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Post-modern Westerns and  
the Endangered Woman



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POST-MODERN WESTERNS AND  
THE ENDANGERED WOMAN

Abstract

This research essay explores the increasing scarcity of female roles in post-modern western films due to changes that have occurred over several decades since the origination of the genre.

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A string of highly-acclaimed post-modern western films of the twenty-first century have an absence of major female characters, the cause of which stems from the way the genre has progressed since its inception. Classic westerns of the twentieth century had explicit representations of society and straightforward (albeit archaic) gender roles, each functioning in a direct manner to fulfil the plot, but as the genre has changed over several decades so has the representation of society, which has directly impacted the already limited female character. By understanding genre conventions of traditional twentieth-century western films, and then looking at how the representation of society has changed in certain post-modern westerns of the twenty-first century, a link between the representation of society and the representation of women will be established, to understand what the female character means thematically to each film and why her role has become increasingly endangered in the genre.

The traditional western is a genre that follows well-established conventions which make it universally recognisable in film. Structural codes which feature particular kinds of plot, character and setting all function in specific ways to create a western archetype where certain themes and ideas are found. In *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell and Thompson write that:

... quite early, the central theme of the genre became the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier. From the East and the city come the settlers who want to raise families, the schoolteachers who aim to spread learning, and the bankers and government officials. In the vast natural spaces, by contrast, people outside civilization thrive – not only Native Americans but also outlaws, trappers and traders, and greedy cattle barons. (p. 339)

The divide between civilised settlements and the savagery of the wilderness is a fundamental element in classic westerns, which quickly boils down to good vs evil. While the wilderness is dangerous and untamed, civilisation is organised and well-mannered. Uncivilised outsiders (most notably Native Americans) threaten society with acts of violence and savagery, but because civilisation is not violent it requires outside help for protection and calls in the cowboy who “stands between the two thematic poles. At home in the wilderness but naturally inclined towards justice and kindness, the cowboy is often poised between savagery and civilization” (Bordwell & Thompson, p. 339). The cowboy is the protagonist who serves as the lens for the audience. His masculine disposition, which he has full jurisdiction over, is always the central driving force of the narrative. It is *his* journey we follow, and the characters he encounters often have very direct purposes in relation to him, which is particularly noticeable in the cowboy-centric orientation of the female roles.

The role of the women is not found in the wilderness as it is dangerous, untamed, and not suited to her given characteristics. The woman is only found in society, where her role comes to represent the positive qualities that the cowboy must protect. A concerned mother represents the civilised good of society, while an innocent daughter

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represents the purity that must be protected. A romantic interest tempts the cowboy away from a life in the wild but will ultimately be unsuccessful, as the cowboy's ethos is unable to integrate with civilisation. The feminine role in relation to the masculine protagonist far exceeds her importance as an individual character, and because of this she lacks depth and is nothing more than an extension of society's representation. This is how the role of the woman is portrayed throughout countless traditional westerns, but with the emergence of revisionist westerns that eventually led to the post-modern westerns of the twenty-first century, the image of society begins to change and the roles that existed for her become threatened.

Post-modern western is a term which is split into two genres of western that emerged in the late twentieth century. One is the revisionist western and the other is the neo-western. The revisionist western uses a traditional western setting but incorporates modern values, and the neo-western uses the conventions of western storytelling but incorporates new values in contemporary settings. Revisionist westerns look at the old with new eyes while neo-westerns look at the new with old eyes. What both genres have in common is how their representation of society has changed drastically from the traditional western, causing the motives of the masculine protagonist to change and the role of the woman to become increasingly scarce. The mid to late 1990s saw the emergence of revisionist westerns which questioned the highly defined ethics of good vs evil in traditional westerns. In post-modern westerns, society is no longer good and lawful but has become increasingly dark and corrupt. Without an unquestionably good society to preserve, the narrative changes from an outsider's quest to protect civilisation to an insider and his role in society. Films begin to show morally ambiguous heroes, or anti-heroes such as the bank robbers of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969), or the ultra-violent revenge plot of *Django* (Corbucci, 1966). The motives of the protagonist change from helping the good of the masses to helping their own needs, often seeking blood or reprisal on the corrupt society that has turned against them.

As the lawful society dies off in post-modern western films, many of the established female roles also begin to die as their habitat is lost. The concerned mother begins to die because society is no longer lawful, as does the innocent daughter as society is no longer pure. The romantic interest has the best chance of survival as she is a deep-rooted figure in storytelling that transcends the western genre, but even her role is threatened. While some films still employ her as a damsel in distress for love-driven plots, her frequency has lessened. In many cases she is relegated to the minor role of the partner with little importance to the film, or to that of the prostitute who shows the darker and lustful side of sex that remains in a fallen society, which, although it is one of the few roles women have which doesn't show society's virtue, it is still a subservient role to man and "in many ways not that much different [from the partner] since in both cases women trade sex for money, room, and board" (Aquila, 2015, p. 14). The masculine protagonist is the lens through which the audience views the world, and is therefore able to adapt to whatever representation of society is being shown; but because the female role has traditionally been an extension of a *good* society, her role becomes increasingly scarce as twenty-first century westerns

continue to grow darker.

