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**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

What I'd like to do very quickly is give you a brief account-- much to skeletal and simplified-- of this conversational drama-- the way in which the Western film becomes a screen on which American values are projected, and on which American values are tested, and in which we see American values or assumptions undergoing certain kinds of transformation-- certain kinds of change.

I don't expect you to remember these titles or all of these titles although the ones I talk about you might think about. And this is very far from a complete list of films. It's just a list of highlights. But I want to give you a sense of, first-- that the Western film is at the center of movies at every phase of the history of the medium.

And as we've noted, one might argue that one of the very first films-- some people have called it the first narrative film although that's a slight exaggeration-- but one of the most fundamental founding documents in the history of movies is, of course, a Western.

If not its first story-- film-- one of the earliest narrative films was a Western. And we might note, in fact, that Western, *The Great Train Robbery*, was also based itself, not on-- although it has mythologized and fictionalized-- *The Great Train Robbery* is based on a historical actuality-- on a robbery that was very widely covered in the press about which dime novels were written and which became a site of many films-- the first one *The Great Train Robbery*.

A more recent one that you may have heard of if you haven't actually seen it-- *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* which tells the same story. It's based on the same gang. It doesn't tell exactly the same story, but it's based on the same gang that was said to have committed the great train robbery.

And that calls our attention to another factor-- another aspect-- of this-- what we might call the story of the mythological aspect of American cinema, and especially of the Western, because it calls our attention to the fact that the same events may be narrated again, and again, and again. One of the points about myth-- about collective stories-- is they're literally told

repeatedly.

One way to think about the Western-- say, OK. There are variations but, basically, it's the same story. Of course, that's a tremendous simplification because it's thematic, and moral implications can change radically-- but, basically, the same set of characters, the same setting, the same materials told over and over again, obsessively.

Why would a society do this? What is driven-- what drives us to do this? Well, one answer is there are pleasures in familiarity. One of the deepest lessons of the history of literature is that the romantic and modernist idea of the artist as a unique individual creating art ab novo-- sui generis-- with no connections to the past is a fantasy and a delusion-- a particular outgrowth of the romantic and modern period. But that throughout history and throughout most cultures, art, and especially storytelling, has been much more like the activities of these popular formats in which the same kinds of stories are repeated again and again with variations.

And one could say that one of the profoundest resemblances between Shakespeare's time and our own is the dominance of genre forms in a popular theatrical environment. In Shakespeare's day, it was the popular theater that had a similar effect of trying to define in some sense our notion of national identity. And that's why I quoted the Renaissance scholar this afternoon who called Shakespeare's theater "the theater of a nation." He was trying to make the same kind of argument about the importance of the centrality of the public theater in Shakespeare's day that I'm making about the movies in the United States in the 20th century.

So *The Great Train Robbery* is a kind of originating text both for film itself and for the genre of the Western. Griffith's *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* was one of the first longer films. I think it was a half an hour or 45 minutes long. It was a much longer creation than earlier films, and it was one of the first major examples of large crowds of people-- mounted people-- engaged in battle. And that was one of the most astonishing things.

It was a tremendously influential film. It dramatized battles between cowboys and Indians in a way that showed the power of the medium of film at a very early stage. In 1914, the first movie dramatization of that novel by Owen Wister that I mentioned earlier-- that was also one of the founding texts in the Western genre.

I've mentioned a couple of other films here. One of them-- one of John Ford's earliest films to demonstrate that-- I've got two Ford films listed there to try to give you a sense of his importance in the silent era. I list *The Covered Wagon* as a way of showing you that the genre

of the pioneer story was already present in the silent era.

I list *The Iron Horse* by Ford as a way of reminding you of how central Ford is but also a way of reminding you that that story of the laying of the railroad-- the Intercontinental Railroad-- one of the central sub stories-- recurring stories in the Western begins in the silent era.

And I mentioned the Keaton partly to show you that the genre had become so widespread that it was now so fully-fledged-- so fully recognizable-- even in the silent era that Keaton was able to make a comic parody of Westerns called *Go West*.

