Genre Revision and Hybridity: Westerns and the West in Twenty-First Century American Television

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A simple internet search for the terms "TV" and "Western" leads to dozens of results including American television shows such as *Rawhide* or *Gunsmoke* that started in the 1950s or 1960s and were no longer produced after the 1970s. Does this mean that Westerns and the American West have now disappeared from American television? Far from it, as Michael K. Johnson pointed out in 2012: "we have seen in the 21st century a remarkable rebirth of the portrayal of the American West on television" (Introduction 124). It is true that, with a few interesting exceptions, we do not find many Westerns set in the time and space of the traditional genre, but if we widen our scope and look at the number of series that use a western setting or make references to the American West or the Western genre, the number of interesting Western-related series that have been developed in the contemporary `Golden Age´ of American television is certainly more significant.

If we look first at the actual Westerns shown on American television in the last two decades, the most successful from a critical point of view is definitely *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006), but as there have already been several books and articles written about it we are going to focus on other TV Westerns that have critically revisited the West and have received less scholarly attention, including *Into the West* (TNT, 2005), *Hell on Wheels* (AMC, 2011-2016), *The Son* (AMC, 2017-2019), and *Godless* (Netflix, 2017).

Into the West is a miniseries produced by Steven Spielberg which tries to summarize the history of the conquest of the West from the 1820s to the 1890s in 12

hours, from the point of view of both the European settlers and the Native Americans. *Into the West* includes the Battle of Little Bighorn, the Ghost Dance Movement, and the Wounded Knee Creek Massacre, together with the creation of reservations and the problems of the forced integration and acculturation of Native Americans. It is extremely inclusive and well-meaning, but as Kay McFadden pointed out, the characters become simple archetypes to illustrate a politically correct version of the conquest of the West: "As the first major commercial miniseries to give equal time to the perspective of Native Americans, the program is commendable. As entertainment, it's on par with summer school". *Hell on Wheels* makes a similar effort to portray Native American characters and culture (such as a Cheyenne Sundance ceremony) and focuses on the progress of the transcontinental railway as it moves through Indian territory (both Cheyenne and Sioux). As Johnson has pointed out, it "provides a more balanced portrayal of that conflict [between the railway builders and the Native Americans] than has often been seen in the television Western" (Introduction 126), although the depiction of female characters leaves much to be desired.

The Son and *Godless* are critically acclaimed shows that continue the revision of Western tropes that seems to characterize TV Westerns in the twenty-first century. *The Son* is based on the 2013 book of the same name by Philipp Meyer and stars Pierce Brosnan as Eli McCullough, a Texas cattle baron who was captured by Comanches as a child and later became a Comanche warrior himself. Most of the storyline alternates between 1849-1850, when Eli becomes `the son´ of a Comanche tribal chief, and 1915, when Eli is a ranch owner (so well-known by his legendary exploits that he is called the 'first-born son' of Texas) with two 'sons´ with conflicting loyalties who help him save his ranch. The first season offers a compelling portrayal of Comanche life at the time of the conquest and it rewrites the portrayal of Latino

characters in Westerns by focusing on a family of rich Tejanos whose land and property are stolen by the McColloughs in the context of the Texas Border Wars (1910-1919). The second season manages to connect the two storylines and adds a coda that takes place in the 1980s. The series offers a dark, Hobbesian view of both distant and recent Texan past, stressing the cruel similitudes between the different settlers of the land: Comanches, Apaches, Mexicans, Americans, and local or foreign oil corporations ("The man who slaughters his opponents wins. That is Texas"). It also creates very interesting parallels between father-son relationships in different contexts, and engages very successfully in the Western tradition by presenting a stark contrast between reality and the "legend" created around it.

