

The Noir Western



Darkness
on the Range,
1943–1962

David Meuel

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ALSO BY DAVID MEUEL

Women in the Films of John Ford (McFarland, 2014)

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*Darkness on the
Range, 1943–1962*

DAVID MEUEL



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To Kathryn

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Preface

“The noir western”—the very term is oxymoronic. On one hand, we have the bright, expansive, colorful landscapes; upright heroes; and nation-building exuberance we associate with most film westerns. On the other, we have the dark, claustrophobic, black-and-white (mostly black) cityscapes; flawed, compromised heroes; and bitter disillusionment of the classic noir crime dramas of the 1940s and 1950s. Then, like slapping raw bacon onto a hot griddle, we put these elements together and voila! Something new is sizzling: a budding film form (or maybe we’d rather call it a “sub-genre”) that is distinctive and remarkable in its own right and that—for decades to come—will influence not only the western but also other film genres.

That’s essentially what happened in Hollywood in the mid-1940s. Influenced not only by the noir crime drama but also by numerous factors from the horrors of World War II, to 1920s German expressionistic cinema, to 1930s “hard-boiled” pulp crime fiction, these “new” westerns incorporated many of the classic noir elements into their stories. Just a few include greater moral ambiguity, greater psychological complexity, greater use of noir-style lighting effects to enhance mood and feeling, and more frequent use of standard noir storytelling techniques such as voiceovers and flashbacks. Now the “Wild West” of the movies was a darker, moodier, more complicated place—a place that more closely mirrored the bleaker, more uncertain mood of the post-war period.

The creative forces behind these darker westerns were a diverse, eccentric, and extremely talented lot. They included—among many others—noted noir directors such as Budd Boetticher, Delmer Daves, André de Toth, Anthony Mann, and Robert Wise; bold, idiosyncratic newcomers such as Sam Fuller; and old Hollywood masters such as Allan Dwan, John Ford, Henry King, Raoul Walsh, and William Wellman.

Together, these directors and their collaborators brought about a major

shift in popular cinematic storytelling. This shift didn't mark an end to the traditional westerns that dated all the way back to the beginnings of cinema. Rather than eclipsing those films, these darker counterparts co-existed with them, the two western forms complementing (and enriching) one another throughout the 1950s—often cited as the “Golden Age of Westerns.”

The number, variety, and quality of these noir-ish westerns are quite impressive. This is especially true when we adopt (as I have done) a fairly flexible definition of “noir” to an analysis of them. There are literally hundreds of deserving films to choose from. Narrowing my focus to a mere 21 for this book was no small task, and I am certain that readers will wonder why I have left out many that could easily have been included. These films also range from textbook noir storylines such as Raoul Walsh's powerful *Colorado Territory* (1949), itself a remake of Walsh's early crime noir *High Sierra* (1941), to Budd Boetticher's idiosyncratic minimalist films such as *The Tall T* (1957) and *Ride Lonesome* (1959), to Sam Fuller's eccentric, in-your-face iconoclasm in *Forty Guns* (1957). And the quality—even among relatively obscure films such as Mann's *Man of the West* (1958) and de Toth's *Day of the Outlaw* (1959)—is surprisingly high. It's a shame the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and other awards organizations have long had a prejudice against westerns and other “lowly” genre films, because many of them should have received much more attention and recognition in their day than they did.

While an enormous amount has been written about both film noir and the western, there is little in-depth examination about the strong and vital connection that exists between them. The subject is briefly discussed in numerous articles and blogs, in sections from two books about Anthony Mann, in an appendix from *The Film Noir Encyclopedia* by Alain Silver, and in sections from books on the western that span much longer periods of time. Jim Kitses' *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (2004), for example, has insightful chapters on Ford, Mann, and Boetticher, but its principal focus is much broader, namely the western genre from Ford's first features in the 1910s, to Clint Eastwood's various efforts up to the 1990s. Another and more recent example is Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr's excellent *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* (2012). Again, this covers the western genre as a whole and includes a section on the more noir-ish, psychologically complex post-war period westerns. But again, the focus of the book is relatively broad, and the subject of the noir western is not explored as fully as it could have been.

