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PROFESSOR: We continue this week, next week, with our conversation-- it's really our final conversation-- about the genre forms that are at the center of the Hollywood era with a consideration of the Western. And that perhaps we should begin by acknowledging how central the Western is as a movie form in the history of American cinema. Before the advent of television in the late '40s-- the first American television broadcast was 1946.

And we can say the television is actually established is a social experience in American life certainly by the late '40s, by let's say 1949 or 1950. And it's through the '50s that television spreads through the society and begins to supplant the movies. So that before television, let's say that before 1950, nearly 30% percent of every movie made in the United States was a Western all the way through the Hollywood era. And in fact, in the silent era, as I will describe briefly again this evening when I do a kind of mini history of the Western movie, even in the silent era, it's a central form.

And even after the 1950s, even after the advent of television, nearly half of all movies that we might identify as set in the past, as historical movies, were Westerns. And of course, as I suggested when I talked about the musical, the Western can be understood along with the musical as a uniquely American form, even though at a certain point in the mid and late '1960s, certain gifted Italian directors begin to take over the Western and darken it and throw a kind of European cynicism into the tradition of the Western. By that time, the Western genre evolved and transformed in ways that made this cynicism not completely unique, not totally European, because a kind of subversive perspective had begun to enter the American version of the Western as well.

Nonetheless, the Western form underwent profound transformations. And it's those transformations that I want to briefly to talk about here in an introductory way. And I'll return to that sort of what we might call the trajectory or the career of the Western briefly this evening when I introduce some comments I want to make about John Ford and about his classic Western, the film we're watching tonight, "The Searchers." I want to talk a little bit more, not

only about the Western, but about why the Western might be seen as being the central American form, why it is so central not only to the History of American cinema, but in a certain sense, central to the cultural history of American society.

One way to see this is to reframe the idea I've been suggesting all through the term this notion that at a certain point, the movies became a form of central storytelling in the society, the form of storytelling that more Americans than any other form participated in and experienced, a form that I've come to label consensus narrative, a kind of story system that appeals across social barriers and across age that intends in some sense to express what might be called the dominant or the central values of a society. We talked about this idea-- I've talked about this idea already at some length and I don't want to spend too much time on it here.

But I want to complicate those ideas one more time by reminding you that one way to think about or one way to frame this notion that the movies and the Western form in particular embody this notion of a story form that tends to reach the whole society or to speak for the whole society or to embody the central values of the whole society is one way of understanding the implications of that is to recognize, first of all, that the Hollywood system which is so committed to forms of genre representation is particularly served by the principles of repetition that are inherent in the conventions that surround the Western. Even the Western-- the content of Westerns or the attitudes within Westerns might undergo great transformations, the basic formulas remain recognizable from the earliest days. We think about the costumes, the horses, the guns, and so forth, and even certain basic plots and subplots that keep returning in the Western.

As with the musical, the genre is so robust that it has many sort of some sub within it so that one can talk about Westerns that involve battles between sheep herders and ranchers. Or one can talk about the Westerns that are so focused on the laying of the transcontinental railroad. Or one could focus on Westerns that focus on the conflict between white settlers and Indians.

Now, many Westerns combine a number of these elements. And there are other sub genres we could describe. The very fact that there are these sub genres is a measure of how robust the system became. And one way to think, therefore, about this idea that I've labeled, consensus narrative, or another way to think about what I've earlier in the course called the cultural work of the movies or the cultural, the anthropological job, that genre forms in general during the Hollywood era perform, is to recognize that we can understand the specific genre as a distilled instance of the larger process of the movies, right, as a smaller clarifying

instance, we can understand in a certain sense as a forum, a space of conversation, a space of discourse in which the culture engages in a kind of ongoing conversation.

