

Breakthrough and Rebirth: The Flux of the American Western from the Perspective of Film Ontology

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Abstract: Western film is one of the most complete, longest surviving, and largest genre narrative film types in the development of American film history. It has always been regarded as a unique cultural carrier for interpreting the “American spirit” and the deep collective psychology. This paper conducts an analysis of the American Western film through the lens of film ontology, examining its development and evolution as a case study. It serves as a platform to elucidate both the achievements and constraints inherent in the artistic exploration of the Western genre across various historical periods, particularly in relation to film aesthetics and ideological frameworks. The investigation delves into the underlying factors that have influenced the transformation of narrative characteristics within Western films. Furthermore, it posits the necessity of revitalizing the genre itself, seeking to understand the successes and limitations of Western cinema in the context of the suppressive nature of ideological tools and the progression of artistic ontology. It seeks to go from the suppression of its iterative ideological domination tool to the rebirth of its artistic essence, showing the original power of the movie itself.

Keywords: Ideology, Film ontology, Western film, Breakthrough and rebirth

1. Introduction

One of the original American movie genres, the Western film, has experienced the baptism of historical changes for over a hundred years. In the ever-evolving history of Hollywood genres, Westerns have been actively exploring the psychological qualities of social audiences, enriching their own contents and forms, and becoming the most mature and complex genre style. In the course of the development of Westerns, one can see the contradiction between film art's vitality and film merchandise's instrumentality under ideology's control. From the perspective of ontology, the development of American Westerns and the interactive evolution of American spirit and ideology can provide a unique perspective for the study of American cultural history and American film history and illuminate the flux and pulsation of the American national spirit from an incisive angle.

2. Genre film representations of the American Western

Westerns, also known as cowboy movies, are one of the oldest styles of American cinema. Utilizing the American West as the narrative backdrop and focusing on the expansion of the frontier by Americans, these narratives are considered to epitomize the national identity and cultural ethos of the United States.

From the point of view of the content and form of expression, the Western movie is a myth created by Hollywood about the history and culture of the United States. The first thing that comes to mind in the movie is the thousands of miles of plains, dusty deserts, rolling hills, and cowboys who get rid of violence, creating a fascinating sensory world. The storyline of the Western is generally simple: good white settlers are threatened by violence, heroic cowboys or lawmen get rid of the violence, and it almost always ends with the group's enemies destroyed and the bad guys duly punished. The story of the individualistic cowboy and the establishment of law and order in a savage land has become one of the main symbols of the American spirit.

In terms of the connotation of the American spirit, the change of Western genre elements and narrative mode implies the change of the American spirit. As Bazin, the father of French cinema, said, "The Western is the quintessential American film, and its mystery lies not only in its youthful vigor, but it must contain a deeper mystery: the mystery of eternity." [1] This mystery, according to Bazan's understanding, is that "the deeper reality of the Western is a myth". The American spirit emphasizes individual freedom and independence, encourages innovation and the spirit of adventure, the courage to explore the unknown, and the tolerance of different cultures and values. In the early days, Westerns successfully displayed the American national character and independent spirit on the screen, helped the United States establish a good national image, and became the embodiment of American heroism. The evolution of Westerns since then has time and again reflected the renewal and change of American spirit and national beliefs in the wind and waves of the times.

3. The flux of deep collective psychology in the development of American Westerns

As time progresses, the film industry has evolved into a manifestation of the convergence of technology and multifaceted artistic expression, encapsulating significant transformations in national cultural psychology, the historical context of the era, and shifts in social consciousness. This evolution reflects the "profound collective psyche" characterized by the prevailing zeitgeist. [2] This theory is mainly derived from the theory of the "collective unconscious" of Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, which refers to the social psychological phenomenon in a certain historical period. Social psychology is an empirical and universal consensus of social consciousness that arises spontaneously and plainly in people's social life practices in a specific historical period. The "deep collective psychology" is acquired, mainly influenced by the social culture of the era in which it exists, and reflects a universal social spirit, which is social. According to the German film theorist Siegfried Krakauer, films that reflect society do not show explicit doctrines as psychological qualities, which are deep collective psyches extending under the dimension of consciousness. Westerns, at different stages of their development, were constantly influenced by and fused influences from different regions and cultures and underwent constant refinement, creation, and innovation by the filmmakers. At the same time, the different narrative attitudes towards the same historical events in different periods have undergone fundamental changes. With time, the function of Westerns in carrying ideology has become more and more distinct.

