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Interrogating (neo) colonialism in the contemporary western: Alejandro González

Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015)

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Abstract:

This article analyzes Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015) as a contemporary Western, exploring how it interrogates the overt coloniality and Anglocentrism associated with the Western genre and the source story of nineteenth century fur trapper Hugh Glass on which the film is based. Through narrative and textual analysis, the article suggests that the addition of active indigenous characters into Glass' story, as well as the film's focus on the genocidal violence inflicted on Native peoples and self-conscious realist strategies challenge the inherent colonialism of the Western. It also points out however, that the scope of these indigenous narratives is limited and made secondary to the narrative of the white fur trapper and how, *The Revenant* falls back on some the stereotypical representational norms of the generic Western. The article argues that this duality, where the film both challenges and reifies the colonialist norms of the Western, is a result of the film's interstitial position in between the industrial and genre norms of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking and Iñárritu's specific auteurist, postcolonial and ideological vision.

Keywords:

The Revenant

the Western

colonialism

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Hollywood

native peoples

In 2016 *The Revenant* was a big recipient of industry awards (Best Director at the BAFTAS, DGAs and Academy Awards). Following the emergence in 2015 of the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, signaling dismay at the lack of Academy Award nominations received by actors and other film personnel of colour, in 2016 Iñárritu was lauded on a personal level for being the only ‘person of colour’ to receive an Oscar nomination for *The Revenant* (Binelli 2016), yet also criticised for what some suggested was the ‘white settler colonialism’ of his film (Quayson 2016).¹ Similar concerns were raised by Ojibwe critic Jesse Wente. Whilst praising *The Revenant* for its authenticity in costume, portrayal and language of indigenous people (large parts of the film are spoken in Arikara and Pawnee languages) he suggested it still fell very much within with the norms of the film industry’s poor representations of indigenous peoples in the Western genre (Wente 2016b). Taking into account Wente’s misgivings and some of the divergent opinions about the film, this article explores how *The Revenant* both pushes against what is often perceived as the inherent (neo) colonialism of the Western (Smith 2000: 16), but also repeats common tropes of indigenous representation and never fully ‘escapes the colonial gaze’ (Wente 2016a). Like Wente and Cherokee Citizen Joseph M. Pierce this article uses tribal affiliation in the first instance and the collective terms indigenous, Native American and Native for people, culture, language and representation.

Key to this article's argument about *The Revenant's* simultaneous post/anticolonial and colonial gaze, are the different positions Iñárritu occupies in the United States and Mexican racial hierarchies and film industries. Iñárritu is a Mexican filmmaker, considered white in his own country but non-white in the Anglo and Anglo centric industry he now predominantly works in. It is this position as 'other' in the context of the United States that Iñárritu emphasized in his acceptance speeches for *The Revenant's* multiple awards. This article suggests Iñárritu's multiple positions call for a nuanced and dual reading of the film's representation of indigenous and native peoples that falls somewhere in between Iñárritu's own position and the perceived white settler colonialism of the film.

The Revenant is Iñárritu's first studio film, financed and distributed by Hollywood major 20th Century Fox. All his previous English language films – *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006), *Beautiful* (2010) and *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014) – were produced in the US independent sector.² As a Western *The Revenant* is also Iñárritu's first genre film, a genre which has been described as self-consciously 'concerned with defining a [North] American nation' (Kalinak 2001: 169). Set in the American North West, and focused on a part of American folklore – the narrative of the infamous survival of nineteenth century fur trapper Hugh Glass (played by Leonard DiCaprio) – *The Revenant's* credentials as an unproblematically US film seem all but confirmed.

However, rather than having to accept that the *The Revenant's* status as a Western makes it a straightforward US or American film, we can benefit from new perspectives on the Western about its provenance, which have shifted, to suggest an 'alternative trajectory' rather than that of the United States solely (Fisher 2016: 3). It's important to examine what Iñárritu as a Mexican filmmaker is doing with *The Revenant*, in light of this ongoing critical reconfiguration of the

Western, a genre which, it's been suggested, is long distant from being an exclusively US genre even though US hegemony may have meant it has been perceived in that way (Fisher 2016: 3).

Such approaches allow for a broader picture to emerge: one of *alternative trajectories from generic building blocks* which emerge from no single point of origin and thus result not in American Westerns and copies of (or reactions to) American Westerns, but instead countless offshoots of a format that has by the whims of historical circumstance become known as a 'Western' due to the economic hegemony of the USA in the first half of the twentieth century (Fisher 2016: 3 emphasis mine).

