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New-Age Western Film Techniques (Charles Brooks)

Background

For almost forty years, I have been a passionate fan of the Spaghetti Westerns which began in 1967 with Clint Eastwood's "Fistful of Dollars" film. I wasn't an immediate fan because I didn't see this film when it was first released. It was not until around 1969 that I was introduced to this film along with two others, "A Few Dollars More" (1967) and "The Good the Bad and the Ugly" (1967) when I attended one of a long-running series of movie marathon screenings of these films. The screenings continued for years afterward, as fans were compelled to re-experience the power of these films over and over. The fact that these marathons occurred proved the power that these Westerns had on moviegoers, many of whom to this day fondly reflect on these films and would jump at the chance to see more. Scenes from these movies were implanted in our minds then and remain solid today. Still today, when I see one of these films playing as I switch through the channels, I sit back and watch it again. Despite having seen it maybe 50 times before, still I find myself intrigued by the power of the film and its many wonderful facets.

A few films of this type followed with intriguing actors, such as, Henry Fonda, Charles Bronson, and Alex Cord. Of course, Clint Eastwood continued to star in similar types of Westerns like "Hang 'em High" (1968), and "High Plains Drifter" (1972). These pictures provided an escape that was not attainable through any other medium available at the time, and produced an entertainment medium that was ageless and still captivating, after dozens of viewings — twenty, thirty, or forty years after their initial release. These films spawned cult followings and repeated marathon film festivals with back-to-back screenings of the old screen classics.

The less-than-enthusiastic response to some of the films that followed the first three was not caused by being lulled into boredom by repetition and over-exposure to these types of films. It was caused by many other factors. As I repeatedly analyzed the power that the first three films had on me in comparison to the later films, I think I was able to put my finger on some of the problems. I began to develop some ideas for what I call a "New-Age Western" that will once again bring to the screen the enormous power of the original films and more. I tried to incorporate some of those techniques when creating my recent Western screenplay, "The Last Gunfight."

New-Age Western

I have analyzed the Spaghetti Western films over and over again, and have given considerable thought to how some of the powerful techniques used in these films could be combined with new techniques and technologies to produce films with unparalleled realism and highly addictive followings.

The New-Age Western that I propose will provide the awe-inspiring appeal of the original classic Spaghetti Westerns with new innovations designed to create a whole new cult following. Skilled cinematography was the key ingredient that led to the popularity and success of the original Spaghetti Westerns. The scenic, rugged panoramic views, powerful music scores, unique camera angles, camera techniques, and stark realism of the characters and storylines allowed audiences to mentally place themselves within the story and view the surroundings as if they were actually there.

The New-Age Western will incorporate new and innovative techniques and technologies of the present with the highly powerful cinematographic techniques of the past to produce an awe-inspiring and addictive medium for moviegoers of the 21st century.

Analysis

As a student of training development and delivery and as a professional providing these services, I have read numerous books and articles on knowledge transfer and the powerful effects that combined stimuli have on learning process and on the establishment of knowledge retention. Conclusively, a combination of **multiple stimuli** enforces learning and memory retention. For example, ideas presented in the form of text, bullet lists, etc. do not have as much effect on knowledge transfer and retention as text accompanied by illustrations and diagrams. Adding animation, sound, and interaction further amplifies the effects at least ten-fold.

In filmmaking, we are not so much concerned with knowledge transfer unless we are producing an educational film. We are concerned, however, with memory retention because this is the key (in my opinion) to producing the cult-classic movie. Forty years later, the Spaghetti Westerns are still stuck in my mind and in the minds of thousands of other fans because when we viewed these films, we were subjected to **multiple stimuli** (e.g., awe-inspiring panoramic views, powerful music scores, clever and unique camera angles and techniques, intriguing characters and storylines, stark realism of characters and settings, the harsh reality of life and death, powerful action scenes and sounds, etc.)

