

THE WESTERN: AN ELEGY TO A VANISHING AMERICA?

by

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Does saying adios to John Wayne in The Shootist (1976) mean we are saying so long to the traditional Western? Is the traditional Western an elegy for a dying or vanishing America? If the traditional Western is really a "genre of location," does it have to take place in the Old West, the West, the Midwest, in America, or even on this planet? And, if much of the traditional Western's basic structure is based on movement toward a destination, must it be here and now or in the historical past of our country?¹

It is the contention of this paper that the answer to all four questions in paragraph one is "no." It is generally accepted that the traditional Western is shaped by "the times" and that it is made to reflect society. In this respect, then, the Western can be anywhere, anytime.

The traditional Western has followed our history through westward expansion and the taming and civilizing of our country. It has portrayed our attitudes, values and ideals, which have been developed and carried through the colonization of America, the American Revolution, westward movement, the Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, World War I, the Depression, World War II, the birth of atomic power, the Cold War, the Korean conflict, the Viet-Nam war . . . right up to the present.²

The traditional Western has shown a world of dangerous balance wherein the forces of civilization and savagery are struggling for supremacy. It has provided us with infinite possibilities and limitless vistas to help us cope with a conflict that is essential to the traditional Western--East versus West; lush, green surroundings versus the desert; good guys versus bad guys; order versus anarchy; the individual versus the community; etc.--and the subsequent establishment of law and order as a basis for our social condition.³

The traditional Western reflects our beliefs and worries and has continually reworked and changed itself to keep pace with our changing values and attitudes. America has survived two world wars, a civil war, involvement in two so-called "police actions" (needed to help stop the threat of the spread of Communism), and many are tired of "real" life, here and now, while others are afraid of it. They still want to belong, to feel that they are a part of something. Many are lonely, alienated, feeling cut off from family, togetherness, identity, etc.⁴

Many feel that there are no more worlds to conquer, no more territory to expand. Not true. There are both inner

space (the "last frontier" as Dr. R. M. Restak calls it) inside the individual himself/herself, as well as outer space (the "final frontier" as it is referred to in episodes of Star Trek).

Although the Star Trek and Star Wars movies are classified by many as science fiction, they contain many of the elements found in the traditional Western.

Both Star Trek movies and all three Star Wars movies deal with "a landscape that presents constant challenge."⁵ All five movies locate their characters in or on worlds other than Earth--facing hostile areas in the galaxy. Too, there is never time to calculate all degrees of danger.

As in the traditional Western, humans (and other ET's or extraterrestrials,) must be able to survive in primitive environments. Both heroes and villains fight to bring their own kind of civilization to wilderness or keep good from being triumphed over by evil (the heroes, of course).⁶

In the two Star Trek movies, Commander James Kirk and his crew are "law enforcers," always on patrol in their starship, the Enterprise. In the three Star Wars movies, the struggle is between the Empire and the rebel Alliance. It is the Emperor, his "enforcer," Darth Vader, and their Stormtroopers versus a rag-tag collection of intergalactic misfits, loyal to the Princess Leia and her cause.

The heroes in the Star Wars and Star Trek movies are very much like traditional Western heroes. They are adventurers, in touch with some "purer reality," who resist cultural impermanence and do not represent naive reaffirmations of "natural man." Many are oftentimes met halfway through their lives, the present already shaped by their past, wandering, not usually tied down by any occupation. And they often, out of necessity, temporarily affiliate themselves with a cause, sometimes making a commitment to it.

Sometimes they are even willing to sacrifice themselves for others, and their philosophy, more often than not, is rather fatalistic.⁷ The most representative example from either the Star Trek or Star Wars movies is Hans Solo, a mercenary who goes about the galaxy in his Millennium Falcon, a spaceship barely held together, as we would say, "by bubblegum and baling wire," in the company of Chewbacca, a giant, fur-covered ET, called a Wookiee, aligning himself with the underdog, in this case the rebel Alliance, Princess Leia, etc., and constantly outwitting the bad guys, Darth Vader et al.

Also, like in the traditional Western, the heroes of the Star Trek and Star Wars movies are competent, quiet, reserved, isolated, aloof--living apart from others because they are usually rejects from society, renegades or rebels.⁸

They are without family--"orphans" in the world. Interesting examples from the Star Wars movies are Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker, twins, children of the evil Darth Vader, who do not know they are siblings or that he is their father. Princess Leia, played by Carrie Fisher, is at first the sheltered, protected young maiden, who then blossoms into a romantic interest, won by none other than Hans Solo. Interestingly enough, Carrie Fisher was 19 years old when the first movie was made. So we have seen her grow up, too.

Her brother, Luke, was raised by an aunt and uncle and orphaned by a Stormtrooper attack on them, and seeks revenge throughout the three movies. We see Luke grow from a naive kid to a Jedi knight, mastering his innate talents and abilities, under the tutelage of a 90 year-old Jedi master named Yoda, and finally accepting his responsibilities.