Part of this broader picture in relation to *The Revenant* is its status as a transnational film situated somewhere between the aesthetic norms and ideologies of the mainstream US film industry, those of Iñárritu's Mexican auteurist vision and the Mexican film industry where he began his feature filmmaking career. Joining with Fisher in challenging the assumption that the Western is an exclusively North American genre and that *The Revenant* falls within its representational poetics, this article suggests that the film performs a postcolonial critique of the ideologies and conventions of the genre, and that these are informed by the significant continuities of style and theme between it and Iñárritu's other films, as well as its Mexican director's politics and identity

In situating Iñárritu's work in this way, this article draws on but also goes beyond the short analysis of the film that featured in the epilogue to my recent book (Tierney 2018). The book takes the films that Iñárritu and five other transnational auteurs (Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, Fernando Meirelles, Walter Salles, Juan José Campanella) have made both

in and outside their national industries and with transnational, mostly independent, funding structures and explores how they embody continuities of style and critiques (political idealism, political repression, migration and the political exigencies of the ‘war on terror’), related to the directors’ specific national or broader continental politics and identity (2018: 11).

Pertinent to this article is how the book suggests that these ideological continuities and political investment is evident in the way these other directors’ transnational films, and Iñárritu’s *The Revenant*, revise genres.³ In this article I suggest that *The Revenant* revises the overt coloniality most often associated with the Western genre and goes beyond previous attempts at anti-colonialism like that of revisionist Western of the 1990s like *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner 1990), by portraying both significant relationships between Native peoples and also assigning them active roles and their own plot lines. However, I also acknowledge how *The Revenant* falls back on the stereotypical representational norms of the generic Western, limiting the scope of indigenous narratives and emphasizing indigenous characters’ secondary nature to the narrative of the white fur trapper Glass. This article therefore is about situating *The Revenant* within the industrial and genre norms of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking but also within Iñárritu’s specific auteurist, postcolonial and ideological vision.

***The Revenant* and indigenous representation in the (contemporary) American Western**

The Western has a continuous history in the American film industry from early cinema’s *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S Porter 1903) onwards. Like many genres, it has a cyclical nature, going in and out of fashion during certain periods and decades (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith 2017: 331). Native peoples on screen also have an extended and variable history in the cinema. Some of the first moving images shown on Thomas Alva Edison’s kinetoscopes included footage

of Sioux Indians from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Edison also filmed Pueblo, Ute and Walpapi Indians between 1898 and 1901 (Taves 1999: 114). There's footage by the Lumière cameraman Gabriel Vieyre sent to film in Mexico of a '*desayuno de indios*' ('breakfast of Indians' 1896). From the 1930s onwards, onscreen representation of indigenous peoples was predominantly found in the Western (Diamond 2009). In films like *Stagecoach* (John Ford 1939) indigenous peoples largely represented a (savage) threat to white settlers that had to be eliminated in order to assure the future and safety of an Anglo United States. After the Second World War the Western entered a more 'liberal' era with films like *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves 1950) that sought to portray Native peoples sympathetically and depict the cultural specificities of different indigenous tribes.⁴ John Ford's approach also evolved from the strictly racist *Stagecoach* through *The Searchers* (Ford 1956) which, whilst still a very racist film, emphasizes that Scar's decimation of Debbie's family is retribution for the destruction of his own family and through *Cheyenne Autumn* (Ford 1964) with its focus on to the enforced marches/trails of tears. The liberal intentions of these films were additionally limited, by the fact that indigenous leading roles were mostly played by white actors in brown face; Deborah Paget as Sonseeray in *Broken Arrow*, Henry Brandon as Scar in *The Searchers* and Elvis Presley and Dolores Del Rio as Cherokees in *Cheyenne Autumn* (Tierney 2011: 128n9).

In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s hugely popular western television series like *Rawhide* (1956-1965), *Bonanza* (1959-1973) and *Gunsmoke* (1955-1975) continued a colonialist American imaginary of the American West, playing a part in upholding the deeply entrenched binaries of settlers versus marauding Plains Indian (Williams 1980) whilst in film, directors like Sam Peckinpah *The Wild Bunch* (1969) used a barbaric West as a proxy for the airing the atrocities of the war in Vietnam. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the Western entered a

