

Examining the Mythic Past: 1950 Westerns and Interdisciplinary Interpretation

Tom Foley
History

Popular American cinema provides a glimpse into the process of national mythmaking. It illuminates how filmmakers have conceptualized bygone eras, framed events, and demonstrated particular philosophies under the often subtle guise of engaging films. American moviegoers indirectly supported and allowed themselves to be influenced by the ideas presented in the moving picture arguments released by filmmakers and studios. Since the first blockbuster, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), stormed into theaters like the western gang of railroad thieves it portrayed, Westerns provided an important venue for American cultural discourse and a powerful incubator for national myths.

Between 1946 and 1962, Westerns dominated American cinema. The genre accounted for approximately 30 percent of major Hollywood films between 1947 and 1950 and over 50 debuted each year until a steady decline beginning in 1958 (explained by the increasing number of serial Westerns on rapidly developing television networks).¹ With that popularity, Westerns became amplifiers for conversations on national issues. Cinema scholar Stanley Corkin notes that Westerns were “not only sensitive to the currents of historical change but also expressive of shifts in national mood and circumstance.”² The relationship of the genre to the time and place of America’s mythologized self birth enabled the Western to be particularly powerful, enticing, and illuminating. Westerns portrayed events – fictional, factual, and fictional billed as factual – usually from the second half of the 19th century, the era of American national adolescence, so to speak, after the Civil War and before the advent of the automobile. Since the golden era of Western film, the idea of the lone cowboy has leached into American political and cultural space, patrolling the range, acting righteously even if doing so requires a descent into the savage behavior of the dehumanized Other, upholding an ambiguous and necessarily racist (according to the cowboy) moral code. Presidents have played rancher and ridden horses in order to appear authentically American, and for a time, the go-it-alone mentality of the noble gunfighter devoted to the cause of the little guy and progress became national policy in the international arena.

Scholars from the related disciplines of history, American studies, English, and film studies have interpreted Westerns to learn something about the makers and viewers of the genre. Their findings reveal much about cultural norms and political philosophies, demonstrate various policy scenarios being tested, and establish central themes in how Americans understood their own past.

¹ Stanley Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 2.

²Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 2.

Corkin, in his 2004 book *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, observes that Westerns “are most revealing in the way they represent their epoch of production.”³ Indeed, Western films embodied an American cultural language produced and accepted by filmmakers and audiences alike which now exposes for interdisciplinary scholars latent information not so much about the eras portrayed in film as the time during which and the people by and for whom they were made. In studying these films and their critical reception, we gain unique insight into the political issues and cultural controversies of that era in America.

In his book *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, Robert Pippin contends that many Westerns employ a “core narrative” involving three main themes: “the conquest by force of arms of the aboriginal people”; “the conquest by labor, persistence, violence, and technology of an extraordinarily hostile, inhospitable natural world”; and “the conquest of inner nature, the need to establish a stable political order.”⁴ Pippin’s three elements of the core narrative of Westerns matches the three prominent lenses through which scholars have examined Western cinema in the 1950s, the high water mark of the popularity and prevalence of the genre.

Historiography

Interdisciplinary scholarship on Western and American history and film is prodigious and thus it is necessary to sample a sliver of it. Richard Slotkin’s 1992 tome *Gunfighter Nation*, Stanley Corkin’s 2004 work *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick’s 1999 text *Celluloid Indians*, Robert Pippin’s 2010 published lecture *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, and Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann’s 2012 book *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral* all examine Western cinema in attempts to better understand American politics, culture, and policy in the 1950s.⁵ All of these authors examine films from across the twentieth century, though importantly, all devote significant attention to films from the early to mid 1950s, a time Corkin called the “golden age of the golden age” of Hollywood Westerns.⁶ Collectively, these authors’ examinations of the films *Broken Arrow* (1950), *Shane* (1953), and *The Searchers* (1956) elucidate the richness of the genre as a primary source for the study of United States social and political thought during the 1950s, a time when the issues related to the Cold War, McCarthyism, civil rights for blacks and Indians, and violence in society dominated the public psyche.

Each of the authors (with the exception of Richard Slotkin, whose work is impressively broad and nuanced and employs a spectrum of lenses) mentioned utilize a particular lens in their examinations of Westerns. Pippin is particularly attentive to the political philosophies of the filmmakers Howard Hawks (not addressed in this paper) and John Ford (director of *The*

³ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 3.

⁴ Robert B. Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 105-106.

⁵ Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral: Western Cinema and the Environment* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

⁶ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 127.

Searchers) while Corkin parses out indicators about the Cold War sentiments of both producers and consumers of Westerns. Kilpatrick examines Westerns with an eye to the representations of American Indians and how Westerns cemented some stereotypes while simultaneously attempting to reverse other racist characterizations, and mirrored U.S. policy towards American Indians in the 20th century. Heumann and Murray uncover the central ecological themes and environmental underpinnings throughout the genre and back into the actual history of the West.