My hope is that this book strikes a responsive chord among people who enjoy westerns, classic noir crime dramas, or both. I have organized the chapters

around individual directors rather than individual films for a specific reason. Each of these directors, I believe, looked at the western (and, by extension, life) in a very personal way, and, as a result, made worthy (and very distinctive) contributions to the noir western form. In turn, each of their contributions added to the form in some way, blazing a trail for other filmmakers to follow or depart from according to their preferences. For those who would like to continue their exploration of this subject after they finish this book, I have also included a list of 50 additional noir-ish westerns made between 1946 and 1962 they might find worthwhile.



The initial inspiration for this book came from a course I took several years ago through Stanford University's Continuing Studies Program. It focused on the western from 1939 to 1959, and, while the emphasis wasn't western noir, I was struck by how much noir influence had seeped into the venerable western genre. The idea for a book-length study of this phenomenon grew from there.

The teacher of the course was Elliot Lavine, a longtime film programmer and instructor in the San Francisco Bay Area who has received wide-ranging praise for his efforts to connect modern audiences with excellent vintage films that—for various reasons—have been unfairly dismissed or simply forgotten. As well as providing me with wonderful ideas and insights, Elliot has always supplied ample enthusiasm and support. I could not have written this book without him.

I also want to thank my trusted “kitchen cabinet” of friends and family members who have generously offered their ideas and insights as I have gone through the book development process. These include James Meuel, Annette Hulbert, Bob and Melanie Ferrando, Peter Nelson, Natalie Varney, Scotty Martinson, Jim Daniels, and Paul Bendix. As always, I've appreciated their good ideas, patience (as they've listened to me ramble on about this subject *ad nauseum*), and unflagging support. Much of the credit for this book belongs to them as well.

Finally, photographs are always a critical part of any book on film, and I would like to thank the people at the New York-based photo archive Photofest, who supplied all the photographs for this book. Their knowledge, professionalism, and enthusiasm were very impressive.



As I went through the process of building this book chapter by chapter, I made many intriguing and some startling discoveries not only about noir

westerns but also about the 11 film directors I singled out as significant contributors to the phenomenon. While some of these directors, such as John Ford and perhaps Raoul Walsh, William Wellman, and Robert Wise, are familiar names to many classic film aficionados, others—such as Allan Dwan, Henry King, and André de Toth—are probably not. Yet, despite their relative anonymity, their contributions both to western noir and to other kinds of films are notable and their personal stories fascinating. It's a shame that—as each passing day puts more distance between us and the great achievements of Hollywood's classic era—their names are fading from the ongoing conversation. With luck, though, this book might spark renewed interest in them and in their better films, some of which were fine noir westerns.

Introduction: The Dark Cowboy Rides into Town

On September 2, 1945, the American battleship the USS *Missouri* was only one of more than 250 U.S. warships anchored in Japan's Tokyo Bay, but, for a short while that day, it commanded the full attention of the world. At about 9:00 a.m. Tokyo time, representatives from the Japanese, American, and several other governments met on its deck and, with stiff but gracious formality, signed what was known simply as the "Japanese Instrument of Surrender." As they wrote their names in the designated places on the documents, the deadliest and, in many respects, the most hideous war in all of human history officially came to a quiet, unassuming end.

The size, scope, and horror of World War II are difficult for most people today to grasp. According to the more conservative estimates, the war took somewhere between 60 and 65 million lives, about 2.5 percent of the world's entire population at the time and about three times the number of people who had died in the deadliest conflict up until that time, World War I. About two-thirds of these people were civilians, and the death tolls in some countries were staggering. The Soviet Union lost about 14 percent of its entire population. Poland lost about 17 percent, a great many of its dead being among the six million people killed at Auschwitz, Dachau, and the other Nazi extermination camps that dotted Central and Eastern Europe.¹

Also difficult to grasp is the impact the war had on those who survived. Not only were their lives changed in ways they could scarcely imagine just a few years before, but many had also changed fundamentally as human beings. Millions were wounded and many of these disabled for life. An untold number also suffered from emotional wounds, various psychological conditions including the one we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. These people

saw the human experience very differently now, and they often decided to take their lives in entirely different directions.

