Title

Revision as Nostalgic Practice: The Imagined Adaptation of *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*

Abstract

This article investigates the role of nostalgia vis-à-vis practices of adaptation and revision in the genre of the American Western and specifically in Joel and Ethan Coen's episodic film *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018). It proposes a view of the Western as a genre that originates in the revisionist adaptation of American national mythology. As an inherently nostalgic genre, the Western has grappled with its ambivalent relationship with the past throughout the twentieth century. Recent Western productions demonstrate their awareness of the genre's sentimental falsifications of the past and integrate nostalgic tensions into their aesthetic repertoire. *Buster Scruggs* taps into both the current success of nostalgic formats on screen as well as the specific affordances of the Western genre. The close readings in this article explore the visual, structural, and narrative strategies the film employs to, on the one hand, permit and, in fact, encourage nostalgic indulgence while, on the other, engaging in the revision of both the postmodern aversion against affective involvement and its wholesale acceptance in the Western's early incarnations.

Key words: Nostalgia, Adaptation, Revision, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, Western genre

Introduction

Nostalgia is booming in American culture. The nation that was long considered to "have no need to take refuge in an idealized past" (Leitch 2018, 3) responded with widely unexpected

enthusiasm to a presidential campaign that promised to return it to greatness. To make something "great again" of course implies that it was great once, and that not only has this better past been lost, but that it can be regained. In this, the current nostalgia of reactionary politics leaves behind the misgivings that much of twentieth-century culture expressed against any heartfelt sentimental longing for the past. Also outside of hardline conservatism, nostalgia in all sincerity has gained cultural acceptance, and scholars are reconsidering the famous postmodern dismissals of the nostalgic affect of which Frederic Jameson (1991) and other postmodern critics were so suspicious.

While there may be some debate over how prone to nostalgia Americans really are—Svetalna Boym (2001) thinks they became nostalgic after the Civil War while Thomas Leitch (2018) claims they are and always were more future-oriented—there is one staple of American popular culture that has been rooted in nostalgic idealization from its beginnings in the nineteenth century: the Western genre in its glorification of the efforts to conquer the West and heroization of the pioneers who achieved it. Apart from being inherently nostalgic, the Western is also, as this essay argues, a genre that originates in both adaptation and revision. The imaginary Wild West functions as a source text, comprised of and feeding into American mythology, which the Western adapts into folk tales, stage performances, novels, films, theme park rides, and other media. Revision, and ultimately falsification, of the historical past as well as its fictionalized representations is not only unavoidable in this process, it constitutes a generative principle of the Western.

This essay explores the imagined adaptation of Joel and Ethan Coen's Western movie *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018). It will investigate the aesthetic and narrative strategies the film employs to invoke, expose, and benefit from the genre's ambivalent relationship with the

past. *Buster Scruggs* straddles the conceptual distinction film studies make between practices of adaptation and revision (see Leitch 2007, 106-09) by utilizing the Western's inbuilt nostalgia, referencing its mediation history, and running the gamut of adaptation strategies from faithful via irreverent to positively feigned. The episodic film pretends to have been adapted from a book of Wild West stories, most of whose existence in the form of literary texts is as fictional as the volume itself.[1] The book features prominently as an object on screen and draws attention to practices of reading as well as strategies of visual adaptation. The film thus poses as an adaptation while preventing—or at least rendering absurd—many of the familiar discussions over textual fidelity.

The disruption of fidelity controversies in and around *Buster Scruggs* extends to questions of genre mediation, authorship, and even established film industry standards such as award categories. Even though only two of its six episodes adapt a conventional literary source to the screen, *Buster Scruggs* was, oddly, nominated for an Academy Award in the category "Best Adapted Screenplay" while the film itself doesn't credit either of the original authors of these two adaptations. Instead, the anthology of Western tales from which the film pretends to be adapted names as copyright holder the invented publisher "Mike Zoss & Sons," which bears the logo of the Coen brothers' own production company, Mike Zoss Productions.[2] These subversive gestures undermine conventions of film production as well as the traditional reverence of adaptation strategies, thus questioning the boundaries of adaptation. At the same time, the film is engaged in what one might call the re-revision of the Western genre, which requires revising the revisions of the myth from which it emerged. *Buster Scruggs* celebrates not merely a specific source text but the media history of the Western genre, the ways in which its stories were distributed and consumed, and the possibilities of film adaptation itself.

As an imagined adaptation—and in what would long have been considered a low-brow genre no less—*Buster Scruggs* undercuts what is often considered in film studies as screen adaptations' traditional relationship to literature. The reverential bow before the older art form's "axiomatic superiority" (Stam 58) has been described as film's attempt to "borrow the weight of seriousness from literature" (Leitch 2007, 20). *Buster Scruggs*, by contrast, borrows the visual rituals of film brandishing its literary source, e.g. in the storybook opening, which lends seriousness to the imaginary book instead of borrowing from it. Making light of the film-literature relationship, *Buster Scruggs* jumbles rather than inverts the familiar timeline of older literary material and younger film adaptation as some parts of the imaginary source text are indeed early-twentieth century literary stories while others do not exist in literary form outside the screen. The made-up book, its visual prominence, and its mix of feigned and actually published literary material destabilize categories of adaptation and tease their limits of applicability.