With the advent of sound, the first decade of the Western movie is, from an artistic standpoint, not very distinguished. Can you guess why one primary reason is? If you look, I say singing cowboys-- because it was sound. The very first thing said, oh, well. We're so enamored of sound. The novelty of sound is so remarkable. The first thing we'll do is we'll introduce cowboys who sing. And there were primitive stories that they told, but the stories were relatively superficial.

I mentioned *In Old Arizona*, the first sound Western, in part because what was amazing about that film, especially to audiences, were literally the sounds-- the crackling of the fire, the creaking of the saddles. The noises of the West were fascinating to people. So the '30s, from an artistic standpoint, were not a very interesting one in terms of the Western's development. Some scholars have argued that the silent Western was more interesting than the Western of the '30s.

But they're worth mentioning because they were very popular, and many Westerns in the '30s were identified as what were called B-films. That is to say, as you may know the-- I wish I had had time in this course to spend some energy talking about what might be called the movie house Culture-- how incredibly the whole society after about 1930 or in the early '30s was permeated by the movies-- how every major city had dozens-- maybe even more than that-- of movie houses showing films that-- many levels of films-- recent films and many older films as well.

And as I think I mentioned in an earlier class, it was possible to go to third and fourth-run movie houses showing movies that were several years old and to pay something like a quarter in the morning and go in and watch five or six movies. And I did this as a child in the late '40s in Brooklyn, New York where I would go into a theater and come out-- I would go in in the bright morning. I would come out-- it would be dark. They were lousy movies, but I was a kid. I didn't

know any better, and it was an astonishing kind of culture.

I should also mention, I call it the movie house culture because, of course-- again, I haven't had time to develop this. But if you google "movie houses," what will immediately appear are a series of magnificent photographs or images of movie palaces. You could even google "movie palaces" and find the same answer-- that now mostly fallen into disuse or destroyed that were all over the country-- very exotic and remarkable.

Even the physical structures of these theaters were exotic and exciting. These exhibition spaces were themselves meant to excite you and take you into another world. And partly because of that, what they always offered was a really robust ticket of offerings. You didn't just go to the movies and watch one movie. You saw at least a double feature. The second feature was often what was called a B-movie-- a second rate movie-- lower budget. Many of them were Westerns.

One reason for that was because the accouterments of the Western are so interchangeable. As I mentioned in an earlier class, one of the things they could do was use stock footage to put these Westerns together very quickly. So they could have a stampede that might have appeared in many different movies but will do the job in this B Western and so forth. And they could use the same props, the same town, the same horses, and the same costumes, and so forth. So for a lot of the '30s, the Western movie was a kind of back-up-- a second banana to the primary film.

In addition, there began to develop, especially on Saturday-- in this movie house culture, Saturday mornings were especially for children-- even Saturday afternoons. They began to develop what they called matinees which were intentionally devoted toward trying to get younger people-- children-- into the theaters. And they had a series of sort of B or C Westerns some of which were serials and would continue from one Saturday to the next.

I want to mention my favorite childhood Western hero whom I still remember. And I remember I loved this character when I was seven and eight years old and would go to the movies on Saturdays and see-- sometimes the serials would last several weeks. Part of it was to try to get the kids to come back and get their parents to pay for them to come back every Saturday. So they would always end with a cliffhanger-- with a moment of great tension-- and you wonder whether the hero and heroin would survive into the next week.

And there were a whole series of such films. My favorite such film was a film where a series of adventures starring a character named Lash LaRue-- can you guess what Lash LaRue's weapon of choice was?

**AUDIENCE:** A whip.

**DAVID THORBURN:** Yes, the whip-- a bullwhip. He never carried a gun. But he had this long bullwhip, and he would take this whip and he'd go--

[CRACK]

--like that. And it would snake out across, and it would flip a gun right out of a person's hand. Or he could go--

[CRACK]

--like this, and a little tiny spot of blood would appear on a person's nose. It was a unbelievably, ridiculous fantasy. And the lash made a tremendous beautiful crack when he brought it back. He was obviously a figure of childhood fantasy, but it was a tremendously, memorable film.

