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Genre, Domestic Distribution, and Audiences (1935–1945)

The Case of the Western

> There will be more of them made in the high budget class this next six months than anytime [sic] in the last decade. Not the mill run stuff constantly turned out for the sticks and nabes on Saturday pm, but for the Broadways of the world.[1)]
>
> Anonymous *Variety* writer

As the report from American trade paper *Variety* cited above suggests, the return in 1939 of the big-budget (or "A") Hollywood Western — a development marked by the release of films including JESSE JAMES, STAGECOACH, DESTRY RIDES AGAIN, UNION PACIFIC, and DODGE CITY — threw into relief the extent to which the Western had by that point come to be associated with low-budget filmmaking. As during the 1920s, Westerns had for much of the 1930s constituted roughly a quarter of the US film industry's output.[2)] Unlike in the 1920s, however, these Westerns were almost exclusively low-budget, or "B", productions. In 1934, for example, no big-budget Westerns were released; in the years that followed there were only four, three, seven, and four Westerns respectively.[3)] The flight from the production of lavish Westerns was in part due to the costly failure of several expensive Westerns released in 1930, including THE BIG TRAIL and BILLY THE KID.[4)] The ghettoization of the Western was concurrent with the widespread implementation across the exhibition sector of double-bill programming, in which theaters offered two feature films for the price of admission. This practice increased demand for low-budget films that could be

1) Anon., 'Hollywood Inside', *Daily Variety*, 25 February 1939, p. 2.

2) Western production dropped to around ten to twenty percent of total US output during and just after the transition to sound but returned to about twenty-eight percent by 1935.

3) These numbers represent, respectively, zero, three percent, two percent, five percent, and three percent of US Western productions. Edward Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Atheneum, 1998), pp. 37–43; 426–428. MGM's VIVA VILLA! might be considered a big-budget 1934 western, although I follow Buscombe in not counting it as such.

4) Buscombe, *The BFI Companion*, p. 43; Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s: The Lost Trail* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001).

rented to theaters at flat rates.[5] Accordingly, disproportionate numbers of 1930s Westerns came from independent "Poverty Row" outfits such as Monogram Pictures, often as parts of film series. The ratio of big-budget to low-budget Westerns became slightly less lopsided toward the end of the decade when some of the major studios began to increase their own B-unit output. This move represented the majors' reluctant acceptance of the commercial realities of the double-bill market, although many studios continued to attempt to end the practice of double-billing.[6] The *Variety* report also illustrates in succinct fashion how Westerns were associated (discursively, and with respect to their domestic circulation) with particular audiences — as audiences were understood in terms of their attendance of theaters occupying different positions within the US film distribution system of the period. Their sheer volume, coupled with their shifting status within the industry, makes Westerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s a particularly instructive case with which to show how genre related to distinctions within the US theatrical market of the "classical" studio era. Furthermore, it shows how such distinctions were connected to industry conceptions of audiences.

Scholarship on American Westerns tends to begin with, or, at least, heavily privilege, the so-called "adult" Westerns of the 1940s and 1950s — of which the late-1930s A Westerns were a notable precursor. Beyond early foundational surveys such as George N. Fenin and William K. Everson's *The Western: From Silents to Cinerama* and Jon Tuska's *The Filming of the West*, two recent books by Peter Stanfield offer the most serious and sustained work on the 1930s Western.[7] One of Stanfield's books focuses on the "singing cowboy" (largely a figure of B Westerns), while the other traces more comprehensively developments in the genre's production and reception.[8] Stanfield argues that the major studios' renewed commitment to big-budget Westerns was part of a broader shift toward action-oriented films, intended in part to appease those independent and small-town exhibitors who felt that their needs were being "ill-served" by the major studios. It was these exhibitors who most strongly supported anti-trust suits designed to combat the distribution practices through which the majors maintained control of the industry.[9] Stanfield also argues that the Western offered an eminently usable (and conveniently historical) textual framework in which to present the kinds of patriotic, democratic stories that the industry felt were called for by the intensification of conflicts overseas.[10] Making Westerns once again attractive to a general (and particularly a female) audience involved increasing their budgets and casting bankable actors like Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn, and Tyrone Power. It also involved the

5) Brian Taves, 'The B-film: Hollywood's other half', in Tino Balio (ed.), *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993); Don Miller, *B Movies* (New York: Ballantine, 1987).

6) Gary Rhodes, '"The double feature evil": efforts to eliminate the American dual bill', *Film History*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2001), pp. 57–74.

7) George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to Cinerama* (New York: Orion Press, 1962); Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976); Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: the Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s.*

8) See Stanfield, *The Lost Trail.*

9) Ibid., p. 145.

10) Ibid., pp. 152–160.

calculated deployment of story elements like alcohol consumption, brothels, and saloons — all perceived to appeal to adult audiences.[11]

This essay broadens our understanding of late 1930s and early 1940s Westerns by looking at their US circulation. As Lea Jacobs and I have argued in a study of 1920s reception and distribution, films were not simply designed for, or delivered to, an undifferentiated "mass" audience.[12] Rather, films were associated with different intended audiences and, accordingly, received different kinds of releases. We argued that, while audiences were discussed in the trade press in demographic terms (including men/women/juveniles and urban/hinterland dwellers) or in terms of their taste formations (notably sophisticated and naïve viewers), these distinctions were often inscribed within a hierarchy of theaters and release strategies.[13] The same phenomenon is true of trade, and some popular, discourse of the late 1930s and early 1940s, with the principal difference being an increased emphasis on a film's potential position on a double-bill.

This study draws primarily on two datasets: press coverage of Westerns, including reviews of individual films as well as commentary about genre more broadly, and distribution information drawn from the US trade and popular press. It first establishes the manner in which different kinds of Western were associated with different target audiences and distribution strategies. A key issue in this respect is the intricate range of options delineated in the press — a range of options that far surpasses a simple A picture/ B picture binary. The paper then complements this discourse analysis with an examination of distribution histories, approaching the question of Western distribution from two angles. First, it contrasts the release patterns of a range of Westerns, from top-budgeted As to the lowest-budgeted Bs, highlighting not just the ways in which a particular film's status (as determined by criteria including production budget and presence of stars) underwrote the form of distribution it received, but how that status could be renegotiated or complicated over the course of its release. Second, it offers a snapshot of the distribution of Westerns in three small markets in the watershed year of 1939. Together these findings illustrate how Westerns functioned within local film ecosystems and particularly the connections between Westerns and certain classes of theaters and types of programming practice.

