

Christopher Dier

Dier

Film as Lit

10/11/25

The Art of Genre Subversion in *The Revenant*

For nearly 50 years, John Wayne defined the American West for movie goers; embodying the iconic hero of the western genre. From the early 1930s into the late 1970s, he was leading settlers west in films like *The Big Trail* (1930), rescuing kidnapped women from the murderous grips of the Comanches in films like *The Searchers* (1956) or as a dying gunfighter looking to end his days with decorum like in *The Shootist* (1976). In the late 1950s, a new western hero challenged and eventually usurped Wayne's stardom with the release of *Ambush at Cimarron Pass* (1956). Films like *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and *Unforgiven* (1992) solidified Clint Eastwood as the new heroic face of the old west maintaining the gritty stoicism of this morally principled "good guy."



A more recent iteration of this western archetype, however, has subverted this characterization offering audiences a more realistic, complex, and human anti-hero. Alejandro González Iñárritu's revisionist western, *The Revenant* (2015), revises the clear-cut good vs evil characterizations of classic westerns by introducing a morally ambiguous and psychologically fragile anti-hero in Leonardo DiCaprio's portrayal of Hugh Glass. Through the subversion of varied artistic elements essential to the western genre, Iñárritu creates an atmosphere of violent desperation rather than the valiant righteousness of previous onscreen worlds.

In stark contrast to fast paced, quick cut montages of the typical western gun fight or horse chase, Iñárritu's scenes are typically drawn out with slow camera



movements pushing into and out of the action to build suspense. The slowed action not only captures the beauty of the setting but also elongates the journey making it even more overwhelming, epic, and dangerous. These sequences are also shot in a single, uncut movement with a handheld camera that grounds the audience in the action. Because he sparingly speeds up camera movements or and avoids quick cuts, when they are used, they create a sense of urgency and impending threat. This reenvisioning of movement minimizes the hero's monumental strength and valor; minimizes the larger-than-life persona expected in such films by making Hugh Glass's trauma and suffering visceral instead of intellectual.

Iñárritu's use of color has an equally physical impact. *The Revenant* was shot primarily in Alberta, Canada where temperatures, at one point, crept below -40 degrees, a fact not lost on audiences. With one exception, every scene felt chillingly cold. River escapes are hidden in hanging fog and mist, rain drops freeze to buffalo skin coats, and vast valleys are tinted a frosty blue by snow and ice. The cold is



inescapable for Hugh Glass and for an audience empathizing with, not only his physical survival but Glass' undaunting sorrow and emptiness. Rather than the atmosphere of stagnant heat,

dust clouds, unquenchable thirst, sweat stained long johns under layers of flannel and leather found in the old west, Iñárritu saturates the screen in arctic rawness that subverts the heartwarming penance of a Wayne or Eastwood portrayal, replacing it with DiCaprio's cold hearted vengeance.

To maintain the realism established in the opening attack sequence, Iñárritu continues to film *The Revenant* predominantly in deep focus creating a spacious field of vision. This allows him to mediate the audience's perspective with Glass' making scenes like the bear attack sequence affective. Deep focus forces audiences stare down the barrel of the rifle as the Grizzly charges from the distance. Glass' vulnerability and weakness becomes real. When Iñárritu deviates from this wide-angle perspective to a more focused, singular layer using a prime lens, the audience is offered a momentary reprieve and is instead



forced to reflect as a witness. These scenes, like the final resolve, expose Glass' weakness, his flawed civility, his anti-heroism. This is something traditional westerns attempt to avoid, preferring instead to keep their heroes upright and uncorrupted.

The real-life Hugh Glass, the guide left for dead by his team of fur traders after narrowly surviving a bear attack, was a morally ambiguous and vengeful man. If his story was told following the traditions of the Western, by the end of his quest for vengeance Hugh Glass would have been glorified for righting a wrong. Iñárritu refuses this celebration. Through his artistic manipulation of movement, color, and space Iñárritu forces audiences to contemplate the brutality of both nature and humanity.