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## CURRICULUM

This teaching guide has three curriculum objectives:

- To help students and teachers using films and videos in the context of the following secondary school curriculum - English Language Arts, Film and Media Studies, Social Studies, and Visual Arts
- To assist educators who are planning to teach films studies for the first time
- To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text

**Note:** Classroom activities are provided after each section along with an answer key at the end of the guide. Answers are not provided for all activities as some questions depend on teachers to choose films they are already working with in their classes.

## PLOT SUMMARY

### ***THE SEARCHERS*** (John Ford, 1956)

In the history of the western, *The Searchers* is one of those movies that seems to define the genre. It includes all the characteristic elements of a western, and then adds some: our hero is not a man of easy affection, or clean morals. He is cruel towards others and bitter in what used to be called his soul. Earlier in his career, director John Ford helped establish the western genre by making films about less complicated if still potent heroes, and in expanding the storytelling potential of this kind of film, he created a masterpiece.

Set in the magnificent (and duly lampooned) landscapes of Monument Valley, *The Searchers* follows Ethan Edwards (played memorably by John Wayne) on a five-year odyssey in search of Ethan's abducted niece, Debbie (played by Natalie Wood). Debbie

has been kidnapped by Scar, a brutal and daring Comanches Indian chief, following a murderous raid on the family farm. Ethan's grim quest will take him through cold, hard winters, majestic river valleys, and any number of encounters with those who would help and hinder his cause. Throughout the film, an ugly racism is shown to underlie and motivate Ethan's quest, until the final moments of the picture when Ethan's racist fury is finally quelled as he is about to make a horrible mistake. As many critics have noted, superb opening and closing images help to reveal Ethan's status as a pathological outsider who seems forever separated from the family he so wants to protect and love. And this is only one of the themes that helps to make *The Searchers* a remarkable celebration of the western genre. This theme gives rise to the spirit of individualism the genre helped to define and sustain in Hollywood.

### Preview Questions

1. Before you watch *The Searchers*, working in groups, draw up a list of the key elements you expect to find in a western. Use the categories in the chart below to help lay out your expectations.

SETTING	NARRATIVE CHARACTERS	KEY IMAGES	MUSIC

2. Pay close attention to the opening series of images in *The Searchers*. Ethan Edwards (played by John Wayne) arrives at his brother's house to be greeted by Martha, Ethan's sister-in-law, along with her three children (including Debbie, who will play a central role in the rest of the film). Observe how Ethan is framed as he walks towards the house. Also pay attention to how Martha is lit and how she physically responds to Ethan's appearance. Write down your observations about these scenes. When you finish watching the film, assess whether your observations about the meaning of these scenes are the same as your thoughts at the outset of the film.

### Follow-up Questions

3. After watching *The Searchers*, discuss whether it fit with your expectations of a Hollywood western, or did it surprise you in any ways. If so, how did it surprise you?

4. Whether you have seen a John Wayne film in the past or not, there is little doubt that his acting style is very distinct. Today, Wayne's distinctive mannerisms and style can seem exaggerated. Think about his performance as Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, and suggest as many reasons as you can to explain why Wayne is ideally suited for this role.

## A GENRE FADES INTO THE SUNSET

It used to be the case that westerns were the most common genre in Hollywood. They were like action movies today: a dime a dozen, and at one point in the history of Hollywood, nearly this cheap to make. Between the 1930s and the mid-1960s the western was the dominant Hollywood film, an archetypal genre and (along with the musical), arguably, the most important American story form of the twentieth century.

Today, this is no longer the case. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a western in any theatre (repertory or otherwise) in any major city in North America. It's like the genre has faded into its own sunset, only rarely to be heard from in films like *Silverado* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1985), *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992), *Tombstone* (George P. Cosmatos, 1993), *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1994), *Legends of the Fall* (Edward Zwick, 1994), and *All the Pretty Horses* (Billy Bob Thornton, 2000). And but for Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* and Clint Eastwood's requiem for the western gunslinger, *Unforgiven*, none of these films will be remembered for much of anything at all.

Which is not to say that the influence, themes, and myths central to the classic Hollywood western have disappeared; just the movies have. Western themes and myths are still alive and well, but they have migrated to other genres, most notably, science fiction and action movies. Here, in some of the biggest box-office success stories of today, we can see the imprint of a genre that used to dominate the Hollywood landscape. A look at the western today is not a revisiting of a dying genre, but an examination of a type of film whose shadow still falls across the theatre screens of North America.

### Early Westerns and the Evolution of a Genre

The first western was also one of the great films from the earliest days of cinema: Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). While famous for its sustained narrative, Porter's masterpiece included three elements (crime, chase scenes, and retribution for wrongdoing) that would find their way into a great many of the westerns to follow. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, as the cinema itself was developing, the western became a generic staple. Actor G.M. Anderson, who played four roles in Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, would become one of the first stars in Hollywood, in part by establishing the primacy of a central heroic figure as the anchor for western movies. Anderson, however, wasn't alone in building a career on the back of the western. Throughout the 1920s, stars like Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson, and Buck Jones would all help build Hollywood and the star system through the success of films about cowboys, Indians, and the great American frontier.

On the studio side, Carl Laemmle would be the most significant studio figure responsible for the development of the western. Beginning in the 1910s and continuing on through the 1930s, Laemmle's Universal Films would become the home of the western, and would help to develop some of the genre's most important talent, including John Ford, director of *The Searchers*. Ford cut his teeth as a director of early Universal silent westerns before becoming one of the masters of the genre throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

With the coming of sound in the late 1920s, westerns like Victor Fleming's *The Virginian* (1929), John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), and Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948) would typify the straightforward heroic tales that would dominate the genre until the 1950s. These movies tended to be about a lone gunman or gunmen forced by circumstance or vocation to protect a community on the outskirts of the American frontier. The enemies were Native Americans (who were often portrayed as vicious savages) or violent gangs of white men. In each case, our hero(es) is forced to protect the well-being of a town or family faced with certain doom.