The Reception of Westerns: Theaters, Audiences, and Circulation Strategies

By the mid-to-late 1930s, low budgets had, for critics and audiences alike, come to define the Western's cultural profile.[14] The revival of the A Western in 1939 and subsequent seasons was, at best, greeted as the rebirth of a great cinematic tradition — a response evi-

11) Ibid., pp. 173–174, 191–192.

12) Lea Jacobs and Andrea Comiskey, 'Hollywood's conception of its audience in the 1920s', in Steve Neale (ed.), *The Classical Hollywood Reader* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 94–109. See also Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Richard Maltby, 'Sticks, hicks and flaps: classical Hollywood's generic conception of its audiences', in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (eds), *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), pp. 23–41.

13) Jacobs and Comiskey, 'Hollywood's conception'.

14) Stanfield, *The Lost Trail*, p. 116.

dent, for example, in the rapturous *New York Times* review of STAGECOACH penned by critic and future John Ford collaborator Frank S. Nugent.[15] Nugent praised STAGECOACH as "a movie of the grand old school" that "swept aside ten years of artifice and talkie compromise".[16] At worst, big-budget Westerns were deemed pretentious, even tedious dressings-up of standard B-grade material.[17] The previous year, Nugent had called Paramount's THE TEXANS "just another romance with unjustified pretensions to importance".[18] Similarly, Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* dubbed MGM's BILLY THE KID (1941) a "western with trimmings" and a "routine horse opera".[19]

Perhaps the worst offender was the Western that was presumed to have abandoned the genre's strengths by forsaking action for psychodrama. Both the *New York Times* and *Variety* lambasted Paramount's THE ROUNDUP (1941), a film directed by Harry Sherman, a veteran of the popular Hopalong Cassidy series that the studio had for several years distributed. Their very similar reviews indicated that Sherman should have known better than to dwell on a love triangle at the expense of, to use the *New York Times*' critic's terms, "a good bang-up riding and shooting fracas".[20] While there was certainly a degree of condescension in some reviews of B Westerns, and particularly in reviews of ultra-low-budget fare, critics expressed with some regularity their appreciation of the films' terseness and skillful adherence to action formulas. For example, critics praised RKO's Westerns starring George O'Brien as being among "the best in the field".[21] *Variety* called THE RENEGADE RANGER (1938) "a very good western, filled with brawling, gunning, and outlawry"[22] and described GUN LAW (1938) as being "long on tensity [sic], nose-flattening fights and hard riding" and deserving of "grade A western playing time".[23] Criticisms such as these were imbricated within assumptions of Westerns' intended audiences. Of THE ROUNDUP, a *Variety* critic noted that "[w]hat makes it doubly a liability is that it has too much psychological drama to be a western and too little story to be a straight feature [...] it will neither please the cowboy 'n' injuns fans nor the drama lovers".[24] Reviews, especially those in *Variety* and other trade publications, reveal much about a film's imagined audiences, for they existed in part to help exhibitors make informed choices about what films to book. These audiences are typically discussed in conjunction with extremely precise assessments of a film's box office potential and recommendations for appropriate distribution strategies. For instance, a *Variety* review of Paramount's CHEROKEE STRIP (1940) read:

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15) Ibid., p. 150.
16) Frank S. Nugent, 'A Ford-powered "Stagecoach" opens at Music Hall', *New York Times*, 3 March 1939, p. 27.
17) Stanfield, *The Lost Trail*, p. 160.
18) Frank S. Nugent, '"The Texans", with Randolph Scott and Joan Bennett, opens at the Paramount', *New York Times*, 28 July 1938, p. 23. Paramount was among the only studios to continue occasional forays into A Westerns in the mid-1930s, with films like THE PLAINSMAN (1936) and WELLS FARGO (1937).
19) Bosley Crowther, '"Billy the Kid," a Western with trimmings, opens at the Capitol', *New York Times*, 20 June 1941, p. 28.
20) Herb., 'The roundup', *Variety Film Reviews*, 10 September 1941, unpaginated; T.S., 'At Loew's Criterion', *New York Times*, 13 March 1941, p. 25. The *New York Times* critic cited here lamented "[g]enerally, the more money a producer spends on a Western, the less happens".
21) Barn., 'Gun Law', *Variety Film Reviews*, 29 June 1938, unpaginated.
22) Barn., 'Renegade Ranger', *Variety Film Reviews*, 5 October 1938, unpaginated.
23) Barn., 'Gun Law'.
24) Herb., 'The Roundup'.

> [w]ith [Richard] Dix starring and rating marquee draw in the family and action houses that go for better-than-usual program westerns, CHEROKEE STRIP will satisfy in those spots. [The] [p]icture's story is both too trite and filled with obviously overwritten dialog on the [melodramatic] side, to give it much chance for dual supporter in the first runs.[25]

In what follows, a sample of these reviews is presented to sketch out a US distribution hierarchy — comprising cities, towns, theaters, and programming slots — within which Westerns and other films circulated. This study catalogued approximately 300 Westerns (A pictures and B pictures) distributed by the "Big Five" and "Little Three" studios, as well as a further fifty Westerns handled by smaller independent companies, between 1937 and 1943. A survey was made of *Variety* and/or *New York Times* reviews of most of these films. Because B films did not receive the amount of popular press coverage that A films received, in many cases only a *Variety* review could be examined.[26] Major studio releases received particular attention because they best captured the range of distribution strategies associated with different classes of Western (major studio releases included nearly all of the period's A Westerns and a rich variety of its B Westerns).