These authors elaborate on the foundations of the study of Western cinema and the American West constructed by the likes of Slotkin, John G. Cawelti, and Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye.⁷ Additionally, Gary A. Yoggy and Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson edited collections of essays on the Western genre, both published in 1998.⁸ In the case of Yoggy's collection, specific actors are the focus of analysis while Buscombe and Pearson concentrate mainly on subgenres of the Western – musicals in an article by Peter Stanfield, television hits in a piece by William Boddy, and German films based on the Western themed novels of German author Karl May by Tassilo Schneider.

As Christopher Frayling noted in his article “The American Western and American Society,” Westerns have been “a legitimate subject for serious academic study” since the 1950s.⁹ As time moves farther from the 1950s, however, additional context becomes less ephemeral as our understanding of the past grows deeper and more nuanced. The combination of broad studies on the phenomenon of the Western with focused examinations of particular elements of Western cinema created the foundation and the framework necessary to support the use of analytical lenses that both contextualize the films and use them as context. Pearson and Buscombe included some nuanced examinations of the general themes and portrayals in Western cinema, with articles on the racial and ethnic messages in “pro-Indian” Westerns, by Steve Neale, and the impact of the Western on American advertising, by Colin McArthur. In their own analyses, Pippin, Kilpatrick, Murray and Heumann, and Corkin represent an elaboration and expansion on the studies included in Pearson and Buscombe's collection and the interdisciplinary studies of Westerns as a broader popular phenomenon.

In addition to the existing historiography of Western film, it is important to note that the scholarship of the authors included in the examination converses and is indebted (reflected by the citations and deference of the authors) to New Western historical scholarship, especially the work by Patricia Limerick in *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987) and Donald Worster in *Under Western Skies* (1994). With the addition of historian Ned Blackhawk's recent book *Violence Over the Land* (2006), which focuses on the unifying theme of violence in the American West,

⁷ John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971); Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds., *The Book of Westerns* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1996).

⁸ Gary A. Yoggy, ed., *Back in the Saddle: Essays on Western Film and Television Actors* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998); Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson, eds., *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London, UK: British Film Institute, 1998).

⁹ Christopher Frayling, “The American Western and American Society,” in *Cinema, Politics and Society*, eds. Philip Davies and Brian Neves (New York: Manchester University Press, 1981), 136.

one has reason to hope that further examinations of Westerns and their use and their portrayal of violence, both as an attempt to strengthen myth and to provide a vehicle for allegory to a different time period, will prove fruitful.

The Western as a Primary Source

While the Western is typically set in a historic place or framed by historical events, it is more part of history than a representation of history. Westerns reveal more about the period of their development and creation than they do about the period they portray. Richard Slotkin notes that the mythologizing Western, and more specifically the Western that depicts a conflict with Indians, “provides a symbolic surrogate for a range of domestic social and political conflicts” of the contemporary era.¹⁰ That the Cold War as a conflict and the Western as a genre rose and declined over a similar time period was not coincidence, he argues. Especially in the nascent years of the Soviet-American rivalry, specifically 1948 to 1954, Slotkin writes that “there was more or less [a] continual exchange of symbols, themes, and concerns between the discourse of politics and movie production.”¹¹ Filmmakers borrowed topics from headlines and buried them in allegorical Westerns and tested both popular and unfamiliar political philosophies disguised under a Stetson hat.

As Slotkin observes, Westerns “provided a frame in which alternative approaches to the political and ideological problems of the Cold War could be imaginatively entertained.”¹² The already mythologized past of the West in American memory, nurtured over time in popular culture by dime novels and Wild West Shows, provided a rich and relatively safe space “for ideological play,” that was enticing, in the words of Slotkin, “precisely because a wide range of beliefs and agendas [could] be entertained there.”¹³ In a way, the audience existed as the only law patrolling and governing the figurative plains of the Western cinema screen, enforcing its order by attendance referendums and executing unfavorable philosophies with disappointing ticket sales. Slotkin notes that the modification of a genre, something that happened in the 1940s as the Western gave way to the war film only for the two to cross-pollinate thematic and narrative devices later in the decade (largely nurtured by John Ford), can be interpreted as active engineering of entertainment on the part of both the producer and consumer. The filmmaker draws upon current concerns and upcoming ideas and the audience influences the evolution of the genre by affirming or rejecting the new elements and ideas proposed through film. To Slotkin, the Western can be conceptualized as a form of mass conversation between viewers and film creators.

Similar to Slotkin, Stanley Corbin recognizes the Western as a demonstration of popular culture and as a public conversation – stretched out over multiple film openings, perhaps –

¹⁰ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 13.

¹¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 347.

¹² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 347.

