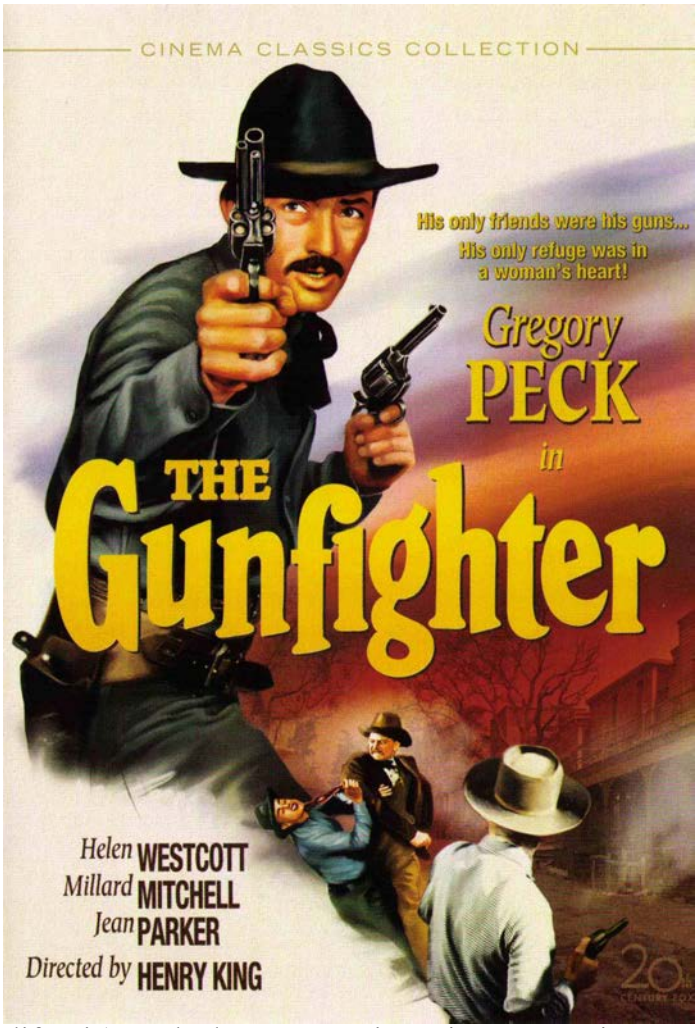


Directed by Henry King
Writing Credits William Bowers developed the story with André De Toth and the screenplay with William Sellers.
Produced by Nunnally Johnson
Music by Alfred Newman
Cinematography by Arthur C. Miller
Film Editing by Barbara McLean

The film was recognized for its writing, with an Oscar nomination for Best Writing, Motion Picture Story at the 1951 Academy Awards and a Best Written American Western Writers Guild of America Award that same year.

Cast
Gregory Peck...Jimmy Ringo
Helen Westcott...Peggy Walsh
Millard Mitchell...Marshal Mark Strett
Jean Parker...Molly
Karl Malden...Mac
Richard Jaeckel...Eddie
Skip Homeier...Hunt Bromley
Anthony Ross...Deputy Charlie Norris
Verna Felton...Mrs. August Pennyfeather
Ellen Corby...Mrs. Devlin
B. G. Norman...Jimmy Walsh, Jimmy and Peggy's son (uncredited)
Cliff Clark...Jerry Marlowe, elderly man who tries to shoot Jimmy (uncredited)
Alan Hale Jr., David Clarke and John Pickard...Eddie's brothers (uncredited)
Kim Spalding...a clerk (his first role, uncredited)

Henry King (b. January 24, 1886 in Christiansburg, Virginia—d. June 29, 1982 (age 96) in Toluca Lake, California) worked as an actor in various repertoire theatres and first started to take small film roles in 1912. Between 1913 and 1925, he appeared as an actor in approximately sixty films. He directed for the first time in 1915 and grew to become one of the most commercially successful Hollywood directors of the 1920s and '30s. His early notable silent credits included the hit comedy *231/2 Hours Leave* (1919) and *Tol'able David* (1921). He made a star of Ronald Colman in *The White Sister* (1923), an acclaimed romantic drama that featured Lillian Gish. King's other box-office hits with Colman included *Romola* (1924), which also starred Gish and her sister, Dorothy; *Stella Dallas* (1925); *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (1926), featuring Gary Cooper in one of his first credited roles; and *The Magic Flame* (1927). King joined Fox (later Twentieth Century-Fox) in 1930 and stayed there until he retired more than 30 years later. His first major sound film was *State Fair* (1933), with Will Rogers, Lew Ayres, and Janet Gaynor. In 1934 he directed Spencer Tracy in *Marie Galante*. The following year King had a minor hit

with *One More Spring*. In 1935, he made *Way Down East*, a remake of D.W. Griffith's 1920 film, with Henry Fonda. 1936 was a big year for King, finding success with *The Country Doctor*, *Ramona*, a popular Technicolor film starring Loretta Young and Don Ameche, and he finished the year with one of its biggest hits *Lloyd's of London*. The director had less success with *Seventh Heaven* (1937), a romantic drama featuring James Stewart as a Parisian sewer worker and Simone Simon as a prostitute who falls in love with him. *In Old Chicago* (1937) was a period effort set shortly before the city's devastating 1871 fire, earning six Academy Award nominations, including a nod for best picture. King next directed the musical *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1938), featuring songs by Irving Berlin, which also received an Oscar nomination for best picture. King made *Jesse James* (1939), then the period adventure *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939). In 1940 King made *Little Old New York*, an account of the life of steamboat inventor Robert Fulton; *Maryland*, a horse-racing drama; and *Chad Hanna*, a 19th-century circus yarn. Next was the hugely popular *A Yank in the R.A.F.* (1941), a World War II drama about a callow American pilot who joins the Royal Air Force to impress an old girlfriend. *Remember the Day* (1941) centers on a teacher (Claudette Colbert) who inspires one of her students to later run for president. In 1942 King made the swashbuckler, *The Black Swan*. In 1943, he ventured into religious dramas with *The Song of Bernadette*, an adaptation of Franz Werfel's book about a girl in Lourdes, France, who has visions of the Virgin Mary, for which Jennifer Jones won the Academy Award for best actress and King received his first nomination for directing; the film was also nominated for best picture. King's next biopic, *Wilson* (1944), was a box-office disappointment, despite critical acclaim. The film, an account of Woodrow Wilson's life, earned King his second Oscar nomination for directing. *A Bell for Adano* (1945), from the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by John Hersey, was more popular with moviegoers. *With Margie* (1946), King traveled back to the Jazz Age. He then made *Captain from Castile* (1947), a big-budget epic, and *Prince of Foxes* (1949), a drama set during the Renaissance that featured Orson Welles as Cesare Borgia. King ended the decade with one of his best-remembered films, *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949). The World War II classic had top performances by Gregory Peck, Dean Jagger, and Gary Merrill. King elicited another strong performance from Peck in the downbeat western *The Gunfighter* (1950). Although a box-office disappointment, the film is regarded as a classic, credited with introducing the "psychological western." King and Peck then worked together on *David and Bathsheba* (1951) and Ernest Hemingway adaptation *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952). King then made *King of the Khyber Rifles* (1953) and *Untamed* (1955). His biggest hit of the decade was 1955's romance *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, which received eight Oscar nominations, winning best song for the popular theme. *Carousel* (1956), an adaptation of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's Broadway musical, was another huge success. In 1957 King revisited Hemingway's work, adapting the novel *The Sun Also Rises*, notable for featuring Errol Flynn in one of his final performances. *The Bravados* (1958) was another foray into westerns, featuring Peck. After the winemaking drama *This Earth Is Mine* (1959), King made *Beloved Infidel* (1959), a dramatization of the affair between F. Scott Fitzgerald (Peck) and gossip columnist Sheilah Graham (Deborah Kerr). His final film was an adaptation of Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1962). He was one of the 36 founders of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and directed more than 100 films in his career. In 1955, King was awarded The George Eastman Award, given by the George Eastman House for distinguished contribution to the art of film.