Godless was created by Scott Frank under the executive production of Steven Soderbergh, and is probably the Western TV show that has received the best reviews since *Deadwood*. It is set in Colorado in 1884 and it tells the story of La Belle, a mining town where an accident has killed all the men, forcing women to step in and take over. The trailer emphasizes the absence of men ("Welcome to No Man's Land") and promised a more "feminist Western in a #MeToo Era" than it actually is. It does rewrite gender roles by offering different means of female empowerment (the prostitute turned school teacher because of the lack of customers, the lesbian leader of the town, and Alice, the widow who is able to defend her land and ranch on her own), but it does many other things in order to rewrite Western conventions. Another storyline is about Frank Griffin (Jeff Daniels as a ruthless outlaw gang leader dressing like a preacher) and his confrontation with his son-like figure Roy Goode. Griffin is an awe-inspiring fascinating character, reminiscent of Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, who defines the title of the series by answering a Norwegian pioneer who does not understand his cruelty: "This here's the paradise of

the locust, the lizard, the snake. It's the land of the bleeding and the wrathful. It's godless country. And the sooner you accept your inevitable demise, the longer you all are gonna live" (Episode 2). *Godless* questions the traditional gender roles of Westerns, their conventional religious values, the predominance of the individual over the community, the gun-loving culture of the American West (by means of Roy Goode, a skillful gunman who teaches Alice's son not to use guns carelessly), and, in general, "the notion of the Old West as an embodiment of American values" (Gilbert). As well-meaning as *Into the West*, it offers a much more gripping story and multidimensional engaging characters, which enables it to revise and update Western conventions well into the twenty-first century.

There are two other series that can also be considered Westerns (because of their location, iconography, characters and themes), but which take place not in the time span of the conquest of the West but in a contemporary setting. The protagonist of *Longmire* (A&E, Netflix, 2012-2017) is a sheriff in a small Wyoming town near a reservation, and the protagonist of *Yellowstone* (Paramount Network, 2018-present) is a rancher in Montana fighting Native Americans and other white people in order to keep his ranch, but they both do their jobs in twenty-first century America. *Longmire* is based on a book series written by Craig Johnson, which has been called "Western Noir" and is certainly more of a detective series than a Western: every episode has a detective story structure, with a whodunit solved at the end which is combined with a longer plot (about Walt's wife death) connecting all the episodes. The Wyoming setting provides the series with many interesting Western references, however. For example, the aging broken sheriff in conflict with modern times and the arrival of contemporary crime (such as transnational drug cartels and serial killers) in the West may remind the viewer of revisionist Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s with similar

characters. Similarly, the vicinity of the town to a Cheyenne reservation makes it a very interesting setting in which to contrast conflicting white and Indian attitudes toward crime, as well as to delve into contemporary Native American issues, such as the legal adoption of Cheyenne children by white families to save them from supposedly negligent Indian parents.

The second `contemporary Western´, *Yellowstone,* presents Kevin Costner as John Dutton, the owner of a huge ranch in Montana who uses all kinds of measures to keep the property in the family. The series raised high expectations, since it was written and produced by Taylor Sheridan, the reputed screenwriter of films like *Sicario* (2015) and *Hell or High Water* (2016), but, according to most reviewers, the first two seasons failed to meet the high standards set by those films. It deals with contemporary Western issues, such as the politics and economics of ranching in a global world, the arrival of Eastern money and tourists into Montana, and the problems of Native American reservations and casinos, but it does so by using soap-opera melodramatic clichés more reminiscent of *Dallas* or *Dynasty* than the Western genre. Although the second season in particular offers an interesting take on contemporary cowboy life, when it deals with the psychological problems or the political and corporate power fights of the Dutton family, it does so without any realism or subtlety in the delineation of characters or plots.

Longmire and *Yellowstone* are also examples of a tendency, identified by Michael K. Johnson in 2012, to set TV programs in the American West. He listed a number of "reality TV" shows with a western setting, and programs set in Alaska as the "Last Frontier State," demonstrating a proliferation that bears witness to the fascination that the frontier experience still holds in the American imagination. A similar fascination with the American West (together with the strong presence of the

television industry in the West) might also explain the number of fictional series with a western setting. In his introduction to the 2012 special issue of *Western American Literature* Johnson mentioned *CSI* (Nevada; CBS, 2000-2015), *Big Love* (Utah; HBO, 2006-2011) and *Friday Night Lights* (Texas; NBC, 2006-2011), but also series that make use of the western location to "include character, plot, and/or visual references to the genre Western" (125), such as *Sons of Anarchy* (California; FX, 2008-2014), *In Plain Sight* (New Mexico; USA, 2008-2012), or *Arctic Air* (Canadian West, CBC, 2012. Western references become so important in some of these programs that the shows themselves end up being defined by the word *Western*. This is the case for *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), as its showrunner, Vince Gilligan, has admitted:

> 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.
>
> Q: Well, you do have a lone gunman.
>
> A: [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*. [*My italics*] (Gilligan, Q&A)

The New Mexico desert present in so many Westerns seems to be the perfect location for the story of Walter White, a timid chemistry teacher transformed into Heisenberg, a methamphetamine manufacturer and violent drug lord. The image of Walter pointing a gun into the camera, the frequent standoffs in the desert landscape, and the black hat worn by Walter when he changes into Heisenberg (no longer `white´), are all visual allusions to the Western genre that indicate other thematic connections. The hero's transformation takes place significantly not on the traditional frontier, 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). 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 emphasized, *Breaking Bad*, like some of the other shows branded as "quality TV" in the last two decades (e.g. *The Sopranos* [HBO, 1999-2007], *The Wire* [HBO, 2002-2008]), *Six Feet Under* [HBO, 2001-2005], and *Mad Men* [ACM, 2007-2015]) have to do with "difficult men" (the actual title of Martin's book): 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" (Martin 13). The solution proposed by *Breaking Bad* to this crisis, as Brian Faucette points out, lies in a return to the "hegemonic masculinity" represented by the Western genre: "Walt's transformation demonstrates that often in an effort to reclaim control men resort to empty rhetoric and performances of hegemonic masculinity because these modes have been crucial in the formation of the nation" (85). Jason Mittell has pointed out how *Breaking Bad* stands out from the other programs for two reasons: first, because of what he calls its "centripetal complexity" (which creates a "storyworld with unmatched depth of characterization, layers of backstory, and psychological 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 noted 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 the

“Fly” episode, an esthetic tour-de-force where we only see Walter’s efforts 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 the `mini-subplot´ of a fly annoying one of the heavies.

Finally, the ending of the series was also inspired by the Western genre, 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” (Gilligan, 'Breaking Bad'). According to Gilligan, Walter’s decision to spare Jesse’s life is inspired by Ethan’s similar decision not to kill his niece in Ford’s film, in spite of the many forewarnings that this might actually happen. As Johnson has pointed out, 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 his brother’s house) (Johnson, Goodbye, "Bad"). Looking at the final episode through the lens of the Western, it is easy to identify Walter as the Western “man in the middle” (Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel 74), related to characters like Ethan, but also Leatherstocking in James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, 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). Johnson concludes that Walter is “on the border between the civilian and the outlaw” and in the final scenes is shown to be alienated, like Ethan in *The Searchers*, “away from the interior space (his house,

his family) that symbolizes his connection to civilization" (Johnson, Goodbye, "Bad").

Another series that takes advantage of its location on the border with Mexico is *The Bridge* (FX, 2013-2014, set in El Paso/Juárez) one of the most thought-provoking TV series from a transnational perspective. The original Danish/Swedish crime series (*Broen/Bron*, SVT1/DR1, 2011-2018)[1] is set between Malmö and Copenhagen and takes advantage of this location to reflect on the conflicts of the borderlands, the relationships, similitudes and differences between people on both sides of the border. This is illustrated by the relationship between two investigators of contrasting nationality and personality: Swedish Saga Norén is `neurodivergent,´ presumably affected by ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) and certainly lacking in social skills, whereas Danish Martin Rohde is extroverted and friendly, a typical representative of the "South of the North" as the Danes like to see their country in the Scandinavian context. The first season focused on the appearance of a corpse in the middle of the Oresund bridge joining Sweden and Denmark (which triggered a double investigation both north and south of the border), and it became so successful that it has been replicated in four different remakes across the world, demonstrating the relevance of borders and the existence of a transnational television audience and industry in a global world. These new settings are the borders between France and the United Kingdom (*The Tunnel*, Sky Atlantic/Canal+, 2013-2018), Estonia and Russia

[1] Another Scandinavian TV series adapted to the American West is *The Killing* (AMC, 2011-2014) set in Seattle and adapted from *Forbrydelsen* (DR1, 2007-2012).

(*Mocm/Sild*, NTV, 2018), Malaysia and Singapore (*The Bridge*, HBO Asia/NTV7, 2018), and the United States and Mexico (*The Bridge*, FX, 2013-2014)[2].

