty hunters and gunslingers and is prepared to resort to torture to run them out of town.

3.1 Analysis

Beginnings

There is an established convention for how Westerns begin; with a lone cowboy riding through the wilderness. As Robert Warshow wrote in his essay *The Westerner* in 1954 Westerns are “an art form for connoisseurs, where the spectator derives his pleasure from the appreciation of minor variations

within the working out of a pre-established order” (ed. Kitses & Rickman 1998:42). This means that any deviation from conventions has a meaning. While the opening of *The Tin Star* clearly conforms to tradition as we are treated to a montage of Hickman on his horse, riding through rocky hills, the opening of *Unforgiven* is static.

Unforgiven begins with a wide shot of a small house that forms a silhouette against the warm glow of a sunset. There is also a swing set, indicating that children live there, and on the right side of the frame we see a man digging next to a tree. The reason he is toiling like this becomes clear as text begins to scroll up across the screen.

In just two short paragraphs we are told that William Munny is a known murderer and thief, “a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition”, and that his wife has died. It is her grave that Munny is digging. This is a very economic way of informing the viewers of relevant background information, that could have required more than one scene had it come up in the course of dialogue for instance.

To viewers who are familiar with the genre's conventions the description of Munny still leaves room for the assumption that he might be a “good badman”, a figure that has been common in Westerns since the silent era. This assumption will eventually be challenged throughout the film and ultimately shattered.

Unlike the traditional Western hero Munny is shown to be still, he has put down roots and settles down. This is already a marked reversal of tradition, and the exact opposite of the opening of *The Tin Star*. In the latter Hickman rides from the wilderness into a town, packhorse in tow, very much the traditional Western hero. And, of course, Henry Fonda was a traditional Western hero as he had been acting one in multiple films since the 30s. It is in light of his established screen persona that the close up of a lifeless hand of a corpse wrapped in a sheet on his packhorse just a couple of minutes into the film tells us we should be on our toes. Hickman clearly is not a squeaky clean lawman.

As Hickman enters the town, no exact location or date is mentioned as is common in Westerns, the

nondiegetic music changes from a light, summery trill to a an ominous warning. The people of the town gather round and follow him, someone runs to alert the mayor. It is obvious that dead bodies are not an every day sight in this well established town, they have grown and developed to a stage of civilized community that will not allow unchecked violence.

As if to make things easier for the concerned citizens Hickman heads straight for the sheriff's office, where he finds a the young Ben Owens practising twirling his pistols in an ostentatious manner. In the 50's it was very common to pair an older star like Fonda with a young actor like Anthony Perkins because, even though the old guard of Westerns were still attracting audiences they were already well into middle-age, and the decade that saw the release of films like *Rebel without a Cause* needed to appeal to a younger crowd with younger stars.

This first interaction of the two leading men lays the ground for their teacher-pupil relationship. While Owens is young and inexperienced Hickman is already a seasoned killer, and while Owens tries to appear like a tough gunslinger, Hickman just is what he is and has no need for posing and doing fancy tricks.

What follows next is a confrontation with the town's mayor and other dignitaries, who view bounty hunters as mere murderers. It was during the 50s that bounty hunters began to feature in Westerns as good guys, when previously they had been decidedly sullied by their morally dubious profession. Thus Hickman is a character that gains depth and an ambiguous position due to the era in which the film was made.

The questionable morals of working as a bounty hunter are very much to the fore in the scene in the sheriff's office. The town's leaders question Hickman's right to kill a man for money, but he instead places the blame on the people who put up a reward to begin with and suggests that extrajudicial actors such as himself are still needed on the frontier until the formal system of upholding the law is fully established. Again, this is very common in Westerns; a hero who exists on the boundary between wilderness and civilization.

The scene in question also sets the stage for the conflict between Bart Bogardus, a local hothead

who happens to be the cousin of the man Hickman has killed. It is soon made clear that there already exists some tension between Bogardus and Owens, as Bogardus is vying for the position of sheriff in order to dispense justice to his own advantage and convenience.

In *Unforgiven* the opening scene of Munny digging a grave cuts to a rainy night in Big Whiskey two years later, and the act of violence that sets off the events of the film. Unlike in *The Tin Star* we know exactly where we are and when, as a title tells us it is 1880 and that Big Whiskey is in Wyoming, and this kind of specificity is probably an attempt at greater realism. The dismal little town itself is a fine example of the genre's convention that any white settlement consisting of more than two buildings can be designated a town, and as such a cradle of civilization.

Big Whiskey consists of two short rows of houses facing each other, and on the night in question the only signs of life seem to come from the hotel/saloon where a number of prostitutes are conducting their business upstairs. They are interrupted by the cries for help of one of their own, Delilah, who is attacked by two cowboys. One action leads to a reaction, Delilah insults one of the cowboys by laughing at his penis, he cuts her face with a knife, Skinny, the owner of the saloon, stops them at gunpoint and sheriff Little Bill is called.

