America: Race and National Identity

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within Hollywood's West: The American Frontier

in Film, Television, and History

Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. $40.00 cloth. 373 pages.

There’s an irony, if not a particularly happy one for fans of the genre, in the fact that there are now more books being published about the Western than there are Western movies coming out of Hollywood. Some of these volumes, like Hollywood’s West, offer a perspective derived from historical or sociological studies, rather than from the film studies perspective with which Film Quarterly readers will be more familiar. In principle, this is all to the good. Clearly, Westerns are in a sense “about” history, and if professional historians can elucidate exactly in what sense, then we may all profit.

The essays in Hollywood’s West result from a conference hosted by Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies in 2002. They cover a wide range of topics. Some concern themselves with little-explored aspects of the genre, including J. E. Smyth’s essay on Cinarron (1930—for sixty years the only Western to win the Oscar for best picture), or Cynthia J. Miller’s discussion of the generic hybrids produced by Jed Buell, including The Terror of Tiny Town (1938), with its all-midget cast, and Harlem on the Prairie (1937), starring black singer Herb Jeffries. In similar vein, John Shelton Lawrence discusses the Lone Ranger and David Pierson analyses the made-for-TV Westerns of TNT, which have so far received little attention elsewhere.

Other topics are more mainstream. Matthew J. Costello writes about High Noon (1952) in the context of the Cold War, a subject recently worked over by Stanley Corkin in his book Cowboys as Cold Warriors (Atheneum, 2004), as well as by Richard Slotkin in Gunfighter Nation (Temple University Press, 1992), and by Phillip Drummol in his BFI Film Classic on the film, published in 1997 (but surprisingly not mentioned in Costello’s bibliography). As we would expect, there are a couple of articles about women in the Western, John Parrris Springer discussing Red River (1947) in that context, and Winona Howe dealing with The Professionals (1966). There are also some observant remarks by Kathleen A. McDonough on how women in Ford’s cavalry Westerns are initiated into support for a masculine code of honour, in contrast to their sisters in other Westerns (like Shane [1952]) who attempt to domesticate the hero’s wildness.

The problem, unfortunately, with some of the essays in the book is that, contrary to the title of the journal which inspired the conference, they aren’t very interdisciplinary. They don’t show much awareness of the analytic strategies developed within film studies, preferring instead to reduce films, by means of a plot summary, to a fairly banal historical proposition, which is then “placed” in relation to a more generalized discourse about American history. This has the effect of evacuating from the films most of what makes them interesting. And in reducing them to such formulaic historical statements, the authors do not always avoid short-circuiting the complex articulations between culture and society. Thus McDonough observes that John Ford’s portrayal of Indians in Fort Apache (1948) and She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949) displays a hopeful and constructive attitude towards dealing with international hostilities. But the last film in the “cavalry trilogy” apparently represents a reversion to a more right-wing attitude, which is then directly attributed to shifts in international relations: “That the Indians in Rio Grande are once again savages reflects the diminishing hopes for lasting peace as tension grew throughout the world” (112).

Yet the chronology doesn’t quite fit. The more optimistic She Wore a Yellow Ribbon was released in October 1949, over a year after the Berlin airlift began in June 1948, an event cited by McDonough as responsible for crucially upping international tension. She claims that the anti-Indian Rio Grande, released in November 1950, registers the further deterioration in relations between the U.S. and the Communist bloc, and it’s true that the Korean War broke out in June 1950. But can we credit Ford with mapping so acutely the twists and turns of international relations? Or is it more likely, as Joseph McBride thinks in his biography Searching for John Ford (St Martin’s Press, 2001), that the director’s more hawkish stance in the later film was mainly due to his hiring of the “archconservative” James Kevin McGuinness rather than the liberal Frank Nugent? A simple, determinist view of the relations between film and history also fails to do justice to the complex contradictions in Ford’s own artistic personality.

A rather different relationship between films and history, but one which is just as directly deterministic, is posited by

ALAN NADEL, William T. Bryan Chair of American Literature at the University of Kentucky, is author of Television in Black-and-White America: Race and National Identity (University Press of Kansas, 2005).

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Matthew R. Turner in his discussion of the parody Western. Speaking of Blazing Saddles (1974), he claims that the “film’s deconstructionist techniques reflect the widespread turmoil of a nation dealing with Vietnam and Watergate. Just as people were questioning the things they once thought were fixed, [Mel] Brooks questions and undermines every established convention of the Western” (224). But can the relationship between the two sets of phenomena be quite so simple as this? And what is the exact meaning of the word “reflects” here? As in a mirror, an exact replication? If so, by what institutional and artistic mechanisms is such a remarkable identity secured? Is politics the cause of what happens in the cinema, or is each of them an effect, produced by a common cause (which is essentially the case argued by Slotkin)?

