"Pulling up a Wild Bill": Television Post-Westerns

Jesús Ángel González (Universidad de Cantabria)

Introduction

The concept of post-Western was first applied to cinema by Philip French in the 1970s and it has been employed by a variety of critics since then to refer to different books and films. Writers such as Richard Slotkin, John G. Cawelti, Susan Kollin, and Krista Comer have applied it successfully to the fields of Film or Western Studies, although they do not always agree on its features or on the films or books that can be included in the category. French, for example, uses it exclusively for film Westerns *set* "in the present-day West where lawmen, rodeo riders, and Cadillac-driving ranchers are still in thrall to the frontier myth" (19-20). Cawelti, instead, includes many other types of films *made* in the present that "draw on Western themes and imagery but treat the Western tradition in a subversive, ironic, or otherwise critical fashion," such as films set in the contemporary West, films set "on the boundaries of civilization" (like the inner city or futuristic settings) and, more generally, revisionist Westerns like *Little Big Man* (1970) or *Unforgiven* (1992) (*Six-Gun* 119).

Neil Campbell's monograph *Post-Westerns* is the most ambitious and thorough contribution toward the definition and application of the category. He uses the term for films produced after World War II which are "coming after and going beyond the traditional Western while engaging with and commenting on its deeply haunting assumptions and values" (31). He relates his use of the prefix *post* to words like *postcolonialism*, *poststructuralism*, or *postmodernism*, both in a chronological sense and in the sense of opposing their antecedents, deconstructing them and trying to go beyond them. Post-Western films like John Sayles' *Lone Star* (1996) or the Coen brothers' *No*

Country for Old Men (2007) take the classic structures and themes of the genre to interact, overlap, and interrelate in complex dialogical ways with them: "post-Westerns constantly and deliberately remind us of the persistent presence of the Western genre, its traces and traditions within the unraveling of new, challenging forms and settings" (309). The concept of post-Western seems to be gaining currency both in the fields of Western Studies and in Film Studies, although it has also been contested by critics like Lee Clark Mitchell and Mathew Carter, who resent the *posthumous* connotations of the prefix *post,* which might suggest a premature burial of a genre that continues to produce interesting films every year.

Post-Western References in American television

So, is there a post-Western television? Does this dialogue with the implications and values of the Western genre take place also on American television? And why is this significant? According to some critics, there certainly are TV shows where we can find references to the Western genre that might invite us to use the post-Western label. For example, both Michael K. Johnson and Amanda Keeler apply the term to *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-present). Keeler points out that the program "features characters forced to reconquer the frontier amid the disintegration of modern society, who must battle undead walkers and other human survivors" (422). She underlines the similarities between Westerns and apocalyptic tales and notes that, by adapting elements from Westerns (like the parallel threats of "outlaws" and "savages"), the show inverts the myth of the frontier and rejects "ideological optimism" (433). Johnson mentions two specific Western-related situations in *The Walking Dead*: a saloon fight, and the arrival of the protagonist wearing a hat and riding a horse into a zombie-dominated town[1]. He points out that "*The Walking Dead* may literally take place in Georgia, but, metaphorically, we are in the 'Wild West,' a state of being brought about by the

collapse of civilization" (124). He also quotes Paul A. Cantor to explain that both the Western and the zombie genre encourage a "philosophical enquiry into the concept of 'the state of nature ... the pre-political existence of humanity'" (128-129), a situation that we can find both in frontier life and in the zombie post-apocalypse. Keeler also talks of a "subconscious desire for adventure" and "contemporary global anxieties" about the fear of a collapse of civilization (435).

Although this allegorical reading seems clear, there is another important reason why the Western is referred to in *The Walking Dead* as well as in other examples of the fantasy genre. The case we can consider is the occasional Western references in *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-present), the fantasy drama based on George R. R. Martin's successful series of books *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Dan Hassler-Forest has pointed out that "one of the most remarkable transformations in this period of widespread acclaim for certain kinds of new televisual content has been the prominence of fantastical genres" and that one of the strategies followed by HBO has been the pursuit of "a cultural logic of gentrification" (163), otherwise called "cultural upgrade" by Steiner (182). The producers of *Game of Thrones* needed to overcome the low-brow perception of the fantasy genre in order to broaden the audience and make the series fit into the format of premium cable "Quality TV," a concept that has "bestowed a bourgeois sense of respectability upon a medium too frequently maligned by highbrow audiences" (Hassler-Forest 164). Hassler-Forest mentions a number of changes oriented to "gentrify" and "rebrand" a fantasy novel originally read by immature teenagers and turn it into a product ("Quality TV") consumed by an adult audience. These changes include, first of all, the promotion of a "showrunner-auteur" identity, on the one hand by emphasizing the presence of producers David Benioff and Daniel B. Weiss in promotional materials, together with the books' author George R. R. Martin, and on the

other by creating a "perceived or constructed intradiegetic authorial voice" (Steiner 190). To this Hassler-Forest adds the creation of "gritty," cynical characters and environment, and the introduction of nudity, sex, violence and profanity (which, although certainly present in the book were made more prominent in the adaptation). Therefore, the TV series suggests "high-culture categories of authorship, novelistic narrative complexity, psychological realism and adult-oriented scenes of sex and violence [in order to] connect to a larger discourse of innovative quality television that is innovative and 'edgy' in ways that remain tasteful to bourgeois viewers" (Hassler-Forest 173-174).