That is when the chain breaks, or rather an additional loop is added to it. Because Little Bill decides not to whip the perpetrators after all, but instead merely fines them in the form of five horses that are to be handed over to Skinny who is effectively the owner of Delilah and considered the real injured party. But in Westerns, and the frontier they supposedly portray, an act of violence must be followed by another act of violence. So the prostitutes take matters into their own hands and put up a reward of a thousand dollars for anyone who kills the two cowboys. Little Bill is a man who does not normally shy away from using violence, but his choice to avoid it in this one situation is what sets off a chain of events that culminate in even greater violence and his own death.

The towns in the two films exist in different stages of civilization, or the process of turning the wilderness into a garden. While the town in *The Tin Star* has developed past the time when men like Bogardus could be in charge, Big Whiskey has allowed a very similar man to elect himself sheriff because they do still seem to need his brand of violent justice. It is his failure to fulfil this role as

dispenser of violence that in the end gets him killed, because he fails to find a civilized yet just punishment that would adequately replace the whipping.

In *The Tin Star* the more civilized way of meeting out justice, in the form of imprisonment or lawful hangings, has failed because the law has failed to bring in the man that Hickman has then killed. But the town does not thank him for it, instead he is told to leave as soon as he has received his reward, he is turned away from the hotel and then confronted by Bogardus who turns him away from the livery stables he runs.

Violence and the Other

However, at the stables Hickman happens upon Kip, and it is through Hickman's interactions with the boy and his mother that *The Tin Star* shows itself to be a post *Broken Arrow* Western. The way in which Bogardus refers to Kip's "kind" is intended to mark him as a bad person, whereas Hickman's uncomplicated attitude towards the pair of social outcasts is meant to reinforce the audience's assumption that he is a good badman. His conversations with Nona Mayfield also serve as a convenient exposition of his past; like William Munny he has been widowed, but unlike Munny he has also lost his child and therefore has nothing to tie him to his past save his memories.

In a similar way to Bogardus' racism, Little Bill's dismissive attitude towards the prostitutes of Big Whiskey marks him as someone the audience is expected to dislike. His decision to treat Skinny as the aggrieved party, as he is Delilah's pimp, cannot sit very well with many viewers. When challenged by a prostitute called Strawberry Alice (Frances Fisher), he belittles the violence the two cowboys have committed because he sees them as "hard working boys who was foolish" and not "given to wickedness in a regular way", at which point Alice interjects - "like whores". Justice does not serve everyone equally on the frontier, as seen both by the violence that women in *Unforgiven* and Native Americans in *The Tin Star* are subjected to, and by the attitudes other characters have to their plight.

Youth and inexperience

The Tin Star and *Unforgiven* both feature pairings of young and older actors, Perkins and Fonda in the former and Woolvett and Eastwood in the latter, and in both films their relationships are used to contrast the ambitions of youth and the settled nature of middle age. This is not an uncommon

element of Westerns, but the two films analysed here use different variations on the idea.

Unlike the rootless bounty hunter Hickman, Will Munny has both a home and a family, and it is in this context we are first shown him up close. He seems for all the world like any hapless pig farmer, trying to make sure his two children are fed and clothed, but it is made clear that he is not doing very well.

An opportunity to improve his circumstances arrives in the form of the Schofield Kid, the nephew of an old associate. He does not ride slowly from the distance like Alan Ladd in *Shane*, but appears abruptly and out of nowhere at the side of Munny's pig pen just in time to see the haggard man clamber up from the dung his fallen into. In spite of being on horseback the Kid is only shown static, again breaking the genre's traditions of showing the characters moving through the landscape. When the Kid asks Munny if he is the man he is looking for, we find out, through Munny's denial, that he might have a past worth hiding from. This interpretation is lent more credence when the Kid starts to list the crimes committed by the man he seeks - murders and theft.

In the subsequent dialogue between the two men the Kid recounts his uncle's description of Munny in more depth. Perhaps viewers ought to be warned off designating Munny the hero of the film by the description "meanest god-damned son of a bitch alive", but his assurances of being "cured" of his old ways by the influence of his departed wife still leave the 'good badman' option open. The fact that the emphasis of the Kid's proposition is on the mutilation of a woman as the reason behind it, as opposed to the money, also serves to paint them as honourable men. Or, at the very least, more honourable than Little Bill perhaps. It is worth noting though, that injuries suffered by Delilah are greatly exaggerated in the Kid's retelling, as the asymmetry of violence – facial scarring versus two murders – may not be sufficiently plausible motivation otherwise. The exaggeration of Delilah's wounds functions in the story as a reason for the two potential killers to delude themselves into thinking they are in the right, but in the plot it also functions as a way to delude the audience into thinking they are watching two ultimately good men.