The American remake is particularly interesting because of its location in one of the most complex and fruitful borders in the world, the border between Mexico and the USA, which has been theorized by scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa or José David Saldívar. The latter describes the borderlands as a "*Transfrontera* contact zone", a hybrid "third space" which becomes a "paradigm of crossings, intercultural exchanges, circulations, resistances, and negotiations as well as of militarized 'low-intensity' conflict" (ix). The border presented in *The Bridge* is all of these things, a greatly conflicting area from a legal and moral point of view, where (as in many Westerns) the protagonists have to look to their own conscience in order to choose a moral path, as we saw in *Breaking Bad*. In *The Bridge*, Sara becomes Sonya Cross, a strict detective from the El Paso Police Department with ASD, and Martin becomes Marco Ruiz, a detective from the Chihuahua State Police who has more flexible ethics in order to achieve the same goals. In this sense, Mexico represents the 'Wild West' of personal justice and corruption as opposed to the bureaucratic justice system of contemporary America. As one of the characters says, "We Mexicans have the virtue of an openly corrupt system", and in fact, at the end of Season 1, Marco finds himself in the position of either taking personal revenge (after his own son is killed) or following the official law. The moral dilemma of taking the law into your own hands or respecting the formal justice system is carried into the second season and related to the Western genre in visual terms. Hank Wade is Sonya's mentor and father-like figure in the El Paso police force and he comes to represent the Old West of personal

[2] There is a fifth series inspired by *Broen/Bron*: *Der Pass* (*Pagan Peak*, Sky, 2018), a German/Austrian coproduction where the corpse is found on an alpine border between Germany and Austria, but the plot in this series departs fundamentally from the original.

revenge by always wearing his cowboy Stetson hat. In fact, this is underlined in the script, first when a Federal officer asks him if he is "into the whole cowboy thing," and later when he misplaces his hat and replaces it with a baseball cap as a visual metaphor of something that does not work anymore ("I thought I could make a difference," he says, talking about his difficult job in a modern transnational world). We can see how the new location adds a great deal of thematic density to the series, as illustrated also by the allusions to the Juarez femicides, the network created to facilitate illegal immigration, the Mexican drug cartels and the corruption of the Mexican police force, none of which appeared in the Scandinavian original.

References to the Western genre are not limited to series set west of the Rocky Mountains, and we can also find them in shows set in very different places, such as Baltimore, Georgia, Kentucky, Iraq and even alternative worlds in fantastic or science-fiction series. As we get further away from the Western location and from the Western temporal setting, we can see that we are moving into new "uncharted territory" where a new concept might be useful: the post-Western, which we will deal with later. One of these series is David Simon's *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), where the streets of Baltimore become a contemporary version of a lawless frontier town. As I have written elsewhere ("'Wiring' *The Wire*" 285-286), the Western genre is one of the most relevant transtextual references to *The Wire;* in fact, by using the Western as a hypotext, *The Wire* can highlight the message of the series as a reflection on the evolution of the "American experiment" and its failure in American inner cities. Another show created by David Simon (*Generation Kill*, HBO, 2008) also makes commentaries about the Western genre, and is set even further away than Baltimore: Iraq. Susan Kollin has already noted the relocation of the Western hero abroad, pointing out that "western American fiction and film have also developed along

transnational routes by featuring the US cowboy hero in an international setting, where his adventures often involve battling foes and restoring order on the global frontiers of the Middle East" (1). She has illustrated her point with films like *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008), which tell tales of soldiers in "Indian/Iraqi country" and demonstrate how the use of the metaphor of the American soldier as cowboy abroad questions "the logic of the Wild West analogy" (163). We can find something similar 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 use the Wild West analogy. Similarly, *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-present) is based on an Israeli series called *Hatufim* (*Prisoners of War*, Channel 2, 2010-2012), and in the first seasons it tells the story of a US marine held captive in Iraq, who later turns on his own country. The series plays with Western captivity stories (like *The Searchers*) and the "classic frontier anxieties in the Western concerning racial and cultural contamination" (Kollin 4), but inverts gender roles by making the captive a man and the rescuer a woman. In fact, the most interesting aspect of this series is probably the portrayal of its female protagonist, Carrie Mathison, a CIA officer with bipolar disorder whose condition is often a liability for her, and who often needs to examine her own moral compass to question her allegiances to her political and/or military commanders. In fact, when we look at female characters like Carrie Mathison or Sonya Cross (from *The Bridge*), we need to reconsider Brett Martin's statements about "difficult men" in contemporary television to include "difficult women" whose characterization and evolution is one of the main assets of these new programs.