period of decline with its central idea of Anglo men settling the frontier migrating into other genres such as war and action films (Carter 2014: 2) and its iconography (showcasing the American landscape) increasingly appearing in the road movie (Kitses 1998: 17), filmmakers from tribal groups emerged challenging the simple binary representations of the past with several independent films (*Smoke Signals* [Chris Eyre 1998] and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* [Zacharias Kunuk 2002]). The Western resurfaced in the early 2010s (Thorpe 2015) due, it has been argued, to the tentative renewed moral authority of an Obama-era United States (Agrasta 2013). A series of high-profile examples of the genre, which range across its different subgenres, including remakes of traditional westerns *True Grit* (Joel and Ethan Cohen 2010) and *The Magnificent Seven* (Antoine Fuqua 2016); spaghetti westerns *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino 2012) and *The Hateful Eight* (Tarantino 2015), largely marginalize or ignore Native Americans. The anthology Western *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (Cohen bros. 2018) is the exception although its representations still offer deeply stereotypical images of Native peoples. ‘The Gal Who Got Rattled’ short depicts the Comanche as undifferentiated and blood thirsty ‘savages’ who ‘rattle’ Zoe Kazan’s character so much that she prematurely commits suicide rather than face capture.

The Revenant similar to these contemporary westerns, takes up a position in which, like many genre films from a postclassical era, it exists in a self conscious or questioning relationship to the central tenets of the genre (Schatz 1981: 14-42) , particularly with respect to issues of race.⁵ For instance, *Django Unchained*, set before the Civil War (when Westerns are usually set after the Civil War and before the early 1900s (Schatz 1981: 48)), (re)inserts the usually omitted black cowboys into the history of the west and deals with slavery, which most Westerns ignore.⁶ *The Hateful Eight* also explores African American history in the nineteenth century, specifically

the killing of black Union prisoners captured at the Battle of Baton Rouge during the Civil War – which is again absent in most classical Westerns but typical of Tarantino’s auteurist revisionism. Despite these shifts and self-questioning, many contemporary Westerns, like *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*, are still politically positioned on the side of the white settler and present an Anglo-centric version of US history (Quayson 2016).

In the years following its release, *The Revenant* was grouped together with the cluster of Westerns that came out at about the same time including *The Hateful Eight* (Thorpe 2015). Set in the American North West, in the early nineteenth century, a little earlier than most Westerns, *The Revenant*’s status as a Western very much depends on the remoteness of its setting and its narrative of survival of a lone white man, against insurmountable odds, or what one journalist calls ‘its icy dance with death’ (Thorpe 2015). Like the other Westerns we have just discussed, *The Revenant* also takes up a contrary position towards the genre conventions of the Western, only in its case, its contrary position is determined by its focus on Native peoples. It is based in part on Michael Punke’s 2002 novel, which in turn is based on the true story of Glass, the early nineteenth century fur trapper who was mauled by a bear, left to die by a fellow trapper and yet survived to crawl his way back to base camp. Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* makes additions to this basic narrative. More importantly, and in contrast to many contemporary Westerns, *The Revenant* diversifies the classical Western’s singular narrative point of view of a lone Anglo hero to make a pointed critique of the ideology and economics of the frontier and white male superiority that are at the centre of the Western. Rather than privilege the abilities of one white man to survive the harsh winter and a near death experience, it emphasizes Glass’ reliance on both spiritual guidance from his deceased Pawnee wife (Grace Dovey) and practical help from a Pawnee man, Hikuc (Arthur Redcloud). Most significantly, *The Revenant* reveals that Glass’

motivation for surviving and dragging himself back to base camp is his mixed-race son, Hawk (Forrest Goodluck) killed by another fur trapper, FitzGerald (Tom Hardy) who was supposed to be caring for Glass after he has been gravely injured in a bear attack.

One review has suggested that Hawk's presence in *The Revenant* is only for melodramatic purposes and that Hawk exists 'solely so he can die' (Chang 2015). Other reviews are similarly dismissive of the indigenous characters in *The Revenant*, rarely referring to them by name, and often mixing up or simply getting wrong the names of their tribes (Pinkerton 2015, McCarthy 2016), as well as suggesting that their presence in the film are subplots surplus to requirements. That these reviews misrepresent, ignore or downplay the Native American characters in the film speaks to the casual colonialism of some film journalism. These reviews also don't take into account the significant shift in spectator positioning that the film introduces through these Native American characters and how this position creates a critical space from which to view the colonialist project at the heart of the Western (Stam and Spence 2004: 885).