The Kid is portrayed as a poser right from the start, by claiming to be a killer, by his general demeanour and especially by his patently ridiculous nickname, The Schofield Kid "on account of

[his] Schofield model Smith&Wesson pistol". But, in spite of obviously seeing right through the Kid's tough guy facade, Munny is interested in the opportunity to make some money. That much is clear from the way he is shown wistfully gazing after the Kid, as he rides off towards the horizon. In these shots, about 13 minutes into the film, there is finally a hint of movement. But even now it is contrasted with shots of Munny, having once again picked himself off the ground in the pig pen, standing still and literally enclosed.

Once Munny gets out his gun to see if he can still hit a target it is evident that he is woefully out of practice. But after failing with a pistol he tries, and succeeds, with rifle, and we begin to see glimpses of the killer in him. Before he rides after the Kid he is still shown as unfitting for the part of a Western hero, as he initially fails to even get on his horse. More than his bumbling attempts to get on the horse, the audience ought to pay attention to what he tells his children is the reason behind the horse's reluctance to let him get in the saddle. He blames the horse's behaviour on himself, saying it is retribution for "the sins of [his] youth" when he was given to mistreatment of animals, and as anyone who is familiar with the genre knows, true Western heroes do not mistreat their horses.

While the ambitions of the Kid draw Munny away from his settled life, the ambitions of Owens in *The Tin Star* draw Hickman into the town and its affairs. Of course, the characters and their motivations are very different. Owens is a traditional, respectable Western character, a man who just wants to be able to do 'what a man's gotta do'. Until he learns how to do that he pretends he already knows, making him just as much a poser as the Kid is for trying to seem like a ruthless criminal. The difference between their motivations is one of the things that make both films products of their times.

The Kid is merely interested in personal gain and notoriety, not an ambition that will benefit the process of civilizing the Wild West. Owens, on the other hand, wants to become sheriff and serve his community. While he may be motivated to some extent by the social status that would come with the job, his ambitions still align with the overall ambitions of American settlement in the West, i.e. the gradual shift from lawless wilderness to modern towns and then cities. This is the legend of the frontier that is reiterated over and over again in Westerns, and while many heroes in the genre can never truly be part of civilized communities as that would mean shedding their guise of frontier

hero, they nonetheless facilitate the process. Hickman is such a hero, one who lives just at the edge of community and civilization, but cannot be of them. His part is instead to help Owens make sure that progress marches on.

Confrontations

The parts they are to play are outlined in the second sequence Hickman and Owens encounter each other. It is preceded by a dialogue between Owens and his girlfriend Milly, in which he makes clear that he will persist in his chosen career in spite of her fears for his safety. It transpires that her father was the previous sheriff and that he was shot dead on the job, giving her good cause to worry and adding to the death toll in the story world of the film. The town's doctor chimes in at this point with a rather heavy handed comment about not evading one's responsibilities, meaning that, as a man, Owens cannot turn his back on the town that needs a good sheriff and that, as woman, his Milly cannot turn her back on the man who needs a good woman. It is quite obvious that in this world facing and perpetrating violence are masculine duties, aimed at paving the way for civilization, and having babies and making a man happy are feminine duties.

Once Hickman enters the office talk turns to the coroner's affidavit confirming that Hickman has indeed killed the right man and that there is no reason to suspect him of killing him unjustly. As they are filling in the reward claim, the sight and sounds of a decidedly unjust killing interrupts them. A man runs out of the saloon across the street and is repeatedly shot in the back, and they immediately know the shooter is Bogardus.

The confrontation between Owens and Bogardus is staged in a way stereotypically associated with Westerns, they face each other on the street, ready to draw. Owens is shown as the underdog, through a shot with Bogardus in the foreground, facing away from the camera. Due to the low camera angle and lack of light from behind him his shape is tall and dark and dominates the frame, whereas Owens appears small in contrast as he approaches his opponent.

At first the onlookers outside the saloon withdraw from Bogardus in fear of a shoot-out, but they remain in the doorway as it becomes apparent that the sheriff is not in charge and not even a threat. The shots of Bogardus are still from a lower angle, while the shots of Owens are from a slightly

downward angle. The moment Bogardus tells Owens that he come close enough, the other stops, a clear sign of weakness. The dialogue reveals that victim was a “half-breed”, and through his racism Bogardus portrayal as a bad guy is reinforced. Not to mention that no good guy in a traditional Western would shoot a man in the back. Another sign of Owen's weaker position is the fact that he feels the need to draw first, but the ultimate failure on his part is that he then lowers his pistol which means that Hickman has to step in to save him when Bogardus covertly draws his weapon.