3.1. Phase I: as an ideological tool - to alleviate the audience's subconscious anxiety by celebrating the "American spirit"

The period from 1903 to 1939 was when the American Western was created, formed, and perfected. When *The Great Train Robbery* was first released, it formed a climax in the 1920s. In 1930, based on the best-selling novel, the *Western Cimarron* became the first western to win the Oscar for Best Picture. 1939, director John Ford directed *Flying Over the Mountain*, which was regarded as "a model film for the form of Hollywood narration". According to Andrew Sarris, "Flying Over the Passage was the first celebration of the extermination of the American Indians, a paean to racial triumph

played on the hoof". Flying over Guam marked the maturation of the West and its entry into full-fledged prosperity. From the beginning of the westward movement, Americans have often adopted an assimilationist education policy towards Indians, the most famous means of which are the Dawes Act and the Dawes Act Amendment. American Westerns endeavored to convey analogous themes to those articulated in the *Dawes Act*, albeit through a medium that transitioned from English textual representation, which was inaccessible to Indigenous populations, to visual narratives comprehensible to a global audience. Still using the footage from *Passing Over the Mountain* as an example, one of the basic ideologies of the film is to divide and disintegrate the Indians.

During this period, Westerns were used as a means of literary propaganda to beautify the evils of violent colonial acts through the narrative of frontier expansion, to cover up and mythologize the historical reality of the founding of the United States, and to form a kind of "Western complex". It can be seen that the so-called "civilization" and "savagery", "law and justice" and "tyranny and discrimination" binary cultural dichotomy exists from the very beginning of Westerns. The dichotomy of "civilization" and "savagery", "law and justice" and "tyranny and discrimination" also lays down the basic contradiction for the change of the thematic ideology of westerns. The ideological narratives associated with Westerns provided a transient alleviation of societal anxieties regarding the inherent contradictions of capitalist frameworks; they effectively mitigated any emergent inclinations toward activism that may have arisen in response to the pressures of such conflicts, while simultaneously venerating and elucidating the ethos of the American frontier.

3.2. Phase 2: ideological loosening - leading the audience to reflect on the reality of problems and subconscious sources of fear

The 1940s through the late 1950s was a period in which Westerns reflected social life in a progressively deeper way. With the development and change of social history, the United States was deep in the quagmire of war, and the people began to reflect on the current social environment and historical events. During this period, Westerns showed a big difference from the previous period in terms of theme and ideology, and there was a major shift and bias in the narrative angle. The main contradictions of the capitalist society were gradually shown and reflected on the screen. [3]At the ideological level, the central character in Western cinema has transitioned from a staunch proponent of the American ethos to a more introspective examination of the concepts of "frontier" and "conquest." This shift entails a re-evaluation and reinterpretation of the historical narratives surrounding the United States, aimed at aligning with the emotional expectations of contemporary audiences. After World War II, American audiences were already familiar with the cowboy heroes and Western scenes in Westerns and were even slightly bored with them. The American public no longer bought into the utopian promises of urbanization, industrialization, and high technology. At this stage, the original ideological dominance of the United States has become unpromising, with the population polarized into rich and poor, class society stratified and solidified, and the public increasingly filled with disillusionment. The scene of the Western society in the movie has changed dramatically; the eyes are not concerned about the pioneering but focus on the search for their values, highlighting the period of Americans in dealing with social problems feeling powerless and lost themselves, as well as doubt and scrutiny of their existence.

At the same time, there is an obvious shift in the scornful attitude toward Indians in the Western narrative. In examining the dynamics between Euro-American settlers and Indigenous peoples, the narrative framework of Westerns transitioned from an exaltation of aggressive conquest to a veneration of Indigenous resistance. This shift encompassed a movement away from disdain for Indigenous traditions towards a critique of the societal norms of Eastern civilizations. Furthermore, by highlighting the solitary support for the unjust warfare waged by Euro-Americans, these narratives sought to evoke profound empathy for Indigenous populations. Ford's *The Searchers*, for example,

has begun to rethink Indian-white relations by presenting an attitude of acceptance of Indian civilization. The movie adopts the revenge mode common to Westerns, with the protagonist Ethan's eldest brother's family being attacked and killed by Indians and his niece being taken captive. After ten years of searching, he recovers his niece with his adopted son Martin, who is of Indian ancestry. Though it is painfully obvious that she has been assimilated by the Indians and made a chief's wife, she is eventually brought back. Moreover, the image of the Indians took a different turn:

Although they were “bad guys”, they showed a humane side, and they participated in plundering but raised white descendants. This can not be said to be the American people in response to the reality of the problem, re-examine the history of a kind of social deep collective reflection and corrective.