You remember the terms I used earlier borrowing from the English critic Raymond Williams. I said that we can understand that these genre reforms or these consensus forms could be said to mobilize three different strains of attitude-- an emergent, a dominant, and a traditional set of voices-- and that one of the explanations for why genre texts and the Hollywood movie specifically and the Western in particular are often so conflicted or divided is precisely that they embody or incorporate some attitudes that are traditional and old fashioned, some attitudes that are emerging and challenge traditional ideas, and also what we might central or dominant values, and that not every text will balance those elements in exactly the same way. The second point about this is to recognize that one of the beauties of genre, one of the reasons they serve such a fundamental cultural or anthropological function in a society, is precisely that they go on forever, that in other words we can think of genre forms as a kind of ongoing continuing conversation centered on the same formats and the same conventions.

And if the genre is stable and if the society produces these genre forms over decades, the genre form itself becomes a mirror in which we can see reflected the changing values and assumptions of the culture. Now, this might be true of any kind of a particular genre form in any medium. But the reason it has special force when we're talking about the movies in the 20th century in the United States is precisely because the form is so central to the society, because so much of the society participates in it.

So the picture of the society that is the ambivalent and conflicted picture of the society that emerges from studying these genre forms is likely to be far more illuminating about the larger culture than, let's say, a study of a cultural form, let's say, like opera. Not that the opera isn't worth studying and doesn't reflect certain cultural values too, but because the opera appeals to a particular subculture, the values are going to be narrower. The kinds of assumptions the people writing opera and attending opera make about the larger culture and about aesthetic experience are profoundly different from the much more dispersed and democratic attitudes and accessible notions that animate the create of a consensus form, of a form that's trying to reach the whole of a culture.

So this is a way of reminding you of what we might call the sociological and anthropological importance of the study of popular forms in general and of American movies in particular, the Western genre even more especially. We can think, therefore, of the Western almost as a

form of kind of national theater, a kind of repertory company in which the same relatively small number, recognizably small number, of actors and actresses, of directors and other sub specialists whose names are never remembered, collaborate to create the film. We can think of the movies as embodying, in a certain sense, what I'm calling the theater of a nation.

And I put the phrase in quotation marks not because it's a fancy phrase, but because I want to call attention to the fact that I'm actually borrowing a phrase from a great literary historian who wrote a book about Shakespeare's audience and about Shakespeare's plays and about the public theater of Shakespeare's day and called that theater the theater of a nation. And in a certain sense, we could say that the Hollywood system was a similar kind of theater. It doesn't from this that every text created there is a noble work of art.

And it's very important to recognize that the distinction I'm making between an anthropological perspective and an artistic one must hold here. And it's another reason for emphasizing this. Because the fact of the matter is it's very hard in a course like this, especially-- because some of these films are so wonderful, my own enthusiasm encourages you to like them and I want you to like them. Nonetheless, it's very important to recognize that I'm not trying to tell you a merely triumphalist story about how magnificently American movies began to sort of realize their possibilities and dramatize experience.

Because in a certain fundamental sense, these consensus values are not necessarily noble ones. And the western is a particularly clear instance of this. And what I'm talking about in a certain sense is the extent to which these genre reforms carry the lies, the prejudices, the nasty qualities of a society as well as their ideals and values. And we can feel those elements, even though the films themselves want to tell uplifting stories, the values embedded in them may not be so attractive at all.

And the Western is a particularly clear instance of this-- a reminder, again, that we don't just look at films for aesthetic satisfaction. We don't just look at films for-- we don't need to just look at films for mere enjoyment. They are anthropological artifacts of the greatest importance exactly because they existed at such a central, at such a fundamental space in the larger society. Why would the Western-- why would the Western be such a central form?

Why, in some sense, could we think of the movies, with its vast, wide, giant screen, as the ultimate destiny of the Western? I think one explanation for the power of the Western film, because there were Western stories and other Western formats before the advent of film--

and I'll talk about them in a moment. Why would the film be such a decisive space for the Western?