Afterwards Hickman advises Owens on everything he did wrong, chiefly that pinning a star on his chest to begin with was the biggest mistake he could have made. At the end of the dialogue it is revealed that Hickman himself used to be a sheriff, continuing the steady trickle of background information designed to make him seem more and more sympathetic.

Haunted Pasts

In contrast, in *Unforgiven*, the more the audience learns about Munny's past, the less likeable he becomes. Generally in Westerns, and in other genres, scenes where the protagonist is reunited with an old friend help the audience to warm up to them, but that is not the case for the meeting between Munny and his old partner Ned Logan.

When Ned does not warm up to Munny's suggestion of one more killing, and protests that the old days are long gone, it is somewhat disconcerting to wonder just what those old days entailed. It is suggested in the dialogue that their mutual past includes murdering people for money, and Munny even uses the promise of the reward as motivation for Ned to join him now. He does not respond to this, though, so just like the Kid, Munny tries to offer the injuries sustained by Delilah as a valid motive for killing the two cowboys. It is telling that he exaggerates the injuries even more than the Kid did, and is obviously trying to psych himself, his partner and the viewers up to the inevitable violent punishment. Ned points out that Munny would not be going after the cowboys if his wife was still alive, which hints at the possibility that he has not really been cured of his violent ways at all, but is just concealing that side of himself.

Regardless of Ned's claims that he is no longer like his old self, he eventually agrees to go along. There is a shot of the moment he begins to change his mind in which the camera tracks backward in

front of Logan as he walks through a doorway in his home, and as the camera simultaneously tilts upward a rifle mounted on the wall above the door is revealed. His proud statement that he “can still knock the eye out of a bird flying” does not support his purported change of personality.

As the pair of old-timers camp for the night and get a chance to talk more, it seems less and less likely that Munny is going to turn out to be a 'good' guy. He reiterates his claims of having been completely altered by his wife, cured of drinking and other vices, but immediately contradicts himself by emphasising how quickly he had turned to killing when he needed money. As if to remind viewers what kind of man he is, he follows this by confessing to Ned that he is still troubled by the memory of a man he shot through the head many years earlier, without any reason beyond being drunk. As he recalls, even the members of his old crew used to be scared of him, and based on his descriptions of his past they had good cause to be wary.

Little Bill and English Bob

Munny and his two associates are not the first gunfighters to arrive in Big Whiskey, that short lived advantage belongs to a Briton going by the name English Bob (Richard Harris) and his sycophantic travelling companion Mr Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek). The reputation of English Bob precedes him, but the thing he seems to be known for is “working for the railroad, shooting Chinamen”, which hardly sounds heroic. He is, however, not someone posing as a killer, in spite of his pretence of upper class status, he is the real deal like Munny is. But, unlike Munny he not only has no regrets, he is more than happy to aggrandize and exploit his notoriety.

Already on the train to Wyoming he is shown to be an excellent shot with a fearsome reputation, but as soon as he is confronted by Little Bill Daggett and his deputies he stops in his tracks, his accent falters and he suddenly becomes very apologetic about the revolver he is carrying, when a few moments earlier he had openly and gleefully flouted the town's ban on firearms. It is not a case of two men squaring up against each other, like in the confrontation between Bogardus and Owens in *The Tin Star*, instead Little Bill has English Bob surrounded with no chance of defending himself.

While the Owens merely took Bogardus' guns into safe keeping and left it at that, Little Bill decides to make an example of English Bob. As a warning to other gunslingers hoping to claim the reward,

he beats up English Bob in the street in full view of everyone in town. As an ominous piece of nondiegetic music begins to play it is plain to viewers that he is taking the punishment too far, the expressions on the faces of the onlookers tell us the same thing. But unlike in *The Tin Star*, no one would dream of questioning the authority of their sheriff. From the dialogue between Little Bill and English Bob it also becomes apparent that they share a bit of history, and that Little Bill has not always used a tin star as an excuse to indulge his violent impulses.

Lessons

Upon finding out that Hickman is not just a bounty hunter but also a former sheriff, he becomes convinced that Hickman would be an ideal mentor to help him prepare for his next confrontation with Bogardus. They begin with a shooting lesson, a long time staple in Westerns where being proficient with a gun is a mark of masculinity and adulthood. An as befitting an initiation ritual of sorts, the lesson Hickman gives Owens is about more than just hitting marks.