Although neither Hassler-Forest nor Steiner mention it, it is important to point out that, in order to reach that broader "bourgeois" audience, the adaptation also encourages a particular type of hybridity, downplaying the fantastic elements (particularly in its first season) in favor of the pseudo-medieval imaginary and the historical aspects of the plot, and making it easy for the adult audience to connect the series' storyworld to the real world of European history and geography. And this is also where the post-Western references fit in: as Garret Castleberry has pointed out, there are several scenes in the series that "pay tribute to the Western in form and style" (no page). He mentions one where characters Arya and The Hound get into a tavern fight reproducing a scene of Sergio Leone's *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and he points at Arya and The Hound as loners in a frontier-like environment of order versus chaos, as well as at the general relationship between the mythological medieval imaginary and the Western cultural mystique. Although it is true that these may be minor allusions, the genre hybridity that *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* hint at when they make these Western references can therefore be understood as a strategic way of broadening the audience base, "gentrifying" a fantasy book series and a zombie comic-book, by

offering the adult "Quality TV" audience genre tropes and conventions belonging to a genre (the Western) that has already been "gentrified" (since Western films are already part of the canon of cinema) and that they can easily recognize and identify with.

Another example of "Quality TV" that has been called "post-Western" because of its "self-conscious citation of the [Western] genre" (Hunt 35) is *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013). In fact, the Western references become so important in this series that it has been defined by its showrunner Vince Gilligan using the *Western* word:

> I like to think of our show as a *modern-day Western*. I'm not sure what I mean by that. There are no 10-gallon hats or six shooters, no horses and whatnot.
>
> Question: Well, you do have a lone gunman.
>
> Answer: [laughs] Yeah we do. There's a man standing on the horizon in a pair of chaps, or in the case of our show, in his underpants. I guess *Breaking Bad* is a *post-modern Western*. (no page) (*My italics*)

The Southwestern desert appearing in so many Westerns seems to be the perfect setting for the story of Walter White, the timid Chemistry teacher transformed into Heisenberg, a meth manufacturer and violent drug lord. The image of Walter pointing a gun into the camera, the frequent standoffs in the desert landscape, or the *black* hat worn by the protagonist when he becomes Heisenberg (no longer "White"), are all post-Western visual references to the Western genre that point to other thematic connections. The hero's transformation takes place significantly not in the traditional frontier between civilization and wilderness, but in the new borderlands between Mexico and the United States, a space consisting of multiple "borders between countries, between peoples, between authorities, sometimes between armies" (Limerick 91), and even between genres. In this violent context of criminals, transnational drug cartels and conflicting

laws, the (anti)hero needs to assert himself as an individual and try to find (or lose) his own moral compass.

As Brett Martin has pointed out, *Breaking Bad*, like some of the other shows branded as "Quality TV" in the latest decades, deals with "difficult men," men in crisis who become protagonists of stories "largely about manhood—in particular the contours of male power and the infinite varieties of male combat" (13). The solution proposed by *Breaking Bad* to this masculine crisis lies in a return to the strong masculinity represented by the Western genre: Walt's transformation is an effort to reclaim control following the mode of traditional frontier men. Jason Mittell has pointed out how *Breaking Bad* stands out from other "quality" programs for two reasons: first, because of what he calls its "centripetal complexity" (223); and secondly, because of stylistic choices directly related to the Western genre: "*Breaking Bad* embraces a much wider visual palette, ranging from stylized landscape shots evoking Sergio Leone Westerns to exaggerated camera tricks and gimmicks" (218). Michael Slovis, *Breaking Bad*'s cinematographer, has mentioned that Gilligan asked him to look for visual and stylistic inspiration in Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). Accordingly, the wide-angle shots, the slow rhythm in the action scenes, the dark-comic tone, and the artistic stylization that Mittell calls "maximum-degree style" (219) seem to come straight from Spaghetti Westerns. A good example might be "Fly", an esthetic tour-de-force where we only see Walter's efforts trying to catch a fly in his lab for a whole episode, seemingly inspired by the opening scene of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, where the suspense of the gunmen waiting at a railroad train station is undermined by a "mini-subplot" of a fly annoying one of the violent characters.