While certain film companies (i.e., Republic Films, which produced *The Gay Cabellero* [1936], *Riders of Whistling Skull* [1937], and *Dark Command* [1940]) would become standard bearers for the western, there were several variations on the kinds of heroes at the centre of these films. For instance, in *Red River*, perhaps the best western of the 1940s, John Wayne starred as an authoritarian and stubborn cattle rancher in conflict with his surrogate son, played by Montgomery Clift. By this time, John Wayne was already the most recognizable star in Hollywood, and the symbol of the western hero. In the film, Montgomery Clift was less quick to use his gun to solve his problems and more willing to forgive the weak for their failings. Because of this, he became a counter-hero to Wayne, helping to bring a gentler face to the classic western gunslinger.

Even with these variations in mind, certain themes would dominate westerns from the 1930s and 1940s, including:

- Stories about man versus nature, especially in a hostile environment
- Stories about the struggles of white Americans against hostile Native peoples
- Stories in which crimes and chases are set in nineteenth-century America

Moreover, before the 1950s, most westerns told stories about the triumph of good over evil, and in this sense, were the kind of moral tales common to many world religions.

In the 1950s, a number of westerns pushed the genre beyond the realm of simple stories about mythic, quick-shooting heroes towards more complex psychological studies of individuals, families, and communities. Rather than simply glorifying the man with the quickest gun in the West, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) and a string of films by Anthony Mann looked at the motivations of men who kill and the effects these killings have on the communities and families they are supposed to defend. Mann's films such as *Bend of the River* (1952), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *The Man from Laramie* (1955), *The Last Frontier* (1955), and *Man of the West* (1958) tended to push westerns into the realm of adult entertainment, where psychological depth and complexity replaced simple heroism.

By the 1960s, the genre shifted again, opening itself up to more complex characters who tended to be extraordinarily violent and even anti-heroic compared to the characters typical of earlier milestones in the genre. Sergio Leone and other lesser directors produced the very successful "spaghetti westerns" (*A Fistfull of Dollars* [1964], *For a Few Dollars More* [1965], and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* [1966]), which were called such because the best were made by an Italian and shot in Italy (or Spain). Perhaps what's most memorable about these films is that they helped launch the career of Clint Eastwood as "the man with no name" and set the stage for what many consider to be the genre's highpoint and end-game.

Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* was released in 1969, and with the appearance of this film, many argue that the genre reached something of an apotheosis and an end. Peckinpah's tale is stylish, exciting, and overwhelmingly bloody. Set in 1913, it tells the story of the West from the point of view of nine outlaws who are bound by a bond of friendship and honour but hounded by bounty hunters. With the coming of the twentieth century, the film suggests, the world of the American West had little room for the vigilante justice, barbarism, and honour of the Old West. As the film's poster said:

*Unchanged men in a changing land. Out of step, out of place and desperately out of time... Suddenly a new West had emerged. Suddenly it was sundown for nine men. Suddenly their day was over. Suddenly, the sky was bathed in blood...*

And in the film, it certainly was. In many ways, the film is the very opposite of the heroic tales of honourable gunmen defending struggling communities that had characterized earlier westerns. Instead, Peckinpah's film is a requiem for a genre. Filled with two memorable scenes of brutal violence, *The Wild Bunch* suggests that the outlaw's code of macho violence is both positive and ultimately doomed. The same might be said for the genre itself.

Moving from heroic tale in the 1930s and 1940s, to the introduction of psychological complexity in the 1950s and early 1960s, through to Peckinpah's revisions about the brutality underlying how the West was won in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the western finally arrived at a parody of itself. Following *The Wild Bunch* and Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, which arrived on screens in 1971, the western story form seems to have completed its cycle. In the decades to follow, Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and Alex Cox's *Straight to Hell* (1987) were simply parodies, announcing the end of a once dominant story form.

Today, if the western has disappeared from movie screens, it is, in part, the result of transformations in the genre itself, and, in part, the result of a fundamental historical transformation in North American life. Generally speaking, the frontier in which westerns are set no longer really matters or makes sense to people the way it did even in the early 1960s. Since the 1970s, the real frontier that audiences are curious about has little to do with the American West. Rather, it is a frontier beyond earth itself: space, "the final frontier." Interestingly, in the same year (1969) that Sam Peckinpah released *The Wild Bunch*, American astronauts first set foot on the moon. Ironically, this moment in real history seems to have undermined the power of the old western frontier in the imaginations of North Americans. And as this transformation took hold, the power of the western as genre lost its status. In the end, the myths and characteristics of the genre did not disappear; they, like the interests of North American audiences, migrated to the world of science fiction and the vast open tracks of new space beyond earth itself.

## activity 01

Certain directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, Sergio Leone, and Sam Peckinpah are associated with history of the western. Today, major directors are still often associated with a certain type of film. For instance, Martin Scorsese is associated with crime dramas, David Fincher tends to direct thrillers, and Jane Campion directs dramas.

Choose two major directors today, and using the following chart, indicate the genre associated with these directors, select two examples of their films that fit with the genre you have identified, and write a one-paragraph review of the film as an example of the selected genre.

DIRECTORS	GENRE	EXAMPLES OF GENRE FILMS	FILM REVIEW
A.			
B.			