William Bowers (b. January 17, 1916 in Las Cruces, New Mexico—d. March 27, 1987 (age 71) in Woodland Hills, Los Angeles, California) was an American reporter, playwright, and screenwriter (59 credits). He worked as a reporter in Long Beach, California and for *Life* magazine, and specialized in writing comedy-westerns. He also turned out several thrillers. His first credited screenplay was *My Favorite Spy* in 1942. Bowers helped write the musical comedy *Seven Days' Leave* (1942), which was a huge hit, and *The Adventures*

of a Rookie (1943) with the team of Carney and Brown. He also did *Higher and Higher* (1943), Frank Sinatra's first movie. He helped write *The Notorious Lone Wolf* (1946) and at Warner Bros did the Cole Porter biopic *Night and Day* (1946). He provided the story for *The Fabulous Suzanne* (1946), and he worked on *Ladies' Man* (1947) for Eddie Bracken. In 1950 he was Oscar nominated for the gritty Gregory Peck Western, *The Gunfighter* at Fox. Bowers produced the last film that he wrote, the Western parody *Support Your Local Sheriff!* (1969). He also had a bit part as an actor in *The Godfather Part II* (1974).

Arthur C. Miller (b. July 8, 1895 in Roslyn, New York—d. July 13, 1970 (age 75) in Hollywood, Los Angeles, California) was an American cinematographer (147 credits) whom was nominated for the Oscar for Best Cinematography six times, winning three times: for *How Green Was My Valley* in 1941, *The Song of Bernadette* in 1944, and *Anna and the King of Siam* in 1947. He retired in 1951 for health reasons but remained active in the industry as president of the American Society of Cinematographers.

Barbara McLean (b. November 16, 1903 in Palisades Park, New Jersey—d. March 28, 1996 (age 92) in Newport Beach, California) was an American film editor with 62 film credits. From the 1930s through the 1960s, McLean was 20th Century Fox Studio's most prominent editor and ultimately the head of its editing department. She won the Academy Award for Best Film Editing for the film *Wilson* (1944). She was nominated for the same award another six occasions, including *All About Eve* (1950). Her total of seven nominations for Best Editing Oscar was not surpassed until 2012 by Michael Kahn. She had an extensive collaboration with the director Henry King over 29 films, including *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949). Her impact was summarized by Adrian Dannatt in 1996 who wrote that McLean was "a revered editor who perhaps single-handedly established women as vital creative figures in an otherwise patriarchal industry."

Alfred Newman (b. March 17, 1900 in New Haven, Connecticut—d. February 17, 1970 (age 69) in Hollywood, Los Angeles, California) was an American composer, arranger, and conductor of film music. Newman and two of his fellow composers, Max Steiner and Dimitri Tiomkin, were considered the "three godfathers of film music." In a career spanning more than four decades, Newman composed the scores for over 200 motion pictures. He received his first Academy Award for *Alexander's Ragtime Band* in 1938. Some of his most famous scores include *Wuthering Heights* (1939), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), *Captain from Castile* (1947), *All About Eve* (1950), *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955), *Anastasia* (1956), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959), *How The West Was Won* (1962), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and his final score, *Airport* (1970), all of which were nominated for or won Academy Awards. He is perhaps best known for composing the fanfare which accompanies the studio logo at the beginning of 20th Century Fox's productions.

Gregory Peck (b. April 5, 1916 in La Jolla [now in San Diego], California—d. June 12, 2003 (age 87) in Los Angeles, California) was an American actor and one of the most popular film stars from the 1940s to the 1960s. In 1999, the American Film Institute named Peck among 25 Greatest Male Stars of Classic Hollywood Cinema, ranking him at No. 12. He first gained critical success in *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1944), a John M. Stahl-directed drama which earned him his first Academy Award nomination. He starred in a series of successful films, including romantic drama *The Valley of Decision* (1944), Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), and family film *The Yearling* (1946). At the end of the 1940s, he appears in films, such as *The Paradine Case* (1947) and *The Great Sinner* (1948). Peck began the 1950s with two westerns, the first being *The Gunfighter* (1950), directed by Henry King, who had worked with him previously on *Twelve O'Clock High*. Peck's next western was *Only the Valiant* (1951). Peck reached global recognition in the 1950s and 1960s, appearing back-to-back in the book-to-film adaptation of *Captain*

Horatio Hornblower (1951) and biblical drama *David and Bathsheba* (1951). He starred alongside Ava Gardner in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952) and Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* (1953), which earned Peck a Golden Globe award. Other notable films in which he appeared include *Moby Dick* (1956, and its 1998 mini-series), *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *Cape Fear* (1962, and its 1991 remake), *The Omen* (1976), and *The Boys from Brazil* (1978). *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) centered on topics of antisemitism, while Peck's character in *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949) dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder during World War II. He won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). In 1983, he starred opposite Christopher Plummer in *The Scarlet and The Black* as Hugh O'Flaherty, a Catholic priest who saved thousands of escaped Allied POWs and Jewish people in Rome during the Second World War.

Helen Westcott (b. January 1, 1928 in Los Angeles, California—d. March 17, 1998 (age 70) in Edmonds, Washington) was an American stage and screen actor (79 credits) and former child actor. She is best known for her work in *The Gunfighter* (1950). When Westcott was 4 years old, she appeared in a series of short films. At 5, she appeared in the full-length *Thunder Over Texas* (1934). She was also known in part for her role in Charles Lamont's 1953 comedy horror film *Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Westcott moved from the big screen to television roles in the late 1950s. In 1958 she appeared on *Perry Mason* as murderer Marcia Greeley in "The Case of the Haunted Husband" (1958). She also made guest appearances on *Bonanza* (1960-1963) and *The Twilight Zone* (1964).

Millard Mitchell (b. August 14, 1903 in Havana, Cuba—d. October 13, 1953 (age 50) in Santa Monica, California) was an American character actor whose credits include roughly 30 feature films and two television appearances. He appeared as a bit player in eight films between 1931 and 1936. Mitchell returned to film work in 1942 after a six-year absence. Between 1942 and 1953, he was a successful supporting actor. For his performance in the film *My Six Convicts* (1952), Mitchell won the Golden Globe Award for Best Supporting Actor – Motion Picture. He is also remembered for his role as Col. Rufus Plummer in Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948), as Gregory Peck's commanding officer in the war drama *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), High-Spade Frankie Wilson in *Winchester '73* (1950), as the fictional movie mogul R.F. Simpson in the musical comedy *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and as a hapless old prospector in *The Naked Spur* (1953).

K. Austin Collins: "*The Gunfighter*: You Can't Go Home Again" (*Criterion Essays*, 2020)

At the start of *The Gunfighter,* Jimmy Ringo is a man with eleven kills to his name, soon to be twelve. But the only place he actually appears to be very violent, or even very vital, is in other people's language. "Just two hands, like anybody else." "He don't look so tough to me." "If he ain't so tough, then there's been an awful lot of sudden natural deaths in his vicinity." If Jimmy *weren't* talked about this way—if he hadn't been rendered into flesh-and-blood myth by being the skillful and lucky survivor of a few too many quick draws, in his outlaw days and in the many years that seem to have passed since he first tried to leave those days behind; if he hadn't somehow secured himself a reputation as a savage killer on par with Wyatt Earp—he might barely exist anymore.

