

Shooting Cowboys and Indians: Silent Western Films, American Culture, and the Birth of Hollywood. By Andrew Brodie Smith. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003. 240 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 0-870-81746-9.

Reviewed by Eric Schaefer

Since the mid-1970s Hollywood has considered the western as dead as a black-hatted villain on a sun-bleached street at high noon. While a few throwbacks—Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992) and the recent HBO series, *Deadwood*, come to mind—have commanded critical attention and audience interest, westerns have been supplanted by science fiction and fantasy as genres that can be counted on to bolster the bottom line. For years, though, westerns were a mainstay of the American motion-picture industry. In *Shooting Cowboys and Indians: Silent Western Films, American Culture, and the Birth of Hollywood*, Andrew Brodie Smith demonstrates that the genre played a critical role in establishing movies as a popular medium and ensuring that Hollywood became the center of motion-picture production in the United States.

Although the existing literature on westerns is extensive, Smith’s book is predicated on what he identifies as two major gaps: “the failure to examine closely silent-era films and the failure to understand the genre’s evolving conventions as a function of larger changes within the industry” (p. 3). Smith shows how the conventions of the western were both a response to contemporaneous social changes and “the crystallization of a particular set of business conditions, including shifts in audience demographics and tastes, censorship and reform activities, and developments in film exhibition and distribution” (p. 4).

The first two chapters of this compact volume, which are perhaps the most interesting, examine the productions of Chicago-based companies, such as the collaborative ventures of film manufacturer William Selig and photographer Harry H. Buckwalter. Buckwalter, who had ties with Colorado developers, saw motion pictures as an ideal tool for promoting the state. The films he made with Selig at the turn of the century were “scenics” and short documentaries that captured the local color of Colorado and were designed to draw tourists and potential transplants. Buckwalter and Selig next

incorporated elements of narrative films, notably crime movies like *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), with the Colorado scenery. Films such as *The Hold-Up of the Leadville Stage* (1904) proved popular with audiences, but Buckwalter quickly realized that the demands of the crime film were incompatible with the requirements of civic boosterism. As Smith notes, “Although Buckwalter and Selig had assembled the basic elements of the western, it was another two-and-a-half years until audiences, filmmakers, and exhibitors recognized the genre and before Selig Company and the industry as a whole were organized enough to exploit its commercial potential” (p. 24). A new Selig employee, Gilbert M. “Bronco Billy” Anderson, was the first to make “western stories” that were promoted as such.

By the fall of 1909 the western had become the dominant genre in the American film industry. Its success was due in part to the nickelodeon boom, but it was derived as well from the western’s relative ease of production and the producers’ ability to promote it as a uniquely American genre, one that could not be properly made by foreign companies. Authenticity became a central concern in the production of the western, whether it was hiring riders and ropers from Wild West shows or Native American performers, such as James Young Deer and Lillian Red Wing. The search for authentic western locations led Selig’s Francis Boggs to establish the first permanent studio in Los Angeles in 1909, and the growing popularity of the genre soon had other studios following Selig’s lead. “By 1911 six major studios were operating at least one unit year-round in the area: Selig, New York Motion Picture, Kalem, Nestor, American, and Pathé West Coast. All of them specialized in cowboy and Indian subjects” (p. 48). Others, like Essanay, which Anderson had created with distributor George K. Spoor, moved into western production, and soon the genre’s popularity not only laid the foundation for a nationalist cinema but also allowed American producers to reclaim control of the domestic market, which had been dominated by European companies. In addition, it proved to be the genre that independent producers could use most effectively in their battle against the Motion Picture Patents Company, the cartel developed by Edison to control film production in the United States.

Much of *Shooting Cowboys and Indians* focuses on the young motion-picture industry’s efforts to reach a wider audience that was both more upscale and included

more female patrons. This campaign led to a decline in the “blood and thunder” of westerns and a greater emphasis on historical spectacle, exemplified in the films that producer Thomas H. Ince made for Bison. But the major change came about with the development of the western hero, and Smith demonstrates how “Bronco Billy,” the character portrayed by Gilbert Anderson, was modified to appeal to middle-class sensibilities. This trend was further elaborated by William S. Hart, who played psychologically nuanced western heroes that were scripted “to promote Christianity, moral reform, and other Victorian values” (p. 170). But following World War I, the old-fashioned values extolled by the western were seen as passé. Urban first-run theaters shunned westerns and booked films that featured matinee idols like John Barrymore and Rudolph Valentino, who had greater appeal to women. As the cowboy hero was transfigured into a character known for his athleticism and riding ability, “moral and psychological battles became less prevalent in the genre” (p. 188), and it became associated with low budgets, second-tier theaters, and a juvenile male audience.

Smith’s impressive research draws on early studio records, trade-paper accounts, oral histories, and a range of secondary sources. *Shooting Cowboys and Indians* suffers from some redundancy, and readers who are unfamiliar with the history of the early film industry may be at a bit of a disadvantage because of Smith’s tendency to treat the western in isolation from the rest of the industry. But he is largely successful in showing how this quintessentially American genre contributed to the creation of that quintessentially American place—Hollywood. *Shooting Cowboys and Indians* shares the qualities of the westerns Smith writes about: leanness, directness, and energy.

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