

Fall 2013

Post-Westerns

Neil Campbell

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Post-Westerns

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NEIL CAMPBELL

Post-Westerns
Cinema,
Region,
West

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Campbell, Neil, 1957–

Post-westerns: cinema, region, West / Neil Campbell.

pages cm. — (Postwestern horizons)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8032-3476-5 (hardback: alk. paper)

1. Western films—United States—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN1995.9.W4C325 2013

791.436'278—dc23 2013007123

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This is for Jane, again.

I keep praying for a double bill of
Bad Day at Black Rock and *Vera Cruz*.

—SAM SHEPARD

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Acknowledgments

This book completes my trilogy examining the New West started in 2000 with *The Cultures of the American West* and continued with *The Rhizomatic West* in 2008. Although they work separately, in my mind they were always connected, if rhizomatically! In the years of writing this book, I have been lucky to work with many strong believers in research, despite all the other pressures of work and life: in particular, my good colleagues Christine Berberich, Robert Hudson, David Crouch, and Sam Kasule. For kind invitations to speak about my work internationally, I'd like to thank Nancy Cook, Krista Comer, Johannes Fehrle, David Rio, and David Martin-Jones. These opportunities always helped the creative process.

For collegial support and friendship, I once again show my sincere appreciation to all the members of the Western Literature Association who have made me so welcome over many years in some extraordinary western places. For specific early encouragement for this project I would like to thank Bill Handley and Lee Clark Mitchell, as well as Steve Tatum and Nat Lewis, who provided wonderfully careful feedback and constructive criticism on the manuscript.

For financial help to secure release from teaching to enable the writing of parts of this book and to support my continued attendance at the Western Literature Association, I would like to thank the Faculty of Arts, Design and Technology at the University of Derby.

Some sections of this book appeared earlier and in very different versions: chapter 2 as "Post-Western Cinema" in Nicolas S. Witschi, ed., *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American*

West (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); chapter 6 as “Forget the Alamo” in Paul Grainge, ed., *Memory and Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); and chapter 9 as “Post-Western Cinema: Down in the Valley,” originally published in *Journal of the West* 48, no. 1 (Winter 2009), © 2009 by ABC-CLIO, LLC, reprinted with permission of ABC-CLIO.

Post-Westerns

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Introduction

Big Hats, Horses, and Dust: The Visible and Invisible West

I have a hard time thinking about what the term *Western* means. . . .
I think it's big hats, horses, and dust . . . and has something to do with
the nineteenth century.

—TOMMY LEE JONES, IFC press conference on the release of *No
Country for Old Men*

Ghosts haunt American literature because the American nation is
compelled to return again and again to an encounter that makes it
both sorry and happy, a defiled grave upon which it must continually
rebuild the American subject.

—RENÉE L. BERGLAND, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and
American Subjects*

Phantom Architecture

In 2003 stories started to appear about the destruction of “Laramie Street,” a Warner Brothers back lot used in the filming of many Hollywood Westerns since the 1930s. As one report put it, “It’s an old Southern California story: Tear down a piece of history, replace it with a slice of suburbia. But in this case, the bulldozed site is not a real place but a part of the collective cinematic imagination: Warner Bros.’ legendary outdoor set, Laramie Street, where the likes of Errol Flynn, Randolph Scott, James Garner, Clint Walker and, more recently, Jeff Bridges and Bruce Campbell played cowboys, lawmen, outlaws and cavalry riding their horses, firing their six-shooters

and romancing saloon gals and schoolmarms.”¹ Westerns, this story tells us, were no longer financially viable or culturally significant. The dusty Main Street of a western town would be replaced with office exteriors to look like houses in a contemporary suburban neighborhood. The cultural significance of this report cannot be overstated for it suggests a major shift away from the Western as a persistence force in Hollywood and toward a new suburbanism that seems, on the surface at least, its complete antithesis.

