

During that time generations of young people inhabited movie houses on Saturday mornings and afternoons, thrilling to the exploits of Tom Mix, Ken Maynard, Hoot Gibson, Tim McCoy, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, William Boyd, and many another courageous cowboy star. The “B” Westerns were subject to much contemporary criticism, not the least of which was due to their generally low artistic quality. Though some recent critics have expressed fondness for the “B”s, they were made with such haste and in such quantity that most of them could not possibly claim to be works of high art. Quite often, in point of fact, they shamelessly exaggerated, distorted, and romanticized to the degree that, in them, the reality of the Old West was virtually obscured from view. What could be more absurdly unrealistic, for example, than the series of “singing cowboy” movies—Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were the best known but hardly the only “singing cowboys” of the time—that were so popular from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s?

Another frequently voiced criticism of the “B”s was that they undermined the morals of the young; such movies necessarily relied on violence as a standard plot device and tended to glamorize outlaws and outlawry. Such complaints, of course, are often directed at the various forms of popular culture.

The “B” Westerns, in any event, were killed, not by critics and moralists, but by television and the breakup of the big-studio system. By the early 1950s the main function of the “B”s, to provide weekend entertainment for restless youngsters, had been appropriated by television. The last Western to be designated as a “B” was filmed in 1954.

Whatever their weaknesses, the “B”s constitute a major component in the history of Western movies. They addressed audiences whose members were ordinarily at an impressionable age, and unquestionably they reinforced in the minds of those audiences the key elements of the western mythos. Moreover, they apparently supplied exactly what Americans in the 1930s and 1940s were looking for: fantasy, escape, and a consoling interpretation of their nation’s past.

Growing up alongside the “B”s was another strain of Western movie that critics have viewed more sympathetically: the full-scale, feature-length, fully, sometimes lavishly financed “serious” Western. One of the first of these was *The Spoilers* (1914), based on the Rex Beach novel. One of the best (of those that have survived the ravages of time, at any rate) was *Hell’s Hinges* (1916), starring William S. Hart, perhaps the greatest of the early Western actors. The movie has strong religious-allegorical overtones, in that it deals with the corruption of a weak-willed clergyman in an evil western town known as Hell’s Hinges; the hero, Blaze Tracey (Hart), who is in love with the clergyman’s sister, takes vengeance on the town by burning it to the ground. The photography of *Hell’s Hinges*, combined with an imag-

inative storyline, makes it the best of the extant Hart Westerns, and one of the best of the early “serious” Westerns.

A landmark event in the history of Western movies was the release, in 1923, of James Cruze’s *The Covered Wagon*, which dramatized the story of the nineteenth-century pioneers’ overland journey to California. Stun­ningly photographed in Nevada and Utah, *The Covered Wagon* introduced the “epic” element to Western film. Though the story itself often seems contrived by current standards, the picture was an enormous box-office suc­cess, and it was unquestionably responsible for the proliferation of Westerns during the next decade; studio production of Westerns in 1924, for in­stance, tripled that of the preceding year.

“Serious” Westerns—especially those in the epic category—abounded in the 1920s. Some of the more notable ones were *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1925), starring Tom Mix; George B. Seitz’s *The Vanishing American* (1927); Raoul Walsh’s *In Old Arizona* (1929) ; Victor Fleming’s *The Virginian* (1929), a “talkie” starring Gary Cooper; and King Vidor’s *Billy the Kid* (1930). A much-ballyhooed epic, released in 1930, was Raoul Walsh’s *The Big Trail*, which featured a promising young actor who went by the name of John Wayne. *The Big Trail*, after its publicity build-up, was a commercial flop, a circumstance that resulted in two unfortunate side effects: Wayne did not receive another starring role in a “serious” Western for nearly a decade, being consigned instead to toil for years in the “B”s; and the studios, by and large, shied away from big-budget Westerns in the 1930s.

In fact it was not until 1939 that the Western recovered fully from *The Big Trail* disaster. In that year Cecil B. DeMille’s *Union Pacific* appeared; so did Henry King’s *Jesse James*, George Marshall’s *Destry Rides Again*, and Michael Curtiz’s *Dodge City*. And, most auspicious of all, John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, with an impressive performance by the rehabilitated John Wayne, was released in 1939. *Stagecoach* has been discounted by some for its roman­tic portrayal of the West, but its immense importance in restoring the West­ern to a position of preeminence in the movie industry in the late 1930s cannot be doubted. Nor can the contributions of its director, John Ford, be questioned.

John Ford was, quite simply, the greatest director in the history of the Western movie genre. Ford first went to Hollywood in 1915, where he acted, under the name Jack Ford, in several D. W. Griffith films. In 1917 he began his directing career, churning out one- and two-reelers, many of them Westerns. His first Western feature was *The Iron Horse* (1924), a silent epic about the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Other Ford Westerns followed in the late 1920s, but during the 1930s he moved on to other topics and genres in his pictures. The success of *Stagecoach* changed all that.

