the western—and the art-movie category that I have been discussing. They are both conceptions held by certain groups about certain films. Many of the theoretical problems of using genre terms have, however, been overlooked in the case of the western. It has become so much a part of our cultural patterning that film criticism has tended to use it as if it were possible to assume common agreement in all the respects on which research would be necessary in the art-movie case. It may be that there is such common agreement on the western, but it does not follow that this would be true of all genre categories. Anyway, it is not at all clear that there is that much consensus on the western. It seems likely that for many people the most western of westerns (certainly the most popular, if reliable is any indicator) is John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960). On the other hand, in the 1940s the same position might be filled by My Darling Clementine (Ford, 1946), in the 1950s by High Noon (Fred Zinneman, 1952). Conventions change, often for reasons entirely out of the control of filmmakers and film critics.

In sum, then, genre terms seem best employed in the analysis of the relation between groups of films, the cultures in which they are made, and the cultures in which they are exhibited. That is, it is a term that can be usefully employed in relation to a body of knowledge and theory about the social and psychological context of film. Any assertion we might make about a director's use of genre conventions—Peckinpah uses the contrast between our expectations and actual images to reinforce the "end of an era" element in *Ride the High Country* and *The Wild Bunch*—assumes, wrongly, the existence of this body of knowledge. To labor the point, it assumes (1) we know what Peckinpah thinks; (2) we know what the audience thinks about the films in question and about westerns; (3) Peckinpah knows what the audience thinks; and so on. Most uses of genre effectively invent answers to such questions by implicitly claiming to tap some archetypal characteristic of the genre, some universal human response. This depends on the particular context of the assumptions employed and on a more general notion of film language. To leap in with genre immediately is to put the cart before the horse.

Notes

2. The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema

EDWARD BUSCOMB

*Genre* is a term much employed in film criticism at the moment, yet there is little agreement on what exactly it means or whether the term has any use at all. There appear to be three sorts of questions one could profitably ask: first, do genres in the cinema really exist, and if so, can they be defined? second, what are the functions they fulfill? and third, how do specific genres originate or what causes them?

It seems sensible to start with a brief review of the history of genre criticism in literature, since it is in this context that certain problems first arise. The notion that there are different kinds of literature, with different techniques and subjects, was first developed by Aristotle; in his *Poetics* he tried to separate what he called poetry—what we simply call literature—into a number of categories such as tragedy, epic, lyric, and so forth. His purpose was to decide what were the particular qualities of each distinctive kind, and what if any kind could be expected to do and not do. He then tried to establish their relative importance, and after much debate concluded that tragedy was the highest kind of poetry.

During the Renaissance Aristotle's ideas were taken up and erected into a rigid system of rules so that certain precise styles and forms were prescribed for each kind (the three dramatic unities are the most notorious example). Such codification was extended in the neoclassical period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when literature was divided into more and more categories, or "species," as they were called, each with its own proper tone, form, and subject matter. As a result of this rather mechanical and dictatorial approach, the theory of literary kinds gradually became discredited. Even the classical Dr. Johnson was moved to exclaim: "There is therefore scarcely any species of writing, of which we can tell what is its essence, and what are its constituents; every new genius produces some new innovation, which, when invented and approved subverts the rules which the practice of foregoing authors had established."
all kinds, the idea of literary species, or genres, as they later came to be
called, suffered greatly. Artists were to be free to write in any manner to
which the spirit moved them. It was not until the rise in the late 1930s
and early 1940s of a Chicago-based school of criticism known as the neo-
Aristotelians that much attention was paid to the influence on the artist
of already existing forms and conventions. The neo-Aristotelians were
consciously reacting against the so-called New Criticism, which had ex-
pressly repudiated any kind of historical approach to literature. The fa-
mous catch phrase “a poem is a poem is a poem” sums up their attitude:
that a work of literature exists by itself and relies upon no reference to
any external reality, whether contemporary or historical.

