

## The Western

The Western genre is a mainstay of film history. The earliest American film makers were simply filming their environment and, as it was the 1890's the frontier spirit was still evident. As much as the genre is based on an American experience, it has also become a symbol of masculinity and chauvinism. Everyone is familiar with the John Wayne-ism, "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do..."

Because the western genre has become such a part of our film knowledge, it is a simple exercise to list the many conventions that are now associated with these films: gun fights, good guys wearing white, the cattle baron, the bar brawl, dance hall girls, whisky, horses, wide plains, towering mountains, etc, etc, etc. These conventions were established in the very first films of this genre, but this is not to say that the myths associated with the frontier and the men who try to conquer it have remained static. As is true with all mythologies, reality is a social phenomenon and is continually redefined whenever society demands, whether the result has been financially successful or not.

Myths are said to evolve as binary structures - where visual codes are identified because they are set in opposition to alternative visual codes. This observation is true of the western. You need only to look at good v's evil, cowboys and Indians, town v country, desert and oasis to find this point amply proven in any western. By simplifying these narrative structures, it becomes easier to view and analyse all western films. Will Wright, in his text *Six Guns and Society* has classified a number of narratives structures that will aid your understanding of this genre.

### The Classical Plot

The prototype of all westerns:

1. The hero enters a social group The Hero is a stranger to the community
2. The hero has an exceptional ability - his ability with guns or his fists
3. The society recognises difference between themselves and the hero - the hero's ability will see him pushed to accept unwanted leadership of the group
4. The society does not fully accept the hero - his violent ways are at odds with the community
5. A conflict of interests exists between the villains and society
6. The villains are stronger than the society - a community led by family-loving weaklings
7. Strong friendship or respect develops between the hero and the villain
8. The villains threaten society
9. The hero avoids involvement in the conflict
10. The villains endanger a friend of the hero
11. The hero fights the villains
12. The hero defeats the villains
13. Society is safe
14. The society accepts the hero
15. The hero loses or gives up his special status within the society

George Stevens' *Shane* (1953) is considered to be the classic of all classic westerns and will be the starting place for this genre study. The binary structure revolves around the wandering life of Shane which is juxtaposed against the apparent drudgery of the life of the homesteaders. The opening scenes of this film reinforce this strong narrative element of inclusion or exclusion from society. Essentially, it is only the gunslingers, Shane and Wilson who live outside the carefully structured lives of the farmers and the ranchers.

Neither gunslingers have "roots" - family, possessions, a home.

In all westerns the most obvious dichotomy exists in the struggle between good and evil. Decent citizens are committed to taming the wilderness and harnessing its resources, bringing schools, churches, law and order to the West. Alternatively, the villains are equally committed to personal gain at any cost - usually to decency and law. In *Shane*, with opposition exists between community progress and individual exploitation.

### **The Professional Plot**

This change in narrative form raises the question, do film makers act to form society's belief systems by challenging norms and attitudes or do films simply depict these pressures and issues. The earliest films that fit into this so-called professional plot structure came to the screens in the late 1950s, a time where society was coming to grips with social revolution, student riots, race and gender issues and no longer trusted the sanitised depiction of the world.

The professional plot still depicted the hero as gunslinger and outsider whose role was to protect society, but the heroes were now professional killers, hired guns. These men were willing to defend society only as a job that they accept for pay or for the simple love of fighting. The social values of love, marriage, family, peace are issues to be avoided, not goals to be won after victory. The most famous of these earliest films were the John Wayne classics *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *True Grit* and the Sam Peckinpah classic *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and the modern *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1970).

The plot structure for the professional western will generally follow the following guidelines:

1. The heroes are professionals
2. The heroes undertake a job
3. The villains are very strong
4. The society is ineffective or incapable of defending itself
5. The job involves the heroes in a fight
6. The heroes have special abilities
7. The heroes form a group for the job
8. As a group, the heroes share respect and loyalty
9. The heroes are independent of society
10. The heroes fight the villains
11. The heroes defeat the villains
12. The heroes stay (or die) together

The selection of films viewed during this genre study (*Blazing Saddles*, *Shane*, *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Seven Samurai*, *Shame*, require you to analyse the use and importance of generic conventions that are associated with all westerns and also to view (by viewing Wright's theory on western genre) the changing narrative structures and how

they have been used to form society's system of belief or, alternatively, to reflect the changing ideals of the different eras.