At least, the news of his arrival in a small town would likely make no real difference to anyone. But Henry King's skillful, still-fresh film, released in 1950, has things on its mind besides starkly outlining western archetypes against the genre's horizon. It is far more concerned with the mind and desires of its hero, for one—and with those desires on their own terms, less as shorthand for a way of life than as evidence of the ways of one man. The time is the 1880s. The place could be anywhere in the American Southwest; we get so few views of the environs, so little in the way of evoking a landscape in the manner that, say, John Ford does Monument Valley, that the actual setting almost doesn't matter. What matters are a person's choices.

The western is inescapably entangled with iconography—from the canon of real-life figures we still make movies about (your Earps, your Wild Bill Hickoks, your Calamity Janes) to the land itself, with its

open horizons and its shifting populaces and politics, its double-edged promises of prosperity. Yet *The Gunfighter* largely trains its eye inward, and not just on the psyche of its protagonist. For a long while, it plays something like a hostage movie, during the part of the story when the cops have the place surrounded and the robber, the hostage taker, has himself become the hostage. Replace the bank with the Palace Bar in Cayenne, and replace the robber with the comparatively coolheaded Ringo, with everyone around him stepping in by turns to play negotiator. Ringo is very much trapped, in this movie, hemmed in on all sides. There is a gun trained on the door should he try to leave the Palace, and a crowd outside whose oppressively celebritizing gaze he would like to escape. There are also the two figures who have come to define his life, as they seem to crop up in every interchangeable town he passes through: a barkeep fanboy eager to draw him into conversation when he stops for a drink, and a young "squirt" who would like nothing more than to make a name for himself by taking down a big-league outlaw.

Johnny Ringo

Ringo has his own desires to contend with, too, though—and the mission that landed him at the Palace to begin with. That story is also told through an emphatic sense of space. King's movie is centered on the places where people live and work—a framework within which Ringo, who spends the movie waiting, can't help but come off like a man without anything to hold on to. There are the marshal's office, the schoolhouse, a barbershop, a store—all of them the sites of pivotal conversations. There's the main street, too, opposite ends of which the Palace and the marshal's office occupy. King traces the path between them in swift, crisscrossing tours that, as the street becomes more and more crowded with onlookers, begin to make the bar and the lawmen's office seem a world apart—a fine analogy for the way the gap between Ringo and the upstanding life he seeks to lead grows wider as the movie tumbles on.

The Gunfighter is a film that, already in 1950, assumes we're up to speed on the myth stuff, and asks us to consider the making of these icons as a part of the story. Rather than lingering on the gun-fighting renown of its hero, or giving us a braggart or someone tightly coiled, prone to swift violence, it gives us a long, lean, unflappable Gregory Peck—a presence, to be sure, but one very much at odds with the prevailing idea of a vigilante. What Peck shows us is how tired this man is, and how badly he wants out of life on the run from his own reputation. As if anyone *could* live up to such a reputation, even if he wanted to. What is a man like Ringo—whose rumored body count goes as high as fifty, depending on whom you ask—supposed to look like? Not like Peck usually did; his mustache here apparently so violated the star's image that executives wanted it changed. But this is of a piece with King's vision, which short-circuited the western repertoire to aim for unadorned realism. A genre audience trained on desert landscapes, murderous, alienated Native people, westward aspirationalism, and the like won't find much of that here. Instead, we get a man looking to craft a redemption for himself—with redemptive arcs becoming another of the tropes King is undermining here. Ringo has come to Cayenne to see his wife, Peggy Walsh (Helen Westcott), and their young son for the first time in eight years. He's here to take them away, into a future free of the cycle of violence that, by the time Peggy finally gives him the chance to propose his plan, has already made his death inevitable.

The Gunfighter paired King with producer Nunnally Johnson, in their second western outing, but this time with the addition of the elite film-noir mind of Andre de Toth, who conceived the story with screenwriter William Bowers (Bowers went on to cowrite the script with William Sellers). It was Bowers's idea to borrow from one version of the history of an altogether minor figure: Johnny Ringo, a peripheral member of the Clanton gang and onetime opponent of Wyatt Earp at the O.K. Corral. Besides an evident skill

with a pistol, there are few similarities between the real Ringo and the hero of King's film. But one other detail is consistent: his murder at the hands of a man who not only gave him no chance to draw but bragged about that fact.

Darryl F. Zanuck was the head of Twentieth Century-Fox at the time, and he's said to have been looking for a "prestige" western: one with the craft and moral seriousness of a picture by Ford (whose *My Darling Clementine* Fox had released in 1946) that would appeal to an audience beyond devotees of the genre. As Richard Slotkin has noted, the figure of the gunfighter as this film understands it was a new invention. De Toth drew particular insight from Eugene Cunningham's 1934 book *Triggernometry: A Gallery of Gunfighters,* which was unique in its focus on sharpshooting as the basis for an archetype. The kind of man Cunningham had in mind wasn't a professional killer or mercenary of the type that audiences were familiar with; he wasn't a man reducible to his quick draw. But that idea—combined with de Toth's taste for the lonely, troubled noir hero and the circumstances of the real Johnny Ringo's death—was the seed of *The Gunfighter*'s best and most permanent notion: the (as Slotkin terms it) "killer-celebrity."

Henry King on The Gunfighter set

There's a trace of the fate of the killer-celebrity in Ford's *My Darling Clementine,* actually. *The Gunfighter*'s elaboration on the idea, its inversion of the emphasis placed on the archetype, is part of what makes it such a different type of western. In Ford's film, a drunk, violent Doc Holliday (Victor Mature) is pulled aside by Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) and warned, "There's probably fifty fellas around town just waiting to see you get liquored up so they can fill you full of holes, build themselves up a great reputation: the man that killed Doc Holliday." The movie leaves it there, as it should: Earp dispenses his pearl of street wisdom like the fragment of social code that it is, to remind Holliday of the way their world works, and Holliday can do with it what he will. Ringo, by sharp contrast, experiences this dilemma less as a social norm than as the primary determinant of his own fate. In both films, peace on the frontier comes down to the choices of individuals—heroes and outlaws both. But in King's, the outcome of those choices no longer has anything to do with the fate of civilization.

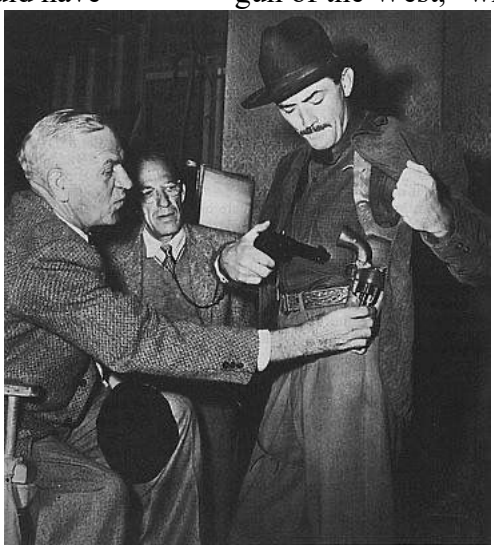
This is what it means to suggest that *The Gunfighter* peers inward, and that in doing so it represents an intriguing pivot in the history of the western. The presiding sense of fate that accompanies Ringo into Cayenne is what makes the character feel familiar but also out of place in this genre at this time. His arrival is, after all, a bona fide event. Word about it gets around, and if anyone has a job, few seem eager to do it. The local girls get the day off from school because the boys, hoping to witness a gunfight, are playing hooky and loitering outside the saloon. King takes pleasure in watching the news travel, his swift tracking shots picking up bits of detail and healthy heaps of shit-talk along the way. We see the moment that the town's moral gatekeepers—a fastidious troupe helmed by a Mrs. Pennyfeather (the great Verna Felton, in a very Verna Felton role)—catch wind of these goings-on, by chance, on a visit to the store; we see the moment that Hunt Bromley learns the news, too, in a barbershop, where what ought to have amounted to idle chatter instead becomes the information that does Ringo in.