And, again, there was no pretensions toward psychological seriousness or even thematic density in these Westerns, but they permeated the culture. They were part of the experience of childhood. So children in the society would grow up watching these children's versions of Westerns, and then they would graduate to the more adult Westerns.

I don't want to call it a form of brainwashing because that's much too negative a way of describing the way in which these story forms shape our understandings or help to shape our understandings. And I don't mean that human beings are completely programmable creatures-- that they go and look at a movie, and they become robots following what the movie said.

But what I am saying is that the way these kinds of stories permeated the society helped to shape Americans understanding of their natures-- of what the social fabric was like, of what masculinity was, of what femininity was, of what families were, of what the relations among the races were, of what American history was, about what the founding story of America is, about what the central organizing values of our culture are.

All of those things are dramatized either explicitly or implicitly in movies. And because the movies were so central through the 20th century, they were one of the central ways in which the belief system-- the values-- of American society were promulgated, dramatized, rehearsed, and in some ways altered and changed.

The classical age of the Western film is often said to be the period of the 1940s, and this is really the moment when the Western as an artistic form begins to come into its own. Although, it also still carries ideological or thematic baggage we might not want to embrace or celebrate. So remember, it's an ambivalent thing here. I'm asking you to respect the artistry of these films, but I'm also asking you to do something mature and grown-up which is be skeptical about the meanings that are embodied in what are sometimes very artful movies.

And we call it the classical age, in part, because a certain kind of much more ambitious intellectually powerful and artistically organized Western begins to appear, dominated-- but not completely-- by the great director John Ford-- one of whose masterpieces you're going to see in a few minutes.

The age probably begins in 1939-- the same year that the integrated musical begins with-- what was the film? We mentioned it last week. The Wizard of Oz in which color is introduced for the first time. Well, here the genre of the Western comes into its own, really, roughly in the same year in a film that stars John Wayne, who was one of the iconic stars of the American Western, and directed by John Ford-- his favorite director-- a director who did other things but who was noted, especially, for his remarkable Westerns. Wayne had had a career in the movies 10 years before that, but in *Stagecoach*, for the first time, he became a major star. The film made him a star.

And *Stagecoach* is an interesting film because it articulates or formulates one of the great sub genres within the category of the Western. And this is-- I don't know exactly what to call it. It's a story in which you have a group of unlike people who are traveling, usually by stagecoach or in some other-- sometimes it can be by train-- who are beset unexpectedly by some kind of danger-- usually an attack by Indians. And then the uneasy community that is forced upon them when they have to defend themselves reveals various aspects of human nature and of human society.

And the film *Stagecoach* is a classic instance of that in which the John Wayne character gets on the stagecoach as it's making a journey across a bleak Western landscape through Indian

territory. And he's a, kind of, ambiguous figure in this film-- the Wayne character-- perhaps an outlaw. And the respectable people who are in the stagecoach-- a banker-- a character who's actually embezzling money and is trying to get away although no one knows. He hasn't revealed it at the time. It comes out in the course of the film-- and a series of other sort of characters with interesting backgrounds that emerge when the catastrophe descends upon them.

And, of course, what happens is the ambiguity of the Wayne character-- the fact that he has a kind of connection to lawlessness turns out to be one of the great virtues that he has because, of course, he becomes the primary defender of the group when they are beset by savage Indians.

And then I've listed-- again, let me remind you. Again, I've just picked-- these are just highlights. Remember what we said. Nearly 30% of all films made during the studio era were Western movies, and these are among the highlights. From the titles you can see the recurring sub genres that occur. *Billy the Kid* in 1941-- the film directed by David Miller-- this preoccupation with outlaws. There are a number of films about Billy the Kid, a number of films about Jesse James, and about the gun fight at the O.K. Corral.

The 1946 film *My Darling Clementine*-- Ford's famous film starring Henry Fonda-- is one of six movies made about the gun fight at the O.K. Corral. And think of what that says to us. What does a myth do? It tells the same story again, and again, and again. Each of those six films is in many ways different from-- in significant ways, each film is different from the other film even though the basic information, or at least the basic situation, is the same.