3.3. Phase III: ideological renewal - forming a fundamental shift in attitudes toward native Indians

Between the early 1960s and the early 1970s, the United States was characterized by intense social conflicts and the civil rights movement. The American people gradually lost faith in the system, and a wave of anti-traditionalism emerged. The old western values and social customs shown in the westerns of this period also disintegrated and degenerated. The heroes of the Westerns appeared as anti-heroes (or non-heroes), and the image of the new Western heroes made a kind of playful and ironic provocation to the image of the cowboys of the West in the past: they were either hired killers by bureaucrats or drunken outlaws. The phenomenon of "self-appreciation" exhibited by the "bandit" was extensively acknowledged by the audience, leading to a notable transformation in the film's portrayal of Indigenous peoples. Fox's seminal western *Broken Arrow* redefined the previously held fierce and savage "cannibalistic" stereotype of Native Americans in cinematic representation, instead highlighting their integrity, sincerity, self-respect, and commitment to self-improvement. On the other hand, due to the influence of modernist literary thinking and other films such as detective films in the 1960s, most of the main characters of professional westerns were pessimistic and world-weary, and they had no way out but to abuse violence or force erotic stimulation, which was manifested as a kind of fatalistic and cold-blooded black humor. For example, Arthur Payne's *Little Big Man* it recounts the tragedy of American Indians slaughtered by white colonists, deep sympathy, but also a satirical view of U.S. history, the white General Custer is shown as a madman executioner of nature of the film, while the film *Dustin Hoffman* was raised by the Indians, and the Indians to the Indian self-identification. This period saw the cowboy figure and the Indian tribe communicating on the same level, and this shift in narrative mode was unprecedented.

Dances with Wolves was released in 1990. The Indians appearing in the movie are no longer a group of faces but “human beings” with specific names, personalities, languages, and even customs and cultures. They have thoughts and emotions, and not only can they become friends with the white protagonist with mutual acceptance and trust, but they also uniquely endow their white friends with an Indian name - *Dances with Wolves*. *Dances with Wolves* is not only a signal of recognition, but also an indication of the uniqueness of Indian culture.

Utilizing the film's title, which epitomizes the aspirational vision of the symbiosis between humanity and the natural environment, the cinematic work effectively articulates the profound aspiration to cultivate a harmonious and amicable rapport between Indigenous peoples and European settlers. Grounded in a critical examination of American historical narratives, this notable evolution in the representation of Indigenous populations renders the film a seminal contribution to the historiography of Indigenous imagery.

In the 1990s, Westerns made a comeback. During this period, the narrative elements of Westerns remained basically the same, while the cultural message contained in them underwent a fundamental transformation: the primitive Western wilderness was no longer a bleak and terrible barbaric land but a flat, broad, and beautifully watered and grassed poetic nature. The confrontation between

civilization and savagery is transformed into a conflict between civilization and nature. Instead of the white man eliminating the “savage” Indians and maintaining the order of civilization, the Indians rise against the white man's invasion and defend the order of nature. As we progress into the new century, there exists a prevailing consensus that the narrative of white settlers in the United States concurrently represents a chronicle of the colonization of the indigenous populations referred to as "Indians." [4] The “founding myths” of conquering nature and smoothing out “savagery” were filled with bloodshed, and the hands of the pioneering heroes were stained with the blood of the indigenous people, who are bound to be re-forged in the present time, when racial integration and multiculturalism are being promoted.