Another group of series where we can find Western allusions is part of the fantasy genre. Johnson noted the case of *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-present),

describing two Western-related situations: a saloon fight, and the arrival of a protagonist wearing a hat and riding a horse into a zombie-dominated town. Johnson pointed 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" (Johnson, Introduction 124). He also quoted 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. Without denying this function, I think that we can find another reason that the fantasy genre refers to the Western. The case we can consider is the 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." The producers of *Game of Thrones* needed to overcome "the low-brow perception of the fantasy genre" (163) 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" (164). Hassler-Forest mentions a number of changes oriented to `gentrify´ and `rebrand´ a fantasy novel originally perceived as a product for immature teenagers, and turn it into a product (`Quality TV´) consumed by an adult audience. These changes include the promotion of a show-runner identity (emphasizing the presence of producers David Benioff and Daniel B. Weiss in promotional materials, to

the detriment of George R. R. Martin), the creation of `gritty,´ cynical characters and environment, and the introduction of nudity, sex, violence and profanity. The adaptation therefore 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" (173-174). Although Hassler-Forest does not mention it, I think it is important to point out that, in order to reach that broader `bourgeois´ audience, the adaptation also encourages hybridity, downplaying the fantastic elements (particularly in its first season) in favor of the pseudo-medieval imaginary and the historical aspects of the plot, making it easy for the audience to connect the series' storyworld to the real world of European history and geography. This is also where the Western allusions 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". He mentions one where Arya and The Hound get into a tavern fight, reproducing a scene from Sergio Leone's *For a Few Dollars More*, and points at both 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. The genre hybridity that *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* display when they make these Western allusions 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 that they can recognize and identify with.

We can see how in the last groups of series we have considered (*The Wire, Generation Kill, Homeland, The Walking Dead, Game of Thrones*), we have moved

away from the space of the American West and from the time frame of traditional Westerns. The allusions we have identified may have an aesthetic, industrial, social or political function, and, as mentioned before, I believe the term 'post-Western' might be appropriate. This term was first applied to cinema by Philip French in the 1970s and has been employed by a variety of critics since then to refer to different cultural products. Neil Campbell 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). Post-Western films thus 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 unravelling of new, challenging forms and settings" (309).

The television shows we have described so far make limited use of these post-Western allusions, but we are going to look now at other series that, although not Westerns, are strongly influenced by the genre. The transtextual references affect the generic semantics and syntax of the series, modifying the iconography, themes, characters and plots of the text, therefore establishing a consistent, systematic dialogue with the Western genre, and taking the spectator into the "space of reflection" described by Campbell in order to comment on the genre's "assumptions and values" (36). Following Genette's ideas about transtextuality, we could say that these Western references are not simply intertextual or hypertextual, but *architextual*, since their purpose is to design a text as part of a genre. Let us remember that, 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 post-Western television series that we are going to analyze now.

Justified (FX, 2010-2015) is set in Kentucky, based on a short story ("Fire in the Hole") by Elmore Leonard (who was also a producer of the series), and I believe it can be considered post-Western television because of the central role played by the Western genre. The Kentucky setting includes Harlan County and the Appalachian area that was once considered the "Kentucky frontier" (when Daniel Boone and other pioneers found a way to cross the Appalachians in 1775) and even the "first American West;" it was advertised by FX as a "twenty-first 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 played Sheriff Seth Bullock in *Deadwood* 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 a gun holstered at his hip, shoots a mafia lord in cold blood, albeit 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.

Raylans' hat, in particular (as we saw to some extent in *The Bridge* and *Breaking Bad*), becomes an instant metaphor for everything Western. For example, there is an episode called "Hatless," when Raylan loses his hat, another episode where a criminal wears a hat like Raylan's to incriminate him in a crime, and a confrontation with a thief, also quick on the draw, wearing a black hat. From that point on, several