¹³ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 350.

between audience and auteur. Corkin demonstrates how “Westerns and, more generally, popular culture are not only sensitive to the currents of historical change but also expressive of shifts in national mood and circumstance.”¹⁴ Corkin contends that the Western provides insight into the popular political and cultural conversations dominant during the films’ production, and that Westerns as “popular film narratives helped audiences assimilate major events and both predict reactions and ideological orientations.”¹⁵ A public weariness about violence after World War II could be gauged – or encouraged – by a cowboy tired of gun fighting and riding alone across the silver screen. Likewise, a policy of intervention into another’s conflict could be entertained by ruminating over a gunslinger’s debate whether to head out onto the range to help the less fortunate one more time. Corkin suggests that by posing these sorts of questions, Westerns tended to “take a more indirect approach, attempting to touch audiences beneath their explicit engagement with the world, offering narratives that resonate at a symbolic or allegorical level.”¹⁶ The gentle massaging of mass minds by Western films observed by Corkin relates to the dialogue between creator and consumer noted by Slotkin. For both, the conversation is revealing about the state of collective identity and ideology. Fears and desires, possibilities and unthinkable scenarios can be parsed and interpreted from the screen.

Like both Slotkin and Corkin, Robert Pippin observes the opportunity present in Western cinema to explore “the mythic framework,” “collective self-knowledge,” and enacted “political psychology” of American society in the 1950s, producers and consumers alike.¹⁷ In Pippin’s view, Westerns offer the opportunity to confront the issues at hand indirectly by observing a symbolic conflict in film. The conscience is confronted with characters decorated with “psychological attitudes, aspirations, and anxieties constitutive of a historic political actuality,” and as a result the audience is able to play out reality in a fictive scenario where all the characters occupy positions possible in the real world. From Pippin’s perspective, Western film, created by persons attuned to the political, social, and cultural turmoil of the time, allowed for a test run of sorts for the audience, able to gauge the possibilities and acceptability of certain actions. With the mythology of the West as a popular and relatable vehicle, political philosophies and new permutations could be easily packaged and unnoticeably (for the most part) delivered.

For English scholar Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, Western films of the 1950s were not so much a test case for possible political ideas as much as they epitomized the popular stereotypes of American Indians of the time and also influenced and echoed U.S. government policy concerning Native American tribes. Kilpatrick observes that from the 1920s through the 1950s, as the U.S. government moved from a policy of cultural preservation and self-determination for tribes and bands of American Indians to a program of termination and strongly encouraged assimilation to a preference for Native American autonomy and self-determination, Western films mirrored those

¹⁴ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 2.

¹⁵ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 2.

¹⁶ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 6.

¹⁷ Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, 102.

developments with their characterizations of Indians.¹⁸ Unlike Slotkin, Corkin, and Pippin, to Kilpatrick, the Western does not represent a testing ground for political ideas as much as it functions as a tool to establish, reinforce, and (later) attempt to correct stereotypes of American Indians. In crafting the Western as a political allegory for contemporary times, filmmakers frequently depicted American Indians as the unknown and savage “Other” enemy in place of real world ideological foes or as the noble but helpless “Other” in place of third world nations, supposedly in need of pity, intervention, or cultural correction. Whether with the sympathetic and knowledgeable Tom Jeffords (Jimmy Stewart) in *Broken Arrow* or the hateful Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers*, the idea that the frontier is to be a white space and that it could not be “tamed” without a degree of once necessary but now unacceptable racism is portrayed and promoted at the expense of Indian identity in the Westerns of the 1950s, according to Kilpatrick.

As for Murray and Heumann, they approach the Western genre somewhat differently. Instead of rejecting a factual examination of the portrayal of the West and embracing an interpretative look at how the content and the context of the productions are mutually engaged, the authors of *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral* encourage viewing Western cinema through an eco-critical lens to realize the centrality of the environment and of ecological conflict to the historical West. From *Shane* to *The Searchers* (1956) on through *Pale Rider* (1985) and *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), Murray and Heumann argue that an environmental struggle – man against the land, man against man over land – forms the basic structure of Western conflict, both as it is portrayed in film and as it played out in the past. Patricia Limerick supports their emphasis on the influence and centrality of the land, having written in *The Legacy of Conquest* that if Western filmmakers truly wanted “to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would be about real estate. John Wayne would have been neither a gunfighter nor a sheriff, but a surveyor, speculator, or claims lawyer.”¹⁹ Limerick frames the battle for land and against land as one for “legitimacy – for the right to claim for oneself and sometimes for one’s group the status of legitimate beneficiary of Western resources.”²⁰ In this regard, Murray and Heumann echo this sentiment for the centrality of the land, its resources, and its ecology. They demonstrably assert that the land and its ecosystems act as protagonist and antagonist, villain, victim, and puppet master in Western cinema. Without environmental conflict, they contend, the familiar – mythic and historic – conflicts of the West would be significantly different.

Three Films: *Broken Arrow*, *Shane*, *The Searchers*

Given the different approaches and some related perspectives these authors maintain in their examinations of the Western film genre, it is useful to examine their critical views on and interpretations of three films over which their analyses overlap.

¹⁸ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 40-41, 55-57.

¹⁹ Limerick as quoted by Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 27.

²⁰ Limerick as quoted by Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 27.