Films' budgets varied significantly within the A and B categories and across studios. The major studios' "normal" A films were budgeted at around $300,000 to $1m, with some "A+" features costing $1.5m to $3m. In his survey of B films of the 1930s, Brian Taves identified four categories of B film. The first category consisted of major studio "programmers". In terms of their budgets and/or runtimes, these films existed somewhere between the A and B categories and could thus play in "any part of the program [...] depending on the prestige of the theater and the other material of the double bill".[27] The second category consisted of the majors' B-unit films, which were budgeted between $30,000 and $300,000.[28] The third sub-category consisted of low-budget films from the best capitalized "secondary studios", including Republic Pictures and Monogram Pictures.[29] Ultra-low-budget quickies handled by the so-called "Poverty Row" outfits made up the fourth, and final, sub-category of B film.[30] In many cases, reviews of Columbia's lowest-budget Westerns were quite similar to those of Poverty Row Westerns (and in fact these two groups of films often played at the same theaters and on similar programs).

To be one of the year's top grossing films (and thus to generate a level of return necessitated by extremely high budgets), a film needed to play in major metropolitan first-run houses, most of which were owned by or were affiliated to one of the "Big Five" studios.[31]

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25) Walt., 'Cherokee Strip', *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 October 1940, unpaginated.

26) Kyle Edwards examines how B/Poverty Row studios marketed themselves in the trade press. See Kyle Edwards, '"Monogram means business": B-film marketing and series filmmaking at Monogram Pictures', *Film History*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2011), pp. 386–400.

27) Taves, 'The B-film', pp. 317–318.

28) Ibid, pp. 318–321.

29) Ibid., pp. 321–323.

30) Ibid., pp. 323–329. Lea Jacobs has further analyzed the flexibility of the A/B distinction over the course of a film's national release. See Lea Jacobs, 'The B film and the problem of cultural distinction', *Screen*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 1–13.

31) Mae D. Huettig offers a landmark analysis of theater ownership. See Mae D. Huettig, *Economic Control of the*

Moreover, the film needed to be held over (that is, overstay the standard one-week booking) at these houses for several weeks. *Variety* called Twentieth Century-Fox's JESSE JAMES "a cinch extended run attraction" and predicted correctly that the film would "wind up in the top list of biggest grossers for the first half of 1939".[32] MGM's NORTHWEST PASSAGE (1940), produced on a budget of over $2m, promised to be a "top attraction for both grosses and extended runs", in part because its purported educational value gave it the capacity to "hit audiences that seldom attend[ed] theaters".[33] Fox's WESTERN UNION (1941), a "super-western of upper-budget proportions", was deemed "strong enough to catch a good share of holdovers" in key cities.[34]

Beyond this top tier of upper A films deemed capable of achieving genuine hit status were a number of lower As and strong programmers. Although *Variety*'s review of Goldwyn/United Artists' THE WESTERNER (1940) does not mention holdovers, it nonetheless predicts strong, steady business: "[the film] should hit a profitable stride in the first runs and roll along through the [subsequent run theaters] to consistently heavy traffic".[35] While MGM's top-budget Westerns, such as NORTHWEST PASSAGE and HONKY TONK (1941), tended to star matinee idols like Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy, most of the studio's Westerns starred the rough-hewn Wallace Beery. *Variety* predicted that one such film, THE BAD MAN OF BRIMSTONE (1938), would grab "nice money solo" (that is, as the only feature film on the bill, presumably accompanied by short subjects or live acts). However, the film was characterized as ideally suited for top billing in first-run theaters that offered double-bills.[36] Fox's FRONTIER MARSHAL (1939), a more modest Western than the studio's JESSE JAMES, was said to fall narrowly short of the "requirements for general top billing in the major keys" (possibly due to its 72-minute length or the moderate marquee draw of stars Randolph Scott and Nancy Kelly). The reviewer nevertheless noted that the film's general audience appeal would allow it to "catch many upper dual bookings in the major houses, and stand on its own in the subsequents".[37] Fox's other Western offering of the season was the THE RETURN OF THE CISCO KID, the first entry in a series that revived the title character following an extended hiatus from Hollywood films. THE RETURN OF THE CISCO KID was predicted to "hit moderate biz in the keys, but catch the kids and adventure-lovers in the subsequents for better than average take".[38] Columbia's *Texas* (1941), one of the studio's most lavish Westerns of the period, was greeted as "an upper B programmer that will catch a good share of solo and billtopping bookings in the secondary houses".[39] In a similar vein, Paramount's THE PARSON OF PANAMINT (1941), which boasted mild religious themes, was called "a topnotch program action melodrama that

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Motion Picture Industry: A Study in Industrial Organization (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), pp. 74–86.

32) Anon., 'Jesse James', *Variety Film Reviews*, 11 January 1939, unpaginated.
33) Anon., 'Northwest Passage', *Variety Film Reviews*, 14 February 1940, unpaginated.
34) Anon., 'Western Union', *Variety Film Reviews*, 5 February 1941, unpaginated.
35) Walt., 'The Westerner', *Variety Film Reviews*, 25 September 1940, unpaginated.
36) Wear., 'Bad Man of Brimstone', *Variety Film Reviews*, 19 January 1938, unpaginated.
37) Anon., 'Frontier Marshal', *Variety Film Reviews*, 27 July 1939, unpaginated.
38) Anon., 'The Return of the Cisco Kid', *Variety Film Reviews*, 26 April 1939, unpaginated.
39) Walt., 'Texas', *Variety Film Reviews*, 8 October 1941, unpaginated.

will provide strong support for the key duals", the best reaction to which would come from "family and small town bookings".[40]

