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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### What is James Bond doing in the Old West?

A familiar image from the opening moments of Westerns is that of the rider (or riders) in the wilderness. This has been among the first things that we have seen in many Westerns over the years. The hybrid science-fiction Western *Cowboys & Aliens* (Jon Favreau, 2011) gives us its version of this image, but not as an opening. What we are shown in the first five minutes of the movie, before we get to the rider in the wilderness, suggests a different relationship to the Western genre.

The film begins with a shot of the landscape, recognisably that of the American Southwest: rocky terrain, sagebrush, mountains in the background. The camera pans across this landscape until a man (Daniel Craig) – his name, we will learn, is Jake Lonergan – lurches up into shot, coming to sudden, panicked consciousness. The next few shots show us Jake's confusion and uncertain relationship to his surroundings. The landscape is kept out of focus as Jake looks around, not seeming to recognise his environment. In the shots following his introduction, Jake remains visually separated from the indistinct haze around him. He does not seem to know how he came to be in his current situation; we see him registering, as if for the first time, the wound in his side and the futuristic cuff on his wrist. In the dirt in front of him is a black-and-white photograph of a woman, the first clear indication of the film's period setting (Jake's clothes, though dirty, are plain enough to avoid being obvious historical markers). It is later revealed that Jake is suffering from amnesia, and at this stage in the story has no recollection of who or where he is.

When a family of scalphunters appears behind Jake, they too are shown out of focus, extending the initial emphasis on Jake's undefined relationship to the place in which he has found himself. The scalphunters, a father and two sons, mistake Jake's cuff for a prison shackle and attempt to bring him in for a reward. Jake kills the three men in a sudden display of instinctive fighting ability. As he plunders their bodies for clothing and gear, putting on boots, a gunbelt, a waistcoat, a gun and finally a hat, Jake starts to take on a more recognisably Western appearance. It is only after Jake has been decked out in Western accoutrements that we are then given the familiar generic image of him as the lone rider in the landscape.

What we start with in *Cowboys & Aliens* is a character who, at least temporarily, does not seem to know how to be in a Western. The initial relation is one of uncertainty and estrangement, both in terms of place (as suggested in the visual separation of Jake from his surroundings) and time (we see the futuristic technology before we see the period photograph). That this is articulated through a major star – James Bond, no less – makes it seem all the more like a characteristic contemporary relation to the Western genre. The contemporary figure does not seem to belong to the world of the Western and must be reconstructed in the image of the genre before the film can proceed. It is not that the conventions of the Western are inaccessible to the movie; rather, they are not immediately to hand and need to be retrieved.

This book is about a way of understanding the Hollywood Western in recent decades: in the context of its "afterlife." By "afterlife" I mean the period since the decline of the Western as a mainstream Hollywood genre, produced regularly and

routinely in the popular American film industry. Westerns are still made in Hollywood and elsewhere, but for some time now they have appeared only intermittently, in isolated cycles and clusters. Between these flurries, there have been periods in which few new Hollywood Westerns have emerged – at times, none. After an extended period as one of the most popular and familiar Hollywood genres, the Western now endures in more peripheral and residual forms.

“Afterlife,” as a critical term, has been used to refer to the later contexts and incarnations in which works, figures or tropes have been revived, extended or transformed. Cultural afterlives can manifest in a range of ways, from specific allusions and appropriations, such as the unofficial merchandise through which fans declare ongoing connections to *Thelma & Louise* (Cook, 2007, 1), to broader discourses like the “cultural tug-of-war” over defining and commemorating the legacy of Oscar Wilde (Wood, 2007, 17) One common element, though, is a sense of retrospection; the concept of an afterlife is built on the contrast between previous and subsequent contexts. Helen Davies describes her book *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* as “a study of how the lives of nineteenth-century freak show performers have been revisited and reinterpreted by contemporary literature and culture.” (2015, 3) This type of retrospective relationship, in which elements associated with the past are transposed into new contexts, is often central to discussions of afterlives.

The notion of an afterlife provides us with one way of looking at the Western genre in recent decades. The genre can be seen as an object associated with the past, subject to forms of revival and retrospection. Indeed, as I have previously argued,

these associations have sometimes been difficult to avoid in more recent Westerns, which “have come to be regarded [...] as revivals of a once-popular genre that is understood to have come to an end.” (Falconer, 2015, 180) The initial sense of distance between the contemporary star and the Western in the example from *Cowboys & Aliens* reflects a version of this perspective. Despite the characteristically Western setting, the conventional trappings of the genre are given a more gradual and deliberate introduction than we would expect in Westerns from earlier eras. Part of this likely to be a consequence of the film’s mix of genres; it is employing the Western genre in a consciously different fashion, in combination with science fiction. Nonetheless, the implication seems to be that, however the genre is to be used, it must first be revived. In this book, I will be examining some of the ways in which the Western has been revived in recent decades, the aspects of the genre that have been retained or adapted and the latter-day associations that it has acquired.