Finally, the series finale is also indebted to Westerns, as Gillian himself admitted: "In the writers' room, we said, 'Hey, what about *The Searchers'* ending?' So, it's always a matter of stealing from the best." According to him, Walter's decision not to kill Jesse is inspired by Ethan's similar decision to spare his niece's life in Ford's film. Gilligan acknowledges the debt to the film aurally (by playing a cowboy ballad at the beginning of the last episode) and visually (by showing Walter looking at his son from the outside in shots that replicate *The Searchers'* signature shots of John Wayne framed by doors and windows outside of his brother's house). Looking at the final episode from the lens of the Western, it is easy to identify Walter as the Western "man in the middle" between wilderness and civilization (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 74), related to characters like Ethan, or Tom Doniphon in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), men who need to resort to their own moral conscience and often end up alienated by society, since "the hero's violence is primarily an expression of his capacity for individual moral judgment and action, a capacity that separates him from society as much as it makes him a part of it" (97). Walter and Ethan are both alienated by their violence, and shown away from the interior spaces that symbolize their tenuous connection to civilization.

Another example we can consider from a post-Western point of view is *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008). Although using a cop show format, this series is obviously a much more complex product in which showrunner David Simon used the Baltimore location to make a sociological statement "about the American city and the American experiment" (Simon 2). In order to do that[2], the program also uses a number of post-Western allusions to the Western genre. In general, we cannot forget that there is a very close relationship between Westerns and the most obvious hypotext of *The Wire*, detective fiction, as can be seen in TV shows like *The Bridge* (FX, 2013-2014), *In Plain*

Sight (USA Network, 2008-2012), or *Longmire*, (A&E, Netflix, 2012-2017), shows located in the West whose protagonists are all members of a police force. Some critics have in fact highlighted that the hard-boiled detective is the heir of the Western hero, a protagonist who, after running out of Western spaces, takes refuge in the city: "the private eye is not the dandy turned sleuth; he is the cowboy adapted to life on the city streets" (Slotkin 478). Cawelti included "the inner city" as one of the new post-Western landscapes "which seem to have some of the mythic power once associated with the Wild West" (*Six-Gun* 119), and he mentioned examples of post-Western films that make explicit use of Western references in crime stories set in an urban setting, like *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981), or even the TV series *McCloud* (NBC, 1970-1977). In *The Wire*, West Baltimore certainly feels like a frontier town, a lawless space with no safety and constant shoot-outs, which could therefore easily meet Turner's definition of the frontier as the place where civilization and wilderness meet. In fact, as different critics have pointed out, the violence from the US Western frontier shifted to urban frontiers, "from a moving western boundary into a relatively fixed partitioning of urban space," a racial frontier with "black urban communities ... on the criminal side of the urban frontier" (Crooks 68, 71).

In this urban liminal space, we find several post-Western references that connect *The Wire* to the Western film genre. For example, there is a stand-off between Brother Muzone and Omar Little staged as a Western style shoot-out ("Middle Ground"), and another scene in the first season ("The Detail"), where a group of policemen go to an area called "the canyon" and are attacked by the inner-city African-Americans from above, as a clear reminder of the typical Western scenes of cowboys being attacked by the Indians from the hills surrounding them. Furthermore, as Lavik has pointed out, there are several dialogues reproducing *verbatim* lines from revisionist Westerns such as

The Wild Bunch (1969), *The Searchers* (1956) or *Unforgiven* (1992) (65-66), like the cold-blooded line from Eastwood's film ('Deserve's got nuthin' to do with it') quoted by one of the killers in *The Wire* (66). This lawless space is the appropriate environment for protagonists similar to Western heroes, "men in the middle" between opposing groups. In this sense, the most atypical and idiosyncratic character of *The Wire* is Omar Little, who becomes a contemporary rewriting of the Western anti-hero, the bandit epitomized by characters like Jesse James, Butch Cassidy or Billy the Kid. Omar is a "man in the middle" between the drug dealers and the police, characterized by weapons and clothes which remind us of the West, and has a "Wild West mentality, the lone frontiersman taming the wilderness of the drug trade" (Marshall & Potter 4). He is extremely dexterous with weapons, whistles a song to announce his arrival, and develops a very personal moral code. Last but not least, like his Western forerunners, Omar Little is a very individualistic hero, a feature underlined by a T-shirt that he wears in the tenth episode of the second season inscribed with the words "I am the American Dream." These words make a connection with Simon's intention to make a statement about "the American experiment" quoted before, and describe the failure of the American Dream in a country where the rules have been rigged. In this sense, the allusions to Westerns as the quintessentially American genre are fundamental to articulate a discourse about "the American experiment," as Lavik also points out: "*The Wire* invokes the Western genre to reflect, and reflect on, notions of where America is coming from and where it is going" (68).

