
Ride, Boldly Ride

The Evolution of the American Western

Mary Lea Bandy and
Kevin Stoehr



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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Acknowledgments

Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western grew out of a suggestion by Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. At the turn of the millennium, he asked the chiefs of the museum's six curatorial departments to contribute a book of studies about their respective collections. I eagerly grasped this opportunity to tell a story of the Western in American cinema, about cowboys and ranchers and new citizens of the West who were creating settlements in magnificent landscapes—never mind the occupation by tribes of Indians who were there first.

I am indebted to Charles Silver, director of the Film Study Center at the Museum of Modern Art, who helped me to discover much of the history of the art of cinema; to Film Department curator Laurence Kardish, an invaluable colleague, for his advice and support; to film curatorial assistant Jenny He, who had assisted in selecting film stills to accompany the text; to Katie Trainor, film collections manager, for her help with additional stills; and to Harriet Bee for her friendship and editorial advice. I give special thanks to Clint Eastwood for contributing the foreword to this book, and most of all to my husband, Gary, for his continual advice, support, and criticism. Finally, I am grateful for the many Hollywood filmmakers who have created one of America's richest forms of cinematic art.

—*Mary Lea Bandy*

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—*Kevin Stoehr*

Foreword

Most filmmakers tend to be devoted to movie history. Any new motion picture with serious intentions provides an opportunity for a director to respond to cinematic traditions, whether reverentially or critically. For example, the first major Western in which I was featured, *A Fistful of Dollars*, was a remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, which was in turn a playful parody of Kurosawa's own earlier samurai films. Like most members of the cinematic community, I have always taken pleasure in exploring connections and chains of influence like these.

I also recognize influences in my own work. I dedicated *Unforgiven* to a pair of filmmakers who had some effect on my early years of directing: Sergio Leone and Don Siegel. Growing up, I experienced many of the classic Western films by the likes of John Ford, Howard Hawks, William Wellman, and Anthony Mann—and watched quite a few of the not-so-great Westerns to boot. When a Western movie is done right, with the passionate commitment of everyone involved, it rises above mere entertainment or spectacle.

The genre has outlasted the critics who have predicted its demise ever since D.W. Griffith directed his one-reel “oaters.” But the public's recognition of the Western movie as a genuine art form was a long time coming, and it helped that the right people lent a hand in making that acknowledgement clear. Mary Lea Bandy is one of those individuals, and I got to know her when the Museum of Modern Art began programming screenings and retrospectives of my films, starting in the early

1980s. Mary Lea also worked with Bruce Ricker in coproducing the documentary *Clint Eastwood: Out of the Shadows*.

Countless pages have been written about the Western film over the years. But often these books and essays, while dealing with plots and actors and directors, do not explain why these movies, or at least the best of them, belong to a genuine art form. *Ride, Boldly Ride* offers such an appreciation. Many of the films discussed here have a powerful effect on viewers, not only because of the acting performances and directorial styles, but also because their stories revolve around themes of violence and tragic loss, and because their images reveal the beauties and challenges of the natural landscape. In addition, the best Westerns offer a feeling of adventure and exhibit a visual tempo that is not unlike musical composition.

Mary Lea's book draws the reader's attention to some of the Western films that have been underappreciated or that do not neatly correspond with rigid definitions of the genre. While there is much that we can learn here about classics like *Stagecoach* and *Red River*, the book also pays tribute to such movies as *3 Bad Men*, *The Wind*, *The Big Trail*, *Ruggles of Red Gap*, *The Westerner*, *Northwest Passage*, *Jubal*, and *Comanche Station*. With movies like these, it is clear that the Western film has a broad and rich history, one in which I am proud to have played a role.

