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When the West Meets the South on Screen

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*L'Ouest et le Western : terre et terrain de réconciliation dans la guerre de
Sécession*

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The West and the Western as grounds for reconciliation in the American Civil War

L'Ouest et le Western : terre et terrain de réconciliation dans la guerre de Sécession

Juliette Bourdin

- 1 In the early days of cinema, two genres proved to be extremely popular on the silver screen, with hundreds of films being produced: Westerns and Civil War films.¹ These two genres followed specific conventions: Civil War stories were set in the East whereas Westerns were inspired by the folklore of the Wild West, filled with outlaws, cowboys and Indians. Later Westerns were generally set between the 1860s and 1890s and often referred to, or at least hinted at, the Civil War (1861-1865), but they generally did so in *postbellum* stories through the character of the veteran, in particular the “embittered rebel.”² Yet, there was a time when Civil War stories were eventually told in a western setting, more specifically in films released between the early 1940s and the late 1960s, thereby raising the question of the impact of this move to the West on the representation of the Civil War and the depiction of Southerners.
- 2 Focusing on ten representative Civil War Westerns with very similar plots and characters,³ this paper intends to demonstrate that the West as space and the Western as genre proved to be ideal grounds for national reconciliation. One specific plot that was used many times presents the romance, of course unlikely at the beginning of the movie, which develops between a couple of characters who belong to the two enemy camps, in particular the Southern Belle spy and the Yankee soldier, or the Union nurse and the Confederate officer. For the sake of clarity, emphasis will be given to *Virginia City*⁴ (Michael Curtiz, 1940) and *Escape from Fort Bravo*⁵ (John Sturges, 1953), for these two movies are perfect illustrations of a more general trend.
- 3 After examining the heritage of the Civil War on the screen as well as the reasons why Civil War scripts “moved West,” the analysis focuses on Southern and Western motifs

in the selected films, highlighting the standard elements of Southern representation and some key ingredients that were inherent to the Western genre and proved useful to convey the ideological message of national reconciliation.

The Civil War on the screen

- 4 Though less in vogue nowadays, the Civil War was a very common and popular theme during the silent era, to the point that the myriad of films produced at the time gave birth to recurring and lasting patterns. Hollywood has often been accused of distorting history, particularly with regard to the Civil War; yet, the film industry drew on a preexistent historiographical trend that had started after the war and spread even more after Reconstruction, when many historians, politicians and writers undertook somehow to “rewrite” the Civil War in order to heal the wounds and accelerate the reunification of the nation. Indeed, bitterness and resentment were, unsurprisingly, still deeply felt on both sides in the aftermath of the war, and particularly so for the defeated Southerners. Consequently, the “nationalist consensus” (i.e., the necessity to restore peace and harmony in the entire country) led to a sort of ideological misrepresentation of history – the creation of “a usable past on which both North and South could agree”⁶ –, often in the form of fables displaying a nationalistic message, with the following recurrent patterns.⁷
- 5 In the first place, one essential feature was that the national reconciliation concerned only the “white” population. The overwhelming majority of Civil War films actually never mentioned the real cause of the conflict (i.e., slavery), or when they did, they explained that the South fought over States’ rights.⁸ As Bruce Chadwick explains, “The only way mythmakers could wash away the bitterness between North and South and bring about reunification was to erase the fundamental cause of the war and all its death and destruction – slavery.”⁹ So, the issue of slavery was, indeed, carefully avoided, and black people were either caricatured in a pro-South perspective or simply forgotten.¹⁰ Secondly, to soothe Southern bitterness, the “Old South” was emphatically romanticized, and Southerners were pictured as gallant, chivalrous and courageous men who fought for a so-called noble “Lost Cause”¹¹ – a well-known trend dubbed as the “Moonlight-and-Magnolias school.” “Moonlight and magnolias” is, indeed, the metaphorical expression that designates the biased representation of a romantic *antebellum* Southern society, with the image of large plantations and great mansions peopled by aristocratic gentlemen wooing young belles under the moonlight, the air fragrant with the scent of magnolias. *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) is the quintessential example of this “school” (sometimes also called the “Plantation Myth”) that perpetuated for decades this nostalgic and yet twisted vision. Finally, in order to bring about the national reunification, it was deemed necessary to present both Northerners and Southerners as (white) brothers who, beyond their temporary rift, were bound to be reunited in the bosom of the family, because they shared one characteristic that was greater than any of their differences: their *Americanness*.¹²
- 6 This rewritten story/history was repeated over and over in countless textbooks, novels, poems, or theater plays which were particularly popular, and the legend became so strong that it eventually supplanted facts and was accepted as historical truth.¹³ In other words, filmmakers just furthered a well-established trend, but when these stories were transposed to the screen, the impact was obviously much greater, so much so that

in the words of historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., Southerners “won on the screen what they lost on the battlefield.”¹⁴ This is the reason why Hollywood was blamed for spreading an inaccurate vision of the war.¹⁵ In any case, as Bruce Chadwick writes, “Few periods in American history have been as romanticized, eulogized and hopelessly distorted through film as the Civil War.”¹⁶