Hickman underscores the importance of confidence, namely, having the confidence to end a fight with one shot. When Owens protests that he does not want to kill anyone Hickman responds by saying that “a decent man doesn't want to kill, but if you're gonna shoot, you shoot to kill”, which pretty much encapsulates the ethos of a lot of cowboy heroes. Before being interrupted by two men riding by, Hickman tells his protégé about the importance of taking one's time before firing a shot, because that split second can mean the difference between life and death. The two men who ride past them are the McGaffey brothers, Zeke and Ed, who will later be behind the murder that the plot turns on.

Interestingly, Little Bill repeats Hickman's advice almost exactly, while giving a very different kind of shooting lesson to Mr Beauchamp in his jail. As it turns out, Beauchamp is a writer, who has lately been working as English Bob's biographer. His books about the “Duke of Death” seem like nothing more than dime novels, and one would assume that means that he agrees with the sentiment made famous by the journalists in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) – when the legend becomes fact, print the legend. But once he hears Little Bill's more accurate retelling of one of English Bob's 'heroic' exploits, it is evident that he is sickened by his complicity in turning a cold blooded murderer into some kind of idol for young boys.

The lessons taught by Little Bill are starkly different to those of the well meaning Hickman. His aim is not really to impart any great knowledge, but to simultaneously impress and humiliate. And Beauchamp is suitably impressed and cowed, and English Bob is humiliated and broken. In fact, the writer is so impressed that the next day, when English Bob is put on a coach out of town, he decides to remain in Big Whiskey and become Little Bill's biographer instead. One of the more important messages the makers of the film seem to want to impress upon their audience is the frame of mind that a killer must have in order to kill. By handing a loaded revolver to Beauchamp during their lesson about shooting, and telling him to take aim right at his chest, Little Bill gives Beauchamp a concrete demonstration in how hard it would be for many to become killers. The visibly shaken writer cannot even find it in him to aim the weapon at Little Bill. But how does this reflect on characters like Munny, who we know has repeatedly both aimed and fired upon other human beings?

Despite the presence of an eager, young tough in the form of the Kid, neither Munny nor Ned are prompted to teach him any skills. And as it transpires that the Kid is in fact severely short-sighted the use of giving him lessons would be questionable. His weak vision does explain his need for a partner, though, and gives some of his posturing a bit of depth.

Transformations

As mentioned earlier, the true natures of both Munny and Hickman are gradually disclosed as the respective films progress., but the characters develop in effectively opposite directions. While Hickman opens up to the other characters to reveal more about how he has become the cynical and mercenary man he was at the start of the film, Munny's past is by others around him, through his denials and avoidances that speak louder than words, and inadvertently through his own slips.

When the three prospective killers approach the town of Big Whiskey, a rainstorm strikes. Munny's old habits come briefly to the fore as he loses his temper and swears at his horse, something he had solemnly told his children he no longer did. He does still refuse Ned's offer of whiskey to warm him up, and later once they've found their way to Skinny's saloon he stays seated in the bar while his partners avail themselves of the services of Strawberry Alice and the other women.

Munny's steadfastness results in a rapidly rising fever, and what is worse, a severe beating administered by Little Bill. Throughout the savage beating the sheriff lectures Beauchamp about why he punishing Munny in this way, which makes it clear that he violence is for display at least as much as it is a tool to uphold the law. As for Munny, his attempts to return to his dubious glory days has landed him on his hands and knees once again, as he crawls out into the rainy street. Little Bill then sets off upstairs to threaten and question the women. When Alice tells him he just beat up an innocent man his response is tells us a lot about his views on laws and justice in what he considers 'his' town - "Innocent? Innocent of what?"

This is the first real blow to the Kids admiration of Munny as a dangerous killer. He cannot fathom why Munny didn't draw his gun even in the face overwhelming odds. Later his image of Munny finally shatters, when he and Ned are taking care of the injured man. Munny babbles incoherently in his fevered state, describing horrific visions of the people he has killed over the years. "Don't tell my kids none of the things I've done" he asks of Ned, an understandable last request for a man like him to make. To the Kid it just doesn't make sense, since he still thinks being a notorious killer is something to aspire to and brag about.

Young sheriff Owens also has his moments of doubt, when Doc McCord suggests Hickman may have lied about having been a sheriff. Unlike Munny, Hickman is only nominally evasive and discloses the truth of his past. It turns out he has not been hardened by violence, but by the harsh treatment he received from his community when his wife and child were dying. Just as the truth has come out, and Hickman has been paid his reward and is ready turn his back on community once more, a coach that has been held up careens towards the sheriff's office. The gathering crowd soon finds out that a coach driver has been shot and killed, and that one of the two thieves has been injured. A posse is sent out to track the killers, but they are unsuccessful.

Turning points

The shooting of the coach driver sets off a new chain of violent events, but it is not really the act of violence that functions as the turning point of the plot that leads to the climax. Nor is the inevitable shooting of the two cowboys in Unforgiven the most crucial killing in that film.