But what really seals Jimmy Ringo's fate is the emotional baggage weighing him down and keeping him in Cayenne, the past that is catching up with him—an idea deftly literalized by the plot itself, with its insistently cyclical sense of comeuppance. In this way, the film has a noirish fatalism that is key to its enduring resonance. You certainly couldn't argue that it was the first film of its kind to trawl the dark. But to do so with so little outright violence—to displace half of the film's tension onto the question of the man's future and his aspiration for reconciliation with his family, rather than making it merely the shoot-'em-up revenge tale it teasingly imitates—was something new.

The shoot-outs are a case in point: precisely staged and cut, beautifully gestural and psychological in their implications, but almost completely obfuscatory in their approach to violence. Just look at the opening

Henry King and Gregory Peck on set

inciting incident—which takes place in the town Ringo stops in before Cayenne—wherein the young upstart Eddie tries to take on Ringo, as Ringo could have predicted someone would, and dies for it. Ringo is at the bar; the conversation heats up; and suddenly we confront Ringo, a glass of whiskey in one hand, letting his shooting hand dangle near his holster with the intensity of a rattlesnake's rattle. We cut to Eddie, who draws—and when a shot rings out, he falls out of the frame. We return to Peck, gun now in his hand, the shot still ringing in the air. But King—and editor Barbara McLean, whose rhythmic handling of not only this scene but the introduction of every new space and pivot in the film is another key to its success—has denied us the goods: Oughtn't we get to see the famed gunfighter *draw*? Everyone else did—this becomes the subject of the scene. "Did you see that?" Ringo asks. Multiple men attest that they did. He asks because the fact of who drew first is the legal difference between self-defense and outright murder—though, so far as Ringo's body count and reputation are concerned, it is clear the distinction is of no consequence.



Eddie's death is the event that, lawless vengeance being what it is, sends the film spinning toward the inevitable. This becomes clear almost immediately, when Ringo is advised to get out of Dodge; Eddie, we learn, has three brothers. And though Ringo gets out ahead of them early on—taking their guns, scattering their horses, and leaving them to hoof it through the desert—they nevertheless remain in his rear view. The movie lets us forget about these guys until it doesn't: their impending arrival is, after all, what makes Ringo's departure from Cayenne necessary. As it happens, by the time we see them again, Ringo has already quashed a feud with one unwanted enemy in Cayenne and made another one: Bromley, last in the line of chest-thumping "squirts."

One of the great joys of *The Gunfighter,* one of its most recognizably human touches, is in fact one of its most melancholic details: the shadow that crosses Peck's face every time a barkeep tries to engage Ringo in a game of "Remember when . . ."; it's the same deflated, agitated look he gets when it's clear that a young man on his periphery is heading his way with aggression on his mind. Ringo isn't exactly one to kill and tell, but it's more than implied that he was once young and reckless. It's his old friend and former fellow vigilante Mark (Millard Mitchell) who alludes to the man Ringo once was, the one who wanted to be "top gun of the West," whose lifestyle once drove his family away but who now seems, if not regretful, at least thoughtful on the subject of violence. "Guess I got more people wondering when I'm gonna get killed than any other man in the country," says Ringo. "You don't sound as happy about it as you did the last time I saw ya," says Mark.

A lot can change in eight years. An infant can grow into a healthy young child, for example. An outlaw like Ringo can live long enough to see his own youth catching up to him by way of violent karma. And an outlaw like Mark—now the marshal of Cayenne—can live to change his ways. Can Ringo? He tries; there's an effective scene a ways into *The Gunfighter*in which Ringo, mistaken for one of Mark's deputies, witnesses the "decent" women of Cayenne, led by Mrs. Pennyfeather, demanding that Mark do something about the presence in their town of Ringo, whom they believe, in unambiguous terms, to be a murderer. So here's Ringo's chance to mount a defense for himself. That he's forced to make his appeal to a group of women foreshadows the appeal to come—to his wife, whom he spends much of the film waiting to see. His defense? Self-defense. One thinks back to the moment of Eddie's shooting and Ringo's insistent canvassing of the witnesses: "Did you see that?"

"So much of The Gunfighter *breaks down along lines of who men are and who they want to be. "*

But who, then, is the man with twelve notches on his belt? You never doubt that Ringo is who he says he is. But the gulf between his reputation and the man we see on-screen couldn't be wider. That's in part thanks to smart choices on King's part. And King could use the appreciation. His directing career started in the silent era, in 1915; he was more than an old pro by the time he teamed up with Zanuck for this feature. It was the second of his collaborations with Peck, who joined him for six films in the span of a decade: *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), for which the star earned an Oscar nomination; *The Gunfighter; David and Bathsheba* (1951); *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952); *The Bravados* (1958)—another, rather darker western—and *Beloved Infidel* (1959).

Twelve O'Clock High and *The Gunfighter* make a particularly good case for what sets King apart without his being, in the auteurist sense, a personal or stylistically distinctive filmmaker. He was a good storyteller—which is to say that part of the impact of his films depends on the quality of the story. Give him a script that's a little vexed or odd and he could do something with it, if not wholly surpass its limits.

King's camera style is discerning and unobtrusive. The details that catch in *The Gunfighter,* the ones I recall when I play it back in my mind, are all thanks to the ways King sets up house in the Palace Bar—how carefully he tracks Ringo's movements, physicalizes his evaporating calm in the deceptively straightforward staging of the actors and the inviting swing of the camera. There's great tension in the way Peck carries his body throughout his Palace scenes: his isolated, careful stillness when Bromley shows up with trouble on his mind, or his showing us how Ringo is drawn toward the door—toward escape—only for circumstances to keep reeling him back in. All the while, King successfully animates a plot that, for all the ways it is about Ringo's being static, cooped up in the Palace Bar in a sad kind of limbo, nevertheless seems to expand as it goes. That's in part a credit to the film's structure, the way one altercation and its cycle of vengeance turn into three such cycles: ghosts of Ringo's distant past, recent past, and immediate present.

And that trio has an analogue in the fates of gunfighters, writ large, as the film presents them. Ringo, whose past glories cause him daily suffering, is but one option. There's also Bucky, formerly of Ringo's entourage and only lately dead, to consider. And Mark, of course: the one who got out, who went from being a source of social disorder to being a keeper of order. It seems clear that it is too late for Ringo to ever become a Mark. There's nothing to say he won't yet become a Bucky. And then there's the life he wants, with his wife and child.

So much of *The Gunfighter* breaks down along lines of who men are and who they want to be. And who they were: more than once, Mark is asked how long he has known Ringo. It being a question about his past, it goes unanswered. In the way that Peggy has shed her former identity as Ringo's wife, down to changing her name, Mark—prompted by some unspeakable experience that seems to have killed the fun for him—seems determined to forget his past. This background is what prepares him for the day's nonsense, in which his central role will be as diplomat, a skilled handler not only of the unbridled mob his town has become but also of the local hothead who'll make it worse, Bromley, and of Mark's own unpredictable friend Ringo.

