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In the opening scene of John Ford's seminal 1956 western, *The Searchers*, the viewer is immediately awestruck by the impressive scale of the image. In the initial rear-tracking shot of Martha (Dorothy Jordan), the camera transitions from the doorway of the Edwards home into a startling long shot of Monument Valley. The initial darkness gives way to an imposing, rugged landscape of bright red and brown. The view of the rocky Mitten Buttes from the doorway immediately situates both the characters and the viewers in a sense of time and place. The towering rock formations and plateaus powerfully communicate the insignificance of the human inhabitants of this arid, unforgiving environment. As a pioneer of location shooting, Ford recognised the power of the American landscape in cementing the core themes of the western, and in particular the need to conquer both the environment and the self in order to survive. For this reason, Phillip French argues longshots such as these serve to elevate western genre heroes into "Olympian status".ⁱ Such images help imbue the western with its mythic status, portraying the struggle of settlers, Native Americans, and America itself as monumental struggles for survival and identity.



The opening doorway scene in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).

Johnathan Hickman and Nick Dragotta's graphic novel series, *East of West* (2013-2019), is a western text fundamentally concerned with this same question of scale. Yet, what is most impressive about Hickman and Dragotta's efforts is their ability to communicate scale on both a visual and narratological level. Set in an alternate timeline in which the American Civil War lasted for decades, *East of West* begins its story in 2064 AD. In this timeline, the extended Civil War has brought about new and terrifying technologies such as jet bikes, flying monoliths, and transhuman augmentations. The timeline also sees the United States split into seven different nations. Primarily focalised through a character named 'Death', the narrative concerns itself with the literal end of the world. As one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Death was originally charged with bringing about the destruction of the neo-frontier space that America had become. However, upon falling in love with a human woman, Death and his companions battle against humans and rival horsemen alike to prevent the end of the world, whilst also rescuing Death's wife and son in the process.

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Hickman and Dragotta's monumental narrative requires visuals of equal scope, and to this end, *East of West* powerfully evokes classic westerns in a colossal opening sequence. Just as Ford's *The Searchers* opens onto a 'Monument' Valley, so too does *East of West* begin with an arresting desert vista. The opening splash page of the narrative seemingly mimics Ford's opening, with its spires of red rock, hundreds of meters tall, that stretch out into a black galaxy. At the centre of the spires, a futuristic portal is strewn across the desert floor, and it is from here that, in panels on the following pages, the three horsemen of the apocalypse, War, Conquest, and Famine emerge, sans Death. The horsemen, reborn as children, are confused about why the fourth member of the group is missing. A succession of small panels, with minimal dialogue, quickly establishes the main thrust of the narrative: Death, the fourth horseman turned gunslinger, has turned his back on the apocalypse. He now wanders a futuristic frontier, enacting bloody justice on those that stand between him and the woman he loves.

The opening splash page of *East of West*.



At moments such as these, the narrative flourish of Hickman and the illustrative flair of Dragotta shine forth to produce a western narrative that, while fundamentally conscious of its genre, is also able to create something new within it. The twenty-first century has seen a small renaissance of the western, a genre once so dominant that it constituted almost a third of all Hollywood productions during the 1950s, before gradually declining over subsequent decades.ⁱⁱ Original works such as the television series *Deadwood* (2004-06) and film remakes of such classic Westerns as *3:10 to Yuma* (2007) and *True Grit* (2010) have helped inspire renewed reverence for the genre. More recent texts include *The Power of the Dog* (2021; Academy Award for Best Picture), as well as popular television series such as *Billy The Kid* (2022-), *Yellowstone* (2018-2024), and the latter's numerous spin-offs. Such a resurgence has of course featured science fiction westerns, the most notable being *Westworld* (2016-2022), and the 2011 film, *Cowboys & Aliens*, itself based on a graphic novel. But these Science Fiction Westerns are not without their own issues. In its first season, *Westworld* was criticised for its antiquated portrayal of Native Americans.ⁱⁱⁱ The series made an about face in season two, but with each passing instalment, *Westworld* drifted further away from the frontier that captivated audiences in its opening pilot, gradually moving deeper and deeper into pure, dystopian Science Fiction. Similarly, *Cowboys & Aliens* never quite managed to marry the genres of the Western and Science Fiction, resulting in a jarring dichotomy of tone.

Conversely, the strength of *East of West* lies in its ability to straddle both genres effectively, whilst at the same time representing race and ethnicity in a far more nuanced fashion than *Westworld* originally did. Central to this representation is the engaging setting of Hickman's fictional world. The Seven Nations that make up the social and political setting of *East of West* are themselves diverse, ranging from the Native American Endless Nation to the African American Kingdom of New Orleans, and even the People's Republic of America, a nation primarily of Chinese ancestry led by none other than an exiled Mao Zedong. Such a plot point requires numerous shifts

in focalisation between each nation, creating a narrative in which non-white characters are frequently pushed to the fore. Moreover, such representations simultaneously elevate non-white characters to positions of genuine agency, whilst also demonstrating the historical prejudices such groups faced. For instance, John Freeman, Prince of New Orleans, occupies the dual position of gunslinger and royal. Yet, John's family is also descendent from freedmen who fought on the side of the Union in the American Civil War. Having established their freedom, John's family navigate economic uncertainties all the while conscious of their generational trauma. Such trauma even leads the Kingdom to avoid borrowing money, as John's father, the King, reminds him "Debt is Chains, son. Chains."^{iv}