### What happened to the Hollywood Western?

The Hollywood Western has never come to a definitive end, but the period in which Westerns were produced in large numbers and maintained a prominent collective profile has been over for some time. The status of the Western as a representative Hollywood genre has rightly been contested (Neale, 2000, 133) but the genre was a significant part of the Hollywood repertoire for many years. According to the statistics in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, Westerns accounted for between 20% and 35% of Hollywood features produced between 1935 and 1959 (Buscombe,

1993b, 427). Over 100 Westerns were produced each year from 1935 to 1943, and again in 1948 and from 1950 to 1952 (*ibid.*, 426). Although series and B-Westerns contribute to the large annual totals in this period, Steve Neale also notes “the unusual numerical prominence of A-Westerns [...] in the 1940s and 1950s (2002, 27). Neale argues that the Hollywood Western went into long-term decline after its final peak in the 1950s (*ibid.*) and the *BFI Companion* figures bear this out, showing that the number of Westerns produced annually fell by 90% between 1957 and 1977 (Buscombe, 1993b, 426). To help establish a context for more recent Westerns, it is worth looking further at the genre’s material decline and subsequent fortunes.

The decline in the quantity of Westerns partly reflects the wider decline in the number of features produced in Hollywood after the breakdown of the studio system, a 41% drop between 1957 and 1967 (Buscombe, 1993b, 427). However, we can also see a decline in the proportion of Westerns, which did not return to over 20% of Hollywood features after the 1950s (*ibid.*). This suggests a specific decline for the Western beyond that seen in the surrounding industry. Neale argues that, between the early 1960s and the early 1970s,

...the Western’s numerical decline was either periodically halted or periodically masked by the production of television series such as *The Virginian* and *Bonanza*, by the impact of the Italian Western and by the visibility, notoriety and critical or financial success of a number of cycles and films. (2002, 28)

Despite the decline in the quantity and proportion of Hollywood Westerns at the beginning of the 1960s, the still-recent peak was sufficiently high, and the elements noted by Neale were sufficiently prominent for the genre to retain a significant popular presence for some time afterwards.

The *BFI Companion's* statistics for the quantity and proportion of Westerns produced each year come to an end in 1977 and 1967 respectively, but Andrew Patrick Nelson provides some further figures for the Westerns released between 1969 and 1980. These are derived from the lists in Phil Hardy's 1983 reference work on Westerns, published under several different titles (the version I have is *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia: The Western*). Nelson presents two additional sets of annual figures, one for all the Westerns listed by Hardy and one that tries to approximate the number of conventional Hollywood feature Westerns by omitting "all foreign, television, sex, and hybrid Westerns" as well as "movies with contemporary settings" (2015, 62). Although it is not always clear which films Nelson has excluded on this basis, both sets of figures suggest a similar pattern for the 1970s. The Hardy / Nelson statistics show that the decline in the annual production of Westerns becomes much more pronounced between 1972 and 1974: a fall of 67% based on all movies from Hardy's lists or 79% based on Nelson's "US" figures (2015, 63). The figures pick up a little in 1975 and 1976, but never fully recover. The number of Westerns released remains in single figures – compared to the triple figures of the genre's earlier peaks in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – from either 1977 (all movies) or as early as 1973 (the "US" figures) (ibid.). Both sets of figures indicate an overall decline in the production of Westerns of around 80% between 1970 and 1980 (ibid.)

Figures published by *Variety* also show a decline in the market share of Westerns during the 1970s. The genre represented 12% of US film rentals in 1971-1972, but dropped sharply after that, falling below 5% from 1975-1976 and remaining at just 1% between 1977 and 1982 (1985, 3).

The 1970s was the decade in which the genre's longer-term decline in quantity and prominence seemed to intensify, and in which the extent and possible permanence of this decline was registered. While pronouncements of the "death" of the Western have, as Nelson notes, been made almost often enough over the years to constitute a genre of their own (2015, 191) some of the best known of these – such as Pauline Kael's claim that "a few more Westerns may straggle in, but the Western is dead" (1974, 100) – were made in the 1970s. By the 1980s, Andrew Sarris was remarking on "the total unfashionableness of the Western genre in America" (1982, 41).

At this point in summaries of the decline of the Hollywood Western, it is customary to mention *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980). It is obvious that the reception of this expensive and long-delayed movie, described as a "profligate box-office disaster" (Thompson, 1992, 52) did no favours to the perceived viability of the genre in the early 1980s. However, as the statistics discussed above indicate, *Heaven's Gate* was released at a point when the mainstream profile of the Western had already diminished considerably. As Nelson observes, "it is not as though the failure of *Heaven's Gate* extinguished a vibrant segment of Hollywood's output." (2015, 196) Former United Artists executive Steven Bach's account of the film suggests that its development was shaped by concerns about "a genre long out of favour" (1985, 128) and that aspects of it were understood as attempts to play down conventional genre associations and avoid being "just another Western" (217). Arguably, *Heaven's Gate* was as much a product of the uncertainties that had already arisen about the commercial prospects and contemporary appeal of the Western as it was a contribution to subsequent uncertainties.