Spectator positioning

The Revenant's post-title sequence initially is presented from the point of view of the white fur trappers. We see Glass and his son Hawk hunting a deer; whilst back at camp the group of trappers are preparing to break camp, some hurriedly skinning beavers and others packing the furs they have collected during the trip. Suddenly, at camp, one of their party comes stumbling towards them, naked and bleeding. Then an arrow pierces another man's neck in what is the dramatic beginning of an attack on the camp by what are initially unseen aggressors. The trappers rush to take cover with the attack continually presented from their perspective. Long

takes and a very mobile camera, positioned within the encampment looking outwards, create the experience of what it feels like to be attacked; the sound of arrows zipping through the air and of the penetration of bodies by tomahawks and arrows emphasize the intensity of the attack and that it is coming at the fur trappers from all sides. A shot from within the camp perspective shows a line of Arikara warriors riding on horseback along the ridge overlooking the camp

But even in this early-on sequence there are hints that these ‘images of encirclement’ of the classical western that focuses on a ‘besieged’ group of whites who must automatically be the focus of sympathy against ‘unknown attackers’ (Stam and Spence 2004: 885) are not going to determine the point of view of the whole film. One of these hints comes when the focus is momentarily drawn from the white fur trappers to an aging Arikara warrior (who we later identify as Elk Dog [Duane Howard]) who is followed by a panning camera riding across the frame and calling out just before he is knocked off his horse. As the surviving trappers retreat to their boat, the Anglos’ perspective continues to dominate visually *and* aurally. This is augmented by the use of subjective sound: diegetic sounds of fighting and screaming fade away and are replaced by Ryuichi Sakamoto’s score that creates a synthesized wall of sound signaling the trappers’ disorientation (a throbbing noise that suggests blood pounding in their ears) and fear as they try to escape from the Arikara. However, once the surviving trappers are on the boat, diegetic sound fades back in, and simultaneously the camera shifts our attention from them by tilting upwards towards the sky. When the camera tilts back down it shows the aftermath of the struggle between the Arikara and the fur trappers from the Arikara’s perspective. We see dead trappers and dead Arikara warriors and Arikara women crying over their loved ones. The camera closes in on Elk Dog who has led the attack saying ‘[m]y daughter Powaga is not here. We’ll trade the pelts with the French for horses and keep looking.’

In contradistinction to Punke's novel which portrays this moment of the Arikara attacking 'without provocation' (2002: 9–10), the sequence gives a clear motivation for the ambush. The ambush was not simply an act of war or aggression, as some of the initial camerawork suggested, or even economic – to take the pelts as one trapper suggested, but a raid designed to search for an abducted child. The raid and Elk Dog's pronouncement about the search for his kidnapped daughter – Powaqá (Melaw Nakehk'o) – begin a narrative thread and point of view that runs throughout *The Revenant*. Both narratives – Glass' narrative about seeking vengeance on FitzGerald for the murder of his son and Elk Dog's search for his daughter – are about fathers and children and are often cross cut with each other. On a macro level this cross-cutting means that explicit parallels are drawn between Glass' quest (to avenge the murder of his son and drag his injured body over rough terrain to do so) and that of Elk Dog searching for his kidnapped daughter.

Cutting between different stories marks another departure from the classical western's spectator positioning. After the initial ambush, and the trappers' escape, rather than use the familiar cutting between pursuer (Elk Dog and his men) and pursued (Glass and the Anglo American trappers), instead, we cut to the Arikara and scenes which further explore their motivation for the pursuit and the politics which force them into this position. For instance, after a scene in which Glass, Hawk and the surviving fur trappers abandon their boat and climb into the hills for safety (because they would be exposed to further attack from the 'Cree'⁷ on the river), we cut to Elk Dog entering the French-Canadian encampment with the pelts abandoned by the American fur trappers when they fled. He is there for horses, guns and ammunition so he can continue the search for his daughter. The leader of the French-Canadian party – Toussaint

(Fabrice Adde) – doesn't want to give Elk Dog horses and comments that the pelts are stolen. In response Elk Dog says:

[Y]ou all have stolen everything from us. Everything. The land. The animals. Two white men snuck into our village and took my daughter, Powaq. We leave you these pelts because honor demands it. I take your horses to find my daughter. You are free to try and stop me.

It is a speech that speaks to the wholesale theft of colonialist enterprise and questions whose horses, resources and land these are (Figure 1). The cruel irony here is that, unbeknownst to Elk Dog, it is the French-Canadians who have stolen his daughter.

<<Insert Figure 1>>

Figure 1: Elk Dog (Duane Howard) "You have stolen everything from us." *The Revenant*. 2015, Iñárritu, U.S. New Regency Productions.