Among these survivors was a celebrated U.S. film director named George Stevens. Born in 1904, Stevens broke into films in 1930 as a cameraman on Laurel and Hardy comedy shorts and within a half dozen years was directing both the Katharine Hepburn romantic comedy *Alice Adams* (1935) and the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musical gem *Swingtime* (1936). In the early 1940s, he continued to work in the same vein, directing such classic comedies as 1942's *Woman of the Year* and *Talk of the Town*, and 1943's *The More the Merrier*. Anxious to contribute to the war effort, he joined the U.S. Army Signal Corps and headed a film unit in Europe. His group photographed inspiring moments such as the liberation of Paris in 1944, but it also documented the war's horrors on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day in 1944 and at the liberation of Dachau in 1945. His team's work proved invaluable. In fact, its footage of Dachau was used at the Nuremberg Trials in 1945 and 1946 to show the extent and brutality of the Nazi extermination practices.

Afterwards, Stevens returned to Hollywood and to directing films—the workplace and the work he had known before the war. For him, however, things would never be the same. After just one semi-comic effort, 1948's *I Remember Mama* (and despite efforts by Katharine Hepburn and others to get him to do so), he never directed another comedy or even another film with comic scenes in it. While some of his post-war films were superbly done, they are all very somber in tone. As his widow, Yvonne, remarked years later, “He just never dreamed, I'm sure, what he was getting into when he enlisted.”²

While Stevens' story is a poignant example of the war's impact, it is certainly not unique among filmmakers in the 1940s. We can see the war's influence on the work of just about everyone who participated in the war from John Ford (who was wounded at the Battle of Midway and who also led a photographic unit on D-Day) to Frank Capra, John Huston, William Wyler, Sam Fuller, and thousands of others involved not only in directing but with every aspect of filmmaking. In addition, the war's impact was felt—often just as keenly—by filmmakers who weren't on the front lines but who followed what was happening to people both in Europe and throughout Asia and the Pacific. Sometimes the war's influence brought a greater humanism, a greater empathy, to the stories they brought to the big screen. We certainly see this in the work of Stevens and Ford. Sometimes, though, it brought greater bitterness and cynicism as we often see in the films of Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang, two of Hollywood's other major post-war directors. But whether a film was infused with Stevens or Ford's humanism or Wilder or Lang's cynicism, it usually

expressed a greater wariness about human nature, a darker view of the world and the people in it.

As the war had changed these filmmakers, it had also changed filmgoers, who increasingly wanted to see something that more closely reflected the new view of things. As a result, the movies went in a variety of new directions, and one of these led into one of the medium's oldest, most beloved, and relentlessly optimistic genres—the western. Audiences didn't quite know it when the war officially ended in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945, but the dark cowboy would soon be riding into town.



For many of the filmmakers returning from the war, Hollywood appeared to be a very different place from the one they had left. Gone were such major stars as Leslie Howard and Carole Lombard, both victims of the war (Howard killed when the German Luftwaffe shot down his plane; Lombard killed in a plane crash after a rally promoting war bonds). Gone were Shirley Temple's childhood years and golden locks. Gone was the entire, largely upbeat filmmaking era that had culminated in 1939, the so-called "greatest year of the movies," a year highlighted by such enduring classics as *The Wizard of Oz* and, yes, *Gone with the Wind*.

Yet much of the old Hollywood—including most of the moguls, directors, stars, writers, cinematographers, designers, technicians, and others who made up its fabled studio system—remained. Although it was showing cracks and would soon be threatened by the new entertainment medium of television, the studio system would stay dominant and vibrant for another decade as well.

