

THE MANDALORIAN: Episode 4 - THE GUNSLINGER

(Disney) has created a self-contained universe which presents consistently recognizable values through recurring characters and familiar, repetitive themes...escape and fantasy; innocence; romance and happiness; sexual stereotype; individualism; the reinvention of folk tales.¹

Here is one of many possible examples of how you could deconstruct and interpret a Disney product and the messages and signs it communicates.

If we look at The Mandalorian (for this example Episode 4: The Gunslinger specifically) we can detect some familiar motifs and structures embedded within it, specifically those we'll refer to here as Arthurian/Chivalric and those inherited from the Western genre.

Andre Bazin² discusses the Western and how it has survived successfully as a distinct genre that, despite containing many overlapping themes and narrative tropes from other genres is easily recognisable as a significant and individual genre in its own right. One of the distinct qualities of the Western that elevates it above its contemporary genres is the way its generic characterisations, narratives and mis en scene are tied into a particular point in American history and culture. The Western both borrows from more classical mythologies (such as Arthurian legend) but also creates and propagates a mythology all of its' own, a mythology that ties into the ideology of Disney that Bryman mentions above. So, what can we learn from this episode of the Mandalorian?

*"The Western is in the epic category because of the superhuman level of its heroes and the legendary magnitude of their feats of valour...it is evident in the set-up of the shots, with their predilection for vast horizons, all-encompassing shots that constantly bring to mind the conflict between man and nature."*³

Firstly lets look at the Mandalorian as a heroic character. As Bazin argues the Western constructs a very specific mythological figure of a Western hero. "The good cowboy is more or less a reformed offender"⁴, if we think of the Mandalorian he is a bounty hunter, a morally ambiguous profession but one that can be redeemed in the specific social context, as vigilantism is a common and acceptable recurrence in both westerns and wider Hollywood narratives (the Avengers for example?). The important thing in the Western is that "if it is to be effective, this justice must be dispensed by men just as strong and just as daring as the criminals". The Western hero inhabits a world where "the morality of a world in which social good and evil, in their simplicity and necessity, exist like two primary and basic elements."⁵This is clear if we look at the binary nature of the wider Star Wars universe (which the Mandalorian and Rogue One may be a new, more nuanced progression from) in which good and evil are two distinct forces and in which you belong to either one or the other.

The Mandalorian is positioned in a slightly more ambiguous role, just like his Western forefathers who also are literally men with no name (Dollars trilogy), however his quest to save The Child and

¹ BAZIN, ANDRÉ, et al. What Is Cinema?: Volume II. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2005. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt5hjhjd. Accessed 16 Apr. 2020

² ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

other feats of valour indicate that he is a “good” bounty hunter whose ends justify the means no matter how brutal they may be. The Western mythology promotes this individualistic quest, the portrayal of the exceptionalism of the American character pitted against the savagery of the frontier and the inherent sense of right and wrong these blood soaked but “honourable” men justify their actions with.

If we look at the Gunslinger episode (subtle) it is basically The Magnificent Seven. Our hero allies himself with another gun for hire to protect the classic innocent and romantically realised village against the dehumanised and marauding savages. The productive farmers threatened by the unproductive brigands (see first nation representations). Our heroes are vastly outnumbered but display superhuman abilities and perform feats of valour to successfully defend the village and defeat the savages. There is even the unrequited romantic subplot so familiar from other western films.

We can extend this analysis a little further by looking back to what influences George Lucas cited as inspirational for the wider Star Wars universe. He acknowledged that a major influence on the saga was the old Arthurian tales and others such as the Paladins and the Knights Templar. These heroic tales of quests and legendary battles between binary good and evil can be seen in the very DNA of the Mandalorian. He is literally a knight in shining armour, a member of an ancient, persecuted order of warriors who conform to a rigid code of honour and behaviour (such as never removing the helmet). He also separates himself as a noble bounty hunter, a “knight of the true cause”⁶ dispensing justice in his protection of The Child rather than collecting the bounty on him. He is a hero because he is a protector of the innocent (profound innocence is also a recurring motif of legend) and motivated by a higher, more noble purpose than money or fame. There is even a duel with a SCI-FI red eyed dragon in the figure of the AT-ST.

A plot device inherited by the Western from the Arthurian quest is the perpetual motion of the hero, constantly travelling across dangerous lands to confront the next challenge in which he must prove his worth. The western genre thus contains many expansive shots of the American west, the horizon a constant reminder of the vastness of nature and the severity and multitude of the dangers faced by our hero as he traverses it. This is continued in the Mandalorian with the constant travelling between remote planets and facing the dangers of wastelands from desert to ice, and also that ultimate endless horizon of deep space.

In conclusion, the Mandalorian presents itself as a space western, a science fiction reworking of both American and more ancient mythologies. It could also be argued that the Mandalorian itself is attempting to perpetuate its own mythology, like the western before it, as part of the wider modern mythic cycle that is Star Wars by transfusing his character with recognisable heroic traits and embedding him in a formulaic questing narrative. This strong adherence to classical narratives and characterisation repeats the recycling of folk tales as seen in the wider Disney universe and presents us with the consistently recognizable values, such as individualism, the importance of a moral code and a rigid social structure and binary conflict of good vs evil that they contain.

⁶ ibid