And I think if you think about it for a moment, you'll recognize instantly why that is the case. The format of the movies is particularly conducive to the sense of grandeur and largeness, spaciousness, that's characteristic of Western spaces and of the parables of heroism and social create, society creation, so the equation of a particular culture or environment in the wilderness, the establishment of civilization as a recurring theme in the western. This kind of recurring subject is at the very heart of what Westerns do and turn the movies, I think, into a particularly appropriate environment for the largeness and grandeur that Westerns represent.

But that itself isn't quite enough to explain why the Westerns occupy such a central place. And of course, there are historical and cultural explanations as well. The first explanation is that the movies are born at the end of a period in which we could say the real west actually existed.

In other words, the movies come in just at the moment-- the movies actually are still around when the experience of what we call the West was still historically actual. It wasn't quite in the past. The Western genre is focused really on a 30 year period, that what some critics have called the real west, in the period from about 1860 through 1890.

And this is the period of the Civil War, of a whole variety of Indian wars, of the laying of the transcontinental railroad, of the California and Dakota gold rushes, the period of the range wars I mentioned a little while ago between settlers and great ranchers who wanted to keep spaces open for their cattle. And of course, we now realize it's the period, although the early Westerns didn't want to acknowledge this and told a kind of opposite, it's also of course the era in which we exterminate, virtually-- the era of genocide against Native Americans, the extermination of Indians and of the Buffalo that roamed the Western plains.

And before this real west moment was over, even before it became history, it had begun to be mythologized. It was mythologized in the popular culture simultaneously with its actual existence. And there were a whole series of forms of publication and forms of drama that drew on the west and stories of the west and begin to establish what we might call the basic conventions of the Western mythology or the parable America likes to tell itself about the nature of the settling the West.

One of these forms were the dime novels that appeared in the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, available usually in paperback at news stands. And some of them were

immensely popular. Here's one title, a very famous one, the equivalent of a best seller, I guess, of the day published in 1882-- *The Life, Times, and Treacherous Death of Jesse James*, 1882.

And of course, what these dime novels did was they took what were quasi historical events, sometimes real events, and immensely elaborated them, fictionized them into heroic fables of various kinds, often celebrating people like Jesse James who may well have been outlaws and disreputable people in actuality. Another title-- *The Illustrated Lives and Adventures of Frank and Jesse James and the Younger Brothers*. And you can imagine what that kind of thing would have done.

In addition to these dime novels, there will also stage performances, plays. They were often some form of melodrama set in the Old West and involving the basic costumes and accoutrements of a Western, right? Pistols and cowboy hats and school marms from the east and so forth.

But perhaps even more important than these two sources, and they were very powerful and important forms of popular culture before films to help establish what we might call the mythology of the west, were the Buffalo Bill shows, the wild west shows. These were unbelievably popular and successful. Here is a picture of a kind of flyer that would be distributed in small towns or sometimes in larger towns as the Wild West show and-- the Wild West show came to town.

The star of the Wild West show was William Cody, Buffalo Bill. He had a very modest actual career in the west. But it was immensely elaborated by him and his publicist into something much grander and more remarkable. Buffalo Bill made his first age appearance in 1872 in a stage melodrama called "Scout of the Planes," which went on a two year four, right?

And then in 1882, 10 years later, he formed his own wild west show, which became immensely popular, traveled all over the country, and then made trips to Europe. He even did one Wild West show before the Queen of England. And it was an immensely successful public enactment.

The basic elements of the wild west show contained the essential mythology that then moved into the movies. They often dramatized-- in the wild west show, they often dramatize a battle between white men and Indians in which the Indians were very treacherous and were finally defeated. They sometimes, in fact, in some of the forms of the wild west show, they reenacted

the Battle of Little Bighorn in which at the last minute, there was a rescue. They reversed history in it sometimes in order to dramatize an outcome that was more appealing to the white audiences.

The wild west show staged battles between cowboys and Indians. And in fact, one of the great historical ironies, the historical irony that the director we're looking at next week, Robert Altman, actually picks up on in one of his films called "Buffalo Bill and the Indians," a film he made in the 1970s-- 1975, I think. One of the shocking things is that at a certain point, at least for two years, I think, one of the participants in the Wild West shows was Sitting Bull himself, the defeated Indian, the defeated Native American leader who was now domesticated and actually became part of the show.

