

Critical Method and Contemporary Film

Critical Method and Contemporary Film:

Reviewing the Reviewers

By

Christopher K. Brooks

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INTRODUCTION

This study has been initiated by the recent premieres of two television series, *Westworld* on HBO and *Billions* on Showtime. Both series have innovated / subverted in terms of character, plots, conventions and generic expectations. In doing so, they have exposed the language of *film criticism* and opened the possibility that the language of the film critic is changing or perhaps must change in order to accommodate the originality of these new programs. Especially interesting is the revelation that follows about the language of film criticism over the years—especially the comparative / analogous modes used by male critics when confronted with innovative or groundbreaking female characters or performances. *Westworld* and *Billions* both employ original characters, particularly women characters, while also challenging gender conventions. It is the nature of those “gender conventions” that this study will primarily examine and question. Who has the privilege of defining those conventions, and who should evaluate how gender is portrayed? What role have women film critics played? How are directors perceived? Who is the audience for a given media narrative? In answering these questions, I have been persuaded to rethink my own critical stance. I believe that a critical shift is currently taking place, that a *neofuturistic* turn is underway that gradually will see film criticism move out from under the shadow of *postmodernism*. Various genres will be examined and their evaluations studied. For this reason, I will focus almost entirely on post 9/11 media productions, as the recent renewal of neofuturistic ideologies coincide with the emergence of new perceptions after the events in 2001. *Lives Matter*, *Occupy Wall Street*, *Me-too* and other awakenings also align with post 9/11 awareness. Colin Kaepernick has impacted sports and advertising. Lady Gaga has emerged fully. As individuals change themselves and the way we perceive them, film evolves.

I offer an example of my thinking in the two reviews that follow. The first is Roger Ebert’s original 1999 review of *Boys Don’t Cry*, written in the context of that period, before 9/11 and subsequent social movements.

“Kimberly Peirce who directed this movie and co-wrote it with Andy Bienen, was faced with a project that could have gone wrong in countless ways. She finds the right note. She never cranks the story up above the level it’s comfortable with; she doesn’t underline the stupidity of the local law-

enforcement officials because that's not necessary; she sees Tom and John not as simple killers but as the instruments of deep ignorance and inherited anti-social pathology. (Tom knows he's trouble; he holds his hand in a flame and then cuts himself, explaining, "This helps control the thing inside of me so I don't snap out at people.") The whole story can be explained this way: Most everybody in it behaves exactly according to their natures. The first time I saw the movie, I was completely absorbed by the characters--the deception, the romance, the betrayal. Only later did I fully realize what a great film it is, a worthy companion to those other masterpieces of death on the prairie, "Badlands" and "In Cold Blood." This could have been a clinical Movie of the Week, but instead it's a sad song about a free spirit who tried to fly a little too close to the flame."¹

This is a fine review from a noteworthy, *Pulitzer-Prize* winning critic. Ebert uses "I" and relates his feelings about the film, citing similar cinematic narratives that visit the same tragic ends. He congratulates the director for her control of the subject matter. And he applauds the characters, each acting according to the world that shaped them. Nothing is amiss in this review.

Here is a 2016 overview of how *Boys Don't Cry* is received in the second decade of the new millennium:

"In 1999 *Boys Don't Cry* became the first film to represent transgender masculinity in a believable way. However, at a recent Reed College screening that point was lost on a group of transgender students who showed up to protest it. Visiting filmmaker Kimberly Peirce was greeted with signs declaring "Fuck Your Transphobia," "You Don't Fucking Get It," and "Fuck This Cis White Bitch." Their beef wasn't new: The movie portrays the plight of a transgender man, but it doesn't feature a transgender performer."²

¹ See: Roger Ebert, "1999 Boys Don't Cry Review," October 22, 1999, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/boys-dont-cry-1999>.

² Jude Dry, "'Boys Don't Cry' Protests: Why We Should Listen to Trans Activists Criticizing The Milestone Film," December 14, 2016, <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/kimberly-peirce-boys-dont-cry-reed-trans-gender-1201757549/>. The byline for this review reads, "*Whether or not the celebrated queer film and filmmaker are worthy targets is irrelevant. Transgender people are tired of being erased in movies and television. We need to hear them out.*" Stating that the *filmmaker's* status is "irrelevant" is an odd stance, as she is being attacked for a *future perception* she could not have foreseen. Still, these voices have their place, and in 2019, those voices seem to have been heard.

A new emerging audience now attends and reviews films, seeking a mirror of their own lives in the stories on the screen. Ever since Al Jolson sported black face, white actors slapped on oil to play Native Americans, and John Wayne played Genghis Khan, audiences have been complaining about miscasting. That used to refer to race, but the charge to a “Cis White Bitch” indicates a sexual orientation perspective in its play. It may be difficult to hear anything about *Boys Don't Cry* cast in such a poor light, but it is a biographically-based, realistic film—Ebert's review insists on that. Hence, three incidences of “fuck” are used to greet a successful, groundbreaking director, a word Ebert would have never employed. Why? According to the transgender students at Reed College, Peirce's film simply isn't as realistic as it could have been: it, too, has been *miscast*, though Hilary Swank won her first Oscar in this role. *Realism* is a fascinating word when one considers how movies work, offering versions, renditions, perceptions, and interpretations that will play onscreen for two hours but represent entire lives, even eons of time in their narratives. And it will be evaluated in the terms of the many new cultural voices that speak out in the new millennium, many unhappy with programmatic institutional casting and production. The major genres of film include crime dramas, science-fiction narratives, and westerns. How realistic are those genres? Let's see.