The neo-Aristotelians were concerned with rescuing literature from
such self-imposed isolation, and in attempting to do so they partially re-
surrected the theory of genres. But they did not always avoid what has
often been a source of confusion; Aristotle had spoken of literary kinds in
two senses: first, as a number of different groups of conventions that had
grown up historically and developed into particular forms such as satire,
lyric, and tragedy; and second, as a more fundamental division of litera-
ture, into drama, epic, and lyric, corresponding to major differences in
the relation between artist, subject matter, and audience.

More time, in fact, was spent in assessing the natures and possibilities
of these three modes of literature than in exploring the historical genres.
As a result, not much of the work is relevant to the cinema, for these three
modes (which correspond approximately to drama, fiction, and poetry)
appear to be equally present in the cinema. And, on the other hand, such
work as has been done on the development of particular genres like the
Gothic novel or Victorian melodrama has not ventured far beyond the
mere recording of lists of examples.

Nevertheless, some profit is to be gained from the literary critics, even
if only a warning. Many people wish to avoid the whole question of genre
because it is held that it will lead to the laying down of rules and regula-
tions that will arbitrarily restrict the freedom of artists to create what
they like, or the freedom of critics to talk about anything they want to.
But if the theory of genres in literature has usually been restrictive and
normative, it need not necessarily be so. One does not have to set up a
Platonic ideal, to which all particular examples try vainly to aspire, nor
even to say that the closer any individual film comes to incorporating all
the different elements of the definition, the more fully it will be a western,
or gangster picture, or musical. Aristotle’s original intention was descript-
ive, not prescriptive.

Some positive assistance is afforded by Wellek and Warren in their The-
ory of Literature. They neatly state the crux of the problem: “The di-
lemma of genre history is the dilemma of all history: i.e., in order to dis-
cover the scheme of reference (in this case, the genre) we must study the
history; but we cannot study the history without having in mind some
scheme of selection.”

As they recognize, the problem is only another aspect of the wider
philosophical problem of universals. With regard to the cinema, we may
state it thus: if we want to know what a western is, we must look at cer-
tain kinds of films. But how do we know which films to look at until we
know what a western is?

For some people the futility of many of the arguments that arise out of
this dilemma—such as whether a film like, say, Lonely Are the Brave
(David Miller, 1962) is a western or not—is so obvious that they give up
in despair. But having posed the problem in such apparently insoluble
terms, Wellek and Warren offer a way out. To begin with, common sense
suggests that it is possible to draw up a list of elements found in films that,
for the purposes of the argument, are called westerns and to say that any
film with one or more of these elements is thereby held to be a western,
though not therefore necessarily identical to other examples of the form.
Wellek and Warren go further, however: “Genre should be conceived, we
think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both
outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (atti-
tude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience). The ostensible
basis may be one or the other (e.g., ‘pastoral’ and ‘satire’ for the inner
form: dipodic verse and Pindaric ode for the outer); but the critical prob-
lem will then be to find the other dimension, to complete the diagram.”

This idea of both inner and outer form seems essential, for if we require
only the former, in terms of subject matter, then our concept will be too
loose to be of much value; and if only the latter, then the genre will be
ultimately meaningless, since devoid of any content.

What, then, are the cinematic equivalents of, first, outer form? Not
rhythm, clearly. To the extent to which a film can be said to have rhythm,
this depends not upon the conventions of the genre within which it is
made, but upon the artistic personalities of the director and editor (ex-
cept perhaps the rapid montage sequences of many gangster films). Nor
does the notion of structure open up many possibilities. It seems ex-
tremely difficult to argue that there is any significant similarity between
the plots of different westerns, for example. There are, of course, a num-
ber of plot structures that reappear in film after film. There is the one
in which a bigoted and usually disciplinarian cavalry officer is narrowly
prevented from starting a “full-scale Indian war.” Or, again, there is the one
in which a reformed gunfighter (or ex-marshal) is reluctantly persuaded
to accept responsibility for cleaning up the town. But to use such struc-
tures as a basis for defining the genre would mean ending up not with one
genre called “the western,” but an almost infinite number of subgenres.
Some may wish to argue that this is the best that can be done. Yet it does seem that these films have something more in common, something that makes the two kinds of story mentioned above part of the same genre.

