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“Western” Themes and Western Films

Certainly one of the most notorious—if not exactly the most respected—American cultural effusions is the Western film. Moreover, Westerns, or “horse operas” as they are more familiarly known, are to be met with in nearly every part of the world. Indeed, a thriving market in reproducing Westerns now exists in both France and West Germany and, perhaps more surprisingly, in Japan. Yet a confessed addict soon learns that a taste for Western films is tolerated rather than rewarded. A rationale for enjoying Westerns might almost be said to be one of our more pressing minor social needs. Possibly a simple change in terminology is all that is required: Where drunks were once viewed with contempt, alcoholics are now regarded with sympathy, and the same motion picture palaces which were shunned for showing what used to be known as dirty movies are now patronized by respectable citizens who enjoy the same wares under the more socially acceptable rubric of art films. At present the sensitive Western viewer must hide his perverse taste behind the mask of scholarly research, and none but the most shameless can approach a box office to buy a ticket to a Western without experiencing a moment of irrational fear that some friend or employer may catch him, red-handed as it were, in the gratification of this illicit passion.

The difficulty, of course, is that, considered realistically, Western movies *are* silly, and most of the objections raised to them may well have more validity than the rather weak and sentimental argu-

ments I can bring to their support. Westerns are an anachronism in the modern world and, though they may pretend to be sober history, they demonstrably are nothing of the kind; they tend to classify the complexities of human behavior into two mutually exclusive types of characters, good guys and bad guys; they are filled with improbabilities such as horses that never get tired and revolvers which never need reloading; and their language is stilted enough to have given rise to at least one recognizable American dialect which someone has aptly, if unkindly, named Hollywooden Indian. But every criminal, no matter how culpable, is entitled to a defense, even if learned counsel is, as in this case, almost certain that the jury will find against him.

Probably the basic objection to Western films—usually put in terms of their being an “escape” from something or other which is doubtless more worth while—is that they are untrue to the facts of American western history. With the exception of an occasional bandit biography of doubtful authenticity and a few relatively rare cinematic treatments of particular historic events (such as *They Died with Their Boots On*, a romanticized version of the defeat of General Custer by Sitting Bull, or the various anachronistic “true” accounts of the notorious gun battle at the O. K. corral in Tombstone, Arizona), Western history is notable in Westerns primarily because of its absence. Moreover, what meager historic content there may be in Westerns tends to be generalized as, for example, in *The Sea of Grass*, which is about the conflict between cattlemen and homesteaders in general rather than in some particular range war, or as in *High Noon*, where the sheriff and his outlaw opponents fight to the death in a world carefully isolated from any particular place.

This objection may perhaps seem less compelling if one remembers that the world of the Western film is true to a certain historic feeling, if not to particular historic facts. The Western mirrors a persistent nagging doubt in American life about whether the choice which America made to become a great, capitalist, industrial power was indeed a wise one. Not surprisingly, objections to modern American life have often taken the form of myths about alternative American destinies, destinies which at least for artistic purposes Americans like to think they positively chose against.

The Western, therefore, is not so much true to the facts of American western history as a mirror image of modern American life, in which the virtuous Westerner, representative of an older and different order, is contrasted with a morally inferior modern—and often Eastern—world. To say, as many critics have, that Westerns are "nostalgic" is to miss the point. They do not so much yearn for an older and simpler life as attempt to set up an alternate standard of values to the often shabby ones of modern finance capitalism. Whether these values are in fact "true" of Western life is relatively unimportant; they are "true" only insofar as they form a hypothetical, self-consistent set of values opposed to modern American life.

The trick is by no means limited to Westerns. Any reader in eighteenth-century primitivism finds a very similar kind of thing, where the Noble Savage is no relation at all to the Indian or South Sea Islander whom he allegedly depicts, but a representative of a standard of values opposed to the conventional values of eighteenth-century society. In American life another alternate myth—which has striking similarities in many ways to the myth of the romantic West—is the myth of the Romantic South, usually conceived, as in *Gone with the Wind*, as representatives of a set of idyllic virtues opposed to the shabby, money-grubbing, commercial morality of the North.¹ Examples could be multiplied indefinitely, but hopefully the point is clear; whatever "realism" there may be in Westerns is not to be found in the faithful reproduction of the facts of Western history but in the implied values of modern society against which Western values stand in contrast.