And in Altman's fictionalized version of this episode, a drunken Paul Newman plays Buffalo Bill. And he's mocked and made fun of in some sense by a character who represents Chief Sitting Bull, who has all the dignity-- he's almost the only character in the film with real dignity. It's a subversive post Hollywood era Western, as you might guess. So the Wild West shows, the Buffalo Bill wild west shows, were essentially an early rehearsal for what the movies became.

And many of the elements of the wild west show-- fancy roping, fancy shooting, conflicts between cowboys and Indians, the performance of various horse riding tricks, herding of cattle and so forth-- all sort of contained the elements that then moved into the movies in an even more systematic and powerful way. And then I might mention one final source-- the novel itself. At the beginning of the 20th century, in 1902, one of the best selling novels of all time in English was published. It was a book called *The Virginian* by a writer named Owen Worcester.

And it remains one of the bestselling books in the history of the United States. It still sells thousands of books every year. I once found, in a used bookstore, an addition of *The Virginian* that had been published I think 15 years after its original publication.

And that addition was, I think, the 50th addition of the book. It went through an incredible number of-- and in fact, the addition I had also included beautiful illustrations that obviously were added to later additions once the popularity of the book became known. So what we find is that the popular culture before the advent of movies had already, in some sense, created a full fledged mythology of the Western, had familiarized the society with the basic attitudes, assumptions, costumes, and fundamental archetypal characters who organize the Western.

And there's one further thing to emphasize. This may be the most important thing of all, what we might call the intellectual culture. It was-- not only was there a real historical background to the Western and not only was there a profound form of popular culture in theater, in public performances, like these wild west shows, and in dime novels as well as in literary novels-- a tremendous compost of discourse that already sort of establishes the genre even before the movies arrive.

There was also a final touch. And this is the thing that helps to explain, I think, maybe more powerfully than the other examples I've given you why the Western had such a hold and continues in some ways to have such a vestigial hold on the American imagination and on America's sense of itself. And that is what happens in what I call here the intellectual culture.

In 1893, one of the most famous historians, Frederick Jackson Turner, published an essay in the American Historical Society-- or delivered a lecture and then it was later published as an essay-- delivered a lecture to the American Historical Society. And the title of the essay was "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." it's probably the single most influential historical essay about the American past.

It's been attacked and undermined and qualified and its limitations have been widely discussed over the last 25 years. But it still remains, in some respects, a seminal essay, even when historians are reacting against it-- one of the most important central essays about the nature of American culture. And this article-- in this article, Frederick Jackson Turner argued essentially that-- he was trying to make a case for what makes the United States unique.

He was making a case for what we now call American exceptionalism, a dubious proposition. But let's listen to his argument, which has a good deal of power and interest. He said essentially that the existence of free land, of a continuously receding settlement, of a continuously receding frontier, the advance of settlement westward with European settlers always pressing against that frontier, that the existence of such a reality in American life had altered inherited notions of social class and aristocratic government and had created a tendency toward what Turner implied were or said were the American ideals of individualism and classlessness, of democracy itself.

In other words, the United States, according to Turner's argument, had a particularly open and democratic feel because the existence of this frontier allowed people to escape into a new life, to find possibilities, to escape the confinements of social class, even perhaps in some small

degree of gender, although feminist historians have certainly shown how confining the life of women in the west actually was. Nonetheless, a sense that the existence of the frontier made the United States a uniquely individualistic and a uniquely free society. What Turner had done, of course, was define a central historical myth for European Americans, for the white society in the United States.

And we've come to recognize that limitations of the argument. What's the most profound, obvious limitation that occurs to you instantly? How about the people who already here, right? In other words, one of the things that's wrong with the Turner thesis is that it's oblivious to the existence of the Native Americans who were pushed aside by the white settlers.

