



The Western Genre Between Tradition and Change

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores analyzes the gender bias of the Western genre, showing how western narratives stem from the perspective of men in a societal structure in which women occupy a central role only to the extent that it is assigned to them within the framework of a patriarchal ideology. The first part of the paper focuses on the emergence of the Western genre and I discuss the characteristics of the western hero. The second part of the paper focuses on the classical hypostases of the western heroine – “the damsel in distress”, “the prostitute with the heart of gold”, “the femme fatale” etc. I discuss the ideology behind the western movies and the way in which tropes and gendered stereotypes from early westerns are revisited and deconstructed in recent westerns, in the light of the theoretical framework of a new ideology which includes queer identities.

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INTRODUCTION

The Western genre in literature and cinematography is a treasure trove of cultural icons and ideas central to the construction of American national identity. In this paper I shall analize the building bricks of the Western Genre, which is formulaic in nature and delights its fans with its beloved repetitive elements or with a permutation of engaging stereotypical variables. The location of western stories is characteristically on the American frontier, a space characterized by wildness, lawlessness, and opportunity. In this environment, institutions such as government and law enforcement were weak because they were in the transitional stages of development.

More than any other genre (literary or cinematic), the Western genre embraces the theme of manhood as a central element. The focus on manhood is not accidental. It results from the national myths that gave birth to the Western genre on the frontier, and from the conflicts and spaces it dramatized. You needed the dynamic energy of masculinity, to cross the continent and transform it, to fight the Indians and build a new country. And male characters frequently navigate the new territory of the continent through different models of masculinity – from the outlaw to the lawman, from the cowboy to the settler.

In his book, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Films*, the critic Lee Clark Mitchell regards the Western genre as the ideal ground for the construction of manhood and for exploring various ideals of masculinity. He considers manhood to be at the very heart of the Western Genre, the most important theme that the genre ever explored. He believes that manhood is “the blood and bone of westerns” and elaborates about the ritualistic humbling and wounding of the hero in “the masculinizing process” of building his manhood, of “making the man”. (Mitchell 175-87)

On the other hand, in his book *Horizons West*, the critic Jim Kitses disagrees with Mitchell’s point of view, which he considers extreme:

“First and foremost, the Western is a historical fable, a saga as well as a drama, which provides a fascinating and never ending series of diverse spectacles and rituals: the pioneer community odyssey of putting down roots, its gunfights and poker games, dances and funerals; journeys of stagecoach and rider, cattle and cavalry: scenes of galvanizing action and

adventure, cattle drives and buffalo stampedes. In my view, to focus single-mindedly on manhood as the principal content, the heart and soul of the genre, is to impoverish it.” (Kitses 19)

Whether we agree with Mithcell or with Kitses, we cannot deny that the Western genre idealizes a past era when masculinity was perceived as straightforward and heroic. This nostalgia reinforces certain masculine ideals and provides a cultural space to explore and reaffirm traditional gender roles. And this was done in formulaic situations, through specific stereotypes.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE WESTERN GENRE

The western genre emerged in the late 19th century as a response to a prevailing trend in American literature known as the Sentimental Novel, in which women occupied a central place. The action of the “domestic novel” was placed in private sites indoors, in kitchens, parlors, and upstairs rooms or other domestic settings. The main character of the novel was a woman, and there were numerous major characters who were also women, who offered one another emotional solace and support. Under the influence of the Second Great Awakening

“there’s a great deal of Bible reading, praying, hymn singing and drinking of tea. Emotions other than anger are expressed very freely and openly. (...) Culturally and politically, the effect of these novels is to establish women at the center of the world’s most important work (saving souls).” (Tompkins 38)

Organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (founded in 1874) brought women together to fight for prohibition, moral reform and women’s rights. The movement began in the early 1800s, gaining momentum during the Second Great Awakening, a period of religious revival that emphasized personal morality and social reform. The WCTU argued that alcohol was responsible for many social evils, such as domestic violence and poverty.