The search for Elk Dog's lost daughter as a narrative thread is an addition to Punke's novel, which is almost exclusively told only from the perspective of the white fur trappers and other white Europeans.⁸ To Punke's novelization of Glass' basic narrative, Iñárritu and his co-screenwriter Mark L. Smith added not just Elk Dog and the search for his daughter Powaq, but also the other indigenous characters Hikuc, Glass' wife, his son Hawk and their plot lines – and, in an era of continued whitewashing in Hollywood, importantly cast these parts from indigenous communities (Tierney 2017).⁹ Scholars have pointed out how, having an autonomous plot line in narrative film is important for characters of colour, who otherwise are often marginalized in parts

where they function merely in relation to white protagonists (Shohat 1991: 220), or in a genre like the musical, as entertainment for white audiences (Dyer 2002: 40)

It is significant to these issues of narrative prominence and representation of native peoples that the film actually begins with a narrative in a pre-title sequence showing an attack by white (American) soldiers on a Pawnee village. In a series of shots we see: a man (who we later learn to be Glass) and a woman (his wife) asleep with their child, a boy (who we later learn to be Hawk), lying asleep between them, the same group beside a tree buffeted by the wind, the boy with a house on fire behind him and a white soldier moving away from the house holding a flaming torch and finally Glass holding the boy in the ruins of the burned village (Figure 2). Throughout the sequence Glass speaks in Pawnee, reassuring his son that he is there, willing him to live and to keep breathing. These events predate the film's main narrative and show Glass and Hawk's earlier life and the circumstances under which Glass lost his wife and how Hawk received the burns scarring his face. This pre-credit sequence also gives historical context to the fur trapping trade, taking place after and made possible by the wars of extermination of Native peoples in the early part of the nineteenth century.

<Insert Figure 2 Here>

Figure 2: Glass and Hawk and the wars of extermination of Native peoples that make the fur trapping trade possible. *The Revenant*.

In addition to the backstory of Glass, his son Hawk and his wife, the addition to the basic narrative is the character of Hikuc. After the bear attack that leaves Glass on the verge of death, and the subsequent murder of his son and his abandonment by Fitzgerald, he comes across Hikuc, a Pawnee man. Hikuc shares with Glass meat from a bison just killed by some wolves (he keeps the wolves at bay with fire). When Glass tells him about the bear attack saying '[m]y men,

left me for dead’, ‘killed my son’ Hickuc responds ‘[t]hey killed my family too’, uniting them in a grievance against a mutual (white) enemy. Through a montage sequence in which we see Hikuc tending to Glass’ wounds from the bear attack, the film makes clear Glass’ survival and ‘rebirth’ are not due to a superiority that is inherently white, which Quayson suggests is the film’s main message (2016). Injured, weak, frozen and hungry, Glass is barely alive when he meets Hikuc. *The Revenant* figures his survival as a result of the care given to him by Hikuc. Also helping Glass, survive are the visions he has of his wife which occur throughout the film and particularly at the end. It is her words to Glass about how if you can draw breath you know you are alive, repeated by Hawk to Glass after he has been attacked by the bear which help him to focus on living.

However, despite all *The Revenant*’s attempts to take into account Native American agency in its development of significant Native American characters, ultimately their narratives are mostly cut short. Predominantly in *The Revenant* Native American characters do not survive. Glass’ wife was killed many years previously. Hawk is killed by FitzGerald. Hikuc dies murdered by the French-Canadian fur trappers as Glass discovers when he emerges from the healing tent Hikuc constructed. The camera dwells on Hikuc’s dead body and on a sign that says in French ‘[w]e are all savages’. Violence towards indigenous people is acknowledged but it is displaced onto the French-Canadians or onto one rogue fur trapper FitzGerald, Hawk’s murderer who is the only Anglo shown to exhibit racist behavior and language. *The Revenant* like many mainstream representations symbolically annihilates the Native American by positing that Native peoples are dying (Glass’ wife, Hawk, Hikuc) or destined to die (Ganje 1996: 41). Even Elk Dog who is alive at the end of the film having found his daughter is portrayed as a tragic character whose demise is inevitable (Wente 2016a). In what is really as false equivalency between Elk

Dog and Glass, *The Revenant* bears out Armando José Prats' (2002) assertions about the exclusion and marginalization of racial minorities in the Western. Prats argues that in films such as in *Dances with Wolves* white characters adopt native identities and take on native perspectives, which may mourn the tragic disappearance of Native Americans but do so only to expiate white guilt for their genocide whilst ironically marginalizing those same Native Americans (2002: 142-3).

In this respect the investment in Native American narratives of Hikuc, Glass' wife and his son, falls within the limited conventions of the Western. As Mathew Carter has suggested of most indigenous characters in Westerns, their role is to serve as 'racial and gendered "others" to secure white male identity' (Carter 2015: 2). From this perspective, shifting the causality for Glass' cross-country survival/trek from retribution on those who abandoned him to vengeance for his murdered son, still traps Hawk within a rationale of securing white male identity; of Glass as a righteous seeker of revenge. The cross-country trek simultaneously fulfills the Western convention and key feature of Iñárritu's films (cf. *Beautiful* and *21 Grams*) of fetishizing the suffering white male body. That the film is further invested in white male identity is also evidenced by a much commented-upon inaccuracy in the use of Native American languages in the film (Gajanan 2016). While Hikuc is curing Glass, a voice is heard reciting a poem, spoken not in the Plains Indian Pawnee that Hikuc speaks but in the Inupiaq language from Artic Alaska by an Inuit poet (Gajanan 2016).