WESTERNS

Westworld premiered on HBO in 2016 and garnered 22 Emmy nominations. Those nominations included performers in all four gendered acting categories (lead and supporting actor and actress), writing and producing in a drama, and production design for a narrative contemporary or fantasy program. This bifurcation into *drama* and *fantasy* categories is important. Series Co-producer Lisa Joy described her program in the following way:

“In a recent interview promoting season two, co-showrunner Lisa Joy discussed how the intention of this series was to examine and undermine the tropes of the western, of these abused damsels, and turn them on their head, while still being careful in how the actual violence is depicted. The founders of the *Westworld* park came to the conclusion, years apart, that suffering is the cornerstone of identity, and the first step towards self-actualization and true, independent thought. The audience brings their own knowledge of suffering to fill in the blanks for these hosts, and in doing so, makes their burgeoning humanity closer to our own.”³

The design of the program to *undermine the tropes of the western* arguably led to the critical acclaim and the twenty-two Emmy nominations. But what exactly are the tropes of the western and has this not been done before? The image that accompanies the article cited above is that of Evan Rachel Wood firing a rifle. Has this not been seen before? An examination of another western fronted by a woman will reveal how critical language marks and even dooms a cinematic record.

Sharon Stone’s *The Quick and the Dead* premiered in 1995 with a strong cast (multiple eventual Oscar winners) and Sam Raimi (*The Evil Dead*) directing. She carries a gun, enters a fast-draw contest, and shows herself able to compete with the male gunslingers. How is this portrayal received by film reviewers? Desson Howe of *The Washington Post* offers this insight:

³ Jessica Mason, “The Subtle Feminism of HBO’s *Westworld*,” April 29, 2018, <https://www.themarysue.com/hbo-westworld-feminism/>.

“*The Quick and the Dead* tries to use ear-shattering gunplay and a battery of comic-book-style touches to disguise the obvious fact that it’s a western vanity project for Sharon Stone. But although Stone may be pleasing to some eyes, she’s pretty small in the saddle here -- just an innocuous gender twist on the reluctant cowboy hero. And her story of hellbent revenge is about as compelling as a 30-second fragrance commercial.”⁴

“An innocuous gender twist” marks this evaluation of Stone playing a “reluctant cowboy hero.” No mention is made of Medea or Nemesis, no typology established from the women of revenge drama, no notion of the justified vigilante: “Stone may be pleasing to some eyes.” Stone is not a cowboy, so she cannot pull off a western—that seems to be the gist of this review. And Howe is not the only critic who looks to the *cowboy* to evaluate a female gunslinger: “Sam Raimi tries to do a Sergio Leone, and though this 1995 feature is highly enjoyable in spots, it doesn’t come across as very convincing, perhaps because nothing can turn Sharon Stone into Charles Bronson.”⁵ Stone is pleasing to the eye but Stone is not Charles Bronson and, to make *The Quick and the Dead* even less appealing, Sam Raimi is not Sergio Leone. Jonathan Rosenbaum typifies the male film critic of the 1980s, the Reagan years, the high reign of postmodernism. Raimi is compared to the highly successful director of *spaghetti westerns* that have been granted a high loft in the annals of generic film history. Stone is likened, and found wanting, in her analogy to Charles Bronson, chiefly remembered for his role in *The Magnificent Seven* where westerns are concerned. *The Quick and the Dead* is not evaluated for what it does but rather for how it fares in comparison to spaghetti westerns and successful western films with megastars in leading roles. This *comparative mode* has served critics, and in particular *male* critics, for decades. It resists change.

I have suggested that the comparative mode—especially male genres versus female innovations in that genre—avoids evolving because it works

⁴ Desson Howe, “‘The Quick and the Dead’ (R),” *Washington Post*, February 10, 1995. Howe also said of Stone’s performance, “there hasn’t been acting this mechanical since *Speed Racer*.”

⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum, “The Quick and the Dead,” *Chicago Reader*, October, 1995. Rosenbaum continues his Leone comparison throughout his relatively short review: “Raimi has a lot of fun with certain Leone conventions (huge close-ups, hokey flashbacks, hyperbolic lines and gestures), and adds a few of his own (like some morphing effects out of *Death Becomes Her*), but he flubs some moments (most noticeably by cutting away from several gunfights at climactic junctures) and generally seems hamstrung by Stone’s determination to play simultaneously the most and least macho character in the story.” As is the case with Howe, Rosenbaum spares nothing in his roasting of Raimi’s film.

so well. It, in fact, established the very conventions of roles and plots that new mediated programming seeks to challenge. I have also claimed this this resistance mirrors *postmodernism*. Here is why:

“There remain . . . two final logical possibilities, both of which depend on the repudiation of any of such a **historical break** and which therefore . . . call into question the very usefulness of the vey category of postmodernism. As for the works associated with the latter, they will then be assimilated back into classical modernism proper, so that the “postmodern” becomes little more than the form taken by the authentically modern in our own period, and a mere dialectical intensification of the old modernist impulse toward innovation.”⁶

If, say, *The Quick and the Dead* had broken new ground, if it had been received as a gender-innovative work that revised the western genre, Jameson’s description of the *assimilative* process of postmodernism would ensure—absolutely guarantee—that the film would quickly be claimed, despite its authenticity, as a postmodern work generated by an impulse to expand the purview of that movement. As summarized here, Jameson’s thinking explains why ideologies such as film criticism maintain a singular methodology:

“For Fredric Jameson, as a Marxist, the problems of postmodern culture must be transcoded into problems of political and economic change. His own analysis does not seem to offer much hope for change. By exploring our society in its totality, he shows us why change in one or another part of the system is not enough. All the pieces of the system are interlocked. Nothing can really be different unless everything is different, which is why we need to think about the totality. One reason to study postmodernism is to learn why such a total change is so difficult to imagine today: we see no point in even thinking about, much less challenging, the totality of the prevailing media/market system. For the time being, the system seems immune to any political challenge.”⁷

⁶ Fredrik Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991), 59. Emphasis added. Jameson’s constant linking of capitalism to postmodernism should be regarded seriously. The movie industry is always eyeing the box-office returns; success breeds success, formulas, franchises, superstar performers and directors, and a desire to maintain profitable practices. Independent film is a relatively new player in this financial game, but also with an eye on profits. “Don’t fix what’s not broken” explains why virtually every *Marvel Comic* character ends up in a film and why James Bond will soon turn 60 on screen.