The film may refuse to defer to a certain art form's seniority or to temporal fidelity, but it knows how to capitalize on its ambiguous stance towards the past. In its elicitation and negotiation of nostalgia, *Buster Scruggs* taps into both the current success of nostalgic formats on screen—most prominently that of episodic structures revitalized and nostalgified by Netflix—as well as the specific affordances of the Western genre. The film evokes several of the media and storytelling traditions that have dominated the Western at one time or another to a contradictory effect: On the one hand, it emphasizes the genre's sentimental revision of the past as well as the broadly assumed cultural devaluation attending any screen adaptation. On the other, it also grants permission for a nostalgic indulgence whose self-awareness indicates critical

distance and the futility of wrangling either fidelity or historical truth from a genre as consistently remediated as the Western.

The Western As Adaptation

Before turning to its reading of *Buster Scruggs*, this essay must address the question of what can be gained by reading the Coen film, and in fact the entire genre of the Western, as adaptation. The simple and short answer is that such an endeavor can enliven adaptation studies by applying an approach that tests the limits of adaptation categories while also exploring the links between adaptation and nostalgia. The scholarship on Westerns has consistently foregrounded the genre's practices of revising and rewriting the American national past (Walker 2001), its revision of a national origin myth (Slotkin 1992) and subsequent revisions of genre conventions (Campbell 2013). This essay proposes to consider the Western's revisionist strategies[3] as practices of adaptation whose essential function is the renegotiation of the genre's inherent nostalgia.

The central challenge of such a reading can be identified at the core of a debate that haunts most theories of adaptation: the difficulty to, in Leitch's words, "adequately demarcate the frontiers of adaptation, the places where it shades off into allusion" (2007, 94). Leitch's phrasing of the question over adaptation's "frontiers" is highly suggestive in the context of this essay. The American Frontier figures as the central symbol and locale of the Western as well as the ideological source of US-American national identity and the mythologies of its nation building. Richard Slotkin in *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) describes the Frontier Myth in terms of a powerful fiction consisting of a central "set of symbols that is apparently simple yet capable of varied and complex uses" exploited by politicians and screen writers as well as in "warfare and child's play" (3). This mythology originated in "a body of narrative lore" that, through the

cultural work over generations, "was adapted to suit the ideological needs of a nation" (4). It is these tales and the myths that grew from them that form the source texts from which the Western emerged.

The question then arises: Does a film—and even a genre—count as adaptation if it hypertextually relates to not one discriminate and identifiable adapted text but a trove of cultural narratives crystalized into an ideologically charged symbol? Can one justifiably conceive of a set of folk tales only vaguely known today as a "literary source"? With the canonical bias favoring written literature over oral tradition and other "primitive" storytelling practices under severe criticism from literary and cultural scholars, it would appear as an oversight if not a blind spot within theories of adaptation to dismiss literary sources that were not written down and circulated in print. If Disney productions that retell fairy tales—which by no means came into being as the invention of those who first put one among many different versions down on paper, like the Brothers Grimm or Charles Perrault—are unanimously accepted as adaptations, then Wild West shows as well as Western movies and television programs that retell or re-imagine the folk tales from which the genre stems must equally be considered as engaging in a similar process of adapting older literary material.

Because the Western is defined, first and foremost, through its inseparable link to the Frontier, both the geographical location and the symbol of American nation building, it reflects the ideological undercurrents of American national identity more than any other genre. The symbol that defines the entire genre (including its remediations in theme park rides, Halloween costumes, or toys) emerged through the constant retelling of "a vivid and memorable set of hero tales" to the point where these tales have amalgamated into one "authentic metaphor" (Slotkin

1992, 3). The Western, therefore, is a genre of adaptation as it fundamentally originates in practices of transposing its material into various media.

Westerns stem from the retelling of fictional material and its adaptation into other media, because the source material of the Western—the Wild West and later the Frontier Myth based on Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis—has been a fiction from the beginning. The Western constantly revises not simply the past but the myth of a past that has never been. Its practices of revision and adaptation are therefore essentially nostalgic. The sentimental longing to return to a mythical, imagined home rather than one that was left behind drives Western stories above all other affects. At the same time, due to the peculiar volatility of that imagined homeland on the Western Frontier, the awareness that such a return is as inadvisable as it is impossible constitutes one of the genre's building blocks.

The home whose loss the Western bemoans was always a product of sentimental fabrication just as it has been an agent of its own demise from the very beginning. Constructed as the opposition between wilderness and civilization, both of which the Western reveres, the Frontier not only separates the two spheres, but is defined by the very effort to tame the former through expansion of the latter. Once the conquest is complete, the Frontier has eliminated itself, a process which constitutes "the central contradiction of the Western genre" in Deborah Madsen's words (138). This contradiction feeds directly into the Western's nostalgic impetus as its core element—the precarious, imaginary, and constantly moving demarcation line that serves as a homeland—is engaged in and defined by self-destruction. The Western comes with inbuilt homesickness.