Revisionist Western or counter narrative

Nevertheless, despite its investment in a narrative of whiteness, *The Revenant*'s depictions of and frequent allusions to massacred Native peoples (Hikuc's family, Glass' wife and their village, a

village FitzGerald and Tom [Will Poulter] come across after they've abandoned Glass), as well as conversations that underline the commodity value of the beaver pelts, evidence the film's revisionist position towards the history of the American West. Carter points out how contemporary Westerns 'with a strong Native American presence' are often linked 'to the revisionism apparent in recent historiography of the American West' (2015: 94). *The Revenant* casts the politics of 'western expansionism' not as a simple 'domestication of the wilderness' as mainstream US ideology and many Westerns have figured it, but as clear 'imperialism motivated by economic forces' that often resulted in 'wars of extermination against America's indigenous populations' (Carter 2015: 1). Bearing Carter's ideas in mind, although the attack was initially presented from the trappers' perspective, the activity that they were engaged in before the attack happened – skinning beavers – was also presented in the terms of an extermination, with lots of shots of blood and flesh and the trappers covered in blood.

Carter also points out however, that the revisionist Western as a category is problematic. because it underpins a political position that projects the (overwhelmingly Anglo) United States as constantly moving towards an ever more enlightened and liberal perspective on its (still classed as) internal 'others'. Carter asserts that, the Western genre has always been much more complex than a straightforward projection of the Myth of the American West.¹⁰ Carter also points out that, revisionist Westerns of the 1990s, are also not necessarily consistently ideologically contestatory or socially progressive (2015: 4). He suggests for instance that *Dances with Wolves*, revisions one tribe (the Lakota Sioux who are given full characteristics and histories) only to polarize another (the Pawnee – one of the tribal groups from *The Revenant* – who are portrayed as 'natural savages') (Carter 2015: 92-93). In addition to the problems of the term that Carter points out, and although Iñárritu's film is *revising* the mythic Western in many

ways, I would suggest that for this article to call *The Revenant* a revisionist Western would fold it unproblematically within the norms and history of the post-World War II Hollywood industry and wouldn't take into account the position of Iñárritu as *The Revenant*'s Mexican director, producer and co-screenwriter. Nor would it take into account how much Iñárritu's previous films *21 Grams*, *Babel* and *Birdman* have consistently taken a critical approach to other absolutes of mainstream US ideology and culture.¹¹ Nor does it attest to the textual similarities between *The Revenant* and Iñárritu's previous films and the political thrust of cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki's shooting techniques.

Auteurist analysis

Iñárritu's realist approach and Lubezki's self-conscious approach to shaping that realism, also play a role in *The Revenant*'s critical project of offering a counter narrative to the hegemonic narrative of the American West. All Iñárritu's films up to and including *The Revenant* display a commitment to heightened realism. In *21 Grams*, *Amores perros* and *Babel* (all shot by Rodrigo Prieto) the use of realist techniques such as hand-held enabled long takes, mobile frame and grainy image produce a sense of a close up look at poverty and emotional struggle. In *Birdman*, Iñárritu's first film shot by Lubezki, the apparently continuous, mobile long take which lasts most of the film mimics but also makes a mockery of Bazinian notions of authenticity (in filmmaking and stagecraft) (see Celestino Deleyto and Marimar Azcona's article in this issue). Like *Amores perros* (2000) and *21 Grams*, *The Revenant*'s commitment to realism, showcased by its long takes, vertical and horizontal pans and multiple tracking shots is about creating an intensely sensorial reality, so that Glass' lived experience of the bear attack, and his long trek across frozen ground is shared by the viewer. Whilst many of these long takes in *The*