Broken Arrow

Released on the eve of the Korean War in 1950, *Broken Arrow* starred Jimmy Stewart and was directed by Delmer Daves. The film was written by one of the blacklisted Hollywood Ten, Albert Maltz and for Maltz's work to be picked up by a studio, his friend Michael Blanford had to sign it as his own script. Blanford reportedly took no money for this.²¹ The film tells the story of a white cowboy, Tom Jeffords (Stewart) who desires a peaceful coexistence between white settlers and the Chiricahua Apache, led by the noble, brave, and articulate Cochise (Jeff Chandler). Jeffords, knowledgeable of Chiricahua Apache customs and fluent in their language, demonstrates "humanitarian concerns [that] take precedence over racial and political distinctions."²² Jeffords seeks to maintain peace and facilitate a treaty between the Apache and the United States, both of whom claim traditional Apache land. In the process of bridging the cultural gap and bringing to the table the two sides led by Cochise and U.S. Army general Oliver Howard (Basil Ruysdael), Jeffords marries an Apache woman, Sonseeahray (Debra Paget). Sonseeahray is murdered in an ambush set by white settlers targeting Cochise and Jeffords.²³ Cochise stops Jeffords from murdering some of the wounded assailants, seeks to preserve the peace and along with General Howard, assure Jeffords his wife's killers will be dealt with justly. The film ends with Jeffords riding into the West, alone again.

Jacquelyn Kilpatrick cites *Broken Arrow* as an example of how politics, perception, and policy influenced and were influenced by filmic representations of American Indians. Maltz, according to Kilpatrick, injected into *Broken Arrow* much of his own experience with the McCarthy hearings and the paranoia over possible Communist infiltration, thus crafting the film as a resistance to McCarthyism. "Stereotypes were reinvestigated and cultural norms, such as the righteousness of manifest destiny, were questioned," Kilpatrick notes of the film as it attempted to portray American Indians as "multidimensional human beings," a monumental shift from decades of silent, savage, and subhuman portrayals.²⁴ The result of Hollywood under attack from McCarthyism was, writes Kilpatrick, a run of films "with a startling degree of tolerance."²⁵ There was, however, a downside to this promotion of understanding: a prevalent patronizing tone. Kilpatrick quotes Ralph and Natasha Friar, authors of the article "White Man Speaks with Split Tongue, Forked Tongue, Tongue of Snake in *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in Movies*, that "[t]he worst ally and the best enemy the Indians could have is a sympathetic friend."²⁶ In the case of *Broken Arrow*, a voice over at the start of the film by lead Jimmy Stewart informs the viewer that all dialogue will be in English, for the benefit of viewers, though it is to be understood that the Apache characters would have spoken in their native

²¹ Michael Walker, "The Westerns of Delmer Daves," in *The Book of Westerns*, ed. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum, 1996), 124.

²² Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 104.

²³ Walker, "The Westerns of Delmer Daves," 128.

²⁴ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 58.

²⁵ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 58.

²⁶ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 58.

tongue. According to Kilpatrick, however, this is disruptive and disingenuous, as it weakens the Indian characters' voices, since they are already being compromised and altered from a natural rhythm and process. What is useful, Kilpatrick remarks, about *Broken Arrow*'s linguistic technique is that the Indian characters are able to appear intelligent, articulate, witty, and admirable, a significant shift from decades of silent Indians whose solemnity came to stand for savagery, stupidity, and subhumanness. While the Indians are notably *not* the villains in *Broken Arrows*, they are not the protagonists or the victors, either. According to Kilpatrick, the Indians in *Broken Arrow* are not only to be "reckoned with, but they can also be reasoned with."²⁷

While understanding and peace between whites and Indians became imaginable in *Broken Arrow*, the idea of coexistence, particularly in a romantic or marital setting, remained impossible. The death of Sonseeahray and the avoidance of interracial bliss reinforced the idea that the "other" remained a member of an unacceptable caste and ultimately doomed.²⁸ While the film questioned the merits and morality of manifest destiny, the inevitability of an Indian past relegated to the pages of history remained the standard and would until the 1980s and 1990s. Though humanized, Indians in *Broken Arrow* are still damned. As it relates to McCarthyism, however, the film's ending – with Jeffords returning to the opened range and Sonseeahray's murders at the hands of justice – suggests that the bullies ultimately will find themselves undone by the alliance of cooperation and understanding forged by embattled, honorable, and well-intentioned persons. Jeffords is assured by both Cochise and General Howard that the killers will be dealt with, perhaps a salute to screenwriters suffering under accusations of socialism.

Richard Slotkin writes that *Broken Arrow* birthed the "Cult of the Indian," a type of Western that focused sympathetically on Indian themes as a vehicle to discuss civil rights while the "Cult of the Cavalry" films that dealt with armed men forging into the wild dealt with issues related to the Cold War.²⁹ Unlike Kilpatrick, Slotkin perceives the death of Sonseeahray as "redemptive" (though obviously not for Sonseeahray) in that it demonstrates the strength of the alliance and cooperation between Indian and white in the interests of peace.³⁰ Slotkin observes that in *Broken Arrow*, however, the white characters do not decide Indians possess humanity and dignity until they see their "whiteness." Jeffords realizes "Apache could cry like White men," General Howard respects the military ability of Cochise, and Jeffords' "white ways and tools" charm Sonseeahray.³¹ For the audience, Cochise's white qualities are magnified by his portrayal by a white actor (Jeff Chandler) "whose pale eyes are not concealed and whose color and physiognomy are distinctly different from the Indians in [Cochise's] encampment."³² *Broken Arrow*, Slotkin asserts, does not advocate acceptance and understanding of difference so much as it encourages uncovering and celebrating sameness. Assimilation remained largely a one-way exercise. In a way, *Broken Arrow* presaged the U.S. policy of termination, whereby the

²⁷ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 59.