*No Country for Old Men* (Coen and Coen, 2007) is one of the best-known neo-westerns of the twenty-first century and is one of several highly acclaimed post-modern westerns, including *The Revenant* (Iñárritu, 2015) and *There Will Be Blood* (Anderson, 2007), all released within a decade of each other and all having a noticeable absence of major female characters. These films show a darker representation of society than the classic westerns before them which, in relation to the change of genre conventions, is the crucial link to understanding how women are represented and why they have so few major roles. *No Country for Old Men* portrays a society which is no longer honest and lawful, but a “vivid expression ... of the darkness in the new West” (Adams, p. 164), which is established in the opening narration in a way that shows a self-awareness to the genre conventions that it draws on. When police sheriff Ed Tom Bell says “I was sheriff of this county when I was 25. Grandfather was a law man. Father too,” from this we know that he comes from a long lineage of authority that has insight into the nature of society, which has changed over time, much like the genre itself. He then says:

There’s this boy I sent to the electric chair. ... He killed a fourteen-year-old girl. Papers said it was a crime of passion, but he told me there wasn’t any passion to it, told me he had been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he can remember. ... I don’t know what to make of that. The crime you see now it’s hard to even take its measure.

Through his speech it is clear that things are not what they used to be. Crime is no longer a classic good vs evil tale where the villains, although evil, have clear motives and goals. Crime is now nihilistic and unknowable, as is the act of a man killing a girl for no real reason. In the face of this new, dark society, “Sheriff Ed Tom Bell represents the traditional ideal of masculinity,” (Adams, p. 172) and through his fleeting nature he acknowledges the “the failure of patriarchal authority, [and] the breakdown of the old system and its values” (p. 172).

This dark, post-modern society with elements of traditional western values is the crucial dynamic to understanding how women are (and are not) represented in *No Country for Old Men*. The film is largely occupied with “the question of manhood [which] is linked with the western genre’s focus on violence and domination as defining features of masculinity” (Adams, p. 170), and because most of the film does this by following Llewelyn Moss’s journey through the dark side of society, there are few roles available for female characters to influence him, as all female roles are on the pure, traditional side of society. After Llewelyn leaves home, the only female characters with speaking roles he encounters are the Del Rio motel clerk and the poolside woman. The poolside woman is a clear reminiscence of the romantic interest who tempts the masculine protagonist away from a life in the wild. She asks if he’s “a sport”, referring to being a cowboy, which she judges from his outfit and rifle. She then flirts with him, saying “Beer! That’s what’s coming. I’ll bring the ice chest out here. You can stay married.” Her recognition of him as a cowboy and the subsequent

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excitement of this signals her depiction of a more traditional character, but Llewelyn is uninterested in her. While the camera shows him in close-up shots from her point of view, she only ever appears in long shots from behind Llewelyn's shoulder, keeping the focus on him and creating an emotional distance in his side of the conversation.

The Del Rio motel clerk is an interesting role because, like the Desert Aire trailer park manager whom psychopathic hitman Anton Chigurh encounters, and Ed's secretary, she is one of several minor female characters who appear in administrative positions, whose femininity has been stripped away due to their being mere outlets for the business they work at. They function in a similar manner to the encounter in traditional westerns – women who would guide the cowboy through his journey, offering him food or a place to stay, but these women are brash and uncaring, simply wanting to get their job done. They have adopted masculine traits and, unlike the poolside woman, they are not impressed at the status of the male characters, nor are they fazed by the obviously dangerous activities they are engaged in. They show us how very minor roles are capable of being adapted to post-modern westerns in the way that they conform to a contemporary masculine world.

Carla Jean Moss (Llewelyn's young wife) is the only major female character in the film, and easily the most prominent female character featuring in any of the previously stated films, but still she appears in less than ten percent of the film's screen time. Her role is in direct contrast to the dark side of society: she is not sexualised, she wears modest clothes and no discernible makeup. She worries for Llewelyn, acting as a voice of reason, and only interacts willingly with other characters who are on the good side of society, such as Ed. Her final scene with Anton Chigurh (into which she enters unwillingly) shows how she is the polar opposite to his remorseless, fatalistic character. Anton has a submissive attitude to events, taking no responsibility for his actions or the dark nature of society which he helps create. He offers Carla a chance to live with a coin toss to decide her fate, but she refuses, saying "the coin don't have no say. It's just you." She upholds traditional western morals, showing honour and loyalty to her husband even though his actions are the cause for her death (and yes, she does die: Anton checks the soles of his boots for blood after he leaves the house), but because the film focuses largely on the defining features of masculinity, her role in the film is relatively minor, only coming into fruition in the final act after the death of her husband.

