Go West, Young Woman: Breaking the Traditional Context of Women

in the Western

Brian Laughran

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Abstract

This review studies how frames in communication have been created to prohibit the roles of women in film and, more specifically, the western. In early 2015, the federal government announced that they would be investigating major Hollywood studios for their systemic discrimination of women in roles as directors and producers. Now more than ever, it is becoming necessary to view the current Hollywood paradigm in a more critical light. What this review seeks to do is discover, through the semiotic language of cinema and analysis of several Hollywood western works, how the industry has created comparatively weak frames for audiences to identify with and to create lasting imprints concerning women. Also included are the particulars for a deliverable that would seek to subvert those expectations within the genre. The methods used in that segment will be those used by professional screenwriters and respected writing instructors Paul Max Rubenstein, Martin J. Maloney, Syd Field, and Lew Hunter.

Introduction

The federal government is coming to Hollywood. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is going to investigate the discriminatory hiring practices against women in the role of directing for film and television (Johnson, 2015). But, is it surprising that Hollywood has a problem with women? For decades, women have been portrayed as second-tier characters, often the arm candy of male characters or as damsels in distress. Perhaps no genre is guiltier of this than that of the western. What this literature review seeks to discover is how through framing theory and use of semiotics audiences have come to accept these tropes and why audiences should stop accepting them. This study was guided by the research question: how are women's roles in society framed in film, particularly through the American western?

Method

The research process for examining framing theory and cinematic semiotics involved researching both the Saint Xavier University library's digital databases as well as their physical literary collection. Key phrases that were searched in the databases include: "framing women in film," "women framing cinema," "gender in film," "women box office," "women in westerns," "gender in western films," and "framing theory in communication". Additional sources were provided through the guidance of Dr. Joel Sternberg – mostly in regards to the best practices sources – and Dr. Brad Mello – a variety of sources involving media semiotics. In only one case, the article by Moshovitz (1984), Google Scholar was used. Two news sources were found through Google searches while searching for specific information regarding "highest grossing westerns"

and "Hollywood discrimination EEOC". 63.2% of sources listed are books (or chapters therein), 13.2% are scholarly articles, 5.3% are news articles, 5.3% are encyclopedia entries, 3% of information is taken from an online database, and 10% of references listed are also films. The films discussed are included due to historical significance, academic significance, and economic success.

Given the nature of cinema and its changes over time, a breadth of sources have been used, reaching back to 1952 and coming up to 2015, in order to give a greater perspective on cinema and screenwriting.

Literature Review

Framing

All communication takes place within a context. People use experiences, across all forms of communication, to build a reference point for future forms of communication. Chong and Druckman (2007), describe this process of framing thusly:

> The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue (p. 207).

Framing can be used in a variety of ways to create explicit impressions on people. News media and political campaign messages are among some of the most common platforms that use framing to invoke certain meanings in the mind of the public as a way of creating immediate context for viewers.

However, framing is not solely reserved for mass media. One of the key elements that framing can invoke is done through interpersonal communication and the creation of relationships. According to Solomon and McLaren (2008), framing helps people "make sense of relational messages by interpreting them as indicators of either dominance-submissiveness or affiliation-disaffiliation" (p. 103). In the case of these situations, people make sense of their communication in relationship to one another and thus give themselves and those around them a sense of belonging or just a general comparison in where they stand in the social sphere. It could be argued that these same principles can be related to cinema, wherein certain characters and their interactions determine who is the dominant in the cinematic relationship. Often in the cinema and westerns, as will be explored later in greater detail, women are relegated through characterization and genre expectations to being framed in the role of the submissive.