⁷Ira Chernus offers this *Interpretation of Postmodernism* through Jameson’s works. Sometimes the paraphrase fits more easily into a work-in-progress than the original

The media/market ideology is tied to Hollywood's production code (star system; recognized genres; proven formula, etc.) and to the press that covers that production code as well. To say that Sam Raimi is not Sergio Leone is acceptable film criticism because Leone, the western, and the male ideology of western acting, directing, and story-telling are part of the mediated *totality* that has, as long as many of us can remember, characterized Hollywood. "Change in one or another part of the system is not enough" is sufficient, I suggest, to understand why *The Quick and the Dead*, clearly a forerunner to *Westworld*, receives such lukewarm reviews. It is **not** *The Wild Bunch*, which the Hollywood system produced. Why heap praise onto or acknowledge the novelty of something that does not measure to what the system has endorsed as a *classic*. Another example follows.

In 1994 *Bad Girls* premiered, another revisionist western helmed by some well-known actresses: Drew Barrymore, Andie MacDowell, Mary Stuart Masterson, Madeleine Stowe. The poster for the film depicts the four co-leads all brandishing weapons, three pistols and a rifle; two wear cowboy hats. Owen Gleiberman, film critic for *The Washington Post*, offers this review:

"I went into **Bad Girls** expecting it to be a campy exercise in pop revisionism, a tale of rootin'-tootin' Annie Oakleys tearing up the range with six-guns blazing. My secret hope was that the film would be so bad it was fun. Well, I got it wrong: The movie isn't that bad--and it's no fun at all. Instead of playing the girls-in-spurs premise for the cheeky hokum it is, *Bad Girls* looks at its cowgirl heroines with solemn reverence. They're victims, soulful sisters trying to make their way in a man's dirty world."⁸

Gleiberman *hoped for* a bad film. After all, women held the starring roles, and the director is Jonathan Kaplan, not Sergio Leone. Kaplan had directed Jodie Foster to an Academy Award in *The Accused* six years earlier but was not known as a director of westerns. Women performing in a

work, steeped in esoteric language. Ira Chernus, "Frederic Jameson's Interpretation of Postmodernism," University of Colorado, 1992, <http://spot.colorado.edu/~chernus/NewspaperColumns/LongerEssays/JamesonPostmodernism.htm>.

⁸ Gleiberman's May 6, 1994, attack on *Bad Girls* adds, "Yet for all the feminist outrage that's been built into the premise, *Bad Girls* never becomes a righteous payback fantasy, a *Thelma & Louise* on horseback." <http://www.ew.com/article/1994/05/06/bad-girls/>. Thelma and Louise die in making a tragic feminist point about the placelessness some women feel. The co-protagonists of *Bad Girls* save one of their party from hanging because they wish to live, a point Gleiberman overlooks.

western should offer “cheeky hokum” because their narrative is likely to be an “innocuous gender twist” if they carry guns and ride horses. Women as victims—*mere* victims—is not a sufficient vehicle for a western film, or so it appears. The *Catholic News Service Media Review Office*, ever protective against offensive material, offers only this succinct opinion of the film: “Director Jonathan Kaplan’s empty oater is coated with a slick Hollywood veneer but its feeble story is nothing more than a string of tired Western clichés substituting female for male leads.”⁹ How can female leads personify “Western clichés” when they are breaking new ground? And it gets even better when *The Grinch* weighs in:

“The main characters are all outlaw ex-prostitutes on the run in the 19th century American west. Stowe is the unemotive leader, Masterson is the snotty other-side-of-the-tracks girl, McDowell is the airheaded Aphrodite, Barrymore is the nurturer...and why I even went to the trouble to describe their shallowness is beyond me! KILL ME NOW! EVISCERATE ME WITH A SPORK! (ahem) Anyways, each of the characters have about as many dimensions as a drafting board diagram of Kate Moss. Their emotions run the gamut from ditzy, to blank, to snotty, to bored. Annie Oakley they ain’t. Sheesh, this isn’t even Raimi’s version of ‘the Quick and the Dead’! This movie might’ve been fun if they had realized how improbable the situation was for the time period and just went full on overboard with it....have Barrymore do stuff like chew tobacco, spit baccar juice on scorpions and snakes ala Josey Wales style, or have a spring loaded double six-shooter device that shoots out of her breasts....SOMETHING other than what we got...a tepid western trying to be believable.”¹⁰

Once again, the film’s storyline is lambasted for **not** offering what the male critic imagined it would. The cast doesn’t shoot like Annie Oakley once again. No one is Josey Wales. Women as victims of western patriarchal bias aren’t sufficient for a plot unless it is taken “full on overboard.” The filmmakers did not “realize”—realize *what*? That the film reviewer had *The Outlaw Josey Wales* in mind as a comparative base? That at least some filmgoers like to see tobacco spit employed in westerns? Scott

⁹ The Catholic review characterizes *Bad Girls* as a “Superficial feminist Western in which disenchanted prostitutes (Madeleine Stowe, Mary Stuart Masterson, Andie MacDowell and Drew Barrymore) flee a murder charge in Texas.” Most falsely accused of murder would be disenchanted. Whether they are “superficially” so is up to the viewer, feminist or not. “Bad Girls,” 1994, <http://archive.usccb.org/movies/b/badgirls.shtml>.

¹⁰ The Grinch, “*Bad Girls*,” September 9, 1999, <http://www.efilmcritic.com/review.php?movie=1699&reviewer=156>.

Weinberg echoes *The Grinch*: “Hell, the *Bad Girls* that I just watched makes Sharon Stone in *The Quick and the Dead* look absolutely admirable.”¹¹ Male film critics have learned to compare within the system. In this case, *The Quick and the Dead* is bad and *Bad Girls* is worse. The vitriolic evaluation of the effort of the four actresses who worked in this latter film can be explained, I would argue, by the comparative system that remains “immune to any political challenge.” Film critics, the vast majority writing for major newspapers and magazines being male, have held cultural and political sway for decades because they speak the language of film criticism which they created, nurtured, and passed on in patriarchal Hollywood fashion. “Sharon Stone looks good” is casting-couch commentary, not legitimate *film* assessment. It will last as long as society accepts it. Maybe the gender should change. Let’s see what happens when it does.