Theory

The New-Age Western could ensure guaranteed success by combining the following:

- Memory Fixing Techniques for Memory Retention — Powerful, memory-fixing techniques used in the past can be combined with memory-fixing techniques of the present, with **multiple stimuli**, to firmly fix the movie's scenes and storyline in the minds of moviegoers for decades afterward.
- Technologies currently available and being used.
- Cinematography techniques currently being used.
- Combinations of the “new-Age” techniques and technologies described in the following section.
- A powerful, unpredictable, well-written, unique and different Western storyline, custom-tailored for all of these technologies and techniques.

By combining all of the above, a film can virtually place the audience within the story as if they were there. I believe this is the key to fixing the film in their minds for decades to come. If the Spaghetti Westerns accomplished this with the limited technology available forty years ago, how could adding more stimuli with today's technology and techniques fail? It has been proven that adding more stimuli improves memory retention. This could be the key to creating a cult-classic film.

New-Age Western Film Techniques

Note: The Last Gunfight screenplay can stand on its own, meeting the last requirement above (A powerful, unpredictable, well-written, unique and different Western storyline) with or without any of the techniques described below, and using standard, current-day filming methods. I have tried to incorporate a few of the techniques, or at least lay the groundwork for adding them or for the director to improvise in the shooting of the movie.

For a full or partial implementation of these techniques, scenes will require non-standard storyboarding and choreography and special equipment to accommodate the "new-Age" sound and film techniques, which will include surround-sound, special sound and light amplification.

Technique-1: 3-D Surround-Sound and/or 3-D Video

Surround-Sound and 3-D are not new technologies. They have been used effectively in the past, but have not been maximized with the intent of magnifying memory retention through increased realism. They can be used separately or together for this purpose but they will require special attention to detail, which could be written into a screenplay or improvised by the director during filming. In the past, these technologies have been used simply to entertain the audience and to enhance their total experience as moviegoers.

My theory is that screenplays and filmmaking can be planned, designed, and carried out with the primary intention of creating a finished product that will absolutely place the audience within a virtual "Western world" for two hours. Unless someone just plain does not like Westerns and is forced into seeing the film, they can't possibly leave the theater without having many of the sights, sounds, and experiences of the film firmly (and entertainingly) fixed and implanted in their minds. They possibly may not realize the effects the film had on them at the time, but they will be powerfully affected by it for years to come.

Just as 3-D pictures brought realism to the movie screen, 3-D surround-sound, when properly used, will place the viewers into the middle of the action. This allows them to immerse themselves in the story, experiencing the realism as if it were actually happening to them.

This will not be just the loud, thundering sounds such as those produced by the Sensurround technology in the movies Earthquake (1974) and Rollercoaster (1977). Instead, the viewers will hear a sampling of ever-so-slight but distinct sounds such as: whiskey being poured in a glass across the room; the sounds of cards being shuffled and dealt; a coin rolling across the table, spinning to a stop, and toppling over; the sound of a gun being cocked and pulled from its holster behind you; the sound of a squeaky saloon door being slowly opened; or a match being struck to light a cigar. These are real sounds, in real time, and in real, multi-directional locations, combined with close-ups, good camera angles and techniques, and unpredictable surprise.

Note: I have tried to incorporate some of the depth and realism that sound can add in the second scene in the "Last Gunfight" screenplay when the rider is entering the town and the sounds from both sides of the street can be heard faintly at first in the distance (front speakers), then gradually getting louder (side speakers), and then fading (back speakers) to simulate depth and movement.

Technique-2: Innovative Camera and Sound Manipulation

Note: Current day filmmaking already incorporates surround-sound and includes low-volume sounds such as foot steps, spurs, murmuring in a crowd, etc., but the techniques I propose include properly scripting and positioning the ever-so-slight sounds and mixing and amplifying them to realistic levels and beyond. Some sounds may be amplified to even slightly higher volumes and occasionally to extra-loud levels to shock or wake up the audience and to remind them that this is no ordinary movie they are watching. The random, unpredictable spontaneity of the New-Age Western won't allow them to settle back and dose off. Some examples of these techniques will follow.