For some critics, the popular failure of *Heaven's Gate* highlighted some of the emerging consequences of the Western's long-term decline. John G. Cawelti argues that,

...the confusions of Cimino's film and its subsequent box office failure did indicate that late twentieth-century audiences could no longer be counted on to respond automatically to the symbols of the Wild West. (1999, 99)

Similarly, Sarris suggests that for 1980s audiences, the Johnson County War, the range war on which *Heaven's Gate* is based and which also provided the broad basis for other famous Westerns such as *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), "seemed even more remote than the Trojan War" (1982, 41). For both writers, a problem faced by the Western by the time of *Heaven's Gate* was that, after the decline in the quantity and popularity of Westerns in the 1970s, mainstream audiences for Hollywood movies were no longer accustomed to watching Westerns regularly and that, as a result, the conventional material of the genre had become less familiar to them. Claims about what is familiar or unfamiliar to audiences can be difficult to assess, but the perception of the genre as increasingly unfamiliar is likely to have been strengthened as the Western continued to decline in the 1980s. Returning to the *Variety* figures, the US market share for Westerns reached zero in 1983 and 1984 (1985, 3). Perceived unfamiliarity has become a recurring concern in the decades since, with claims continuing to be made that audiences (Buscombe, 2006, xiv; Anderson, 2013, 60) and filmmakers (Thompson, 1992, 52-53) no longer understand the Western genre.

### Revival and retrospection

The films that I examine in this book come from 1985 onwards, after the low ebb of the Hollywood Western in 1983-1984. 1985 saw the first of the occasional revivals of the genre that have emerged since that point. Two high-profile mainstream Westerns, *Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood) and *Silverado* (Lawrence Kasdan), and two parody Westerns, *Rustlers' Rhapsody* (Hugh Wilson) and *Lust in the Dust* (Paul Bartel), were released that year. By this stage, it is already possible to see the Western being treated in ways comparable to those in the opening of *Cowboys & Aliens*. The deliberate retrieval and revival of generic elements is emphasised in both *Pale Rider* and *Silverado*. *Pale Rider's* Preacher (Eastwood), apparently back from the dead, is resonant in this context. Eastwood's history as a Western star makes the motif of supernatural revival seem to apply more broadly, with the genre itself among the elements apparently resurrected. This dimension is more evident than in *High Plains Drifter* (Clint Eastwood, 1973), the other Western in which Eastwood plays an ambiguously supernatural revenant, which was released during a period in which Eastwood had starred in Westerns almost every year. By contrast, *Pale Rider* was Eastwood's first Western since *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Clint Eastwood, 1976), not counting *Bronco Billy* (Clint Eastwood, 1980), a contemporary-set comedy-drama based around a Wild West show.

The restoration of Western elements in *Silverado* is presented in a manner closer to the introduction and reconstruction of Jake Lonergan in *Cowboys & Aliens*. In the first part of the movie, the Western genre is figuratively reawakened through the characters of Emmett (Scott Glenn) and Paden (Kevin Kline). We first see Emmett

sleeping in his cabin, surrounded by items of Western iconography: a saddle with a lasso lashed to it, a pair of boots and a gun in a holster. The cabin is attacked, and it is as if this Western figure, lying dormant, is suddenly reactivated. In this opening scene, the revival of the Western hero is combined with a restoration of a characteristically Western setting. The space in the scene gradually opens out, first as a result of the holes made in the cabin walls and roof during the confrontation, and then when Emmett opens his door and steps outside, revealing a spectacular landscape. This moment is emphasised not only by the shift in scale from the tight interior, but also by the displaying of the film's title and the first occurrence of its main musical theme. The emergence out into the open is offered as a declaration of the film's identity and as a return to the Western; both the landscape (dry, rocky terrain, a deep valley and snow-capped mountains in the distance) and the music (a brisk but stately melody somewhere between a fanfare and a folk tune) evoke the genre in different ways. The genre connection is also emphasised by the resemblance to the famous opening shot of *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), with Emmett moving through the doorway from a dark interior into a bright landscape. More generally, though, the impression is of a spectacle associated with the Western, initially withheld and then unleashed.

<FIGURE 1.1 ABOUT HERE>

<FIGURE 1.2 ABOUT HERE (STRAIGHT AFTER 1.1)>

<CAPTION FOR FIGURES 1.1 and 1.2> *Silverado* (Lawrence Kasdan, Columbia / Delphi IV Productions, USA, 1985) – the world of the film opens out

When we first see Paden, he is lying on his back in the desert, having been robbed of his possessions and most of his clothes. Paden is both literally revived – Emmett gives him water from his canteen – and figuratively rebuilt, in terms of his Western identity. As with Emmett, this identity is at least partly understood in terms of characteristic items of Western clothing and equipment. The absence of such items is initially emphasised; Paden speaks wistfully of the possessions he has lost, particularly his horse and his hat. When he and Emmett arrive at a town, Paden instinctively reaches for missing items, first tipping an absent hat to some ladies and then trying to draw an absent gun when he sees his stolen horse. When Paden regains his hat in the next town, a shot picking out the hat falling to the saloon floor underlines its status as a significant object. Like the landscape outside Emmett's cabin, the hat is offered for a moment as the sole object of our visual attention. Paden's gun is treated less emphatically. He mentions his "ivory-handled Colt" during the confrontation in the saloon, and we see him strapping on a gun with a light-coloured grip as he and Jake (Kevin Costner) escape from jail, but the gun is not picked out like the hat is. However, we see Jake at the same time with his own returned guns, twirling them gleefully before holstering. The emphasis in this moment remains on the restoration of iconographic objects to their rightful owners.