My point is that this might be seen as a timely reminder *not* of the destruction of the West but actually of its survivance, its “living-on,” in other forms.² On this back lot in the geographic West, another West remains “alive” in the ground, under the new offices and suburban homes, rather like the archaeological vision of the architect Rem Koolhaas, wherein “each block [of the city] is covered with several layers of *phantom architecture* in the form of past occupancies, aborted projects and popular fantasies that provide alternative images to the [West] that exists” (emphasis added).³ This book’s starting point is to think about the “phantom architecture” of the West imagined through its cinematic representation (its “ghost Westerns”) and to begin to understand how in the post-West there might live on the haunting presence of the past within the present and future and that *together* these multiple stories provide some fuller and better understanding of the contemporary West itself. As Avery Gordon has written, “To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories.”⁴

These “ghost stories” emerge for me through a variety of films of the postwar West that refuse to dwell in the nineteenth-century moment of the classic Western but rather explore its divergent histories by veering into and across unexpected, uncanny landscapes.⁵ The broad aim of this project has been to refute Gilles Deleuze’s contention in *Cinema 1* that post-1945 American cinema was limited because “all the aesthetic or even political qualities that it can have remain narrowly critical” of region and nation because it is, in different ways, always “striving to save the remains of the American dream,” opting too often for parody or for the limp criticism

of institutions or apparatuses rather than a more comprehensive analysis through a “project of positive creation.” The clichés, therefore, although “maltreated, mutilated, destroyed,” are “not slow to be reborn from [their] ashes” rather than being undone and transformed.⁶ For Deleuze, America’s greatest film genres, including the Western, might appear to “collapse” through revisionism and new forms during the immediate postwar period, and yet in the end, he argues, they simply “maintain their empty frame.”⁷ What *Post-Westerns* shows is that this frame was far from empty and that the Western genre, rather than collapse, actually found a “project of positive creation” through which to interrogate the very ideological frameworks that had conjured it into being in the first place.

Thinking Postwestern

History, history! We fools, what do we know or care? History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery. . . . The ghost of the land moves in the blood, moves the blood.

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, *In the American Grain*

There is a prehistory to the term *postwestern* within the realm of American western studies, and a brief discussion of its differing uses will help to explain my development of the concept when applied to the cinema and to certain films emerging after 1945.⁸ As early as 1973 the British film critic Philip French in the first edition of his book *Westerns* applied the term *postwestern* directly to films that dealt with “the West today, and draw upon the western itself or more generally ‘the cowboy cult,’” and in particular “the way in which the characters are influenced by, or victims of, the cowboy cult”; to do this, “they intensify and play on the audience’s feelings about, and knowledge of, western movies.”⁹ French’s early usage will be important as this book develops, and his ideas will be applied and discussed at various points in the text. However, more often the notion of the postwestern relates to a broader consideration of historiography or periodization, such as in 1994, when Virginia Scharff called for “a postwestern history” that takes mobility seriously, building

on the premise that “to question the stability of our most cherished historical categories of analysis” is a productive process allowing us “to imagine history anew” and, most significantly, to both recognize “the weight of the western frame,” as she puts it, and to simultaneously treat this “frame” with a certain skepticism, or to be “alert, edgy and restless” and to “burst the boundaries of region.”¹⁰ Scharff’s essay further reminds us of the extent to which the concept *West* is a “totalizing and value-laden” term and that more nuanced and subtle approaches would always expand and cross-refer it in complex but meaningful ways.¹¹ To pursue her interest in mobility (in the context of gender studies), one might say that the West (and by implication, for my purposes, the Western) “travels”; therefore, any attempt at stabilization nullifies many of its most significant and, indeed, ultimately defining aspects. By implication, Scharff is asking critics to get “outside” the “weight of the western frame” so as to see it differently, askew if you like, and from a “deterritorialized” position, “a sort of conceptual trip,” as John Rajchman calls it, “for which there preexists no map — a voyage for which one must leave one’s usual discourse behind and never be quite sure where one will land.”¹² As a result of such thinking, as Blake Allmendinger puts it, “today, although the West may be settled, its meanings and boundaries remain unfixed and unsealed. . . . The West isn’t necessarily what or where one might think it is.”¹³