Further down the budget/distribution hierarchy were B Westerns assumed to be designed and destined for the bottom of double-bills and/or relatively unimportant theaters — that is, smaller houses outside the key first-run markets. Unsurprisingly, films that were not released by the Big Five or Little Three were usually relegated to this lower category. Typical in this respect is a *Variety* reviewer's remark that the "brevity" of Monogram's PALS OF THE SILVER SAGE (1940) "will allow it to fill many double bills, especially independent houses".[41] The aforementioned George O'Brien/RKO Westerns represent the best regarded and most promising of this category. *Variety* placed one such film, TRIPLE JUSTICE (1940), in the "A-bracket" of low-budget Westerns, adding that it "ranks among the cream for the action places, just as the star-studded colossals go with deluxers" (that is, TRIPLE JUSTICE was to neighborhood and grindhouse theaters what prestigious A films were to downtown movie palaces).[42] Less charitably, *Variety* described the same studio's VALLEY OF THE SUN (1942) as "an action supporter [...] geared to catch attention of western addicts and kids", predicting that the film would flop if placed on the top of double-bills in key engagements.[43] Similarly, *Variety* characterized Universal's LADY FROM CHEYENNE (1941) as "a minor league programmer destined for the supporting dual grooves".[44] While the "programmer" label implies that a film like LADY FROM CHEYENNE could play in a variety of theaters that offered double-bills, other films were deemed appropriate only for bottom-rung houses. For example, CHEROKEE STRIP (1937), a 55-minute B from Warner Bros., starring singing cowboy Dick Foran (a different film than the one of the same titled mentioned earlier), was labeled "strictly suitable for nabe double-headers".[45] Near the bottom of the Western hierarchy was a film like Columbia's THUNDER OVER THE PRAIRIE (1941), which was associated exclusively with naïve audiences and cheap theaters. For instance, one reviewer called the film "wild hokum [...] strictly a filler for the action houses and juve matinees".[46] A *Variety* report from a trade screening of the film called it "the kind of picture that exhibitors hope will not be made any more after the consent decree goes fully into effect" — that is, once theaters had more access to advance screenings and were not compelled to block-book a year's program of films.[47]

The various distinctions drawn between Westerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s are illustrated neatly by the case of Universal's TRAIL OF THE VIGILANTES (1940). Running at about 75 minutes and directed by Allan Dwan (fresh from helming the A Western FRONTIER MARSHAL for Fox), TRIAL OF THE VIGILANTES was a cut above Universal's

40) Walt., 'The Parson of Panamint', *Variety Film Reviews*, 15 September 1941, unpaginated.
41) Wear., 'Pals of the Silver Sage', *Variety Film Reviews*, 23 May 1940, unpaginated.
42) Art., 'Triple Justice', *Variety Film Reviews*, 9 October 1940, unpaginated.
43) Walt., 'Valley of the Sun', *Variety Film Reviews*, 14 January 1942, unpaginated.
44) Walt., 'Lady from Cheyenne', *Variety Film Reviews* 2 April 1941, unpaginated.
45) Rowl., 'Cherokee Strip', *Variety Film Reviews*, 2 June 1937, unpaginated.
46) Walt., 'Thunder over the Prairie', *Variety Film Reviews*, 30 July 1941, unpaginated.
47) Anon., 'Thunder over the Prairie', *Daily Variety*, 25 July 1941, p. 3. For details on exhibitors' grievances see Huettig, *Economic Control*, pp. 117–142; Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 58–83.

standard Western output, which had in the years immediately prior been dominated by 60-minute B films starring singing cowboy Bob Baker and/or former football player Johnny Mack Brown. TRAIL OF THE VIGILANTES boasted the modest marquee draw of Franchot Tone (then best known for his role in MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY [1935]), with support provided by Broderick Crawford and Andy Devine. *Variety* praised the film, calling it a "strong programmer" and suggesting that it mixed "straight western" elements shrewdly with "sideline satire directed at westerns in general" — with the latter potentially affording the film some appeal to sophisticated audiences. The trade paper noted that TRAIL OF THE VIGILANTES was a:

> [...] neatly concocted feature with a double-edged purpose for bookings. In the secondary spots for the keys, the upper strata audiences will catch the thinly-disguised burlesquing of the story with the numerous interjected cracks aimed in that direction. For the action patrons, there are all the ingredients necessary for lusty entertainment.[48]

The reviewer went on to highlight "two handicaps" which he believed had the capacity to prevent the film from achieving the commercial success it warranted: first, the film's title marked it as a "regulation western", and second, the film's comic undercurrents were not emphasized at an appropriately early stage. As a consequence, the reviewer suggested that "the semi-sophisticates will not catch the satirical intent until along in the third reel".[49] Indeed, TRAIL OF THE VIGILANTES did not receive as prestigious a rollout as comparable intermediate/programmer Westerns. Instead, it made its New York debut at the Rialto, a 750-seat Broadway grind-house known primarily for showing B-grade action and horror fare.[50] In this sense, the release of TRAIL OF THE VIGILANTES was similar to that of standard B Westerns. A number of George O'Brien/RKO B Westerns had, for example, opened at the Rialto (albeit on double-bills).[51] Universal was capable of gaining access to larger and more prestigious New York theaters for some of its Westerns; it had done so for DESTRY RIDES AGAIN (shown at the Rivoli theater), 1940's WHEN THE DALTONS RODE (shown at Loew's State), and LADY FROM CHEYENNE (which unspooled at the Roxy). A film's New York release strategy is usually a good indicator of its "class"; however, its opening tells only part of the story of how a film circulated nationally.

48) Walt., 'Trail of the Vigilantes', *Variety Film Reviews*, 11 December 1940, unpaginated.

49) Ibid.

50) Bosley Crowther, 'The screen: at the Rialto', *New York Times*, 7 December 1940, p. 17. See also Tim Snelson and Mark Jancovich, '"No hits, no runs, just terrors": exhibition, cultural distinctions, and cult audiences at the Rialto in the 1930s and 1940s', in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Phillippe Meers (eds), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 199–211; David Church, 'From exhibition to genre: the case of grind-house films', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 50, no. 4 (Summer 2011), pp. 1–25.

51) Examples of O'Brien Westerns debuting at the Rialto included *Gun Law*, *Painted Desert*, and *Racketeers of the Range*.

