THE RETURN OF THE WESTERN

Wayne O’Brien
THE RETURN OF THE WESTERN

- Introduction
- Genre and the western
- The decline of the western film
- Revivals
- Postmodernism?
- Red Dead Redemption – playtime and reflection
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INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVES

• Co-author of *Studying Videogames*

• PhD student with University of Leicester – Learning to Kill?

• Head of Media & Film Studies, Smestow School, Wolverhampton
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- Objectives
- To explore ideas about media literacy by:
  - exploring the concept of genre
  - examining the usefulness of postmodernism
  - Through a consideration of Red Dead Redemption
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- Media literacy – my definition
- "Media literacy is being able to engage not just with the immediate content of a media text, but also to be able to apply knowledge and understanding of institutional factors that have an impact on shaping the text itself and on the messages and values embedded within the text. Media literacy also involves knowledge and understanding of how different audiences in different times and places may interpret the text in different ways. Crucially, the media-literate reader of the text is able to see that his/her own reading of the text may well be at odds with that applied by some or all of the target audience"
- (from A2 Media Studies for OCR, McDougall, 2009)
- Will we interpret Red Dead Redemption different to its target audience?
THE RETURN OF THE WESTERN GENRE AND THE WESTERN

- What is genre?
- “Genre is a system of expectations that circulate between industry, audience and text” (Steve Neale)
- What is a western?
- “North of the Rio Grande, west of the Mississippi”?
- The Last of the Mohicans / Cross of Iron – westerns?
- The thorny problem of genre
THE RETURN OF THE WESTERN DECLINE

- The death of the western – Heaven’s Gate (1980)
- The birth of the action-adventure – Star Wars (1977)
- Dead / dormant / mutate
- Back to the Future III / Young Guns / Lonesome Dove / Deadwood
- Die Hard – the western in disguise
- [Website Link](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qxBXm7ZUTM)
THE RETURN OF THE WESTERN REVENGE

- The 90s revival – Unforgiven / Tombstone / Wyatt Earp / Unforgiven / Maverick
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• The ‘function’ of the western – a mirror to reality?
• “How the west was won” – the evolution of the western tracks changes in society
• Metz – stages of a genre
  1. Classic western
  2. Self-conscious parody
  3. Challenge of genre conventions
  4. Critique of genre itself (the postmodern stage?)

• Red Dead Redemption – self-conscious parody or critique of genre?
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RED DEAD REDEMPTION

- Western games – fringe part of the video games industry
- Red Dead – is it significant?
- Red Dead Redemption – not just a game, but a brand – game / DLC / machinima movie / live action movie?
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RED DEAD REDEMPTION

• Influence of western movies – comparison to ‘The Wild Bunch’
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwdAYRK56kk
• Cut scenes – enabling or inhibiting ‘immersion’?
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A7pVbWNgNKU&feature=related
• ‘Exodus in America’ – religious / mythical connotations
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RED DEAD REDEMPTION

• Playing the game – reflection on mode of consumption – differences between watching and playing

• What cultural capital / representational competence / media literacy skills are needed to play and to ‘understand’ the game?
THE RETURN OF THE WESTERN POSTMODERNISM
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• Following Strinati (1995) *An introduction to theories of popular culture*
• Emphasis on style over substance
  • *Genre as tinsel*
  • *Red Dead Redemption is Grand Theft Auto in disguise?*
• Breakdown over distinction between art and popular culture
  • *Are video games art or ‘just’ popular culture*
  • ‘*The invincible rise of the video game*’
• Confusion over time and space
  • *Where are we? America? Mexico? Liberty City?*
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FINAL THOUGHTS

• What use / what value does attaching a label to a text or product (e.g. postmodern) bring to it and to audiences’ interactions with that text / product?

• What benefits do skills in media literacy (a knowledge of western conventions, characters, narratives) or representational competence (knowledge of video games in general and an understanding of the rules of this game world) bring to the interaction with the text?