This, I would contend, begins to define postwestern thought, shifting beyond and engaging with the past, its discursive formations, and its weighty frames, and, in so doing, becoming what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term *deframing power* in their study of painting, since this method “opens . . . up [the existing frame] onto a plane of composition or an infinite field of forces . . . diverse . . . irregular forms, sides that do not meet . . . all of which give the picture the power to leave the canvas. The painter’s action never stays within the frame and does not begin with it.”¹⁴ Thus in reconsidering the West, we might also seek out these “outside” perspectives to “contest” the “old fabric” and to “unravel” its existing languages and thereby open a space “in which no existence can take root.”¹⁵

Kerwin Lee Klein's 1996 article "Reclaiming the 'F' Word, Or Being and Becoming Postwestern" refers to Scharff's work, and in a wide-ranging commentary on schools of western history, attempts to reclaim the concept of *frontier* as a more nuanced term rather than a simple line dividing different groups. To do this he quotes the work of the ethnohistorian Jack D. Forbes, a mixed-blood Native American whose work defines *frontier* as "an intergroup contact situation" where "interethnic" exchanges of all kinds take place. He goes on to suggest that frontier, "even in its Latin origins . . . troped a space where one culture identity fronted another."¹⁶ Klein is "ambivalent" about the term *postwestern*, as it suggests, he claims, a view of history that locks us into an "insatiable desire for novelty" and a direct linearity that moves us from "pre" to "new" to "post" as if all were separate, distinct categories with no tangible relationship or points of contact. For him, the postwestern too often implies a rejection and denial of the past ("too burdened with guilt or error to be carried into the future") and its unglamorous association with what "has gone," is "old," or is "pre-" whatever we are "now." Yet *postwestern*, he adds, can also be useful, reminding us that there is "no western Mind," "no western essence," offering "a mediate space en route" to other narratives. The term might also "liberate historians of the West from the margins" by suggesting the various ways the region connects with a wider world.¹⁷

In 1996, the same year Klein's article appeared, Frieda Knobloch published *The Culture of Wilderness*, in which she too "anticipates" a "postwestern history": "Postwestern: as in 'United States out of North America,' a particularly succinct indigenist, anti-imperialist, and antistatist demand, for which no 'West' as such, cultural or geographical, exists."¹⁸ However, as with Scharff, the postwestern is presented by example rather than definition. In fact by the time Scharff published her book *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* in 2003 any direct trace of the postwestern has disappeared from the text. Perhaps this demonstrates, as Klein suggests, the very problematic nature of the term and the very definite baggage it carries or appears to carry.¹⁹ However, in 2004 Stephen Ta-

tum recognized the “ongoing reorientation of the field imaginary of the literary West” into its “postfrontier” phase, wherein old ideas of assimilation and clear-cut lines of expansion were being disrupted by the sense of the West as “an intercultural contact zone.”²⁰ And in 2006 Nina Baym commented that in the post-West there are considerable “worries about the ontological status of any story a western historian or writer or literary academic might want to narrate.”²¹ Taken together, these multiple points of view formulate a growing awareness of the need for “thinking postwestern” and shifting beyond the conditioned responses to frontier, nation-building, and expansionist Manifest Destiny mythologies.

In Susan Kollin’s edited collection *Postwestern Cultures* (2007) the term is finally appreciated as “an emerging critical approach” working “against a narrowly conceived regionalism” and with a distinct awareness of how the West has been seen as a “predetermined entity with static borders and boundaries.” The book as a whole makes a determined call for a method based on the “critical reassessment of those very restrictions, whether they be theoretical, geographical, or political.”²² She explains very clearly how the problem manifests itself: “In dominant national discourse, the American West has been imagined and celebrated largely for its status as ‘pre’ — for its position as a pre-lapsarian, pre-social, and pre-modern space . . . so that like the very spaces of an idealized western geography, some literary and cultural scholarship about the region has adopted a pre- or even anti-theoretical stance, as if regional studies could offer a similar retreat or refuge from a dehumanizing culture.”²³