In the early part of *Silverado*, we repeatedly move from situations where conventionally Western elements are absent or inert to situations where these elements have been restored. This applies to the revivals of Emmett and Paden and to the revealing of the landscape; in both cases, the film moves from an initial state of suspension to an emphatic restoration. In this way, the movie presents itself as a triumphant return for the Western genre. This can be connected to the immediate

context of 1985, coming after a period of absence or scarcity for the genre. Neale notes that *Silverado* and *Pale Rider* “were both designed and reviewed” as deliberate interventions by “industrially powerful individuals” seeking to bring the genre back into the popular mainstream (2002, 30). However, as the opening of *Cowboys & Aliens* suggests, similar motifs of revival and restoration have persisted in many of the Westerns that have been made since.

A continuing emphasis on revival implies a continuing perception of its necessity. The short-term context for the 1985 movies, responding to a recent dearth of Westerns, has become a long-term situation for the Hollywood Western. As I have noted elsewhere, “there has been no significant or sustained return to the regular production of Westerns in Hollywood since the 1970s.” (Falconer, 2016, 262) There have been periods in which more Westerns have been released – including a relatively substantial cycle in the first half of the 1990s, as outlined by Neale (2002, 33) – and more localised flurries in 2007-2008 and 2015-2016. Some of these revivals have been spearheaded by successful Westerns, such as *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992), both of which won multiple Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and recorded domestic grosses of over \$100 million (*Box Office Mojo*<sup>1</sup>). However, renewed interest in the genre has proved difficult to maintain over longer periods. Neale notes the “disappointing box-office returns” (2002, 33) that helped put an end to the 1990s cycle. Very few Westerns since *Dances with Wolves* and *Unforgiven* have been able to replicate, or even approach, the success of those films. As Dana Harris observes, “only two Westerns” released between 1994 and 2004 exceeded \$100 million in

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<sup>1</sup> All box office figures in this book, unless otherwise specified, are from *Box Office Mojo*.

domestic grosses (2004, 7). These were *Maverick* (Richard Donner, 1994) and *Wild Wild West* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1999), both hybrid movies that combine the Western with other genres. Since 2004, a few more Westerns, including *True Grit* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2010), *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) and *The Revenant* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu, 2015) have had comparable commercial success and industrial recognition.

New Westerns are still typically seen as the latest attempts at a revival. This suggests an underlying assumption that previous revivals, however successful on an individual basis, have failed to re-establish the genre. That this has now become a standard perspective can be seen in the journalistic articles that appear whenever a relatively high-profile Western is released, whose titles announce “the return of the Western” (e.g. Gumbel, 2007; Clough, 2013; Mottram, 2016) or declare that the Western is “back” (e.g. Adair, 1992; Lederman, 2011; Thorpe, 2015). The tone of such articles is often quite optimistic about the genre’s prospects, but versions of the same perspective have recurred over the years as if nothing in the wider situation has changed. The Western is often perceived as returning, but such perceptions never seem to develop into a consensus that it has returned.

The treatment of the Western as an object of perpetual revival is also linked to its increasingly strong associations with the past. As the situation of limited numbers and occasional successes has remained largely unchanged, the length of time since the genre was a regular Hollywood offering has continued to increase. A significant difference between *Silverado* and *Cowboys & Aliens* is that *Silverado* was released at a time when, although there had been very few recent Westerns, the memory of

the Western as a major mainstream genre was still relatively fresh. 15 years earlier, the genre's decline was considerably less advanced and Westerns were still being released fairly regularly. 26 years after *Silverado, Cowboys & Aliens* evokes a more distant memory of the genre. Over time, the sense of retrospection implicit in the revival motif has come to be more generally associated with the Western and more prominent in individual Westerns.

Retrospection is not a new feature. There has always been a range of positions that Westerns can take in relation to their historical settings, with overtly looking back as one available option. Some Westerns have employed framing sections, set in or closer to the present, with characters remembering the events depicted in the main narrative. Examples include *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962). Other movies have offered prologues or introductory elements that place their stories in retrospective contexts. Examples of this include the book, *Early Tales of Texas*, that introduces the action in *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) and the titles and montage in *Frontier Marshal* (Allan Dwan, 1939) detailing the discovery of silver in Southern Arizona and the growth of Tombstone. The difference in more recent Westerns is perhaps one of degree rather than kind; retrospection now seems to be more extensively and pervasively applied within the genre.