Generation Kill (HBO, 2008), another show created by David Simon, also makes commentaries about the Western genre, but "the boundaries of civilization" are pushed even further away than Baltimore and taken to Iraq. Susan Kollin has already underlined the relocation of the Western hero abroad, pointing out that "western

American fiction and film have also developed along transnational routes by featuring the U.S. cowboy hero in an international setting, where his adventures often involve battling foes and restoring order on the global frontiers of the Middle East" (*Captivating* 1). She has illustrated her point with films like *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008), which tell a tale of rescue from "Indian/Iraqi country," and show the use of the metaphor of the American soldier as cowboy abroad, questioning "the logic of the Wild West analogy" (163) and its application to contemporary American enemies. Something similar can be found in *Generation Kill,* a documentary-like miniseries based on a book by journalist Evan Wright, narrating the story of a group of marines invading Iraq, where the soldiers constantly make references to the Wild West and the Muslim enemy as savages. Similarly, *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-present) tells the story of a US marine held captive in Iraq, who later turns on his own nation. Particularly in the first season, the series plays with Western captivity stories (like *The Searchers*) and the "classic frontier anxieties in the Western concerning racial and cultural contamination" (Kollin, *Captivating* 4), but inverts gender roles by making the captive a man and the rescuer a woman.

Post-Western TV Series

Although TV shows like *Homeland* or *Generation Kill* use a foreign post-Western frontier to question the use of Wild West analogies in US foreign policy, the post-Western references in these hybrid programs are less important than the presence of other generic tropes coming from the spy or war genres. Something similar could be argued about the other TV series mentioned so far: the presence of the Western in *The Walking Dead, Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* is certainly significant, but probably not enough to consider them "post-Western series". However, we are going to look now at other series that are more deeply influenced by the Western. In these shows, the

transtextual allusions to the Western genre are so important that they affect their generic semantics and syntax (Altman); they influence the iconography, the themes, the characters and the plots of the text, therefore establishing a consistent, systematic dialogue with the Western genre, taking the spectator into the "space of reflection" described by Campbell in order to comment on the "genre's assumptions and values" (31). Following Genette's ideas about transtextuality, we could say that these Western references are not simply intertextual or hypertextual allusions, but *architextual* features, since their purpose is to design a text as part of a genre. For the French narratologist, *architextuality* refers to the generic taxonomies suggested by a text, influencing the reader's expectations and reception of the work, which is precisely what happens with the three post-Western television series that we are going to consider now: *Justified* (FX, 2010-2015), *Firefly* (Fox, 2002-2003), and *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-present).

Justified is based on three short stories by Elmore Leonard, and is set in Kentucky, mostly in Harlan County and the Appalachian area that used to be considered the "Kentucky frontier" or the "first American West" (where Daniel Boone and other pioneers found a way to cross the Appalachians in 1775). This area was advertised by FX as a "21st century Wild West," since it is depicted as an area where crime is hard to fight and the police forces need to resort to "justified" violence, as we will see later. The protagonist is US marshal Raylan Givens, played by Timothy Olyphant, the actor who had impersonated Sheriff Seth Bullock in *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006) and who has been called a "postmodern Eastwood" (Barrett) because of his Western hero *persona*. The references to Westerns are obvious from the very first scene, set not in Kentucky but in contemporary Miami, where Raylan, wearing his Stetson white hat, his cowboy boots, and his gun holstered at the hip, shoots a mafia lord in cold blood, but after

giving him a chance to draw his gun first; of course, this makes the killing "justified," not just for the hero but also for the Western-loving audience, even if Raylan is mildly punished by his bosses and transferred to his native Kentucky. Raylan's hat, in particular (as we had seen in a minor scale in *Breaking Bad*), becomes an instant metaphor of everything Western. From here on, several characters make references to his hat, calling him "Wyatt Earp here" and say things like "you're the guy who pulled a Wild Bill" or "Gary Coopered up on that guy in Miami." The audience can see a poster of the movie *Tombstone* (1993) in the marshals' office, as well as marshals and villains watching Westerns on TV, and hear nostalgic conversations about the Kentucky "Western" Pioneer past and about the contrast between marshals like Wyatt Earp fighting crime in the past and contemporary marshals.

Paul Zinder calls the series a "postmodern New Wave Western" (130), whereas Laura Crossley emphasizes the hybridity of the Western and Gangster genres, stressing the contrast between Raylan and the rural gangster (formerly Raylan's friend) Boyd Crowder. However, without denying the obvious hybridity in the series (which mixes elements not only from the Western and gangster genres, but also from crime television in general), the accumulated transtextual references to the Western become a central part of the series (become *architextual*) and "justify" the use of the term post-Western. The Western-like Kentucky setting, the iconography, the characters (the contrast between Raylan and the other marshals in particular), the themes and the plots (fighting modern crime using contemporary tools or "Old West" values) actually *depend on* the spatial and temporal relocation of Western conventions, therefore establishing a permanent dialogue with the genre and their "deeply haunting assumptions and values" (though not necessarily criticizing them), which is why we can call the series post-Western. For Johnson (following Campbell), however, the term post-Western implies an