Kollin therefore invokes the “post” as a counterbalance to this “pre-lapsarian, pre-social, and pre-modern” vision, reminding us all that the West persists as a real and imagined cultural space that must be fully and critically engaged with. Similarly classic Westerns reproduced this sense of “retreat or refuge” into a premodern community governed by specific values and ideologies. These deliberations on the postwestern as period and approach “in motion,” pushing against boundaries and all the “lines of demarcation,” refusing to “know its place” within an established generic and cultural grid,

make it a platform from which to examine changes in forms of representation as well.²⁴

These broader definitions found specific cultural anchors in relation to film through John Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (1999), which returned to Philip French's earlier definition to claim the post-Western as always examining the "limits and inaccuracies of Western generic formulas," with particular emphasis on "the ironic parody of the Western myth." In addition, he sees the post-Western as those films that were "made in other countries [and] redefined and expanded the meaning of the west itself as mythic terrain or territory."²⁵ Two works in 2000 took up this challenge in relation to cinema: Del Jacobs's *Revisoning Film Traditions — The Pseudo-Documentary and the NeoWestern* and Diane M. Borden and Eric P. Essman's "Manifest Landscape/Latent Ideology: Afterimages of Empire in the Western and 'Post-Western' Film." The latter claims that "post-Westerns remapped the American moral landscape" by presenting "a dystopic vision of both the past and the present," which by "carrying over remnants, social and political attitudes, and cultural artifacts identifies with the 'Old West.'"²⁶ Borden and Essman do, in part, agree with the suggestive comments of Kollin by arguing that the "post-Western is both an echo of its engendering aesthetic and a critical inquiry into the 'fictions' of American history."²⁷ It is this latter argument that comes closest to Jacobs's sense of what he terms the *NeoWestern*, which he claims "keeps alive the basic elements and clichés of the traditional Western while still allowing them room for modification in future Western films and in other NeoWesterns."²⁸ Through this double movement the genre "contends with the modern world" and presents possibilities for what he calls "the first post-western generation," ushered in with Presidents Johnson and Reagan.²⁹ It was once again Susan Kollin who summarized this aspect of post-Western cinema so well; in a piece on *Dead Man* and *Smoke Signals*, she defined the post-Western as "a film that acknowledges Hollywood's legacy . . . but that resists this hegemony in an effort to seek another form of storytelling." In doing this, she felt it had the capacity for a "more self-conscious examination of the genre's con-

ventions and icons” so as to instigate “a more critical cinema” for the future.³⁰

This book engages with these “postwesternisms” to some degree and in so doing aims to think beyond the frontier region, outside the frame of the classic Western. In the spirit of Tatum’s “ongoing re-orientation” I explore how what I call post-Western cinema contributes to an expanded critical regionalism within the field of western cultural studies.³¹ As Tatum puts it, “Places or regions need to be regarded not only as geopolitical and geological territories or physical landscapes but also as *sites* produced by the circulation of peoples, of technologies and commodities, and of cultural artifacts, including of course images, stories, and myths.”³²

However, to move forward with this idea we must first go back to the problem of the prefix *post-*, which is critical to any discussion of what I am calling post-Western cinema because contained within the debates surrounding it, as Klein noted, much can be revealed about the relationships of the Western to its “past” and to its “future.” Commenting on the use of *post-* in contemporary culture, and particularly in postcolonialism, Stuart Hall argues (following Ella Shohat) that it signals both the “closure of a certain historical event or age” and a “going beyond . . . commenting upon a certain intellectual movement.”³³ Hall comments that Shohat leans toward the “going beyond” in her version. Peter Hulme, however, sees the notion of the postcolonial as signifying an important and productive tension between “a temporal dimension in which there is a punctual relationship in time between . . . a colony and a post-colonial state; and a critical dimension in which . . . post-colonial theory comes into existence through a critique of a body of theory.”³⁴ Hall’s point is that Shohat’s view of the postcolonial attempts to be “both epistemic and chronological,” making it different from other *posts-*, whereas he prefers to see it as part of the same process: as “not only ‘after’” but “going beyond” the colonial, as postmodernism is both “going beyond” and “after” modernism, and poststructuralism both follows chronologically and achieves its theoretical gains “on the back of structuralism.” A similar logic can be usefully employed to

