



DRAMA · WESTERN

Once Upon a Time in the West

1968 · Directed by Sergio Leone

Spaghetti Western

Historical Epic

Auteur Cinema

A railroad is pushing across the Arizona desert, and a patch of dry land with the only water for miles has become worth killing for. A widow from the East, a hired gunman, a bandit and a mysterious stranger with a harmonica converge on it. Slow, operatic and deliberately mythic in tone.

DIRECTOR Sergio Leone

YEAR 1968

RUNTIME 2h 46m (166 min)

COUNTRY Italy/USA

GENRES Drama, Western

CAST Claudia Cardinale, Henry Fonda, Jason Robards, Charles Bronson, Gabriele Ferzetti

MUSIC Ennio Morricone

IMDB 8.5 / 10 (383,734 votes)

ROTTEN
TOMATOES 96% (critics)

METACRITIC 82 / 100

TMDB SCORE 8.3 / 10 (5,071 votes)

WHERE TO	Stream (US): Philo, MGM Plus
WATCH	Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, Spectrum On Demand
	Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 Sergio Leone's grandest Western and the summit of the Spaghetti Western

Made after the Dollars films, it is the film in which Leone, with a Hollywood budget and Monument Valley, turned a low-cost European genre into a full-scale epic about the end of the Old West.

2 Henry Fonda as a cold-blooded killer

One of American cinema's great heroic faces plays a villain, and the casting charges every scene with the audience's memories of Fonda's earlier roles.

3 Cinema as music and time

Ennio Morricone's themes, composed before shooting, and Leone's long, patient silences show how sound and duration can carry a film as much as plot does.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of the Spaghetti Western and a late, self-aware summation of the whole genre, made by a European director as both tribute to and requiem for the American Western.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a ritual rather than a plot machine: every glance, silence and sound is staged like a note in a score.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How long Leone holds a shot and lets ambient sound, such as wind, creaking wood or dripping water, fill the silence before anything happens.
- The extreme close-ups of eyes and weathered faces set against huge, empty landscapes, and how the two scales alternate.
- How each major character is tied to a musical theme, and how the music seems to enter the scene as if it belonged to the person.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Whose story is this really: the gunmen's, the widow's, or the railroad's?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Genre moment:** By 1968 the classic Hollywood Western was fading, while Italian Westerns, cheap and violent and often dubbed, had become an international craze led by Leone's Dollars trilogy.
- **Industry:** An Italian-American co-production backed by Paramount, it gave Leone his largest budget and a cast of American stars, including Henry Fonda, and let him shoot partly in Monument Valley.
- **Technology:** Shot in widescreen Techniscope, a economical process, by Tonino Delli Colli, allowing faces in extreme close-up to share the frame with vast landscapes.
- **Director's moment:** Leone wanted to move beyond the anti-hero cynicism of his earlier films and make a Western about the myth of the West and its passing, co-writing the story with Dario Argento and Bernardo Bertolucci.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)

Leone's previous Western refined his close-ups, music-led duels and widescreen landscapes, which this film then takes into a more mythic mode.



FILM

Stagecoach (1939)

John Ford's Monument Valley Western set the visual vocabulary of the mythic West that Leone both reveres and reworks.



FILM

The Searchers (1956)

Ford's story of an obsessive avenger, framed by landscape and doorways, helped shape Leone's treatment of revenge and the frontier.



FILM

High Noon (1952)

Its tense, drawn-out use of waiting and clock time is echoed in Leone's stretched suspense.



THIS FILM

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)

NEW AT THE TIME *A Western built like an opera, in which music, silence and ritual duels matter more than plot, and in which the genre's own conventions are the real subject.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in 1968, a year of upheaval, as an Italian director used Hollywood money and American locations to reflect on the myth of the frontier.

- **Italy and Hollywood:** Italy's postwar economic boom had built a mass cinema audience and a busy film industry. Paramount, an American studio, financed this film, which combined Italian production with US stars and Monument Valley locations.
- **A turbulent year:** 1968 brought the Vietnam War, student protests and political assassinations in the US, and radical unrest across Europe. Audiences were increasingly doubtful about heroic national myths, and the film's view of the West is correspondingly sceptical.
- **Progress and violence:** The film is broadly about the coming of the railroad and the pressure that money and expansion put on individuals. This reflects a late-1960s, left-leaning European view of the American frontier as a story of capital as well as heroism.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Leone had made the hugely successful Dollars films, which were often dismissed by critics. He was now given a larger budget and American backing. He worked with the young Bernardo Bertolucci and Dario Argento on the story.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Very slow and deliberate by modern standards. Scenes are stretched into long, tense rituals; the payoff is atmosphere and anticipation rather than speed.
- **Style:** Operatic and stylised, with extreme close-ups, wide landscapes and a heightened, mythic tone rather than realism.
- **Sound:** Morricone's score is central; dialogue is sparse and much of it is post-dubbed, as in many Italian productions of the period.
- **Format:** Colour, widescreen at roughly 2.35:1. Best seen on a large screen if possible.