²⁸ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 59.

²⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 377.

³⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 377.

³¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 375-376.

³² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 375.

government dismantled agencies that served tribal communities and abolished relations between Congress and many individual tribes and bands. As Kilpatrick writes, “in the fifties the best Indians were those that had assimilated.”³³ Both Slotkin and Kilpatrick recognize the sympathetic but pathetic message of *Broken Arrow*, that a good Indian is a white Indian, echoing the sentiment of Ralph and Natasha Friar that a sympathetic white made for either the “worst ally or the best enemy.”³⁴

Unlike Slotkin and Kilpatrick’s contextualization of *Broken Arrow* within the contemporary issues of Indian policy and McCarthyism, Stanley Corkin argues that “*Broken Arrow* more directly speaks to the international terms of the Cold War, as it offers a range of analogies between the American West and the world, between Native Americans and other presumed adversaries in the United States, between the nativists of the nineteenth century and the cold warriors of the twentieth.”³⁵ Corkin contends that the social utility of violence and whether peace can or should be pursued in a violent world form major themes in *Broken Arrow*. Films like *Broken Arrow*, Corkin suggests, examine the shift of proponents of total disarmament to the side advocating some form of military defense during the Cold War, “as [such films] depict a world that *should* respond to rational appeals to avoid confrontation, but, because of factors of custom and impulse, will not. In such a world, those who lay down their guns may become victims of the guns of others.”³⁶ Jeffords experiences this truth asserted by Corkin.

Corkin, Slotkin, and Kilpatrick recognize three influential contexts for the same film, and each emphasizes the different lenses to different degrees of importance. With film as both an art and an argument and subject to interpretation, it is more pragmatic to accept all three – McCarthyism, U.S. Indian policy, and the Cold War – as adding to the formation and messaging of the film than to reject one or exclude another. Given the invariability of filmic interpretation and the subtle and allegoric representations in films, dealing with possible seems safer than asserting the definite.

Shane

George Stevens’ 1953 *Shane* often garners mention as one of the greatest Western films of the 20th century. Starring Alan Ladd as the title character, the film juxtaposes homesteading cattle farmers, personified by the Starrett family (Jean Arthur, Van Heflin, and Brandon de Wilde as Marian, Joe, and Joey, respectively), against the corporate free-range ranching tycoon Rufus Ryker (Emile Meyer). Shane rides in across the landscape to the Starrett farm from an unspecified, but apparently violent past – Shane no sooner takes a drink of water when he spins around, hand to holster, at the sound of young Joey adjusting his toy rifle. Nevertheless, Shane assists the Starretts as they attempt to stave off ill fortune and Ryker’s attempts to dominate the landscape and the profit possibilities with his free-range cattle. By siding with the homesteading

³³ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 56.

³⁴ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 58.

³⁵ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 106.

³⁶ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 109.

Starretts and their neighborly compatriots against the tycoon and his henchmen, Shane is inevitably drawn back into the violent life he sought to leave behind. Shane, who seems to have affections for Mrs. Starrett, engages Ryker and his psychopathic hired gun, Wilson, but only after unfairly knocking out Joe Starrett to preventing the farmer from challenging Ryker and Wilson alone and outmatched.³⁷ Shane succeeds in killing the cattle baron and his henchmen, though not without being wounded himself. With blood flowing down his arm, Shane tells young Joey, who asks him to stay as a friend and a neighbor, that “there’s no going back” for him, having realized his identity as a man of with a history of violence is, inescapable. He does, however, tell Joey to assure his mother that “there aren’t any more guns in the valley.” Shane leaves a place he cannot remain safe for the habitation of peaceful homesteaders like the Starretts.³⁸

Slotkin contends that *Shane* cements the good gunfighter as a replicable hero and the trope of the well-intentioned and necessary but wrong action presaging a greater moral triumph in the myth of the American West. Shane’s past is mysterious, but his dress and speech – symbols of refinement and gentility – certify his position on the side of the good and by proxy the protagonists, the Starretts and other homesteaders. The film portrays Shane as a man worn by his past as a gunfighter, a label attributed to him by men on both sides of the range struggle. In all cases, the epitaph indicates a wariness and mistrust on the part of the speaker, a neutral term acknowledging potential and waiting for a signal of decision and intent.