The contrast is often implicit, and often, it should be added, rather silly and rather heavy-handed. I remember distinctly a film biography of "Buffalo Bill" Cody which I saw as a child (and which, parenthetically, had absolutely nothing in common with the historic Buffalo Bill but the name of its hero) in which his wife, who did not like the hardships and deprivations of life in the West, took herself and their young son off to a life of ease in the East. There the boy caught diphtheria and died. Buffalo Bill carefully—if in exactly—explained to his contrite wife that diphtheria was a disease

¹For a more thorough comparison of the Western with the "golden myth of the antebellum South," see David B. Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero," *American Quarterly*, VI (Summer, 1954), 112f.

of civilization, the implication clearly being that in the West life is more "healthy."

The scene itself is ludicrous, but our objection is not so much to the metaphor—after all, Camus uses something very similar in *La Peste*—as to the clumsily didactic way in which it is presented. The end of the motion picture *Shane*, where Shane rides away from the grubby town in which the action of the film has taken place, is a more satisfactory statement of a very similar theme, as is the concluding visual metaphor of *High Noon*, where the sheriff contemptuously drops his badge in the street of the town which, though he has defended, he has found not worth defending. Perhaps best of all is the masterly interplay of ironies in *One-Eyed Jacks*, in which a bandit who has gained his freedom by betraying a friend significantly turns up later as the sheriff of an ostentatiously upright community. "You're a one-eyed jack in this town," the friend whom he has betrayed tells him, "but I see the other side of your face."

Western films, then, like Western novels, often represent a philosophical and, on occasion, political point of view which is at the very least profoundly suspicious of the development of modern American democracy. What set Western films apart, however, are the peculiar cinematic conventions which surround them, and which—to belabor the obvious—are due to the fact that Western movies must be seen rather than read. To discuss Western films solely as philosophical tracts is to misrepresent them and largely to ignore the cinematic techniques which make them successful.

One might begin by recalling briefly a fact which, though widely known, is often ignored—the sheer immensity of the land area loosely delimited as the American "West." If one defines this West as that part of the United States west of a line running from the eastern part of North Dakota down the eastern border of Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma, and including Texas, one includes a land mass far bigger than the land mass of all Europe.² Moreover, this arbitrary geographical definition of the west is if anything too conservative; it eliminates, for instance, Missouri and

²I am indebted for this working definition to Robert Edson Lee's admirable study *From West to East* (Urbana, 1966), pp. 2-3.

the western part of Minnesota, both favorite localities for the operations of the real life—as well as the motion picture—Jesse James. In any case this West is, as a recent film had it, a big country, and visual cinematic metaphors which insist on this bigness are not far to seek.

Though often these metaphors are of little significance other than as a statement of the common unthinking American equation between something big and something valuable, when sensitively used they make quite a different point, that of the insignificance of human endeavor when considered against the sheer immensity of this landscape. Even in a relatively uninteresting Western like *The Big Country*, the use of the cinemascope screen and of long-distance shots succeeds in implying considerable ironic depth to a predictable plot and uninspired dialogues. The galloping horses in this film are commonly photographed far to one side of the wide screen, galloping across an empty landscape; and the final "shoot-out" between the two hostile parties is brilliantly resolved in another long-distance pan shot which by reducing the size of the characters to insignificance implies the true measure of their petty quarrel.

