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Title	Ride the Frontier: Exploring the Myth of the American West on Screen, by Flavia Brizio-Skov
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Publication date	2021-11-01
Original Citation	Corsini, A. (2022) 'Ride the Frontier: Exploring the Myth of the American West on Screen, by Flavia Brizio-Skov', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 22, pp. 103-108. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.22.10
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.22.10
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Download date	2026-10-31 13:19:56
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12634



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 22, 2021, pp. 103–108
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.22.10

Ride the Frontier: Exploring the Myth of the American West on Screen, by Flavia Brizio-Skov. McFarland, 2021, 242 pp.

Andrew Corsini

Flavia Brizio-Skov's *Ride the Frontier: Exploring the Myth of the American West on Screen* comes at a crucial time for the western. It is no secret that the genre has suffered a loss in popularity in recent years, compared to its ubiquity in the Hollywood golden era—also due, for instance, to high-profile critical and commercial failures such as *Cowboys and Aliens* (Jon Favreau, 2011) and *The Lone Ranger* (Gore Verbinski, 2013), the latter of which is examined in this book's final chapter. The conventions of classical westerns have been reappraised many times before. *Cahiers du cinéma* critics like André Bazin had high regard for the films of Howard Hawks, whereas Laura Mulvey, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, discussed how the western hero was often split between nostalgic narcissism and social integration. More recent trends in academic studies demonstrate a progressive approach by proposing new ways of looking at old material. Ryan W. McMaken sees anti-capitalist traits in the cowboy genre, arguing for "The Gunfight Vs. Capitalism". Douglas Brode infers a "New Deal Western", while Lee Broughton offers positive alternative Euro-Westerns, in comparison to their American counterparts, noting progressive representation of women, Native Americans and African Americans.

While these examples show the diversity of approaches to examining the western, *Ride the Frontier* is a useful addition to this academic cycle. The author finds unique ways to look at oft-examined films which have previously been the subject of other novel interpretations. For instance, *Westward the Women* (William A. Wellman 1951) is a film much analysed by feminist and gender studies scholars in works such as Hallett's *New Western Women and the Birth of Hollywood* and Matheson's *Women in the Western*. A motif that emerges throughout Brizio-Skov's volume and distinguishes it from other works is the analysis of westerns through a cultural studies lens; this provides examples of how classic films (as well as the aforementioned film adaptation of *The Lone Ranger*) embrace and subvert the very tropes they are accused of displaying. Through the author's analysis of such aspects as the western's international influences, its empowerment of women and its positive treatment of Native Americans, one is encouraged to see the genre if not in a more positive light, then at least in a more complex way than some critics have previously argued.

Brizio-Skov begins by establishing her work in the tradition of recent scholars who have looked at the western from fresh perspectives. The introduction, "Why the Western?" justifies the genre's appeal for the author as well as speculating on the reasons behind its wider popularity. This requires an American cultural studies perspective, which hints at the criticism the genre has received by certain theorists who cite imperialist views evident in classic westerns. This is well-trod ground academically, and therefore Brizio-Skov provides a

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refreshing escape from such readings. The author then re-familiarises the reader with recent studies of westerns such as David Lusted's *The Western* and Neil Campbell's *Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*. As a sign of the author's intent to move away from simple cultural readings, she points out how the very setting of the West, which used to be seen as colonial property, is to be seen as a "rhizomatic space" belonging to disparate cultures (4). Brizio-Skov concurs with Campbell who sees the West as less a national space and more of a global matrix: "it is necessary to move away from the old utopia of unity, away from the obsession with roots, place and nationhood and to reposition the West within a more transnational global matrix" (24–5).

The first chapter continues on this theme and begins not in America but in Japan, exploring the differences between Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) and Sergio Leone's remake, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). Even those chiefly critical of the western often describe it as a wholly American genre, rooted in nationalism and with no room for modern international interpretations such as *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (Kim Jee-woon, 2008). Brizio-Skov removes or at least clarifies the nationalistic element of the genre by pointing out its Japanese and Italian roots. However, those roots extend even further than *Yojimbo* to American writer Dashiell Hammett's book *Red Harvest*, from which Kurosawa took elements. As *Red Harvest* was a pulp detective novel, this adds a further layer to an already complex relationship between source material and adaptation.

The second chapter examines the portrayal of Native Americans in several films. *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950), *The Devil's Doorway* (Anthony Mann, 1950), *The Last Hunt* (Richard Brooks, 1956) *The Last Wagon* (Delmer Daves, 1956), all intended to be positive portrayals at the time of release. These depictions are tied explicitly to the post-war civil rights push in Hollywood which is further linked to messaging on race relations during the Cold War. This link between westerns and foreign policy is well established. Stanley Corkin argues it necessitated the genre's very existence: "post-World War II westerns built on antecedents within the genre and provided a conceptual bridge between frontier mythology and Cold War imperatives" (70).