Revenant are achieved digitally rather than photochemically, there is a clear commitment to realist depiction. Beyond the film language of realism, in *The Revenant* realism and authenticity in shooting style is taken to extreme. Lubezki's approach to the film included a much talked about use of only 'natural [sic]' (available) light (Riley 2015), and other realist techniques such as location shooting and the overt shunning of available facilitating film technology (apart from the CGI used to depict the bear attack and the bison and elk crossing the river). Together these approaches establish the realist credentials of a shoot that chose not to compromise or fabricate its spectacle.¹² Glass' mauling by the grizzly bear is as visceral and unbearable as the dogfighting scenes in *Amores perros*. In addition to Iñárritu's auteurist realist style there is also however, Lubezki's formally self-consciousness realism, that supports the film's counter narrative of the American West by drawing attention, as counter cinema does, to the apparatus and to the film itself as a text. On a couple of occasions, we see Glass/DiCaprio's breath against the camera lens (which is an acknowledgement of the apparatus similar to Octavio/Gael García Bernal's look to camera in *Amores perros*). There is also a brief negative parallax – where Glass seems to bulge out from screen – as he emerges from inside the hollowed out hide of his dead horse, into which he had clambered to escape the sub-zero temperatures. Soundtrack is also used to forward the film's counter cinema approach. As the white fur trappers are escaping Sakamoto's non-diegetic score mimics the sound of blood pumping in the ears, increasing in volume whilst diegetic sound disappears from the soundtrack. This use of sound is similar to the way sound is distorted in the third reviewing of the chase and crash sequence in Iñárritu's *Amores perros* when Octavio and Jorge are also under attack and trying to escape their pursuers. In both films, this use of sound increases its subjective quality, and the feelings of being under attack, whilst at the same time drawing attention to itself as a formal device.

An accompanying paratext/making of documentary to *The Revenant, A World Unseen* (Eliot Rausch, 2016) folds the film's counter narrative into an environmentalist agenda. In *A World Unseen* Forest Goodluck – who plays Hawk – goes on a journey with his brother around some of the different reservations in the continental North West of America. The film features multiple sites where Native land and/or communities have been destroyed in order to tap their natural resources, including the flooding of a village to make a dam and oil wells on Fort Berhold, North Dakota. As well as going into some history of how tribal communities suffered as a result of the fur trade and the demand for beaver pelts in Europe – what DiCaprio calls in the documentary 'the genocide of the Indians to get at their natural resources' the paratext also shows how this destruction and plundering continue by showcasing the contemporary destruction of natural resources. Footage of Duane Howard (Elk Dog) watching news about an oil spill in Vancouver – emphasize that this is a contemporary struggle and that first nation people are still fighting for the land, to keep it and protect it. This fight to protect the land (from its historical and continued plundering), as part of an environmentalist agenda is underlined as urgent through the revelation in the documentary that the filming of *The Revenant* experienced climate change. Snow either had to be shipped in to the set or, as with the film's climax, the entire production had to move to another continent (Patagonia, at the Southern tip of Argentina) as global warming meant there was no snow in Northern Washington state where they had been filming. With shots of oil wells next to reservations the film ties this climate change firmly into corporate greed and the ever-increasing exploitation of natural resources (exploiting the wilderness for tar sands, displacing indigenous communities). By placing the Native American actors who play *The Revenant's* Indigenous characters at the centre of the paratext, and limiting DiCaprio to a brief appearance the paratext counters the marginalization of their narratives in the feature film.

During the awards season Iñárritu's acceptance speeches for the Best Director awards at the Directors Guild Association (DGA) and at the British Academy of Film and Television Association (BAFTA) asserted his own and the film's diversity credentials: aligning himself, his awards and *The Revenant* with his fellow (hardworking) Mexicans and Latin Americans and against the negative stereotypes that then presidential candidate Donald Trump had used to launch his bid for the presidency.¹³ A central point in Iñárritu's speeches was that *The Revenant* is the story of a father and his mixed race son which positions *The Revenant* not just as a counter narrative of the American West but also as a narrative matched with Mexico's own official racial ideology – of *mestizaje* or racial mixing which is also about troubling an Anglo perspective. *Mestizaje* is part of Mexico's post-revolutionary myth of origins, which seeks to posit 'true Mexico' and the 'true Mexican' as the fruitful coming-together of two separate cultures, the Spanish culture and the indigenous culture. While Iñárritu's adoption of a discourse of *mestizaje* served as a valuable political corrective to Trumpian xenophobia, in reality, there is a gap between this official ideology and racial politics in Mexico both contemporaneously and historically. As *Roma* (2018), a film by Iñárritu's compatriot Alfonso Cuarón, emphasizes the relationship between the white mother Sophia and the Mixtec nanny Cleo is built on a centuries-old structural relationship between Mexico's white elite and a poor indigenous/*mestizo* underclass (Shaw 2018; Sanchez Prado 2018; Tierney 2018b). In addition to its adoption of this discourse *The Revenant* also shares a point of contact with Mexico's own filmic tradition. Like *The Revenant* with its respectful depiction of Hikuc, Hawk and Glass' wife, Mexico also has a tradition of lionizing indigenous culture, but of doing so largely through 'dead' 'Indians' such as the titular *María Candelaria* in the 1943 film by Emilio Fernández.