What was decidedly different was the *tone* of more and more of the films now being made. Stories—especially in the crime and suspense genres—were darker, harsher, and more fatalistic. Screen violence (though mild by today's standards) had become more intense, visceral, and graphic. Heroes could be weak and corruptible. Leading ladies, while still beautiful, were often manipulative and just pure evil, eventually earning themselves the unflattering label *femme fatales*. Happy endings were by no means a foregone conclusion. Characters were often more complex and contradictory, more nuanced psychologically, and more at the mercy of personal demons. To ratchet up audience anxiety, these films were also photographed in very different ways from the films people were used to seeing. Most were darkly lit, with scenes frequently taking place at night and on ominous (and sometimes rainy) city streets. Shadows were prominent and usually meant to suggest menace or something (or



Heavily influenced by the German expressionist cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) is a fascinating early example of American film noir. Here, the stranger (Peter Lorre at his creepy best) makes things very uncomfortable for young Jane (Margaret Tallichet).

someone) sinister. Cameras frequently captured scenes from extremely high and low angles, putting audiences off-balance and adding to their general discomfort and uneasiness. There were a few color films of this kind, of course. John Stahl's *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) starring Gene Tierney is a good example. But the form thrived in—in fact, it seemed tailor made for—the more abstract, otherworldly, and emotionally detached medium of black and white, still dominant in the 1940s.

These kinds of films had actually been in evidence during and, in a few cases, before the U.S. entered the war. One early example is Boris Ingster's *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) with Peter Lorre, John McGuire, and Margaret Tallichet, a low-budget thriller that involves a man haunted by unsettling nightmares who's also wrongly accused of murder. This darker tone of filmmaking went more mainstream the following year. One major milestone was the release of Orson Welles' seminal *Citizen Kane*, which—with its extreme

camera angles, boldly innovative use of shadow and light, complex flashback structure, and morally ambiguous hero—had an enormous influence not only on this new kind of film style but on filmmaking for decades to come. Another was John Huston's film of Dashiell Hammett's classic detective novel *The Maltese Falcon*, a film noted for its hard-edged dialogue, harsh tone, and treacherous femme fatale, Mary Astor's Brigit O'Shaughnessy. Films such as Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Fritz Lang's *Scarlett Street* (1945), and others offered steadily darker and bleaker takes on human beings and their relationships. More and more, too—as in *Double Indemnity* and *Scarlett Street*—the obligatory Hollywood happy ending went by the wayside.

While American audiences usually referred to these kinds of films as crime stories or melodramas, French filmgoers, who had been denied U.S. films throughout the war and were anxious to catch up, were seeing something else—something new. In particular, they felt, American wartime films exhibited a different worldview, or sensibility, than they had experienced in pre-war American films (even in hard-edged 1930s gangster movies), and this worldview was being expressed in a very different cinematic style. In 1946, the French film critic Nino Frank coined a name for this new kind of film. He called it “film noir,” or “the black film.”³

Although World War II was certainly a driving force behind changed attitudes in the world and the emergence of new film forms to express those attitudes such as film noir, it by no means did the job single-handedly. The roots of film noir are many and varied. In literature, they go back to the “hard-boiled” school of crime fiction that includes work by Ernest Hemingway, Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich, and many, many other writers. In fact, classic noirs have been made from Hemingway's *The Killers* (1946), Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1946), Cain's *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and Woolrich's *The Black Angel* (1946) as well as Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and Cain's *Double Indemnity*. In film, we can find the roots of noir in films dating back to the German expressionist efforts of the 1920s and early 1930s such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), and Fritz Lang's *M* (1931). Highlighted by both desperate economic conditions and political unrest, the pre-war climate in Europe during the 1930s also had an enormous influence. As a result, many of Europe's most talented filmmakers—opposed to Nazism and fearing that another European war was inevitable—emigrated to the U.S. A number of these—including Lang, Wilder, Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, and André de Toth—brought their talents, their experience with expressionism, and their dark takes on life (the seeds of noir) with them.