The Distribution of Westerns

Whether or not the trade press's recommended release strategies and predictions of box office performance were always correct, the highly differentiated range of distribution options sketched out in the reviews above did hold true.[52] What follows is an attempt to trace out some of these options through the distribution histories of selected Westerns in 1) first-run theaters in key cities and 2) a sample of small towns — the markets with which the genre was associated most closely.[53]

Near the top of the Western budget hierarchy were A Westerns like JESSE JAMES, which cost approximately $1.6m to produce and became one of the top grossing films of 1939.[54] First released in mid-January 1939, JESSE JAMES was backed by an advertising blitz, including a stunt in which a band of masked horsemen rode through Manhattan and stopped traffic to stage a holdup of an armored vehicle.[55] The film performed so well that it was held over in a number of major cities and theaters, playing, for example, at New York's Roxy for four weeks.[56] JESSE JAMES replicated this success in many additional key cities, including Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh. In each location, it enjoyed multiple downtown runs by moving immediately from one downtown theater to another.[57] For its first several weeks in release, the film played mostly solo engagements, and, when it played on a double-bill, it appeared on the top half. Somewhat surprising was the number of smaller locations in which the film played concurrent to its big-city debuts. By late January or early February of 1939, it had reached such towns and cities as: Reno, Nevada; Bakersfield, California; Joplin, Missouri; Miami, Oklahoma; Brownsville, Texas; and all three of the case study towns examined below.

One can compare the muscular rollout of JESSE JAMES to that of TRIPLE JUSTICE, one of the George O'Brien/RKO B Westerns. Released in the fall of 1940, TRIPLE JUSTICE appears only a few times in *Variety*'s Picture Grosses pages, indicating that it played in relatively few important first-run theaters in key cities. The first *Variety* record of its exhibition is a notification of its run at the Memphis Strand, where it played on a single-bill for two days in late September that year and reportedly generated poor grosses.[58] The film was not reviewed in the *New York Times*, although it did receive a downtown New York opening in mid-October at the Central, one of the smaller Broadway houses. TRIPLE

52) Jacobs and Comiskey, 'Hollywood's Conception'.

53) To do so, this section draws on several sources, including: *Variety*'s "Picture Grosses pages, which reveal where, and on what programs, films played in important first-run theaters in a number of key cities; mass circulation newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Los Angeles Times*; and the large collection of small-town newspapers that has been digitized and made accessible through Newspaperarchive.com. For another recent study, also highlighting the degree of differentiation in release patterns across cities and theaters, and based on the *Variety* Picture Grosses pages, see John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, 'Cinemagoing in the United States in the mid-1930s: a study based on the *Variety* dataset', in, *Going to the Movies*, pp. 155–195.

54) The AFI Catalog of Feature Films, <http://afi.chadwyck.com> [accessed 15 March 2012]

55) Anon., '"Jesse James" Broadway holdup best exploitation of week', *Variety*, 18 January 1939, p. 19.

56) Anon., *Variety*, 8 February 1939, p. 9.

57) Anon., *Variety*, 8 February 1939, pp. 9–10; Anon., *Variety*, 22 February 1939, p. 9.

58) Anon., '"Westerner", $7,000, neat in Memphis', *Variety*, 2 October 1940, p. 10.

Justice played as the top half of a double-bill with Gambling Ship (1938), a two-year-old series feature distributed by Universal.[59] Triple Justice appeared sporadically in a few key cities until the end of 1939, usually for split weeks (that is, as part of a theater's twice- or thrice-weekly program changeover) on double- or triple-bills with films from the Little Three or the Poverty Row studios. For example, in late October, it played for half a week in Cincinnati (a city in which the first-run market was dominated by RKO), topping a bill that also included Monogram's Who is Guilty (1939).[60] In mid-November, it played in Omaha on one of the Town theater's three weekly programs, alongside two older British imports: 1936's The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (aka Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street) and 1938's Return of the Frog (aka Nobody's Home).[61] Triple Justice was in mid-December playing on the bottom of a double-bill with Universal's Seven Sinners (1940) in an RKO-owned theater in Boston.[62] Despite playing relatively few engagements in the nation's most important metropolitan markets, Triple Justice — a reasonably well reviewed B Western from one of the Big Five, with a moderately bankable star — was able to maintain some presence there.

Some B Westerns bypassed the major downtown markets almost entirely. One such film was Columbia's Thunder over the Prairie, mentioned above for its reception as "wild hokum" and "strictly a filler for the action houses and juve matinees".[63] The film's New York release was not unlike that of Triple Justice; it was not reviewed in the *New York Times* and opened at one of the lesser Broadway theaters, the New York — a 600-seat house offering a mixture of first-run films and reissues.[64] Whereas Triple Justice played on the top half of a double-bill, Thunder over the Prairie played on the bottom, supporting I'll Sell My Life (1941), a mystery starring Rose Hobart that was produced by Merrick-Alexander Productions and distributed by Select Attractions.[65] Thunder over the Prairie does not appear in the *Variety* "Picture Grosses" pages. When it opened in New York City in early September 1941, the film had already been playing for over a month in smaller cities and towns across the country, mostly on the bottom half of double-bills. For example, during the second week of August, it played in this position during a Thursday-to-Saturday run in Iola, Kansas (population approximately 7,000). On the top half of the bill was Double Cross (1941), produced and distributed by Producers Releasing Corporation.[66] Thunder over the Prairie also played on the top half of double-bills or as a solo presentation, with repeat appearances in many locations. For example, it had at least four bookings in Bakersfield, California between September of 1941 and March of 1942. The film received a top-billed first run, alongside a cowboy singing act, in the much larger location of Salt Lake City only in April of 1942.[67] If Chicago is a reasona-