- 7 Gary W. Gallagher identifies four major traditions in Civil War films: the romanticized Lost Cause; the Union Cause, which generally focused on the father figure of Abraham Lincoln; the Emancipation Cause, which emerged only in the 1960s; and the Reconciliation Cause, which insisted on the Americanness of both sides so as to justify and praise the “logical” and even “unavoidable” restoration of the nation – although Americans were only “reunited in their whiteness.”¹⁷ However, it is to be noted that plots showing the impossibility of reconciliation also existed during the Silent era – a type of film which may be dubbed the “Betrayal plot.” One example is *The Sting of Victory* (J. Charles Haydon, 1916), in which a Southern aristocrat sides with the Union army, becomes estranged from his family and his former sweetheart, and finds upon his return from the war that his family will not forgive him for his “betrayal.”¹⁸ Films with “Betrayal plots” remained exceptions to the rule, and some of them actually included a reconciliation-like pattern, generally expressed through the parents’ regrets at having banished the son or daughter who had dared marry someone from the enemy camp; yet, this trend did exist.
- 8 Of the four principal traditions, the classic “reconciliation cause” has been by far the most widely used plot, first because this typical storyline was found in the majority of the theater plays that Hollywood simply adapted to the screen,¹⁹ and then because there is no better scenario than a love story springing between a Southern Belle (quite often a spy) and a Union soldier, or between a Union nurse and a Southern officer. Quite tellingly, among Civil War films produced between 1897 and 1961 (excluding documentaries and educational films), at least one third present a main plot based on the reconciliation pattern (between siblings, friends, etc.), with a hundred or so stories involving specifically a romantic relationship between a Yankee and a “Rebel.”²⁰ A very high number of motion pictures also involved spies, notably Southern Belles, to such an extent that, as Bruce Chadwick concludes with a touch of humor, it seemed that half of the women of the South acted as spies during the war. Indeed, out of the Civil War films mentioned above, at least 87 include spies, either male or female, in the plot. One recurring character was “Nan the girl spy,” the intrepid Southern heroine of at least seven pictures – and even *she* fell for a Union officer in *The Love Romance of the Girl Spy* (Kalem, 1910)!²¹
- 9 Hundreds of such films were released during the silent era, in particular between 1911 and 1915, for Americans celebrated then the 50th anniversary of the conflict.²² Indeed, almost 50% of Civil War films were produced during the years of commemoration,²³ culminating with D. W. Griffith’s three-hour-long epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915),²⁴ whereas a decrease in the production could be observed during the interwar years,²⁵ notably because the U.S. entry into World War I made American viewers favor light-hearted and escapist movies, but also because the nationalist consensus was being challenged by some historians who revisited the Civil War and the Reconstruction era to offer new interpretations.²⁶ World War II, on the other hand, restored the nationalist consensus – a restoration strengthened by the beginning of the Cold War, which imposed the unity of the country against the external threat of the Soviet Union – and

the new followers of “consensus history” stressed again what had united rather than divided the country.²⁷ World War II led to the production of many war films,²⁸ including some that focused on the Civil War, and generally conveyed a propagandistic message emphasizing the need for national unity. This is quite obvious in the movies directed by Michael Curtiz during those years, in particular *Santa Fe Trail* and *Virginia City*, both released in 1940, which inaugurated Civil War films in a *western* setting. The trend, however, was to reach a climax only in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Civil War goes West

- 10 Several reasons explain the “westward migration” of the Civil War film. First, the Western had been the most popular genre for several decades since the late 1920s,²⁹ providing action and adventure to thrill-thirsty audiences, and “horse operas” (as Westerns are sometimes called) were much cheaper to produce than Southern epics in the Griffith-Selznick tradition.³⁰ Many Civil War Westerns were cheap B-movies, and most of them simply transposed the usual spy plot to a Western context.³¹ However, the more Western-like (and historically accurate) ingredient of a gold shipment from the West to the East was often included in the plot. Gold shipments allowed these films to touch on the Civil War in a Western framework and provided an excuse to include beautiful spies, while adding a spirit of adventure as the two enemies were determined to grab the precious metal for their respective camps.³²
- 11 Secondly, the Western provided a much more “neutral” setting where the highly contentious issue of slavery, which had been at the heart of American politics and sectionalism, could be ignored.³³ Indeed, Civil War stories could be depoliticized in the Western environment, where no one expected to see any black character, and even less so any slave.³⁴ Westerns were thus viewed as “risk-free products.”³⁵ Moreover, if (white) Americans were to be reunited again, what better place to do so than in the legendary West, which had always represented “a nation within a nation” and stood for America’s future? The West, as symbolic and geographical space, proved to be a perfect place to reconcile the divided nation, especially with the above-mentioned rise of “consensus history” which, after World War II, emphasized what brought the country together. Before the revisionist current of the 1960s onward, Westerns generally concluded with a happy ending, and the Reconciliation plot wholly suited such an outcome, notably with the union of a Southerner and a Northerner embodying the *re*-union of the nation and enhancing the “building of American nationalism.”³⁶ Being far from home in the West, both Billy Yank and Johnny Reb,³⁷ although typically full of hatred and thirsty for revenge at the beginning of the movie, could eventually and more easily see beyond their differences.
- 12 Finally, the Western genre provided the antagonist that is needed to bring about the North/South reconciliation, demonstrating the wisdom and utter necessity of reforging the unity of the United States. As Jenny Barrett writes, “In order to emphasize the sense of self or identity, there must an ‘other,’ the enemy, against which the self can be defined.”³⁸ *De facto*, the West and the Western offered very convenient ready-made enemies: the Indian, of course, who had always been pictured as a racial “Other” and as an obstacle to the white man’s Manifest Destiny;³⁹ outlaws, who posed a threat to the rule of law and to democratic institutions; and also Mexicans, who often presented a mix between Indians and outlaws.⁴⁰ As Warren French remarks, “‘Good guys’ (frontier

scouts, cowboys, Texas Rangers) and ‘bad guys’ (Indians, rustlers, Mexicans) were easily identified in non-political terms in Westerns; ‘Southerners’ unavoidably involved touchy political issues.”⁴¹ In other words, not only was it easier to avoid the unfortunate issue of slavery in Westerns, but the genre provided a stock enemy whose presence reminded the warring brothers that they still remained white American Christians who had to fight together against barbarian heathens.⁴²