While film historians love to quibble and quarrel, there is more or less a consensus that the classic era of U.S. noir existed from the early 1940s until the late 1950s or early 1960s. There is also widespread agreement that noir is still very much with us. In the 1970s, for example, the term “neo-noir” first appeared in an attempt to describe contemporary films that possessed a distinct noir sensibility. A few of many, many examples over the years include *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Body Heat* (1981), *The Grifters* (1990), *The Last Seduction* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *American Psycho* (2000), and *Dead Man Down* (2013).

In addition to remaining a mainstay in the crime and suspense genres, the noir style and sensibility have become prominent in numerous other genres from science fiction to superhero films. Some noteworthy examples include such dystopian futuristic thrillers such as Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and John Carpenter’s *Escape from New York* (1981) and *Escape from L.A.* (1996) as well as the three superhero films that make up Christopher Nolan’s brilliant Batman trilogy: *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

Long before this noir style and sensibility began to seep into science fiction and superhero films, however, it was exerting an enormous influence on one of the oldest and most optimistic film genres of them all—the western. Spurred by the horrors of a world war and the styling of the noir crime drama during the mid 1940s, Hollywood’s filmmakers—many now veterans of noir films as well as the war—began to look at the venerable western form in a new way, one that more closely reflected their current attitudes and preoccupations. The result was the birth of a new kind of western. Darker in tone and more nuanced psychologically than its usually sunnier and more simplistic predecessors, this “noir western” would soon make a major impact on this hallowed genre. Not only would it help to trigger a Golden Age of westerns from the late 1940s to the early 1960s (a period, which, incidentally, maps very closely to the classic period of noir), but it would also change the western forever.



Tracing its origins to the very beginnings of projected motion pictures in the 1890s, a time when the “Wild West” was still very much a reality, the film western is—in much the same way as jazz, baseball, or national parks—a distinctly American creation. In part, of course, these stories of the American West, usually in the late 1800s, are based on reality. People such as Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Jesse and Frank James, Calamity Jane, George Armstrong

Custer, Sitting Bull, Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, Annie Oakley, Geronimo, and numerous other legendary figures actually did live during this time and did do many of the things we've seen them do in films. Wagon trains also crossed the Great Plains, ranchers fought range wars, and lonely U.S. Cavalry outposts dotted the Southwest. In part, too, these stories are pure invention. The exploits of real figures were often exaggerated and romanticized in the dime novels of the time, and writers—to satisfy a public that seemed to find the subject endlessly fascinating—eagerly created new characters and stories as well. Probably the first modern western novel and one of the most influential of the era is Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902). Another enormous influence was the prolific Zane Gray, whose more than 60 novels, the most popular of which is *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), inspired dozens of films. Whether mostly real, somewhat real, or totally concocted, western stories took hold in the public imagination. Almost instantaneously, they became (as they largely remain today) our nation's founding myths—the heroic tales of how those who came before us crossed and tamed the vast continent and prepared the way for us—our equivalent of ancient Greece's Trojan War stories or England's Arthurian legends.

This transition from reality to myth came quickly, so quickly, in fact, that many real western figures went on to live (at least in part) off their myths. The Lakota Sioux chief Sitting Bull, for example, became a star attraction at Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, earning \$50 a week for simply riding a horse once around an arena during each performance. And Wyatt Earp, who lived until 1929, became a consultant on Hollywood silent westerns, sharing his knowledge of the "Wild West" with such directors as the young John Ford.

The transition of these mythic stories to film happened nearly as quickly. Some of the very first westerns came from Thomas Edison's budding film-making company in the 1890s. Although short and crudely made, they feature some elements that soon became fixtures of the genre. One of these films is the one-minute-long *Cripple Creek Bar Room Scene* (1899), which shows a prototypical western bar room scene complete with a barmaid (played in this film, incidentally, by a man). Another, *Poker at Dawson City* (also 1899), depicts a crooked poker game, which leads to a bar-room fight.