59) Anon., 'New Films on Broadway', *New York Times*, 13 October 1940, p. 128.
60) Anon., 'Crosby, $11,000, clicks in Cincy', *Variety*, 23 October 1940, p. 10.
61) Anon., '"Mounties" get $14,500, Omaha', *Variety*, 27 November 1940, p. 9.
62) Anon., '"Alley" $17,000 hub fairly steady', *Variety* 18 December 1940, p. 11.
63) Walt., 'Thunder over the Prairie', unpaginated.
64) Cinema Treasures, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/6604> [accessed 15 March 2012]
65) Anon., 'Of local origin', *New York Times*, 9 September 1941, p. 27.
66) Unnumbered Display Ad, *Iola Register*, 7 August 1941, p. 8. *Thunde rover the Prairie* is specifically identified as "second feature" in an advertisement.
67) Unnumbered Display Ad, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 22 April 1942, p. 16. The ad specifies that the film is "First Run".

ble indicator of the presence of THUNDER OVER THE PRAIRIE in the neighborhood markets of major metropolitan areas, this presence seems to have been minimal.[68] The film continued to crop up throughout the summer and fall of 1942 — a year after its first bookings — and resurfaced, sometimes on top of double-bills, periodically for another three years. For instance, in June of 1945, it played as the top half of a double-bill (with the 1943 Republic Western THUNDERING TRAILS) in Middleport, Ohio, a town with 3,000 inhabitants and a single 250-seat movie theater.[69] In sum, its bookings were quite sporadic and unpredictable and were largely limited to small-town theaters and some urban neighborhood houses.

In order to understand better the place of Westerns in the exhibition markets of the small towns with which the genre was associated discursively, I selected three case study sites and catalogued all film programs advertised in local newspapers for alternating months of 1939 (starting with January), recording about 770 programs that comprised about 1,300 feature film bookings. The sites were: Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Billings, Montana; and Yuma, Arizona.[70] Before exploring the exhibition of Westerns in these markets, it is useful to establish the basic parameters of small-town film exhibition. First, in none of the theaters in any of the three locations did films typically play for more than three or four days. Of the eleven theaters in the sample, ten changed programs three times a week and one theater changed its program twice a week. Films did occasionally play for longer stretches of time; however, releases of this sort were the exception and not the rule. While only one theater screened exclusively single-bills, seven theaters consistently screened double-bills (along with the occasional solo program for special films). Three houses, all located in Billings, utilized a mixed programming policy, offering both solo and double-bills. In terms of ownership, these theaters included ones owned by, or affiliated to, the major studios, ones belonging to small chains, and ones owned independently. Table 1 shows Western programming data arranged by city and theater. For each city, the first theater listed is that market's main first-run theater (i.e. the theater in which the major studios' A films debuted). Beyond that, classifying these theaters by run in the same way one could a group of urban houses is not a straightforward process. While some A films went through a relatively clear series of runs in these markets, the exhibition of B films was significantly less hierarchical. Some B films were slotted into supporting positions in first-run theaters and appeared later at secondary houses (either on the top or on

68) The film makes only a handful of appearances in listings for Chicago theaters. See Unnumbered Display Ad, *Chicago Tribune*, 9 January 1942, p. 17; Unnumbered Display Ad, *Chicago Tribune*, 22 January 1943, p. 17.

69) Unnumbered Display Ad, *Athens Messenger*, 8 June 1945, p. 8.

70) Portsmouth, with three movie theaters totaling about 2,100 seats, had a population of approximately 15,000; Billings, with five movie theaters totaling about 3,500 seats, had a population of approximately 16,000; and Yuma, with three theaters totaling an unknown number of seats (possibly 900 to 1,700), had a population of approximately 5,000. Portsmouth data were drawn from the *Portsmouth, N.H., Herald;* Billings data from the *Billings Gazette*; and Yuma data from the *Yuma Daily Sun and Arizona Sentinel.* All newspapers were accessed through newspaperarchive.com. My study shares something with that conducted recently on the Chief Theater in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in which Mike Chopra-Grant reminds us that film scholars' tendencies to privilege A productions obscure the range of films encountered by everyday audiences in their local theaters. Mike Chopra-Grant, 'Dirty movies or: why film scholars should stop worrying about CITIZEN KANE and learn to love bad films', *Participations*, vol. 7, no. 2 (November 2010), pp. 292–315.

Table 1. Westerns in advertised programs of three towns, 1939 (Jan and alternating months)

		Single bills w/westerns	Double bills w/ westerns	% single bills w/ westerns	% double bills w/ westerns	% all bills featuring westerns	Westerns as % of all films
Yuma	Yuma	2/6	13/77	33 %	17 %	18 %	9 %
	Lyric	n/a	30/56	n/a	54 %	54 %	28 %
	Orpheum	n/a	11/13	n/a	85 %	85 %	46 %
	Total	**2/6**	**54/146**	**33 %**	**36 %**	**36 %**	**19 %**
Portsmouth	Colonial	8/82	n/a	10 %	n/a	10 %	10 %
	Olympia	n/a	14/83	n/a	17 %	17 %	8 %
	Arcadia	n/a	39/82	n/a	48 %	48 %	24 %
	Total	**8/82**	**53/165**	**10 %**	**32 %**	**25 %**	**15 %**
Billings	Fox	2/2	6/60	100 %	10 %	13 %	7 %
	Babcock	n/a	27/78	n/a	35 %	35 %	17 %
	Lyric	8/57	10/17	14 %	59 %	24 %	20 %
	Empire	5/44	8/33	11 %	24 %	17 %	12 %
	Rio	22/50	8/30	44 %	27 %	38 %	27 %
	Total	**37/153**	**59/218**	**24 %**	**27 %**	**26 %**	**17 %**

the bottom halves of double-bills). More often than not; however, B films went straight to secondary houses, where they were touted as "first-run" attractions by virtue of their being the first local showings of the film.[71]

In some cases, the sample is too small, or the data not sufficiently comparable, to draw meaningful conclusions.[72] Also, it was not possible to analyze patterns in billing order because of the difficulty of determining from a newspaper advertisement which of the two films advertized featured on the top half of a double-bill and which featured on the bottom. Indeed, the status sometimes appears quite clear only for the billing order to be reversed in subsequent advertisements.[73] This research, and these numbers, should therefore be taken as a "first stab" at a comparative study of local film distribution, useful in part because it points toward potential strategies and questions that may shape subsequent research. The data nonetheless suggest striking similarities as well as differences across case

71) For example, the Lyric theater in Billings specified that its screenings of Monogram's *The Man from Texas* (1939), a Tex Ritter Western starring a "Billings girl", were the first local showings of the film. This practice was by no means limited to films of special interest. In Portsmouth, the Arcadia billed its double features regularly as "all first-run programs". For example, — a program of Republic's ORPHANS OF THE STREETS (1938) and Bennett/DuWorld Pictures' KLIOU, THE KILLER (1936) See Unnumbered Display Ad, *Portsmouth, N.H., Herald,* 21 September 1939, p. 11; Unnumbered Display Ad, *Portsmouth, N.H., Herald,* 3 January 1939, p. 6.