ethical position, a rewriting of Western conventions to "think differently and better" about the American legacy of conquest shown in the genre (129), and here *Justified* seems to be full of contradictions. Even though Paul Zinder considers that it "allegorically questions American political attitudes and military action since 9/11, through its progressive representation of its Western hero, villains, and families" (130), *Justified* is fundamentally conservative in its glorification of the Western male tradition of personal justice and violence. And even though Raylan is portrayed somewhat critically as an anachronistic, "angry," "violent" man whose failure at the domestic sphere (both with his ex-wife and his criminal father) raises questions about the credibility of traditional modes of masculinity (Crossley 64), this criticism is often downplayed by Raylan's frequent displays of hegemonic masculinity, marksmanship, police skills and wit. If anything can justify the ethical stance that the post-Western needs according to Johnson and Campbell, it is probably the critical portrayal of the rural Western-looking Southern community of Harlan County and the failure of the Western-like hero to help the community. As in *The Wire*, the displacement of the boundaries of civilization is also used to illuminate the failures of the American Dream, in this case exemplified by the widespread abuse of methamphetamine, and the alienation and disillusionment of the Southern white working class left behind by capitalism and globalization. Zinder has stressed how the program shows "a society both desensitized and demoralized" by the Western-like U.S. response to the 9/11 attacks, where former war veterans find it almost impossible to integrate back into civil society (121). In this sense, it is very relevant to see how Raylan, unlike former Western heroes, does not really help his community: at the end of Season 2, after Raylan's intervention, his native Harlan county is left at the hands of the criminal gangs and a mining corporation that gets hold of people's lands and destroys traditional ways of

living. The traditional solutions of Western heroes do not seem to function in the contemporary environment of neoliberalism and globalization.

Johnson considers another series post-Western both in the "aesthetic and ethical sense" (127): *Firefly*, a cult series created by Josh Whedon, the originator of other successful TV series like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (The WB & UPN, 1997-2003). The series was discontinued after the first season, but it had such a strong success in its release in a DVD format that Universal made a film summarizing the script of the second season: *Serenity* (2005). Action is set in 2517, in a new solar system ruled by "the Alliance" after a Civil War that has left a group of rebels moving in the "border planets," far from the "civilized" central planets. This might sound like *Star Wars*, a film series that has repeatedly been described as a "space Western," or a "space opera," a science-fiction subgenre that uses Western elements and includes films, television series and comic strips like the *Star Trek* franchise or *Flash Gordon*. However, once again, the Western in *Firefly* becomes crucial, architextual, since the iconography, the themes, the characters and the plots, the semantics and the syntax, all hinge on the spatial and temporal displacement of the genre. Unlike the "space operas" mentioned, life on the "border planets" of this series actually includes horses, gunslingers, stagecoaches, cows, cowboys, and trains crossing deserts (and all of this hybridized with spaceships, technology and weapons from the future). The characters use Western slang and the series depicts Western stock situations, like the saloon brawl, the train robbery, the bounty hunter, the town bully, or the spaceship itself, which is very much like the stagecoach in the eponymous John Ford film. In fact, as Fred Erisman has pointed out, *Stagecoach* (1939) is not only the inspiration for the characters of the series (the outlaw hero, the doctor, the priest or the prostitute), but also for some of its more important themes: the "questioning of conventional morality" and "civilization," as well

as the notion of an unlikely "community" shown as "an alternative to conventional civilization" (253-255). *Firefly* was defined by Emily Nussbaum as "an oddball genre mix that might have doomed it from the beginning: it was a character-rich sci-fi western comedy-drama with existential underpinnings" (72), but it fits within the framework of post-Westerns as we have defined them, in this particular case, post-Westers set in the outer space frontier.

Johnson has also related it to Campbell's definition of post-Westerns and their "deliberate jarring of expectations" (128) and stressed its redefinition of gender roles: "post-Western television shows such as *Firefly* move us beyond the traditional Western's often-stereotypical depictions of masculinity and femininity and ask us 'to think differently and better' about the roles of women and men in society" (129). In fact, the series creates some of the most diverse and interesting female characters on television, a feature that both Cawelti and Campbell have highlighted as typical of post-Westerns, and that we can also see in *The Walking Dead* (Keeler 430). With strong female characters like a soldier or a mechanic, *Firefly* deconstructs the traditional masculine discourse and male gaze of Westerns, by focusing both on men and women and by presenting male and female characters with roles that defy Western gender expectations. For example, there is a married couple where the wife is the expert soldier and the husband is a pilot lacking fighting skills. And one of the female characters is a "companion," a high-status courtesan whose personal services extend beyond sex to spiritual and emotional well-being. The series also deconstructs the stereotype of Indians as savages: throughout *Firefly* the characters are constantly threatened by the Reavers, a group of Indian-looking savages whose cruelty reaches inordinate proportions. However, in the film sequel we find out that the Reavers are the result of an Alliance experiment gone wrong, an artificial creation that can be interpreted in

different ways. On the one hand, this finding creates a real *terra nullius*, an ideal colonization scenario without any natives to claim property of the new planets; and, on the other, it subtly points at the fact that the "savage" is always an artificial creation constructed in the imagination of the settlers. At any rate, it seems clear that the rewriting of gender roles and the reinterpretation of the Reavers in *Serenity* take the audience into the post-Western "space of reflection" and help rewrite Western conventions related to the situation of women and Native Americans.