- 13 But there is yet another important type of antagonist: the “bad reb,” who often becomes the surrogate common enemy. The “bad reb” is generally pictured as being all too willing to abandon the cause of the South for his own interest (i.e., greed), or as a man unable to transcend his anger, his bitterness and his thirst for revenge. Such characters can be found in *The Outriders* (Roy Rowland, 1950), *Hangman’s Knot* (Roy Huggins, 1952), and *Santa Fe* (Irving Pichel, 1951). In the latter two films, Randolph Scott plays the “good Reb” who espouses the cause of the entire nation when his own is definitely lost. While the “bad Reb” is unambiguously pictured as the man in the wrong, the “good Reb” shows the path to follow, as when in *Santa Fe* Britt Canfield (Randolph Scott) tells his angry brothers who embody the “embittered rebs”: “We fought for something we believed in and lost. Now we’ve got to mend our fences. Hate won’t help us any.”⁴³

The heritage of the “Moonlight-and-Magnolias school”

- 14 One of the most striking features of these Civil War Westerns is the traditional, frequently clichéd, over-romanticized portrayal of the Southerners, with the stereotypically gallant Confederate gentlemen and Southern Belles. The heritage of the “Moonlight-and-Magnolias school” is unmistakable, for instance, in *Virginia City*, which actually starts in the South. In the early scene where Julia (Miriam Hopkins) meets Vance Irby (Randolph Scott), all characteristic elements are present: a romantic setting at night under the moonlight, the great aristocratic Southern mansion as decor, the blond Southern Belle and the knightly Confederate officer remembering with nostalgia a world that seems already “gone with the wind,” while the Southern hymn “Dixie” is gently being played as background music. Julia remembers the “old days,” the social gatherings that used to be organized, and of course her father’s “pride,” adding bitterly that she has nothing left because “the war has taken everything.” The whole scene depicts the usual romanticization of the South that was part of the biased narratives meant to soothe Southerners’ wounded pride. We can also see that the Southern officer selflessly accepts the fact that Julia does not return his love, forecasting that she will fall for another man.
- 15 Likewise, in *Escape from Fort Bravo*, the romanticized South is present, but through less obvious visuals, since the whole movie is set in the West right from the beginning. Rather, it is through the contrast between the Confederate prisoners and Union Captain Roper (William Holden), portrayed as brutal and unforgiving, that the Southern type is highlighted. For instance, despite the dreadful conditions of the prison camp, Confederate Captain John Marsh (John Forsythe) retains his dignity and proudly declares that although he may have fought in the “wrong army,” he has nonetheless fought for the “right cause” (the exact nature of “the cause” is, however, never specified). Meaningfully enough, the Confederates also count among their ranks a poet, Bailey (John Lupton) – a cowardly deserter in the eyes of Roper – who symbolizes the

noble, delicate and romantic ways of the *antebellum* South. The poet is the one who brings back nostalgic memories of his native South (Virginia) that clash with the arid, hostile West (Arizona): “It’s awful out there. Just space and death.” Bailey then breaks into a smile, thinking of his hometown, in a recollection that resonates with the moonlight-and-magnolias South recreated by Hollywood: “Virginia town on a street of maple trees. At the end of that street, a brook ran under a stone bridge.”

- 16 In other Civil War Westerns, Southern motifs typically involve Southern gentlemen, whose gallant manners sharply differ from those of the Frontiersmen in the rough West where such courtesy is uncommon – so uncommon that local women do not always fully appreciate such graciousness! In *Santa Fe*, for instance, when one of the polite Southerners takes off his hat to salute a lady, he concludes from her surprising lack of reaction: “I guess the gents up here don’t bow to ladies.” In the same film, Britt Canfield is equally astonished when he meets Judith Chandler (Janis Carter), who happens to be the railroad company’s paymaster, telling her with a smile: “In the South, we don’t usually see a woman doing a man’s work.” These comments are definite clichés about the South, just as – on a more humorous note – the Southerners’ military discipline and efficiency sharply contrast with the Yankee “outfit of misfits” in *Advance to the Rear* (George Marshall, 1964), or with the clumsiness of the Northern bell boy recruited as a spy in *A Southern Yankee* (Edward Sedgwick, 1948).

The West as a symbol of America’s future

- 17 In most Civil War Westerns, the hero is represented as an individual who is essentially a Westerner, i.e., a frontiersman who is symbolically above the partisanship that tears the “Easterners” apart: he thus remains, first and foremost, an American. One of the most telling examples of this suggested equation can be found in *Escape from Fort Bravo*, in which Captain Roper, at the outset a cruel Union officer who ruthlessly drags an escaped prisoner (the poet mentioned above) back to the fort, is also shown as a man able to grow roses behind the barracks, in the middle of the desert. Hence, he cannot be such a bad man. In fact, he demonstrates that the Southern poet does not have a monopoly on a certain feminine sensitivity, and, unsurprisingly, the Southern heroine from Texas, Carla (Eleanor Parker), falls in love with him. As a soldier in the Union Army, Roper fulfills his duty like any of his counterparts in the Confederate Army, but his true loyalty is to the West, and as a genuine Frontiersman, he is able to transform the desert into a verdant, delicate place, thus furthering the pastoral tradition of the “Myth of the Garden,”⁴⁴ which, interestingly enough, is generally associated with the agrarian South rather than the industrial North.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Roper remains a true Westerner who, unlike his Southern prisoners, loves the arid West: “That’s the wonderful thing about this country. Everything about it is so complete.” *Complete*, indeed, as the country should be in its entirety, and this is what the West is able to do by acting as the keeper of the American flame: bring the whole country back together again and make it as “complete” as the West.
- 18 In *Santa Fe*, whose backdrop is the building of a railroad line, Judith Chandler, the Union paymaster, is still angry at Southerners like Britt Canfield, but she comes to love the man just as she loves the nation that the railroad itself allegorically represents.⁴⁶ When Judith sees Britt being torn between his sense of duty (toward the railroad and

the country) and his family loyalty (toward his brothers embodying the “embittered rebs”), she tells him:

Britt, a railroad must keep growing, or it dies. And if it dies, all life along its right of ways dies too. Our loyalty belongs to the thousands of people who’ve put their trust in men like you [...]. Nothing must stop this railroad from going forward. It’s bigger than any one person, Britt. Even a brother.