At the risk of stating the obvious, just as the mainstream popularity of the Western has increasingly seemed to be consigned to previous eras, the historical period conventionally depicted in Westerns has continued to get further from the present. To return to my last example, *Frontier Marshal* is one of many Westerns featuring

Wyatt Earp. The gunfight at the O.K. Corral took place in 1881, less than 60 years before *Frontier Marshal* was released. This time gap is roughly equivalent to that of recent movies set in the 1950s and early 1960s, such as *Bridge of Spies* (Steven Spielberg, 2015), *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo del Toro, 2017) and *Green Book* (Peter Farrelly, 2018). Of course, there are elements that complicate such a comparison; there is, for example, a more extensive photographic record (including film and television images) in which to ground cultural memories of the 1960s than there is for the 1880s. Nonetheless, it is still reasonable to suggest that the historical setting may have different meanings in *Tombstone* (George P. Cosmatos, 1993) and *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1994), made over a century after the 1880s, to those it has in *Frontier Marshal* or *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946). Even if there had been a more sustained revival of the Hollywood Western, some degree of retrospection is likely to be unavoidable.

### Perceptions of the Western

In Hollywood, the success of individual Westerns has not dispelled the perception, already evident in Bach's account of *Heaven's Gate*, that the genre is no longer a reliable commercial prospect. In recent decades, this perception has been reinforced by the related view that Westerns have limited appeal outside the USA. Harris suggests that Hollywood executives "fear that Westerns face an uphill battle when it comes to the international marketplace" (2004, 7). With anticipated international sales helping to determine the budgets for Hollywood movies, this is likely to restrict the support and resources available for new Westerns. Scott



Roxborough notes that “Germany [...] can often make up 10 percent or more of a film’s budget on a pre-sales basis,” and also that the Western is considered to be among the “must-fail genres for the German market” (2013).

Although the decline of the Western is measurable to some extent in material terms (the quantity of Westerns produced, the commercial fortunes of those that are made, etc.) it is equally important to consider the perceptions and assumptions that have shaped contemporary understandings. I have already referred to some of these, including the perception that the conventions of the Western are unfamiliar to contemporary audiences and the broader associations with the past. Such perceptions may have some basis in the genre’s material situation, but they also have a life of their own, informing views of the genre in ways only partially connected to the fortunes of individual movies. When it comes to genre, there is no clear line between perception and reality. Genres rely on some shared recognition, however vague and provisional, and prevalent perceptions can establish themselves as conventions through repetition.

In his discussion of pastiche and genre, Richard Dyer argues that pastiche can act as “a positive affirmation of what a genre is like, even an intervention in defining it” (2007, 119), offering a specific selection of features as characteristic of a genre, and potentially establishing a new definition of the genre based around these features (ibid., 129). Dyer also recognises that such interpretations are based on selective perceptions, sometimes even misconceptions, observing that pastiche Westerns often present “an implicit model of the Western that turns out on inspection to be at the least questionable” (ibid., 117) and that “what neo-noir imitates is not

straightforwardly noir but the memory of noir, a memory that may be inaccurate or selective.” (ibid., 124) Perceptions of genres may not have a tangible basis, but they can have tangible effects. Prevalent views of a genre not only influence which of its conventions are perpetuated and which new conventions arise; they also affect its material fortunes and institutional standing. The ways in which the Western is perceived, for example, as lacking appeal in certain contemporary contexts, can affect the likelihood of further Westerns being made.

Characterisations of the contemporary status and commercial viability of Westerns can also reveal other perceptions. Anne Thompson refers to the Western alongside other types of movie that, by the 1990s, were viewed in Hollywood as dubious prospects. Thompson observes that, despite the success of individual Westerns in the late 1980s and early 1990s, “old habits, like considering the Vietnam or baseball movie uncommercial, die hard.” (1992, 52) Interestingly, the baseball movie has been a recurring point of comparison, with both Harris and Roxborough’s articles quoting remarks from Hollywood executives likening Westerns to baseball films in terms of the perceived difficulties they face in the international market (2004, 7; 2013). That the Western can be treated as equivalent to a historically much smaller and more specialised genre reflects its diminished status and profile. More generally, the comparison seems to suggest a view of the Western as, in the words of executive Ken Kamins, “an inherently American genre, one whose protocol doesn’t necessarily translate.” (Harris, 2004, 7) Although “the global influence of the Western” (Klein, Ritzer and Schulze, 2012, 7) has been an increasing feature of critical discussions, elsewhere the genre has been perceived as parochially American.