- **Versions:** The original runs about 166 minutes. A shorter cut of roughly 145 minutes was released in the US, so seek out the full version.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

13+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from all audiences (France) to 12 (UK), PG-13 (US) and 16 (Germany); 13 suits the violence, menace and very slow, long running time.

Official ratings: US PG-13 · UK 12 · Germany 16 · France TP

- **Good for:** Teens who enjoy epic Westerns, striking widescreen landscapes, Ennio Morricone's famous score and tense standoffs. It rewards patient viewers and makes a good first step into classic cinema.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Gunfights and killings, some shocking and sudden. Little blood by modern standards, but the tone is cold and serious.
- **May unsettle, menace:** Long, silent build-ups to confrontations, with ruthless villains and threatening behaviour that can feel tense for younger viewers.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Includes coercion and unwanted physical advances towards a woman, plus revenge and greed as driving forces.
- **May unsettle, pace:** At nearly three hours, with sparse dialogue and very slow stretches, it can test the patience of children used to faster films.
- **Explain first:** It is a Western from Italy, so the style is stylised and operatic: long silences, close-ups and music matter more than talking.
- **Explain first:** The story is set as railways spread across the American frontier, and land and water were valuable and fought over.
- **Explain first:** Characters are often archetypes rather than realistic people, and the film plays with the genre's heroes and villains.

Talk about it after: *>How did the music, silences and close-ups of faces affect how tense you felt, compared with a film that relies on fast action?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as an elegy for the mythic West: a world of individual gunmen, honour and open land that is being replaced by money, railways and institutions, and a genre that knows it is looking at its own ending.

THEMES

- **Progress versus the gunfighter:** The railroad stands for an economic order that makes the lone gunman obsolete, even while it relies on gunmen to clear its path.
- **Revenge and memory:** One man's quest is driven by an old wound that the film reveals only gradually, so that violence is tied to something remembered rather than just present.
- **Land and water as power:** The film places value on a patch of ground whose worth is invisible until the railroad needs it, showing how capital and property decide who survives.
- **Women and the frontier:** Jill arrives as an outsider in a masculine world and becomes the film's practical centre, the figure who builds rather than destroys.
- **Myth and genre self-awareness:** Leone reuses images from earlier Westerns, and casts Fonda against type, to ask what the genre meant and what it hid.

Key scenes

The railway station opening

A long wait, filled with sound design rather than dialogue, establishes Leone's method of turning time and tension into spectacle, and ends in a sudden burst of violence that sets the film's terms.

The introduction of Frank

The reveal of Fonda's face in close-up after a massacre exploits his heroic screen persona to shock the audience, making casting itself an act of storytelling.

The auction

Here the film shows land, reward money and violence entangled in a public economic ritual, dramatising how the new order works through contracts and bidding as much as guns.

The final duel and flashback

The duel is built as a ritual with music and slow cutting, and the flashback finally explains the harmonica, linking revenge to memory and bringing the film's emotional and musical threads together.

Filmmaking

- **Music:** Morricone composed the themes before filming, and Leone played them on set so that the rhythm of scenes could follow the music. Each lead has a motif, and Harmonica's is literally played inside the story.
- **Framing and cinematography:** Tonino Delli Colli alternates enormous landscape compositions with extreme close-ups of eyes and faces, so that individual people seem both tiny and monumental.
- **Editing and duration:** Leone stretches moments of tension far beyond conventional length, making waiting itself the drama and giving the final confrontation the feel of a ritual.
- **Casting:** Fonda's villainy, Bronson's silent avenger and Cardinale's central female role reshape expectations of the genre's roles, with each performer used as an icon as much as a character.
- **Design and locations:** Monument Valley brings the imagery of John Ford's Westerns into Leone's world, while sets and Spanish locations create a mixed, constructed West that feels more mythic than historical.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Three men wait at a remote railway station and kill a stranger who arrives on the train, but he turns out to be another man. At the Sweetwater farm, a family is murdered by gunmen in dusters, and Frank, an outwardly respectable killer played by Henry Fonda, takes charge. He works for Morton, a crippled railroad baron who wants the land because the line must pass the farm's water.

Jill McBain arrives from New Orleans as the widow of the farm's owner and discovers she has inherited the property. A bandit, Cheyenne, is blamed for the killings, though Frank's men are responsible. A harmonica-playing stranger, who seems to be hunting Frank, helps Cheyenne and protects Jill.

Frank tries to force Jill to sell. When Harmonica intervenes, Frank turns on his employer, Morton, and kills him, intending to take over his business. Harmonica outbids Frank at the auction by delivering Cheyenne for a reward, then helps free him.

In the final duel, Frank is shown the reason for Harmonica's hunt in a flashback: Frank once hanged Harmonica's brother while the boy was forced to hold him up with a harmonica in his mouth. Harmonica kills Frank. Cheyenne, wounded, dies, and Harmonica leaves with his body as the railroad arrives and Jill brings water to the workers.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Writing with future directors:** Leone developed the story with two young film critics who later became directors, Dario Argento and Bernardo Bertolucci. They worked through the Western's references together, watching and discussing classics before shaping a story, with the screenplay credited to Leone and Sergio Donati.
- **Fonda against type:** Leone wanted an actor known for decency to play the film's ruthless killer, and cast Henry Fonda. The shock of the first close-up on his face depends on his history of playing honest heroes for John Ford and others.