- 19 She might as well have said: “Nothing must stop this *nation* from going forward.” Between his sense of duty and his sense of family, the choice is finally obvious for the “good reb” Britt, and implies that unless his brothers accept the defeat of the South, they will have to be sacrificed for the good of the entire nation. At the beginning of the film, the railroad entrepreneur declares that “nothing but a railroad will make this new empire a part of an expanding America,” asking Northerners and Southerners to “put aside [their] differences for all time, in the interest of a good and common cause.” Echoing this message, the very last words of the movie conclude: “What the future holds, no man can know, but there’ll always be a new end of track. Our trains will become bigger and faster. For as the railroads grow, so will America.” America, as one nation, linked and even mended by its railroad tracks, is henceforth truly indivisible.
- 20 Besides a hostile land due to its natural hindrances (the desert, mountains, etc.) and human obstacles (Indians, outlaws, etc.) that challenge the heroes to the core, the West also conjures up a realm of possibilities, a space where the hatchet of revenge may eventually be buried to allow us to see the men beneath their grey or blue uniforms. In fact, soldiers often end up looking like cowboys, as in *Virginia City*, *The Outriders*, and *Escape from Fort Bravo* – or merely wearing long johns, as in the comedy *Western Advance to the Rear*. To misquote deliberately Thomas Paine’s famous words: “These are the *spaces* that try men’s souls.” This is clearly illustrated in *Virginia City* with the ordeal of the crossing of the desert. The Civil War becomes mostly a background story in a West where people eventually reveal their true nature as individual human beings: cowards and crooks must be sacrificed because they do not deserve to be reunited with the nation, whereas courageous and loyal men are welcomed back into the Mother country, because, no matter which “cause” they fought for during the war, they remained loyal, hence truthful, men. In sum, characters who fight for their cause (the Union cause or the Lost cause) prove worthy of respect, while those who abandon it for selfish motives become the enemies of the entire American nation.⁴⁷

Unity against a common enemy

- 21 Warring brothers unite when threatened by a third party, and the Western genre provided stock enemies that came in handy: Indians, outlaws, or any characters of a greedy, despicable, and immoral nature. In *Virginia City*, when the Union soldiers catch up with the southern rebels’ wagon train, some light-hearted music conveys the idea that the Yankees mean no harm – an idea reinforced by their warm smiles. The musical motif suddenly changes into an ominous tune when a large group of Mexican bandits (whose leader, John Murrell, is played by a rather miscast mustachioed Humphrey Bogart) is seen approaching the wagon train, representing a menace to both Southerners and Yankees. When the bandits attack, the Union soldiers immediately rush to the rescue of the Southerners, and the latter let them enter the circle of wagons formed to defend themselves. The reconciliation is visually manifest when Irby and Bradford are seen fighting side by side against the Mexican bandits symbolizing the

racial “Other”: the former enemies instantly recognize their mutual brotherhood and their shared (white) “Americanness.” Through these two characters battling in the Western territories, the North and the South are portrayed as embodiments of common American values: on both sides, they fight courageously, display dignity, trustworthiness and respect for one another. The message is still hammered home in the last piece of dialogue between Bradford and the dying Irby, notably when the former declares: “Too bad you and I had to be on opposite sides of the fence in this. I think we might have been friends.”

- 22 In *Escape from Fort Bravo*, the same logic applies when Roper and his Southern prisoners are suddenly attacked by Mescalero Indians, as foretold by an unambiguous prologue:

In 1863, while the War Between the States still raged, a large group of Confederate prisoners were held in a sun baked stockade at Fort Bravo, Arizona Territory. Captor and captive—these men in blue and gray—eyed each other with hatred. In the wilderness around them a *common enemy* eyed them both—the deadly Mescalero Indians. [Emphasis added]

- 23 The audience thus knows that the “men in blue and gray” are bound to unite. So, even though for the most part of the film, the prisoners hate and despise Roper as inhuman, when a Mescalero sneaks behind his back to kill him, one of the Southern prisoners immediately picks up a gun and saves his life – just as expected. Roper then tells the man: “In any other place than this, I’d thank you,” to which the young Southerner replies with a smile, “In any other place, you wouldn’t get the chance.” Reconciliation could not happen somewhere in the North or in the South; but in the West, the unimaginable suddenly becomes possible: it is the one place able to reunite the country and make it “complete” again. The verbal exchange between Roper and the young Southerner is their last and only concession recognizing the Civil War rift, for right after that, Roper silently distributes guns and rifles to everyone, because it literally goes without saying. Although initially separated by their differences of allegiance, they now join forces for the survival of the group against the external threat embodied by the “faceless” Indians.⁴⁸ In a sense, they cease to be Union and Confederate soldiers at war with each other, to be, once again, white Americans fighting the “bad Indians.”⁴⁹ This is also the case in *Arizona Bushwhackers* (Lesley Selander, date) where the deep-rooted hatred between the Northerners and the Southerners is forgotten once their small Arizona town is attacked by Apache Indians.
- 24 Thus, symbolically, the presence of Indians or Mexicans enabled the white Americans to unite against a racial “Other” without touching on the subject of slavery or the status of African Americans in the United States, providing a key to the reconciliation between the white brothers at war.⁵⁰