This assumption of specific, limited national resonance is connected to another perception: that the Western is primarily about American history. This perception is not new but does seem to inform some of the dismissals of the genre's contemporary appeal. Thompson quotes Tom Pollock, then chairman of Universal Pictures, as saying that he is "not rushing out to make Westerns, because audiences find history lessons an immediate turnoff." (1992, 53) Pollock's assumption that Westerns offer "history lessons" may have been informed by the still-recent *Dances with Wolves*, with its sometimes didactic emphasis on wider historical issues (although that film had few problems finding a popular audience). However, it also reflects a general view of the Western as a fundamentally historical genre. It is tempting to speculate on the factors that may have helped to strengthen this perception. These might include the continuing influence and critical status of revisionist Westerns, which often stress the supposed authenticity of their portrayal of history. Another factor might be a more general perception of the Western as old-fashioned. As I have already noted, the genre is now associated not only with the period it conventionally depicts, but also with previous eras of Hollywood in which Westerns were more prominent and numerous. These two distinct ways in which the Western is seen as a historical genre – a genre *about* history and a genre *from* history – may reinforce one another and contribute to the wider sense of retrospection with which the Western is viewed. For whatever reason, however, this has been another recurring perception of the genre in recent decades. Another Hollywood executive quoted by Harris, Jim Jacks of Alphaville Films, connects the limited commercial success of Westerns in the early 2000s to the fate of other types of historical movie: "All the period films tanked this Christmas." (2004, 7) Once again,

we can see the Western being treated not as a major Hollywood genre, but as something smaller, in this case a sub-category of the period film.

Nelson argues that “Scholarship on the Western of the 1990s onwards needs to acknowledge [the] change in the genre’s status from a popular to a specialty form” (2015, 207). This is part of what I am trying to do in this book, going back a little further to include the second half of the 1980s. By “specialty form,” Nelson is referring to the perception of the latter-day Western as a type of prestige movie, “serious films made by auteur directors that are intended to garner awards and critical acclaim.” (ibid.) As Nelson notes, this view of the genre treats the award-winning Westerns since the 1990s as models for contemporary success (ibid., 206). It can also be considered as a counterpart to views of the Western as dated or old-fashioned, with the associations of the past inflected more positively in terms of “classical” pedigree and the conventional seriousness often attached to historical movies.

### What does it now mean for a movie to be a Western?

The perceptions of the Western that I have mentioned here are not the only ones that have gained traction in the genre’s afterlife, and I will be examining different views throughout this book. It is important to recognise, however, that critical discussions of contemporary Westerns are still coming to terms with what Nelson calls the “change in the genre’s status.” The Western retains a presence within Hollywood cinema, but in a context very different to that of its popular heyday. It is

reasonable to expect that, within this different context, the genre might carry different associations and create different meanings. As Cawelti suggests, the influential critical accounts of the genre that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, including his own, treated the Western as “a flourishing popular genre, and in some ways *the* archetypal American genre” (1999, 102) and assumed that it would stay that way. In 1955, still closer to the genre’s popular peak, André Bazin claimed that,

...the western is definitely made of quite other stuff than the American comedy or the crime film. Its ups and downs do not affect its existence very much. Its roots continue to spread under the Hollywood humus and one is amazed to see green and robust suckers spring up in the midst of the seductive but sterile hybrids that some would replace them by. (1955, 152)

This confidence that Westerns would remain a key feature of popular American filmmaking has shaped the ways in which the genre has been understood, both during its decades of prominence and since. We may want to question some of the interpretations that this perspective has produced, for instance, those that assume straightforward parallels between Westerns and historical events from around the time they were made. Such interpretations are better supported (even if they are not ultimately justified) by a thriving popular genre than by a genre with a more marginal place in the mainstream. As Nelson asks, “Can anyone credibly argue that the Western still enjoys a privileged relationship with the American consciousness?” (2015, 207) In order to think about how contemporary Westerns might work and what they might mean, we need to take the genre’s latter-day context into account.

Although it is important to consider the implications of the genre’s decline in quantity and profile, it is also important to avoid treating the afterlife of the Western as a completely separate context, cut off from the genre’s history. The former prominence of the Western continues to register, for example in its widespread

influence on other areas of popular culture around the world – as Edward Buscombe points out, “The Western myth has overflowed its origins in visual and written narrative and fertilised popular music, fashion, children’s toys, advertising, and even our everyday speech” (1993a, 15) – and in the continuing availability of older Hollywood Westerns on television and in other formats. An awareness that the Western was a major Hollywood genre for a long time and that its associated conventions and images retain a presence in popular culture continues to form part of how the genre is understood.

Lee Clark Mitchell argues that, despite the genre seeming “like an increasingly vague memory or receding dream,” the “conventions of the Western” (2018, 177) remain an important source of meaning in many movies, even some that do not obviously present themselves as Westerns. I am less confident than Mitchell that films like *A History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005) “demand to be read as Western” by virtue of narrative and thematic affinities such as a “focus on family dynamics and gender roles” (ibid., 153). While considering such films’ connections to the Western can be illuminating, it does not necessarily follow that the genre is the dominant factor in their construction, and that it should “dictate our interpretive efforts.” (ibid., 177) Instead, I would suggest that some recent movies display a tension between the continuing influence and resonance of the Western and an uncertainty about its contemporary status.

However we assess the legacy of the Western as a Hollywood genre, it is clear that the genre now occupies a different position in mainstream American filmmaking. The genre’s afterlife is one of many contexts in which contemporary Hollywood

Westerns can be discussed, but it is helpful in that it allows us to acknowledge the Western's former prominence and proliferation, the more fitful production in recent decades, and the disparity between the two. My aim in this book is to consider some of the implications of this complex situation for specific Westerns, and for the Western more broadly: how the different conditions in which the genre now operates have affected the ways contemporary Westerns look and sound, the perspectives they adopt, the features they emphasise or play down. What does it now mean for a movie to be a Western, and how does this compare to the ways in which the genre has been understood at other points in its history?