—Clint Eastwood

Introduction

[*Anthony Mann on the Western*]: Well, I think the reason why it's the most popular and long-lasting genre is that it gives you more freedom of action, in landscape, in passion. It's a primitive form. It's not governed by rule; you can do anything with it. It has the essential pictorial qualities; has the guts of any character you want; the violence of anything you need; the sweep of anything you feel; the joy of sheer exercise, of outdooriness. It is legend—and legend makes the very best cinema. It excites the imagination more—it's something audiences love. They don't have to say: "Oh, I know about that"; they just need to feel it and be with it, because legend is a concept of characters greater than life. It releases you from inhibitions, rules. . . . And this is what the Western does—it releases you, you can ride on the plains; you can capture the windswept skies; you can release your audiences and take them out to places which they never would have dreamt of. . . . And, more important—it releases the characters. They can be more primitive; they can be more Greek, like *Oedipus Rex* or *Antigone*, you see, because you are dealing again in a sweeping legend.¹

[*Kenneth Turan interviewing Clint Eastwood*]: What is it about the Western that makes it so resilient?

[*Eastwood*]: I guess because of the simplicity of the times. Now everything's so complicated, so mired down in bureaucracy that people can't fathom a way of sorting it out. In the West, even though you could be killed, it seems more manageable, like a lone individual might be able to work things out some way. In our society today, the idea of one person making a difference one way or the other is remote.²

The cinematic tradition of the Western is a complex, collective memory and, on close viewing, no more nostalgic for the good old days than Jane Austen's novels are sweetly romantic. Aside from a sense of adventurous freedom, an emphasis on the natural landscape, and a fusion of history and myth, what retains our interest throughout these seemingly repetitive Western sagas is the westerner himself, a character dear to us for his psyche and his physique. The invader and defender of western territories required great strength, courage, endurance, quickness, and strategic intelligence. The Western protagonist might not talk quite as much or as wittily as Henry V or Cary Grant, but that is because he is listening and thinking and feeling. Like a detective, he relies heavily on his intuition but sometimes has to figure out what really is going on, distinguishing the truth from the lies. He has to contend with the rustler, the card shark, the thief, the murderer, and the gunfighter that the wealthier villain hires to do his dirty work. On top of all this, as if greedy villains are not enough of a challenge, there are the Indians who fight with ferocity and know the meaning of sacrifice.

The leading protagonist of the Western is pretty sure to be a man, but not a kindly, upright sort of guy. Heroic in a classical sense, he is a courageous, fit, and active type, eager for adventure or plagued by it, a personality formed by adversity and challenge, as wily and selfish as any of his Homeric or Virgilian predecessors who were teased by the Olympian gods. Cowpoke or gunfighter, he can ride like the wind and rope a horse or steer at a hundred yards. He is likely to be a "good bad man," the character conceived and formed in the second decade of the twentieth century by Broncho Billy Anderson, William S. Hart, and Harry Carey Sr. This character often has a revelation at some point in the plot and sees the errors of his ways, or is blinded by the goodness and purity of the heroine and, by the final reel, undoes the mischief he and his friends have caused. He can serve as easily as sheriff or hired gun, pursuer or pursued, until the real villains are unmasked.

The westerner's instincts, it has been made clear to us in many an opening scene, are superb: he knows what to do, which usually means going considerably beyond assumed limits. More important, his character is fixed before he encounters the challenges of the script, for no westerner grows up on the screen. Faced with evil and danger, he might wake up, give up, try to atone, or revise his commitment to the bad guys (or occasionally bad gals), but in his case the child is certainly father to the man. His disposition is a given, which is why we admire our cowboy hero. We know that he has grown up in this landscape before the

story takes place: *we* are seeing it for the first time, but it is understood that our youthful or aging cowboy knows his way around every sagebrush and arroyo. He sleeps anytime and anywhere, with a saddle and horse blanket for bedding, rides as easily in the dark as at dawn, and can expertly spot smoke signals or just “git a feelin’” for trouble that will arise in the narrow rocky canyon ahead.