discuss the relations and tensions between the Western film and its *post-* forms as both going beyond and coming after its earlier “classic” structures and themes. To borrow the phrasing Hall uses, “It is because the relations which characterised the . . . [classic Western] are no longer in the same place and relative position, that we are able not simply to oppose them but to critique, to deconstruct and try to ‘go beyond’ them.” Drawing on Antonio Gramsci and Jacques Derrida, Hall goes on to argue for this sense of the *post-* as a means of articulating “a shift or transition conceptualised as the *reconfiguration of the field*, rather than as the movement of linear transcendence between two mutually exclusive states” (emphasis added). The *post-*, therefore, does not just mean overcoming the “past,” so that when it is used, as in the term *post-Western* throughout this book, it should be seen as “a process of disengagement” from the system it is in tension with (the Westerns of the past). I also use the term in the full knowledge that it is “probably inescapable” from that system as well. Hence any sense of the Western and its post-Western forms “never operate[s] in a purely binary way” but always interacts, overlaps, and interrelates in complex dialogical ways.³⁵ This is a key point for my own interpretation of the cinematic genre as a mutational and dialogical form, an idea I first discussed in *The Rhizomatic West* (2008).³⁶

To “Reconfigure the Map of the Sensible”

John Beck writes, “The recognition that the freedom and transparency of democracy are underwritten by unseen and often unknowable powers might be said to be a defining characteristic of the post-war world.” In studying literary texts Beck explores concealment as a cultural phenomenon and through a process of “critical unveiling” seeks to analyze the “open secret of the American West” as the site of such hiddenness.³⁷ However, the association of the West with democracy, freedom, and national identity constructs an elaborate screen that “shields from view the contradictions produced by the inclusion of the excluded.” Beck is explicit in his conclusions: “The West is the screen upon which openness is projected and also

the veiling screen that preserves secrecy.”³⁸ The use of this cinematic image is of considerable interest to me, for it suggests that, besides the literature that Beck examines, it might also be productive to examine the postwar West through film as well. The open/veiled screen relates well to the emergence of the post-Western as a cinematic mode wrestling with the cultural political legacy of westward expansion in all its forms. How does cinema evoke the modern West once it has dispensed, if it is possible to do so, with the mythic trappings and the historical locations that we associate with its most conventional representations? What might we learn of the West as region, as psychogeographical space, from examining certain key films made in and about the West after World War II?

The historian Patricia Nelson Limerick wrote evocatively of the trash heaps left by pioneers as they moved ever westward in the nineteenth century, and yet, she argues, despite the historical significance of such archaeology, “Hollywood did not commemorate those heaps in Western movies.” She goes on to note of the many abandoned mines that also pockmark the western landscape, “One walks with some caution in these historic regions; land that appears solid may be honeycombed, and one would not like to plunge unexpectedly into the legacy of Western history.” Like Beck, Limerick alerts us to the veiled nature of western history, to its preference for mythic “screening” instead of a more systematic and extended analysis of the details of lived experience, wherever that might be found. For Limerick it was the role of New Western History to see “the continued vitality of issues widely believed to be dead,” or in other words to explore the very hidden and haunted histories of the West too often veiled, buried, or ignored.³⁹ This book aims to demonstrate that, contrary to Limerick’s dismissal of Western movies and Beck’s concentration primarily on literature, widely circulated films produced in the postwar period may equally provide an alternative screen through which to debate and counter perceived notions of “westness” and, in so doing, to chart the emergence and understanding of a postwestern culture. Jacques Rancière uses the concept of the “distribution of the sensible” to explain how a sys-

tem of divisions and boundaries defines what is visible and audible, seen and hidden, within any aesthetico-political regime.⁴⁰ It is precisely the role of the work of art, he argues, to “reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission.”⁴¹