Nostalgia and the Western

When the Covid-19 pandemic's rapid spread around the globe caused governments worldwide to decelerate public life with unprecedented measures in early 2020, American talk-show host Stephen Colbert opened one of his shows with the remark: "2020 has done the impossible, it made me nostalgic for 2019!" Besides referencing the political situation in the U.S., his lament illustrates how nostalgia as a cultural concept has, for one thing, accelerated to a point where it is possible to mourn the loss of a past no older than three months and, for another, become increasingly self-conscious and self-referential. Nostalgia is aware that what it longs for wasn't great to begin with, it knows of its own illusions and artificiality, and it nonetheless craves after the escapist comforts of the home that was lost to the past. Hence, Colbert's examples of what was better about that lost past (of three months previous) are memories of holiday intoxication, of false hopes since disappointed, and of the latest *Star Wars* film—a nostalgic-escapist indulgence above all else.

In its current remediations, nostalgia often functions as its own nostalgic object. Rarely is this more evident than in recent productions of the inherently nostalgic Western genre. A case in point is Antoine Fuqua's remake (2016) of John Sturges' *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), which barely leaves a cinematic Western cliché untouched. Fuqua's film goes through the motions of emulating the genre-defining camerawork of classic Western films with the expected close-ups (of gunslingers' eyes before the shoot-out; of fists curling around holstered pistols, etc.) and crane shots moving upwards from the frontier town's street level to its rooftops and beyond to encompass the vast surrounding landscape. The music score continuously teases the audience with quotations from Elmer Bernstein's famous 1960 soundtrack before fully giving over to the original score in the final credit sequence.

No new Western is complete without purposefully negotiating the sentimentalization of the past. In Jacques Audiard's *The Sisters Brothers* (2019) the protagonists' humorous banter repeatedly circles around questions of glossed-over or inaccurate memory. John Maclean's *Slow West* (2015) has a character "predict" the fate of Native-American cultures that will "be viewed with selective nostalgia, mythologized and romanticized in the safe guise of art and literature" (0:30:19 – 0:30:40) only after the genocide of indigenous peoples. In *Woman Walks Ahead* (2017) Susanna White includes a scene in which an aging general reminisces longingly about life in the "true" West of his youth after the film has already exposed its main character's expectations of Sitting Bull as romanticized stereotyping of the Sioux chief. The Wild West was a glorified and inaccessible place of longing even in the imagination of those who experienced it, and Westerns flaunt their awareness of its fictional quality with relish.

Current expressions of nostalgic sentiments have become so self-referential that they barely seem to express any longing for the past at all. Instead, they long for the simulacra of the past. In articulations of 21st-century nostalgia, this is a past that is, as Helmut Illbruck observes, "simulated and constructed as much as [it is] revised" (4). That the irrecoverable past requires editing and even misrepresentation to generate nostalgia is no hindrance to the audience's affective involvement. While the origins of nostalgia—the pathologies of homesickness in the 17th and 18th century—indicate "a sense that the present is deficient" (Shaw and Chase 3), this is no longer necessary when the past has been exposed as always already a result of revision. As David Lowenthal points out, even the most reactionary displays of American nostalgia usually refer to a past that is "safely, rather than sadly, beyond recall" (28). Yannis Gabriel confirms that nostalgia "reflects the discontents of today rather than the glories of the past" (213). Instead of expressing an actual wish to return to the past, nostalgic feelings grow from the tension between,

on the one hand, a wish "to see the world re-mystified" (Shaw and Chase 6) and, on the other, the secure knowledge that neither is this possible nor would it be truly desirable. Recent Western films find ways of integrating this tension into their aesthetic repertoire.

As a narrative mode as well as intended audience response, nostalgia provides a bridge between the two practices of adaptation and revision that Leitch separates. Transformation of the source material that goes beyond adjustment results, according to Leitch, in revision (2007, 106-107). He distinguishes between revision and adaptation based on what he describes as their "attitude towards the past": revision wants to rewrite and reassess the past while adaptation looks to the past for an assessment of the present for which "the past is the measure" (2007, 106). Nostalgia, as an affective involvement that points to the shortcomings of the present rather than the glory of the past, knowingly turns a fictitious past into a measure of the present. Awareness of this process includes both the intentional alteration of the past (the attitude of revision in Leitch's sense) as well as the evaluation of the present by way of looking to the past (adaptation's position vis-à-vis past and present). In its contemporary incarnations, nostalgia can therefore activate central functions of both adaptation and revision, if only via intentional falsification.

Imagined Adaptation in *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*

Buster Scruggs explores the Western's nostalgia by mining the genre's mediation history, which means to position itself in relation to that history's revision and adaptation of its founding myth. For this purpose, the film uses strategies of what Sandra Annett has termed "nostalgic remediation" (2014) while expanding these strategies beyond sentimental remembrance of cinema's past. In her film analyses, Annett addresses "digital cinema's longing for celluloid as

part of our *affective experience* of film within today's new media ecology" (170). *Buster Scruggs* expresses not so much a longing for the celluloid era and its media characteristics, but rather emulates the media specificity of printed text, of illustrated books, of the short format of folk tales and tall tales, and the flashy hyperbole of the Wild West Show. More than aiming to "engage with cinema's historical memory" (Annett 170), each of the mediation and storytelling experiences that *Buster Scruggs* evokes engages with the Western genre's historical memory and the recognition that it is always already the result of nostalgic fabrication. This awareness is most prominently displayed in the—largely feigned—adaptation from an imagined book.