72) See, for instance, the very small sample size of the number of single-billed Westerns in the main first-run theaters.

73) For example, see two listings for the Fox theater in Billings, in which the billing order of Fox's THE ARIZONA WILDCAT (1939) and Paramount's ZAZA (1938) is reversed. See Unnumbered Display Ad, *Billings Gazette,* 10 January 1939, p. 7; Unnumbered Display Ad, *Billings Gazette,* 12 January 1939, p. 6.

study sites. First, it appears that at the smallest site, the town of Yuma, Westerns featured on a relatively larger portion of local film programs, with about thirty six percent of advertised programs featuring a Western. The actual percentage of Yuma programs with Westerns was likely even higher. This is because listings for the Orpheum theater (where bills were, more than any other theater in the study, dominated by Westerns) only started appearing in the local newspaper in November even though the theater had been operating continuously for some time.[74]

Perhaps the most striking finding of this research is how heavily certain secondary theaters in each market relied on Westerns. For instance, Westerns played on more than half of the bills at two theaters in Yuma: the Lyric and the Orpheum. In Portsmouth, one house, the Arcadia, played Westerns on about half of its bills. One Billings theater, the Lyric, programmed a combination of single and double-bills and seems to have had reliable access to major studio releases (of all of the theaters in Billings, it functioned most like a second-run house). The Lyric played Westerns on only about fourteen percent of its single bills but on nearly sixty percent of its double-bills. The Rio, the Billings theater that relied most heavily on product not from the major studios, often let Westerns carry single bills (it did so forty-four percent of the time, compared to twenty-five percent of double-bills). This pattern is not too surprising: Western productions were predominantly low-budget films, and these low-budget Westerns came disproportionately from independent/Poverty Row companies. (Indeed, Westerns constituted more than half of these companies' total production rosters during the period under discussion).[75] It stands to reason that the houses that relied most heavily on such low-budget fare would show a proportionally larger number of Westerns than first-run theaters. But the release strategies for Westerns in first-run and secondary theaters do not simply reflect the general proportions of high- and low-budget Westerns; they are more tightly patterned and calculated because, in certain types of theaters, these films played overwhelmingly on certain days of the week — and particularly on the split-week runs that included Saturdays (most often Thursday/Friday/Saturday runs).

Steve Broidy, longtime head of Monogram, once suggested that, because B films were typically rented for flat booking fees rather than a percentage of the films' gross, small-town exhibitors screened them on Saturdays. This practice allowed them to keep the busiest days' profits to themselves rather than having to share them with distributors. Broidy suggested that films themselves were not particularly important in drawing audiences, because many people (among them, those who traveled from more remote areas) converged upon theaters on Saturdays regardless of the film being shown.[76] In the sites examined in this study, however, Westerns appeared disproportionately among films screened on weekends. Relevant data on playdates are presented in Table 2. In Yuma, for example, about seventy-four percent of the Lyric theater's Saturday programs boasted a Western

74) Unnumbered Display Ad, *Yuma Daily Sun and Arizona Sentinel*, 4 October 1939, p. 5.

75) For data for 1941 see Buscombe, *The BFI Companion*, p. 421.

76) Linda May Strawn, 'Steve Broidy', in Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn (eds), *Kings of the Bs: working within the Hollywood system* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), pp. 270–271. Broidy refers to theaters that offer two programs between Sundays and Fridays and "keep Saturdays for themselves", a practice that does not seem to have obtained in any of the sites I examined.

feature film. At Portsmouth's Arcadia, every Saturday program included a Western feature film. Advertisements for these screenings were often targeted at children, promising perks like free toys or ice cream at matinees (on most other days the theater gave away plates to female patrons).[77] The Rio in Billings also played Westerns on all of its Saturday programs. The Babcock, also in Billings, did so ninety-three percent of the time. The Lyric — a second-run Billings house offering a significant number of the majors' pictures on single-bills — did not show the same pattern. Although Westerns sometimes played on Saturdays, they did not make up a majority of these programs, nor were they significantly less likely to appear on other days of the week.[78] In general, the more often a theater booked Westerns, the more likely were two related phenomena: 1) Westerns would be present on all or almost all of its Saturday programs; 2) the theater would place a large majority of its Westerns on its split-week run that included Saturday rather than booking them on other split-week runs (e.g. a Sunday/Monday/Tuesday run).

Table 2. Western playdates in advertised programs of three towns, 1939 (Jan and alternating months)

		% total Western bills on Saturdays	Saturday Western bills as % of total Saturday bills
Yuma	Yuma	(5/15) 33 %	(5/25) 20 %
	Lyric	(20/30) 66 %	(20/27) 74 %
	Orpheum	(4/13) 31 %	(4/4) 100 %
	Total	**(29/58) 50 %**	**(29/56) 52 %**
Portsmouth	Colonial	(3/8) 38 %	(3/26) 12 %
	Olympia	(11/14) 79 %	(11/26) 42 %
	Arcadia	(27/39) 69 %	(27/27) 100 %
	Total	**(41/61) 67 %**	**(41/79) 52 %**
Billings	Fox	(5/8) 63 %	(5/26) 19 %
	Babcock	(26/28) 93 %	(26/28) 93 %
	Lyric	(7/18) 39 %	(7/28) 25 %
	Empire	(9/12) 75 %	(9/27) 33 %
	Rio	(28/31) 90 %	(28/28) 100 %
	Total	**(75/97) 77 %**	**(75/137) 55 %**

77) See for example Unnumbered Display Ad, *Portsmouth, N.H. Herald*, 25 May 1939, p. 6; Unnumbered Display Ad, *Portsmouth, N.H., Herald* , 23 May 1939, p. 6.