The women’s religious campaign for temperance put a lot of coercive pressure on husbands and sons. Therefore it is not surprising that male readers opted to escape the external pressures of their environment, envisioning a space devoid of women and social constraints. The Western genre emerged in response to the domestic novel, serving as a direct opposition to the ideal of domesticity that was prevalent in what can be referred to as “American Victorian culture” – reflected in the Sentimental novel of the 19th century.

THE WESTERN GENRE AS A REACTION AGAINST FEMININE DISCOURSE

In westerns, men escape from the suffocating Victorian interiors, the domestic conflicts prevalent in those settings, and the emotional complexities that remain unresolved. Unlike the Sentimental novel, which often features a greater presence of women, westerns are characterized by a time and environment where women are scarce, and the prevailing conditions prevent them from gaining any social influence. Therefore, women receive roles that seem to exist only to fulfill men’s needs, in the western genre.

Western stories usually take place outdoors in the main street or in the prairie, in saloons or barber shops, in locations controlled by men. The only women in the saloon are the dancing girls, who work there to provide entertainment for men. The opportunities for women in the American West were markedly restricted, the most respectable occupation being that of a schoolteacher. Alternatively, women could venture westward as “mail order brides,” serving as solitary companions for isolated ranchers united through the forlorn method of correspondence.

Under the restricting impact of the Temperance Movement, men started to see women as impediments diminishing their strength. Simultaneously, women’s domain was often viewed by American men as a realm that imposed constraining limitations of civilization. From the nation’s inception, American men have sought refuge in forests and in the wilderness to escape the confines of civilization, which they associated with women.

In Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*, the protagonist goes hunting to evade his nagging wife, only to fall asleep in the woods for two decades. Upon returning to his village, he discovers that everything has changed and his wife is dead, a situation which allows him to relish his newfound freedom. In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown*, the Puritan hero ventures into the forest at night to confront the darker aspects of his psyche, fleeing from his wife, Faith. Similarly, Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn runs away, to avoid being “civilized” by Widow Douglass. And Ernest Hemingway’s Nick Adams joins the boys for a hunting trip in a space that is reserved exclusively for men.

The landscape of the western (prairies, deserts, boomtowns, open range) is coded as a public, hostile environment where survival and honor are tested. This is not the private sphere of home or the tamed landscape of the gardens and cultivated areas which are the domain of women. Westerns frequently depict violent confrontations – gunfights, duels, and battles with outlaws or Native Americans, in a world where no woman can enter. It is a world of exploration and adventure, where he must undertake tests of courage, honor, and strength, qualities traditionally associated with masculinity.

THE LANGUAGE OF MEN

By contrast with the Sentimental novel of the 19th century, the western genre does not express emotions freely. The western heroes are men of few words, who believe that words are weak compared to action. The people who rely on speech are considered inferior to the individuals who take action. Salesmen, bankers and politicians, whose profession revolves around language, are often regarded with contempt.

In John Ford's *Stagecoach*, the official who steals the money never shuts up and the other stagecoach passengers turn their faces away from him, when he sprays them with spittle as he yells. The weakness of his character is made evident by the way in which he speaks.

The Western heroes talk in short, blunt sentences. They prefer to speak only when it is absolutely necessary. Talkative folks are generally the victims in westerns. Those who like to boast and brag will most likely be killed. It is the quiet man, mouth clenched, tongue bitten, who is going to win the shoot-out, not the orator.

In *Phallic Critiques* (1984), the critic Peter Schwenger describes a mode of expression called "the language of men". He argues that this language is one of the aspects of what he describes as "the School of Virility", following from the writer Jack London to Ernest Hemingway and extending to Norman Mailer and beyond. He explains that the Western hero protects his personal integrity by presenting himself to the outer world in an impenetrable armor. Schwenger asserts that when a person expresses himself verbally or shows emotion, he exposes himself and becomes vulnerable. In contrast, silence serves as a way of maintaining masculine dominance and control.

