



The Western is, perhaps, the prime means by which America interprets and represents its history to itself. Westerns are set within a certain period of American history, approximately 1860-1900, in which America began to build the nation that it is today and to forge its identity. Many of the characters portrayed on film are men who really lived in that time, e.g. Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, General Custer. The Western is one of the oldest genres – since 1904 hardly a year has gone by without a Western film being made; there have been comic Westerns, musical Westerns and television Westerns. The study of Westerns enables us to examine issues about North America's myths and legends; to look at how America thinks and feels about itself and its history; to explore how men and women fit into the community; and to look at those outside or on the edge of it. It investigates the building of a nation and its identity, patriotism, male friendship, honour and revenge, the triumph of good over evil. The popularity of any myth is rooted in its power to reflect and reproduce a society's beliefs, values and fears in a palatable form. The myth of the Western tells its American audiences, and others, something about themselves and their society.

Westerns often open with the scene of a lone rider sitting in the saddle of his dusty horse, travelling across the wide open plains towards a small frontier town with muddy streets and noisy saloons. He wears a worn wide-brimmed hat, a bandanna round his neck and a gun rests at his side in a well-worn holster. As he approaches the town we see the plains behind him rolling gently away towards deserts or mountain peaks. The scene is familiar to most Americans and to audiences of other nations. It presents a familiar setting within a context of social and moral meanings which are immediately understood. Stories of the Wild West include tales of glory and suffering, sacrifice, love and heroism, and have been a rich source for the growth and development of the myth. During this crucial period of settlement in which most Westerns are situated, major Indian wars were fought, cattle empires flourished and died, and some wagon trains reached their destinations. Part of the appeal of the Western is that it was a setting for romance and adventure and that many ways of life were available for people to start afresh or to reinvent themselves. Farmers, cowboys, cavalrymen, miners, Indian fighters, gamblers, gunfighters and railroad builders – all had their own elements of adventure, were contemporary with one another and had their own interests and values. This variety was a rich source for stories of conflicts between those interests and values.

### ■ USING THIS TEACHING GUIDE

This Guide will enable teachers and their students both to enjoy the Western as an exciting and popular film genre and to explore areas of Film and Media Studies syllabuses. The Guide provides background information on the Western as well as tasks and activities for students. Also included are synopses of significant Westerns and a bibliography.

The Guide specifically focuses on Sergio Leone and the 'Spaghetti Western', enabling students to look in detail at one

type of Western and examine the influence of both a director (Sergio Leone) and a star (Clint Eastwood).

It also offers ways in which the investigation of this genre could deliver other areas of the syllabuses and concept areas. Exploring a range of Western films, or extracts, can help Film and Media students investigate how meaning is made in film by asking them to analyse the features of a film's form and style and to identify the techniques of storytelling specific to narrative film. Through the Western they can also consider the intended and actual response of audiences; look at representation; examine the codes and conventions within a particular genre, the historical development of a genre and the relationship of genre to media industries and audience.

### ■ MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES LINKS

At AS Level Media and Film Studies students will need to understand and work with the following:

#### Narrative

Students are asked to look at the overall structure of the film and the way in which the elements of the story are organised. The study of a specific sequence will include how narrative information is communicated. Westerns usually open with a set of very clear narrative 'clues', for example, look at *The Searchers*, *The Quick and the Dead*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Students can be asked to look at the opening sequences of two or three Westerns and identify the film language, such as the establishing camera shot; the colour and the lighting; the *mise en scène*; and the music, which also gives information about the kind of story it is going to be. What are our expectations of this story? How do we know this man is the main character? What kind of a town or location is it? Is it hostile or friendly? How does the film language tell us this?

The Western is also useful for demonstrating narrative structure as an example of classic Hollywood narrative. When students see a whole film they can be asked to examine how the initial situation or equilibrium is disturbed or disrupted and how the situation is re-established to produce a changed or amended equilibrium at the end.

#### Genre

Students should become familiar with the means by which a narrative film communicates meaning particularly through the use of signifying features or icons which an audience readily recognises. It is important to discuss genre in terms of how film is marketed to its audience. The Western makes a useful introduction to the iconography of particular genres. Students could be asked to list all the things (or icons) they expect to see in a Western and to discuss an audience's expectation of this particular genre. They could then match what they see in film clips with the iconography on their own list and their own expectations. The opening sequences already referred to should be useful for this exercise.