Such nuances also lead to far less stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in the series. In the first season of *Westworld*, Native Americans were given no speaking roles and existed purely as antagonistic cannon-fodder for white lead characters. Granted, season two of *Westworld* featured the Native American tribe, Ghost Nation, in an incredibly prominent role, with members of the tribe being central to the resolution of the overall plot. That being said, such a narrative emerged in the series only *after* significant criticism emerged from viewers and critics alike in the wake of season one. For instance, GQ labelled the park a place "for white people", whilst in an analysis of season one, Christopher M. Innes argued that the viewer is left with the impression that people visit *Westworld* "to just shoot Native Americans."^v Munya Andrews, an Aboriginal Elder from the Kimberly region, asserted that, "In Season 1, there is no attempt to understand or show Native Americans as real people with real culture or as full human beings."^{vi}

Such a phenomenon in *Westworld* mirrored the more problematic elements of race in *The Searchers*, what Quentin Tarantino described as John Ford's tendency to depict "faceless Indians ... killed like zombies."^{vii} In *East of West*, the Native American nation is easily the most powerful and influential of the Seven Nations, largely on the back of

their technological superiority. In a powerful inversion of historicity, the Endless Nation not only conquers the Republic of Texas and hangs its leaders, but it has also adopted an ideology of racial supremacy. As one such leader declares, “ours are the only lives that actually matter.”^{viii} Such a position is undoubtedly a pointed reversal of nineteenth century American exceptionalist ideology, specifically manifest destiny, that advanced the notion that the United States had a divine mandate to conquer Native American territory.^{ix} Yet, it is arguably the position of the Endless Nation that keeps the series so effectively grounded in science fiction. Technology, and its advancement, often at the expense of the human, is what drives Endless Nation. Such a premise presents interesting questions that coalesce around both the historical denial of agency to Native Americans, and future concerns of posthumanism and transhumanism in a world increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence.

Where *East of West* does tread familiar ground is in its portrayal of Death. A clear doppelgänger of Clint Eastwood, Death occupies the stereotypical status of the Western Stranger as seen across Eastwood’s vast array of westerns, from *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) to *Pale Rider* (1985). Hickman himself acknowledged that Death was directly modelled on Eastwood’s screen persona.^x The harsh vectors used by Dragotta to sketch out the face and body of Death consistently evoke memories of Eastwood’s best films. Much like Eastwood’s nigh immortal gunslingers, Death wreaks havoc upon those that stand in his way, delivering frontier justice across a depressing American future. In truth, many such encounters are predictable and frequently endow Death with a striking sense of invulnerability. From an opening saloon shootout to a showdown in the Oval Office itself, Death is always too quick for those he hunts. Yet unlike many of Eastwood’s cinematic cowboys, Death longs for a place to call home. It is not the promise of a bounty or a lust for violent justice that propels him across the frontier, but simply the desire to be reunited with those he loves. It provides Death with an interesting duality that, realistically, is not always achieved. This is partly due to the fact that he revels in the blood and gore he inflicts on others, which makes

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Hickmann's infrequent depictions of Death as a loving family man somewhat unconvincing from a narratological standpoint.



Death in the saloon.

East of West is a text worthy of engagement. Its straddling of both the western and science fiction genres, as well as its representation of non-white history, trauma, and agency, create an engaging and fascinating world. Despite some predictable plot elements regarding its gunslinging protagonist, the work presents a highly original contribution to the history and historicity of the western genre.

- i French, Phillip. *Westerns*. Carcanet Press, 2005, pg. 68.
- ii Corkin, Stanley. *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History*. Temple University Press, 2004, pg. 2
- iii Bady, Aaron. "'Westworld', Race, and the Western", *The New Yorker*
- iv Dragotta, Nick and Hickman, Johnathan. *East of West, The Apocalypse: Year One 9*, Image Comics, 2013.
- v Christopher M. Innes, "Justice or Pleasure." *Westworld and Philosophy: Mind Equals Blown*, edited by Richard Greene and Joshua Heter, Open Court, 2019, pg. 192.
- vi Munya Andrews, "The Power of Media to Shape Our World – Westworld Decoded by Munya Andrews", *Evolve Communities*, <https://www.evoves.com.au/westworld-decoded/>
- vii Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "An Unfathomable Place: A Conversation with Quentin Tarantino about Django Unchained (2012)." *Transition: An International Review*, no. 112, vol. 47, 2013, pg. 53.
- viii Dragotta, Nick and Hickman, Johnathan. *East of West, The Apocalypse: Year One 12*, Image Comics, 2013.
- ix Johannsen, Robert W. "The Meaning of Manifest Destiny." *Manifest Destiny and Empire*, edited by Sam W. Haynes and Christopher Morris, Texas A&M University Press, 2007, pg. 10.
- x Truitt, Brian. "Horsemen ride into a dystopian future in 'East of West'." *USA Today*, 26 March, 2013, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2013/03/26/jonathan-hickman-east-of-west-comic-book-series/2022209/>. Accessed 10 June, 2022.