Storybook Opening

The unusually slow opening credit sequence emulates the storybook opening of many Disney movies, but goes beyond the animated storybook by using a "real," i.e. material, book whose pages are turned by hand. By presenting the book as actual book and not as an animated prop, the digital movie highlights the analogue medium in its limitations as well as its characteristics as technology and cultural artifact. The opening sequence also foregrounds the materiality of the book as object. It showcases the different textures of the cover, of the pages printed with text, of the partly transparent protective page before the color pages, and the smooth, shiny surface of the color plates that reflect light as the pages are being turned. The book and its use as analogue technology opens and provides access to the film.

The opening sequence introduces the basic elements of a separate storyworld, one that is evocative of pre-digital and even pre-film consumption of Western stories. It points to the formative, pedagogical work performed by these narratives and also to the performative nature of their consumption, like the reading out loud of a bedtime story or the child games of re-enacting

the stories with friends. By making recourse to the genre's media history as well as the audience's relationship with that history of consuming Western stories, the opening sequence charts the distance between *Buster Scruggs*'s viewers and the historical audiences it invokes. It is increasingly unlikely for audiences today to have actually read a book of the type used in the credit sequence (the fictitious publication date is given as 1873). Their nostalgic response therefore constitutes what Kathryn Pallister describes as a "residual" one, "due to a mediated knowledge" rather than personal experience (3). The image of the book is affectively engaging because it refers to well-known nostalgic tropes of media consumption, which not simply "impute to [the book and its narratives] powers beyond" those of film (Leitch 2007, 96). Rather, the film celebrates the power of these tropes themselves and their validity beyond the media from which they first emerged.

This media nostalgia is consistently tied to strategies of adaptation throughout the film. Each episode begins with the first and ends with the last page of the respective adapted story superimposed upon the first and last frames of the filmic version. The text of the first story's opening page, for instance, fades while a typical Western landscape slowly takes up the screen. "A cinematic image of nostalgia," as Svetlana Boym puts it, "is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of … past and present" (xiii-xiv). In this case, the superimposition goes beyond the crude metaphor of the written word being replaced by moving images, and not only because the written text of each story returns at the episode's end. The passages of printed text reveal additional information left out in the film version of the story, continue the story further beyond what the filmed episode tells, and at times seem to be at odds with the film version's tone or its characterization of a protagonist. *Buster Scruggs* therefore

addresses central issues of adaptation itself, such as questions over the reciprocal relation between source and adaptation or the translatability of certain media-specific properties.

The film's exploration of its genre's mediation history exceeds the limits of its own media specificity, such as the assumed hierarchy between film and literature. On the one hand, the imagined source text references the reverence towards literary sources that characterizes celebratory adaptations. On the other, faking an adaptation by creating an imaginary source that blends "real" and "fake" literature seems to align with what Leitch identifies as a recent trend in adaptation theory, namely to "question the primacy of literature as a touchstone for cinema" (2007, 3). In pretending to be adapted from prototypical Old West stories, *Buster Scruggs* thus confirms what film studies praise as one of the medium's cultural values, namely its ability to, among other things, provide "insight into overdetermined historical moments" and to "explode[] shibboleths that stifled critical discussion" (Leitch 2007, 4). The historical moment of conquering the West has been overdetermined, as Slotkin points out, due to the American reluctance to accept it as mythology (1973, 3-6). The storybook on screen represents the verbal (written text) as well as visual (color plates and other illustrations) media into which this mythicized moment has been adapted from the nation's cultural subtext. The book is made to look like an old edition with leather binding and gold-imprint cover and is written in an identifiably old-fashioned tone, which recalls the genre's pre-revisionist era and thus a time when the "Wild West" was still a place of unequivocal longing for white American audiences and had not yet been exposed as sentimental fiction by postmodern remediations.

The book as a visual indicator of film adaptation is the vehicle *Buster Scruggs* uses to bring together the Western's sentimental past, its revisionism, and its current remediations and re-revisions. Film adaptation has been widely described as generally an expression of nostalgia.

As Linda Hutcheon points out in her seminal study, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), adaptation includes practices inherently stirred by the "comfort of ritual" (4), which Philipp Sheppard identifies as "a nostalgic comfort" (3). Ginette Vincendeau argues that literary adaptations must *per se* be considered nostalgic (xvi and xxvi). Thanks to the Western's origins in national mythology and its long tradition of revisionism, *Buster Scruggs* can draw on the genre's history of grappling with its own nostalgia.