The classical Western was defined by certain powerfully repeated cycles and tropes endorsing desires for settlement against the odds, establishing roots in the New World, transforming the earth from wilderness to garden, taming land taken from its “savage” populations, expressing a renewing masculinity as the source and engine for these actions, domesticating the feminine within this new western world, and confirming through the combined power of these acts, a cosmogenesis or national identity narrative spawned out of the western lands. The origin story of the United States was *solidified* in the Western, *materialized* in the actions of its heroes and villains, and *naturalized* through its specific geomystical symbolic locations. Its apparently progressive, linear history intimately associated with Frederick Jackson Turner’s lucid, expansive frontier line moving inexorably across from East to West epitomized the inevitable narrative sequence and the logical language of internal colonization’s nation-making process. From the “blank spaces” of the western lands was created, forged, and inscribed a grid of human inhabitation, settlement, and narrative. In this book I interfere in this mythic, ideological narrative to show how film might also “reconfigure the map of the sensible” in order to mobilize a more varied vision of the West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The post-World War II West boomed as a military-industrial heartland, with urban centers like Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver, and Las Vegas becoming the new magic kingdoms of population expansion, economic shift, and tourist dollars. The cinematic Western, however, was oddly out of time with these developments, preferring to look backward to the nineteenth-century frontier, utilizing the stories of the Old West to tell symbolic parables about national identity, masculinity, race relations, power, and anxiety, or

what the actor-director Tommy Lee Jones calls “big hats, horses, and dust.”⁴² The classic Western’s “distribution of the sensible” was defined by “engaged heroes who morally ensure the rule of right,” as Stanley Corkin puts it, and could be found in iconic films such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Red River* (1948), which spoke loudly of triumphal conquests of land and people, the establishment of communities and economies, and the violent assertion of law and social hierarchies of gender, class, and race. “Cold War Westerns,” according to Corkin, were “concurrently nostalgic and forward looking. They look back upon the glory days of western settlement as they look ahead to the expression of U.S. centrality in the postwar world.”⁴³ Like Rancière, Corkin saw this process as creating a “map for a great many Americans that helped them navigate the stresses and contradictions of Cold War life” and enabled them to believe in a unifying frontier dream of building a nation-as-one, a just consensus for an audience now living increasingly ordered and gendered lives in the suburbs. Corkin goes on to claim that “‘classic’ Westerns show the frontier as a place where the American ethos of the individual could be articulated and then recontained in a social structure that offered a moral order based on postwar U.S. assumptions regarding the nature of the world and the terms of Cold War international relations.”⁴⁴

As Corkin correctly notes above, such visions both look back and forward, but increasingly films started to appear that seemed uncertain of this map’s “moral order” and seemed more intent on exploring a sense of what Stephen Tatum calls “living in *the aftermath of loss*,” looking back toward some (imagined) moment of wholeness and goodness now threatened by an emergent postwar culture defined by consensus, militarism, and renewed expansionism.⁴⁵ Lee Clark Mitchell, for example, read in Sam Peckinpah’s Westerns a “self-conscious belatedness” and an often overwhelming sense of “a lost vision, a revelation of what no longer counts in American culture, perhaps never did.”⁴⁶ The classic Western codes of heroic masculinity in action, hierarchical social structure, community cohesion, and moral purpose were no longer reproducible without some

shaded critical reflection, revealing, as Mitchell suggests, the “fundamental ambivalence” in Peckinpah toward the long generic tradition of the Western itself and the values it espoused.⁴⁷ William R. Handley calls this urge “retrospective revisionism” in western studies, explaining its linear “ethical injunction to try to know the past” and “to find out where things went wrong.”⁴⁸