And, in fact, in some versions of the film-- in some versions of that account-- the account of the O.K. Corral-- Wyatt Earp and the Earp brothers fight against the Clanton brothers. In the classic versions-- in the version *My Darling Clementine* in 1946 by Ford, the Earps are heroes. And Wyatt Earp is a great American-- is a noble American hero who defends a town against anarchy and evil. The Clantons are entirely evil.

But in later revisionist versions of the same story, Earp and his brothers are seen as arrogant officials who are trying to control gambling and prostitution in the town of Tombstone. And the Clantons are not seen as noble but are seen, essentially, as rivals of the Earps-- not necessarily as inferior, evil characters. And such a perspective, of course, profoundly changes our understanding of what the gun fight at the O.K. Corral represented-- interesting and

deeply revealing that so many Westerns have been repeated. I mean, the same story told again and again.

And so the fact that the gunfighter at the O.K. Corral was repeated at least six times in feature length films-- there were also television versions of the O.K. Corral event, adding to the number-- is a dramatic example of what we might call this mythological function or this forum function-- this discourse space function that genre forms in general and the Western movie, in particular, have.

I've already mentioned *Red River* in my earlier discourse about Howard Hawks. And I want to just remind you that that great director of screwball comedy was also one of the great directors of masculine adventure films including what many people think is one of the great Westerns of all time-- *Red River*. And *Red River* is an interesting sub genre as well. It's a cattle drive Western.

Many Westerns are about cattle drive, but this one also adds a very interesting complexity because there's a kind of oedipal drama and acted out between the John Wayne figure-- recurring figure in so many Westerns-- and a younger man played by the great actor Montgomery Clift who plays a surrogate son to the John Wayne character. And, of course, conflict develops and the rivalry between father and son is a fundamental subplot in that remarkable Western.

One other thing I should say about the '40s period-- I call it the classical age primarily for this reason-- I sort of didn't name this. Forgive me for not mentioning this earlier. Again, we're talking about the period just before, during, and after the Second World War. The United States feels itself to be beleaguered. The world is beleaguered in a way.

That outer reality also helps to explain why the Western of the 1940s would be, essentially, a celebration of American power, a celebration of American empire, a celebration of American know-how and competence in the wilderness because, by analogy, the Western is a story of American success-- of American conquest. One might think of it as a story that American needed to tell itself during the period.

So the war-- the Second World War is a great reinforcement to the way in which-- in the classical age of the American Western, the Western film is basically telling an heroic story, is celebrating the conquest of the West, and is seeing the white man's settlement of the West in relatively unambiguously, admirable terms, celebrating the courage, and the resilience, and

the physical prowess of the pioneers and the great, noble gun fighters who tamed the West for us.

But by the 1950s, this confidence has begun to wane. Part of it is, look-- the war has been over for a significant time. American society is in a peacetime boom which is going to build through the '50s. And it's also a period in which a certain kind of-- this was, of course, the period of my childhood. I was 10 years old in 1950. And I remember it vividly. In fact, saw some of the films that are listed here in the theaters for the first time.

So I mention that to you just to remind you that, in fact, what we're talking about is not ancient history at all because I actually experienced some of the films on this list in my own actual lifetime when they were originally shown in the theaters. And although I am infinitely old compared to you guys, I'm still a vigorous, functioning human being. So within my lifetime's memory, many of these films were contemporary. And it's important to realize how close we are, in fact, to these times.

But one of things that begin to appear in the 1950s was a kind of skepticism about the social arrangements in the society. At first they were very modest and mild. There was in the 1950s, for example, what came to be called a generation gap in which older and younger-- in which there was thought to be a distance between older and younger people.

And there was a great concern in the 1950s for alienated youth and juvenile delinquency which was a great catch phrase. And some of the films of the 1950s dramatized that. For example, the film *The Left-Handed Gun* in 1958 starring Paul Newman-- directed by Arthur Penn-- is a story really about-- it's a *Billy the Kid* story. Newman plays a *Billy the Kid* type character, but he plays a young boy. He plays, really, a post adolescent. And you can feel that what's partly being dramatized there are teenage angst.