Shane, therefore, is emblematic of the “gunfighter mystique” in America, a mythic vision of the past that influenced much nationally, from foreign policy and intervention ideas to gun rights. Educating Mrs. Starrett about firearms, Shane tells her his weapon and those like it are merely tools, and that a gun is only “as good or as bad as the man that uses it.”³⁹ The message, thus, according to Slotkin, is that “‘a good man with a gun’ is in every sense the best of men – an armed redeemer who is the sole vindicator of the ‘liberties of the people,’ the ‘indispensable man’ in the quest of progress.”⁴⁰

For Shane, through Slotkin’s lens, his desire to “settle down” is overwhelmed by his drive to “sav[e] the valley.”⁴¹ Demonstrated by his affection for Mrs. Starrett, Shane need not be perfect to be a hero. He can covet his neighbor’s wife, be motivated to act against Ryker with her first in his mind (reinforced by his last words to Joey, “Tell your mother there are no more guns in the valley”), unfairly defeat her husband for the honor to defend her indirectly, and still maintain the right of might. While these imperfections may seem slight, Slotkin asserts that the idea of a white knight splattered with considerable amounts of mud represented an America wary of hostility after World War II but also a nation ready to accept the necessity of violence in the face of more grievous dangers. *Shane*, which debuted nearly three years into the Korean conflict and at the

³⁷ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 399.

³⁸ Bob Baker, “Shane Through Five Decades,” in *The Book of Westerns*, ed. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum, 1996), 214.

³⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 396.

⁴⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 396.

⁴¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 399.

time of the McCarthy hearings, reinforced what Slotkin calls the “Gunfighter Mystique” also celebrated in *The Gunfighter* (1950) and *High Noon* (1952). The idea of the reluctant warrior willing to side with the side of moral right interlocked with the tradition of the American citizen-soldier service tradition experienced by many in the post-war era, especially around the time of the Korean War.

In contrast to the historical context acknowledged by Slotkin, both affecting the production of the film and in how the film produced helped solidify a new permutation on the American myth of the West, authors Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann interpret the conflicts within *Shane* as demonstrative of the central role environment played in the forming and fighting of the American West. Whereas Slotkin sees *Shane* as emblematic of the themes of the reluctant warrior and the nobleness of an imperfect hero protecting the liberties of the “little guy,” Murray and Heumann, engaging in an eco-critical examination to the film, see *Shane* as an example of the struggle over how to best profit from the land.⁴² They emphasize the conflict in terms of “sustainable development principles” versus “fair use” of the land; homesteaders versus free-rangers.⁴³ Around the time of *Shane*’s debut, ecologists were divided over the impact free-range grazing, fenced grazing, or cattle ranching in general had on the environment.⁴⁴ As a result, when viewed in the context of other ranching Westerns of the 1940s and 1950s, *Shane* presents an argument in favor of fenced-grazing (as practiced by the homesteading Starretts) while some other films, like *The Sea of Grass* (1947), argued that free-range was best in terms of profit and environment. Murray and Heumann determine that *Shane* reveals two major environmental points: that the case for or against free-range grazing was ambiguous in the post-war period, and that the environmental struggle portrayed in *Shane* and other Westerns reveal that land played a central role in the historical struggle in the West. The West was not so much bilateral human conflict as it was a trilateral struggle involving the environment.

Murray and Heumann’s reading of *Shane* as reflective of the history of the West instead of mainly allegorical with the West as a trope is somewhat problematic, but understandable. With filmic studies, the range of interpretations is incredibly broad and additionally, the meaning perceived in a film viewed a half-century after its production may be different than the meaning perceived at its immediate release. The historical framework changes as more is understood about the period and as the incomparable context of first hand experience dissipates. As a result, the meaning of a film, absent the specified intentions of the filmmakers, is more a possibility than a certainty. This, in the opinion of this writer, is part of the beauty and complexity of film as a source for argument and the malleability of art as evidence.

⁴² Murray and Heumann, *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral*, 4, 39.

⁴³ Murray and Heumann, *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral*, 39.

⁴⁴ Murray and Heumann, *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral*, 44.

The Searchers

Voted the greatest Western of all time by the American Film Institute (which also voted *Shane* #3), *The Searchers* starred John Wayne as Ethan Edwards, a Confederate veteran and mercenary of sorts recently returned from work in Mexico. The film, directed by John Ford, begins as Edwards arrives at the farm of his brother and his family, complete with two young daughters and a wife towards whom Edward's fondness is clear. Edwards, who possesses a palpable hatred for Indians, takes his brother's place in a posse to track down some cattle bandits, only to return to find his brother murdered, his sister-in-law raped and murdered, and his nieces kidnapped. Edwards thus embarks with a dwindling number of assistants to find the girls and the Comanche warriors who stole them. As the film progresses, the ramifications of Edwards's venom towards Indians (curiously interposed with his apparent knowledge of their ways) manifest fully and shockingly when the audience realizes Edwards intends not to rescue the girls but to kill them, thus sparing them from miscegenation and mixed-blood relations. When Edwards and his companion Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter) come across two white women recently rescued from Indian captors, Edwards remarks, "They ain't white anymore – they're Comanche."⁴⁵ Edwards' abhorrence of anything affected by Indian influences, even women, is startling, especially given his intimate knowledge of Indian traditions, and his perception that his mission is both necessary and noble is discomfiting. At one point, Martin steps between the monomaniacal searcher and his younger niece, Debbie to prevent her murder, and is saved from death only when a Comanche shoots Edwards with an arrow. After years of searching, Edwards and Martin, along with a newly formed posse and a U.S. Army cavalry detachment, kill Debbie's captor and current husband but Edwards, for reasons left unclear by director John Ford, does not kill his niece. The film ends with Edwards dropping Debbie at a neighbor's home and walking back out into the blowing dust.