Finally, the most recent addition to this corpus of post-Western television is *Westworld*. It is based on the eponymous 1973 film written and directed by Michael Crichton, which described three amusement parks in the future: Westworld, Medievalworld, and Romanworld. The film's three "worlds" were populated with androids that were practically indistinguishable from human beings. For a high fee, guests could indulge in any adventure with the android population of the park, including sexual encounters or a fight to the death. Unfortunately, as one could expect, the androids malfunctioned and began killing visitors, but there was no hint of a *Blade-Runner*-like rebellion. In the contemporary TV series, the first big difference is that it basically deals only with one park ("Westworld")[3], and the second difference is the focus on the (mostly female) androids, now called *hosts*, and their rebellion. Described by HBO as "a dark odyssey about the dawn of artificial consciousness and the future of sin," the thematic emphasis is on artificial intelligence, cognition, psychology, and philosophical issues related to post-humanism: the possibility of creating life, and the relationship between consciousness, identity and memory, or, in essence, what makes us human and different from androids.

Another interesting feature of the series (like the film before it) is that it presents the park as the place where you can fulfill all your fantasies, by taking part in "100

interconnected narratives" or story lines, which is in fact an extension of what happens in popular narratives like Westerns, detective stories or romantic novels. As John G. Cawelti explained in *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, readers and spectators (or, in this case, participants) fulfill their fantasies (respectively, power over life and death, knowledge over all mysteries, or eternal love) when reading, watching or participating in popular stories or more contemporary interactive video games. In this case, the *guests* (mainly male) can decide if they want to go "black hat" or "white hat": if they want to indulge in their worst perversions, or go for a cleaner fantasy. The self-referential aspect of the series has been identified by different scholars, who point out that "it is a television show about something that frequently evokes and resembles a television show" (Beckley-Forest & Forest 188) and that "it embeds its discourse on artificial consciousness in a highly reflexive plot because it appears to be aware that it is a series" (Favard 2). In fact, the discussions between the different park creators about the stories written for the android-characters are metafictionally replicated by the guests themselves when they discuss their experience in the park as either crass enjoyment ("guns and tits") or High Art ("discovering oneself"): "this classic debate between sanctified art and the corporate entertainment machine, embodied by the struggle between the owning company and gamerunners such as Lee Sizemore, Dr. Ford, and Bernard, would then seem to present itself as the show's central subtext" (Beckley-Forest and Forest 190).

Westworld hybridizes science-fiction and Western conventions, takes the audience to the post-Western "space of reflection" about the myth of the West and the role it has played in the USA, and extends it to the ethical issues related to reception and identification processes: how Western film spectators have fulfilled their fantasies enjoying battles where Native Americans were massacred or women were mistreated,

and how the TV series spectators can identify with the *guests* indulging in their worst fantasies. In this rewriting of Western conventions, female hosts are systematically raped and treated as sexual objects before they acquire consciousness and lead the android rebellion; similarly, the Native Americans are first presented as stereotypical savages (called the "Ghost Nation") but later given complexity and value in the second season, in a replica of the evolution of the Western genre itself. This critical discourse about the West is articulated through transtextual references to Western films, specifically the ones by John Ford, because *Westworld* "is built upon the foundation of tropes, clichés, and cinematic shorthand that Ford's work popularized" (Bady): it is filmed in Castle Valley, Utah, where Ford filmed his last four Westerns; one of the hosts is called Clementine in reference both to the popular Western song and Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946); the creator of the park is called (Robert) Ford, and he actually repeats the famous quote from John Ford's *The Man who shot Liberty Valance* ("when the legend becomes true, print the legend") to explain some of his decisions about the park; there is a female captive (Dolores) who is the protagonist of a captivity subplot very similar to *The Searchers*, and the beginning of the first episode also has a shot which is a reference to the famous doorway signature shots from *The Searchers* (that we also identified in *Breaking Bad*). Finally, as in Ford's last films, *Westworld* "forces us to consider our understanding of the American 'settler' and his false distorted view of the American west as his land for the taking" (Wilson). By extension, it also forces us to consider our own role as spectators, and our own sense of guilt when we feel that we have identified with the racist heroes of some Westerns, or with the guests in their perverted fantasies. Finally, it is interesting to mention that the second season includes a more hopeful rewriting of the Western myth, when it shows a group of Indian and white pioneers heading into a new different West-looking world called "The Valley