"It is by cutting words to an emotion, that it becomes feminized. As long as the emotion itself is restrained, held back, it hardly matters what the emotion itself is; it will retain the male integrity. (...) Not talking is a demonstration of masculine control over emotion" (Schwenger 43)

The language of men in westerns also incorporates regional slang and idiomatic expressions from the American West, lending authenticity to the story and grounding the characters in their setting. But despite the roughness, there is often a certain politeness or formality in the language of men, especially in addressing strangers or in moments of respect, reflecting the fact that the western hero has a certain code of honor.

The typical Western hero would be an athlete who is extremely strong and rugged in body. His skin is the result of sun, weather and a harsh existence in nature. And it is his own freedom and self-reliance which allow him to exist alone in the wilderness. He often has a trained horse with which he shares a relationship of trust. He is also a man of justice and personal integrity and is often the protector of the vulnerable.

THE FLAW OF THE WESTERN HERO

However, the western hero does have one major flaw – misogyny. This is a complex and often critical aspect of the Western genre, reflecting historical attitudes and character archetypes, as well as characteristic canonic requirements. Let us have a look at the most famous western hero, the one interpreted in numerous westerns by John Wayne.

Although he is regarded as a role model and a paternal figure – having taken on fatherly and uncle-like roles in over 25 western films –, Wayne's esteemed position as a "professional hero" does not translate into being an exemplary family man. This is determined, perhaps, by his misogynistic ideas. For example, in *True Grit*, the character Rooster Cogburn remarks, "A man will never work for a woman unless he's got clabber for brains." "If women ever get the vote, God help us." Given his consistently patronizing demeanor towards women, the frequent assertion that a wife is a burden and his ongoing expressions of misogyny, it is not surprising that his wife or romantic partner has passed away or left in most of his westerns, and he lives alone.

John Wayne's characters embody traditional patriarchal values, where men hold authority and women are expected to be submissive or secondary. His heroes tend to assert control over women's decisions and lives, reflecting a worldview that prizes male power. In *The Searchers* (1956), Ethan's frantic search to save his niece Debbie is motivated by familial love but also by the need to "cleanse" her of the Native American influence. He considers Debbie's abduction as a form of defilement. Ethan's willingness to murder the girl rather than let her live as a Native American woman is a prime example of misogyny and racism.

In many John Wayne Westerns, women are often portrayed less as fully realized characters and more as symbols of civilization, morality, or rewards for the male hero's bravery. This reduces women to objects or prizes rather than autonomous individuals. Wayne's Western heroes often exhibit misogynistic traits through their patriarchal control, objectification of women, and dismissal of the feminine point of view. These traits are integral to the traditional Western hero archetype but are increasingly critiqued today for their reinforcement of gender inequality.

While the male characters are conquering the wilderness and the wild frontier, the female characters are relegated to more subtle and stereotypical roles in the background. Ask anyone who some of the great western film characters were and you are likely to get responses like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. Ask anyone about women in western films and you will probably get a more hesitant answer. Being able to list famous actresses or feminine roles in westerns is quite difficult.

WOMEN IN WESTERNS

The Western genre is informed by a patriarchal mentality which attributes in movies the main roles to male characters, while women receive only minor and stereotypical roles. These stereotypes reinforce narrow views of women's identities and limit their complexity. The traditional westerns rarely explore the lives of women beyond their relationships with men and underrepresent the complexity of women's contribution to the development of the American West.

Feminine characters typically do not have major roles that move the plot forward. The female role is not at the forefront of the action in westerns. While the female's role is often intertwined with the male's, the common image of women in westerns is that of a saloon girl, a "damsel in distress" that needs to be saved and sometimes even a tomboy who tries to be a part of the action. The women in these films are generally seen in stereotypical roles, because the story is told from a male perspective that follows a traditional code of behavior.

