**[Defining the ‘Revisionist Western’](http://chrisphilpott.co.nz/b/?p=38)**

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In this essay I will explain the meaning of the term ‘revisionist western’, in relation to the wider notion of the western as a genre, by drawing on examples from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

According to the American Film Institute (2008) the Western can be defined as “a genre of films set in the American West that embodies the spirit, the struggle and the demise of the new frontier.” The Great Train Robbery, a silent film released in 1903, is often cited as the earliest Western movie. This film helped to establish the Western as a legitimate film genre, as well as proving its financial value as a form of entertainment.

Western films are easily identifiable due to a number of conventions that can be found in a majority of works within the genre. Large, open patches of desert, stretching outward from a small settlement on the western frontier, are often the setting for stand-offs between heroic men who stand for law and order, themselves representations of the taming of the west following the introduction of civilisation, and the gun-slinging outlaw trying to protect his wild way of life.

The traditional western places value on the “eastern” way of life, favouring civilisation and the law over the unknown element of the western frontier, while marginalising female, Native American and Mexican characters. William Phillips points out that, “Symptomatic of the transformations celebrated in westerns … near the end of The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), the main woman character says of the area now settled, ‘It was once a wilderness. Now it’s a garden.’” (Phillips, 1999)

By contrast, the revisionist western takes the established conventions of the traditional western and turns them on their head. Where traditional western films celebrated the civilised nature of American society, film-makers of the late 1960s began to use the western as an outlet to voice their criticism of American society and values, achieving this by using stories, settings, and visual conventions in the mise-en-scene that were directly opposed to the established conventions at the time. Thus, the revisionist western was born.

Robert B Ray, in his book A Certain Tendency Of The Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980, explains that “the western’s importance derived from the national ideology’s eagerness to assert an American exceptionalism as the basis for avoiding difficult choices.” (Ray, 1985) The revisionist western opposed this notion and openly questioned the national ideology. Film-makers were sometimes able to question the idea that the American “exceptionalism” and the American method of civilisation was superior by telling stories that focused on typically non-American social groups. For example, 1970 film Little Big Man, directed by Arthur Penn and starring Dustin Hoffman, tackled issues of prejudice by sympathetically portraying a group of American Indians who are forced to raise a Caucasian boy as one of their own.

Strong female characters, and the use of so-called “anti-hero” characters, are also commonplace in revisionist westerns. George Roy Hill’s 1969 film Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid makes use of both: the main characters of Butch and Sundance (played by Paul Newman and Robert Redford respectively) are bank robbers in the infamous Hole-in-the-Wall Gang, while Sundance’s lover Etta (played by Katharine Ross) goes against the female stereotype by repeatedly standing up to the men and eventually leaving them of her own accord. The use of outlaws as the film’s heroes flies in the face of traditional westerns, in which law and order reign supreme.

Other film-makers voiced their criticism by using visual cues to show that the established conventions of the western were gone, as a metaphor for the way in which the established ideals of American society we no longer adequate. An example is found in McCabe and Mrs Miller (1971), in which director Robert Altman replaces the clear blue skies and pristine, golden settings of earlier western films with gloomy clouds and desaturated colours, and replaces the dry, dusty streets of the conventional frontier town with messiness and mud.

The preferred reading of revisionist westerns, as films that oppose the established conventions of the genre and can be read as opposing the established beliefs of society, is entirely dependent on the idea of binary opposition, pioneered by philosopher Claude Levi-Strauss. “Levi-Strauss argued that an abiding structure of all meaning-making, not just narratives, was a dependence on binary oppositions, or a conflict between two qualities or terms.” (Branston & Stafford, 2006). Branston & Stafford continue to point out some typical binary opposites in the western, such as feminine/masculine, domestic/savage, and Christian/pagan.

In conclusion, we can see that the term ‘revisionist western’ describes a set of films which have rejected the conventions of traditional westerns, and uses the system of binary opposition to challenge the established ideas of the western genre and, by extension, the established ideology of American society as a whole.