Since we are dealing with a visual medium we ought surely to look for our defining criteria in what we actually see on the screen. It is immediately apparent that there before our eyes is a whole range of "outer forms." There is, first of all, the setting, the chief glory of many of the films. Often it is outdoors, in very particular kinds of country: deserts, mountains, plains, woods. Or it is indoors—but again, special kinds of indoors: saloons, jails, courtrooms, ranch houses, hotels, riverboats, brothels—all places frequented by those who live an outdoor and/or wandering kind of life.

Then there are the clothes: wide-brimmed hats, open-neck shirts with scarves, tight jeans (which have become steadily tighter as the years have gone by), sometimes worn with leather chaps and almost always with spurs and high-heeled boots; or, alternatively, army uniforms or the wide but carefully distinguished variety of Indian costume. There are also certain clothes for specialist occupations. There are bootlace ties for gamblers and black gloves for psychopathic hired guns; a man who wears a watch chain is often a judge; and a black hat can denote a preacher; a bowler, a newspaperman. For women there are usually only two sorts of clothes: wide, full skirts and tight bodices or the more tomboyish jeans and shirt. (There is a third costume usually reserved for the Mexican girl or prostitute—often synonymous—in which the bodice is looser and the neckline appreciably lower.)

Third, there are the various tools of the trade, principally weapons, and of these, principally guns. They are usually specifically identified: Colt 45’s, Winchester and Springfield rifles, shotguns for certain situations (such as robbing banks or facing a numerically superior enemy), and, in westerns of an earlier period, single-shot, muzzle-loading muskets. Such care in the choice of weapons is not mere pedantry nor dictated purely by considerations of historical accuracy, for an incredible variety of arms were in use. The weapons employed in the films are there for largely stylistic reasons; consider, for example, the significant difference in the style of movement required to cock a Winchester and a Lee-Enfield 303. Other weapons have their place: knives, often the murderous looking Bowie type, whips (used by women or bullies), sometimes cannon for the military, and assorted Indian hardware, notably the bow and arrow. Again, there are specialist weapons. The man who wears a bootlace tie should be watched carefully in case he produces a Derringer.

Next in importance come horses, also used in formally differentiated ways. Indians ride barebacked or with only a blanket, a sign perhaps of their closeness to the animal world. White and black horses have frequently a symbolic function, and if a woman does not ride sidesaddle she is no lady, though not always the worse for that. Doctors and judges ride in a buggy, unless, like Doc Holliday, they have ceased to practice. We know, too, what kind of people travel in stagecoaches: in descending order of their entitlement to respect, women, gamblers, corset salesmen, and Easterners.

Fourth, there is a large group of miscellaneous physical objects that recur and thereby take on a formal function. Trains are invariably of the same kind, with cowcatchers in front of the engine, carriages with a raised open platform at the back (useful for fights), and seats either side of a central aisle. Mines, general stores, and forts also feature largely, representing the corruption of money, the virtue of honest industry, and an oasis of strength in a hostile land. Indians, too, in spite of the more liberal attitudes of the last few years, are still primarily important not as people in their own right but as part of the setting.

All these things operate as formal elements. That is to say, the films are not "about" them any more than a sonnet is about fourteen lines in a certain meter. For example, Winchester 73 (Anthony Mann, 1950) is not about the gun, which is a mere connecting device to hold the story together. The film, like all films, is about people. Obviously the formal structure is looser than that of a sonnet; not all the elements need be present. But if we say that a western is a film that includes at least one of them (and of course the list is by no means exhaustive), then we are saying something both intelligible and useful. The visual conventions provide a framework within which the story can be told.

But what is more important is that they also affect what kind of story it will be. Just as the nature of the sonnet makes it more likely you will be successful in writing a love poem of a very personal kind rather than some other, and has so grown up as a genre with both outer and inner form, so too what kind of film a western is, is largely determined by the nature of its conventions. One can put this more forcefully in a negative way: if you are going to write a sonnet, you will tend not to consider certain themes or subjects (unless, as in High Noon [Fred Zinneman, 1952], you are consciously trying to adapt the form to your purpose in an arbitrary way).