characters make references to his hat, and say things like "you're the guy who pulled a Wild Bill," or "Gary Coopered up on that guy in Miami" (Series 1, Episode 3). There is a poster of the movie *Tombstone* (1993), marshals and villains watching Westerns on TV, and nostalgic conversations about the Kentucky `Western´ pioneer past, and about the contrast between marshals like Wyatt Earp fighting crime in the past and in the present (not unlike the reflections of Tommy Lee Jones' character in *No Country for Old Men*). The series is obviously a hybrid of crime drama and Western, with a touch of Southern grotesque that has been called "hillbilly noir," but I believe that the accumulated transtextual references 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" (although not necessarily criticizing them), which is why we can call the series 'post-Western'. For Johnson, however, the term post-Western implies an ethical position, a rewriting of Western conventions to "think differently and better" (129), and here *Justified* does not fit the bill, since, as Justin A. Joyce points out, *Justified* is "inherently conservative, deeply continuous of the traditional, triumphalist Western's glorification of individuals taking justice into their own hands" (180).

Johnson does consider another series to be post-Western, in both the "aesthetic and ethical sense" (127): *Firefly* (Fox, 2002-2003), a "cult series" created by Josh Whedon that was discontinued after the first season, but had such strong success in its release to DVD format that Universal made a film summarizing the script of the

second season: *Serenity* (2005). The 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 is often associated with the Western, and has been described as a "space opera" or even a "space Western"), but the Western in this series becomes, once again, crucial, architextual, since the iconography, the themes, the characters and the plots all hinge on the spatial and temporal displacement of the genre. Life on the "border planets" includes horses, gunslingers, stagecoaches, cows, cowboys, and trains crossing deserts (all of this mixed with spaceships, technology and weapons from the future). The characters use Western slang and Western stock situations, such as the saloon brawl, the train robbery, the bounty hunter, the town bully, and the spaceship itself, which is very much like the stagecoach in the John Ford film (which inspired the choice of some of the characters, including the outlaw hero, the doctor, the priest and the prostitute, as acknowledged by Whedon himself). It 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 I think that it fits within the framework of post-Westerns as we have defined them. 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). The series has also had a strong academic impact, as shown by the existence of a scholarly volume and several articles devoted to its use of language, gender, genre, religion, visual aesthetics and fan reception.

Finally, the last post-Western series that I would like to mention, and the most recent, is *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-present). It is based on the eponymous 1973 film written and directed by Michael Crichton, which describes three amusement parks in the future (Westworld, Medievalworld, and Romanworld). The film's three "worlds" are populated with lifelike androids that are practically indistinguishable from human beings. For $1,000 per day, guests may indulge in any adventure with the android population of the park, including sexual encounters or a fight to the death. Unfortunately, as one may expect, the androids malfunction and begin killing visitors, but there is no hint of a *Blade-Runne*r-like rebellion. In the TV series, the first big difference is that it basically deals with only 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 in their promotional material 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 aspect is how the series (like the film before 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,

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

watching or participating in popular stories. In this case, the *guests* (mainly male) can decide whether they want to go "black hat" or "white hat:" if they want to indulge in their worst perversions, or if they want to choose a cleaner fantasy.

Westworld hybridizes science-fiction and Western conventions and 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 about the ethical issues related to reception and identification processes: how Western film spectators have fulfilled their fantasies by 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. This discourse is articulated through transtextual references to Western films, specifically those 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; the creator of the park is called (Robert) Ford, and he actually repeats the famous quote from *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) and 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* (which 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, I would add that it also forces us to consider our own role as spectators, and consider our own sense of guilt when we feel that we have identified with the guests in their perverted fantasies. Finally, it is interesting to note that the second season includes a more hopeful rewriting of the Western myth, when we see 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 have been forced to play those roles before and have now been liberated, leaving the world of the West for a better realm where the peaceful coexistence of different races is possible.

In conclusion, we have seen how the trend that Michael K. Johnson identified in 2012 has continued in the last decade, so that we can still speak of a `rebirth´ of the West and the Western in twenty-first century American television. Whether in the form of traditional or contemporary Westerns, or in the form of post-Western hybrid formats (relocated away from their traditional spatial and/or temporal framework), the series we have mentioned are a testimony of the persistence of the Western myth in the American imaginary. We have also seen that most of these TV series are part of a general revisionist process to rewrite genre conventions in order to include groups (basically women and Native Americans) who had been excluded in traditional Westerns, to offer a less triumphalist and more thought-provoking vision of the settling of the West, and to take Westerns away from their traditional setting and into new, hybridized worlds.

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