Beyond." In fact, it is a group of androids, who had been forced to play those roles before and have now been liberated, leaving the world of the West for a better realm where peaceful coexistence of different races seems to be possible. Future seasons will show whether and how that discourse is also articulated through references to the Western myth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Western myth and the Western genre seem to be still working as cultural tools for contemporary television series' creators and audiences. The analysis of these television programs has shown the existence of both series with post-Western elements and series where the post-Western aspects are architextual in Genette's sense of the word. Post-Western television has inherited some of the features of traditional Westerns and is adapting and updating them from a critical and ethical point of view, showing that the Western is still a "malleable parable for contemporary political realities" (Bloom 214) both in the USA and in the countries where these shows are being exported successfully. Even though the more traditional television Westerns have "moved to the periphery of mainstream American television culture" (Crossley 60), the critical lens of the post-Western has given a new life to the genre in American television. Whether set in the contemporary American West (*Breaking Bad*), the American city (*The Wire*), Kentucky (*Justified*), the Middle East (*Homeland, Generation Kill*) or a more or less dystopic version of the future (*The Walking Dead, Firefly, Westworld*), post-Western television seems to be thriving in the 21st century.

The Western genre, which started out as popular entertainment, has now become an essential part of the canon of cinema, and the references to this genre are now being used to legitimize, to "gentrify" other television categories like the zombie and fantasy

genres. French scriptwriter and director Thomas Bidegain has explained that Westerns show "the state of the nation" and that spinning "cowboy-Indian metaphors" can still be a useful tool to "relate how the situation has progressed" (Talu). The television series that we have described make an extensive use of the "cowboy-Indian metaphor" to highlight the failures of the American Dream and talk about the contemporary "state of the nation" in the inner-city (*The Wire*) and the rural areas of America (*Justified*), and they also use it to illustrate the dangers of applying a frontier mentality in American foreign policy (*Homeland, Generation Kill*). Significantly, they also use this metaphor to articulate a discourse about gender roles in contemporary societies, whether by displaying "difficult men" that try to rescue Western-like patterns of hegemonic masculinity (*Breaking Bad, Justified*) or by showing female characters that rebel against patriarchal conventions (*Firefly, The Walking Dead, Westworld*). The temporal and spatial displacement of the Western myth that we have identified in these series allows their creators to take the television audience into the post-Western "space of reflection," make comments about the Western genre, and look for new ways to articulate fears and worries in contemporary America.

Works Cited

Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. British Film Institute, 1999.

Bady, Aaron. "'Westworld,' Race, and the Western." *The New Yorker,* 9 December 2016, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/how-westworld-failed-the-western. Accessed 31 January 2019.

Barrett, Jenny. "A Cop in a Cowboy Hat: Timothy Olyphant, a Postmodern Eastwood in Justified." *Critical Perspectives on the Western: From A Fistful of Dollars to*

Django Unchained, edited by Lee Broughton, Roeman & Littlefield, 2016, pp. 89-102.

Beckley-Forest, Thomas, and Michael Forest. "The Dueling Productions of Westworld: Self-Referential Art or Meta-Kitsch?" *Westworld and Philosophy: If you Go Looking for the Truth, Get the Whole Thing*, edited by James B. South and Kimberly S. Engels, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 185-195.

Bloom, Peter J. "Reappropiation of the 'Good Badman' in France, the French Colonies, and Contemporary Algeria." *Westerns: Films through History*, edited by Janet Walker, Routledge, 2001, pp. 197-216.

Campbell, Neil. *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West*. U of Nebraska P, 2013.

Carter, Matthew. *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative*. Edinburgh UP, 2015.

Castleberry, Garret. "Creating Game of Thrones' Cross-Demographic Appeal through Genre-Mixing Iconicity." *In Medias Res,* 23 September 2014, mediacommons.org/imr/2014/09/09/creating-game-thrones-cross-demographic-appeal-through-genre-mixing-iconicity. Accessed 19 Aug. 2019.

Cawelti, John G. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*. U of Chicago P, 1976.

—. *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*. Bowling Green State UP, 1999.

Comer, Krista. "New West, Urban and Suburban Spaces, Postwest." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, edited by Nicolas S. Witschi, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 244-260.

Crooks, Robert. "From the Far Side of the Urban Frontier: The Detective Fiction of

    Chester Himes and Walter Mosley." *College Literature,* vol. 22, no. 3, 1995, pp.

    68-90.

Crossley, Laura. "Gangstagrass: Hybridity and Popular Culture in Justified." *Journal of*

    Popular Television , vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 57-75.

Erisman, Fred. "Stagecoach in Space: The Legacy of Firefly." *Extrapolation,* vol. 47,

    no. 2, 2006, pp. 249-258.

Favard, Florent. ""The Maze Wasn't Made for You": Artificial Consciousness and

    Reflexive Narration in Westworld (HBO, 2016-)." *TV/Series*, vol. 14, 2018, pp.

    1-17. doi.org/10.4000/tvseries.3040.

"Fly." *Breaking Bad*, written by Sam Catlin and Moira Walley-Beckett, directed by

    Rian Johnson, AMC, 2010.