The role of Mark is an essential supporting one in part because it provides the psychological heavy lifting that another film might relegate to flashbacks. He provides context for who Ringo is. And for what this film is—for all its expansions on the western genre, it doesn't abandon or deconstruct the hallmarks of the tradition. It is about a white frontier community, its drift toward civilization, its desire to curb lawlessness and encourage order. It still gives us a cowboy straddling the line between savagery and civility; his uneasy alliance with everyone around him, as he adheres to his own moral code within amorality, is familiar too. And, of course, all roads lead to a climactic gunfight.

But we shouldn't oversimplify it. What makes *The Gunfighter* an admirable and unique accomplishment, and more than just a satisfying spectacle or good storytelling, is its handy undermining of its own redemptive arc. Perhaps we never really think things will work out for Ringo. Peggy's choice not to leave with him—her choice to protect their son from what she, too, knows will be Ringo's fate—is not really a choice at all. Just look at that crowd; there is no version of this story in which Ringo somehow, if only barely, gets out of this situation alive—heart-bruised and browbeaten, surely, but alive. It would be dramatic enough, tragic enough, a conclusion for him to end up a mere heroic failure, a man with no future. But that would be the outcome of a lesser movie, with a lesser vision than *The Gunfighter*'s surprisingly harsh view of a person's chances of escaping their own fate.

Westerns (Wikipedia)

History

The first films that belong to the Western genre are a series of short single reel silents made in 1894 by Edison Studios at their Black Maria studio in West Orange, New Jersey. These featured veterans of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show exhibiting skills acquired by living in the Old West – they included Annie Oakley (shooting) and members of the Sioux (dancing).[1]

The earliest known Western narrative film is the British short Kidnapping by Indians, made by Mitchell and Kenyon in Blackburn, England, in 1899.[2][3] The Great Train Robbery (1903, based on the earlier British film A Daring Daylight Burglary), Edwin S. Porter's film starring Broncho Billy Anderson, is often erroneously cited as the first Western, though George N. Fenin and William K. Everson point out (as mentioned above) that the "Edison company had played with Western material for several years prior to The Great Train Robbery". Nonetheless, they concur that Porter's film "set the pattern—of crime, pursuit, and retribution—for the Western film as a genre".[4] The film's popularity opened the door for Anderson to become the screen's first Western star; he made several hundred Western film shorts. So popular was the genre that he soon faced competition from Tom Mix and William S. Hart.[5]

"Golden Age"

The period from the late 1930s to the 1960s has been called the "Golden Age of the Western". It is epitomised by the work of several prominent directors including:

- Robert Aldrich – Apache (1954), Vera Cruz (1954)
- Budd Boetticher – several films with Randolph Scott including The Tall T (1957) and Comanche Station (1960)
- Delmer Daves – Broken Arrow (1950), The Last Wagon (1956), 3:10 to Yuma (1957)
- Allan Dwan – Silver Lode (1954), Cattle Queen of Montana (1954)
- John Ford – Stagecoach (1939), My Darling Clementine (1946), The Searchers (1956), The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962)
- Samuel Fuller – Run of the Arrow (1957), Forty Guns (1957)
- George Roy Hill – Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969)
- Howard Hawks – Red River (1948), Rio Bravo (1959), El Dorado (1966)
- Henry King – The Gunfighter (1950), The Bravados (1958)
- Sergio Leone – For a Few Dollars More (1965), The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966), Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)
- Anthony Mann – Winchester '73 (1950), The Man from Laramie (1955), The Tin Star (1957)
- Sam Peckinpah – Ride the High Country (1962), The Wild Bunch (1969)
- Nicholas Ray – Johnny Guitar (1954)
- George Stevens – Annie Oakley (1935), Shane (1953)
- John Sturges – Gunfight at the O.K. Corral (1957), The Magnificent Seven (1960)
- Jacques Tourneur – Canyon Passage (1946), Wichita (1955)
- King Vidor – Duel in the Sun (1946), Man Without a Star (1955)
- William A. Wellman – The Ox-Bow Incident (1943), Yellow Sky (1948)
- Fred Zinnemann – High Noon (1952)

Stories and characters

Stories commonly center on the life of a nomadic, male, white American drifter, cowboy or gunfighter who rides a horse and is armed with a revolver and/or a rifle. The male characters typically wear broad-brimmed and high-crowned Stetson hats, neckerchief bandannas, vests, and cowboy boots with spurs. While many wear conventional shirts and trousers, alternatives include buckskins and dusters).

Women are generally cast in secondary roles as romantic interest for the male lead; or in supporting roles as saloon girls, prostitutes or as the wives of pioneers and settlers (the wife character often provides a measure of comic relief). Other recurring characters include Native Americans of various tribes, African Americans, Mexicans, lawmen, bounty hunters, outlaws, bartenders, traders, gamblers, soldiers (especially mounted cavalry), pioneers and settlers (farmers, ranchers, and townsfolk).

The ambience is usually punctuated with a Western music score, including American folk music and Spanish/Mexican folk music such as country, Native American music, New Mexico music, and rancheras.

Locations

Westerns often stress the harshness of the wilderness and frequently set the action in an arid, desolate landscape of deserts and mountains. Often, the vast landscape plays an important role, presenting a "mythic vision of the plains and deserts of the American West".[6] Specific settings include ranches, small frontier towns, saloons, railways, wilderness, and isolated military forts of the Wild West. Many Westerns use a stock plot of depicting a crime, then showing the pursuit of the wrongdoer, ending in revenge and retribution, which is often dispensed through a shootout or quick-draw duel.[7][8][9]

Themes

The Lone Ranger, a famous heroic lawman, was with a cavalry of six Texas Rangers until they all, except for him, were killed. He preferred to remain anonymous, so he resigned and built a sixth grave that supposedly held his body. He fights on as a lawman, wearing a mask, for "Outlaws live in a world of fear. Fear of the mysterious".

The Western genre sometimes portrays the conquest of the wilderness and the subordination of nature in the name of civilization or the confiscation of the territorial rights of the original, Native American, inhabitants of the frontier.[10] The Western depicts a society organized around codes of honor and personal, direct or private justice–"frontier justice"–dispensed by gunfights. These honor codes are often played out through depictions of feuds or individuals seeking personal revenge or retribution against someone who has wronged them (e.g., True Grit has revenge and retribution as its main themes). This Western depiction of personal justice contrasts sharply with justice systems organized around rationalistic, abstract law that exist in cities, in which social order is maintained predominantly through relatively impersonal institutions such as courtrooms. The popular perception of the Western is a story that centers on the life of a seminomadic wanderer, usually a cowboy or a gunfighter.[10] A showdown or duel at high noon featuring two or more gunfighters is a stereotypical scene in the popular conception of Westerns.