In trying to be more specific here, one is inevitably on dangerous ground, for unless one has seen all the westerns ever made (or, to be absolutely logical, all the westerns that ever could be made), there cannot be any certainty that generalizations will hold. Since the object is to stimulate discussion, not end it, however, a start can be made by saying that because of the physical setting, a western is likely to deal successfully with
stories about the opposition between man and nature and about the establishment of civilization. As Jim Kitses points out in his book *Horizons West*, such oppositions are seen from two points of view: for nature or for civilization. If, on the other hand, you want to deal with the sense of fear, isolation, and excitement engendered by great cities, you won't do it very well within the framework of the western.

This much perhaps is obvious. But it is possible to go further. The men in westerns wear clothes that are aggressively masculine, sexy in a virile sort of way. (As if to underline this, the gambler, whose clothes are flashier, is invariably a ladies' man.) This in turn determines the character of the hero—taciturn, tough, uncomplicated, self-sufficient. It is surely no accident that the most famous western heroes are not, by conventional standards, good-looking. John Wayne, Randolph Scott, James Stewart, Gary Cooper, and Kirk Douglas all have their attractions, but they are not, like Cary Grant, at home in a drawing room. Likewise, the clothes of the women determine that they will be either very feminine or very masculine. Part of the interest comes from feminine clothes hiding a masculine character—Angie Dickinson in *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959)—or vice versa, as with characters like Calamity Jane, who usually turn out to be pining for a home and children.

But either way, because the men are so aggressively masculine and lead wandering lives and the women are forced either to stay at home or become the equivalents of men, few westerns have a strong love interest. The formal elements of the genre make it hard to deal with subjects that presuppose in the characters an interest in, and a time for, the heart's affections.

It is also likely that, given the arsenal of weapons on view in the films, violence will play a crucial part in the stories. This is not to say that there could not be pacifist westerns, though they are significantly less common than pacifist war films, because the kind of weapons used makes the violence less immediate and unpleasant. But it is hard to think of a western in which there is at least no threat of violence. Thus the world of the West is different from that of a Henry James novel, where no hand is ever raised in anger. Because the guns are there as part of the formal structure, there will be, characteristically, a dilemma that either can only be resolved by violence or in which the violence would be a solution, though a wrong one. The characters will be of a kind whose virtue resides not so much in subtlety of intellect, or sensitivity, or imagination, as in their willingness and ability to stand up for themselves, to be in some sense, not necessarily physical, strong.

One could go on. But it might already be objected that it is the subject matter that determines the outer form, not the other way round; that the things a director wants to say will decide the form he or she uses. Not enough is known about how most westerns are conceived in the minds of directors and writers to say whether this is the actual process of creation. One may be forgiven for suspecting, however, that the worst way to make a western is to think of a theme and then try to transpose it into western form.

If one looks at a cinematic genre in this way, as being composed of an outer form consisting of a certain number of visual conventions that are, in a sense, arbitrary (in the same way that a tragedy has five acts), then certain problems are on the way to being solved. First, we are not bound to make any very close connections between the western genre and historical reality. Of course there are connections. But too many discussions of these problems fall down over this point because it is usually assumed that the relationship must be a direct one; that since in fact there was a West, westerns must be essentially concerned with it. Kitses, for instance,
states that "the basic convention of the genre is that films in Western guise are about America's past." This is simply not true of many of the films, including several of the ones he discusses, for only Peckinpah of his three directors is at all preoccupied with historical themes. In some of his films Mann includes such material, though that is not where the central interest lies; and Boetticher appears quite oblivious to any such considerations. To be fair, Kitses is aware of other elements in the genre. He summarizes what he calls "interrelated aspects of the genre" under the headings of "history," "themes," "archetypes," and "icons" (which are equivalent to what I have called visual conventions). But he fails to show in what their interrelation consists; nor, ultimately, does this first chapter have much to do with his discussion of particular directors, and for the reason I have suggested, that history, to which Kitses devotes most of his attention, is a relatively unimportant part of many westerns.