From *The Man Who Shot Liberty Vallance*: the archetypal Western hero (John Wayne) meets the ineffectual Eastern politician (James Stewart).

### **Mise en Scène and Cinematography**

These include setting, costume and make-up, expression and movement, lighting, framing and composition, off-screen space, camera position, colour, depth of focus and special effects. A short sequence, in which particular scenes could be freeze-framed, will allow students to identify close ups; the framing of the camera; the lighting of that particular scene; and to discuss why the film-maker has made these choices. Looking at interiors and exteriors from *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* should encourage questions about the physical positioning of the characters, the groupings within the domestic context and the placing of the characters against the landscape.

### **Editing**

Students need to be aware of how the film-maker organises time, both within a sequence and across sections of the narrative and how the organisation of space creates coherence for the spectator. Most Westerns follow a linear narrative; one of the ways the film-maker can heighten tension and add urgency is through editing shots together. For example, how is the chase by the Indians in *Stagecoach* made to seem so tense and dangerous? Students could be asked to look closely at how one scene cuts to another, so changing the pace.

### **Sound**

Sound is a significant part of film language and includes the variety of ways in which aural elements – speech, music and noise – are used in relation to visuals, and help inform them. For example, the opening sequence of *Once Upon a Time in the West*

conveys a great deal of information through ‘natural’ sounds. Without looking at the visuals, students could be asked to write down all the sounds they can identify and what those noises mean to them, then compare their ideas with the information given when the visuals and sound are combined.

### **Auteur debates**

In A Level Film Studies (A2) these investigations are extended by asking students to carry out a research-based study of a specific *auteur*. The Critical Studies section also asks students to explore the ideas of genre and authorship.

The term *auteur* is used to describe directors who have attained the status of an artist or author, and who are perceived as producing personal films, identified as their own. As film-making is essentially a collaborative process this sometimes makes authorship difficult when you consider how some directors regularly use the same scriptwriter, cameraman or lighting team. The *auteur* debate has continued for over thirty years – *Theories of Authorship* by John Caughie is a useful text in outlining the main areas of debate.

The use of the director's name is often key in the marketing of film nowadays but the original definition of *auteur* does not really apply to this emphasis on ‘star’ directors. This ‘development’ might be an interesting area for students to explore in terms of film marketing and the context of production. Sergio Leone, John Ford, Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood (and others) could be subjects of student research, which could include looking at narrative structure, themes, *mise en scène*, representation and ideology and music.

## EXAM QUESTIONS

A study of the Western could usefully help answer the following questions from past Film and Media examination papers:

### Narrative

**Q** Analyse any two film or broadcast fiction texts which employ different narrative strategies.

The Western can be used here as a classic Hollywood narrative text and contrasted with another kind of film narrative, e.g. *The Searchers* or *The Outlaw Josey Wales* with *Pulp Fiction* or *Land and Freedom*.

### Genre

**Q** 'Genre is a means by which an audience brings knowledge to a film; genre films provide frameworks in which the audience's capacity to recognise certain story elements of plot, theme and image create the potential for great subtlety of meaning where the conventions may be stretched, played with or subverted'. How far would you agree with this view of genre? Refer to one or more genre films.

*Lone Star*, *Unforgiven*, *The Quick and the Dead* are all Westerns which explore and subvert the generic conventions of the Western. Students could consider the audiences for these films as well as looking at the film-makers' use of the conventions and iconography.

**Q** How useful is the concept of genre to media producers and audiences? Discuss with reference to specific examples.

The Western and how it is marketed could be explored here. Students should look at posters, trailers and other advertising material (web sites) in order to examine who the distributors are targeting and how. Stars associated with this genre are also useful marketing tools in reaching an audience.

**Q** Outline the principal themes, conventions and iconography of any one genre of your choice, illustrating your answer with a range of examples.

Three contrasting aspects of the Western could be considered through *Lone Star*, *Unforgiven* and *The Searchers*.

### Stars

**Q** 'Stars contribute more than potential box office appeal; they significantly determine meaning in the films in which they appear.' Discuss this statement with reference to three films.

**Q** Stars are often considered in partnerships, for example with a director or with another star. Explore what is revealing in a study of the work of a star in two partnerships.

Clint Eastwood and John Wayne are two stars with which the Western is associated and their work with particular directors is significant. *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Pale Rider*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, *The Searchers*, *Stagecoach*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* offer useful texts through which to compare

the relationship of a star persona to a particular director and genre.

