

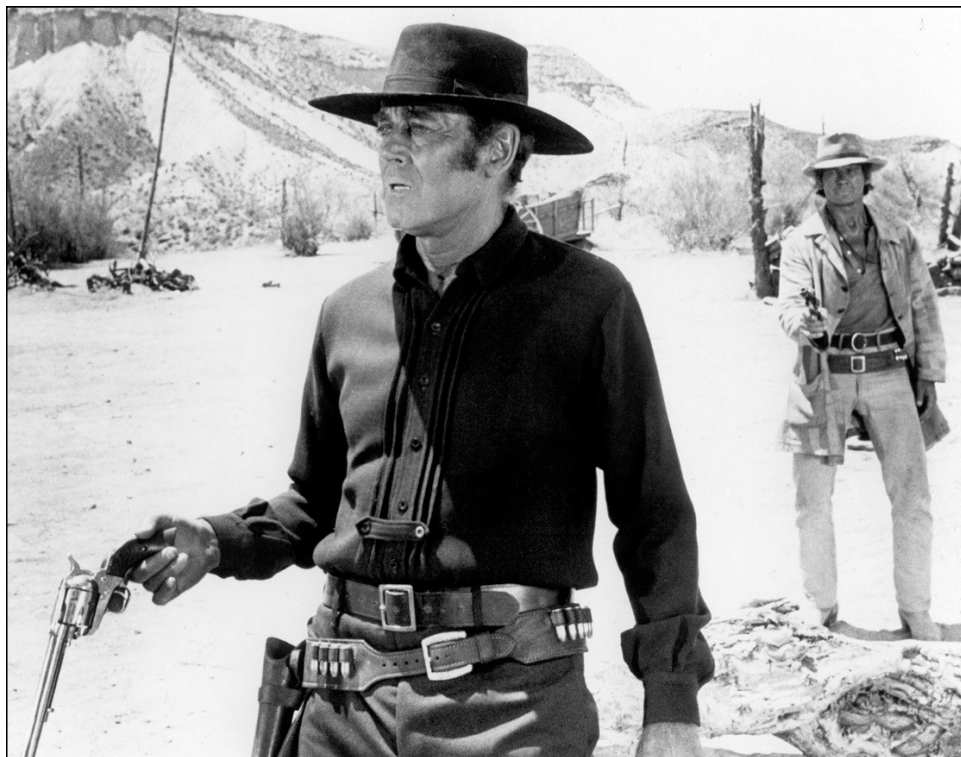
# Once Upon a Time in the West

By Chelsea Wessels

There is no simple description for “Once Upon a Time in the West” - the film tackles the coming of the railroad, the American myth of progress, the conflict between wilderness and civilization, and the classical revenge story. The western genre is on full display in both the story and the characters that populate it: a corrupt businessman, a mysterious stranger with a hidden agenda, a bandit on the run, a woman with a past seeking a new future on the frontier. Yet all of these generic elements are not deployed in service of cliché. Rather, these “known” stories and characters rise to mythic proportions as the film explores the uses and limits of the western genre and its American story of westward progression. Put another way, by Umberto Eco, “if you have one stereotype, a film is likely to be kitsch; if you have a dozen, it becomes art.”

When asked about taking on a typically ‘American’ genre of the western, director Sergio Leone said that “America is really the property of the world, and not only of the Americans, who, among other things, have the habit of diluting the wine of their mythical ideas with the water of the American Way of Life.”<sup>1</sup> This ‘dilution’ of myth is countered in “Once Upon a Time in the West,” where the myth of the West is intensified, coming from a cinematic perspective instead of a historical perspective. Rather than concerning itself with an American West and its associated American values, Leone distills the West on film: the western genre as mythical representation. In this way, the story of westward progression is not about celebrating Manifest Destiny, but rather, interested in how this story can be told cinematically. With a screenplay that includes contributions from Bernardo Bertolucci and Dario Argento, the film unfolds through visuals of Monument Valley, made instantly recognizable by the westerns of John Ford, and an operatic score by Ennio Morricone.

In “Once Upon a Time in the West,” history is only



*In a twist of casting, Henry Fonda (foreground) plays the villainous Frank while Charles Bronson as Harmonica draws on Frank from behind. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

accessible through its cinematic telling. The historical moment of the film is the West on the cusp of industrialization - represented by the coming of the railroad and the money-hungry railroad baron Morton - in other words, the closing of the frontier. However, by stripping away the “American Way of Life” as it is often overlaid with history, the film finds its way into debates about genre revision through the elevation of cinematic history over American history.

The opening credit sequence illustrates this emphasis on the cinematic history of the western, through a series of deliberate generic references that play out in a slow unfolding of heightened sounds and images. Three men wait at the station for the next train to arrive, immediately a clear reference to Fred Zinnemann’s 1952 “High Noon.” Even more referential, the three men are played by recognizable key figures in a number of westerns: Woody Strode, Jack Elam, and Al Mulock. As the waiting stretches on, a series of sounds draw the viewer’s attention to minute details: the buzzing of a fly, water dripping onto a hat, the clatter of an unattended telegraph receiving new messages. Critically, one of the men rips the cords of the machine, the sound of civilization interrupting his meditation on the violence to come as he caresses his gun after trapping the fly inside. Already, the dialectic between civilization and the frontier - a common theme in the western - is embellished with

cinematic and generic flourishes.

The unhurried pacing of the film builds to dramatic heights courtesy of Ennio Morricone's score. Composed in advance of the film, the score includes Morricone's instantly recognizable combination of intervals and timbre. The main characters each have their own theme, from the harmonica line that accompanies Harmonica, the menacing electric guitar for villainous Frank (who, in a twist, is played by stalwart good-guy of the western, Henry Fonda), a rhythmic, sauntering progression for bandit Cheyenne, and the melodic soprano lines for Jill McBain. Having the score in advance let Leone play it on set for his actors and gives the film a feel of orchestration, such as a moment when Frank's horse appears to trot across the desert in rhythm with the music. As the composer for westerns ranging from Leone's "Dollars" trilogy to Quentin Tarantino's "The Hateful Eight," for which he won his first competitive Academy Award in 2016, Morricone's sound is distinctively linked with the western, adding yet another layer of generic reference to the film.

"Once Upon a Time in the West" arrived in Italian cinemas in 1968 – a year of revolution and political upheaval, as well as the height of the 'spaghetti' western in Italy before it began to decline in popularity. 1968 is also often cited as a key moment in the emergence of postmodernism – characterized in film by borrowing, inverting, and the mixing of styles in a kind of aesthetic playfulness – which, for many critics, epitomizes Leone's approach to the western here. By the time the film premiered in the United

States in 1969, the running time of nearly three hours had been reduced to just under two and a half hours, which proved disastrous for the film's box office success. As Christopher Frayling notes, Paramount's attempts to cut the film revealed that "they did not have a shorter work on their hands, just a long work that was short in places."<sup>2</sup> The slow pacing, interspersed with stunningly choreographed moments of violence, is a cinematic experience that uses the western genre as its starting point. By elevating genre above an (American) historical referent, "Once Upon a Time in the West" offers a version of the West where the images and sounds take precedence; a striking, wistful look at the final moments of the frontier, real or imagined.

<sup>1</sup> P. H. "LEONE: "I'm a Hunter by Nature, Not a Prey"." American Film (Archive: 1975-1992) Jun 01 1984: 23-5.

<sup>2</sup> Frayling, Christopher. "The Ultimate Horse Opera" in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, July 12 1996: 14.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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