If women represent the goodness and domesticity of society in the western, then how does *The Revenant* (2015), a film without a fully constructed society, represent women? The answer is, it doesn't. At least not women who belong to the group of people comprising modern society. *The Revenant* is a revisionist western that portrays early settlers in America and has only one line of dialogue spoken by a female character. The line is "I will cut your balls off" and is spoken by a Native American woman who, along with other women in the tribe, have a minuscule role. She says this after being saved from a sexual assault, which leads back to more of a classic western representation where "misogyny [is] the norm as evidenced by numerous rapes, shootings, and beatings of women. Female victims [are] typically

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depicted in ripped clothing that revealed bare legs and bare backs, or [are] shown in titillating poses” (Aquila, p. 19). The scene does not overtly sexualise her in the sense of being titillating to the audience’s gaze, but her character has no more depth than the fact she is a sexual assault victim.

The narrative follows Hugh Glass and other settlers traversing the wilderness which, as we have been told time and time again, is no place for civilised women in the western genre. Because of this there are no European women in the film, only Native American female roles. The film shows war between Native Americans and settlers, but there is no black and white depiction of good vs evil. The Native Americans are represented sympathetically, as it portrays their land and resources being taken, but they are also violent and vindictive characters. While the settlers are the aggressors, theirs is the narrative we follow, and many of the individuals are likeable and seemingly removed from the damage their group inflicts. This puts both groups in a moral grey area. The film leans towards the settlers being ‘the bad guys’ because they are more to blame for the damage being done to the land, but regardless of race, mankind is the source of destruction.

After the chaos of battle there is a still shot of scenery where we see the scorched earth and scattered bodies, as a burning tree eventually tumbles down. In another scene we are shown thousands and thousands of buffalo skulls stacked in a pile. The film’s dark tones, which are common in post-modern westerns, do not stem from a debased society in an obvious way, simply from man’s impact on the earth. However, the role of the (Native American) woman is still employed to show goodness as she is in opposition to the evil which is happening. She is a hunter-gatherer with a level of mysticism about her, which was a common characterisation of indigenous women in traditional western cinema, and because of her natural characteristics and ties to the land she is a victim of the devastation that is taking place. She has minimal screen time, no character depth and her only real scene of importance involves being saved from a sexual assault. In this instance she has not adapted from her traditional representation, and because the film is largely set outside her main habitat of modern towns and cities, there is little-to-no place for her to exist.

Finally, *There Will Be Blood* is a revisionist western that tells the story of Daniel Plainview, a ruthless oil tycoon who promises to bring prosperity to the people of a small town but is only focused on his own “greed and ambition” (Anderson, p. 187). *There Will Be Blood* has plenty of minor female characters who all conform to traditional western conventions. The town has a focus on wholesome family and church life, so women function here in their classic role, showing civility and purity. Young girls wear white clothing, and mothers and townsfolk wear modest dresses with hats, and cross necklaces. In one scene we see much of the town come out for an outdoor feast, and the depiction of women as part of society here helps mould a classic image of peace and unification. In the representation of the town women are plentiful as extras, but individual major female roles are completely absent. The film shows an awareness of this that it uses to portray the evil attributes of Daniel.

Because women represent the good in society, the lack of substantial female roles in Daniel's life shows how he is not a part of this. He tells people his wife died in childbirth, but really he adopted his son from a man who died working on one of his oil rigs, in order to appear like a family man. In one scene where he addresses the town he uses Mary, Pastor Eli's young sister Mary, as a prop, holding her up for everyone to see as he tries to show his link to society, but during actual business he only ever deals with men. The film goes beyond using women to represent the goodness of society to employing the absence of women as a device to show the evil of society. At the film's end Daniel has become a cynical, lonely alcoholic while his adopted son H. W. has married Mary and is now an honourable man, although adult Mary is never even shown. The film has slid completely into the darkest representation of society, therefore there is no place for Mary. Much like traditional westerns, being incapable of showing civilised women in the wild because of the purity they represent, post-modern westerns are often incapable of showing *any* women in the darkest reaches of society because of the goodness the genre wants them to represent. The problem with this is that post-modern westerns almost always show dark representations of society that either give women little place in the genre or force them to be used in a contrasting manner, which does not require them to have major roles.

In all three films, minor female roles have largely kept their roots from traditional westerns and major roles have almost completely vanished as the genre has refused to integrate them into new representations of society. Whether or not the absence of women in these films is a problem is up to the viewer to decide. The films may try to depict a somewhat realistic interpretation of the times and events, but because the scenarios being shown are conceived of according to a male-dominated world, the absence of female characters is a clear consequence. But for a genre that has managed to adapt to so many new settings and scenarios it seems odd that it has struggled to reinvent the female role. These films are often viewed without audiences realising how few major female characters there are, but if a film had an almost entirely female cast with only one male character having a single piece of dialogue, I can tell you that audiences would damn sure notice.

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## Author

Hamish Parker graduated from Victoria University of Wellington with a Bachelor of Arts majoring in both film, English literature and creative writing.

## Course information

Professor Missy Molloy's Film 302 – Cinema and Representation – examines how cinema represents issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality in a critical manner, paying attention to theories of representation and spectatorship central to feminist film studies which address provocative depictions of sexuality and social inequality onscreen. This paper was submitted in July 2017.