The portrayal of Native Americans in westerns allows for a discussion regarding the genre's ideology and myth-making. Brizio-Skov discusses a series of titles that, although positive in their intent, make problematic viewing for modern audiences. The author identifies the purpose of these as not solely to give Native Americans a place in the western or to offer an apologia for past traumas but to show America's progress with regard to civil rights. Following this interpretation, the Native Americans in these films become symbolic of all minorities in America: an expectation that the films cannot possibly match. A common element is their celebration of racial progress viewed as a result of what Euro-Americans achieved in the Second World War, which makes these films congratulatory rather than critical looks on race. This erases the history of the Native American genocide in favour of narratives that compromise by praising both the indigenous tribes and their oppressors—narratives that contain a "hidden imperialist agenda" (52). Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Broken Arrow* with its sanitised American Cavalry. Brizio-Skov expands on three films — *The Devil's Doorway*, *The Last Hunt* and *The Last Wagon* — that offer critical looks at white society; crucially, though, these films were outliers with their critiques. Moreover, they were not flawless portrayals of Native Americans as they came with their own cliches: for instance, the embrace of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "noble savage" myth in *The Last Wagon*.

The crux of Brizio-Skov's study is to examine classic western motifs under a different lens, discovering alternative meanings contrary to traditional academic readings. This is evident in the chapters, "Heroines in Western Films?" and "Hybridity and (De)Construction of Femininity and Masculinity", where one of the central tenets assigned to the genre—masculinity —is analysed in several case studies to see if alternative readings are available. Bakhtin's concepts of the monoglossic utterance (the language of authority) and heteroglossia discourse (dissenting voices) make apt tools for a discussion of women's place in the western. Bakhtin-inspired studies are an emerging trend in film studies and, in particular, with regard to popular cinema. Martin Flanagan assures us we can use Bakhtin to find new ways of understanding Hollywood film. E.A. Williams uses Bakhtin's concept of Carnival to specifically analyse *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006). By using these terms in a cultural context, Brizio-Skov distinguishes between monoglossic identities (such as Marian in *Shane* [George Stevens, 1953]) and heteroglossic identities (such as Amy Fowler Kane and Helen Ramirez in *High Noon* [Fred Zinnemann, 1952]) as well as introducing a new notion, X-glossia, borrowed from Gary Heba and Robin Murphy (321–25), which is applicable when a newly-formed identity transcends both heteroglossia and monoglossia. An example of X-glossia can be found in *Westward the Women* in which traditional roles are subverted in a master narrative where one would expect the male protagonist Buck (Robert Taylor) to masculinise the women under his care so they can survive the journey west: instead, "in the course of the story Buck himself gets more 'feminized' and the women more 'masculinized' without losing sight of their capacity for love, compassion and nurturing. They change without sacrificing their femininity" (100–1). "Hybridity and (De)Construction of Femininity and Masculinity" can be seen as a continuation of this analysis with the added dimension of a queer reading. Mary Ann Doane's assignment of "insisted-on" heterosexuality is a feature of many westerns where many of the characters have clear heterosexual partners or relationships (109), often solidified with marriage, such as Grace Kelly's new bride in *High Noon* and Martin's waiting fiancé in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956). Brizio-Skov identifies exceptions to this heterosexuality trope which she boldly assigns to be "women's films" instead of the male norm. Films such as *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952), *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1953) and *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946) have been the subject of much scholarship. For instance, Laura Mulvey similarly identified *Duel in the Sun* as a subversive western (35). Brizio-Skov resorts to the notions of "filmic text", "peritext" and "paratext" to analyse the internal structure, the surrounding material and material which is secondary to the main body of work, and expand on their subversive potential.

The final chapter offers a revisionist look at *The Lone Ranger*, a western considered far from classic and indeed rejected by critics and audiences alike when it was released. An examination of the film from an academic standpoint shows its narrative to be anti-conventional and unusual in ways that put off viewers. The disconnected relationship between Verbinski's film and the original television series meant the film failed to appeal to older viewers or attract newer, younger ones. Brizio-Skov posits the film is haunted in a way by the old Ranger adaptations, thus fitting Pete Falconer's description of the western as a genre suffering from an "afterlife" in the title of his 2020 book. Similarly, Neil Campbell suggests a "ghost-western" whereby the western is haunted by its earlier form (*Post-Westerns* 2). Brizio-Skov suggests *The Lone Ranger* inserted a new hypertext over an outdated one. This collision between the old and new was the reason for the film's financial failure as it detracted from the original show's more conventionally told narrative. Conversely, it is also one of the ways to find merit in *The Lone Ranger*. The author's analysis highlights the benefit of this approach: derided films viewed in a progressive light become more complex.

Whereas, in the case of *The Lone Ranger*, the book offers a fresh look at the film's unassuming quality, the rest of the study takes an altogether new look at progressive features in classic films. Brizio-Skov's approach is novel in that it searches for progressive rather than conservative tropes in classic westerns and frequently comes up with numerous effective examples. Rather than making a case for the western as wholly progressive or wholly conservative, Brizio-Skov finds new layers of complexity that make an apt case for the genre's longevity in academic discussion, if not at the box office.

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Suggested Citation

Corsini, Andrew. "*Ride the Frontier: Exploring the Myth of the American West on Screen*, by Flavia Brizio-Skov." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 22, 2021, pp. 103–108. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.22.10.

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