Special camera and sound techniques make the screen explode with realism, placing the audience within the action — instead of just viewing it. In addition to adding realism, the audience is treated to a smorgasbord of rich orchestrated music scores, popular current-day Grammy Award-winning music tracks and classic music tracks, panoramic views, intriguing settings, and mixtures of sights and sounds. Using the “Last Gunfighter” screenplay as an example, as the film begins we see an aerial, arc shot from a helicopter zooming in behind a lone rider riding toward the top of a ridge overlooking a town nestled in a valley below.

Note: Of course, this panoramic view is accompanied by a rich, powerful music score, reminiscent of “Ennio Morricone,” during the rider's trek to the top of the ridge. The arc shot is timed so the camera angle is behind the rider as he tops the ridge.

The lone rider is the first of a series of challengers looking to make a name for themselves by finding and outgunning the notorious, aging gunfighter. In the distant horizon the crimson dusk sky erupts with a lightning display and the low rumble of distant thunder can be heard.

As the camera zooms closer, it takes on a subjective view through the rider's own eyes as he strikes a match to light a cigar. The screen erupts with a brilliant light and accompanying, amplified noise of the flashing match.

Note: This is an example of an ever-so-slight sound being amplified to a higher-than-normal level for effect. The light from the match is amplified as well. (For a close simulation of this effect, see the scene in the opening credits of the 1983 movie, “The Keep,” where Jurgen Prochnow's character strikes a match to light a cigar and the screen and theater is filled with amplified light and sound.) The opening scenes in “The Keep” also provide a good example of the power of the subjective camera view through the German officer's eyes as the German division moves into the village, and the villagers look on from both sides of the street.

In the second scene (maintaining the subjective camera view) the rider is entering the main street of the town. The audience views the rider's hands holding the reins, horse's head, and the buildings and townspeople as the rider slowly moves down the street. The audience hears a multitude of sounds emanating from both sides of the street and the exhausted horse's hoof steps and labored breathing (See examples of the subjective view and sounds in the opening scene in the 1972 movie, “High Plains Drifter.”). The rider dismounts, sloshes through mud, scrapes his boots, walks up some wooden steps then down a wooden sidewalk, bumps into a saloon girl being chased by a drunken saloon patron, slowly opens one side of the swinging saloon doors, walks into the saloon. All of these sounds are amplified much louder than normal, especially sounds of the footsteps on the wooden sidewalk.

Note: Beginning with the rider's entrance into the town's main street, all of the sounds and sights are scripted and positioned properly and amplified slightly higher than normal. As the rider moves down the street, the levels of the various sounds are diminished or amplified appropriately as their source is approached, passed by, and then left behind. This is the attention to detail that I mentioned before. For even more attention to detail, the sights and sounds could be story-boarded, choreographed, and arranged so that the audience could easily differentiate between them and become more aware of the virtual sense of movement. The theater audience will hear these sounds approach and move by them to side and then rear speakers as if they were riding into town themselves. The mixture of sights and sounds (e.g., music from multiple saloons, street traffic, voices, laughter, fighting, shooting, etc.) creates a true-to-life, hodgepodge of stimuli to fix memories in the minds of the audience and place viewers into the virtual world of this story.

Technique-3: Random Unpredictability

Just as real life is unpredictable, to provide true realism, unpredictability is the key. Unpredictability also means that the viewer cannot predict by deciding what the normal event would be, and then predicting the opposite. Audiences have gotten smart after years of viewing films, and can often guess which way the story is going. Random unpredictability provides the audience with the thrill and excitement that will have them begging for more and have them telling others of the unique style of the film, days later. To maintain unpredictability, the storyline sometimes must make bizarre twists and turns, but an unusual, out-of-the-ordinary turn-of-events magnifies the memory of a film in the minds of the audience. Unpredictability must also be random. We must insert some predictability along the way to lull the audience back into a sense of being in control so we can set them up for the next big shock.