78) It is possible that theaters like the Lyric did not get to select their playdates; according to Huettig the issue of assigned playdates as part of block-booking agreements was one of independent exhibitors' main grievances. See Huettig, *Economic Control*, pp. 124–125.

Conclusions

This study has examined genre as a structuring factor in the American film industry's conception of its audiences and the closely related histories of film distribution and exhibition during its classical studio era. In doing so, it has clarified some of the connections between genre and a highly differentiated set of theatrical release strategies that are no longer used. Westerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s offer a particularly useful test case not just because of their central (and changing) position within the film industry at this time, but because they are so clearly tied to perceived or actual hierarchies of films, audiences, localities, and theaters that shaped industry production strategies as well as the movie-going experiences of US audiences. More complex than an A picture/B picture binary, these hierarchies reflect films' imagined audiences as well as their imagined places within different movie-going experiences.

Looking beyond the ways films were released in major first-run theaters in key cities, this study has sought to establish key parameters for understanding and evaluating the system of film distribution in small markets, including how oftentimes different types of film surfaced, the day(s) on which they played, their placement on various programs, and how local theaters differentiated themselves from one another through such variables. It is through these forms of distinction, that we can recreate the "ecosystems" of local exhibition markets and identify the different kinds of theater to which critics and industry-insiders refer when they associate films with concepts like "family bookings" or "action houses". The fact that Westerns appear to have figured so centrally in this system — at least in small-town America — further confirms their crucial, albeit oft-neglected, position in US film culture of the 1930s.

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Films Cited:

The Arizona Wildcat (Herbert I. Leeds, 1939); *The Bad Man of Brimstone* (J. Walter Ruben, 1938); *The Big Trail* (Rauol Walsh, 1930); *Billy the Kid* (King Vidor, 1930); *Billy the Kid* (David Miller, 1941); *Cherokee Strip* (Lesley Selander, 1940); *The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (George King, 1936); *Destry Rides Again* (George Marchall, 1939); *Dodge City* (Michael Critz, 1939); *Double Cross* (Albert H. Kelley, 1941); *Frontier Marshal* (Allan Dwan, 1939); *Gambling Ship* (Aubrey Scotto, 1938); *Gun Law* (David Howard, 1938); *Honky Tonk* (Jack Conway, 1941); *I'll Sell My Life* (Elmer Clifton, 1941); *Jesse James* (Henry King, 1939); *Kliou, the Killer* (Henri de la Falaise, 1936); *Lady from Cheyenne* (Frank Lloyd, 1941); *The Man from Texas* (Albert Herman, 1939); *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Frank Lloyd, 1935); *Northwest Passage* (King Vidor, 1940); *Orphans of the Streets* (John H. Auer, 1938); *Pals*

of the Silver Sage (Albert Herman, 1940); *The Parson of Panamint* (William C. McGann, 1941); *The Plainsman* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1936); *The Renegade Ranger* (David Howard, 1938); *The Return of the Cisco Kid* (Herbert I. Leeds, 1939); *Return of the Frog* (Maurice Elvey, 1938); *The Roundup* (Lesley Selander, 1941); *Seven Sinners* (Tay Garnett, 1940); *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939); *The Texans* (James P. Hogan, 1938); *Texas* (George Marshall, 1941); *Thundering Trails* (John English, 1943); *Thunder over the Prairie* (Lambert Hillyer, 1941); *Trail of the Vigilantes* (Allan Dwan, 1940); *Triple Justice* (David Howard, 1940); *Union Pacific* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1939); *Valley of the Sun* (George Marshall, 1942); *Wells Fargo* (Frank Lloyd, 1937); *The Westerner* (William Wyler, 1940); *Western Union* (Fritz Lang, 1941); *When the Daltons Rode* (George Marshall, 1940); *Who Is Guilty* (Frederic Zelnik, 1939); *Zaza* (George Cukor, 1938).

SUMMARY

Genre, Domestic Distribution, and Audiences (1935–1945).
The Case of the Western

Andrea Comiskey

This article examines the domestic circulation of Hollywood westerns from the late 1930s through the early 1940s — a period in which the genre's status within the U.S. film industry shifted due to studios' investment in big-budget, or "A," westerns, which had for years been rare. This shift affected not just the production of westerns, but their distribution and exhibition as well. Films of the classical era received highly differentiated releases that aimed to deploy them most effectively across the nation's hierarchy of movie theaters. These varied release strategies were closely connected to films' imagined audiences as well as distinguishing factors like budgets, genres, and stars. The shifting status of the western makes it a valuable case study for understanding different strategies of distribution in the studio era.

This study draws primarily on two datasets: press coverage of Westerns, including reviews of individual films as well as commentary about genre more broadly, and distribution information drawn from the US trade and popular press. It first establishes the manner in which different kinds of Western were associated with different target audiences and distribution strategies. A key issue in this respect is the intricate range of options delineated in the press — a range of options that far surpasses a simple A picture/ B picture binary. The paper then complements this discourse analysis with an examination of distribution histories, approaching the question of Western distribution from two angles. First, it contrasts the release patterns of a range of Westerns, from top-budgeted As to the lowest-budgeted Bs, highlighting not just the ways in which a particular film's status (as determined by criteria including production budget and presence of stars) underwrote the form of distribution it received, but how that status could be renegotiated or complicated over the course of its release. Second, it offers a snapshot of the distribution of Westerns in three small markets (Billings, Montana; Yuma, Arizona; and Portsmouth, New Hampshire) in the watershed year of 1939. Together these findings illustrate how Westerns functioned within local film ecosystems and the connections between Westerns and certain classes of theaters and types of programming practice.