Essential to the figure of the westerner is his weapon. Whether he carries a six-shooter or a rifle, Colt or Winchester, every man of the West has mastered the use of a gun or has bought control of those who have. The knife and the bow and arrow are powerless to overcome such armaments, and native tribes have learned to trade and handle the West’s most effective portable enforcer. Good guy or outlaw, the westerner is, or has been, a gunfighter. Killing and avoiding being killed are, or were, his principal activities—not just the climactic scenes or the denouement, but the stuff of everyday Western life. This was how the real Old West was settled, through violence, as raw frontier became territory, and then territory gained statehood, taking along with it various practices and prejudices that were transmitted into law. Justice and moral order were imposed and dispensed by strong, courageous men who used violence to fight violence.³ To be an effective lawman, the Hollywood westerner must likewise have the cunning and skills of the warrior, and that is why he often is a southerner who learned his trade and honed his skills in the brutal training ground of the Civil War. As Robert Warshow tells us in his influential essay “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner” regarding this solitary, reposed figure and his willingness to use violence when needed: “There is no suggestion . . . that he [the westerner] draws the gun reluctantly. The Westerner could not fulfill himself if the moment did not finally come when he can shoot his enemy down. But because that moment is so thoroughly the expression of his being, it must be kept pure.”⁴

The Western introduces the fixed character of its principal protagonist without necessarily filling us in on details of his past but instead following his actions and reactions to events and situations and landscapes. It is not so much that our hero always improves his moral character by enduring life-threatening crises as that we come to understand him better. He might be exhausted by the end, or wounded, or dead. He might have sought and achieved revenge, at no little price, and after it is all over he might be as bitter and alone as at the start. He wants to *survive*, not necessarily to triumph, and on his own terms. Cole Thornton, the gunfighter played by John Wayne in Howard Hawks’s *El Dorado*, points out to James Caan’s youthful character, Mississippi: “Ride, boldly

ride? Well, it don't work out that way." Western life is too contradictory, too difficult to always have a happy ending, but some recognition and knowledge of the contradictions and difficulties might be gained. In the end, as in the mythical tales of the medieval knight, the story of the westerner is in many cases a story about a journey through landscape and reality toward the goal of self-knowledge. And along the way there is almost always a need to struggle for survival and to fight against others.

And what is the fight all about? In most instances, it is about control of the land, land for the white man's community to tame, nurture, and establish as homestead and town. It is about taking from the earth its riches, its gold and silver, its trees and beavers and buffalo—about making the land yield itself to human desire. And, as important as the land itself, there is the essential resource of water, along with the rights governing its usage. No matter how learned he might be in the ways of the West, no westerner can guarantee a supply of water. And water is also possibly the most elusive and treacherous element in the larger landscape. Rivers have to be crossed, and their rushing currents can destroy wagons as well as drown cattle, horses, and men; they might erupt in flash floods or dry up; riverbeds might cause animals to mire in mud or quicksand. Watering holes might disappear, become poisonous, or be ruined by users too stupid, careless, or vengeful to care about the consequences. Drought kills, but heavy rains, followed by a sudden burst of cold weather, can turn steers' hides to icy sheets and cause grass to become brittle and inedible. Deep snow might fall at the wrong time, preventing passage or freezing cattle, sometimes burying families beneath avalanches. The scarcity of water is as dangerous as an Indian war party, and the two often occur together to destroy, or at least impede, the white man's progress.

The Western hero helps to fight the good fight, but he is hardly ever a successful and settled landowner. Nor does he usually want to settle down before the credits fade. He is typically a loner, passing through, unwed and unencumbered by family and responsibility. On occasion, if he survives his troubles on the range or in the dusty streets of Dodge City or Tombstone, his gal will throw a rope around him and he will think about becoming respectable. This, at least, is the scenario established by Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, which set the character of the Western hero: a slightly less than good man, a southerner turned westerner, laconic and handsome, smarter and stronger and faster on the draw than everyone else, and pestered by an ornery cuss who tempts his best but weaker-willed friend to go over to the wrong side of the law.

The law, not incidentally, is the law of the land—not necessarily the federal law of the United States but the code of the newly created territory, imposed at will by settlers or often-corrupt sheriffs or judges and enforced by posses or vigilantes. We rarely see shelves full of law books in Western courts, which are usually set up temporarily in the saloon, the judge having suspended drinking during the trial. The Declaration of Independence may be the code of ethics behind this territorial will, but the Bible is the most visible text in Westerns, followed by the handbill. Absent a unified legal structure, justice and its dispensation are quick on the trigger. Thus the Virginian hangs his best friend, Steve, and two others for rustling—no trial, just hang 'em the next morning, and let a supporting character explain to the confused heroine, Molly, why this is what a man has to do.