A major breakthrough came just a few years later with the release of Edison protégée Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Often called the first narrative western, this 10-minute-long film was a major step forward in cinematic storytelling and included many of the elements that soon became standard in the genre such as good guys versus bad guys, a robbery or other wrongdoing, a chase on horseback, and natural outdoor settings.

By the 1910s, both “two-reelers” (films about 20 minutes in length) and feature-length westerns were appearing in droves, and by now most of the conventions of the genre were firmly established: bright sunlight; vast desert or mountain landscapes; brave, resourceful heroes; sweet young heroines; colorful, often comical sidekicks; clearly delineated bad guys; and happy endings. These efforts included suspense, lurking danger, and occasional violence, of course, but a rough-and-tumble exuberance and optimism usually abounds. These were stories, after all, of a young, restless, energetic nation that was ceaselessly building and expanding. The features soon gave way to epic silent westerns such as James Cruze’s *The Covered Wagon* (1923) and John Ford’s *The Iron Horse* (1924), both stories that continued to celebrate America’s “Manifest Destiny.”

To support their usually optimistic sensibilities, most traditional westerns—not just during the silent era but also well into the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—were filmed in a direct, unpretentious way. They begin with establishing shots of wide-open country, and audiences look their heroes straight in the eye. As color became more economically feasible for productions in the 1950s, these films also highlight the dramatic and often beautiful color location shooting in Wyoming, Oregon, Utah, Arizona, and half a dozen other scenic western states. The warm, rich hues of color cinematography and westerns go well together, and sometimes they take on a pristine, travelogue quality. As we watch many of these films, it’s sometimes natural to start planning a visit to Wyoming’s Grand Tetons, Oregon’s Cascade Mountains, or numerous other gorgeous locales.



In just about every respect, of course, all of these western trappings seem incongruous with noir films with their disconcerting dark shadows and extreme camera angles meant to heighten audience anxiety; stark, stifling, present-day urban locales; psychologically haunted men; and dangerous, manipulative women. In fact, it seems inconceivable that these two film types—one overwhelmingly optimistic and the other intrinsically pessimistic (and occasionally even nihilistic) in sensibility and style—should cross-pollinate in a big way.

Yet that’s exactly what began to occur during the mid-1940s. Slowly at first but then with increasing frequency, audiences began to experience “new” westerns that told stories much darker in substance and tone than their usually sunnier predecessors and often conveyed in much the same way a noir crime drama might be.



John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1924) was one of the large-scale western epics that raised the bar for the genre in the last years of the silent era. Here, the film reenacts the 1869 ceremony at Promontory Summit, Utah, where the golden spike, signifying the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, was driven into place.

Over the years, critics and scholars have given these films many names. In addition to the “noir western” or “western noir,” they have been called “the psychological western,” “the existential western,” “the Freudian western,” and (a favorite) “sagebrush noir.” In noting the trend to change and enhance the traditional western by incorporating new elements into these films in the 1950s, critic Andre Bazin went as far as to invent the term “superwestern.” This, he wrote, “is a western what would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence—an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, or erotic interest—in short some quality extrinsic to the genre and which is supposed to enrich it.”⁴ Bazin’s point is well taken. Although traditional westerns would continue to be made for decades after the mid-1940s, he suggests that, by the mid-1940s, filmmakers had already sensed that audience tastes were evolving and that, if venerable genres such as the western were going to survive, they needed to evolve as well.

Rather than corrupting or polluting the western as some purists might have assumed, these changes had a decidedly different impact. Because they were so antithetical to the norms of the traditional western, they gave the genre added dimension, complexity, and dramatic tension—an enormous creative spark, if you will. The result was a synthesis of sorts, and, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, the genre enjoyed a period of popularity and inspired creativity unequalled at any other time in its long, rich history. An enormous number of fine to great westerns were made, and tens of millions of appreciative filmgoers flocked to them.



