

Brian Hannan: The Gunslingers of '69: Western Movies' Greatest Year

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Brian Hannan's book *The Gunslingers of '69: Western Movies Greatest Year* has a seemingly straightforward mission: to outline 1969 as the single best year of the Western genre. Without question, considering such acclaimed contributions to the genre as *The Wild Bunch*, *True Grit*, *Once Upon A Time In The West* or *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*, there is a good case to be made to support such an argument. Indeed, as these films either profoundly destabilized generic conventions or nostalgically reiterated the Western's mythic premise, 1969 Westerns managed to suitably reflect the schism that seemed to sunder the nation. As the United States had arguably undergone one of the most turbulent decades in the history of the nation the Western genre presented a hugely contested and therefore tremendously attractive (and potentially lucrative) arena for artists to issue a commentary on the country's as well as the genre's history.

Hannan has decided to approach the Westerns released at that pivotal moment in history from a different angle, neglecting for the bulk of his discussions the allegorical scope of many of these films, focusing instead on the cast-iron figures of box office revenue, contemporaneous press reviews, and background information about cast and crew, as well as production circumstances. Details and trivia abound as

Hannan re-narrates film plots, recapitulates film stars' earlier assignments, recounts the accolades previously earned by film directors, and reminds readers of the often carefully premeditated studio decisions that not rarely determined a film's success or failure.

Yet for all these names and numbers Hannan's analyses remain predominantly descriptive. Repeatedly, Hannan's assessments manage to only scratch the surface of his subject matter, resulting in such oversimplifications as to attest Bruce Dern's character in *Support Your Local Sheriff* with recurrent "stupidity" (p.55), failing to contextualize this as an example of the genre-debunking comic hyperbole that permeates the entire film. Elsewhere, Hannan suggests that Sergio Leone's treatment of the railroad in *Once Upon A Time In The West* was evidence of – ironically – "oversimplification" (p.90), which results from his reading the film as an engagement with the West-as-history, even though Leone, as Christopher Frayling has convincingly demonstrated, confronts the West-as-myth (Spaghetti Westerns, p.192-216).

Moreover, many of Hannan's descriptions do not exactly substantiate his argument. He is full of praise for such acclaimed masterpieces like *Once Upon A Time In The West*, *True Grit*, or *The Wild Bunch* and he proposes to reevaluate forgotten gems like *Support*

Your Local Sheriff or *100 Rifles*. Crucially however, as Hannan fails to develop an argument on the extraordinariness of 1969 Western films beyond the ubiquity of what he considers exceptional Westerns and references to shifting production and distribution conditions in Hollywood, the author cannot fully eschew the predicament of essentialism.

Though one is inclined to agree with the author's verdict, the observation that 1969 provided a wealth of outstanding material can hardly qualify as a coherent methodology. Why 1969 and not, say, 1939, which featured equally outstanding Westerns like *Jesse James*, *Dodge City*, *Union Pacific*, *Drums Along The Mohawk*, *Destry Rides Again*, and perhaps most importantly, *Stagecoach*? Hannan seems to be aware of the quandary, and thus initially tries to dismiss claims that suggest other years as "Western Movies' Greatest Year," like 1939. His reasoning however, that "earlier pictures were not contending with genre history, or having to find twists on traditional tales, nor being asked to tackle contemporary issues" (p.4), does not stand the test of established, canonic scholarship on the genre that does, as it were, consider a relationship between the genre and socio-cultural and

politico-historical discourse (cf. Harry M. Benshoff, Sean Griffin: *America on Film* [Southern Gate: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009]; cf. Richard Slotkin: *Gunfighter Nation* [Norman: Oklahoma UP, 1998]; cf. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* [London: BFI, 2004] to name but a few). And so, Hannan's answer to the question "Why 1969?" boils down to the ultimately arbitrary, rather sentimental phrase he invokes in his preface: "I selected 1969 because it was the year of some of my favorite westerns" (p.1).

To summarize, I struggle to find merit in Hannan's book that furthers academic assessment of the genre. That said, I do wish to highlight the appeal that his scrupulous listing of names and numbers might have to a different readership. Hannan unquestionably knows his movies. The amount of preparation that has obviously went into compiling box office data, let alone watching the myriad of films he effortlessly recounts is as impressive as it is informative. If you are looking for detailed, annotated synopses of a more than representative selection of Westerns from 1969, this might be an interesting read.

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