Generally speaking, women do not have a lot of power and they tend to revolve around a man who is taking care of them or affirming their worth. They rarely get the spotlight; instead, they are consigned to the role of sidekick in the hero's quest and treated more like objects or devices, rather than fully fleshed characters. A great number of Westerns portray women as mere vessels of male lust that look good but are devoid of personality or brains. This objectification results in a shallow representation which degrades the dignity of women.

The genre frequently reinforces traditional gender roles, where men are rugged, independent heroes, and women are caretakers, objects of desire, or barriers to be overcome. Women in Westerns have often played two roles: the innocent, inactive "damsel in distress," and the "saloon girl," or "femme fatale."

THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

One of the most popular feminine character stereotypes in Westerns is "the Damsel in Distress". Western women are often portrayed as damsels in distress, forced into perilous situations – be it from outlaws, marauding Indians, or the elements. Their weakness works to spike the heroism and valor of the male hero riding to the aid of vulnerable feminine characters in dangerous situations. By going after a helpless woman in distress, the male hero demonstrates his manhood and strength. He is placed in situations where he has to fight the enemy in order to save the woman, and this allows him to emerge as a hero, while she emerges as a helpless victim that is reliant on the man in order to survive.

The Damsel in Distress characters are not very active. They can be kidnapped, threatened or in peril, but they rarely lead the action or find the solution to their problems by themselves. It is essential to understand this stereotype, to be able to analyze how the relationship of gender and power is typically framed within Western storytelling. By framing the woman as an object to be rescued, the Western underlines again and again the supremacy of the male hero.

In John Ford's film *The Searchers* (1956), Debbie (Natalie Wood) is kidnapped by Native Americans and the male protagonist Ethan (John Wayne) and his sidekick embark on a long quest to rescue her. When they find Debbie, she is unwilling to be rescued and wants to stay with the Indian tribe, as she feels they are her people now. But the men refuse to give up and rescue Debbie despite her resistance, taking her to her Anglo-American home. They refuse to consider her choice and believe that they know what is best for her, asserting their control over her.

THE MADONNA OF THE PRAIRIE – A CIVILIZING AGENT

The "Madonna" sends us to the symbolic figure of Virgin Mary and represents purity, motherhood, and spiritual grace. In Westerns, this character is a woman of moral goodness who serves as a civilizing influence. She is usually a woman who shines as a paragon of hope and morality in the rough and tumble life of the frontier. She may be a schoolteacher, the wife of a settler, a missionary who offers stability and hope. This sort of woman symbolizes the values of domestic life and often tends to children, the village, or her land – representing fertility and growth. She acts as a civilizing force, and frequently redeems or humanizes the male protagonist, encouraging him to eschew violent or lawless behavior and become a moral and socially responsible citizen.

A classic example of this kind of feminine character is the character Clementine Carter from John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946). The movie is an old-fashioned revenge story focusing on the confrontation between Wyatt Earp, his brothers, and the Clanton gang. When Clementine arrives in the rough and tumble frontier town, she brings with her civilization and social order, signalling the transformation of the Wild West into a new kind of settled society. She acts as Wyatt's conscience and advises him to seek justice by legal channels, not through personal violence motivated by vengeance: "You're not only a gunman, Wyatt. You are a man who can bring peace to this town."

THE PROSTITUTE WITH A HEART OF GOLD

The moral ambiguity introduced by this stereotype along traditional lines of good and bad of the western genre aids in making the film more emotionally rich. Despite the fact that her occupation is reviled as having a low status, she is a woman of kindness, loyalty, and human worth. She flips the audience's assumptions about morality and virtue, insisting that goodness can thrive outside the traditional social roles.

The 1939 John Ford film, *Stagecoach*, does an excellent job of portraying Dallas, the “prostitute with a heart of gold”. Dallas is introduced as a woman who is cast out of town by the righteous ladies of the Law and Order league, because she is a dancing girl and a prostitute. But the social rejection directed toward her eventually emphasizes her fundamental goodness. Despite the contempt of the other stagecoach travellers, she demonstrates remarkable generosity and compassion when they suffer and need help. Because of her openness and vulnerability, we relate to her as a human being and eventually she is redeemed.