As I argue in different ways throughout this book, this curious mix of hope, yearning, and loss is intimately bound to the West and the Western as a type of haunting presence. It is what Zeese Papanikolas has called “a kind of silence . . . of something withheld, of something locked behind the omissions of printed words,” or perhaps behind the images projected on movie screens. What remains, claims Papanikolas (echoing Limerick, Beck, and Tatum), is “American Silence”: “a kind of longing, a sense of something lost, lost perhaps even at the moment of gaining it, and possibly irretrievable.” “It was a silence,” he argues, “as compelling as all the myths of success you grew up with and believed, and perhaps inseparable from them.” This “figure of silence” represented a “palpable absence and sense of loss” of “something missing” in the very heart of the American story. The proximity of loss in the West is critical, being “there just yesterday” in the dreams of Manifest Destiny and frontier glory, making its loss seem “more poignant, and the wound fresher” since one is conscious always of the “utopian possibility that we just missed.”⁴⁹ This developing and intensified sense of mourning within the West becomes part of the emergence out of the classic Western, of the post-Western sensibility with its “wounded,” “haunting” past scarring the present, in which its consequences are still being played out in the changed and changing landscapes of the New West.⁵⁰ So to return to Handley’s earlier comment, the post-Western refuses to dwell only in the past, for it understands the West’s past as “not past but ongoing . . . a tangled history connected to an ongoing present in which anything can happen and in which history may not, after all, be a measure of anything other than our own failures.”⁵¹

The Western’s double movement of yearning and mourning can

be seen in the same post–World War II moment within which Cor-kin defines the cold war Western’s classic period. Between 1952 and 1956 came *High Noon*, *Shane*, and *The Searchers*, all regarded as examples of a golden age of classic cinema, and yet, as I will discuss at greater length in subsequent chapters, Hollywood also produced in this same period post-Westerns like *The Lusty Men* (1952) and *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1956), which explored the modern West as “ongoing” and with “a tangled history,” wherein the older codes were interrogated far more closely in relation to a new and different age.

To adapt a quotation discussing W. G. Sebald’s work is to understand the ways these early post-Westerns explore the “wounded” and “haunting” landscape of the West: “The scar, like a tattoo, is an assault the body refuses to keep secret. Scars, whether on the skin of a body or the ‘skin’ of the photographic object, invite ‘interpretation’ . . . [and] offer us the opportunity to ‘name’ . . . that once imperceptible wound now made visible through its scars, through its ‘effects.’”⁵² In many of the films I explore in this book, it is the “imperceptible wound [of the past] now made visible” in the present West being uncovered and dramatized. Indeed, as we shall see, it is the “effects,” or rather the aftereffects of the West as once dreamed and imagined that haunts these postwar films.⁵³

Yet increasingly there was a disjunction between the audience’s willingness to accept the nineteenth-century historical frame to tell a modern story of a changing New West and the reality of the world in which they lived. The pleasure of watching a “historic” Western film set in “frontier” times where wrongs were righted by heroic, if violent, actions was becoming ever more incongruous with the anxious cold war world in which audiences actually lived. The “imperceptible wounds” of Western American history resurfaced in films that were no longer defined by their mythic-historical context but were traced in the cinematic “scars” that, on first viewing, may appear to have moved on, disavowing the past for a present with new, more pressing concerns and troubles. Thus post-Westerns are haunted *and* haunt with traces, silences, and scars of absent presences and with the secrets and desires of loss, yearning, and mourn-

ing. These are troubled and troubling texts about the West viewed no longer as an ideal, prelapsarian community or a clear register of national identity or imperial desire, but rather as complex and awkward meanderings into a layered, scarred region, both geographical and psychical.