- **Music before filming:** Ennio Morricone composed the score before shooting started, and Leone had it played on set so that actors and camera could move to it. The method was unusual in a period when scores were generally added afterwards.
- **Ford's landscape, Leone's eye:** The film shot in Monument Valley, the landscape made famous by John Ford, but also used Spanish and Italian locations. Leone borrowed the valley's mythic associations but photographed it in his own close-up-heavy style.
- **Cut for America:** Paramount released a shortened version in the US, and the film did poorly there, while in Europe it was a major success. Its reputation in America later grew largely through restored longer cuts.
- **Myth:** The entire film was shot in Monument Valley. **Reality:** Only some scenes were. Much of the film was shot in Spain's Almería region and in Rome's Cinecittà studios, which Leone blended into a single imagined West.
- **Myth:** It was an immediate classic that audiences embraced everywhere. **Reality:** It was a major success in much of Europe, but was shortened and did poorly on its US release. Its reputation in America grew later.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

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THIS FILM

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)



FILM

Once Upon a Time in America (1984)

Leone's final film applies the same slow, operatic, music-led approach to gangsters and memory, and is often seen as a companion piece.



FILM

Unforgiven (1992)

Clint Eastwood, Leone's former star, made a late Western that, like this film, treats the genre's myths with elegy and moral weight.



FILMMAKER

Quentin Tarantino

His use of extended tension, needle-drop music and genre homage owes a clear debt to Leone's staging and sound.

Reception and reputation

Reception divided along geography. In Europe, particularly France and Italy, it drew large audiences, but in the US a shortened release met a cool response from audiences and many critics, who were unsure what to make of a slow, European Western with Henry Fonda as a villain.

Its stock rose steadily as critics and filmmakers reassessed Leone as a serious stylist. It is now widely regarded as his masterpiece and one of the greatest Westerns, and its slowness is now read as ritual and its borrowings as a meditation on genre.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Morricone's themes:** Ennio Morricone's score, with distinct leitmotifs for each main character, including Harmonica's mouth-organ theme and Jill's soaring theme sung wordlessly by Edda Dell'Orso, became staples of compilations, concerts and advertising, and are familiar to many people who have never seen the film.
- **Harmonica as icon:** The image of the silent, vengeful stranger playing a harmonica, and the opening scene of three gunmen waiting at a station while a windmill creaks, became shorthand for the stylised, slow-burning Western and are widely referenced and parodied.
- **Fonda against type:** Casting Henry Fonda, long associated with decent heroes, as the cold-blooded killer Frank, with the shock of his first blue-eyed close-up in the child-killing scene, is often cited as a landmark of subverting a star's screen image.
- **Spaghetti Western canon:** Alongside the Dollars films, it helped make 'spaghetti Western' a durable cultural label. Its desert locations, including Monument Valley, and its picture of the railroad displacing the frontier are still used in discussion of how the myth of the West is told.

Its lasting influence

Its widescreen close-ups, operatic duels and music-led staging became touchstones for Quentin Tarantino, Clint Eastwood's later Westerns and the modern revisionist Western, and its mood of genre elegy echoes through films that look back at their own traditions.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)

Leone's earlier epic shows his close-up and music-driven style in its more cynical, comic form, and ends in one of cinema's most famous duels.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

The Searchers (1956)

John Ford's tormented Western about obsession and the frontier is a key source for Leone's mythic West and its imagery.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Stagecoach (1939)

The classic Hollywood Western that made Monument Valley iconic shows the tradition Leone was honouring and rewriting.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

The Godfather (1972)

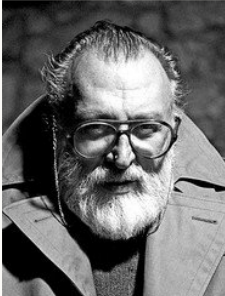
Another late-1960s-early-1970s epic that treats violence, business and a vanishing code with operatic scale and deliberate pacing.

JUMP FORWARD

The Wild Bunch (1969) **COMING SOON**

Sam Peckinpah's Western, released a year later, offers a more violent American take on the same sense of the West coming to an end.

FULL CAST AND CREW



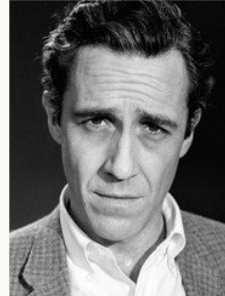
Sergio Leone
DIRECTOR



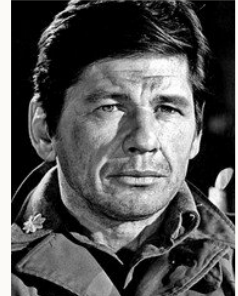
Claudia Cardinale
ACTOR
as Jill



Henry Fonda
ACTOR
as Frank



Jason Robards
ACTOR
as 'Cheyenne'



Charles Bronson
ACTOR
as 'Harmonica'



Gabriele Ferzetti
ACTOR
as Morton



Ennio Morricone
COMPOSER

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