Although many film historians cite 1947 as the official birthdate of western noir, we can, if we like, go back to some westerns made several years earlier to see noir influences already at work on the genre. One example of what we might call a “proto-noir western” is William Wellman’s *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), which superbly tells the story of a frontier lynching with the help of Arthur C. Miller’s disturbingly dark and bleak cinematography. A second is John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1946). While not nearly as dark in tone as *The Ox-Bow Incident*, it does include a few noir-ish elements new to Ford films. One is the film’s characterization of the doomed and deeply troubled Doc Holliday (one of Victor Mature’s best roles). Another—which is quite under-appreciated—is the characterization of Pa Clanton (portrayed brilliantly by Walter Brennan), which conveys a depth of evil very rarely seen in Ford’s work up to that time.

Despite these and other efforts, however, 1947 is most often cited as the official birthdate because of two films, which premiered exactly two months apart that year—Raoul Walsh’s *Pursued* (released on March 2) and André de Toth’s *Ramrod* (released on May 2). Usually designated as the first of the new breed, both films runneth over with noir-ish elements. *Pursued*, for example, is drenched in them from its stark, eerie, black-and-white cinematography by James Wong Howe to its flashback story structure, to its voice-over narration (by noir icon Robert Mitchum, no less), to its hero’s nightmares and psychological torment. *Ramrod*, which features a traumatized hero and plenty of unsettling noir-ish camera angles and lighting as well, is a rare example of a western that also features a scheming femme fatale (played by noir siren Veronica Lake).

Soon to follow in the late 1940s are a number of very intriguing westerns with a decided noir edge to them. One fine and little-known example is Well-

man's *Yellow Sky* (1948), in which a bank robber (Gregory Peck) struggles between a growing desire to "go good" and intensifying pressures from others in his gang to stay bad. *Yellow Sky* also makes great use of cinematographer Joe McDonald's fine camera and composition work to visually reinforce this struggle in one of the bleakest of natural landscapes, California's Death Valley. The next year, Sam Fuller's *I Shot Jesse James* shows a man (John Ireland's Robert Ford) who murders his friend for money and (as one must in noir) meets an ignominious end.

Then, throughout the 1950s, noir westerns came fast and furiously. Many of them were the work of veteran Hollywood masters such as Wellman, Walsh, and Henry King. Many more were from directors who had first distinguished themselves in 1940s noir crime dramas such as Anthony Mann, André de Toth, and Budd Boetticher. As these directors transitioned from noir to the western, bringing both their personal worldviews and filmmaking styles with them, so did many of the actors, writers, cinematographers, and others who had been major contributors to noir. Among the actors, just a handful of notable names include Mitchum, Barbara Stanwyck, Robert Ryan, Susan Hayward, Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster, Gregory Peck, Glenn Ford, Richard Widmark, Dick Powell, Jane Greer, John Payne, Van Heflin, and Dan Duryea.

Of all the noir-ish elements, however, perhaps the one that appears to be most dominant in these films is the hero, a character who is often much darker in spirit than his pre-war cowboy predecessors. Frequently, this dark view is the result of a severe psychological trauma experienced in the past—the kind of trauma many people would either recognize or directly identify with in the years immediately after World War II. Usually, the hero continues to struggle with this trauma (many times the violent death of a loved one), and often the action of the film centers around "settling a score" so the hero can (he hopes) put the past behind him and move forward. Sometimes the reason for this dark view is not as clearly spelled out in exposition. The hero may have experienced a traumatic event or events, or he simply could be someone who has been hardened by the world or is, by nature, dark and difficult. The lonely life is a frequent theme, too. Many of these heroes may want to find love and community, but they ultimately find that, however hard they try, they don't—and will never—fit in. Again, this echoes the sense of not belonging, of displacement, common among many war veterans. How these heroes manage their demons also varies widely. Some, such as the characters actor Randolph Scott often played, are stoic and persevering. They bear their grief quietly and with dignity. Others can't help but bring their rage and pain

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