The West I unravel through its post-Western cinema is therefore a spectral landscape. As Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok put it, “The phantom is . . . a metapsychological fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.”⁵⁴ Post-Westerns investigate these “gaps” and “secrets” for an inheritance buried deep in the American national psyche and played out on its movie screens through what Kathleen Brogan calls “cultural haunting.”⁵⁵ Repeatedly post-Westerns return to scenes of absence and loss or to buried secrets: to remains in the ground (*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Bad Day at Black Rock*, *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, *Lone Star*, *No Country for Old Men*), to the scattering of ashes back into the same land (*The Big Lebowski*, *Down in the Valley*, *Don’t Come Knocking*), or to the terrible return of secrets (*Silver City*). As we shall see, post-Westerns engage with what Deleuze called the “time-image” or “the phantom that has always haunted the cinema.”⁵⁶

But underlying all this is another thread of the story, one that indicates a certain unwillingness to portray or acknowledge the West in its new guise as increasingly multicultural, globalized, urbanized, and militarized; it is a complex space much changed from the preferred simplicity of a nineteenth-century version constantly revisited by Hollywood with its fundamentally clear lines of demarcation around issues of race, gender, land use, and national identity. There is, of course, always something comforting in the familiarity of forms, narratives, and settings, no matter how revisionist they might appear. There is often the sense that in revising by inclusion (the black Western, women’s Western, or ethnic Western), one simply slots new groups back into the existing framework with the same primary values and ideologies, thereby maintaining an overall hegemony.

In one respect, the very stark, simple landscapes of the classical Western (desert, mountains, homestead, or an incipient town) epitomized this position — think of *My Darling Clementine* or *Shane* — whereas increasingly the landscape that cinemagoers in the 1950s actually experienced in the West was in transition, modernizing, and affected by shifting national and global economies, militarization, and suburban development. The Western film could no longer entirely be defined by John Ford’s Monument Valley when its cultural and political landscape was urban, multiracial, and globalized, juxtaposing traditional forms of life with an ever-changing, contingent experience. As Wim Wenders wrote of Monument Valley when thinking about locations for his film *Don’t Come Knocking* (see chapter 7), “It felt as if the place had lost its soul and had turned forever into some sort of ‘Marlboro Country.’ The spirit of John Ford had altogether vanished, I felt, and had been replaced by a crude ‘tourist adventure ride’ culture.”⁵⁷ However, as Jacques Derrida reminds us reassuringly in *Specters of Marx*, “Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony.”⁵⁸ In other words, we might conclude that the “hegemonic” Western is always already haunted by other traces and forms, critiques and extensions that challenge and mark it in many different ways so that rather than Ford’s landscape having “vanished,” it lives on directly or indirectly in new and often very different, perhaps even contrary works. Of course, a haunting in Derrida’s terms also infers what is “to come” as well as what has been, and therefore signifies the continued presence of the classic Western (as haunting) *within, alongside, and in relation with* the post-Western.

With this haunting in mind, a number of key questions emerge: Could the Western as a genre contribute to the representation of this New West and break out of what Rancière called “the by now provincial world of the Western”?⁵⁹ Could those long-established strands of the Western find new expression in an age of superhighways, air travel, casinos, and sprawling cities? Could the Western do different cultural work by both reflecting upon the tradition that the

birth of cinema and nation had created, while simultaneously developing films that *critically* redirected and reaccentuated those very traditions in ways more suited to a transnational, global media age? In looking again at the survival and “survivance” of the Western, I wish to, in Derrida’s phrase, set “the system in motion,” where the “system” is the framework of definitions, assumptions, and ideologies that have surrounded and, to a degree, fixed, the genre since the 1900s.⁶⁰

In addressing these and other questions throughout this book, I engage with films well-known and less well-known but deserving of critical and cultural attention within the context of an evolving definition of critical regionalism in the American West. To this end, *Post-Westerns* is the final part of an “informal” trilogy on the New West that began with *The Cultures of the American New West* and was followed by *The Rhizomatic West*, through which I wanted to rethink aspects of western studies as critically regionalist, drawing into this new conceptualization ideas and frames of reference from theories and philosophies traditionally viewed as outside or beyond the normative interests of the field. In this book’s use of cinema I want to show how what Deleuze and Guattari term the “minor” contributes critically to this process of intervention and interrogation of established forms and ideologies, making the “major” stutter, as they put it.⁶¹ In analyzing these movements within film, the book begins to chart also the necessary and contested politics of the post-Western as it has emerged since 1945.