While Solomon and McLaren's study is based mostly in that of Relational Framing Theory (RFT), which primarily focuses on interpersonal communication between individuals, this key point can be translated into mass media, particularly when looking at gender politics. Often, the world functions in a fashion that is driven by gender. These frames for what are considered "female" or "masculine" media drive the content consumed. In terms of media content that is considered feminine, Gill (2007) traces this history back to the 1970s and the push for female-driven media spaces and that what ensued was the sharp divisions of female and male media; among these, she counts how someone may consider the lifestyle and housekeeping section of a newspaper feminine and sports in the male category. It can be observed how this divide may influence the way that audiences view movies and associate different genres,

characteristics and actions as being either feminine or masculine (i.e. westerns may be considered by some to be masculine and romantic comedies are commonly associated with female audiences).

Evaluating Framing Theory

Framing meets several qualities set forth by Littlejohn (1998) in the context of this study: it is appropriate as framing can be used to set the template for how masses see issues and cinema has often been a reflection and a cause of how people interact. Given how often people indulge in media, it makes studying the theory valuable. As media evolves the theory becomes open to different exploration, as well as gaps that allow for parsimonious exploration as well.

Strengths & Limitations of Framing Theory

Framing can be used to make changes for the better. Often times, frames that exist in mass media can help bind people and create mass change (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Certain frames find their way into the public's consciousness through various forms of media and can compel them to change on a mass scale. It can be argued that this could also work the opposite way and form negative frames in people's minds, compelling them to devious actions or complacency. One of the challenges in discussing framing is that proper research on the production of frames has yet to be conducted (Borah, 2011).

Much attention has been paid to what kinds of frames have been built and in what contexts, but little attention has been aimed at frame production. Also, it is worth noting that many of the studies done on framing have been an analysis of news media or in the context of interpersonal communication. Very little research could be found involving communication framing and cinema. Many studies on gender and cinema has come from

feminist film criticism and not necessarily from the communication discipline. These two limitations are what make the following discussion more necessary and unique; they focus on a communication channel not readily discussed in the existing research and focus on its production in terms of history, genre, and characterization.

Semiotics – Building a Cinematic Context

However, before the specific history of framing in cinema and visual narrative entertainment can be discussed, it would be useful to talk about the use and history of semiotics to understand the coding of filmic messages. Danesi (2002) defines semiotics as the study of signs across all forms of communication and that these signs can allow people to "represent the world in any way we desire through signs, even in misleading and deceitful ways" (p. 28). The history of this study can be traced back to the time of the Greek philosopher Hippocrates and his use of symbols in the early communication of medial theory; St. Augustine used symbols in his own teachings to explain messages from God; then in the early twentieth century, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Pierce began to study signs and their representations in theatre and philosophy respectively, but it is not until the late 1950s and early 1960s when Roland Barthes and Jean Baudillard began to study signs and symbols in popular culture – mostly exploring materialist and politicized messages in the mass media (Danesi, 2002).

This study of signs and symbols in mass media essentially seeks to understand three things: "(1) what something means and represents, (2) how it exemplifies its meaning, (3) why it has the meaning it has" (Danesi, 2002, p. 34). When audiences take in certain pieces of communication – for example, cinema – they are observing a story where characters go on a journey that is eventually resolved. The lessons experienced and

learned (or not) by characters and the results and themes of said journey all inform the message that the filmmakers intended for the audience to take away from the film.

In cinema, the three people who are majorly responsible for deciding what these images and signs mean are the director, writer, and producer (Leipzig, Weiss, Goldman, 2015). Together these are the senders of the message. They craft the story, characters and themes of cinematic communication and thus are key in creating the frames audiences bring in with themselves into future cinematic experiences. They become gatekeepers of what the audience is and is not going to see during their time at the movies.

The audience, however, is not without tools to understand the messages represented through film. Zavarzadeh (1991) argues that the audience essentially creates meaning in the images and symbols by using the frames and contexts that they bring with them within the viewing of the film. This is not to say that audiences are creating the film and its message. Rather, they are interpreting the messages for themselves through prior experience with the medium as well as bringing their own personal perceptions of the world around them inside the theater. That, in essence, is what makes film relatable. Eisenstein states that film is nothing more than images – that may or may not be related – juxtaposed by cuts and it is the job of the audience to make sense of these cuts (as cited by Mamet, 1992).