One reviewer, Gretchen Koot, declares that *Bad Girls* offers “a fun way to spend an afternoon” because, and this is significant, “Most of the film seems highly unrealistic but that fits the genre.”¹² At last, someone cites the fact that westerns are not particularly realistic: they are fictional, often fantastical, and they beg the willing suspension of disbelief. Koot’s notion of a “fun way” to pass time acknowledges that westerns are a form of entertainment, not of high realism. Koot evaluates the film for what it *does*, not what it could have or should have done. In evaluating the film in such a manner, Koot reminds us to measure the film as an individual piece, not a chapter in the book of westerns. And this recognizes a crucial fact. The western genre had to change. It had practically disappeared after *Once Upon a Time in the West* appeared, Leone’s film being so comprehensive an *homage* to American Westerns from the 1930s on that few westerns were made—at least successfully—in the next ten years.¹³ Revisionist westerns

¹¹ Scott Weinberg waited until 2005 to annihilate *Bad Girls*. See his unbending dislike of the film at <https://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/16436/bad-girls-extended-cut/>.

¹² “Ladies Ride the Range in Fun but Unlikely Western” is the title of Koot’s viewer-friendly, April 26, 1994, piece. Hers can be read at: <http://tech.mit.edu/V114/N23/bad-girls.23a.html>.

¹³ “Leone is a director of pure style, as opposed to emotional meaning, and *Once Upon a Time in the West* has little purpose beyond further defining his mannerist style against the methods of those classicists before him. He celebrates the films of John Ford by merging setting and the theme of Manifest Destiny with his own flourishes, and in turn, creates an incomparable opera-Western whose power resides in the awe he creates around the traditions carved down before him. The result could scarcely be described as a Spaghetti Western, given the film’s devotion to American filmmakers and their conventions, and the notable lack of hopelessness within the story. Rather, this postmodern epic, with all its recycling and references, provides a

emerged (*Little Big Man; McCabe and Mrs. Miller*), but some critics believe that the iconic western had disappeared until Lawrence Kasdan's *Silverado* appeared in 1985.¹⁴ With the success of *Silverado* came these women-led westerns, following Kasdan's film which utilized four *male* leads (Kevin Kline, Scott Glenn, Kevin Costner, Danny Glover) and a strong supporting cast (Brian Dennehy, Jeff Goldblum, Linda Hunt, John Cleese) and the expectations of success following Kasdan's popular *Big Chill*. Of course Kaplan and Raimi's films would pale in comparison, but they should not be subjected to a film-by-film comparison considering they target different themes, with Kasdan's film *observing* western conventions and Kaplan's and Raimi's films *undermining* them.

How does the most significant western on television since *Guns, Smokey, and the Bandits* fare? And does it reflect some ideology other than *postmodernism*? A definition of *Neofuturism* from the performing arts helps:

"Neo-Futurism aims to present actual life on stage by creating a world in the theater which has no pretense or illusion. By advocating the complete awareness and inclusion of the actual world around us, Neo-Futurism subverts theatrical conventions of character, setting, plot, and the separation of audience and performer."¹⁵

Here is a further elaboration from the same theatrical group, *The Chicago Neo-Futurist Players*:

stage where a grand anastrophe on a classic tale is committed with no end of expressionist wonder." Bryan Eggert, "Once Upon a Time in the West," August 10, 2010, <https://deepfocusreview.com/definitives/once-upon-a-time-in-the-west/>.

¹⁴ Gene Siskel writes, "the film was a completely successful physical attempt at reviving the western" in his *Chicago Tribune* July 10, 1985 review, 5. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* asserts, "*Silverado* is a sweeping, glorious-looking western that's at least a full generation removed from the classic films it brings to mind." Ian Freer of *Empire* adds, "Whereas many of the westerns from the '70s try a revisionist take on the genre, *Silverado* offers a wholehearted embracing of western traditions." The key here is 1985. The conventional western returns to the screen with the production of *Silverado*, a film which then invited the creation of such "new westerns" as *The Quick and the Dead* and *Bad Girls*. And if Maslin is correct, the "full generation" that has passed before *Silverado* appeared would reach back to Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The two female-led films receive no credit for energizing the revival of the western, though both still garner significant airplay in the new millennium.

¹⁵ See this seminal definition at: Greg Allen, "Neo-Futurism In A Nutshell," 2010, last modified October 3, 2012, <http://www.neogregallen.com/category/neo-futurism/>.

“Neo-futurism is a late 20th–early 21st century movement in the arts, design, and architecture. It is a departure from the cynical attitude of post-modernism and represents an idealistic belief in a better future and ‘a need to periodize the modern rapport with the technological.’”

It seems fair to say that the cited reviews of *The Quick and the Dead* and *Bad Girls* were cynical, that few words of praise were to be found—the very attitude *Neofuturism* seeks to supplant. But the quote from Lisa Joy (above) indicates that *Westworld* aims to *undermine* the tropes of western movies. Neofuturism *subverts* and *Westworld undermines* the conventions of the creative narrative. Moreover, *Westworld* utilizes the “abused damsel” as the vehicle for its revision, the very scenario that male critics lambasted *Bad Girls* for offering. It seems that violence against women, when handled with discretion, can succeed in communicating stories of self-actualization. And while Gretchen Koot rescued *Bad Girls* from total critical neglect by citing its willingness to play against realism, *Westworld*, nominated in the *fantasy* category as well as drama, makes other claims. Here are the descriptive statements¹⁶ of the two female leads, Thandie Newton and Evan Rachel Wood respectively:

“I just want to play truth, and very often the truth of the characters I play as a woman is that she’s powerful, she’s intelligent, [and] she’s able to multitask. So I want to give it up massively to the f–ing men on our show to have the generosity of spirit, to have the sophistication, the progressiveness to put a platform up for women.” (Thandie Newton)

“I’ve always said playing this role completely changed my life and transformed me, and it’s hard not to go through this same evolutionary shift as the characters because you’re on the journey with them. And you don’t get to know what happens to them, and you don’t get to mentally prepare, and the existential crisis there is very real.” (Evan Rachel Wood)

The “true, independent thought” sought by co-producer Lisa Joy is echoed by Newton’s desire to bring truth to her performance and by Wood’s assertion that her character’s experiences are existentially *real*. As Evan Rachel Wood testified before Congress in support of the Sexual Assault Survivors Bill of Rights Act, herself a victim of male sexism, her role as Dolores (a rape victim in *Westworld*) reflects reality and nicely illustrates the elimination of the barrier between performer and character, between character and audience. The goals Dolores pursues in *Westworld* are, in essence, Wood’s real-world goals. So how do these gun-toting women of

¹⁶ Mason, “Westworld.”