It's a very complex story and I don't want to oversimplify it. I don't mean that the heroic white people who got in the Conestoga wagons and who settled the west, about whom there are dozens if not hundreds if not thousands of-- certainly thousands if we count stories in all formats-- of movies and books and short stories and plays and so forth. I don't want to suggest that there was nothing heroic or remarkable about that behavior. There was.

The United States is not wrong-- American culture is not wrong in some sense to celebrate the heroism of those people. But of course, as we've come to realize, and as many of our most recent Westerns openly acknowledge, this original mythology which sort of celebrated unambiguously the white settlement of the West was actually also in some sense an invasion and even a genocide. And the Turner thesis doesn't even imagine that.

It sees it as a triumphal reality. So there were limits, terrible limits, to the argument. But there's also something profoundly helpful about the argument. There is a sense of spaciousness, a sense of new possibilities, a greater hostility to social class and inherited wealth in the United States than there are in other places.

And for both good and ill, the United States celebrates forms of individualism as against communal behavior with a kind of intensity and compelling power that many, many, not just Europeans, that many, many non Americans think is excessive and think has been reflected in some sense in various forms of national behavior which we needn't discuss in detail now. But you could all imagine your own examples. But to come back to the primary point, then, one of the reasons that-- it's as if the movies were sort of waiting for the Western, as if the Western form already in some sense, in fundamental ways, fully formed comes into the movies just as the movies are born, as if the format of the movies and the content of the Western were made

for each other in some sense.

And it becomes one of the dominant, one of the signature features of American cinema. One of the fundamental aspects of what the Western is, if we think of it as a kind of cultural mythology, is that it tells a founding story. It tells the story again and again.

It repeats it every time you see a Western in some sense. Every Western is implicitly a story about the foundation of a society, about the equation of a community. It's always implicitly about it. In many Westerns, this is an explicit topic.

And what we can say is that this means that the Western is the United States' form of a kind of story that every culture has, right? The ancient Greeks had a founding mythology grounded in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, right? And Tudor England had a founding mythology partly promulgated by Shakespeare in the history plays that were put on in the public theater in the 16th century. And what we can say about these founding stories as they are always, in some sense, fantasies or fictions.

But they articulate values and assumptions that the culture, in some sense, would like to believe about itself. And by their reiteration, by their repetition, by telling them again and again, they instantiate these values, these assumptions about the society, in the culture as a whole. Their very repetition is important.

Because one of the fundamental things about a myth or a mythology, one of the most fundamental things about it, is that it's a collective-- it's a collective story. It's not made by a single person. And one way to think about all Westerns, although of course many of the best Westerns have the trace of-- more than the traces-- have the imprint of individual contributions. John Ford-- John Ford is a great director.

And there are aspects of John Ford's personality in every one of his Westerns. Nonetheless, even the most profoundly Fordian Western is still a collaborative form, not only because Ford as a director-- because the movies are inherently collaborative because they have so many different people who contribute to the creation of the whole. No one, even the most powerful director, can completely control everything.

The greatest directors know how to collaborate with their performance and their writers. But in any case, it's a collaborative form to begin with, right? But there's another kind of collaboration, several other kinds. What are they?

One of them is that every Western is implicitly in a conversation with every previous Western. And in that sense, there's no author. It's a collective-- the story of the American Western, in that sense, is a collective story. It's a creation of the culture.

And in fact, every new version of the Western adds to the mythology in some sense, right? So in that sense, we can think of genre reforms generally, the Western in particular, as a particular kind of ongoing, recurring discourse. And if you come back again to the arguments I was making at the beginning of our class about the ways in which genre forms and especially the Western can be seen to sort of dramatize cultural change or the way in which a society's attitudes may alter over time exactly because so many elements of a genre are stable and recognizable, those that are different are easy to recognize, are easy to identify and speculate about.