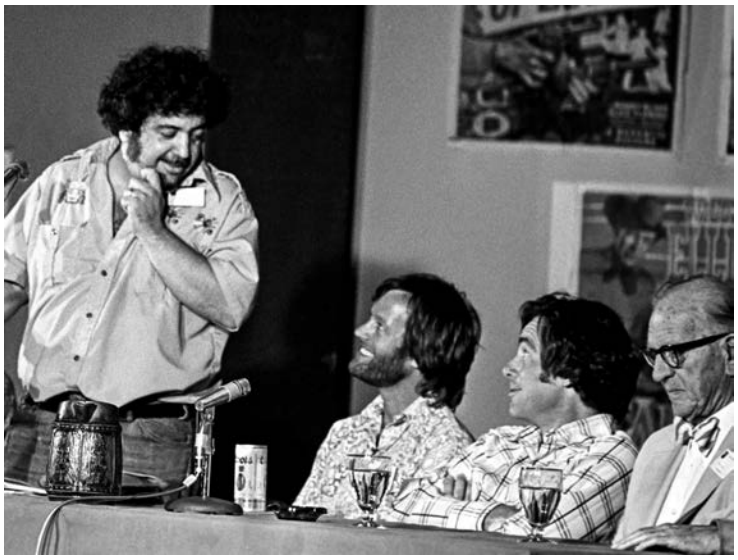
In some ways, such protagonists may be considered the literary descendants of the knights-errant, who stood at the center of earlier extensive genres such as the Arthurian romances.[10] Like the cowboy or gunfighter of the Western, the knight-errant of the earlier European tales and poetry was wandering from place to place on his horse, fighting villains of various kinds, and bound to no fixed social structures, but only to his own innate code of honor. Like knights-errant, the heroes of Westerns frequently rescue damsels in distress. Similarly, the wandering protagonists of Westerns share many characteristics with the ronin in modern Japanese culture.

The Western typically takes these elements and uses them to tell simple morality tales, although some notable examples (e.g. the later Westerns of John Ford or Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven, about an old hired killer) are more morally ambiguous. Westerns often stress the harshness and isolation of the wilderness, and frequently set the action in an arid, desolate landscape. Western films generally have specific settings, such as isolated ranches, Native American villages, or small frontier towns with a saloon. Oftentimes, these settings appear deserted and without much structure. Apart from the wilderness, the saloon usually emphasizes that this is the Wild West; it is the place to go for music (raucous piano playing), women (often prostitutes), gambling

(draw poker or five-card stud), drinking (beer, whiskey, or tequila if set in Mexico), brawling, and shooting. In some Westerns, where civilization has arrived, the town has a church, a general store, a bank, and a school; in others, where frontier rules still hold sway, it is, as Sergio Leone said, "where life has no value".

…Western films were enormously popular in the silent-film era (1894–1927). With the advent of sound in 1927–28, the major Hollywood studios rapidly abandoned Westerns,[14] leaving the genre to smaller studios and producers. These smaller organizations churned out countless low-budget features and serials in the 1930s. By the late 1930s, the Western film was widely regarded as a "pulp" genre in Hollywood, but its popularity was dramatically revived in 1939 by major studio productions such as Dodge City starring Errol Flynn, Jesse James with Tyrone Power, Union Pacific with Joel McCrea, Destry Rides Again featuring James Stewart and Marlene Dietrich, and especially John Ford's landmark Western adventure Stagecoach starring John Wayne, which became one of the biggest hits of the year. Released through United Artists, *Stagecoach* made John Wayne a mainstream screen star in the wake of a decade of headlining B Westerns. Wayne had been introduced to the screen 10 years earlier as the leading man in director Raoul Walsh's spectacular widescreen The Big Trail, which failed at the box office in spite of being shot on location across the American West, including the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and the giant redwoods, due in part to exhibitors' inability to switch over to widescreen during the Great Depression. After the Westerns' renewed commercial successes in the late 1930s, their popularity continued to rise until its peak in the 1950s, when the number of Western films produced outnumbered all other genres combined.[15]

Screenwriter and scholar Eric R. Williams identifies western films as one of eleven super-genres in his screenwriters' taxonomy, claiming that all feature length narrative films can be classified by these super-genres. The other ten super-genres are action, crime, fantasy, horror, romance, science fiction, slice of life, sports, thriller, and war.[16] Western films often depict conflicts with Native Americans. While early Eurocentric Westerns frequently portray the "Injuns" as dishonorable villains, the later and more culturally neutral Westerns gave Native Americans a more sympathetic treatment. Other recurring themes of Westerns include treks (e.g. *The Big Trail*) or perilous journeys (e.g. *Stagecoach*) or groups of bandits terrorizing small towns such as in The Magnificent Seven.



Bruce Jackson, Peter Fonda, Tom McGuane, Henry King. Sun Valley, 1976. Photo by Diane Christian

From Bruce Jackson, "Silver Bullets," *The Story is True: The Art and Meaning of Telling Stories* (SUNY Press 2022)

Where the West Was

Before the American West was explored, European painters imagined it as a new Golden Land, full of spectacular landscapes and wonderful animals. Some of America's most important nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists focused on the West and the people who inhabited it: George Catlin, Frederick Remington, Charles Russell.

In print, dime westerns were best sellers in the nineteenth century. You can still find their equivalent—Louis Lamour's novels, for examples—in any large airport newsstand right next to the section of romance paperbacks. Cormac McCarthy began writing novels set in Tennessee, but then his imagination moved west. All his later novels have been set in Texas and Mexico: *Blood Meridian* (1985), *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), *Cities of the Plain* (1998), *No Country for Old Men* (2005), and *The Road* (2006). Larry McMurtry's best-selling novel *Lonesome Dove* was also an Emmy-winning TV miniseries. The image of the manly westerner is so powerful that for decades it was used by Marlboro to peddle cigarettes.

One of the first narrative films—and what is often cited as the first film with real editing—was a Western: *The Great Train Robbery*, ten minutes long and made in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in 1903. More than 7000 westerns followed. In the early 1950s nearly 25 percent of American film production was westerns. There were hundreds of western serials back in the days

when going to the movies on Saturday afternoons meant two features, fifteen cartoons, Movietone News, coming attractions (it would be years before anyone outside the film industry called them "trailers"), and episodes of one or more serials. Dozens of television series were set in the imaginative nineteenth century American West. One of them—*Gunsmoke*—ran for two full decades (1955−1975). Clint Eastwood's first important role was Rowdy Yates in *Rawhide*, a series about a cattle drive that was always en route but never seemed to get anywhere. Sergio Leone saw those programs and hired Eastwood for the trilogy that rejuvenated the theatrical western and made Eastwood an international star: *A Fistful of Dollars* (*Per un pugno di dolleri,* 1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (*Per qualchi dollari in piú*, 1965)*,* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (*Il Buono, il brutto, il cattivo,* 1966)*. Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, and *Rawhide* still appear on cable.

Henry King, Col. Tim McCoy, Tom McGuane. Sun Valley, 1976.

The action of most films advertised or characterized as "westerns" was situated in the American Southwest, but they were also set in Florida, Alaska, California, Washington, and the Adirondacks. Some westerns were about cowboys, but others were about farmers, sheepherders, migrants, miners, pimps and whores. Some were about war and some about love. Some were about whites, some about Blacks, some about Mexicans, some about Indians; some were about relations between these groups. Some were about the vastness of Western space Some were up close, like classical drama; some are broad, like classical epic. In some the battles were enormous, and in others the battles were intimate. The American West was a great canvas upon which myriads of stories were told. It was a very large real place, and it was and remains a much larger imaginative space. Particularly in movies….

A Grand Time

….Hollywood producers justify graphic violence in recent films in the name of realism, but in the case of the gunfighter western, earlier films were probably more realistic than most of what came later. The quick and simple gunfight in the 1923 *Virginian* was closer to reality than any gunfight in any film directed by Sergio Leone or Howard Hawks or Clint Eastwood. The first men to play cowboys in westerns made in California were cowboys who had driven herds of cattle to California. Silent era actors Tim McCoy, who had been a real western marshal, and Tom Mix, who had been a real Texas Ranger, played western marshals and Texas Rangers in their films.