Reconciliation: the symbolic Union

- 25 Unlike most Westerns in which the hero (or anti-hero) remains fundamentally a lone ranger or a “poor, lonesome cowboy,”⁵¹ these Civil War Westerns actually need a love story as a symbol of reconciliation: the Westerner eventually settles down with his sweetheart, formerly from the enemy camp.⁵² In *Virginia City*, reconciliation is definitely sealed thanks to the father figure of Abraham Lincoln who grants pardon and permits the reunion of North and South through the symbolic union of the Yankee officer and the Southern Belle spy, who pleaded with the president to save the man she

loves. The president's words could not be more meaningful: Southerners did not lose the war, they were "found" and brought back into the "indivisible" national family. Likewise, *Escape from Fort Bravo* rebuilds the national bond through the love story between Union Captain Roper and the Southern Belle Carla, her feelings for the man being eventually stronger than her allegiance to the Southern cause. During the long siege by the Indians, the reunion is unequivocally forged by the quite selfless recognition of this North/South love by Carla's own dying Southern fiancé, Confederate Captain John Marsh, who nobly asks Roper to save her and love her as she deserves to be.

- 26 In Westerns in general, women tend to add a touch of glamour and romance to a manly genre,⁵³ but in Civil War Westerns in particular, women also frequently embody the future of the nation, as their love for the onetime foe is presented as the example to follow. Thus, what was true of most silent Civil War films in the 1910s continued to be true in the Civil War Westerns from the 1940s to the 1960s. Not only does the woman's love for the former enemy symbolize the reunion of the entire nation, but it also represents the pardon that heals the wounds on both sides:

[W]omen were used as means to absolve everyone, North and South, of guilt about the war. [...] Which side a man was fighting for didn't matter, directors intimated, because the woman knew – although no one else did – that when the war ended the nation, just like the family, would be reunited.⁵⁴

- 27 Women do know and do forgive, as Judith, in *Santa Fe*, who declares that although Britt Canfield led the Confederate raid that killed her husband during the war, she "never did resent him as a person. Only what he stood for." In *Siege at Red River* (Rudolph Maté, 1954), the Confederate male spy admits: "Where I come from, saving Yankees isn't considered very noble," to which the Northern nurse who loves him simply asks: "Can't you think of them just as people?" Just like Judith, this female character distinguishes between the uniform and the man, between the soldier who accomplishes his duty and the human being. The same message can be heard in *Arizona Bushwhackers*, as the Southern Belle spy, Jill (Yvonne De Carlo), tells the Northerner she loves that the ex-Confederate who has come to act as sheriff is "not in the war anymore. He's just a *human being*, like you. He's trying to pick up the pieces and live the best way he can." [Emphasis added]

- 28 Women, therefore, embody America itself: men, no matter what their initial loyalty was, should love America just as they love a particular woman belonging to the opposing camp.⁵⁵ A marriage between a Northerner and a Southerner is thus needed to convey, unambiguously, this patriotic message.⁵⁶ As Barrett sums up: "With their joining by the end of the narrative, they become parents who will birth the new nation."⁵⁷ The most iconic illustration of the symbolic Union and national reconciliation can be found in the very last image of *Virginia City*: a close-up zooming in on the joined hands of the couple formed by Errol Flynn and Miriam Hopkins, while a cheerful crowd composed of Northerners and Southerners – a historically unlikely scene – rapturously celebrates the end of the conflict.

Conclusion

- 29 Civil War Westerns clearly appeared to be quite nationalistic or even propagandistic, praising the winning qualities of winning Americans. The Western genre made it easy

to further the myth of a supposedly “unavoidable” national reconciliation, facilitating a depoliticization of the Civil War while stressing the necessity of national unity at a time when Americans had to band together, first in the context of World War II and then during the Cold War. The West and the Western were convenient means to repeat the traditional Reconciliation plot – a reconciliation, however, which was designed only for white Americans – without running the risk of sparking off a controversy, as there was no need to justify the absence of African Americans or to mention the cause of the war (slavery) in the Wild West.

- 30 However, Civil War films were eventually to “go back East,” notably after *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989), and the West and the Western were abandoned as grounds for Civil War stories filled with Southern Belles and gallant gentlemen from Dixieland. Several factors explain the disappearance of what Gary W. Gallagher dubs the “Civil War on the Edge of the Range.”⁵⁸ First of all, the Western genre gradually lost popularity and the number of productions (including Civil War stories) consequently decreased. More importantly, the nationalist consensus of the 1950s and 1960s was severely shattered at home, not only because of the Civil Rights Movement (which put racial issues center stage and made it difficult, if not impossible, to continue to ignore the role and place of African Americans in the nation’s past and present, or to maintain the usual “white only” reconciliation plot in Civil War stories), but also by the trauma of the Vietnam War (which profoundly divided the nation and tested the general agreement that the country should rally round the flag in the Cold War). This “loss of innocence” led to a disenchanted or more critical view of the country, thus fueling a general revisionism of the nation’s history, not only regarding the Civil War and the African Americans, but also the history of the American West itself. Finally, if directors decided to tell more authentic stories about the Civil War, moving the setting back to the East was needed in order to confront the North/South rift and the question of slavery. This, however, did not mean that the Reconciliation Cause disappeared from screens,⁵⁹ as the distorted history of the Civil War remains an enduring legacy.

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Filmography

Virginia City. Dir. Michael Curtiz. Perf. Miriam Hopkins, Errol Flynn, Randolph Scott, and Humphrey Bogart. Warner Bros., 1940.