Conclusion

In revising the terms of the Western, Iñárritu's *The Revenant* takes on aspects of the history of the misrepresentation of indigenous peoples in Hollywood films, confronting narrative marginalization and mystification and focusing instead on the history of indigenous genocide and colonial theft. By adding indigenous characters to the original frontier story of Glass and Punke's novelization of it, and giving narrative prominence to Elk Dog's search for his daughter and Glass' quest for vengeance for his mixed raced son, *The Revenant* aligns itself against the Western's Anglo centrism and Americanism. *The Revenant*'s counter narrative of the American West and the environmentalist agenda of its paratext 'A World Unseen' signals its authorial continuity with Iñárritu's other films and their criticisms of mainstream American ideology. However, for all the progressiveness in its depiction of indigenous peoples *The Revenant* still fits in with mainstream ideas about indigenous people as a marginal and disappearing population. As with another of Iñárritu's progressive texts *Babel*, and as I and Deborah Shaw have pointed out, although it revises certain Anglo norms of the genre ultimately *The Revenant* still privileges Anglo-American concerns (Tierney 2018: 66; Shaw 2013: 139).

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¹ Coined by Broadway Black managing editor April Reign in 2015 to bring attention to the Academy's overlooking performances and achievements by non-white actors, directors, screenwriters and beyond

² Independent speciality houses/studios which produced his first four English language features: respectively Focus Features, Paramount Vantage, Focus Features/Lionsgate/Roadside, Fox Searchlight (Tierney 2018). See Deborah Shaw's article in this special issue where she writes about *21 Grams* as an independent film of interest.

³ In *The Shape of Water* (2017) del Toro rewrites the science fiction thriller to make the amphibious man/'monster' the primary identificatory figure and romantic hero. In *Gravity* (2013) Cuarón rewrites the space disaster film frustrating the standard romance plot line, eschewing noisy explosions and most significantly avoiding the genre's usual upholding of the tenets of dominant masculinity (its protagonist is female) and US hegemony (Langley 2011).

⁴ *Broken Arrow* was the one of the first films to accurately portray the Apache people living in wickiups.

⁵ In *The Searchers* John Ford questions the racist absolutes of his earlier films such as *Stagecoach* – condemning Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) for his racism towards native Americans and also depicting Scar’s attack on Hawke’s brother and sister-in-law as revenge for an attack his family suffered.

⁶ *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood 1992) is a notable exception.

⁷ Another name for the Arikara.

⁸ Unlike Punke’s novel, which is almost exclusively told from the perspective of the white fur trappers and other white Europeans. Furthermore, the novel portrays the Arikara as attacking ‘without provocation’ (2002: 9–10), and gives almost no subjectivity to the American Indians it portrays (except for a couple of lines from the perspective of a Mandan Indian who brings Glass back to his village to be cured [2002: 172–173] and the thoughts of some boys about to steal horses from Glass and his fellow travellers).

⁹ Forrest Goodluck’s father is Navajo, his mother is Hidasta, Mandan, Navajo and Tsimishian. Arthur Redcloud is Navajo. Duane Howard is Nuu-Chah-Nulth. Melaw Nakehk’o is Dehcho and Denesuline Dene.

¹⁰ My own work on the Mexican-American actor Pedro Armendáriz in three late 1940s John Ford westerns or quasi-Westerns, has similarly suggested that classical Westerns are not necessarily ideologically monolithic, nor are they always promoting a simple Anglo perspective (Tierney 2011: 126-128).

¹¹ *21 Grams* emphasizes the results of neo-liberalist policies the extreme wealth of the few versus the extreme poverty and lack of social mobility of others, the rigid social stratification and disenfranchisement of the poor. *Babel* emphasises the inequalities of global capitalist practices: the freedom with which First World residents may cross borders; Chieko’s father’s hunting trip

to Morocco, Susan and Richard's trip to Morocco but how the reverse is not possible. When Third World nationals cross into the First World, as Amelia and her nephew Santiago try to do after the wedding, where they happen to also live and work, they are automatically viewed with suspicion.

¹² Having said this, the shoot had to move from where the story was set, North West America, to Patagonia in Southern Argentina to find the snow it needed for the final sequence. But this is a part of the search for realism paradoxically, not in opposition to it.

¹³ Donald Trump's announcement of his presidential bid in June 2015 included the characterization of Mexicans as drug dealers and rapists. His exact words were: 'When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people'.