HBO fare critically? Here is the overall scoring skein from *Rotten Tomatoes*: Average Rating: 8.16/10; Average Episode Score: 94%; Season Reviews: 84; Fresh: 69; Rotten: 15. Critics Consensus: With an impressive level of quality that honors its source material, the brilliantly addictive *Westworld* balances intelligent, enthralling drama against outright insanity.¹⁷

The samplings from *Metacritics* also run very positive:

“If all this sounds heady, pretentious or derivative, then *Westworld* may eventually turn out to be guilty as charged. But from at least from the first two episodes sampled, *Westworld* is also a genuinely different new series that offers something even better than that: It’s genuinely engaging.” (Verne Gay).¹⁸

The critic’s use of “genuinely different” with “new” about the reboot of a 1971 movie is crucial to illustrating the difference between postmodern critical language and neofuturistic evaluative diction. The acknowledgement of the first line that the new series is *derivative* would have been sufficient in the late twentieth century to under-value the series. A typical review from the 80s or 90s would have stated that female gunslingers are not new and women’s oppression is not the stuff of western narrative. In 2016 and through today, it is the stuff of westerns—new “genuinely engaging” westerns that seek to communicate “true, independent thought.” Independent from what? The cynical, traditional, inscribed, expectation-laden, comparative critical method that places every innovative or original narrative up against the self-proclaimed classics of its own institutional making. For example, endnote one cites Sergio Leone’s genius “in the awe he creates around the traditions carved down before him.” Leone works within traditional generic boundaries and seeks to expand them. That is why Eggert correctly labels *Once Upon a Time in the West* as “a postmodern epic.” This film resonates “against the methods of those classicists before him.” The eyes of the critic are on the classic westerns and the conventions they communicate from era to era. John Ford, of the famous *Cavalry Trio* of western films, is mentioned by name. American filmmakers *and their conventions* are cited. Hence, Leone’s 1968 epic essentially passes muster

¹⁷ *Westworld* is first listed at *Rotten Tomatoes* on October 2, 2016, its premiere date: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/westworld>.

¹⁸ Verne Gay, “‘Westworld’ Review: HBO’s bloody, exciting Wild West fantasy” posted September 12, 2016 at *Metacritics* and at Verne Gay’s alternate address, <https://www.newsday.com/entertainment/tv/westworld-review-hbo-s-bloody-exciting-wild-west-fantasy-1.12380126>.

with the muster makers by identifying with and creating within the conventions of American filmmakers. But Sharon Stone **is not** Charles Bronson. *Bad Girls* **are not** Annie Oakley. *Westworld* must be doing something right. What more have the critics to offer?

Zack Handlen offers this viewpoint:

“Anyone looking for proof that the second season of *Westworld* is playing with a different set of rules than the first can find it in the introduction and reveal of the season’s first major new human character, Grace.” (Katja Herbers)¹⁹

Handlen reveals how *Westworld* is neofuturistic: it changes the rules regularly, subverts convention, minimizes homages to the *classics*, and often does so with the introduction of a new human—and typically woman—character. Perhaps an existing female character is revised, her agenda and identity changed. Both Maeve and Dolores have been killed and reincarnated, always with residual memories, curiosity about their pasts, and an agenda to alter their existence. That does not occur in typical westerns. Hence, at no point do the producers invoke other westerns in their descriptions of their creation. Why should they—they are convention-breakers and rules re-writers by profession. If *Silverado* revitalized the western genre in 1985 by “embracing western traditions,” what can a new western series offer 33 years later by also maintaining those same traditions? Each new season, Handlen implies, allows the *Westworld* producers to change their own operating rules. This is almost the definition of *neofuturistic* creativity in that the series not only *periodizes* the narrative with contemporary concerns but *re-periodizes* their offerings with images—now new conventions—not seen in westerns: feudal Japan battles; Tribal Native Americans witnessing twenty-first machinery at work; nineteenth-century commoners exposed to twenty-first century computer technology and medical ingenuity. These would represent glaring anachronisms in a Leone or Eastwood western, but the new HBO series is simply not playing by those rules. HBO President Casey Bloys does declare that the “mythologically dense series is not for casual viewers,” adding, “It requires your attention. It’s a unique show and that’s what we look for.”²⁰ The

¹⁹ “A resonant *Westworld* finds meaning in the past,” May 13, 2018, <https://tv.avclub.com/a-resonant-westworld-finds-meaning-in-the-past-1825996883>.

²⁰ Michael Ausiello, “Westworld Backlash: HBO Addresses Polarizing Season 2,” July 25, 2018, <https://tvline.com/2018/07/25/westworld-season-3-spoilers-creative-direction/>.

audience has changed. Characters in *Westworld*, moreover, find out in almost every episode that things are not what they seem, even that *they* are not what they seem. This transcends the conventions of the classic western. Here *Westworld* merges the conventional western with *fantasy*.