A Southern Yankee. Dir. Edward Sedgwick. Perf. Red Skelton, Brian Donlevy, Arlene Dahl, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1948.

The Outriders. Dir. Roy Rowland. Perf. Joel McCrea, Arlene Dahl, Barry Sullivan, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1950.

Santa Fe. Dir. Irving Pichel. Perf. Randolph Scott, Janis Carter, Jerome Courtland. Columbia, 1951.

- Hangman's Knot*. Dir. Roy Huggins. Perf. Randolph Scott, Donna Reed. Columbia, 1952.
- Escape from Fort Bravo*. Dir. John Sturges. Perf. William Holden, Eleanor Parker, John Forsythe. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1953.
- Siege at Red River*. Dir. Rudolph Maté. Perf. Van Johnson, Joanne Dru, Richard Boone. 20th Century Fox, 1954.
- The Horse Soldiers*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. John Wayne, William Holden, Constance Towers. United Artists, 1959.
- Advance to the Rear*. Dir. George Marshall. Perf. Glenn Ford, Stella Stevens, Melvyn Douglas. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1964.
- Arizona Bushwhackers*. Dir. Lesley Selander. Perf. Howard Keel, Yvonne de Carlo, John Ireland. Paramount, 1968.

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NOTES

1. As a film genre, the Western started to be more precisely defined from the mid-1920s onward. See Jean-Louis Leutrat & Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, *Western(s)*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2007, 13-14.
2. Typical examples include, for instance, the character of Frank “Stonewall” Torrey (Elisha Cook, Jr.) in *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956, or Josey Wales (Clint Eastwood) in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Clint Eastwood, 1976). On the characters of the veteran and the “embittered rebel,” see Bruce Chadwick, *The Reel Civil War: Mythmaking in American Film*, New York: Vintage Books, 2001, 237-239.
3. The filmography at the end of the paper lists exclusively the ten Westerns used specifically for the analysis of southern motifs. Other films cited are referenced only in the notes or in the body of the paper.
4. Set toward the end of the Civil War, *Virginia City* stages a struggle over a 5-million-dollar gold shipment Confederate sympathizers in Virginia City (Nevada) want to send to the nearly defeated South. On his way to Nevada to try and stop the shipment, Kerry Bradford (Errol Flynn) – the Union officer who has escaped from a southern prison and sworn revenge on his former jailer, the Confederate officer Vance Irby (Randolph Scott) – falls in love with Julia Hayne, a Southern Belle spy (Miriam Hopkins), not suspecting that she is one of the conspirators. Later on, Bradford will pursue the rebels’ wagon train, led by Irby and joined by Julia, across the western wilderness.
5. *Escape from Fort Bravo* tells the story of a Union prison camp run by the rough and uncompromising Captain Roper (William Holden) in a remote place in the arid West. When Carla Forester (Eleanor Parker) arrives at the fort, Roper falls in love with her, unaware that she is a spy sent to help some prisoners escape. When the prisoners do escape, Holden chases them to bring them back, until the group is attacked by Mescalero Indians.
6. Alicia R. Browne & Lawrence A. Kreiser, “The Civil War and Reconstruction,” in Peter C. Rollins (ed.), *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 58.
7. Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know about the Civil War*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008, 33; Jenny Barrett, *Shooting the Civil War: Cinema, History and American National Identity*, London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009, 9-10; Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 5, 7-9, 54.
8. Another key issue in American history and political institutions, “States’ rights” are the powers that the U.S. Constitution grants to the state legislatures rather than the federal government. In the context of the Civil War, it refers to the idea that the South, invoking States’ rights, defended its own interests against the “tyrannical” authority of the federal government.
9. Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 14. Or, as Thomas Cripps sums up, “If [Civil War] movies are about eventual unity, the presence of African Americans would break a silence and risk

stopping the flow toward a happy resolution in the form of a victory that was the outcome of unity.” Thomas Cripps, “The Absent Presence in American Civil War Films,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 14, n° 4, 1994, 369.

10. One rare exception is *Shenandoah* (Andrew V. McLaglen, 1965), which blamed slavery for the war. But *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989) was the first “serious” Civil War film, starring African American actors Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman. Alicia R. Browne & Lawrence A. Kreiser, *op. cit.*, 62-63; Gary W. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 52-54.

11. It should be noted that the idea of the “Lost Cause” encompasses the general rewriting of the Civil War (i.e., the historical distortion previously mentioned), and was expressed in various forms, notably in literature and films.

12. Gary W. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 33.

13. For a detailed discussion of the numerous references (in books, in the press, on the stage, or in popular culture) which rooted this rewritten story/history throughout the United States even before the advent of cinema, see the first chapter (“I Wish I Was in the Land of Cotton: America Rewrites Its History”) in Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 17-36.

14. Cited in *ibidem*, 13.

15. Evelyn Ehrlich, “The Civil War in Early Film: Origin and Development of a Genre,” in French Warren (ed.), *The South and Film*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981, 70-71; Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 9-10.

16. Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 5.

17. *Ibid.*, 15. See also Gary W. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 2; Jenny Barrett, *op. cit.*, 89.

18. Paul C. Spehr (ed.), *The Civil War in Motion Pictures: A Bibliography of Films Produced in the United States since 1897*, Washington: Library of Congress, 1961, 71.

19. Evelyn Ehrlich, *op. cit.*, 71.

20. In Spehr’s bibliography of films (1897-1961), at least 143 entries can clearly be identified as documentaries or educational films among the 608 movies detailed as “Theatrical and Educational Motion Pictures” (excluding those listed as “Newsreels”). See Paul C. Spehr, *op. cit.* These figures do not take into account the numerous movies with reconciliation subplots, such as, significantly, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which, despite its resolute and unequivocal pro-South stance, also included the final reunion of the entire country with the marriage between the Northern Lady Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) and the former Confederate colonel named Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall). The exception to the rule is *Gone with the Wind*, where the Reconciliation motif is nowhere to be seen. Gary W. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 107-108; Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 101, 112.

21. Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 49, 67; Paul C. Spehr, *op. cit.*, 72, 125, 191, 204-205, 331, 534.

22. One interesting example is *The Memory Tree* (Big U, 1915), which tells the story of a Union and Confederate veteran soldiers who “end their long hatred on the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War.” Paul C. Spehr, *op. cit.*, 46.

23. Out of the 608 entries already mentioned, 286 films were produced between the five years of celebration, with respectively 74 films in 1911, 58 in 1912, 97 in 1913 (the peak year), 31 in 1914 and 26 in 1915.

24. It is to be noted that although the film was (and still is) highly controversial and was immediately condemned by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – which demanded a ban on the film for its glorification of the

Ku Klux Klan and its demeaning, explicitly racist representation of the African Americans – *The Birth of a Nation* did not put an end to the making of Civil War films, especially because it was an incredible box-office success. It did, nevertheless, make filmmakers somewhat more cautious about filming the Civil War, in particular the racial and political issues that might alienate viewers in one way or another. In other words, Hollywood would make sure to depoliticize the conflict in its storylines. See Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 121-127.

25. These rarer Civil War movies (for instance, Clarence G. Badger's *Hand Up!* and Buster Keaton's *The General* in 1926, or Richard Boleslawski's *Operator 13* in 1934) continued to use the usual device of a spy story.

26. The loss of interest was such that even Buster Keaton's Civil War comedy *The General* was a box-office flop upon release in 1926. In fact, not until the tremendous 1939 success of Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* would the trend be reversed and the gallant representation of the Civil War draw crowds again. Alicia R. Browne & Lawrence A. Kreiser, *op. cit.*, 60; Evelyn Ehrlich *op. cit.*, 70; Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 139-140.

27. Alicia R. Browne & Lawrence A. Kreiser, *op. cit.*, 61-62.

28. Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 234.

29. As Edward Buscombe explains, "between 1926 and 1967, apart from a brief period in the early 30s, Westerns consistently formed around a quarter of all feature films made in Hollywood. This one genre, with its highly formulaic content and steady market, can be seen as the absolute bedrock of Hollywood, the foundation upon which its glittering palaces were erected." Edward Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, 35.

30. Warren French, "The Southern': Another Lost Cause?" in French Warren (ed.), *The South and Film*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981, 3.

31. Spies are found in seven of the ten films selected for this paper: Michael Curtiz's *Virginia City*, Edward Sedgwick's *A Southern Yankee*, John Sturges's *Escape from Fort Bravo*, Rudolph Maté's *Siege at Red River*, John Ford's *The Horse Soldiers*, George Marshall's *Advance to the Rear*, and Lesley Selander's *Arizona Bushwhackers*.

32. Such plots can be found in *Virginia City*, *Advance to the Rear*, Roy Rowland's *The Outriders* and Roy Huggins's *Hangman's Knot*, whereas *Siege at Red River* adapts the idea by substituting gold for Gatling guns for a change.

33. Just as Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* had stirred up a fierce controversy in 1915, so too Disney's *Song of the South*, in 1946, was sharply denounced by the NAACP for its degrading portrayal of African Americans and its nostalgic plantation setting, confirming thus that it was preferable for Hollywood to remain silent about the antebellum South. (See Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 234; Jenny Barrett, *op. cit.*, 90; Warren French, *op. cit.*, 3-4.) Moreover, as the African American Civil Rights Movement placed racial issues at the forefront of the domestic debate and shattered the nationalist consensus in the 1950s and 1960s, Civil War stories more than ever had to be depoliticized – which in this case meant avoiding the sensitive issues of the Civil War and the slavery era's enduring legacy of racial segregation and discrimination. (See Thomas Cripps, *op. cit.*, 372-373; Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 139-140.)

34. Only very few Westerns touched on the subject of slavery, generally dealing with the figure of John Brown, and even when the topic was alluded to, as in Michael Curtiz's *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), abolitionists were pictured as dangerous fanatics with very sinister

looks, whereas the gallant Southern hero, embodied by Errol Flynn, was clearly the wise and generous man. One exception, which is generally (and regrettably) overlooked, is *The Scalphunters* (1968) by Sydney Pollack, in which Ossie Davis plays a very smart runaway slave who tries to escape to Mexico through the West.

35. Thomas Cripps, *op. cit.*, 367, 371-372.

36. Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 244-245.

37. Billy Yank (for Yankee) and Johnny Reb (for Rebel) are the national personifications of the common soldiers of the Union and Confederate armies in the American Civil War.

38. Jenny Barrett, *op. cit.*, 90.

39. Coined in the mid-19th century, the expression “Manifest Destiny” defined the belief that it was the right and even the duty of the United States to expand all the way to the Pacific Ocean so as to spread “civilization.”

40. Thomas Cripps, *op. cit.*, 368; Jenny Barrett, *op. cit.*, 61-65; Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 234-235, 251-252.

41. Warren French, *op. cit.*, 3.

42. This is clearly represented in *Virginia City, Escape from Fort Bravo, Siege at Red River*, as well as in *Arizona Bushwhackers*.

43. *Santa Fe* takes place when the war is just over and features a former Confederate named Britt Canfield (Randolph Scott) who leaves his native state of Virginia to seek a new meaningful life in the West. Britt is accompanied by his three brothers who, unlike him, cannot bring themselves to take the oath of loyalty to the Union in order to work for the railroad company that is to build the line all the way to Santa Fe. His brothers – embodying the “embittered rebs” – soon become outlaws, while Britt, who was formerly loyal to the southern cause, is now devoted to the railroad company that hires him. A romance will also gradually spring between Britt and the Union paymaster Judith Chandler (Janis Carter).