Nor is this visual metaphor of bigness only a function of the recently developed cinemascope screen. Indeed, many recent Westerns go wrong precisely because they do not understand the implications of this new wide screen and concentrate upon the opportunities for close-up shots which it gives.³ One of the best Westerns ever made, long before the cinemascope screen, was John Ford's production of *Stagecoach*. When the action of this film moved from the town out into the open country, Ford's camera techniques changed dramatically, and as the film went on the camera work developed into a masterful photographic essay in the contrasts between the little world of the stagecoach and the immense, brooding landscape across which it was traveling. The theme was beautifully stated visually at a moment near the beginning of the film when the stagecoach parted from its cavalry escort to set off on its own. After the farewells had been said, the camera drew away to watch

³*How the West Was Won*, a recent Western complete not only with wide screen but with the alleged esthetic advantage of three-dimensional photography, gives a clear example of this. The failure of this film is due almost entirely to the producers' inability to think in terms of the cinematic implications of their production in any visual terms other than those of a simple-minded fascination with gadgetry.

the cavalry and the stagecoach part company. Though the cavalry detachment was large, the dominant impression was of its insignificance; and though all the horses were galloping, the effect was not of frantic action but of almost imperceptible movement.⁴

A corollary to this metaphor of bigness may also be indicated by referring briefly to another fact about the American West, that in this land mass larger than all Europe lies a population smaller than that of Great Britain. Clearly the size of the West does not imply a beneficent nature, and indeed the natural background against which the action of Western films is played out often appears not only indifferent but actively hostile to human endeavor. The innumerable films which dwell on the pathetic plight of those who for various reasons find themselves without water in the Great American Desert give a clear, if often unintentionally ludicrous, example; not so immediately apparent is the role played by the Indian in this context.

Generally speaking, the Indian in Western films falls into one of two roles. The first of these, a clearly recognizable descendant from the Noble Savage of eighteenth-century primitivism, one might call for convenience the "good Indian." The good Indian is a man who, like his noble savage ancestors, represents the various virtues that civilization lacks or, alternatively, which it is irrationally prejudiced against. Clearly this good Indian may be a convenient vehicle for the examination of racial prejudice, and recent good Indians in Western films have tended to become fairly obvious types of people who are unjustly discriminated against simply because their skin is of a different color. Sometimes, as in *Cheyenne Autumn*, the theme is ineptly handled; sometimes, as in *The Unforgiven*, the treatment is brilliant; but in any case, the figure of the Indian himself is not difficult to interpret. The same is not true of the second kind of Indian, the "bad Indian."

The bad Indian, whose blood-curdling yells strike terror to the hearts of lonely homesteaders and besieged emigrants in film after Western film, has permanently disillusioned many a humanitarian with the possibilities of the *genre*. Indians, he will say, are

⁴The recent re-make of *Stagecoach* was disappointing largely because the camera technique lacked Ford's subtlety and, significantly, concentrated on close-up shots.

not like that; and of course he is quite right. The bad Indian, unlike the good Indian, is not a person, even at one remove; he represents a visual statement of the hostility of nature and of the evil which lurks beneath the apparently inviting beauty of the West.

A glance at a cinematic cliché, familiar in its classic form to almost everyone, will make the point clearer. In this scene it is night, and the wagon train is drawn up in a circle around the cheerfully blazing campfire; perhaps a square dance is in progress or children are playing. Outside the perimeter of the wagons a group of men, including at least one frontiersman and one tenderfoot, are keeping guard. Suddenly an owl hoots. "Listen to that owl," the tenderfoot blurts out. "Sonny," the frontiersman says portentously, "the owl what made that noise ain't never had no feathers." "You mean . . . ?" the tenderfoot says, and the frontiersman gravely nods. Of course it's an Indian, skulking about the camp up to no good.

There is a certain charm to this classic moment, perhaps because of its ingenuousness, which almost totally disarms criticism; but the point ought to be clear that its concern is to demonstrate the evil which hides unseen in this apparently peaceful bucolic setting.⁵ It may not be so immediately evident that this scene is itself a serious (if often inept) parody of another cinematic cliché, perhaps most readily seen in nostalgic sentimental movies such as *Mrs. Miniver* or *Random Harvest* about English country life. In both these films, which though convenient are by no means unusual examples, the significance of the plot is emphasized by some kind of natural metaphor used to indicate man's harmony with nature. In *Mrs. Miniver* the essential goodness of English country life is indicated through a rose-growing contest; and in *Random Harvest* the hero recovers from amnesia when he revisits the simple country cottage, covered with roses and surrounded by singing birds, in which he had earlier been happy. In these two films positive values are indicated through metaphors of men's places in nature; indeed, in the latter the hero's amnesia is didactically seen as un-

