

ABSTRACT

KEVIN FLINN. “Every Sound Must Signify”: The Evolution of Sound in Westerns. (Under the direction of Professor Devin Orgeron.)

In 1927, Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*, the motion picture industry’s first “talkie,” which heralded the end of the silent movie era and ushered in the age of sound in films. Before this, the Western had become a staple of silent cinema, when the good guy battled the bad guy and rode off into the black-and-white sunset with a swooning heroine. As a genre, the Western often portrays the conquest of the wilderness and the subordination of nature in the name of civilization and tells stories that center on the life of a wanderer, usually a cowboy or a gunfighter. In the years following the debut of the talkie, the Western adapted to the new technology and eventually employed sound in ways that not only accented the image but became inherently vital to it. Given the genre’s box office success well into Hollywood’s golden age, the Western’s acclimation to sound proved just as successful (if not more so) than its brethren. This essay will examine four films from the Western canon—*The Virginian* (1929), *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), and *There Will be Blood* (2007)—and show how sound in the Western evolved from simple sync dialogue to sweeping scores to ethereal effects, all of which highlight the grandeur and expansiveness of the genre. Along the way, I also examine how and why many of the sounds in these films became the conventions and tropes of Western sound, and once those conventions became established, how later filmmakers would both employ and distort them, drawing their audiences into the idea of the Western while also subverting the idea of just what made it a Western in the first place.