The consequence of the stagecoach hold up is that Doc McCord is asked to tend to the wounds of the Zeke McGaffey, and immediately realises the brothers must be the two men everyone is looking for. The thanks he gets for saving Zeke's life is to be shot by older brother Ed as he is on his way back to town.

It has been well established in several scenes that Doc McCord is very well liked and respected in the town. The outrage following his death is so great that Owens has no chance of controlling the large posse intent on retaliation. In an almost distractingly convenient plot device Owens discovers that Doc has written down the details of his visit to the McGaffey brothers' ranch in his notebook, that the audience has been made aware of in a couple of earlier scenes.

The unruly mob that forms the posse becomes even more bloodthirsty when the mayor agrees to put up a monetary reward for anyone who brings in the McGaffeyes, dead or alive. This is blatantly hypocritical in view of his attitude to Hickman in at the beginning of the film, hinting at a more relativist take on violence. Owens once more asks Hickman for help, but he refuses to be deputised. It is not until he finds out that Kip has ridden after the posse that he is forced to use his talents as a tracker to help the Owens and the town.

In *Unforgiven* Munny recovers over a few days and then it is time to do what they came to Big Whiskey to do. They scout out the ranch where the cowboys work, find a place to lie in wait and then they hit. But there is no glory or glamour about the killing. During the first murder Ned shoots the horse of one of the cowboys, cannot bring himself to shoot the man after all, so Munny takes the shot instead. While they have both been saying that they have changed and “aren't like that no more”, it seems that only Ned really has lost the ability to murder.

Shocked by what he has done and participated in, Ned decides to ride home, but is caught by some ranch hands before a posse has even been sent out. Unaware of this Munny and the Kid go on to kill the second cowboy.

It is quite possibly one of the least glamorous or heroic killings the genre has seen. The morbid eagerness with which the Kid looks forward to shooting another man, Munny's lack of emotion, and

the setting, an outhouse, are not the stuff of legends. After hiding near the outhouse through the night they finally see the man they are looking for entering it. The Kid rushes over, and after a few seconds of hesitation he shoots the cowboy three times, and then they make their getaway.

What Munny and the Kid don't know is that while they have been waiting for their chance to kill the cowboy, Little Bill has been torturing Ned to death in the jail. It is his death that brings about the climax of the film and peels off the final layer of Munny's pretence of being reformed.

Resolutions

In *The Tin Star* the final resolution is not reached until both the McGaffneys and Bogardus have been dealt with. When Bogardus takes control of the posse, Owens knows that he must find the brothers first if he is to take them alive. Bogardus' idea of justice is to burn down the McGaffney ranch, and Owens wants nothing to do with it.

At the same time Hickman is tracking Kip, who happens to follow the McGaffneys' dog that leads him to the cave where they are hiding. As a result Owens and Hickman end up following the same tracks and their different attitudes clash. Owens wishes to take them in alive and give them a fair trial whereas Hickman is mostly concerned with avoiding unnecessary heroics and staying alive, while preferably also collecting the reward.

This is connected to the Western's function as mythic representation of American history, specifically the history of civilizing the frontier and making it safe for more than just the cowboys. The film never really presents Bogardus and his lynch mob as a plausible option, the town has demonstrably passed that stage already. But there is still a question of just how far it will develop. It might stall at the stage represented by Hickman, when killing is still an unfortunate necessity. Or it might, and of course audiences know that it will, move forward to match the vision Owens has.

For a moment it seems like Owens' way is doomed to fail, because how does one fight violence with principles alone. Despite continuing to refuse Owens' offers of a deputy's badge, but acquiesces to using his wits instead of his skills as a marksman, and manages to take the McGaffneys

alive. Which is a victory for civilized community and for Hickman's character development, but still leaves Bogardus.

By the time Bogardus and his posse ride back into town the sheriff already has the McGaffey's in custody. Seeing as how he has failed in capturing the criminals, Bogardus instead resolves to make sure that their punishment is to the liking of him and his "white man's jury". The McGaffey's have some Indian blood, which is not obvious but has been mentioned in a previous scene, and Bogardus is eager enough to have already bought some rope.

In the end Hickman is the only one who will stand next to Owen, even agreeing to wear a badge. He does not need to do anything to help his friend, however, because thanks to his lessons Owens is now ready to take in Bogardus.

The two men square up to each other in a repetition of their confrontation in the first half of the film, except that this time Owens is portrayed as an equal opponent. And this time he does not draw first, but still ends the fight with one shot, proving that he has mastered the code and the skills of the Western hero.