3.4. Phase 4: rebirth after ideological collapse - redefining and reimagining the American spirit through the wild bunch

Based on Michael Punke's full-length novel of the same name, *The Wilderness Hunter* tells the story of Hugh Glass, a 19th-century fur hunter who miraculously survives and seeks revenge after being mauled by a bear and abandoned in the wilderness by other hunters who have taken his belongings. The film received accolades for Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Cinematography at the 88th Academy Awards in 2016. The central character, Glass, endeavors to integrate into Indian society with the fervent aspiration of mitigating the Indo-White conflict; however, he finds himself ensnared in a persistent ethical quandary. He speaks Indian and has killed white officers who attacked his home. He transcends racial rivalry with blood kinship through his union with an Indian woman. As the hero of the text, he is silent and strong, wise and stoic. His incorporation of Indian culture. At the same time, there is another variation of the pioneering spirit-conquest to integration.

The westward movement "will always be a blot on the annals of the American frontier," [5] and behind Glass's dilemma is the eternal dilemma of history. The call of *The Wilderness Hunter* to the "American spirit", the setting up of western heroes, and the imaginative integration of different ethnic groups are realized by returning to the family, to the individual, and the heart. Through the liberation of the individual's spiritual predicament, the imaginative transcendence of the historical predicament is accomplished.

In 2009, *Avatar*, as a traditional Western genre film dressed in science fiction, the bloodshed in the history of the founding of the United States, and the cruelty under the cloak of "civilization" were put on the cosmic stage, rising from a confession of whitecentrism to a reflection on anthropocentrism. This is the era of globalization, in which humankind has experienced two world wars and in which industrial civilization has brought about the destruction of nature and the alienation of human beings. Science and technology have not brought the ultimate promise of happiness but have become mushroom clouds on the ruins of civilization. The concept of achieving comprehensive dominion and ensuring human triumph is progressively evolving into a contemporary educational ideal, drawing inspiration from ancient civilizations. This paradigm aspires to the egalitarianism of all entities, fostering harmonious coexistence and a return to foundational principles.

4. From the tool of ideological domination to the rebirth of artistic ontology: the self-breakthrough of genre films

Westerns utilize the historical context of American westward expansion during the latter half of the 19th century as their primary narrative backdrop, elucidating the intricate tensions between immigrant populations and indigenous communities, the dichotomy of civilization versus savagery, and the relationship between humanity and the natural environment. These narratives celebrate the "American spirit" characterized by audacious exploration, thereby contributing to the construction of a "founding myth" within the collective consciousness of the American populace. The "myth of the

founding of the nation" was constructed in the collective consciousness of Americans. With the passage of time and the change of historical background, the relationship between Westerns and ideology presents different characteristics. Under the great changes in social culture, audience groups, and technical conditions, this genre of Westerns is also exploring and conforming to the trend, transitioning from a tool of ideological domination to an artistic text for reflection and criticism of ideology and returning to the true artistic essence at a later stage. In such a development trend, the American Western, as a typical genre movie, actively or passively adapts to and reflects the changes in the mainstream values of the society and the call for the return of culture and art to its essence.

4.1. The method of self-breakthrough of the genre film--clarifying the relationship between artistic ontology and ideology

"I think that the movie has become, in a way, a model of art."--Jacques Rancière. [6]

Art is, first and foremost, an ideology of an aesthetic category.[7] The ontology of art is the core of art works, and it is the carrier for artists to convey emotions, thoughts and concepts through specific artistic language and expressive methods. The essence of art lies in the world of feelings and imagery it expresses, and its ontology is imagery, which embodies human aesthetic interests, aesthetic values and spiritual pursuits. The ideological function of art lies in the fact that it produces the discourse of the imagined relationship between human beings and reality, all kinds of symbols of meaning and types of lifestyles, and it produces a mirror image for individuals to imitate and copy, and satisfies the unattainable desires of the subconscious mind of the viewing individual in self-projection. In these ways, art influences the individual, making him or her a parasite of ideology, producing and reproducing his or her subject by the demands of ideology.

Art has the function of exposing and criticizing ideology at the same time. Art not only reflects the aesthetic interests, values, and spiritual pursuits of society, but also participates in the construction and criticism of social ideology to a certain extent.[8] Art not only produces ideology, but also has the function of revealing, destroying, criticizing and rebelling against the existing ideology. The interplay between artistic expression and ideological frameworks is characterized by reciprocal influence and dynamic interaction. Art is not only a reflection of ideology but also a producer and critic of ideology. Through its unique aesthetic form, art participates in the construction and critique of social ideology, reflecting the contradictions and conflicts of society and, at the same time, creating an imaginary world for social individuals.