French, Philip. *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre*. Carcanet, 1973.

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*. U of Nebraska P,

    1997.

Gilligan, Vince. *'Breaking Bad': Creator Vince Gilligan explains series finale*, 30

    September 2013, ew.com/article/2013/09/30/breaking-bad-finale-vince-gilligan/.

    Accessed 19 Aug. 2019.

González, Jesús A. "'Wiring' The Wire: Transtextual layers and tragic realism in The

    Wire" *The Journal of Popular Television*, Vol. 7, no. 3, 2019, pp. 279-297,

    doi.org/10.1386/jptv_00002_1

Hassler-Forest, Dan. "Game of Thrones: Quality Television and the Cultural Logic of
    Gentrification." *TV/Series* vol. 6, 2014, pp. 160-177.
    doi.org/10.4000/tvseries.323.

Hunt, Alex. "Breaking Bad as Critical Regionalism." *Breaking Down Breaking Bad:*
    Critical Perspectives, edited by Matt Wanat, and Leonard Engel, U of New
    Mexico P, 2016, pp. 33-48.

Johnson, Michael K. "Introduction: Television and the Depiction of the American
    West." *Western American Literature,* vol. 47, no. 2, 2012, pp. 123-131.

Joyce, Justin A. "The Warp, Woof, and Weave of this Story's Tapestry would Foster the
    Illusion of Further Progress: Justified and the Evolution of Western Violence."
    Western American Literature, vol. 47, no. 2, 2012, pp. 175-199.

Keeler, Amanda. "A Postapocalyptic Return to the Frontier: The Walking Dead as Post-
    Western." *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television*
    Studies, vol. 13, no. 4, 2018, pp. 422–437.

Kollin, Susan. *Captivating Westerns: The Middle East in the American West*. U of
    Nebraska P, 2015.

—. *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*. U of Nebraska P, 2007.

Lavik, Erlend. "The Poetics and Rhetoric of The Wire's Intertextuality." *Critical Studies*
    in Television, vol. 6, no. 1, 2011, pp. 52-71.

Limerick, Patricia. "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century." *The*
    Frontier in American Culture, edited by James R. Grossman, U of California P,
    1994, pp. 67-103.

Marshall, C. W. and Tiffany Potter. "'I am the American Dream': Modern Urban

    Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction." *The Wire: Urban Decay and American*

    Television, edited by C. W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter, Continuum, 2009, pp.

    1-14.

Martin, Brett. *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The*

    Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad. Penguin, 2013.

"Middle Ground." *The Wire*, written by David Simon and George Pelecanos, directed

    by Joe Chappelle, HBO, 2004.

Mitchell, Lee Clark. *Late Westerns: The Persistence of a Genre*. U of Nebraska P, 2018.

Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New

    York U P, 2015.

Nelson, Andrew Patrcik. *Contemporary Westerns: Film and Television since 1990*. The

    Scarecrow P, 2013.

Nussbaum, Emily. "A DVD Face-Off Between the Official and the Homemade." *The*

    New York Times, 21 December 2003, p. 72,

    movies2.nytimes.com/2003/12/21/arts/television/21NUSS.html. Accessed 18

    March 2020.

Simon, David. "The Wire: A One-Hour Drama for HBO." 6 September 2000,

    kottke.org.s3.amazonaws.com/the-wire/The_Wire_-_Bible.pdf. Accessed 19

    Aug. 2019.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century*

    America. Atheneum, 1992.

Steiner, Tobias. "Steering the Author Discourse: The Construction of Authorship in

      Quality TV, and the Case of Game of Thrones." *Series: International Journal of*

      TV Serial Narratives, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, pp. 181-192.

Talu, Yonca. "Interview: Thomas Bidegain and Finnegan Oldfield.". *Film Comment,* 24

      June 2016*,* filmcomment.com/blog/interview-les-cowboys-thomas-bidegain-

      finnegan-oldfield/. Accessed 25 January 2018.

"The Detail." *The Wire*, written by David Simon and Ed Burns, directed by Clark

      Johnson, HBO, 2002.

Wilson. "Wilson's Movie Log." *Westworld, John Ford and Doorways.*

      wilsonh915.wordpress.com/2016/10/05/westworld-john-ford-and-doorways/.

      Accessed 19 Aug. 2019.

Zinder, Paul. "Osama Bin Laden Ain't Here: Justified as a 9/11 Western."

      Contemporary Westerns: Film and Television since 1990, edited byAndrew

      Patrick Nelson. The Scarecrow P, 2013, pp. 119-134.

---

[1] To this we can also add that the protagonist's best friend is called Shane and that the

latter has a very close relationship with the former's son and wife, just as in George

Stevens' film.

[2] As I have pointed out elsewhere (González 285-286).

---

[3] Although in the second season we see glimpses of a samurai world, called "Shogunworld," and a "colonial fantasy" world, called "Tajworld."