Another citation from Zack Handlen is useful. Handlen asks,

“How much do the stories we live by matter when we find out those stories are a lie? It’s an idea that *Westworld* keeps coming back to, especially in its second season, when the show has more or less surrendered itself completely to the hosts.”²¹

“Weapons of mass destruction found. Isis is contained. I saw Americans laughing on 9/11.” We live in a world of *rendition*, *spin-doctoring*, and *fake news—fantasy*. We have a choice of news providers to patronize, but we cannot be certain which is most accurate, as this citation suggests:

“Two-thirds of people (67 percent) cited one of these factors as a reason they don’t trust what they read. Unsurprisingly, concerns about political biases were particularly significant in the U.S., where 34 percent of respondents who distrusted news media cited concerns about political bias as the reason why. This concern is even more acute among those on the political right, who were three times more likely to distrust the news media than those on the left.” (Three responses featured in the report: “Liberal media is full of bullshit and lies,” “Fox News keeps it fair; CNN tells us left-wing lies,” and “They are so far to the left, they might fall off.”)²²

Westworld is only one resort at Delos, and Delos is only one form of escapism in the “real world.” In Delos, everyone—hosts, humans, guests, technicians—are uncertain about what Delos really represents. The viewing audience feels the same. Plots to replicate human psyches are underway; hosts plan to kill humans; some characters do not know if they are real or robot. All are certain there exists another reality, if only they can find it. Heaven? In this real world we argue—we contest—what bathroom a transgendered person should use. We challenge the birthright of our President. We react satirically and supportively to Bruce Jenner’s gender

²¹ “*Westworld* brings in a new world with some old ideas,” 5/20/2018, <https://www.avclub.com/c/tv-review/westworld>.

²² Ricardo Bilton authored this report through a *Reuters News* study. “Why don’t people trust the news and social media? A new report lets them explain in their own words,” November 30, 2017, <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/11/why-dont-people-trust-the-news-and-social-media-a-new-report-lets-them-explain-in-their-own-words/>.

change: what is he/she now? We do not trust our politicians or, as the last citation implies, the news media. People lose spouses to gay and lesbian lovers. Children are raised by two fathers or two mothers. What are we to do? How do we address people of a different sexual preference? Lisa Joy would suggest that we *self-actualize*, that we become what we need to be to solve the problems that oppress us—that’s what *Westworld* offers to the many, many hosts who have learned that the lives they live are indeed a lie. That’s why some humans come and will not leave. The “western” of *Westworld* is the known, the classic story, the conventional—the stuff of twentieth-century film criticism. Ironically, all of this, the *Westworld* experience, is artificial. *Delos* is a fantasy land. Gunfights, madams soliciting in bars for their girls, stagecoaches roaring through, bar fights and broken glasses—that’s the left hand, the “stuff” of classic westerns. The right hand is telling stories of identity, awareness, awakenings, and desire, stuff the news knows nothing about. As Bill Keveney puts it, Evan Rachel Wood would call it “the truth”:

“*Westworld’s* first season was filmed long before the Me Too movement came to national prominence, but star Evan Rachel Wood sees parallels between activist victims of sexual misconduct and the abused android hosts rising up against authority in the HBO sci-fi drama. . . . ‘It’s hard not to draw comparisons now, just because it’s mirroring what’s going on in the world.’”

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Irony abounds in this innovative program. Lisa Joy, Thandie Newton, and Evan Rachel Wood laud the truthfulness of *Westworld’s* message while Gretchen Koot celebrated *Bad Girls* for flaunting the lack of realism it offered. Artificial humans populate *Westworld*; “real” people animate *Bad Girls*. Which mode offers more “truth”? If a lack of realism—fantasy-- is permissible as a western film element, where might the western go?

1966 saw the premier of *Billy the Kid Versus Dracula*. Critics pretty much dismissed that film²⁴. 2011 offered *Cowboys and Aliens*. This latter

²³ Bill Keveney, “Evan Rachel Wood: How the uprising of oppressed ‘Westworld’ androids mirrors Me Too movement,” *USA Today*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2018/03/26/evan-rachel-wood-how-uprising-oppressed-westworld-androids-mirrors-me-too-movement/446953002/>.

²⁴ Cavett Binion labels *Billy the Kid versus Dracula* “one of the weirdest scenarios ever committed to film.” Nate Yapp states that “The genres involved don’t so much mix as poke at each other warily. What laughs there are come unintentionally; what laughs are intended come unintelligibly.” And David J. Parker offers, “Man, was I snookered by this movie. I mean, how could this movie *not* be brilliantly bad with a title like *Billy the Kid Vs. Dracula*? Here’s how: It’s bad, but it’s also boring. . . . A

film, a commercial success, offers a fine test for film critics. Here's Roger Ebert's take:

"Yet I feel a certain small sadness. I wish this had been a Western. You know, the old-fashioned kind, without spaceships. Daniel Craig, cold-eyed and lean, plays a character familiar in the genre; think of the Ringo Kid or Doc Holliday, bad guys who rise to goodness.

Harrison Ford, as the rancher, embodies the kind of man who comes riding into town at the head of his private posse and issues orders to everyone. Sam Rockwell's Doc is the kind of small businessman who has come West while seeking his fortune among hard men. All the elements are here.

We are told, however, that the Western is a dead genre. The last one kids liked was 'Rango,' an animated cartoon. 'True Grit,' 'Appaloosa' and '3:10 to Yuma' were good, but limited in their demographic appeal. A competent director—Favreau, say—could have ditched the ridiculous aliens and made a straight Western with the same cast, but today there's small chance of that."²⁵

Ebert, a fine film critic, imposes a classicist and highly conventional expectation onto *Cowboys and Aliens*. It's compared in Ebert's mind to what a fine old shoot 'em up ought to be and not evaluated for what it *is*. *True Grit* and *Appaloosa* are invoked as potential narratives to emulate, and even a cartoon motion picture is cited as noteworthy. Craig's character should have aspired to becoming a Ringo or Doc Holliday *type*, something familiar, tested, true, and recognizable to those who love westerns. What is needed is "a straight western," but the western movie is "a dead genre."

James Berardinelli splits the difference. The *Variety* film critic appreciates the film *because* it merges genres well:

"Favreau works magic interweaving the two genres, showing equal respect for both. Western conventions entwine with science fiction ones. One moment, we're looking at an image pilfered from *Alien*; the next, we're watching a shadow of *The Searchers*. The way in which extraterrestrial involvement is explained in the 19th century uses religion rather than science as its lynchpin, which is understandable. What we would call 'aliens' in 2011 are regarded as 'demons.' Still, the reaction to Lonergan's

movie can be the worst waste of film ever created, but it's not worth watching if it isn't also entertaining. And boring isn't entertaining." See more reviews at https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0060168/externalreviews?ref_=tt_ovrt.