Episodic Structure

In formal terms, this negotiation of nostalgia and revision is bolstered by the film's episodic structure. The collection of stories as imagined source text utilizes the nostalgic potential of the serial format, which has become one of the hallmarks of Netflix's success. The streaming service, as Matthias Stephan demonstrates, has been a critical factor in boosting and then harnessing the existing nostalgia for episodic television. This establishes the audience's affective involvement not just with individual shows, but with the Netflix brand as a reliable provider of television's "retro" comforts and a connection to "the perceived stability of the past" (Stephan 26). In retaining an episode structure and incorporating it into a full-length movie, *Buster Scruggs* can exploit Netflix's and other digital streaming services' reinvention of television nostalgia while staying with the traditional feature-length of Westerns on screen. It also taps into the current nostalgic revival of nineteen-nineties' "alternative" culture with its celebrated, era-defining episodic films such as Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990), Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* (1991), Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and the multiple directors production *Four Rooms* (1995), to name but a handful. As *Buster Scruggs* was produced as a feature-length episodic movie instead of a television series, Netflix's

aggressive and strongly nostalgia-based production and marketing strategies (see Pallister 2019) ensure that the film can capitalize on *all* the potential for nostalgic audience involvement, not just that afforded by the Western genre.

Apart from leveraging the nostalgia boom of serial television, the episodic structure also provides the opportunity for abrupt changes between visual aesthetics, themes, storyworlds, etc. *Buster Scruggs* exploits the potential for this variety to the effect of juxtaposing the affective strategies with which its episodes mediate nostalgic tension. The following analysis targets the overall function of *Buster Scruggs*'s episodic structure while focusing its readings on four out of the film's six episodes in order to showcase how that structure impacts the negotiation of Western nostalgia and its revision. While each of the six episodes develops a unique take on certain aspects of the genre and its history, the selection made here aims to tease out a trajectory from parodic via melancholic to celebratory modes within the film. It is thanks to this composition that *Buster Scruggs* can chart the Western's mediation history while strategically recontextualizing its adoration for wilderness and violence as well as its aesthetic forms of reverential expression.

After foregrounding the imagined literary source text in its analogue quality, the first episode has the appearance of a stage-to-screen adaptation of a Wild West Show that squeezes as many stereotypical Western elements as possible into its roughly 15 minutes: wide-angle landscape shots, the birds-eye view into a canyon, the lonely rider, the wanted poster, the frontier town, the victory shot through the wide stance of the duel winner, the saloon, and the inevitable pistol fight over a card game. It also includes the cinematographic markers of ironic commentary such as the camera shot from inside the protagonist's guitar. Its protagonist, the titular Buster Scruggs (Tim Blake Nelson), breaks the fourth wall repeatedly, speaking directly into the camera

and offering commentary and explanations. His clownish duel, in which he shoots an opponent backwards over his shoulder with the aid of a mirror, is but one element reminiscent of theme-park shows or slapstick cartoons. And when Buster meets his inevitable end—being shot in a duel, of course—he continues narrating and singing while his soul leaves his body complete with angel wings and harp until he floats off.

"It would be easy," as Sandra Annett writes, to find evidence in nostalgic remediation for "the commodification of history, or the ironic, ahistorical" pastiche that Jameson criticized in postmodern nostalgia films (170). "On closer inspection," Annett continues, and I want to argue that this is the case for *Buster Scruggs* as well, "there is also … an affective and personally invested dimension [in such films] that is intimately linked to their knowing self-reflexivity" (170). *Buster Scruggs* follows the overamplified retro aesthetics of its opening credits with an episode that uses a wide spectrum of postmodern detachment strategies while running the gamut of established Western tropes. In this combination of visual, filmic, and storytelling strategies, the film anchors its self-reflexivity in the affective dimension of a celebratory adaptation that reveres more than its source text (even more so because that source is an imaginary one). It celebrates the genre's power to entertain and capture its audiences across generations as well as its longevity through various revisions and remediations from nineteenth-century Wild West Shows via cartoons and theme park stages into digital television.

More than an allusion to and a remediation of the genre's history, the show aesthetics of *Buster Scruggs*' first episode constitute what David Greetham has conceptualized as "contamination," where "one mode of discourse … leaks into … another" (1). Greetham's notion of contamination helps reveal where *Buster Scruggs*' adaptation strategies venture into the borderlands between adaptation proper (if such a thing exists) and other ways of putting different

texts, media, genres, and other discourses in dialogue with one another. After the slow and cozily old-fashioned credit sequence, the film's beginning signals unmistakably that it participates in a form of subversive adaptation and remediation without any self-serious reverence for potential source texts or, god forbid, historical accuracy. While equally irreverent adaptation strategies, as Allison Lee and Frederick D. King have shown for the TV show *Penny Dreadful*, result in an "original [that] is contaminated by a history of adaptations" (n.pg.), *Buster Scruggs* exposes and celebrates the Western genre itself as the contaminated source text.