Western screenplays derived from novels and short stories, including those published by popular presses, more often than from newspaper or journal accounts or historical records. It is not that filmmakers rejected history or realism, but that they were enticed by legend and therefore blended mythmaking with a manufactured sense of authenticity. The myth *is* the reality, as was famously proclaimed in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Scripts utilized actual events, people, and places, both to legitimize the fictional narrative in an historical framework and to give some pretense of remaining faithful to that history. Various films accomplished this pretense simply and efficiently by printing a specific place and date over the shot that follows the opening credits, such as "Texas, 1868," which introduces Ford's *The Searchers*, despite the fact that the film was shot mainly in Monument Valley on the border between Utah and Arizona.

And so, through Westerns, filmmakers reflected creatively on America's social and political history. Some, like Ford and William S. Hart in the first half of the century, earnestly mixed historical realism and patriotism, however populist in flavor. Filmmakers such as Fred Zinnemann (*High Noon*) and Arthur Penn (*Little Big Man*, *The Missouri Breaks*) later used Western themes metaphorically to represent current political or cultural preoccupations. The more intellectually challenging Westerns tended to interpret American history freely—especially the actions of its law keepers and its outlaws—so as to arrive at larger moral truths. Westerns have always managed to combine apparent "material" accuracy—a concern with specific facts about a given event or series of events, or at the very least a semblance of concern with such facts—with a kind of

“discursive” accuracy that conveys the overall *meaning* and *significance* of such events.⁵ This is not so much a difference between truth and myth as a distinction between the factual truths of history and the ways in which those “truths” have become conveyed in narrative form, especially in a form that has a meaningful impact on us. But whether it veers toward realism or symbolism, the Western film helps to tell a story, usually more than a merely superficial one, about what it means to be—and what it took to become—an *American*.

History is inevitably mixed with tragedy, and the story of America’s westward expansionism is also the story of the frequent suffering and loss experienced by pioneering settlers, by townspeople attempting to build structured communities in the middle of the wilderness, and by those displaced natives who were forced to make way for the railroads and the civilization-builders. The narratives of several landmark Western films discussed at length in this book deal with tragic suffering and a sense of loss: Victor Sjöström’s *The Wind*, Howard Hawks’s *Red River*, John Ford’s *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and Clint Eastwood’s *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and *Unforgiven*. On the other hand, many of the great Western films have managed to maintain a balance between tragedy and comedy, and some Westerns tend toward being purely comical. The Western comedy should certainly not be overlooked as an essential component of the genre, and one enlightening example is *Ruggles of Red Gap* with Charles Laughton.

Several of the films selected for focused examination here have not been traditionally included or emphasized in other surveys of the Western. *The Wind* and *Ruggles of Red Gap*, for example, are almost always ignored, and yet they not only contain basic elements of the genre but also stretch and mold the parameters of the Western in intriguing and unique ways. Essential classics such as Ford’s *Stagecoach* must, of course, be accorded their due as standard-setters. But not enough attention has previously been paid—beyond books that address Ford’s entire body of work—to his silent feature Westerns *Straight Shooting* and *3 Bad Men*. These early but nonetheless impressive films are addressed here within the wider context of other silent Westerns, such as D.W. Griffith’s pioneering Biograph Westerns, Thomas Ince’s and Francis Ford’s early trailblazers *The Invaders* and *Custer’s Last Fight*, William Hart’s *Hell’s Hinges*, and James Cruze’s *The Covered Wagon*.

At the time of the release of Ford’s landmark Western *Stagecoach* in 1939, Hollywood was just beginning a renaissance of “A-Westerns” that filled the landscape of American cinema in a prominent fashion until

the nation became fully engaged in World War II and war films began to predominate. These Westerns included, in addition to *Stagecoach*, Cecil B. DeMille's *Union Pacific*, Henry King's *Jesse James*, Michael Curtiz's trio of *Dodge City*, *Virginia City*, and *Santa Fe Trail*, Fritz Lang's *The Return of Frank James*, Wesley Ruggles's *Arizona*, and Raoul Walsh's *They Died with Their Boots On*. It was Walsh who directed one of the first big-budget A-Westerns of the 1930s, just after the end of the silent era: *The Big Trail*, an epic story of frontier survival and settlement that, along with Wesley Ruggles's *Cimarron*, harkened back to Cruze's *The Covered Wagon* and also anticipated such later prairie schooner sagas as Ford's *Wagon Master*. A detailed look at the 1939–1941 A-Western is offered here, including a focus on two underappreciated examples: William Wyler's *The Westerner* and King Vidor's *Northwest Passage*.

