

The Myth of the West in John Ford, USA

“There are no more clichés in Westerns than in anything else, and this applies to our moral approach, too. I don’t think I, nor anyone else, have always garbed my heroes in white and my villains in black and so forth. Good doesn’t always triumph over evil. It doesn’t in life and it doesn’t in all Westerns. Usually it does, but I think this is the way it should be. I have depicted some sad and tragic and unjust things in my Westerns, as have others.”

“These men are natural. They are themselves. They are rugged individualists. They live an outdoor life, and they don’t have to *conform*. I think one of the greatest attractions of the Western is that people like to identify themselves with these cowboys. We all have an escape complex. We all want to leave the troubles of our civilized world behind us. We envy those who can live the most natural ways of life, with nature, bravely and simply. . . . We all picture ourselves doing heroic things. And there are worse heroes than the Westerns for us to have.

“The Western heroes may be ‘larger than life,’ but so are many of our historical heroes, and we hate to dispel the public’s illusions. If we cast handsome men and attractive women in semibiographical roles, portraying persons who were really homely, we are doing no worse than has always been done in movies. I myself am a pretty ugly fellow. The public wouldn’t pay to see me on film. It is probable that the Westerns have been most inaccurate in overglamorizing and overdramatizing the heroes and villains of the period, and in playing up the gunfights. We could do without such stock characters as the hero who leaps from two stories onto his horse, fires twenty shots at a time from his six-shooter and has a comical, bearded rascal for his sidekick. But again, these are generalizations, which don’t apply to all Westerns.

“We have been charged with using too much violence, with too often achieving a good end through the unfortunate use of violent means, and this charge has merit, but, after all, those *were* violent times. I’ve tried not to overdo this and so have a lot of men who have turned out good Westerns. The very term ‘gunslinger’ makes us cringe, and we try to hold shoot-downs to a minimum. But men did carry guns and did shoot each other. There wasn’t much law for a long while, after all.”

“Actually, the thing most accurately portrayed in the Western is the land. I think you can say that the real star of my Westerns has always been the land. I have always taken pride in the photography of my films, and the photography of Westerns in general has often been outstanding, yet rarely draws credit. It is as if the visual effect itself was not important, which would make no sense at all. . . . Is there anything more beautiful than a long shot of a man riding a horse well, or a horse racing free across a plain? Is there anything wrong with people loving such beauty, whether they go experience it personally or absorb it through the medium of a movie? Fewer and fewer persons today are exposed to farm, open land, animals, nature. We bring the land to them. They escape to it through us. My favorite location is Monument Valley, which lies where Utah and Arizona merge. It has river, mountains, plains, desert, everything the land can offer. I feel at peace there. I have been all over the world, but I consider this the most complete, beautiful and peaceful place on earth.” –Interview with Bill Libby, 1964

The Six Creeds of the Western (Raymond Durnat and Scott Simmon, 1980)

Durnat and Simmon argue that six overarching sets of values shape the western as a genre, as often in violation of their ideals as in their practice:

1. *Covenantal*: The cowboy is shaped by Puritan ideals—inward self-possession; ethical consistency; physical as spiritual survival; calmness before a dangerous world.
2. *Hobbesian Nature*: If the world back East is orderly and enlightened, the West is still too often “Nature red in tooth and claw.”
3. *Jeffersonian Democracy*: Property, especially of the yeoman farmer, is sacred and idealized. The commoner is highly valued and the rural community in general has common sense and native goodness.

4. *Family as Bedrock beneath the Individual Hero*: The individual family is assumed to be the basic element of society, far more important than the social polity. The individualistic hero is on the border of the family, bound to it yet often still outside it.
5. *American Populism*: The common people are naturally moral and their livelihood should be protected; however, ethnic “others” are often left out of this equation and excluded.
6. *Manifest Destiny*: American expansion across the “unsettled” territories is assumed quite often as a given aspect of Enlightenment Progress.

General Global Questions

- Is the West founded upon violence? Is civilization? Should it be?
- How important are Jeffersonian, populist, and expansionist politics to Ford’s films?
- How important is family in these two films of Ford’s?
- Does it matter whether Ford’s picture of the West (or his topography for that matter) is historically accurate?
- Ford admitted to borrowing an aesthetic from Frederick Remington and Charles Russell for some of his films. He also kept a volume of Charles C. Schreyvogel's western paintings by his bedside. How do you think these artists shaped the way he and we see his Westerns?

Content Questions

***The Searchers* (1956) [119 min]**



1. What is significant about the opening song, “What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam? . . . Ride away. Ride away”?
2. Is Ethan a hero? By what standards?
3. How do Ethan’s loyalties to the lost cause of the Confederacy shape his personality?
4. What does Ethan actually believe? He seems as guided by the ways of the Comanche, as by his own code of vengeance. Is there something more?
5. How significant is Marty’s multi-racial status to the meaning of the film? What does “kin” mean anyway?
6. How important is the land itself to the film’s craft and meaning? Does it matter that Monument Valley is not in (West) Texas?

7. Does *The Searchers* tell us anything true about the nature of sexual violence and of miscegenation?
8. What purpose does the subplot between Marty and Laurie serve in the film?
9. Some have argued that the one false note in the film is the scenes with Wild Goose Flying in the Night Sky, especially the scene in which she is rolled down the hill by Marty. Would you agree?
10. Some have suggested that Scar is actually Ethan's doppelgänger. Would you agree?
11. Where is Debbie's home? By what criteria can we decide this?
12. Why does Ford end the film with Ethan outside the family home looking in?

***The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1961) [123 min]**



1. Why do you think Ford chose to shoot *Liberty Valence* in black-and-white?
2. How do Ransom (Ranse) and Tom represent two different aspects of western expansion and progress? Whom do we trust more as the movie unfolds?
3. How trustworthy of a narrator is Ranse? What role does memory play as compared to that of Huw's in *How Green was My Valley*?
4. Why is the cactus flower such an important image in this film?
5. How would you characterize Hallie? What are her motivations? Whom does she finally love in the last analysis?
6. Is Peabody an idealist or a realist? What does his character suggest about the West?
7. Why is it significant that Tom burns down the wing he was building? Does it go beyond the obvious disappointment in love?
8. Some have argued that *Liberty Valence* is not only Ford's swan song, but the swan song of the classic western. What do you think?
9. How does Ranse compare to the Young Lincoln or Wyatt Earp?
10. "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." What do we conclude about these lines?