²⁵ Ebert's honest but conservative review can be read here: Roger Ebert, "Cowboys & Aliens," July 27, 2011, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/cowboys-and-aliens-2011>.

plasma weapon (or whatever kind of ‘ray gun’ it is) is surprisingly understated, bordering on nonchalant.”²⁶

Berardinelli mentions two classic films in the two merged genres to *praise* the innovation of the new western. He also cites the fact that “Indiana Jones” and “James Bond” are playing against type in *Cowboy and Aliens* but also that both actors carry off their roles well: they both *belong* in this western and don’t invoke in Berardinelli a desire to see a bullwhip in Ford’s hand or a Walter PPK in Craig’s. He admits, “It’s a solidly engaging and well produced spectacle that puts to shame some of its bigger and flashier predecessors on this long, depressing 2011 Summer Blockbuster Road” and brands the movie with three stars. He essentially sees the film for what it is—a mixed-genre offering—and evaluates it as such.

Other perspectives have their say. From the women’s perspective, Leah Rozen of *The Wrap* sees two films, however, one of which works, the other which does not:

“‘C&A’ is most effective and amusing when it is plumbing the clichés of cowboy movies and goosing them, as in when Jake, galloping on horseback, attempts to outrace an alien plane. The sci-fi half of the film is disappointingly ho-hum and familiar, drawing on ‘Alien,’ ‘Independence Day’ and a score of other films from the past couple [of] decades.”²⁷

Rozen invokes no classic westerns when citing the “clichés” of cowboy movies but cites two classic sci-fi films whose effectiveness *Cowboys and Aliens* did not reach—and to which most singularly themed *science-fiction* films cannot aspire. The film title, after all, uses *and* but not *versus* as if to merge the conflicted groups in an innovative narrative. Indians, outlaws, and cattle barons ally themselves to defeat the extraterrestrial invaders. This is a hopeful *fantasy*. Traditional *enemies* in classic westerns are confederates in this film. To believe such a tale requires the viewer to merge the two genres. Rozen keeps them separate.

And Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* takes us full circle:

“Maybe it’s all the western clichés, . . . including the dusty town, the gun-toting preacher the mild-mannered doctor, the trigger-happy scion of a powerful cattleman adored by the American Indian orphan who would make

²⁶ See: James Berardinelli, “Cowboys & Aliens (United States 2011) A Movie Review,” July 28, 2011, <http://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/cowboys-aliens>.

²⁷ Leah Rozen, “‘Cowboys & Aliens’: Yeah, There Are Cowboys ... and Aliens—But Not Much Else,” July 27, 2011, http://www.mrqe.com/movie_reviews/cowboys-and-aliens-m100062715.

him a better son. Don't forget the surrogate for this PG-13 picture's presumptive audience, a wide-eyed boy whom you half expect to cry out for Shane. ... Mr. Favreau ... wavers uncertainly between goofy pastiche and seriousness in a movie that wastes its title and misses the opportunity to play with, you know, ideas about the western and science-fiction horror."²⁸

Conventions and clichés. If a director uses them, critics evaluate their work for how fully realized they are, how effectively integrated they appear to be employed. And that means the *conventional* or *clichéd* film can be contrasted to the classics which employ those conventions most brilliantly. The boy in *Cowboys and Aliens* is not Brandon Dewilde and Daniel Craig is not Alan Ladd. The expectations of critics give them tunnel-vision. Jon Favreau, for example, earned accolades for directing the *Iron Man* films and a trio of *Avengers* movies, mainly science fiction works. He is a very successful director. But he didn't have to compete with 90 years of westerns working in the science-fiction genre.

Hmm. What word characterized *Silverado*? "*Revitalized*" was the descriptive term used for Kasdan's film, and Kasdan's film was a "straight western." Male leads; good guys and bad guys; a final showdown: *formula*. *Westworld*, on the other hand, is revitalizing the western genre by aligning its narrative with current events: "Executive producers Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, who mapped the *Westworld* story five years ago, see a universal comparison that goes beyond specific movements such as Me Too, Time's Up and Black Lives Matter."²⁹ All of these movements have been recognized in *Westworld*, which seeks to transcend them. It seems that one way to revitalize the ailing western genre is to shape it to converse with current events. This is the "modern rapport" of neofuturism, the aligning of technological advances with current human concerns. This is the "inclusion of the actual world" that neofuturistic theater demands. And, according to the ratings, this is what a postcontemporary audience wants—something *new and current*, something *fantastical* and *dramatic*, no matter what clichés and conventions are involved. Merging the western with *science* can succeed.

²⁸ See this sensible review: Manolah Dargis, "Movie Review 'Cowboys & Aliens,'" July 28, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/29/movies/cowboys-aliens-with-daniel-craig-review.html>.

²⁹ See: Bill Keveney, "Evan Rachel Wood: How the uprising of oppressed 'Westworld' androids mirrors Me Too movement," March 26, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2018/03/26/evan-rachel-wood-how-uprising-oppressed-westworld-androids-mirrors-me-too-movement/446953002/>.