Following the Second World War, Ford made a remarkable series of superior Westerns. He formed a kind of stock company of actors and technicians that periodically journeyed to Monument Valley, his favorite shooting location. (Ford, among others, was responsible for an oft-repeated jest in the 1940s that the typical Western movie was set in Texas, filmed in Arizona, and financed in California.) The first of the series, *My Darling Clementine* (1946), starring Henry Fonda and Victor Mature, is the best of all the Wyatt Earp-OK Corral movies. *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950), all starring John Wayne, constitute Ford's so-called U. S. Cavalry trilogy. *Fort Apache*, in particular, is a rich, provocative work that marks a turning point in Ford's portrayal of the American Indian; in *Fort Apache*, for the first time in the American cinema, the Indian is treated fairly, sympathetically, and without condescension. *Wagonmaster* (1950), starring Ben Johnson, a somewhat scaled-down version of the 1920s *Covered Wagon* epic, was Ford's personal favorite of all his films.

The critical consensus, however, seems to favor *The Searchers* (1956) as Ford's greatest picture. *The Searchers* is, arguably, the best Western movie of all time. Certainly the role of the Indian-hating Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* brought forth John Wayne's career-best performance as an actor (a judgment Wayne agreed with, incidentally). The film's photography, featuring the Monument Valley backdrop, is excellent. The movie's complex theme, however, is the primary factor in its greatness. John Wayne's portrayal of Ethan Edwards, with psychosexual implications oozing from his racial hatred, is truly memorable. But what is most impressive about the film, viewed from the perspective of the 1980s, is its continuing relevance to a world in which individual and collective "hearts of darkness" lurk ubiquitously.

The decade and a half after the Second World War, 1945 to 1960, was a period of considerable change for the Western. As one critic has put it, previously ignored subjects such as "sex, neuroses, and racial conscience" began to seep through the genre's widening crevices. Howard Hughes's *The Outlaw* (1943) and King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1947) brought sex into the Western with much fanfare and not a little controversy. Such bizarre versions of the genre as Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) certainly qualified as neurotic. And as previously mentioned, even John Ford, who in *Stagecoach* had used Indians simply as background props to validate the principle of white supremacy, began to portray Native Americans with seriousness and sensitivity.

An important trend in the Western genre following the Second World War was the emergence of the "adult Western." Because of the popularity of the "B" Westerns among young people of the time, the industry felt com-

pelled to make clear that some Westerns anyway—those that focused on psychology rather than action—would appeal to adults as well as to children. The best-known of the “adult Westerns” of the 1950s were Henry King’s *The Gunfighter* (1950), Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon* (1952), and George Stevens’s *Shane* (1953).

*The Gunfighter*, starring Gregory Peck, is a stark drama of an aging gunman who must face the fact that he is very nearly over the hill. Jimmy Ringo (Peck) returns to his hometown to visit his wife and son, whom he has not seen in a long time. In the end he is gunned down, unfairly, by a young man who wants the reputation of having killed the great Ringo. Ringo allows the boy to go free, secure in the knowledge that living the harried life of a gunfighter will be punishment enough for his action.

*High Noon*, starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly, is perhaps the most controversial Western ever made. It has been interpreted variously, usually in terms of political allegory. Critics either love it or despise it; there appears to be no middle ground. Certainly the scenes in *High Noon* in which Will Kane (Cooper) prepares to shoot it out with the Miller gang, to save a town that does not deserve to be saved, are among the most suspenseful the Western genre has to offer.

Adapted from the classic novel by Jack Schaefer, *Shane* is generally acknowledged to be the finest celluloid portrayal of the Western hero. The title character appears mysteriously at the beginning of the film, defeats the evil cattle baron and his hired guns, and then rides off into the sunset at the close. With classical simplicity, the movie establishes a pattern of behavior for the Western hero and etches into the viewer’s consciousness the image of the hero as frontier savior.

The post-Second World War period was a time of rich innovation and development at all levels of the genre. Not only did John Ford do his best work during this era and the “adult Western” come of age, but a number of talented lesser directors, whose works are only now beginning to be appreciated, were active during the period. I am thinking, specifically, of Anthony Mann, Delmer Daves, and Budd Boetticher. Mann directed a series of excellent *Westerns*—*Winchester 73* (1950) and *Bend of the River* (1952), for example—starring James Stewart. Daves’s contributions include *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *3:10 to Yuma* (1956), and Boetticher’s half-dozen low-budget Westerns with Randolph Scott during the 1950s—the last, *Comanche Station* (1960), is the best—are all finely crafted films.

One of the great directors in the history of American motion pictures, Howard Hawks, also made two notable Westerns during the post-war era: *Red River* (1948) and *Rio Bravo* (1959). *Red River*, starring John Wayne and Montgomery Clift, is the best of the cattle-drive epics. Regal in length and pacing, the movie is one of the classics of Western film. It supplied John

Wayne with—next to his portrayal of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*—his most memorable role. *Rio Bravo*, though it has been highly praised by influential critics, does not, in my estimation, measure up to the classic stature of *Red River*.

As the decade of the 1950s drew to a close, the Western found itself, as it often had before, in an ambiguous position. A rapidly evolving world made the Western's moral and geographic landscape seem, to many, anachronistic. Technology had changed the nature of the motion picture industry drastically, and of all movie genres, the Western was affected most adversely by those changes. The Western would undergo radical surgeries in the 1960s and 1970s, and predictions of the death of the Western would be rife in the 1980s. In the first six decades of its existence, however, the Western movie generated a grand, gaudy, and occasionally glorious history.

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