In the five episodes that follow this first one, *Buster Scruggs* explores several more typical themes and settings of the genre, including two classical Western stories centered on its traditional hero, the frontiersman paving the way for civilization while unfit or unwilling to live in it. Instead of following the episode sequence of the film, the following readings will first focus on these two classic tales, in episodes four and five respectively, before turning to a more extensive look at the third episode in the next section. Episodes four and five are in many ways the only representations of "pure" Western heroes in the film. The character of Buster Scruggs in the first episode as well the Cowboy (James Franco) in the second one are comical figures whose ironic detachment prevents the "mystical moment of communion between the cowboy and the hostile environment" that defines the quintessential Westerner (Madsen 130). Episodes four and five, however, seem to reinstate and celebrate the hero's "privileged access to the truths of the land [and] his deep understanding of it" (Madsen 130). For this return to the "true" Westerner, the film turns to its only "true" adaptations as both episodes bring a traditional literary Western tale to the screen.

"All Gold Canyon," the fourth episode and an adaptation of Jack London's 1904 short story of the same title, features the aging Prospector (Tom Waits) digging for gold in an idyllic

and benevolent landscape that provides for him and rewards his patience and hard work. In the fifth episode, "The Gal Who Got Rattled," based on Stewart Edward White's story "The Girl Who Got Rattled" (1901), the wagon master Mr. Arthur (Grainger Hines) guiding a wagon train westward survives heroically against a group of attacking Indians while the woman he meant to save, and who carelessly wandered into the wilderness, dies. The wagon train's other guide, Billy Knapp (Bill Heck), who was about to turn his back on the wild, is punished by the loss of the woman who was luring him away towards domesticity. He will remain on the Frontier where he is needed.

If viewed separately from the framework of the film as a whole as well as outside the context of the Western's mediation history, both stories seem to return to the original, undiluted nostalgia of the genre. The two episodes showcase two different ways of adapting literary sources to the screen, the former aiming for textual fidelity, the latter adjusting its source's character constellation and plot while toning down the misogyny of White's story but retaining most of its evident racism. Fittingly, the superimposed written text at the beginning and end of episode four quotes verbatim from London's story while White's words have been rewritten to match the alterations of the adaptation. Rather than analyze the discrepancy in adaptation strategies, I want to draw attention to the ways in which both episodes signal a continuation of the film's engagement with nostalgic tension and the revisionist tradition of the modern and postmodern Western.

While the fourth episode follows the setting and plot of London's story almost to the letter, it converts one of the literary text's features, namely its compositional symmetry, into visual indicators of artificiality. The symmetrical structure of London's narrative, which begins and ends with the undisturbed nature of a mountain valley, translates onto the screen in shots of

an idyllic landscape whose oversaturated colors and improbable symmetry mark it as a sentimental idealization. When a stag, standing by a crystal-clear river in a lush green meadow under an azure sky with white clouds, lifts its head in the very center of the frame with its antlers to both sides forming a mirror image of the other half, the shot resembles the gaudy nature representations of the proverbial postcard idyll. The episode's photography continues its penchant for idealizing composition throughout and thus uses the adaptation's visual dimension to illustrate the artificiality of its curated wilderness.

The fifth episode uses the adjustments made to White's story for an opportunity to include references to both the film makers' earlier work as well as the genre history of adaptation and revision. Whereas the short story centers on the wagon master as its main protagonist, the main female character, Alice Longabaugh (Zoe Kazan), takes center stage in the film version. Her personality is altered considerably in *Buster Scruggs*, which allows for character development and audience sympathy towards the character. This constitutes a momentous alteration, especially given the blatant misogyny of the literary text. In addition to focusing the story and with it the audience's emotional involvement on Alice, the film adaptation includes a scene that is entirely absent from White's story and that quotes extensively from a Coen brothers' earlier Western movie, *True Grit* (2010). A dinner scene brings back both the characters of the stingy boarding house owner as well as that of Grandma Turner, with whom Alice is expected to share a bed just like *True Grit*'s protagonist.

Given that the Coen version of *True Grit* is an adaptation of Charles Portis's revisionist Western novel (1968), which had already famously been adapted to the screen by Henry Hathaway (1969), these self-referential elements unlock several layers of mediation and adaptation history. The rearrangement of character constellation in combination with quotations

from the 2010 *True Grit* invoke, among other things, the return to and augmentation of Portis's revision of the Western hero in the Coen film (see Schniedermann 2017), which in turn revised the earlier adaptation's rollback of some of the progressive gender aspects of its literary source. The episode hence maintains the film's proclivity to foreground its hypertextual and metatextual connections while making recourse to how its genre's mediation history is shot through with revision efforts on several levels.

The second half of *Buster Scruggs*, episodes four through six, qualifies the humorous nostalgic gratification of the beginning. This shift in tone is not only due to the indicators of the film's awareness of its artificial sentimentality and self-referential discussion of revision practices, but is also an effect of the particular sequence of episodes and thus a function of the episodic structure. The film's turn to self-serious traditional Western material in the "real" adaptations of episodes four and five is preceded by an episode that extinguishes any lighthearted nostalgic pleasures.

Anti-Nostalgic Intervention

The third tale, entitled "Meal Ticket," clashes with the previous episodes on many levels and most strikingly so in its color palette, illumination, and lack of chiaroscuro effects. *Buster Scruggs* opens with a humorous tale of a sardonic gunslinger in a radiant landscape characterized by sharp distinctions between light and shadow. The protagonist's improbably clean clothes amplify the brightness of the setting while the stark contrast of his suit's off-white fabric and its black decorative trimmings enhance his resemblance with a cartoon character. Radiant colors return, are even enhanced, in the film's fourth episode, but only after it has burst the nostalgia

bubble in the third one, which constitutes a complete change of tone not just in terms of color mood and use of light.