Few real-life cowboys or sheriffs or badmen had the time or skill or money to be the superb marksmen they so often were in films. Putting a bullet where you want it to go is like putting a tennis or golf ball where you want it to go: accuracy requires diligent and regular practice. One may practice the day long with a tennis or golf ball for little cost, but revolver cartridges expensive. Few men trying to get by in the nineteenth-century American West would have shot up a month's pay putting holes in targets, but I remember only one film—*Warlock* (1959)—in which the hero discussed the great cost of the ammunition he consumed in his daily practice.

The splendid Buntline Special and Navy Colt pistols, so common in film, were rare in reality. Few men had use for them: gunfights beyond a few paces were avoided or negotiated with rifles or shotguns. Only an ill-prepared fool would put all his trust in a weapon as inaccurate as a pistol, and ill-prepared fools did not have great life expectancies in the West, real or fictive.

Shots in the back, common enough in reality, appeared in the films only when they were of special narrative moment, as in Henry King's *The Gunfighter* (1950). In that film, an ambitious punk named Hunt Bromley shoots famed gunfighter Jimmy Ringo in the back. The sheriff is about to arrest Bromley, but the dying Ringo insists he went for his gun first. The sheriff says everybody knows that isn't true; Bromley insists he doesn't need any favors. Ringo tells Bromley he's not doing him any favors: he's sentencing him to a life in which he will never be free of ambitious homicidal punks like Bromley himself.

In a 1973 episode of the television series *Gunsmoke*, a farmer pressed into a Dodge City posse inadvertently shoots in the back the killer being pursued. The entire town turns against him, and the town children

even slaughter his young daughter's cat. Marshall Matt Dillon, the protagonist of the series, finally ends the abominations, but he is uncomfortable about his interference. Not even Matt Dillon could abandon the rules of propriety in the film's version of the great American West.

Only villains and noncombatants ignore the rules, and only women are excused from them. Marshall Will Kane's Quaker wife in *High Noon* (1952) shoots a villain in the back when his guns are unloaded. A few minutes later she (Grace Kelly) distracts another badman about to have a gun duel with her wounded husband (Gary Cooper), enabling Kane to kill him. Ordinarily, a gunfight won by improper means is a spoiled triumph. "I remember when I first killed a man," says the gunfighter marshal in *Warlock* (played by Henry Fonda). "It was clear and had to be done, though I went home afterwards and puked my insides out. I remember how clear it was. Afterwards, nothing was ever clear again, except one thing: that's to hold strictly to the rules; it's only the rules that matter, hold on to them like you were walking on eggs. So you know yourself you've played it as fair and as best you could."

Was this real life in the real west? No more than the Lone Ranger's silver bullets had to do with anything that ever existed anytime or anywhere. In the world of the storied heroes, the rules are clear, the consequences are absolute, and guns do not rust.

Tradition

Writing in 1954, critic Robert Warshow famously said that the western is "an art form for connoisseurs, where the spectator derives his pleasure from the appreciation of minor variations within the working out of a pre-established order." Warshow was writing about gunfighter westerns in particular, those in which the action is resolved by a gun battle between two opponents. The gunfight was an early theme: like the chase and the cattle drive, it was easy to depict on screen and didn't require much explanation for the audience to understand what was going on.

But it changed over time. In the second film version of *The Virginian*, made in 1923, the gunfight toward which the entire film has been heading is over in two or three seconds and is viewed from a wide angle more than a hundred yards away. The only way we know it happened is one of the two men in the scene falls down. The gunfight in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969) is exquisitely choreographed and scored, and takes four minutes, an eternity in screen time. At some points a single eye fills the entire screen. The fight is between a mysterious harmonica-playing wanderer played by Charles Bronson and an unmediated malefactor played by Henry Fonda (ten minutes into the film, he murders a father and three children preparing for a wedding reception). At the end of this ballet, Bronson whips out his pistol, fans the hammer, and Fonda's character falls to the ground, a bullet in his heart.

In real life, that bullet had as much chance of hitting a crow flying overhead. Fanning—a swift slap on the hammer with the heel of one's free hand to cock the pistol and advance the cylinder—came into films sometime in the 1920s when a director said to actor Tim McCoy that he needed something new and different in his gunfight scene. Either McCoy or the director came up with the idea of fanning the hammer. McCoy told me he'd never heard of anyone in a real life gunfight fanning a pistol: fanning makes it nearly impossible to control the vertical position of the muzzle, which means the pistol is nearly impossible to aim. Nonetheless, fanning quickly became a film standard. Reality was not at issue.

All art is in some measure about other art. Like other artists, filmmakers are aware of the workers and work they follow. In 1961, the great Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, a fan of western films, made *Yojimbo*, which is about a samurai who comes to a small town where two gangs are warring. He hires out to both of them and, by the time he leaves, nearly everyone in both gangs is dead. Three years later, the Italian director Sergio Leone plagiarized the plot for *A Fistful of Dollars*. In 1995 Walter Hill used Kurosawa's plot, with full acknowledgement, for *Last Man Standing* with Bruce Willis.

Schlock filmmeister Roger Corman used the plot to make a sword-fighting movie starring David Carradine, *The Warrior and the Sorceress* (1984). It differed from the others in two primary regards: the

location was a mythical planet with two suns, and the leading lady plays the entire film naked from the hips up. In his autobiography, Carradine says he called Corman to say he liked the script but was worried about the similarity to *Yojimbo*.

> Roger said, "Yes, it is rather like *Yojimbo*.
>
> I said, "It's not like *Yojimbo*. It IS *Yojimbo*."
>
> Roger said, "Let me tell you a story. When *Fist Full of Dollars* opened in Tokyo, Kurosawa's friends called him up and said, 'You must see this picture.' Kurosawa replied, 'Yes, I understand it's rather like *Yojimbo*.' His friends corrected him, 'No, it's not like *Yojimbo*, it IS *Yojimbo*. You have to sue these people.' 'I can't sue them,' he responded. 'Why not?' 'Because,' Kurosawa confessed, '*Yojimbo* IS Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*.'"….

Individual Combat and Master Status

The American heroic western took shape in a new space and received its most powerful dissemination in a new medium, but the action is old. Fran Stryker and George W. Trendle invented the Lone Ranger, but not the imaginative world he inhabited. Nor did the authors of the nineteenth-century dime novels and the producers of the late twentieth-century filmic bloodbaths. I quoted Robert Warshow's statement that the western was "an art form for connoisseurs." Warshow thought that the order was one that had been defined in the western film tradition itself. He didn't look far enough. The gunfighter western is a recent avatar of a much older narrative order.

The great epics—*Odyssey, Iliad, Aeneid, Beowulf*, and many others—deal with the same concerns: power, law, peace, order, death, chaos. As with these older narratives, the western film, with the gunfight as central dramatic device, is always predicated on a sense of unendurable disorder hovering just outside whatever boundaries are established or assumed: outside town, outside the ranch, beyond the range—forces, which may from no internal provocation but quite on their frivolous and gratuitous own, come in and ravage everything.

The action is always one of restoring equilibrium: the beast Grendel violates the peace of Hrothgar's castle in *Beowulf*, the suitors violate the security of Odysseus's home in *Odyssey*, Paris violates the rules of visitation in *Iliad*. The film *Warlock* begins with the senseless murder of an unarmed barber. The action that begins Clint Eastwood's 1976 western, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, is the brutal slaughter of a farmer's wife and child by a gang of wandering thugs; no reason is ever offered for that violence.

Such is the enemy—the random and sudden violence that rudely shatters the boundaries of normal life—for those mythic and legendary heroes of the epics, and for those gunfighter heroes of the film's recreation of the American West.