Fortunately this anthology includes two outstanding essays which set up a much more complex and interesting set of relationships between cinema and history. Joanna Hearne’s contribution, “The ‘Ache for Home’: Assimilation and Separation in Anthony Mann’s Devil’s Doorway,” is a detailed and knowledgeable discussion of how the politics of the U.S. government’s relations with its indigenous peoples work their way into Mann’s film, and others of the period such as Broken Arrow (1950) which center on the conflict between whites and Indians. One of the most valuable things Hearne does is to show that this conflict is not best viewed as a perennial, unchanging background within which films are set (as the Indian himself is often seen as an immutable essence), but has its own history, to which particular films can be related.

Alexandra Keller’s essay, “Historical Discourse and American Identity in American Westerns since the Reagan Era,” like Hearne’s, pays attention to the insights of film studies into how films make their meaning. She has a sophisticated understanding of how such Westerns as Dances With Wolves (1990), Walker (1987), and Tombstone (1993) exhibit a different stance towards issues of historical authenticity. Dances With Wolves, for example, is an exercise in nostalgia because it fails to problematize historiographic method. It tries merely to picture the past without interrogating the way in which that past is constructed. (Keller, incidentally, also had an excellent essay in Janet Walker’s anthology Westerns: Films Through History, published in 2001 by Routledge in the AFI Film Readers series, a volume covering somewhat similar ground to Hollywood’s West, but written by film specialists.)

Overall, then, this is a collection that contains much of use and something of real value, but one which might have profited from a more searching interrogation of what history is and how it is told, besides a greater knowledge of what film studies have already said about such questions. The general introduction by the editors does not shed much light on these issues, and contains a couple of errors. Surely by now one believes, as they assert, that Iron Eyes Cody was a Cherokee? The picture on p. 22 is of Shirley Temple, not Joanne Dru. And are they really sure that Thelma and Louise (1991) was shot in Monument Valley? I think they will find it was not.

EDWARD BUSCOMBE is the author of three volumes on Westerns in the BFI Film Classics series.

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Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture


Prosthetic Memory is a provocative text that engages with mass culture and its reflections on historical trauma. In combining commentary on literature, comic books, television, museums, and most frequently, popular film, Alison Landsberg mounts an argument in favor of a politically progressive understanding of mass culture that challenges much of the twentieth-century theoretical literature on the topic. Her book represents a bold effort to redeem mass culture from the systems of control to which it has been doomed by many commentators—most famously, Theodor Adorno. Landsberg argues that mass culture can implant new memories in the viewer/reader/spectator, as it literally causes real emotional experiences of empathy and affect that, through the texts, are connected rhetorically to the historical traumas that they depict. Our experiences with these texts leave behind “prosthetic memories” of the traumas that they represent, therefore allowing us a special kind of mediated access to histories that we have not literally lived.

The majority of the stories and situations that Landsberg describes engage with significant events of public trauma from twentieth-century history (particularly as they impact the United States). The author discusses texts that reflect upon immigration, slavery, and the Holocaust in the context of mass-cultural narratives. Landsberg’s primary question here however is not, what do the texts say? But rather, what do they do? In her discussion of the TV series Roots (1977) or the comic book Maus, Landsberg is concerned with explaining the work’s intellectual and affective force and then, by extension, its capacity to change how we think and feel about the subject that it represents. In this sense, Prosthetic Memory is primarily about defining a particular model of spectatorship that produces a real, experiential type of knowledge-acquisition, which differs markedly from notions of aesthetic experience that describe this interaction between subject and mass-cultural text as primarily escapist. In her discussion of slavery and the Holocaust in American memory, Landsberg discusses Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon and Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993) in addition to Roots and Maus. This wide-ranging combination of mass-cultural objects allows Landsberg to discuss new kinds of alternative memory production and knowledge transference, ones that are more “experiential” and affective than what one might encounter with, for example, a history textbook.

The author draws attention to mass-cultural objects that convey their messages through various kinds of emotional and experiential transfer; the fictions create new memories in the viewer through what Landsberg calls, following Freud, their “transferential spaces” (23). In one variety of this affective use of fiction, Roots allows white viewers, in Landsberg’s words, “to see the world through black eyes” (83). For Landsberg, spectral identification is one of the most significant