**Q** Hollywood stars are the direct or indirect reflection of the needs, drives and dreams of American society. Discuss this view of stars, making reference to one or more stars in at least two of their films.

The Western as a myth and reflection of American society could be investigated looking particularly at the different representation of heroes through two or three films from different eras, e.g. *High Noon*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Dances with Wolves*.

### Auteur debates

**Q** Auteur status is claimed today by Hollywood marketing hype for almost any director. What, in your opinion, are the characteristics which make a Hollywood auteur? In answering this question refer in detail to one or more directors and their work.

Leone's work could be a basis for this question as could an investigation of the work of John Ford, Sam Peckinpah and Clint Eastwood. It could also be interesting to discuss with your students whether Clint Eastwood is a star or an *auteur*, or combines qualities of both.



Clint Eastwood in *Pale Rider* – developing his persona as 'the man with no name'.

**S**paghetti Westerns are generally considered to be a sub-genre of the Western, describing Italian and Spanish made 'Westerns'. The term was first used almost exclusively as a term of abuse. Other terms were used at the time to describe 'alien' interpretations of the Hollywood Western, such as German 'Sauerkraut Westerns', or Spanish 'Paella Westerns'.

Today the influence of the Spaghetti Western on those made subsequently in the US is more clearly recognised and the term is used descriptively to define those European Westerns filmed predominantly in Spain with American lead actors, Italian directors and Italian film crews.

The violence and overt machismo of the Spaghetti Western were matters of concern when they first appeared. The world of the Spaghetti Western was an almost exclusively male one and women were incidental to the narrative. The films were a celebration of masculinity: men were men and women were women, and 'knew their place'. The women were shown as either 'madonnas' (sisters, mothers, wives) or whores (saloon girls). Today the violence in Spaghetti Westerns looks timid when compared with the films of Wes Craven and Quentin Tarantino, although Peckinpah himself claimed that he would not have made his films in the way he did had it not been for the example set by the films of Sergio Leone.

## ■ SERGIO LEONE

January 23rd 1921–April 30th 1989

Leone was born in Rome, the son of one of Italy's film pioneers. At 18 he turned his back on an academic career and entered the film industry as an assistant to various Italian directors, such as de Sica on *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948). During the 1950s Leone worked for several American production companies making Hollywood epics in Rome. In 1959 he worked as an assistant on Fred Zinnemann's *The Nun's Story*, starring Audrey Hepburn and Peter Finch. His official debut as principal director (and co-screenwriter) was with the historical epic, *The Colossus of Rhodes* (1961), an Italian/Spanish film made in Spain.

Leone found that working with a variety of directors, both Italian and American, was an invaluable experience but was certainly not over-awed by the Hollywood system:

*I have worked with directors from the best to the worst, from the mediocre to the talented, from the genius to the idiot.*

Leone was determined to find his own voice both in content and in style:

*If the critics write that I resurrect old myths and make them even larger, that's true. I was at the side of directors who applied all the rules: for example, a close-up to show that the character is about to say something important. I reacted against all that and so the close-ups in my films are always the expression of emotion. I'm very careful in that area, so they call me a perfectionist, a formalist because I watch my framing. But I'm not doing it to make it look pretty; I'm seeking, first and foremost, the relevant emotion. You have to frame with the emotion and the rhythm of the film in mind.*

### TASK 1

- Find three examples of this kind of close-up in Leone's films. What effect is the director aiming for? What other aspects of film language emphasise these effects in each sequence?

He was often disappointed by other directors and saw directors of the calibre of Raoul Walsh and William Wyler wasting their talents with populist 'sand, sex and sandal' epics while

*I was their assistant, the victim of some curse ... Whilst I organised chariot races, battles between triremes, and explosions on galleys, I was silently dreaming about Nevada and New Mexico.*

Sergio Leone's dream came to fruition in 1964 with the making of *Per un Pugno di Dollari – A Fistful of Dollars*, the first of his films with which he was to make his mark on film history as 'the father of the Spaghetti Western.' Although the phenomenon was relatively short-lived, Leone dominated this sub-genre. His influence was substantial and Clint Eastwood publicly acknowledged his personal debt to Leone by dedicating *Unforgiven* (1992) to him.