There are several reasons why it is necessary to resist the temptation to talk about westerns largely in terms of history. First, one usually ends up by talking about Ford, who is, clearly, more concerned with it than most. But Ford is not the western. Second, if this is what westerns chiefly present, it is hard to see why half the world's population should spend its time watching them. Third and most serious, to define westerns as films about a certain period of America's past is to misunderstand the nature and meaning of genres and how they work.

Before going on to deal with this, however, two more points should be made. Although the western seems to me the most important of the genres, the one in which the largest body of good work has been done, there are obviously others. The same approach could be applied to them; namely, to inquire into the outer form, the visual and other conventions, and to see whether there is the same relation between form and content, whether it could be shown that the subject matter dealt with is determined by a series of formal and given patterns. The gangster movie is an obvious subject of inquiry, though one problem is that it shades off into the thriller, so that at one end of the spectrum we have, say, White Heat (Raoul Walsh, 1949) and at the other, Hitchcock. Musicals, too, would repay attention. Nor need visual elements be the only defining ones, for film is not only a visual art. For example, it is (or used to be) understood that in Hollywood's romantic comedies people do not sleep together unless they are married. Clearly this is a convention—it never was actually true. And it cannot be explained merely by referring to the Hays Code, for that would make it simply a restriction. Although it does limit the kind of subject that can be dealt with, in the same way that it does in the Victorian novel, a lot of mileage can be got out of it. The famous scene in It Happened One Night (Frank Capra, 1934) where Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert share a room together uses the convention as the basis of its humor. All the same, the major defining characteristics of genre will be visual: guns, cars, clothes in the gangster film; clothes and dancing in the musical (apart from the music, of course!); castles, coffins, and teeth in horror movies.

The second point is that while it is possible to talk of themes and archetypes in genres, as Kitses does in his book, it doesn't in the end help very much. He cites archetypes such as "the journey and the quest, the ceremonies of love and marriage, food and drink, the rhythms of waking and sleeping, life and death." Not only do these appear in other genres besides the western; they exist in films that can scarcely be classified into any genres, and what is more, they occur in other forms of art besides the cinema. What we need is a way of looking at a genre that can make clear what is distinctive about it and how its outer and inner forms relate.

But what functions does genre perform? Or, in other words, why bother to talk about it at all? Can't we get along just as well with our present director-oriented theories, while admitting that some films are like others? The trouble is that our present theories are so extreme. They assume that the auteur (who need not necessarily be the director, of course) is personally responsible for everything that appears in the film—or that someone is responsible, if only a heavy-handed producer. This form of overcompensation, a reaction to the critical Dark Ages when American cinema was dismissed as repetitive rubbish, mass-produced to a formula (unfortunately all too successful) in the factories of Hollywood, has led to a situation in which American films are held to be wholly the expressions of the artistic personalities of their highly original creators.

There may well be several reasons for this, apart from the swing of the pendulum. There is a kind of critical snobbery which assumes that you cannot really appreciate a film unless you have seen all its director's other films and which leads to the more bizarre forms of auteur-hunting. For if an individual film is good, then it must have an auteur behind it, and if he or she is an auteur, it follows that this person's other works will be good—or at least interesting. And yet there are films which are totally successful and which derive their power from the traditions of a genre rather than from any distinctive directorial contribution. Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1942) is such a one, as Andrew Sarris recognizes in The American Cinema. It doesn't help much to have seen other Curtiz films, but one's enjoyment is enormously enriched by having seen Humphrey Bogart and the rest in other films of the period. It may be objected that strictly speaking this has nothing to do with genre, since the qualities that actors can bring to a film cut across genres. Yet it is not a fact that Bogart's battered face instantly communicates a blend of cynicism and
honesty, weariness and generosity, that is genuinely part of a tradition of the American film noir? What he represents in the film owes little to Michael Curtiz, much to the other films he played in.