The immediate post–World War II era ushered in a series of visually and psychologically expressive Westerns that included Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*, Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, Walsh's *Pursued*, and Hawks's *Red River*. We pay special attention to the latter film within the wider context of Hawks's recurring collaborations with John Wayne. Postwar movies such as *Red River* led to the emergence of a kind of “super-Western” (to steal André Bazin's term), predominant in the 1950s. In these super-Westerns, conventional elements of the genre were fused with, or in some cases superseded by, themes and visual stylizations that were borrowed from other types of cinema, such as film noir. These movies—and especially those directed by Anthony Mann, Delmer Daves, and Budd Boetticher—tend to be psychologically complex and existentially charged, forging a path for the revisionist or even postmodern Westerns that were to follow in the 1960s and 1970s: Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* and *The Wild Bunch*, Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and Penn's *Little Big Man*—to name but several.

In addition to exploring the mid-twentieth-century Western through a focus on selected movies by Mann, Daves, and Boetticher, we examine Ford's two later masterworks (*The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*) in terms of their own profound ways of deepening and transforming the genre. Finally, we argue that Eastwood's Westerns serve as a fitting culmination of sorts, especially in their fusions of traditional and antitraditional elements and when appreciated in the wider context of the post-Fordian and post-Hawksian Western. This is especially true when one considers that Eastwood's major works either reflect or combine (always intriguingly so) two distinct modes of the genre, as a result of his earlier work with two influential filmmakers: the stylized,

“operatic” Westerns of Sergio Leone and the character-oriented, narrative-driven Westerns of Don Siegel. Eastwood’s masterpiece *Unforgiven*, most especially, blends the best aspects of the traditional *and* antitraditional Western.

Not surprisingly, the post-*Unforgiven* world of the movie oater is a world in which the distinction between the classical and postclassical conceptions of the Western has become antiquated. Works of this period range from the more conventional (e.g., Kevin Costner’s *Open Range*, Ed Harris’s *Appaloosa*, and Joel and Ethan Coens’ remake of *True Grit*) to those that radically integrate genre elements (e.g., Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*, Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood*, and the Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men*). The Western film has indeed become a kind of territory that is defined by borders and boundaries regularly crossed in dialectical fashion, a cinematic terrain in which the adventure of the genre includes the essential task of modifying and amplifying what has gone before. It is not that the traditional Western has been negated and thereby transcended by its ongoing transformations; rather, it has been integrated into a realm of highly creative and self-conscious reverence.

Diverse Perspectives in Silent Westerns

Landscape, Morality, and the Native American

The movie “oater” was born during the last decade of the nineteenth century, as the world of cinema was first emerging and around the time that the American West was closing its final frontiers. In the decades between the Civil War and World War I, by which time the territories of Arizona and New Mexico had been granted statehood, the nation could savor a nostalgia for a fading frontier while hearing news of the actual dangers of its concluding scenes. One could traverse the continent on the Southern Pacific in the 1880s, riding through territory not far from where the escaped Apache leader Geronimo was holed up in the Chiricahua Mountains. Or one could read of daring journeys, thanks to the new publication venture of inexpensive paperbacks known as dime novels, which had appeared as early as the 1860s in a series brought out by Erastus Beadle, appealing to a mass audience eager to enjoy adventures of outlaws and cowboys. Edward Judson, who wrote under the pen name Ned Buntline, was the best-known dime novelist. On the stage, a national celebration of the taming of the wilderness was initiated in the 1880s, in typical American style, as a form of highly successful commercial exploitation by some of those who had played key roles at historic moments. William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, a former chief scout for the U.S. Cavalry, famously launched the story of the Wild West as a form of live spectacle that included representations of Custer’s Last Stand and appearances by Sitting Bull.

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