Characters in particular tend to serve as the gateway for audiences to find self-representation within the filmic world. Gaut (2010) argues that the character and the audience have a symbiotic relationship: that either audiences watch a character start in a certain point emotionally and grow with the character or realize that through the character responding to the plot and making the adverse decision that the audience would make

they come to learn or take something from that journey and from character flaws. This notion provokes the question: what is to be made of characters who are institutionally made to be weak or less assertive than another? For those who identify with certain characters – by virtue of gender - it may create systematic responses or attitudes based on their interpretation of their gender's portrayal in various forms of popular media.

Perhaps what is most dangerous about these perceptions is how quickly they find their way into the consciousness of the audience's character association frame. As Gianos (1999) points out, many film characters are often associated with stereotypes in order to make them instantly identifiable. These frames become so fortified that audiences can instantly recognize and make jumps in their minds so that filmmakers don't have to reach to create new ones.

Gender and Film – The History Behind the Frame

The gender politics of Hollywood have always been and continue to be problematic and thus gender portrayals have followed suit. Many early studies of gender and visual narrative story telling were originally done in television. According to a study done by Thompson and Zerbinos, "analysts of children's cartoons showed that male characters were more likely than female characters to show leadership, to express opinions, to use aggression, to issue threats, and to show anger" and that female characters were given less to do and generally fit into roles of asking for information, needing protection, and engaging only in "routine services," (as cited by Schement, 2002, p. 354). These traits play into the memory banks that people access when they approach future interactions with the medium and possibly within reality.

Passivity alone is not the only problematic trait that has plagued women in entertainment, but passivity paired with sexual objectivity has played a role in this as well. Film theorist Laura Mulvey (1985) draws several connections to the history of spectacle to the sexual objectification of women in cinema: "Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pinups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire" (p. 309). One of the key reasons that women are placed in this role is that it puts men in a position of power. Placing females into such character roles creates limited opportunities and, as Guat was cited earlier, limited identification. While some argue that this limiting of opportunities directly in terms of how roles for women has subsisted in a story sense, Schemet (2002) notes that new stigmas that limit the ages of actresses and placing emphasis on youth and beauty have become a new way to limit the actresses who play these roles and places sexuality back in the forefront in many ways.

Limiting characters, particularly females, can be done through other coding and frame building other than sexualization. As Zavarzadeh (1991) argues through his analysis of *Prizzi's Honor* (1985) and its use of the Mafia patriarchal structure, genre can also be used to relegate women into specific and passive roles. Even when women are given the same opportunities as men in film, they are often treated as oddities. Hatch (2011) argues through her various criticisms of the "Tomboy" subgenre of films, that often times these pictures in the 1950s were used to solidify male dominance by treating women who acted like men as being oddities and validating male dominance. Perhaps no genre has as distinct a relegation of women into passivity and dependent on male-

dominance as that of the western. These frames have been built through genre coding since the genre's rise to popularity in the 1950s.

Gender and the Western – Framing in Action

Since its rise to popularity in the late 1950s, westerns have always produced a tricky situation for female characters. Ray (1985), traces the rise of the genre from the B-pictures to massive popularity in post-World War II America; citing that the genre represented American exceptionalism and a need to expand, but that grounding these hopes and dreams on the frontier largely excluded women. While this reflection of American society would inform the genre and its gender roles, it is important to note that there has been slow growth within the genre. What follows is an analysis of key films and their reflections of growth within gender portrayals in the genre.

The Searchers. One of the most seminal westerns in cinematic history is John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). The plot concerns an ex-Confederate soldier named Ethan Allen (John Wayne) and his adoptive nephew Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter) who go on a manhunt to find the Comanche tribe that has kidnapped Allen's niece, Debbie (Natalie Wood). The film is regarded by the American Film Institute (2007) as the greatest western ever made, though despite its cinematic merit, it represents some of the stereotypical gender roles that are historically attributed to the genre.