But the chief justification of the genre is not that it allows merely competent directors to produce good films (though one is grateful enough for that). Rather, it is that it allows good directors to be better. And the main reason why this has not been more generally recognized is that the auteur theory is not very well equipped to deal with popular art. Even in its less extreme forms, it cannot really make room for the contribution of the tradition in which a film was made. Thus in order to appreciate Casablanca, we must do more than simply accept Curtiz as an auteur (which is what Higham and Greenberg want us to do in Hollywood in the Forties). When we are faced with genuinely distinctive artists, we too often consider them apart from the genre background they work in. Robin Wood's book on Hitchcock is an excellent piece of criticism. But in his discussion of Psycho (1960) he says nothing of the film's obvious relation to the horror genre. Surely our sense of fear depends at least in part on our built-in response to certain stock symbols that Hitchcock employs.

People rarely take Hitchcock seriously when he talks about his pictures; yet at the head of the section on Psycho Wood has this quotation: "The process through which we take the audience [is it not significant that he so often says 'we,' not 'I']?, you see, it's rather like taking them through the haunted house at the fairground. . . ."10 The house itself, with its vague suggestion of Victorian Gothic, is straight out of any number of horror films. And when at the end Vera Miles goes down to the cellar, we are terrified, not just because we have heard Norman say he is taking his mother down there (we don't know yet that his mother is a corpse, though of course we suspect all is not well); our certainty that something unpleasant will be found comes from our knowledge that nasty things come out of cellars in this kind of film. This is not to deny Wood's ascription of Freudian overtones to the cellar; but the trouble with Freudian overtones is that you aren't supposed to be aware of them. It seems more likely that our conscious reaction to the scene owes more to our having assimilated them through an exposure to the tradition of the genre.

Most people see films this way. No one would suggest that we must be bound by the aesthetic criteria of the man in the street. Yet anyone who is at all concerned with education must be worried at the distance between much of the criticism now written and the way the average audience reacts to a film. For them it is not a new Hawks or Ford or Peckinpah; it is a new western. And to sympathize with this view is not to deny the claims of these directors to be artists. Popular art does not condemn its creators to a subsidiary role. Instead it emphasizes the relation between the artist and the material, on the other. The artist brings to the genre his or her own concerns, techniques, and capacities—in the widest sense, a style—but receives from the genre a formal pattern that directs and disciplines the work. In a sense this imposes limitations, as I have suggested. Certain themes and treatments are, if not ruled out, unlikely to be successful if they work too hard against the genre. But the benefits are considerable. Constant exposure to a previous succession of films has led the audience to recognize certain formal elements as charged with an accretion of meaning. Some of these I have tried to isolate, and in some cases their meaning has been suggested. Some critics like to refer to them as "icons."

All too often, however, discussion has ceased there. But it is vital to see not how icons relate to the cinema in general but to genres in particular, and how in the popular cinema they may be reconciled to our natural desire to see films as the expression of an artistic personality.

This can best be done through the notion that a genre film depends on a combination of novelty and familiarity. The conventions of the genre are known and recognized by the audience, and such recognition is in itself a pleasure. Popular art, in fact, has always depended on this; one might
argue that the modern idea of novelty (or “originality”) as a major, even the major, quality to be desired in a work of art dates from the romantic period. And, as Raymond Williams shows in *Culture and Society*, it is during this period that art began to move away from its contact with a large, roughly homogeneous audience. We have there the beginnings of the present-day division between “mass” and “highbrow” culture. All too easily this originality degenerates into eccentricity, and communication is sacrificed in the interests of self-expression. It is one of the chief merits of the American cinema that this has, on the whole, not yet happened; and because this is so, the popular cinema (which is almost, though not quite, synonymous with the American cinema) offers one of the richest sources of material for those teaching liberal studies to the culturally unsophisticated. Those who are unconvinced by this might wish to argue that the opposite of eccentricity is the cliché. It is true that if a director slavishly copies the conventions rather than uses them, then we get a film which is just what Hollywood is so often, even now, held to have produced exclusively: a thoroughly predictable string of stock situations and images. However, this article is not primarily intended as propaganda for Hollywood. That battle, if not won, is at least being fought by increasing numbers of people on ever widening fronts. Rather, the intention is to argue that it is a mistake to base the argument for popular cinema exclusively on a case for the auteur.