In 1958, 54 feature Westerns were made in Hollywood: in 1962-3 a mere eleven. However, in 1967 annual production reached 37. Between the summer of 1963 and April 1964 the month Leone began filming *A Fistful of Dollars* – 24 Spaghetti Westerns were made and by 1967 annual production of Spaghetti Westerns had risen to 72. It is clear that the revival of the Hollywood Western was largely due to the success of 'international Westerns', especially the Spaghetti Western, and even more importantly the films of Sergio Leone starring Clint Eastwood. The popularity of Leone's Westerns not only boosted commercial demand but also influenced the content and style of future Hollywood Westerns.



A characteristic scene from Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars*.

- *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964)
- *For a Few Dollars More* (1965)
- *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966)

*A Fistful of Dollars* has been summed up disparagingly as a low-budget Western (the total budget was \$200,000), based upon a Japanese film, pretending to be an American one, produced in Italy. It achieved, however, instant success in Italy and eventual international success.

In this, the first of what was to become known as the Dollars Trilogy, Leone was to present his audiences with an alternative mythology of the West. His hero lives by his wits and is little concerned with 'honour'. Leone viewed the American hero with a more objective, if not cynical eye:

*In my childhood America was like a religion. I dreamed of the wide, open spaces. Of demi-gods upon the prairies.*

The real-life Americans he saw arriving to liberate Italy at the end of the Second World War '*upset all my dreams*'. Leone saw their weaknesses as well as their strengths:

*They were no longer the Americans of the West. I found them energetic, but also deceptive men who were materialistic, possessive, keen on earthly pleasures and goods. I could see nothing or almost nothing of the great prairies or of the demi-gods of my childhood.*

In an interview in 1973 Leone rejected Hollywood's interpretation of the West as a place where the 'whiter than white redresser of wrongs' existed. He recognised the 'real' West as a

*world of violence, fear and instinct – a world of men. If you were 'honourable' like the heroes of the traditional Westerns – you would find yourself in the cemetery in no time at all. Life in the West was not pleasant or poetic. Up until the arrival of the railroads the law belonged to the most hard, the most cruel, the most cynical.*

## TASK 1

- Take one Spaghetti Western and two other Westerns, each from a different period, and trace the changes in the characterisation of the 'hero'. What is retained from the traditional hero? What is lost?

The outline narrative of *A Fistful of Dollars* was written in three weeks by Leone and two co-writers. The story was based heavily on Akira Kurosawa's samurai film *Yojimbo* (1961). Both Kurosawa and Leone suggested that their main inspiration came from Hollywood films. Kurosawa said that *Yojimbo* was born out of a passion for the Hollywood Western, and in particular, George Steven's *Shane*, a hugely popular film in Japan.

## TASK 2

*'Good Westerns are liked by everyone. Since humans are weak they want to see good people and great heroes. Westerns have been done over and over again and in the process a kind of grammar has evolved. I have learned from the grammar of the Westerns.'*

KUROSAWA

- What does the 'grammar of the Westerns' mean, do you think?
- What would a Western have to have to attract a contemporary audience? Write a synopsis for a Western which would attract your peer group. Think about effects, casting, narrative.

## THEMES AND STYLE

The Dollars Trilogy avoids sentimentality by combining black humour and brutality. In *For a Few Dollars More* Eastwood's characterisation of 'the man with no name' became almost self-parody. In the complex game of the treasure hunt in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* much of the violence has almost a cartoon quality about it. Guns are fired from unexpected places: up sleeves, in a bath and from a boot. All the films include graphic close-ups of people eating voraciously. Less savoury functions are also featured.

Ennio Morricone's music plays a significant role in the films. Many of the characters have musical reference points. In *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* each character has his own distinctive sound – a trill or a whine, sung whistled or played and taken from the opening bars of the main title theme.

Leone employs heavily amplified background noises to dramatic effect. Throughout the Dollars Trilogy there are long scenes where there is little or no dialogue but Leone emphasises the mechanics of loading, cocking and firing a rifle or pistol by electronically enhancing or simulating the sounds. This helps to increase the dramatic tension. For the opening sequence of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* amplified natural sounds are used to dramatic effect.



A closing sequence from  
*For a Few Dollars More*.

Leone's technical devices are frequently deliberately overplayed. He uses fluid camera movements, often incorporating the camera as part of the action. He places objects in eccentric juxtapositions and frequently uses big close-ups to show reaction rather than action.

#### TASK 5

- Select a sequence from any of the Dollars Trilogy and discuss why it might be criticised for 'excesses of style'.