Women are most often in the picture portrayed as fixtures of the homestead or operate in the capacity of victim. Moshovitz (1984) points to the fact that while women play integral roles in moving the plot and being at the center of the inciting incident, it is their inactive status that moves the film forward. Debbie as a victim drives Ethan Allen's vengeance. Other than Debbie, the only other women in the film find themselves slain by

the end of the first act or eagerly await the return of Ethan and Martin from their five-year manhunt.

Often in the film, the women represent objects of the male gaze, as Mulvey spoke about. Ethan's sister-in-law Martha (Dorothy Jordan) is, throughout the first act of the film, the recipient of Ethan's affection and attention. Allen's attention and gaze follows her into every room as she plays hostess upon his initial arrival to the family ranch. The same could be said for Martin's love interest, Laurie (Vera Miles). Aside from her role as domestic, the only other role that Laurie serves is as one of inconsistent affection from Martin.

Perhaps one scene in the film summarizes roles of women in the traditional John Ford-era western best. Laurie's mother (Olive Carey) has come out to watch a fight that has erupted on her husband's property. As she begins to cheer as the men do, Ethan Allen turns to her and curtly shoves her back into the house saying: "Don't forget you're a lady!" (Cooper, Ford, & Ford, 1956).

The Missing. Ron Howard's *The Missing* (2003) seems to be a film that is so divorced by time from the traditional western that it has contributed to the template for what a feminist post-modern entry in the genre should look like. The plot shares many points with the aforementioned *The Searchers*, in that the plot revolves around finding a young girl (Evan Rachel Wood) and a collection of other women and save them from an Apache tribe that plans to sell them off in Mexico. The major difference between the two films is that this time around it is a mother – Magdalena Gilkeson (Cate Blanchett), a sister – Dot (Jenna Boyd) and a grandfather – Samuel (Tommy Lee Jones) who are off to save her and the other women.

It is from this plot that Schwartz (2014) develops the tenets of what she believes counts as a feminist entry into the genre. These tenets are:

 (1) the plot must constitute a subversion of and a challenge to a

mainstream text…. (2) the actions of a female protagonist must drive the

plot rather than simply provide a reason for the actions of the male

character…. (3) the dialogue of one or more female protagonists must

challenge and subvert the masculine discourse, as well as convey

agency…. (4) meanings must be plural rather than singular (p. 66-68).

While *The Missing* easily meets three of these four points, the only one that Schwartz cannot seem to definitely pin down is the second. Schwartz identifies that while much of the movie rests on the shoulders of Magdalena and that her actions bring Samuel into the fold, as well as making several attempts to catch the attention of the army to get her daughter back, much of the heroic actions of the movie rest on Samuel as opposed to Magdalena. While Magdalena throughout the course of the film proves herself able with a rifle, killing a few antagonistic figures, and is the one to finally lead her daughter and the other victims to safety, it is Samuel who is given the larger heroic arc. Samuel is the one who squares off with the main villain in the initial attempt to save his granddaughter, is given a larger redemption arc, tends to a sick Magdalena and is given major acts of heroism throughout.

While *The Missing* may not be a perfect entry as a feminist western, it is a notable move into a more inclusive direction and attempts to break the frames set forth from the 1950s.

True Grit. According to Lovece (2013), *True Grit* (2010) is one of the most financially successful westerns of all-time and also happens to meet many of the requirements set forth by Schwartz. The Coen Brothers' 2010 adaptation of Charles Portis's novel follows a young girl, Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) trying to avenge her father's murder. But in order to do this and navigate the Choctaw territories, she must enlist the help of Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges), a trigger-happy U.S. Marshal, and LaBoeuf (Matt Damon), a loquacious Texas Ranger. For most of the movie, Mattie propels the search for the murderer (Josh Brolin) forward. Her dialogue often serves to support her own agenda, defend her actions and motivations, and frequently reveals the foolishness – particularly LaBoeuf's – of the male characters.