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4.2. Artistic ontology breaks through ideological controversy--contrasting the academic debate on "soft cinema"

The historical trajectory of global cinema reveals a parallel between the artistic ontology and ideology of the United States and China. In the 1930s, a discourse emerged within Chinese film theory, particularly among the "New Sensibility School" and leftist factions, regarding the dichotomy

of "soft cinema" versus "hard cinema." Proponents of hard cinema posited that Chinese film bore the responsibility of illuminating reality and enlightening the populace, thus embodying a mission-driven ethos. Conversely, advocates of soft cinema contended that film should encapsulate the entirety of human experience and evoke emotional resonance. They argued for the adoption of innovative forms, mathematical abstractions, and the creation of symbols that transcend conventional causal frameworks, asserting that the mundane aspects of daily life lacked allure. This avant-garde perspective, while misaligned with the socio-political context of China at the time, marked a significant conceptual advancement in Chinese cinema, with the ontological assertions of the soft film school exerting a lasting influence on the trajectory of the Chinese film industry.

"Soft Cinema" theorizes film ontology, addressing the tension between art ontology and ideology, and represents an abstract theory of film art with metaphysical traits. [10] Despite differing in subject matter and expression, soft cinema and Westerns share emotional drive, characterization, narrative technique, cultural response, and visual style, resonating with audiences. This phenomenon elucidates why diverse cultural groups in the East and West simultaneously question cinema as a narrative and cultural medium. Furthermore, the Eastern discourse on soft versus hard cinema reflects the conflicting relationship between cinematic art ontology and ideological control in the evolution of American Westerns. The soft film school's resistance to hard film's ideological tools and its focus on film ontology parallels the American ideological state apparatus's constraints during Western development, both illustrating the ontological vitality of film art beyond commodity and instrumental definitions. The interplay of ontological cinema power from the East and West affirms cinema's status as an independent art form.

4.3. The way of rebirth of the movie art ontology-creating its source of vitality

The evolution of global social values necessitates that film producers recognize the shifting aesthetic preferences of diverse audiences, which demand varied cultural backgrounds and experiences. To thrive in both international and domestic markets, a flexible, market-oriented strategy is essential, focusing on harnessing the intrinsic vitality of film. Art possesses inherent vitality, capable of either upholding or challenging prevailing ideologies. Works such as Ginsberg's *Howl*, which critiques McCarthyism, and Lu Xun's *The Scream* and *Indecision*, which confront feudal ideologies, exemplify art's capacity for ideological rebellion. While film art is intertwined with ideology, social consciousness can exist independently and even precede social realities. Ontological cinema can transcend ideological confines, returning to its core artistic and aesthetic values, thereby underscoring the autonomy and significance of art.

The resurgence of film art ontology signifies a liberation from ideological constraints, allowing for a pure expression of imagery and aesthetic sensibility. [11] Film art transcends mere ideological function, existing as an independent artistic entity. From its historical role in embodying national ideologies to its multifaceted reflection of social realities and its global cultural communication, cinema has consistently aimed to represent societal values and cultural forms. Its worth is rooted not in ideological utility but in its intrinsic artistic and aesthetic qualities, showcasing the essence of art and its inherent vitality.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, under the background of the new era, the western film is ushering in various opportunities for breakthrough and rebirth, and also facing the severe challenge of ideological consolidation of traditional positions. How can to consolidate its position in the new pattern of world cinema by combining the utilization of natural cultural resources with the mechanism of the modern film industry through modern means of interpretation? How can to retain the traditional charm while

innovating and seeking changes in narrative themes, visual styles, and topics of expression to continuously inject new vitality and social significance into the film itself and adapt to the multiple tastes and aesthetic demands of the new generation of audience groups? How can to further expand the time and space of expression, enrich the ontology of art, and come out with a road of rebirth that can not only highlight the historical and cultural connotations but also gain market recognition and returns? These are the topics that Western films must face nowadays. We hope that the above research and thinking can provide a perspective for the development of Western films and movies. Let's look forward to this classic film genre in the new era, continue to explore and develop in the art and market, to achieve the phoenix nirvana, and to rebuild the vitality and extraordinary attraction of the art itself.

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