In the final scene everything is neatly wrapped up, with Hickman, Nona and Kip forming a new family together, Owens a fully fledged sheriff and Milly a dutiful girlfriend and future wife. As Hickman says to Owens: "You got nothing more to learn. Maybe I learned from you, a man can't run away from his job. (...) I'll find me a town that needs a sheriff." And then he and his new family ride out of town with townsfolk shouting friendly farewells in an atmosphere completely opposite to that of the first two scenes.

In the world of *The Tin Star*, violence used in the right way, by the right people and for the right reasons will lead to success in both relationships and careers on both the personal and societal level. It is as if making the frontier safe for women, children and democracy is simply a matter of removing one bad apple, in this case Bogardus, and whole towns can be fundamentally altered.

The resolution of *Unforgiven* offers no such easy answers, and violence merely begets more

violence. There is no pride or honour at stake, it is just a matter of killing the other guy before he kills you.

The Schofield Kid, after all his bragging and posturing, has finally found out what it is really like to kill someone, and has already sought comfort from a bottle of whiskey while he and Munny wait for their reward. Munny is decidedly nonplussed by the experience, the only difference to the old days seems to be that this time he was sober.

They talk about the experience of killing while Munny's eyes follow a woman approaching on horseback. It is the first honest conversation the two have had and the Kid even admits to never having killed anyone before and cannot handle knowing that he is the reason that someone is never going to breath again. "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have." says Munny. He understands what the Kid is going through but doesn't seem to experience any of those emotions himself, and it is doubtful whether he ever has.

It is not until the woman reaches them and they start discussing how to divide the money that they find out what has happened to Ned. The woman tells them his body has been propped up in front of the saloon, with a sign marking him as a killer. For the first time Munny seems affected by the events of the plot, when previously he has only seemed emotionally connected to events in his past. Ned has been killed because of the murders committed by Munny and the Kid, and the realisation of his part in his friend's death is what finally drives Munny to drink again.

As we see Munny fall right back into his old personality we finally find out just what the description "known murderer and thief" in the beginning of the film was referring to. The woman recounts what Ned has told Little Bill and the others under torture; that his partner is William Munny, who in '69 dynamited a train, killing women and children, and who was going to come and punish Little Bill for what he was doing. As the audience is told of Munny's true identity, so is the Kid, and his disillusionment with killing is complete. "I ain't like you, Will", he says and refuses his share of the reward and lets Munny take his pistol. The world of Unforgiven is very different to that of The Tin Star. The men in this film are not rewarded with happy relationships or successful careers.

When Munny steps inside Skinny's bar his transformation back into a cold blooded killer is complete. He does not fear walking in among a room full of enemies, and the reactions of Little Bill and the others to the sight of him betrays their fear of him. And they are right to be scared, because Munny does not operate by anything like a cowboy code. When he opens fire it is upon an unarmed man. When Little Bill accuses him of cowardice because of it, Munny simply retorts that the man should have armed himself before decorating a saloon with one of Munny's friends.

After the bloodbath that follows, five men, including Little Bill, lay dead or dying, but Munny is unscathed. The rest of the uninjured leave voluntarily, but Beauchamp lingers. He has finally seen the kind of gunfight he has only written about before, and cannot help but be intrigued by a man who is a genuine killer. After seeing Little Bill defeat and humiliate English Bob he has now seen Little Bill defeated in turn. There is something about the way he looks at Munny, and the questions he asks him, that makes one wonder if he is planning to try to sell the character of Munny as a dime novel hero too.

The penultimate words of Little Bill are the bewildered statement, "I don't deserve this, to die like this". To which Munny replies that "deserve's got nothing to do with it", before shooting him in the head. This is the same kind of thinking that Little Bill himself has exercised when assuming everyone must be guilty of something.

As Munny rides out of Big Whiskey he warns its inhabitants that if they don't bury Ned properly, or if they ever cut or otherwise harm the prostitutes then he will return and kill everyone. While Munny has removed the despotic Little Bill, he has not put anything in his place, so there is no progression of civilization to hope for. At best his threat of returning could frighten the people of Big Whiskey to behave themselves.

Unforgiven and The Tin Star echo some of the same themes, most noticeably the notion that a man cannot hide his true nature any more than a leopard can outrun its spots. Whereas Hickman's true nature is that of a thoroughly decent guy, Munny's true nature is that of a sociopathic, indiscriminate killer. Where the films decidedly diverge is in their depictions of community, and of how the

protagonists relate to them. While the characters in *The Tin Star* all come to contentedly accept the responsibilities they have to each other, in *Unforgiven* no one seems to get anything without taking it from someone else by force or cunning. The only sense of community to be found in *Big Whiskey* would appear to exist among the prostitutes.