THE “FEMME FATALE”

The “Femme Fatale” stereotype is usually characterized as a woman who removes a man’s manhood, physically or psychologically. This archetype is not only a challenge to the controlling power, masculinity or social position of the male lead. Her metaphorical “castration” of the man, like that performed by Delilah on Samson in the Bible, can be regarded as a reversal of male-female roles and it exemplifies male fears of female sexual empowerment.

The “femme fatale” is simply a seductive woman who makes use of her sex charm in order to influence men, so as to bring them to their ruin or loss of power. She serves as a cliché or a contrast to more typical and conventional female characters such as the saintly schoolteacher, the faithful pioneer wife, or the angelic mother figure – adopted from the Sentimental Novel. She embraces freedom, sexual empowerment, and moral ambiguity rather than traditional domesticity and purity. She will seduce and/or betray men, inciting conflict and causing tragedy. She can be an allure to the male lead, bringing him into harmful and ruinous confrontations. Regarding her roles – she could be a saloon singer, gambler, outlaw’s sidekick, or con artist.

An exemplification of the femme fatale is Ronda Castle (Ruth Roman) in the Anthony Mann Western, *The Far Country* (1954). Ronda is a hard-working and independent woman who operates the saloon in a frontier town. It was an original approach in the 1950s to have a female character in a western, who can be self-sufficient and independent in her own business. She employs her humor and charm as a lucrative way of coping with the male world, using her assets – her innate intelligence and the feminine power to seduce and connive.

She is pragmatic and manipulative, if necessary for success: she leverages her relationships to secure her sense of order. Ronda questions the assumptions of the hero, Jeff McCloud (James Stewart), asking whether it is worthwhile to lead an ethical life when you can be bought out with remarkable benefits. But Ronda ultimately sides up with Jeff’s chase for what is just and fair, revealing a true emotional connection with her man, rather than adopting a cold-hearted way of being. Ronda Castle of *The Far Country* is an excellent example of a Western “femme fatale”. However, in the end she sacrifices herself for love. She defies the hero and audience’s expectations, and in so doing becomes exactly what is so enticing (and threatening) in the archetype, while also transcending it with her complexity and ultimately redeemable aspect.

THE TOMBOY

The Western hero is tough, therefore it is not surprising that the only way in which a woman can play the main role and focus attention in the Western genre is to become masculine. The tomboy figure appeared as a consequence of the heroine’s need to incorporate masculine characteristics in order to survive in the Old West. This behavior may cause a conflict with other characters’ conventional expectations of how women should behave, but the tomboy character feels that her need for independence and agency is more important than cultural demands.

Discarding the traditional feminine appearance, the tomboy heroine puts on a man’s crumpled shirt, pants, cowboy boots and wears her hair close-cropped. She rejects the traditional “girly” roles of women and instead demonstrates skill and assertion in activities that are socially coded as male behavior.

In the film *Cat Ballou* (1965), the female lead role Cat Ballou, interpreted by Jane Fonda, shows the behavior of this type of character. Her “Tomboy” traits set her apart from the conventional female roles of the time. Cat Ballou is presented as an assertive woman with initiative, the very opposite to the character of “the damsel in distress”, who sets out to revenge the death of her father, when the male individuals in her entourage fail to rise to the challenge. She rides horses, she shoots the bad guys and explains to a child, at a tea party during which mothers serve the children lemonade (she gives the child what appears to be a drink of whiskey), that he must learn early that “Good people are overrated.” She also has no second thoughts about dancing with a Native American boy at a barn dance where everybody is racist or about robbing a train – though the seriousness of the heist is alleviated by the elements of comedy in the story.

Occasionally, she is a bit of a brat and that is what charmingly gives her a tomboyish appeal. Whether you are a child or an adult, you cannot help being won over by this endearing character.

The tomboy nature of Cat Ballou serves to destabilize traditional gender roles in the Western, and her character plays out as a rebel and an independent woman, a trait which began to characterize the heroines of the revisionist Westerns of the 1960s.