For Robert Pippin, *The Searchers* is akin to Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*: it is an exploration into the self – in particular, the person of Ethan Edwards. Edwards is racist, violent, and offensive, desecrating corpses, interrupting weddings and funerals, and spewing vitriol. Pippin notes that director John Ford pulls Edwards in an impressive number of directions and manipulates him – and the viewer – in astounding ways to confront the viewer with the reality of Edwards: that the United States forged its destiny with "a virulent racism and genocidal war against aboriginal peoples, a war that would not have been possible and perhaps would not have been won without the racist hatred of characters like the John Wayne character."⁴⁶ In looking at Edwards, Ford makes the viewer look inward and address the American mythic self in all its ugly realism. Pippin interprets the casting by Ford of Wayne as Edwards as intentional to this end: the viewer assumes Edwards to be "*the* John Wayne type, an immensely competent,

⁴⁵ Douglas Pye, "Double Vision: Miscegenation and Point of View in the Searchers," in *The Book of Westerns*, ed. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum, 1996), 233.

⁴⁶ Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, 104.

tough loner of great integrity and heroic capacity.”⁴⁷ For Pippin, *The Searchers* plays at the American consciousness and attempts to force a realization and rectifying of the flawed and mythic self, necessary from Ford’s political perspective amidst the civil rights movement.

Pippin also notes that the central plot device of the kidnapping and the importance of kinship in the film echo “the American civil rights issues of 1956.”⁴⁸ For Edwards, whiteness in the film is both an inherent physical property as well as a condition. Debbie is white but can become unwhite (Indian). In contrast, Martin, who is of mixed blood, cannot become fully white, though his whiteness develops a degree of trust with Edwards. Whiteness as a commodity and as a characteristic is a strong theme both in the film and in correlation to the contemporary civil rights issues surrounding the film’s first appearance. Likewise, John Ford’s casting of John Wayne as a former Confederate soldier becomes an unlikely coincidence.

Unlike Pippin, Stanley Corkin frames *The Searchers* strictly within a Cold War context. Corkin writes that *The Searchers* debuted as the Cold War assumed a settled quality for Americans, as it premiered after the Korean cease-fire armistice and before the escalation in Vietnam. In Corkin’s view, the film “suggests Ford’s ambivalence about the dehumanization and subjugation of racialized opponents of U.S. hegemony (Native Americans or, by analogy, Asians)” and also indicates an edge to the frontier myth and a path, like Pippin understands, to “acute self-awareness.”⁴⁹ Corkin’s lens of analysis is from a foreign policy and Cold War perspective, so understandably he reads *The Searchers* characters and themes in such a light. Edwards’ persona reminds Corkin of American Generals Curtis LeMay and Douglas MacArthur, military figures who “were rabidly ideological and backward looking”, who perceived empire in terms of geographic domination, and for whom international economics was a war to be “utterly dominated.”⁵⁰ It is not difficult to see Ethan Edwards as both backwards looking and ideologically set in his ways in *The Searchers*, characteristics portrayed in the film as decidedly negative but perhaps at one time necessary (though perhaps still not positive) in the West.

Of all Corkin’s analyses of *The Searchers* in the context of the Cold War, his most interesting point is his observation on violence as a solution to social problems. In discussing both *Shane* and the *Searchers*, Corkin highlights the weakness of “civic power” in the face of “martial power.” In *The Searchers*, Clayton, a reverend and a captain in the Texas Rangers, pales in terms of effectiveness and tenacity in comparison with the shoot-niece-first-ask-questions-later mentality of Edwards. Like *Shane*, *The Searchers* asks the question of whether the *post facto* social problems caused by violence are worth the expedience of military solutions. Citing the election of Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency in 1952 and again in 1956, Corkin suggests Americans felt more comfortable relying on military men as opposed to bureaucrats to settle national conflicts. The ending of *The Searchers* highlights this bifurcation of civilized society protected by men willing to reside in the uncivil outside. Ethan Edwards carries his rescued niece

⁴⁷ Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, 134-135.

⁴⁸ Pippin, *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth*, 123.

⁴⁹ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 129.

⁵⁰ Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*, 131.

to a neighbors porch, where she is taken inside by husband and wife, followed closely by Martin and his love, Laurie. Edwards remains outside, looks briefly from the porch through the doorway, and walks back into the desert amidst blowing dust. Through Corkin's Cold War lens, John Ford constructs Ethan Edwards not as a man to be admired but a man who is necessary in a violent world, a world where the civil and the warriors are necessary different but mutually dependent.