And yet the *Paramount* network has produced *Yellowstone* for the TV audience starting June, 2018, while *Netflix* offered *Godless* the previous summer. Scott Tobias of *The Washington Post* offers his ideas on these new TV series:

“While the western, traditional or otherwise, has been left for dead by Hollywood movie studios, neo-westerns such as *Yellowstone* are finding a home on television, which can better accommodate a niche genre than risk-averse blockbusters. ... Western themes of identity, enterprise, power, and violence are made newly relevant, shot through with the gun-toting brio that once enthralled audiences in the genre’s heyday.”³⁰

“Neo-western” is a useful but puzzling term for narratives that employ the number of western *themes* that Thomas lists. Perhaps “neo” is employed for the reason Thomas cites in his opening statement: Hollywood movie studios no longer make westerns. But *Yellowstone* seems to connect to “classic” westerns at the thematic level. Taylor Sheridan, author of *Yellowstone*, lists these elements:

“The overarching conflicts that westerns have explored since the 1930s still exist today in those regions. You still have massive land developers doing everything they can to buy out ranches and develop them. You still have the consequences of settlement in that region to Native Americans. You have issues with government and oversight, and an influx of people into an area that continually change it. You have a small population that’s trying very hard to resist change. All of those themes exist today, and they’re worthy of exploration.”³¹

Yellowstone is new and has split voters at *Rotten Tomatoes* 50/50. Some label it a western soap opera / family drama. Another likens it to a Yellowstone geyser that never goes off. Here is a moderate review from Dustin Rowles: “It’s a lot of pushing and pulling, narratively speaking, but the cinematography is gorgeous, the acting is great, and while the characters still fit into neat little archetypes, that’s likely to change over the course of the season as it evolves.”³²

³⁰ Scott Tobias, “How TV has brought the western into the 21st century,” *The Washington Post*, June 29, 2018.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dustin Rowles, “What We’re Watching This Summer: ‘Cloak & Dagger,’ ‘Yellowstone,’ ‘Dietland,’” June 27, 2018, http://www.pajiba.com/tv_reviews/review-cloak-dagger-yellowstone-dietland.php.

Archetypal characters typify conventional westerns, leaving little room for innovation or thematic variance. But Kelly Reilly distinguishes herself in the context of gender and in subverting western tropes. Kevin Costner's lead character, John Dutton, says this to his son about his daughter Beth, played by Reilly: 'I need Beth because she's one thing that you'll never be. She's evil, and I need evil.'³³ Beth is a sexual creature who will seduce and near-seduce men into shameful and sometimes violent situations. But is she *evil*? Lynn Elber describes Beth as "family matriarch and doubling as a cutthroat business negotiator."³⁴ A sexually seductive family *matriarch* is new to the western, although *Queen of the South* features Veronica Falcon in a similar role in a crime drama that shares some western ideologies with *Yellowstone*. When local strong man and Dutton family enemy Dan Jenkins (Danny Huston) makes sexual overtures toward Beth, she brings him to a cowboy bar where he is perceived, due to his business suit, as an undesirable and pummeled and punched several times—to Beth's utter delight. She abandons him there, assuring him that she would "fuck his brother, his father, and his *sister*" before she ever accommodated him. Whether this is evil or merely manipulative, taunting versus coy, is open to interpretation.

In the August 4th episode, *The Remembering*, Beth sets the tone for her own perspective in a frank discussion with Montana Governor Lynelle Perry (Wendy Moniz), who is sleeping with Beth's father and who has compared Beth's "highly functional alcoholic" ability to that of her own psychologically damaged son. Beth listens, then retorts as follows:

"Men don't think like us. Too simple to weigh the significance of every act. My father just wants to forget. But not you. You want to piss in every corner and make those corners yours. You need to look closer when you look at me, Lynelle. I ruin careers for a living. You sleep in my mother's bed again, and I will ruin yours. Ruin it. Got it? And tell your son to grow up. He sounds like a real pussy."³⁵

³³ Fred Topel recorded this provocative remark below the "Yellowstone Season 1 Trailer" in "5 Things We Learned About Yellowstone From New Drama's Creator And Stars," June 19, 2018, <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/yellowstone-creator-taylor-sheridan-stars-kelly-reilly-wes-bentley-reveal-drama-details/>.

³⁴ Lynn Elber, "Kevin Costner gets strong Native American co-star in Montana-set 'Yellowstone,'" *Great Falls Tribune*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.greatfallstribune.com/story/news/2018/06/20/kevin-costner-yellowstone-television-series-native-american-montana/717285002/>.

³⁵ Beth is as direct and mean-spirited to women as she is to men. No gender favorites grace her vocabulary, making her one of the more innovative new characters of the television season.

No men are present, as they have been sent from the room for this two-woman, two-matriarch showdown. Beth has also questioned why her brother needs a campaign manager, suggested that the attractive woman who has been assigned the role is a whore for the establishment. In other words, she is driving away or at least distancing any woman who symbolically might replace her deceased mother. She recognizes women as being as potent an enemy as any male: they mark territory in a place where *any territory* is contested.

Just as importantly, John Dutton recognizes the power structure of his adult children and sees the emotional and psychological strength of his only daughter. After Beth challenges her father about his ongoing affair with Governor Lynelle Perry, John Dutton reacts violently: “Now you’re the only child I have tough enough to take this advice. Now, you need to man up, you understand. You need to man up, be a part of the solution, or go back to fucking Utah.”³⁶ Dutton has two grown sons, including his attorney son Jamie (Wes Bentley) who is running for State Attorney General with the support of the governor, and Kayce Dutton (Luke Grimes), who alienated himself from the family by marrying a Native American girl. Hence, the only dependable child Dutton has to do the tough work, the dirty deeds, is his daughter Beth. Beth is strong, vengeful, and loyal. She is the only child that John Dutton can ask to *man up* because the males are systemized, domesticated, team players who do not understand the power play underway between new developers, casino-bent Native Americans, and political enemies who want John Dutton’s land. Beth does.

Godless airs on *Netflix* and is reviewed by Chris Cabin:

“For all its thematic flirtations, *Godless* is first and foremost an entertainment, awash in familiar backstories, thrilling set pieces, romance, and scenes of horror or empowerment that don’t speak to any reflective concepts outside of those needed to keep the plot running smoothly.”³⁷

So both of the “neo-westerns” employ the *familiar* tropes of the western, differing in that *Yellowstone*, like *Westworld*, aligns its themes with topical and contemporary issues of the period while *Godless* offers simple

³⁶ This dialogue appears in *Yellowstone*, “The Remembering,” Episode no. 6, first broadcast August 2, 2018, Paramount Network. Directed and written by Taylor Sheridan.

³⁷ Chris Cabin, “‘*Godless*’ Review: An Excellent Cast & Stunning Imagery Elevate Netflix’s Dark Western,” November 22, 2017, <http://collider.com/godless-review-netflix/>.