Technique-4: Random Back-to-Back Action

A problem with the Spaghetti Westerns was that although exciting, the gunfights — which were over in a flash — were separated by long periods of non-action. This led to periods of boredom because the audience could sit back with confidence in knowing they could tell when the next action scene was about to begin. They became so adept at this, that they could easily determine a good time to make another trip to the snack bar for popcorn or drinks.

By combining the unpredictability factor discussed in Technique # 3 with random, back-to-back extended time gunfights which may be separated by 5 minutes or sometimes 15 minutes, the audience is unaware of when the next flurry of bullets occurs, keeping them on the edge of their seats with anticipation and surprise.

Note: This brings up opportunities for new and different plot and camera/sound techniques: the absence of plot, setting, or background sound that warns the audience of upcoming events. Instead, we insert a combination of storyline, sights, and sounds that leads the audience to believe we are entering a period of calm, safety, and security, just before we deliver another shocking event to keep them on their toes.

A certain unpredictability component is being used in today's films. An example is in the 2000 film, "U-571." Some of the characters have just retrieved the code machine on a German submarine, and are about to scuttle it and return to the U.S. submarine. A friend of mine took his kids to see this movie. At this point in the film, he got up to go get some popcorn because there seemed to be a lull in the action. When he returned he discovered that the U.S. submarine had been sunk and the characters were stranded on the German submarine. So we are talking about a type of unpredictability that will keep people glued to their seat because if they look away for one minute, they could miss a major turning point in the movie. It is also the technique that will have the viewers begging for more, and talking about the movie for weeks afterward.

Technique-5: Time Extension

Instead of showing gunfights in slow motion, which detracts from realism, within the New-Age Western time will be extended in real-time to allow viewers to see true fear in the faces of the participants. The problem with the original Spaghetti Westerns was that the gunfights were over in a flash, slow motion ruined the realism, and there was nobody left alive to display fear or awe at the lightning fast speed of the superior gunfighter. When all of the villains were killed instantly in a blaze of bullets, no one was left to be afraid or to show a hint of fear or amazement.

By scripting the confrontations and gunfights (especially those with multiple assailants) to extend over longer periods of time, in real-time bursts, challengers and witnesses alike can experience the true emotions that would be seen in a display of these almost unbelievable gun-fighting skills. By extending the scenes and using real-time camera techniques to display nervousness, emotion, fear, wonder, and amazement, true realism can be achieved. One way to accomplish this is to script the gunfighter's character to be so fast and accurate that he can literally use his challengers for target practice, disarming them at will, and killing them one by one, leaving some wounded, frightened, shocked, and stunned to run away and carry on the story of his incredible speed and accuracy.

Technique-6: Combined Orchestra and Popular Music Tracks

The New-Age Western will enrich the total experience of moviegoers through a combination of rich powerful orchestrated productions, reminiscent of "Ennio Morricone," to add strength to the rugged panoramic scenes, and highly popular current-day Grammy Award-winning music tracks and classic music tracks to add heart, feeling, and emotion to the poignant and heart--wrenching scenes. Combinations of these sounds will drive home the sights, action, and music in the minds of the audience for decades afterward through the magic of ***multiple stimuli.***

Conclusions

If our goal is to indelibly fix a film in the memories of the audience, to create a cult-classic, or at the very least a new genre of Western films — proving exciting and lasting — I may possibly be the perfect sounding-board and gauge upon which to base our design specifications. I am a forty-year fan of the Spaghetti Westerns, but since that time have not been enthralled by any films that followed them. If I had to list the most important traits of a film that I think would indelibly fix a film in my mind, they would be the following:

- An intriguing storyline with characters that you will immediately embrace and want to see more of long after the movie has ended.
- Random unpredictability.
- Random and unexpected back-to-back action scenes.
- Displays of fear and amazement in the faces of challengers and witnesses.
- Choreographed sounds to add realism and depth and to simulate virtual movement.
- Amplified sounds and light to keep you awake and on the edge of your seat.
- Panoramic scenes and rich music scores along with popular current-day Grammy Award-winning music tracks and classic music tracks to add heart to the emotional scenes
- A powerful ending that reaches out and grabs you just before the credits roll