In conclusion, the Western genre has been a literary and cinematic genre with a patriarchal and conservative ideology. From this perspective, “the feminine in the genre seems to exist to validate masculinity as the dominant mode” (Kitses 21). But, as the changing cultural tendencies become more nuanced, things are beginning to change, allowing the emergence of new empowering characters in modern Western films.

THE PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY – HENRY NASH SMITH’S BOOK, “VIRGIN LAND”

Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) was a foundational study of American cultural studies, an account of the ways in which the myth of the American West shaped American national identity. The patriarchal narrative of conquest characterizes the construction of the West, and therefore Western lands, in the view of them as a “virgin” or empty soil to conquer and colonize. Under the myth, men create and remake and women are secondarily positioned in domesticity.

There is an absence of female agency. Smith’s narrative ignores women as active, diverse workers in the settlement process, women’s roles in myth-making in the West. This omission bolsters a view of the masculine by framing men’s conduct as the cause of history and myth, while women are either passive players or spectators. *Virgin Land* delves into and justifies the traditionalist ideology at the heart of this myth, the myth of America’s expansion and selfhood as a nation.

PATRICIA NELSON LIMERICK – THE NEW HISTORIANS’ CHALLENGE OF PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

Patricia Nelson Limerick, a leading figure in the New Western History movement of the 1980s and 90s, is known mainly for her ground-breaking book, **The Legacy of Conquest** (1987), in which she challenges the patriarchal ideology of the American West supported by Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry Nash Smith, by deconstructing male-centered myths, amplifying the roles of women and marginalized groups, and presenting the West as a complex, contested space shaped by multiple identities and social forces.

Patricia Nelson Limerick contests the dominant version of history as written by the WASP segment of population and argues that a realistic history should include multiple view points. Her approach allows for the complexity of race, class and gender in the history of the West, revealing that patriarchal oppression forms part of a more complex matrix that intersects with other systems of power. The myth of the West should involve Native Americans, the Chicano, the African Americans and the Chinese, she argues. As she synthesizes these issues in the history of the American West, she points to the persistence of prior challenges that continue to haunt us today and to become part and parcel of the West’s “legacy of conquest.”

One aspect in the work of Patricia Nelson Limerick contends that in realities gender roles were never locked in place and needed negotiation and diversity. She also critiques the age-old myth of the West as an untouched frontier waiting for male settlers to conquer and civilize while combating the Myth of the “Empty” or “Virgin” (Feminine) Land that awaits conquest and civilizational intervention by Anglo-American male settlers. Emphasizing how women were involved in creating the economic, political, and cultural foundations of the West, she provides examples of historical female figures who added to the history of the American West.

THE WESTERN GENRE REVISITED - THE QUEER WESTERN AS A NEW SUBGENRE

Recent Westerns have started to reflect the changes in the generally accepted ideology. The portrayal of men and women becomes more complex emotionally and psychologically, and moves beyond the traditional stereotypes. Traditional masculinity is now criticized and deconstructed, instead of being glorified. Recent westerns depict vulnerable men and empowered women. Female characters begin to take over roles previously reserved for men and break through the stereotype of the traditional masculine hero.

The contemporary understanding of gender roles becomes more complex and goes beyond black and white stereotypes, and different kinds of characters appear, defying the Western trope and challenging existing conventions. We also notice an increasing inclusion of Indigenous women, women of color and LGBT characters, broadening the cinematic portrayal beyond binary gender stereotypes and Anglo-centric storylines.

The new ideological trend could be exemplified by the ideas of Jack Halberstam. In his book *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam contradicts the notion that masculinity is reserved to people with a male body or to fixed biological or social features. Halberstam shifts the focus from sex assigned at birth to cultural constructs of masculinity. In other words, she argues that masculinity can be adopted and imitated in ways that do not necessarily depend on one’s biological sex or sexual orientation. She explores “alternative masculinities” that may be more vulnerable, existing outside normative patriarchy. This rejects the cultural stereotype that masculinity must be emotionally repressed, hyper-heterosexual and associated with power and dominance.