The mainspring of the western is individual or single combat, which is grounded in the notion that physical performance can be equated with virtue, and that through a single well-done act, a person may achieve all the status he might want or need. Killing the fastest gun in the West immediately makes the killer the new fastest gun in the West. No need for intermediate steps, no slow ascendance through the ranks. The win immediately engenders a radical change in status, and the opportunity is there for anyone who encounters the present titleholder on the street, at a bar, or in the alley.

Real life isn't like that. With rare exceptions, the slow progress that leads to success is boring. Usually, it is meaningless except in retrospect, it needs the stretched-out dimension of time past to have any apparent meaning at all, and it needs a decent social nexus and even some luck to occur. That is the process of success for most people, though it surely isn't the way most people would prefer, which is why folk and popular literature and films are filled by narratives documenting a faster kind and style of certification. (It's also why state lotteries—lousy investments by any standard—have done so well: "Hey, you never know," say the lottery ads in New York.)

We hear in folktales of the magic wish heard and fulfilled, the dreadful beast properly slain, the king's beautiful daughter won and married. In the folktales all

kings' daughters are beautiful, and the marriages mean that the poor country boys get to move from farm to castle, from amorphous rural space to the center of power. In westerns, we see the quiet cowboy enduring insult and outrage for just so long. Then he lets go with the fastest forearm reflexes in local memory, and the badman is outdrawn and blown away.

We can go back for examples at least four thousand years—to the great Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*, in which the young god Marduk kills Tiamat, the great and malevolent mother, in one of the goriest homicides in world literature. Tiamat had created evil beings to destroy her own children, so the gods hired Marduk as their marshal to go against her in battle. He takes the contract, but demands authority to commence creation anew, to rebuild the world his own way. The elder gods are desperate and drunk, so they quickly agree to his terms. Marduk and Tiamat assemble spectacular armies, but they meet in single combat to decide the fate of the world.

Marduk first immobilizes Tiamat with his net, and then orders Imhullu, the wind, to blow in her mouth so forcefully her belly bloats; he shoots an arrow through the belly to the womb, and then kills her with his sword. In a grim parody of parturition, he uses her split cadaver to form the universe we know. Even the masters of slice-and-dice teenage slasher movies would blanch filming this encounter.

After Tiamat is dead, nobody knows quite what to do with Marduk. He got rid of the beast, he restored order, but how does one live with a character so powerful? The problem of what to do with the successful hero after he's done his job appears regularly in myth and legend and in western films.

The Babylonians solved the problem by making Marduk abstract. They affixed to him all the powers of all the fifty gods in their pantheon, then had him assign his day-to-day powers to some local officials who would be his earthly representatives—the priests of Babylon. Marduk was kicked upstairs and out of town.

Heroic success invokes alienating stigma. When Beowulf defeats Grendel, the poet tells us there is no man more worthy of kingship. Not only has he destroyed the most pressing evil and is, therefore, considered capable of managing the general good; also they have no idea what else to do with so capable a person when there was no combat in progress. Either elevate him to a form of kingship or run him out of town—those are the two alternatives. In similar fashion, the outside hero who comes in to save the town in the gunfighter films nearly always leaves at the end. It happens in *Warlock, My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Death of a Gunfighter* (1969), and scores of other westerns. It happens in every radio, television, and film episode of the Lone Ranger. Even when the savior is the insider who has heroically risen to the occasion, he is sufficiently changed so he no longer fits his old role once he has excised the community's infection. Owen Wister's Virginian begins as just a ranch hand, rises to foreman, and then, after lynching his best friend and killing his enemy Trampas in a gun duel, he gets the girl and, in the novel, becomes a wealthy industrialist.

America's Last Romance

Star Wars writer and director George Lucas told a *Rolling Stone* reporter in 1977, "One of the significant things that occurred to me is I saw the western die. We hardly knew what happened, one day we turned around and there weren't any westerns anymore." (4) Lucas wasn't at all right. Westerns continue to be made, though far fewer of them than in decades past. Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) won an Academy Award for best picture, as did Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992). *Lonesome Dove* (1989) won an Emmy. Mel Gibson starred in a film version of TV's *Maverick* (1994), and Kevin Costner starred as *Wyatt Earp* (1994). Sharon Stone played a gal gunfighter in Sam Raimi's *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). Jeff Bridges starred in Walter Hill's *Wild Bill* the same year. Hill, who directed *The Long Riders* (1980), directed Bruce Willis in *Last Man Standing* (1995). The following year Jim Jarmusch directed what might be the first hallucinatory Western: *Dead Man,* starring Johnny Depp as William Blake and Gary Farmer as an Indian named Nobody. In spring 2004, HBO followed its immensely popular *Sopranos* with the western series *Deadwood* set primarily in a mining town's whorehouse and hardware store. The filmic mud

was fabulous; how much it had to do with the real west was anyone's guess.

They're still being made: Tom Hanks starred in Paul Greegrass's *News of the World* (2020). Jane Campion directed *The Power of the Dog* (2021), based on Thomas Savage's 1967 novel. And James Samuel directed *The Harder They Fall*, a 2021 Netflix film in which all the principal actors were Black, portraying fictionalized versions of real life people. It was chockful of gunfights.

The real West was only incidental to the action going on in nearly all those westerns. It may have been, as I've suggested, just a local backdrop against which a far more basic action could be played out, just as were the undifferentiated universe of the Enuma Elish for the final battle between Marduk and Tiamat and the black sky for the final battle between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader…

THE SPRING 2022 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS #44:

All films in the series but two (*Notorious* and *The Power of the* Dog) are available from Criterion or Netflix: **c** after a title indicates it is available on Criterion, **p**=Amazon Prime, **p$**=Amazon Prime with an extra $4 fee. *The Power of the Dog* is available, for now, only on Netflix. *Notorious* is available on FlixFilm (low-resolution versions are free on YouTube and Tubi.). All four subscription services let you cancel at any time, so you should have access to all 24 films for well under $100. *The Gunfighter* is on Amazon Prime and, in low rez, free on Tubi. Nine of the films—all with "UB" after the title—are available free to anyone with a UB email account via the UB Library's Swank and Kanopy portals. Five films are available only on non-UB streaming services: *Le Corbeau, The Gunfighter, Naked, Salesman* and *The Power of the Dog*.(The Swank titles will be available at UB's Library for a year; the Kanopy titles for 3 years.)

Feb 1: 1921 Victor Sjostroms, ***The Phantom Carriage*** c UB-Kanopy
Feb 8: 1934 Frank Capra ***It Happened One Night*** c p$ UB-Swank
Feb 15: 1941 John Huston ***The Maltese Falcon*** p$ UB-Swank
Feb 22: 1943 Henri-Georges Clouzot ***Le Corbeau*** c
Mar 1: 1946 Alfred Hitchcock ***Notorious*** FlixFling, YouTube, UB-Swank, Tubi (free)
Mar 8: 1950 Henry King, ***The Gunfighter*** *p$,* Tubi (free), YouTube (free)
Mar 15: 1958 Orson Welles ***Touch of Evil*** p$ UB-Swank
Mar 29: 1962 Yasujiro Ozu ***An Autumn Afternoon*** *c p$b* UB Kanopy
Apr 5: 1973 Federico Fellini ***Amarcord*** *c p$* UB Kanopy
Apr 12: 1993 Mike Leigh ***Naked*** c
Apr 19: 2002 Phillip Noyce ***Rabbit-Proof Fence*** p$ UB-Kanopy
Apr 26: 2016 Asghar Farhadi ***Salesman*** *p*
May 3: 2021: Jane Campion ***The Power of the Dog*** *NETFLIX*
May 10: 2011 Martin Scorsese ***Hugo*** *p$* UB-Kanopy

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