⁵Nor is this cliché unique in emphasis. Two other equally hackneyed moments have precisely the same concern. In the first, an apparently empty landscape suddenly produces a crop of Indians; in the second (brilliantly handled in *Stagecoach*) a party of whites is congratulating itself on having successfully come through supposedly dangerous Indian country without a scratch when suddenly, without warning, one of the party is transfixed by an arrow.

natural, and his return to his proper identity is celebrated visually by his re-acceptance into the natural world. In the Western cinematic cliché, conversely, wisdom is achieved when one realizes that things are not as they seem and that the apparent beneficence and peace of nature are illusory. And indeed illusion might almost be said to be the great visual metaphor of good Western films, in which what is real becomes an obsessive question, visually as well as philosophically. Is the hooting which one hears really an owl, or is it an Indian? Is the stagecoach real, or is it only an illusion before the mountains?

For all its fairly straightforward cinematic presentation, then, the Western film is strikingly analogous to many other modern and more avowedly experimental films, in which the ambiguous nature of the commonly accepted certitudes of life is also presented in very similar visual terms. In *Last Year at Marienbad*, for instance, differences in time were indicated through positive and negative exposures of the same scene, effectively making the general visual point that our commonplace and unthinking ordering of experience through causal temporal sequence is only a convention, and indeed a convention which may on occasion prove confusing rather than revealing. An analogous visual technique was used in an older Western film, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, where the beginning and end camera shots of a traditional Western movie cliché—the two heroes riding into and out of town—were seen to be obviously unreal. In this film the street down which the cowboys rode did not pretend to be an actual street lined with real buildings but was clearly an imitation street lined with artificial flat stage scenery. This device, as used in *The Ox-Bow Incident*, is far more than a clever way of indicating the parabolic, “once-upon-a-time” quality of the story; nor in *Last Year at Marienbad* is it only an ingenious technique for presenting that hoariest of visual expository devices, the flashback. The technique bears much more resemblance to the Elizabethan play within a play, another long-disused technique which the modern theater has rediscovered in significantly visual terms—for this technique, on the stage as well as on film, provides one way of removing visual art from the restrictions of the realistic theater’s three-walled stage and, perhaps more significantly, of the restrictions imposed on all visual art by the tyranny of language.

Language, after all, is primarily a method of explaining experience in terms of temporal order: linguistically speaking, things happen before, after, or at the same time as other things, and it is impossible to imagine language divorced from some kind of temporal framework. Yet the temporal structure which language places about our apprehension of life is by no means the only possible way to comprehend experience; Freudian psychology has pointed out that when we are asleep our minds do not think temporally, and that the organizing principle of dreams is that of the association of ideas rather than that of temporal causality. When as in dreams we think in pictures, the Freudian would point out, our minds are not ruled by the conventional structure of language. One may very well argue, as many critics of the cinema do, that the development of the talking picture was the greatest disaster which could possibly have befallen the infant film industry; for it foisted upon a visual art form a technique which was primarily verbal and hence profoundly unsuitable.

And here is, I think, the secret of the perennial fascination of Westerns. For Western movies, far more than any other popular film genre, ask us to *see* their world rather than to talk about it. The conventions of the Western film are all aimed at asking us to understand the Western world visually rather than linguistically. The Western hero is not a talker; he understands the meaning of sense impressions without needing to discuss them. He moves in a world in which a single enigmatic hoofprint may signify either the presence of friendly cavalry or of hostile red men; in which it is not always certain that the hoot of an owl or the howl of a coyote may safely be disregarded; where a friendly landscape may suddenly reveal a horde of hostile Indians; where the oasis one sees in the desert may be only a mirage. It is, in short, a world which for all its superficial differences is, fundamentally, remarkably like our own. In both worlds apparent benevolence often conceals real hostility, sense impressions are ambiguous, and misapprehension is always dangerous. To understand either world is hard enough at the best of times; it becomes impossible when one places his faith in words rather than in vision.