In regards to the subversion of a mainstream text, perhaps the most obvious subversion would be to compare this version to the 1969 adaptation of the same name. The focus in the original rests on Cogburn (John Wayne) as opposed to Mattie (Kim Darby). This updated version gives Mattie more attention, even adding a prologue narrated by the ingénue and an epilogue in which the audience is given closure to the girl's story, seeing her grown into an adult and placing the final emphasis on her growth, whereas the original ended on a triumphant shot of Wayne's one-eyed cowboy doing tricks on his horse.

<div align="center">**Deliverable**</div>

The Final Product – Breaking the Frame

What this research will generate is a screenplay that will attempt to subvert the expectations that have been created by the early filmmaking structure and to continue in places where *The Missing* and *True Grit* left off. By taking the western, the script will

have the opportunity to illustrate how a successful story that is normally associated with a primarily male and machismo focus can in fact be used in a proactive feminine context. In a genre where women are associated with either being the arm candy of the cowboy heroes, passive caretakers, or over-reliant on the male characters, this film will seek to create an active female hero who both narratively and symbolically will represent a woman in a man's world, yet will not be dependent on a man or allow her actions to be driven by that of a man for trite reasons.

Method/Deliverable Conventions

What sets this particular deliverable apart is that it is a demonstration of the exception. Meaning, there are several critical analyses of western films (some of which have been discussed above) that all suggest things that are troubling when considering their gender portrayals and the representations that they put forward to mass audiences, but it seems that very little has been done to actual combat these portrayals within the genre.

True, even in the modern cinema there are less-than-ideal portrayals of women in the few westerns that are produced. *True Grit* (2010) featured a bright and female heroine, but *Django Unchained* (2012) revolved around a rescue plot involving two male bounty hunters coming to save one of the few female characters, planted in the role of a damsel in distress. The cinema has such a wide variety of characters that audiences can see, instead they have been given a majority of female characters who are somewhat un-relatable or dated in their perspective and roles.

Best Practices

  Character development. When it comes to a project of this sort – a film that tries to allow the characters to defy genre expectations that viewers have framed in their minds – it is imperative for the characters, the females in particular, to have those traits that will allow them to exceed those expectations and break those frames. As Cowgil (2010) says, a character is driven by her needs that fuel a goal. In the case of the film that is to be created, these needs must force a woman to break the context of a domestic and force her into a world that she is unfamiliar with. However, this need is not enough. There must be conflict to build a strong character. According to Martin (2010), the conflict is what audiences relate to and that the measure of a great protagonist is how they handle the antagonist or internal conflicts present. What the element of conflict adds is the avenue for action and the ability to make a visual impression.

  Using Martin's logic, the villain – in this case the man who kills the protagonist's husband – rises to the challenge put forth by Akers (2008), that the antagonist must be the agent for the protagonist's change. The death of the protagonist's husband then makes the antagonist the agent of change. The antagonist is the reason she decides to pick up a gun. The antagonist provokes her to move out of the domestic sphere. Thus, not only has the antagonist provoked the protagonist, but has also found a way to help break the frame of the traditional western and thus propels the female protagonist to do acts that are associated with being generally masculine.

  Given that the story will center around a woman learning to become a gunfighter with no previous experience, it is not illogical to write in a tutor for her. Thus, the film is given an immediate tension of opposites. According to Egri (2007), the "unity of

opposites" – the inherent conflict and drama of putting two elements that immediately

clash together – will not only help sustain the drama, but allow the two characters to learn

– what a domestic life is like and what it is to be a gunslinger – from each other's

experience and grow as human characters (p. 123). This point should appear more

interesting when the female protagonist learns this skill from another female, though one

with radically different life experiences.

These actions are what will create a dynamic character. While dialogue can be

potent and intriguing, it is action that serves as the best characterization. Alexander

(2010) states that the purpose of placing the emphasis on the action mostly helps avoiding

"having every character speak in the same voice" and "developing a character that does

something completely uncharacteristic" (p. 200). In essence, action keeps characters

individual, consistent and more memorable and more likely to build a strong frame.