One of the best examples of the way in which genre actually works is in Peckinpah’s *Guns in the Afternoon* [in the United States released as *Ride the High Country*, 1962—Ed.]. Knowing the period and location, we expect at the beginning to find a familiar western town. In fact, the first minutes of the film brilliantly disturb our expectations. As the camera roves around the town we discover a policeman in uniform, a car, a camel, and Randolph Scott dressed up as Buffalo Bill. Each of these images performs a function. The figure of the policeman conveys that the law has become institutionalized; the rough and ready frontier days are over. The car suggests, as in *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah, 1969), that the West is no longer isolated from modern technology and its implications. Significantly, the camel is racing against a horse; such a grotesque juxtaposition is painful. A horse in a western is not just an animal but a symbol of dignity, grace, and power. These qualities are mocked by having it compete with a camel; and to add insult to injury, the camel wins.

Randolph Scott is not just an actor. It is enough to have seen two or three of his films to know that he represents a quiet, cheerful kind of integrity. Peckinpah uses this screen image by having him play against it all through the film; but the initial shock of seeing him in a wig, running a crooked booth at the fair, does more than upset our expectations about his role in the film. It calls into question our whole attitude to the heroes of western legend. Scott dressed up as Buffalo Bill is an image that relies not only on Scott’s screen personality, but also on the audience’s stock response to Buffalo Bill, for he too is debased by this grotesque impersonation. This, Peckinpah is saying, is the state that things have come to, that heroes are exploited for money.

Clearly, then, although Peckinpah is working against the conventions, he could not do this unless he and the audience had a tradition in common. He needs the outer form, though in many ways he is making an antiwestern. What is especially interesting is the relation between this and the inner form. Here I am obliged to take issue again with Jim Kitses. He believes that Peckinpah’s films are essentially about a search for personal identity. While not wishing to deny that some such concern may be traced in the pictures, one must protest that this rather tends to ignore the most obvious fact about them: that they are westerns. Personal identity can be sought for anywhere, anytime. But the essential theme of *Guns in the Afternoon* is one that, while it could be put into other forms, is ideally suited to the one chosen. The film describes the situation of men who have outlived their time. Used to a world where issues were decided simply, on a test of strength, they now find this way of life threatened by
complications and developments they do not understand. Since they cannot, or will not, adapt, all that remains to them is a tragic and bitter heroism.

The cluster of images and conventions that we call the western genre is used by Peckinpah to define and embody this situation, in such a way that we know what the West was and what it has become. The first is communicated through images that are familiar, the second through those that are strange. And together they condition his subject matter. Most obviously, because the film is a western, the theme is worked out in terms of violent action. If it were a musical, the theme might be similar in some ways, but because the conventions would be different, it would probably not involve violence (or if it did, the violence might well be highly stylized and so quite different in effect). And if it were a gangster picture, it seems unlikely that the effect of the film’s ending, its beautifully elegiac background of autumn leaves, would be reproduced, suggesting as it does that the dead Judd is at one with nature, that nature which seems at the beginning of the film to have been overtaken by “civilization.”

Much of what has been said has been expressed in other ways by recent writers, occasionally more esoterically. What needs to be done now is to put to work our increasing understanding of how important semiology is, to explore the precise relation between the artist and his or her given material, in order to explain our intuitive feeling that a genre is not a mere collection of dead images waiting for a director to animate it, but a tradition with a life of its own. We return to the third question asked at the beginning of this article. Genres predate great directors. The western was going along happily under its own steam well before John Ford, or even James Cruze, came upon it. We need much more work on the early history of these various forms if we are to fully comprehend their strange power and the exact process by which they grew rich enough to attract the talents they did. Last, the question of the relation between the western and history, which I have argued is by no means simple, and not always central, can only be answered with certainty when we know how the form began. It’s usually assumed that it sprang, fully armed, from pulp fiction, and yet so much of it is visual that it is hard to believe this is quite true. And if the western originates in history and is a response to it, what about the musical? Or the horror film? Can we possibly evolve a theory to fit them all?

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