Unforgiven closes on the same shot it opened with, a wide shot of Munny's home and the tree that shelters his wife's grave. Now the scrolling text tells us that he and his children have moved away, possibly to San Francisco, where Munny may have prospered in dry goods. Following the scene in which he is shown to be a psychopathic killer this attempt at realism and historical specificity is somewhat more disconcerting. It is hardly surprising that for most of the history of the Western the films have portrayed men like Hickman and Owens as the builders of America, rather than men like Munny.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Looking back at the hypotheses stated in the first chapter of this thesis, I would say they are mostly supported by the what I have gleaned from the films. Violence certainly is integral to the genre, although I could not confidently claim that it is a defining element any more than in many other genres.

The films I have viewed for this work do satisfactorily exemplify the importance of violence in Western narratives, as I have found that in both films acts of violence serve as plot devices and they are used as part of characterization as well as to signify character development. This also applies to the characters' attitudes to violence, which are not only used to convey information about individual characters but also the culture they live in. While most Westerns are located on the frontier during the latter half of the 19th century, that still leaves room for a lot of variation regarding specific stages of the communities' development and levels of isolation. As an illustration of this the town in *The Tin Star* is manifestly at a more advanced stage of civilization than *Big Whiskey* in *Unforgiven*, necessitating different approaches to violent inhabitants on the part of the lawmen in the respective communities. Due to the differences the lawmen themselves are also afforded different levels of

autonomy, which is why Owens has to worry about being elected as the permanent sheriff while Little Bill is free to run Big Whiskey how he pleases.

Stylistically the depictions of violence in *The Tin Star* and *Unforgiven* differ greatly, which is to be expected as one was made before the final dissolution of the Production Code and the other more than two decades after. In *Unforgiven* the violence is portrayed ostensibly realistically, and the severity and ubiquity of it is almost excessively brutal. *The Tin Star*, in contrast, only shows a slight trickle of blood in a couple of scenes, neither of which involve anyone actually dying. The deaths in the film are all quick and painless, often partly or wholly off screen, completely unlike the deaths of the cowboys in *Unforgiven*.

In *The Tin Star* the morality of the cowboy ethos is still alive and well, and there is some distinctly 50s' community and family centred ideology at play. *Unforgiven* on the other hand seems devoid of any ideology or moral guidelines, in spite of contemplating both in the course of the story. I would say that the influence of action films is readily present in the latter, and should one wish to view it as a mere example of violent entertainment that would surely be possible. Something the two films do have in common is the structure that compels the viewer to stick around until the end of the film for the promised pay-off of violent resolutions, albeit with different connotations. When the Bogardus gets his comeuppance at the end of *The Tin Star*, the audience can join in with the sense of achievement Owens feels, but the absence of a clear hero-villain dynamic in *Unforgiven* makes the audience's demand for a violent climax rather questionable, as their support makes them complicit. It is as though we, the audience, are the Beauchamp character, we reserve the right to be horrified by violence, but are still more than willing to allow ourselves to be fascinated by it and glorify it in culture.

Unfortunately, where the limitations of this thesis become an obstacle to drawing any generalized conclusions. One could not possibly conclude from watching two films that no revisionist Westerns have any ideological motivations, or moral conviction. But one can perhaps venture a guess that they have a greater moral ambiguity than their traditionalist counterparts, because revisionism in the genre means not only questioning the conventions of traditional Westerns, but also the version of America's past that has been become legend through its reiteration in countless films, and there can be no moral certainty in combination with historically accurate realism.

One question that the comparison of these two films has raised for me, in relation to realism and historicity, is whether it would have been possible for Americans to mythologize their past in Westerns if the Production Code had not required that violence be portrayed in such a sanitized way. If the violence committed in the course of the birthing of their nation, towards their own and towards Native Americans, had been depicted in its gory reality, would Americans have been so ready to claim those legends as facts?

Perhaps this discord between realism and myth is why traditional and revisionist Westerns treat their characters in such different ways. For instance, the Hickman and Munny characters are both seemingly of the Good Badman type, a character that has been part of Western lore since the silent era, but only one of them follows the expected course of development of such an archetype. While Hickman is maligned in the beginning of the film as a murderer, he reveals himself to be a man of honour, but Munny fails to live up to the expectations formed by Western convention.

Although, one could say that none of the characters in either film really develop at all, they are merely stripped of their masks and revealed for who they have really been all along. Hickman was really an honourable man all along, Munny was really a cold hearted killer all along, as revealed through his aptitude for killing, and similarly the Schofield Kid was never really a killer, he just needed to kill someone for that to be revealed.

It is through the final realisations of Ned and the Kid that *Unforgiven* shows a lighter, more hopeful side. Ned says he is not really a killer, and proves that by not being able to shoot a man. The Kid pretends to be a killer, but experiences an epiphany by the end and so we know he will not turn out to be another Munny.

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