Other critics such as Yvonne Tasker and E. Ann Kaplan have also analyzed the way in which Western films incorporate or resist against emotional complexity in male characters. Sheridan French, in his book *Queer Cowboys* (2020), identifies a category of westerns named “queer Westerns”, and discusses it as part of a broader movement of “revisionist Westerns.” Revisionist Westerns, which emerged in the 1970s, challenge and deconstruct the myths and conventions of classical Western cinema.

French argues that queer Westerns criticize how hegemonic masculinity functions in the Western space, which is often characterized by violence, repression and emotional stoicism. And by showing queer men wrestling with masculinities outside the heteronormative perspective, they reveal the toxic and exclusionary characteristics of traditional Western masculinity and create valid alternative mythologies.

Revisionist Westerns question traditional portrayals of masculinity and the history of the frontier, whereas queer Westerns extend the revisionist approach by directly confronting and reinterpreting the heteronormative and patriarchal beliefs that form the

foundation of traditional Western stories. French analyzes a variety of queer Western movies, but quotes *Brokeback Mountain* as a watershed that brought queer relationships in the spotlight of the Western genre.

Brokeback Mountain (2005), directed by Ang Lee, focuses on a romantic and sexual relationship between two men. The protagonists, Jack and Ennis, are cowboys – a type of hero which traditionally represents Western masculinity: they are tough, stoic and self-reliant. Yet the film explores their emotional vulnerability, which is usually excluded from the make up of the traditional Western hero. Jack and Ennis are portrayed as complex individuals with deep emotional needs, who struggle to hide their non-heterosexual identities, in order to survive in a heteronormative, patriarchal environment and escape the ostracism of social homophobic norms. The movie subverts the traditional expectations regarding the behavior of the cowboy stereotype and centers on a previously marginalized queer identity.

Another movie which challenges the traditional western stereotypes is the *True Grit* remake, directed by the Coen brothers (2010). The entire narrative of the movie centers around the female protagonist, Mattie Ross. Focussed on revenge, she undauntedly hunts down the killer of her father and demonstrates qualities that are traditionally coded as masculine and masters skills such as markmanship and riding horses. On the other hand, the male hero, Rooster Cogburn, displays weaknesses such as heavy drinking and moral ambiguity, which make him assume a secondary position in the narrative, after Mattie Ross.

In this revisionist movie, the female character has become stronger than the male hero. She is no longer romanticized or sexualized, and she does not appear as an object of sexual desire or a moral symbol of male redemption, and this contradicts the expectations of traditional gender stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we could say that the western genre is constantly adapting to modern sensibilities, incorporating new approaches and storytelling methods which make the traditional patriarchal norms obsolete. For example, women have begun to take the main role, instead of being relegated only in secondary positions that serve men. The western genre is transforming the fixed gender roles and stereotypes through the inclusion of previously marginalized figures, reinventing itself.

Modern filmmakers have started to include new themes such as gender identity and race, which were anathema when the Western genre was at its peak of development in the 1950s. Gay westerns or movies made from the point of view of women or minorities such as the Chicanos or Native Americans would have made the cinema theaters explode, because the spectators were not ready to digest these approaches, until the end of the 20th century. The New History approach, feminist and gay studies, or ethnic studies have shifted the lens of perception, enabling the incorporation of new elements which bring a new depth and relevance for contemporary spectators.

However, the Western Genre has always been, from its very beginning, constructed around a keystone of beliefs and values that stand at the core of the American nation, such as the American Dream of success, the settlement of the continent, the Anglo-American Manifest Destiny, the building of the American nation, patriotism. When these traditional core values, patriarchal or not, are being revised, we cannot help wondering if the Western Genre is not collapsing, because the new ideas and values that are beginning to penetrate it are threatening the very core on which it has been built.

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