Story Development. One of the key ways of breaking the contexts of the western

in a lot of ways will depend on breaking the contexts of the west. Which is to say, the

script will seek to do what both *The Missing* and *True Grit* did: place the main female

character in a context in which she will need to break out of the traditional role as a

domestic and changing her role into that of a gunfighter. As Herman (1952) points out,

this is a concept known as "reel realism," meaning there will be an effort to create

enough realism that the audience recognizes the context and barriers that will stand in the

protagonist's way, but enough concessions in history – and genre – that such an

adventure could take place (p. 77-78).

In order to ensure that this deliverable is created to reflect the industry standards

of screenplay writing, the guiding force of the writing process will be the teachings of

Syd Field. The most instrumental piece of Field's methodology that will be used in the creation for the narrative structure of the story will be his signature story paradigm. Field (2005) argues that generally most films tend to follow the same basic three act structure with events that tend to happen at certain time intervals within the first 90 minutes of a film, these include: an engaging first ten pages, a transition from Act I into Act II around page 27 on the script, and a transition into Act III of the film around page 87. While some may argue that there should be no structure to a creative endeavor and that a story should be free to wander wherever it may please, there is no denying that this is a successful model and one that many professionals in the industry hold to be the gold standard of story structure.

In regards to those criticisms and ideas, one should notice that Field leaves a lot of room as to what can be included within the 90+ pages of the script that is to be developed. Field (2005) says it best: "If we want to get creative, a glass can hold raisins, trail mix, nuts, grapes, etc. – but the space inside doesn't change. The *context* is what *holds* the *content* in place" (p. 22-23). Thus, Field gives a professional model, but has not discriminated against what makes the story, characters and plot unique.

Script development. The process of developing a script will reflect a professional screenplay development. This project is essentially being overseen by three Saint Xavier faculty members who will serve in the capacity of producers – guiding and checking in the development of the script at thirty page intervals. These check-ins will serve to make sure that the script is reflecting the themes and concepts established above as well as serving to make sure that the script is being developed on a proper timeline.

However, before any formal pages of a script are written, an outline is currently being developed based on the information found in the sections above. This outline will conform to Hunter's (1993) observation that the outline is just a breakdown of the movie into simple steps, in order to show the writer the logic of the script, story and characters. In creating this outline, the initial story will also be guided by the important questions posed by Schiffman (2010), involving the proper genre, format, and characterization to help make the vision more specific. Once this outline is done and a story is created for the author's own purposes, a larger treatment will be created. This treatment will be turned in near the beginning of the spring semester and then development and actual writing of the script will follow upon receiving notes and input on the story.

The treatment will expand upon the outline. As Rubenstein and Maloney (1988) state the treatment will essentially read like a short story and not just a linear map of story. Placing the story in this format will allow those involved with the process to view more clearly the themes and ideas at play and show how those will be demonstrated through the linear follow-through of the western narrative.

Conclusion

While at first it may seem discouraging, there are opportunities for films featuring strong women who defy prevalent frames. Films with women are still not the norm, but many films that do feature women actually do quite well when given a proper budget and proper marketing (Lindner, Lindquist, & Arnold, 2015). In addition to this, many foreign markets are beginning to take notice of the lack of female presence in cinema. Consider the United Kingdom's government and the British Film Institute. According to

Hockenhull (2008), together these two organizations have begun to hold government lotteries to fund female led/directed projects as well as male film projects.

Despite this, there are still certain frames that enforce negative views of women in American cinema and the western in particular. Historical in nature and accepted as stereotypes by many, these frames are ingrained in the collective consciousness of some and still need to be revised. This research into the theory and the history of the medium will serve to inform a feminist western that will subvert the genre expectations that are slowly being chipped away and carrying the torch from where films like *The Missing* and *True Grit* left off.

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