The episode is low-keyed and set mostly in the dark or under low clouds. Many scenes are dominated by a cold, green-greyish tint that is reminiscent of mold and that lends a cold, damp appearance to all materials. The only splash of color comes from the dollish make-up that one of the protagonists wears for his nightly performance. The limbless Artist (Harry Melling) travels with his owner, the Impresario (Liam Neeson), and his mobile stage. His stage performances—theatrical orations of classical poetry, bible passages, and political speeches—are part freak show, part high-brow culture, and their dwindling, indifferent audiences' donations comprise the two men's meagre income. The Impresario ends up murdering the Artist so that he can free his stage for a chicken that solves math problems, promises a much better revenue, and is cheaper to keep alive. Despite the borderline cynical humor of this replacement and the dark comedic element in the portrayal of its characters, the episode rejects the parodic mockery of the first two. By switching from cartoonish violence to a quiet and utterly dehumanizing cruelty, "Meal Ticket" complicates the film's relationship to its own and the genre's nostalgia.

Besides advertising a general change of ambiance or tone, the variations in color moods, levels of brightness, and chiaroscuro contrasts, more specifically, herald a different stance towards and representation of violence. As one of the Western's indispensable ingredients and a marker of its affective strategies, the depiction of violence is traditionally a central visual element of Western movies. In the first half of *Buster Scruggs*, physical violence spans from, first, a lack of consequences typical of slapstick in an opening story rich in light-dark contrasts via, second, a blinding orange sun under which a carefree outlaw hero repeatedly escapes a violent death and quips even on the gallows to, third, the uniformly dim scenery and washed-out

colors in which one protagonist dehumanizes and then kills the other out of economic despair and without a hint of compassion.

While each story ends with a protagonist's violent death, Buster keeps on singing and narrating, and the Cowboy takes his execution in stride. Violent death in the bright first episodes either remains without consequence or is treated as a casual occurrence whose aftermath is not part of the story. Only in "Meal Ticket" is the killing of a character a momentous act. The deed itself, however, is not shown but left to the imagination of the viewer. "Meal Ticket" *only* depicts the consequence of the murder, which amounts to nothing more than an empty seat on the Impresario's cart. The looming threat of replacement and final absence of the Artist elicit affects so opposed to those triggered by the slapstick and mockery of the beginning that the entertainment value of the violence so integral to the Western genre is thrown into sharp relief.

It is no accident that the third episode's protagonists make their living in an early stage of the American entertainment business. As an accepted and, qua Frontier mythology, inevitable part of westward expansion, violent altercations are carefully choreographed visual devices driving Western movies forward with the underlying reassurance that, while violence is necessary in the made-up past, its only lasting consequence is civilization's progress. Violence thus provides much of the Western's nostalgic entertainment as it aestheticizes a reassuringly unreachable past and, especially in its humorous representations, one that can be enjoyed remotely. Centering the third episode on the precarious existences of two entertainers eliminates some of the distance on which remote amusement relies, accentuates the range of affective involvement triggered by varying degrees of visualizing brutality, and draws attention to the correlation between entertainment value and economic value.

"Meal Ticket" functions as an anti-nostalgic pivot within the movie. "The diverse goals of contemporary nostalgia do have one point in common," Lowenthal writes. "They mainly envisage a time when folk did not feel fragmented, … a past that was unified and comprehensible, unlike the incoherent, divided present" (Lowenthal 29). This third episode undercuts such aspirations. Its main characters are disfiguringly fragmented, most blatantly manifest in the Artist's lack of limbs. Their present (the audience's supposed past) is incoherent and incomprehensible, illustrated by the fact that the two men never talk with each other and the Artist does not utter a single word outside the stage. The episode's anti-nostalgic purpose in fact stems precisely from its direct engagement with nostalgic feelings. "Significantly," Lowenthal continues, "one thing absent from this imagined past is nostalgia—no one *then* looked back in yearning" (29). The impresario, however, is portrayed as deeply nostalgic, demonstrated in his half-drunk renderings of Irish folk songs. The artist's performances also advertise looking to the past. His oration repertoire includes romantic poems by Shakespeare and Shelley as well as historical speeches. Closing his performance every night with the Gettysburg Address urges his audiences to recall the high ideals on which their nation is supposedly built. Both protagonists display or promote nostalgia, which renders this look into an imagined past not a nostalgic but rather a melancholic, if darkly comical, one.

At the same time, the episode is not entirely unsympathetic with an audience that prefers clownish fun-fair curiosities to citations of canonical literature and somber speeches. The few spectators gathering in front of the Impresario's stage every night are at least as wretched as the two entertainers, and a montage sequence of the Artist's performances highlights the gloomy solemnity of his orations. "Meal Ticket" counters the film's earlier comical pleasure while conceding both the economic pressures of professional entertainment and audiences' wishes for

diversion. While the parodistic tone of the first two episodes potentially undercuts the media nostalgia inherent in their overamplified referencing of the Western's mediation history, "Meal Ticket" blocks its own dark humor from fully unfolding by replacing nostalgic tones with melancholic ones and escalating the dread of its ending into a profound shock.