Luke in the traditional Western, many heroes of the Star Trek and Star Wars movies pattern their lives on solitary romantics, wanderers, beyond the understanding of everyone else, displaced god-like figures, driven into demonic wastelands. They are, however, capable of doing the right thing when everyone else panics. They display determination and confidence.⁹

From the Star Trek movies such an example is Mr. Spock, science officer on the Enterprise: half-human, half-Vulcan, he constantly tries to conquer his own "inner space," searching for the Ultimate Reality, etc. At best, he tolerates humans and their emotional, irrational behavior. Yet, he is always the "first one in and the last one out," so to speak.

The later Westerns, by the 1960's, had heroes who had gradually descended from heroic demi-gods, superior in many ways to nature and man, to psychologically more complex and more sympathetic characters--neurotics like everyone else. They manage to maintain traces of their isolated sense of honor and strike a romantic pose, even in the face of extinction.¹⁰

An example of such a hero, from the Star Wars movies, is Lando Calrissian, Hans Solo's swashbuckling partner in the last two of the three movies. He is a cocksure, galactic guerilla but also a man of contradictions. Interestingly enough, Billy Dee Williams, the actor who portrays Lando, admits to being into both drugs, i.e. LSD, and Eastern philosophy. He says that they served as a sort of "rebirth" and that the Buddhist wisdom helps him cope without losing his sanity.¹¹

Not to be forgotten, as part of the traditional Western, are the "sidekick," the "saloon scene," and the "showdown." Examples of confrontations between antagonists, in the Star Wars and Star Trek movies, are battles, fought sometimes from spacecraft and with laser weapons, between representatives of the forces of "good" and "evil."

Likewise, not so very different from characters in traditional Westerns, 6-shooters strapped to their side, characters from the Star Trek and Star Wars movies, humans and aliens alike, go about with laser pistols or rifles, firing "from the hip" with deadly accuracy like their Western counterparts.

Another typical part of traditional Westerns is the saloon, tavern or cantina scene. These were also copied by the Star Wars and Star Trek movies, intergalactic "watering holes," at which the dregs of intergalactic space gather. From these places leave the most interesting groups of humans and other ET's, banded together (for a price, for the glory, or maybe just for the fun of it), to help the underdog in his/her time of need.

Last but not least, the "sidekick," a sort of Sancho Panza to Don Quixote. The traditional Westerns had Roy Rogers, his wife, Dale Evans, and a dog; Gene Autrey and Smiley Burnette; the Lone Ranger and his Indian, Tonto; the Cisco Kid and Pancho; and Wild Bill Hickock and his portly companion. The Star Wars and Star Trek movies have Mr. Spock, the half-breed, half-human, half-Vulcan; Chewbacca, a Wookiee; and C3PO and R2D2, two robots, to name but a few. These "sidekick" characters are paired with humans: Spock and Kirk; Chewbacca and Hans Solo; and the two robots with all the different heroes in the Star Wars movie.

To repeat, as a way of summarizing, it is the contention of this paper that the Western is not dead nor has America died nor is it dying. They/We simply change to meet the demands of "the times." People, who in the past watched traditional Westerns, rooted for the good guys and jeered the bad guys. This has not changed. They/We identified with the Tom Mixes, Hopalong Cassidy's and Matt Dillon's as they fought crime and tried to make the world a better place in which to live.

Those of us who go to see Star Wars, Star Trek and the like have not changed. We simply keep abreast of the times. In a world of space shuttles, disks or dishes for TV, telecommunications satellites, etc., we continue to produce movies where the plot is simple--good guys versus bad guys. This allows us to escape "real" life for the moment (entertainment) and gives us something to think about when we leave the theater (educational). It is just that our "cowboys" today wear laser guns instead of Colt 45's, ride in spaceships instead of on a horse, and right the wrongs of intergalactic space, our new frontier. And, instead of saying "Hy-Yo, Silver, away!" our heroes are more likely to close with "May the Force be with you."

NOTES

1. Jack Nachbar, Focus on the Western (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974); Philip French, Westerns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Robert Sklar, Movie-made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York: Vintage Books, 1975); William K. Everson, A Pictorial History of the Western Film (New York: Citadel Press, 1969); and John Fell, A History of Films (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979). I also used People Magazine (May 30 and June 6, 1983) and Star Magazine (June 14, 1983), and miscellaneous articles on the Star Wars and Star Trek movies.

2. Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film-making and the Studio System (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), p. 46.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

4. A combination of ideas from Globe Magazine, 21 June 1983, and National Enquirer, 21 June 1983, pp. 3 and 12 respectively.

5. Stanley J. Solomon, Beyond Formula: American Film Genres (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich, Inc., 1976), p. 16.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 16 and 19.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

8. Nachbar, French, Sklar, et al.

9. Beyond Formula, op. cit.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Us Magazine, 20 June 1983, pp. 28-29.