44. The “Myth of the Garden” refers more particularly to the agrarian utopia upheld by figures such as Thomas Jefferson or J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, notably to the lasting belief that the virtuous farmer would transform the virgin land into a cultivated garden – the vision of America as the “Garden of the World” is also reminiscent of the Christian Garden of Eden. See Henry Nash Smith’s classic analysis of this “Myth of the Garden,” first published in 1950. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1970.

45. See for instance Hervé Mayer, “The ‘Ever-growing Ogre’: The Railroad vs. Progress in Henry King’s *Jesse James* (1939),” in Taïna Tuhkunen (ed.), “Railway and Locomotive Language in Film,” *Film Journal* 3, 2016, <<http://filmjournal.org/fj3-mayer>>, accessed on October 5, 2017.

46. In fact, the railroad is often a symbol not only of the nation but also, more precisely, of the industrial, capitalistic North, as opposed to the traditionally agrarian South. Therefore, by accepting to work for the railroad, the “good reb” Britt Canfield acknowledges both the reconciliation of the country, as well as the victory of the northern model, whereas his “embittered” brothers, through their refusal to work for the railroad company, reject both the political and economic victory of the Union. About the allegorical meaning of the railroad, see for instance Hervé Mayer, *op. cit.*

47. As highlighted by such films as *The Outriders*, *Santa Fe*, *Hangman's Knot*, and *Arizona Bushwhackers*, these patterns remain explicit in Civil War Westerns.

48. Explaining the frequent anonymity of the Indian figure in Westerns, Philip French writes: "This faceless symbol [of the Indian] became a stereotype: historically a figure to be confronted and defeated in the name of civilization, dramatically a terrifying all-purpose enemy ready at the drop of a tomahawk to spring from the rocks and attack wagon trains, cavalry patrols and isolated pioneer settlement." Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005, 49.

49. As Edward Buscombe sums up: "The Western as a genre has traditionally celebrated the myth of taming the frontier 'wilderness.' As such it has been able to see the Indian only as the unknown 'other,' a part of those forces which threaten the onward march of Euro-American civilization and technological progress." Edward Buscombe, *op. cit.*, 156.

50. Indians made it possible to emphasize the brotherhood of white men even in retrospect, as in John Ford's *The Horse Soldiers*, when Union doctor Kendall (William Holden), after having met an "old friend" who is now a Confederate soldier, recalls that they had fought Indians on the Platte together. Sometimes, Indians could turn out to be very useful also for production costs, as in Maté's *Siege at Red River* in which the footage of the battle scene between the cavalry and Indians actually came from William Wellman's *Buffalo Bill*, released in 1944! George Fenin & William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to Cinerama*, New York: The Onion Press, 1962, 249.

51. A typical example of the lonesome protagonist is George Stevens's *Shane* (1953), often presented as the quintessential Western. The main protagonist, Shane, is a mysterious rider (actually a gunfighter) whose solitary figure opens and closes the film, as he joins the homesteaders and eventually leaves a community in which he cannot fit.

52. As Jenny Barrett explains, "the War-Westerner *does* need the love of a woman, and he may even actively pursue it. In keeping with the ideology of national unity, his partner is often his political enemy, and their union further represents the displacement of the North/South line of conflict." Jenny Barrett, *op. cit.*, 88-89.

53. See, for instance, the feminist analysis of the genre offered by Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

54. Bruce Chadwick, *op. cit.*, 66.

55. There are very few exceptions to the rule. One of them is *Border River* (George Sherman, 1954), in which the Confederate hero falls in love with a Mexican woman.

56. While a number of the Westerns studied here picture a love story between a Southern Belle and a Unionist (for example, in *Virginia City*, *Escape from Fort Bravo*, *The Horse Soldiers*, *Advance to the Rear*, etc.), quite a few also present a romance between a Confederate soldier and a Northern woman, who often happens to be a nurse, since nurses, just like doctors, pledge to look after everyone, no matter the color of the uniform (for instance, in *Santa Fe*, *Hangman's Knot*, and *Siege at Red River*).

57. Jenny Barrett, *op. cit.*, 88-89.

58. Gary W. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 55.

59. *Ibidem*, 106.

ABSTRACTS

Focusing on a selected filmography of ten Westerns, this paper explores the reasons why Civil War films, though traditionally set in the East, eventually moved to a western setting, particularly between the early 1940s and the late 1960s. It also aims to show how and to what extent the Western genre proved to be a convenient means to sustain the tale of national reconciliation in the American Civil War. These films reveal that the genre simply drew on preexisting codes and past trends to represent both the war and Southerners, but also used what the West had to offer, notably stock enemies and a neutral territory, to bring about the national reunification.

À partir d'une filmographie sélective de dix westerns, cet article étudie les raisons pour lesquelles les films portant sur la guerre de Sécession, traditionnellement situés dans l'Est des États-Unis, ont fini par être tournés dans un décor de western, en particulier du début des années 1940 à la fin des années 1960. Il vise également à analyser dans quelles mesures le genre du western est apparu comme un moyen très commode d'entretenir le mythe de la réconciliation nationale aux États-Unis. Ces films montrent que le genre a reproduit certaines représentations habituelles de la guerre et des Sudistes, mais qu'il a également puisé dans ce que l'Ouest avait à offrir, notamment des ennemis tout trouvés et un territoire neutre, pour permettre la réunification nationale.

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Mots-clés: cinéma, guerre de Sécession, Ouest américain, réconciliation nationale, western

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