There are-- and what also begins-- in 1952, the film *High Noon*-- a fragment of which I will show in next week's lecture when we talk about *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* to do a contrast with a classical Western and a post-classical Western-- that film introduces certain kinds of contemporary political concerns. Many people see *High Noon* as a parable about the McCarthy era-- Senator Joseph McCarthy and the fear of-- the paranoia about communism and the anti-communist hysteria of the late '40s and early 1950s when the Cold War was just getting powerfully started.

And *High Noon* is a kind of parable about a good man who turns to-- a sheriff played by Gary

Cooper-- one of the great iconic heroes of masculinity of the classical Hollywood era along with John Wayne. And Cooper plays a sheriff who has brought peace to the town. He's been a sheriff for many years. And on his wedding day, he's marrying a Quaker-- a Quaker woman. He's giving up his gun because a Quaker woman, played by Grace Kelly-- you'll remember her from the Hitchcock film although here she plays a Western heroin. She's a Quaker, and he's putting down his gun to join his wife.

And on his wedding day a man that he sent to jail is coming back by the noonday train to take his revenge. So the Sheriff spends the early part of the film going around to the townspeople-- a town that owes its life to this great, heroic sheriff saying, help me. I'm going to be attacked by Frank Miller and his gang. No one will help him. He's left on his own. He has to stand by himself because the town is too cowardly. And it's a parable of the cowardice of people who deserted-- it's in some sense a, kind of, left wing argument. It's a parable about the cowardice of people who wouldn't stand up for folks who were attacked by Senator McCarthy and other anti-communists for being disloyal. So certain kinds of political meanings begin to-- skeptical political meanings begin to creep in.

And the society that's dramatized in *High Noon* is hardly an admirable society. The Western culture may have created a town, and the town has a church. And they have a meeting in the church in the film. He goes-- it's a Sunday, and you can hear the church bells. And he goes to the church, and he asks for help from the congregation. And they won't do it. They're too cowardly.

And so it's a parable about cowardice, and about political dysfunction, and about communal disloyalty. Also, already by the 1950s, before the Hollywood era has completely concluded or been obliterated-- Hollywood dominance is still significant in the 1950s-- the Western has begun to change. It's begun to reflect social changes as well as thematic or ideological changes that have to do with the way the society is altering after the Second World War.

And a number of the films that I've listed there do that kind of thing. And one can also see in this listing of so-called adult Westerns a greater emphasis on psychological themes-- on the conflict between individuals. One very powerful and interesting instance of that is a film in 1967 directed by Martin Ritt, starring the great Paul Newman, in which Newman plays a half white, half Spanish, or half Indian character. I think he's an Indian-- a Native American. And it's a parable about racism. The Newman character is angry at both the white and the Native

American society. He doesn't fit in any place. But it's especially a parable about his exclusion, about the Paul Newman character's exclusion from white society, and about the power of racism.

By the time we get to the end of the 1960s, we're beginning to get films that have a kind of violence quotient that's different, and bloodier, and more disturbing than the violence we saw during the classical age. And we especially associate this form of violence with the director Sam Peckinpah whose film in 1969, *The Wild Bunch*, takes a number of actors who had been stars in classic Westerns and brings them back in a Western that is much darker and shows these older men as-- first of all, their age is emphasized. They're sort of doddering around. They're my age. They're in their late 60s-- early 70s, and they don't seem as vigorous as they should be, for one thing.

I think there are even scenes in which their nearsightedness of one of the characters is dramatized. But their age and trembliness is only a part of their unheroic dimensions. And we can see that the film, although it celebrates these heroes in a certain way-- the celebration is cankered. It's damaged. It's a damaged kind of celebration. There's a sense that these men are past their prime, that they're sleeping with women who are far too young with them, and there's something kind of disgusting about that.