In order to answer this, I will consider how different films position themselves in relation to the Western, and the views of the genre that these positionings reflect. In chapter 2, I introduce the importance of rhetoric to my discussion. A film expresses its relationship to its genre(s) rhetorically, presenting its own version of a genre's significant features and pleasures. I start by identifying some of the ways in which latter-day Westerns have defined what is valuable within the genre and attempted to avoid some of its less desirable associations. The next two chapters extend the discussion of these perceived deficiencies. In chapter 3, I consider some of the responses that Westerns from recent decades have offered to the different problems that have been identified with the genre, including racism, sexism, historical inaccuracy and the perception of Westerns as rigidly formulaic. Chapter 4 focuses on two recurring strategies in afterlife Westerns: an emphasis on difficulty and effort and the redeployment of conventions associated with the American South. Both are employed in different ways by movies to address perceived issues with the genre.

The discussion in chapters 5 and 6 centres on the association of Westerns with the past. In chapter 5, I examine the presentation of the Western as an elusive world of the past and the mythic, Gothic and supernatural inflections that this can generate. Chapter 6 begins with examples that suggest parallels between temporal and geographical distance by connecting the genre to spaces outside the USA. I then discuss other tropes through which the association with the past is expressed, including the prevalence of older male characters and the adoption of stylistic devices that evoke previous eras of filmmaking. Through such examples, I want to consider how recent incarnations of the Western define and relate to the genre's own history. I continue to develop this focus in chapter 7, which discusses the historical landmarks and precedents favoured in latter-day Westerns. The ways in which recent movies relate to the Western suggest different generic canons, with different implications for how the genre is understood. Finally, chapter 8 looks at some of the ways in which the conventions of the Western have been transposed into different contexts and, particularly, combined with other genres. Hybrid generic contexts can provide the Western with valuable support.

### A context, not a category

Out of convenience, I will sometimes refer to the films that I discuss in this book as "afterlife Westerns". However, this is not intended to imply that these films constitute a discrete sub-genre. The films are more productively understood as offering a range of responses to the Western genre and to the conditions in which it has operated in its later years. Throughout the book, I treat the Western primarily as a pool of flexible conventions, which can be adapted to different contexts, but which



still require some degree of recognition and understanding in order to function. While these conventions may have been used to express some values or perspectives more often than others, I do not assume that any such viewpoint is inherent to the genre.

Different conceptions of the cultural and historical significance of the Western will be relevant at different points in my discussion, but I am not treating it as representative of any single set of concerns. The Western has at least a nominal basis in American history as well as mythic resonances within American culture. However, the significance of these contrasting dimensions varies considerably from Western to Western, depending on how different conventions are deployed and received.

Discussions of latter-day incarnations of the Western have tended to emphasise one source of significance or another. Richard Slotkin, for example, views Westerns in terms of the wider “Myth of the Frontier” that has shaped conceptions of America as a nation (1993, 4) and treats the decline of the genre as part of “the process of giving up a myth / ideology that no longer helps us see our way through the modern world.” (ibid., 654) Other critics have stressed the genre’s changing representations of American history; Alexandra Keller assesses “the range of historicity in Westerns since the waning Reagan Era years” (2003, 48). It is entirely legitimate to focus on a specific area of meaning associated with the Western and to consider changes in relation to that area, but that is not my approach here. The conventions of the Western make a variety of different meanings and perspectives possible, and my aim is to explore some of the ways in which the genre has been used and understood in recent decades.

This emphasis also informs my choice of terminology. I avoid the term “post-Western,” which has been applied elsewhere to more recent permutations of the genre. One reason for this is, as Neale points out, “post-Western” and similar terms “tend to unify” diverse approaches to the genre under a single label (2002, 43n). Although “afterlife” is a similarly singular appellation, it refers to a set of broader circumstances, to which different movies might present different responses, rather than indicating a particular manifestation of the genre.

The term “post-Western” has also been used to mean different things. One recurring usage has been to refer to films set after the historical period usually depicted in Westerns. In Philip French’s account, post-Westerns are “films about the West today” (2005, 84). Similarly, the works that Neil Campbell calls “post-Westerns” are “a variety of films of the postwar West that refuse to dwell in the nineteenth-century moment of the classic Western” (2013, 2). Although the Western genre is an important context for Campbell, his wider emphasis is on changing conceptions of the history, culture and identity of the American West as a region. The films, Campbell argues, “are deserving of critical and cultural attention within the context of an evolving definition of critical regionalism in the American West.” (ibid., 15) Cawelti’s conception of the “post-Western” is particularly expansive, taking in forms of parody and revisionism (1999, 101-102), works that reflect some of the concerns of the New Western History (ibid., 109), transpositions of Western elements into other genres and settings (ibid., 119), Westerns and Western-like films from outside the US (ibid., 103, 112) and works set in the modern West (ibid., 113)