So one of the things we're recognizing here is that in a certain sense, the very fact that the mythology is open, is unfinished, reflects something that's fundamental about society too. And this is part of Raymond Williams' great insight into culture when he said-- what he said was culture is a constant mix of emergent, traditional, and dominant voices. It's never over.

What culture is is a conversation. It's never any one fixed thing because culture is always in process. It's always changing.

And what we can say-- the value of these genre reforms, and especially because the movies could reach so widely, even across linguistic barriers, the value of the movies or the power of the movies as a form of this kind of discourse is overwhelmingly clear exactly because we can imagine this process, this conversation, going on repeatedly over time-- the recognizable elements juxtaposed against the elements that are not recognizable, allowing for a kind of constant process of reevaluation, of rehearsal, and of rethinking, right? And we can say, in fact, that that's one of the deep functions that genre forms in general play and it's one of the central functions that the Hollywood movie plays. And I'll try to concretize this for you this evening in a kind of-- it's a kind of comic attempt, but I'm going to give you a kind of capsule history of the trajectory of the Western from its earliest days, from "The Great Train Robbery," to "Unforgiven."

So the Western is a mythology. It's a mythology. The fact that mythologies themselves are open ended, are spaces in which a society defines and redefines its identity and its central values, makes the Western movie a particularly powerful and central anthropological space.

It enacts, in different ways over and over again, a story about the founding of society. And at the end, it is grounded therefore also in a series of complex dichotomies that are worth making clear, even though they're very obvious when you think about what all Westerns do. But think about them.

One of the dichotomies is the dichotomy between what is thought to be civilized and what is thought to be savage-- between civilization and savagery. Another is often between East and West in which the east represents civilization and the west the sa-- but there's an ambivalence. Because the east is also a place that is thought to be dessicated and lacking vitality. And the west is thought to be an authentic place that tests us in our heroic, largest possibilities, right?

And another kind of dichotomy that is present in virtually all Westerns is a dichotomy between what we might call the claims of community, the claims of society on the one side, and the claims of the individual on the other side, right? This is a special problem for the Western because it celebrates American individualism so powerfully. The iconic scenes of the Western in which two men wearing guns square off against each other and the quicker one survives-- that scene of the quick draw one and of the death in the dusty street could be sent to be a kind of embodiment of these values in which you have to rely on yourself.

You can't rely on someone else. You can't rely on the government. You can't rely on the Sheriff.

You can't rely on the police. You can't rely on your neighbors. You have to trust yourself.

And in fact, one of the ways you can see the power of these Western mythologies operating, as it seems to me in some sense, one of the great divides in the United States today over the question of guns and gun control is partly grounded in these myths of individualism that the Western mythology has been promulgating since before the advent of the movies. In other words, the attitudes-- and in fact, if you listen to even some of the most extreme forms of gun rights advocates actually talk in a language that we can recognize from Westerns, from Western movies. Not an accident that one of our recent presidents was a star in Western films and actually remembered some films he'd been in as if they'd been actual history.

And I don't say that in a way to sort of disparage poor Ronald Reagan at all, but as a way of reminding us the confluence or the confusion of actual history with these mythological

accounts of the west is a characteristic feature of the American imagination. How could it be otherwise? We have been so inundated in these stories about the west.

So another dichotomy, then, is that between society and the individual, maybe finally we can say a dichotomy between culture and nature, right? Which is the story that's enacted again and again in the great epic stories that every culture sort of generates for itself. One of the most distinctive features of these dichotomies is the divided hero, a character you'll see embodied with great complexity in tonight's film played by John Wayne, a character who is-- the Western hero is often seen very ambivalently as both a savior and a savage, as someone who has the power and authority to bring a kind of decency and lawfulness to a community, but who is himself so touched by, so tainted by the very savagery that he tried to tame, that he's often excluded from the community once it's been created.

And you'll see a wonderful instance, a complex instance of that, in tonight's film in the way the John Wayne character, at the very end of the film, is in a certain sense excluded from the community that he has helped to defend. One way to see many of these things or to clarify many of these things is to juxtapose-- or maybe as a way of crystallizing this process I'm talking about whereby a genre form can, in some sense, dramatize changing values. I want to show you one scene.