More similar to Pippin's view of *The Searchers* as an allegory for the civil rights movement than to Corkin's Cold War perspective, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick examines the film with an eye to the portrayal and treatment of American Indians. Kilpatrick comments that John Ford was most responsible for "the ideas Americans had about Native Americans," and notes that while some perceive *The Searchers* as Ford's first attempt to revise his portrayals of Indians, the film "still perpetuated attitudes about Native Americans that were far from positive."⁵¹ Some of Ford's impact on American perspectives was summed up by director Stephen Feraca, who in 1964 stated, "[Indians are] not expected to come out as human beings because I think the American people do not regard them as wholly human."⁵²

Ethan Edwards' fixation on protecting his nieces by killing them and his maniacal focus on preventing miscegenation and blood-mixing propels the plot of the film. This logic – to save the village one had to destroy it – would become systemic during the American war in Vietnam. Even though Edwards ultimately experiences a change of heart and does not murder his niece Debbie, Kilpatrick observes that "[n]o in depth attempt to humanize the Comanches is made in the film." The author quotes Raymond William Stedman, who wrote that the apex of the film "says only that at the moment of truth John Wayne cannot murder a *white* girl who is also a close relative."⁵³ If there is any redemption in the film, Kilpatrick suggests, it is more in Debbie's renewed whiteness rather than that others accept her cultural identity. And, as in *Broken Arrow*, the idea that an interracial marriage is acceptable or possible remains taboo, further tempering the idea that any redemption actually occurs to redeem the film from a contemporary social perspective.

The American Film Institute rating system of films includes different criteria than Corkin, Slotkin, Pippin, and Kilpatrick utilize in their evaluations and readings of *The Searchers*. The film, as art and as argument with John Ford shaping its vision, contains multiple layers, numerous messages, and many meanings. Those parsed out by the examining authors are but a few and in the vein of French literary criticism, the context of each viewing – temporal, experiential, and informational – influence the interpretation.

⁵¹ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 60.

⁵² Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 47.

⁵³ Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 61; quoting Raymond William Stedman, *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (Norman, OK: the University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 112.

Conclusion

The popularity of Western cinema in the 1950s cannot be understated in its significance. The dominance of the genre, its directors, and its prominent actors remains unrivaled in the history of American film. That the films enabled a conversation on contemporary issues between producers and consumers of the movies seems apparent and well argued, though the supremacy of one interpretation of a film's influences and allegories remains problematic. Scholarly interpretations, assigned meanings, and contextualizations of *Broken Arrow*, *Shane*, and *The Searchers* are sometimes varied and occasionally overlapping. The nature of film as an art establishes it as the subject of interpretation, regardless, to some extent, of both the intentions of the filmmaker, as well as the reality that film – and art – is broadly viewed, sometimes subtle, and often subconscious arguments. This compels their evaluation by scholars from across the academic spectrum who are interested in the study of the period of the films' production. Even actions within the film can be interpreted differently. For example, in *The Searchers* shortly after John Wayne's Ethan Edwards discovers his elder niece (off screen), Edwards plunges his knife into the ground. While Robert Pippin interprets the action as revelatory of Edwards' subconscious frustration at the loss of his beloved sister-in-law and his elder niece, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick deduces that Edwards is cleaning his knife after discovering and killing the older sister. The meaning of a look and the implication of a particular camera angle can be difficult to interpret accurately and precisely, and as such, the possible is preferable to the precise, since exactitude is elusive.

What is clear, however, is that interpretations and new understandings of Westerns, particularly those of the 1950s, will continue to emerge and be debated as new contexts develop and old contexts are better understood. One could, as Bob Baker did in his article "Shane Through Five Decades," examine why a film remained popular and in what new contexts was it understood and interpreted in various time periods.⁵⁴ Further interdisciplinary scholarship on films portraying the West hopefully will address this type of cross-temporal question. Additionally, while consensus on the meanings of the films discussed remains elusive, the interpretations and dynamic lenses will prove insightful both about the periods of production and the eras of viewing.

⁵⁴ Bob Baker, "Shane Through Five Decades," in *The Book of Westerns*, ed. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum, 1996), 214-220.

Bibliography

Books

Buscombe, Edward and Roberta E. Pearson, eds. *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London, UK: British Film Institute, 1998.

Cameron, Ian and Douglas Pye, eds. *The Book of Westerns*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1996.

Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971.

Corkin, Stanley. *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004.

Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn. *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

Murray, Robin L. and Joseph K. Heumann. *Gunfight at the Eco-Corral: Western Cinema and the Environment*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012.

Pippin, Robert B. *Hollywood Westerns and American Myth: The Importance of Howard Hawks and John Ford for Political Philosophy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Atheneum, 1992.

Yoggy, Gary A., ed. *Back in the Saddle: Essays on Western Film and Television Actors*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998.

Films

Broken Arrow. Directed by Delmer Daves. 1950. Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007.

Shane. Directed by George Stevens. 1953. Hollywood, CA: Paramount, 2000.

The Searchers. Directed by John Ford. 1956. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 1997.