Within *Buster Scruggs*'s narrative structure, the episode's anti-nostalgia qualifies what might otherwise appear like unequivocal celebration of the traditional Western's sentimental idealization of the past in the following stories. Nostalgia is permitted, even encouraged, and it serves an affective function not to be easily dismissed. It requires a revision of both the postmodern skepticism towards emotional engagement and its wholesale acceptance in the genre's early incarnations.

Conclusion

This article considers the Western as a genre that originates in the adaptation of folklore material and the national founding mythology of the Frontier. Both the Frontier Myth and much of classic Western adaptations—be they Wild West Shows, literary short stories or early films—have long been exposed as ideological falsifications of America's national history. Revisionist Westerns that address this tension in novels and films have themselves become objects of nostalgic longing, which requires current productions to take up position vis-à-vis the genre's practice of revising national history and its negotiation of nostalgia. Recent Westerns respond to this challenge by embracing nostalgic tensions in aesthetic forms that give expression to an equivocal stance on the past that nonetheless allows for—in fact, makes use of—affective involvement.

Nostalgic pleasure relies on editing out parts of the past and glossing over or adding others. Instead of condemning these practices wholesale, current Westerns seek to save the

genre's fundamental affect from postmodern suspicion. For this purpose, they enlist contemporary nostalgia's ambivalent relationship with the past to combine the different views and functions of the past expressed in forms of adaptation and revision respectively. Such productions, therefore, seem to have outgrown the long-established category of the "nostalgia film" in Jameson's sense, whose critique of the "desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past" (156) is still one of the main reference points for film critics when it comes to nostalgia on screen (Sprengler 2009). *Buster Scruggs* evokes the genre's burdened nostalgic heritage in its storybook opening sequence and exploits the nostalgic revitalization of episodic visual storytelling in its narrative structure. Within the sequence of episodes, it juxtaposes different ways in which the Western has historically utilized and discussed its sentimental attitudes towards and attendant falsifications of the past. This generates a tension that peaks in the third episode's anti-nostalgic intervention, which invites an ambivalent yet emotionally invested view of the past.

Amplifying the feigned quality of an imagined past by faking an adaptation in a deeply nostalgic genre signals not just a self-awareness of the postmodern collapse of boundaries between truth and meaning making, but overthrows postmodern aversion against emotional investment. The imagined adaptation in *Buster Scruggs* ascribes value in itself to nostalgic comfort and gives permission to indulge in it, if only with reservations and without resolving the heightened nostalgic tension. In its "insistence on the impossibility of reconciliation [and] adherence to postmodern tropes," *Buster Scruggs* exhibits features of what Robin van den Akker and Thimotheus Vermeulen term "metamodernism," which they characterize as "a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern" (5-6). The film therefore follows the affective turn in twenty-first century culture that returns what Rachel Greenwald Smith describes as "tonal warmth" (423) to cultural productions, which rescues the representation and elicitation

of emotion from postmodern suspicion while employing typical postmodern strategies like irony, pastiche, self-referentiality, and hypertextual commentary (see Armstrong 2014; McLaughlin 2004).

Buster Scruggs celebrates the Western and its heroes while contemplating the possibility of its future(s) after postmodernism. All episodes culminate in death, and in the final one, the genre that has been declared dead so often is taken to its allegorical afterlife: Five people are crammed into a stage coach, three of them dead, only they don't know it yet. Their souls are passing over into the afterlife, accompanied by two men who declare themselves "reapers" and "harvesters of souls". As the light shifts from a warm gold into cold blue darkness, the coach driver—cloaked in black as is befitting for Death himself—rushes them Westward where they will ascent up a staircase toward a bright light. The dead passengers, each representing a specific type of Western character, are invited (or, rather, coerced) to reconsider their assessments of themselves and their life stories. They all end up revising the ways in which they have edited their own narratives. The West is then not only the mythical locale of death, but also that of a transformation after revision.

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[1] To be more precise, the book used in the film doesn't credit any individual authors for its stories, most of which were written by the directors themselves. Two of the tales, however, fully qualify as adaptations in a more traditional sense as they bring older literary sources to the screen. "All Gold Canyon" adapts Jack London's 1904 story of the same title while "The Gal Who Got Rattled" only slightly changes the title of Stewart Edward White's "The Girl Who Got Rattled" from 1901.

[2] The duo often unsettle or tamper with the framing of their films, for instance by sharing editing credit under the alias Roderick Jaynes, a fictional persona who has received two Academy Award nominations. I want to thank the anonymous reviewer as well as the guest editors for pointing out the extent of the Coen brothers' history of paratextual subversion and its relevance to this article.

[3] For more on the history of revisionist Westerns, see David Lusted's chapter on the topic (231-271); consider also Barry Langford's overview and David H. Evans's discussion of the genre's inherent contradictions.

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