Maybe I'll just end with the scene. This is a scene from "McCabe and Mrs. Miller", the film you're going to see in two weeks, a Western that comes after the breakdown of the Hollywood system, after the movies no longer have the responsibility or the obligation-- no longer saw themselves as having to speak to everyone-- a moment of great, in many ways, extraordinary artistic freedom, the period of the late '60s and through a good part of the 1970s.

Many people would say it was a moment in American cinema unrivaled for its complexity and its richness. And one of the reasons it was such a rich moment was that the movies had been liberated from their responsibility to talk to the whole culture. There was an irony connected to that because they have smaller audience.

But it gave them a kind of political freedom, a kind of moral freedom that they hadn't had before. And I want to show you one scene. One reason I'm choosing it is because it will resonate for you when we come to "McCabe and Mrs. Miller." But it requires that you know one thing.

The scene, the iconic scene that I mentioned earlier where two heroes or one hero and a bad

guy square off against each other on a dusty street to draw a gun might be said to be the most recurring or the most-- the quintessential Western scene, although there are others we might nominate as almost as important. And in order to understand the scene you're about to see, you need to recognize that what lies behind this very subversive version of the shoot out are dozens, if not hundreds, of earlier scenes in which heroic characters that we greatly admire shoot down bad guys in the street, right? Well, here's a scene from "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" of this iconic moment.

Remember, "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" comes after the consensus dispensation. It's free not to be a consensus form. But one reason I want to show you this is I hope you can recognize that what gives this scene its power is not-- it's very brilliantly photographed and dramatized. But what gives it its power has very little to do with what it itself does.

What grants its enormous authority are the dozens, if not hundreds, of prior scenes with which it's in conversation, against which it is contrasting itself. Because this scene of confrontation between two individuals-- who has the faster gun, right-- is, as I've suggested, the iconic moment in the Western. And it is, in the heroic Western, in the traditional Western, it's a heroic moment of individual self assertion in which good conquers evil. Watch Robert Altman's version of this.

WOMAN: Careful. Come back.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

[? -There's ?] shorty! [INAUDIBLE]!

[DOG WHINING]

[CLINKING]

[GUNSHOT]

-I wasn't trying to hit it. The trick is not to hit it, but to make it float.

PROFESSOR: He's lying. You're supposed to realize he's lying here. He meant to hit it. Here comes the cowboy who's just [INAUDIBLE]. All the prostitutes loved you.

-Hey, hold it, sonny.

-What?

-Hold up on your target practice a minute. I don't want to get shot.

-Well, then get off the bridge, you saddle tramp.

-I want to buy some socks. I got a long ride ahead of me.

-What's wrong with the socks you got on?

-I wore them out running around half-naked in that whorehouse over there. Actually quite a place. You been there yet?

-Take off your boots and show me.

-You're joshing me.

-I said, take off your boots, and show me, eh, sucker?

-I ain't going to do that.

-What are you wearing that gun for?

-[INAUDIBLE] I just wear it. Can't hit nothing with it.

-Well, that don't make no sense. What kind of a gun is it?

-Colt.

-Them's big guns. That's what I got. Must be something wrong with it.

-Naw, it's me. I just can't shoot good.

-Well, let me see it. Come on. Maybe I can fix it for you.

-OK.

PROFESSOR: OK.

[END PLAYBACK]

BOY: So what the scene-- what the scene does is it turns on its head what we might say are the central values or assumptions that have lain behind such a seen in dozens, if not hundreds, of prior Westerns. And that's a distilled example of this process of a conversation that goes on-- if it goes on for a long enough time, the content of the conversation can virtually reverse itself even though the genre remains stable. And that's one of the-- we might call that the genius of genre, the genius of a genre form. It has to do with-- it's a version of what I mean when I talk about the cultural work or the anthropological function that movies have.