I share multiple points of emphasis with scholars of the “post-Western”. One of the definitions of the term presented by Cawelti – “the kinds of films and novels that continued to make use of or refer to Western images in spite of the decline of the genre as a major component of American popular culture” (1999, 102) – offers a good description of the situation that I am calling the afterlife of the Hollywood Western. Campbell’s emphasis on “the continued presence of the classic Western (as haunting) *within, alongside, and in relation with* the post-Western” (2013, 16) suggests some useful ways of thinking about how elements from older Westerns survive and endure in new contexts, another central concern of this book. I also recognise the important role of movies set after the period conventionally associated with Westerns, like *No Country for Old Men* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) in contemporary conceptions of the genre, especially given the relative scarcity of period Westerns in recent decades.

However, uses of the term “post-Western” also sometimes imply that the Western is a discredited form that must be transcended or supplanted. Campbell contrasts the “complex space” of the new West with “the preferred simplicity of a nineteenth-century version constantly revisited by Hollywood with its fundamentally clear lines of demarcation around issues of race, gender, land use and national identity.” (ibid., 15) Although Campbell stresses that the traditional Western retains a spectral presence within the “post-Western,” he still characterises the latter in terms of “both going beyond and coming after” the Western genre (ibid., 9), marking a new era and engaging in retrospective critique. Similarly, in his chapter on the “post-Western,” Cawelti argues that parodic and revisionist Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s “reflected an increasing sense of the limits and inaccuracies of Western generic

formulas” (1999, 101) and that “the basically sexist orientation” of the genre is one of several factors that make it “difficult to create an effective contemporary Western.” (ibid., 123) In both instances, the assumption seems to be that, over time, the politics of the conventional Western have rendered it untenable as a popular form. There are grounds for this view; many Westerns have included highly problematic elements, whether these relate to the treatment of race or gender, or to other issues like the relationship between violence and power. At the same time, it is important to avoid simplifying the Western and ignoring the many differences between individual movies by ascribing certain ideologies to the genre as a whole. Different political issues are more significant in some Westerns than in others, and there is scope within the genre for different treatments of its conventional material.

The view of the genre, suggested in some discussions of the “post-Western,” as ideologically or culturally obsolete is only one of multiple competing perspectives on the Western in its afterlife. As I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, some movies, for different reasons, treat the Western as a problem genre. These reasons include politics but also many of the other concerns that I have mentioned, such as doubts about the genre’s commercial viability and associations with earlier eras of popular film. Alongside these perspectives, we can identify other manifestations in which the Western is presented, again for a range of reasons, to be a valuable genre worth reviving and perpetuating. In this book, I will be examining different interpretations of the Western genre, some that view the genre positively and some that view it negatively. The term “afterlife” suggests a combination of departure and continuity, and these elements combine and interact in many different ways.

For reasons of space, I have had to limit my focus to American Western movies. I mention a few examples from beyond this context, including the *Red Dead Redemption* video games. The first *Red Dead Redemption* game is one of the genre's most prominent recent incarnations. A preview in *The Guardian* asked if it was "the best videogame ever" (Stuart, 2010) while *The New York Times* described its protagonist, John Marston, as the "new face" of the "leading edge of interactive media" (Schiesel, 2010). The *Red Dead Redemption* games are arguably as representative of the contemporary Western as any film; indeed, few Western movies from recent decades have had comparable success or acclaim within their medium. However, examples from the games will be kept brief and will support my discussion of Western films.

Westerns and Western-related works in other media deserve more detailed attention than I can give them in this book. In the period I cover, television in particular merits its own discussion. There have been significant successes such as *Lonesome Dove* (1989) and *Deadwood* (2004-2006, 2019) as well as interesting transpositions of Western elements into other genres in series such as *Firefly* (2002-2003), *Justified* (2010-2015) and *Westworld* (2016-present). David Pierson argues that the feature-length Westerns made for Turner Network Television in the 1990s and into the 2000s were able to "remain popular and meaningful to contemporary viewing audiences" (2003, 63) at a time when Hollywood was releasing "few feature westerns" (ibid., 56). These TNT movies also fed into the subsequent production of Western films for cinema release; Tommy Lee Jones, later to direct *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) and *The Homesman* (2014), made his debut as director with the television film *The Good Old Boys* (1995). While television and

other media have helped to maintain the genre's wider cultural presence, Western movies have still had to adapt to a context in which they are far less prominent and plentiful than they once were. In order to do justice to this complex situation, my discussion will concentrate on feature films.

The afterlife of the Hollywood Western is not the only context in which the films I discuss can be viewed. They can be situated ideologically, institutionally and connected via numerous other elements or issues. However, I have found that considering my examples in relation to the specific conditions of the latter-day Western can reveal surprising commonalities and clarify approaches that might otherwise seem puzzling. I make no claims to comprehensive explanation, but the evidence suggests that the connections between these movies are more than incidental. The past few decades have not been fruitful for the Hollywood Western, but they have presented some interesting challenges, and individual movies have offered complex responses.

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