### The Desert

One of the central motifs in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is the contrast between the cactus rose and the references made to real roses. In Ford's mythology of the West the desert can become a garden. In the majestic landscape of Monument Valley families can establish themselves. The future will survive through marriage, children and civilisation. In Leone's West the desert is sterile. The desert provides a suitable setting for a world rooted in violence, greed and cruelty. Leone's characters inhabit a hostile environment but they are not pioneers interested in opening up a new frontier. There is nothing of the traditional West for self-fulfilment or self-awareness in Leone's heroes.

### The Family and the Church

The only thing worth preserving in Leone's world is the family. And such is the violence and greed of his world few families survive. Leone links the image of the family with the symbol of the community – the church bell (the *campanile*). Culturally this represents a significant 'Italianism' in his films. The image of the church bell is frequently used, e.g. in *For a Few Dollars More* the mission bell is used for target practice by members of Indio's gang.

#### TASK 6

- Look for examples of where the family and church are referred to or portrayed in the Dollars Trilogy. What is the effect they have on the action?

### Images of Death

Leone frequently gives his characters names associated with death (cf. *mors*, the Latin word for 'death'). There is Colonel Mortimor, the Morton brothers, and another Morton in *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The closing sequences of *For a Few Dollars More* is of the 'man with no name's' farm wagon piled with dead bodies. In *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* a driverless hearse appears from nowhere in the middle of the desert. Possibly most significant of all is the fact that the gold is buried inside a grave. Greed and death are inextricably intertwined.



There are some actors who are associated with Westerns and with particular roles in them. The physical presence and characteristics of these actors have become part of the genre's iconography, either accepted literally or worked into new patterns or used for fresh meanings. The well-known faces, with familiar plots and situations help to reinforce the sense of ritual, e.g. John Wayne is not associated with parts that require much inner turmoil, Henry Fonda is a key figure in Ford films such as *My Darling Clementine* and Gary Cooper is honest and upright, as in *High Noon*. If any of these are cast as criminals or outlaws there is the definite suggestion that there is something basically wrong with society.

**T A S K 1**

■ Which actors do you associate with the Western, and which qualities are associated with them? How do these qualities contribute to audience expectations and to the marketing of the film?

Leone originally wanted Henry Fonda to play 'the man with no name' as an older character; his second choice was James Coburn. Both actors were too expensive and he tried, unsuccessfully, to cast various actors who were living in Europe. Clint Eastwood was, at the time, the co-star of the CBS TV Western series, *Rawhide*. Eastwood had joined the series in the winter of 1958, aged 28, as Rowdy Yates, the 'ramrod' of the cattle drivers. Eastwood was signed to play the 'man with no name' in the spring of 1964: his salary was \$15,000. The film took a mere seven weeks to complete, after which Eastwood returned to *Rawhide*. After the death of Eric Fleming, who played the trail boss in *Rawhide*, Eastwood had solo billing until the series ended in 1966.

Before casting Eastwood, Leone had watched an episode of *Rawhide* and thought that he was 'a little sophisticated, a little light' but 'he was good at getting on a horse and had a way of walking with a tired resigned air'. Leone decided that he had to 'make him look more virile, harden him, 'age' him for the part – with that beard, that poncho which made him look broader, those cigars.' Leone's original vision of 'the man with no name' changed considerably when Eastwood took on the role. Leone saw that

*in real life Clint is slow, calm, rather like a cat. He does what he has to do, then sits down in a corner and goes to sleep immediately, until needed again. It was seeing him behave like this on the first day that helped me mould the character.*

Clint Eastwood was aware of the differences between his acting style and what he referred to as the 'Helzapoppin school of drama' in Italy. He decided to remain 'impassive'. Also, according to Eastwood, the original script of *A Fistful of Dollars* was overlong and very wordy. As shooting progressed Eastwood and Leone came to a compromise over the dialogue and Eastwood's character was allowed to say less and less.



Clint Eastwood's 'the man with no name' – another kind of hero?

Clint Eastwood carefully refined his 'man with no name' persona, introduced with such dramatic effect in Leone's films, culminating in his homage to *Shane* – the mystical preacher in *Pale Rider* (1985). Two of the most exciting Hollywood Westerns of the seventies were his *High Plains Drifter* (1973), a surreal extension of the genre, and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. *High Plains Drifter* sees the hero consumed by revenge but in *Josey Wales* he is freed from revenge and made 'human' again. The screenplay quotes the classic line from Anthony Mann's film *The Naked Spur* (1952): 'Choosing a way to die, that's easy; it's choosing a way to live that's the difficult thing to do.'