We see that one of the actors-- an older figure-- Robert Ryan-- a very gifted actor who was in many, many Westerns and other films in the classical age of Hollywood-- plays an agent and very effective gunfighter. There's a terrible scene in a brothel where he's-- she's not a teenager, but there's a woman surely 30 years younger than he who becomes his bedmate. And there's something sour about the scene intended, I think, by the director. I mean, you can feel it. It's as if the Western values have begun to congeal and sicken even before we get to the-- what I'm calling the-- anti-Western.

And, of course, in the late '60s there also begins to emerge the phenomenon I talked about earlier this afternoon-- how the Italians start making Westerns-- putting them in Italian and they find locations in Europe that replicate American deserts and so forth. And the Italian Westerns, especially those that are associated with Sergio Leone, have a dark, existential, almost nihilistic flavor.

And one of the things that Leone did that was very subversive. He took characters-- American actors-- who were associated with great, heroic, idealistic roles in American Westerns of the

'40s and '50s, and he put them into Westerns in which they played evil villains-- murderers criminals who had no compassion or pity for any of their victims. And there's something shocking about seeing noble Henry Fonda who played young Abe Lincoln in John Ford's movie and played so many wonderful, heroic figures including Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine* suddenly turned into a stone killer. And that kind of reversal anticipates what happens in the 1970s.

And, of course, what happens in the '70s-- partly, again, a consequence of transformations in American society. I'll talk a bit about the cultural history of the '70s next week when I talk about film in the '70s in a systematic way. But suffice it to say for now, that what goes on there is a series of Westerns begin to appear that are permeated by the anti-establishment values of the counterculture-- that are permeated by the anti-war movement-- because the era of the Vietnam War-- of tremendous fissures in American society. I'll talk more about this next week, so I don't want to repeat myself.

So it's a period in which American culture is-- it's conflicted and divided in a horrific way. And the Westerns will begin to reflect that. And, in fact, the old heroic enterprise of the classic Westerns of the 1940s and early '50s is suddenly transformed in a series of anti-Westerns or dissenting Westerns.

In 1970, Ralph Nelson makes a film called *Soldier Blue* in which the American cavalry, the heroes of so many films including a trilogy of films by John Ford made in the late '40s called the *Cavalry Trilogy* in which-- John Wayne is in one of those films. At least one of those films celebrates the American-- the blue-suited cavalry of the Western era. In Ralph Nelson's film, the American soldiers are the enemy. It's almost-- and they commit atrocities that some scholars have associated with the My Lai atrocities in Vietnam. And so the Western has become a screen on which America's anxieties about the Vietnam War have been projected. Why would the Western work so well for this?

One answer is what I've been saying all along about the power of genre and the power of repetition. Look, if a thing is repeated again, and again, and again, it looks familiar. When it's so familiar, what happens? It licenses something disturbing. Because the genre seems on the surface to contain so many familiar, reassuring elements, those very elements of reassurance enable the exploration of disturbing, or uncertain, or problematic materials. And that's one of the-- and, of course, because any one of these films would have nothing like the power they actually have if they existed individually. But it's because they're part of this long conversation

that goes back to the earliest days of movies that they have the power that they have.

In 1971, the film starring Dustin Hoffman, *Little Big Man*, is another such film in which it's the Indians-- the Native Americans-- who are the heroes. And the little, big man of the title is played by Dustin Hoffman. He's a Native American who has survived Indian massacres and lives to tell the story. And, of course, in 1971-- the film you'll see next week that will embody these principles-- Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*.

The Western doesn't disappear. It doesn't completely die, but it falls away as time continues in part, I think, because our increasingly urbanized society after the 1950s became less and less amenable. The Western became less and less credible or valuable. It became harder and harder for most Americans to identify with aspects of the Western. That's one reason.

And other genres begin to take over, especially the science fiction genre. And one of the things you might think about if you think about the rise of science fiction from the '50s and '60s, and then especially from the '70s and beyond, and especially the rise of the science fiction film is you can begin to see a hybridization going on in which many of the features of the Western are superimposed on a science fiction format. And, man, I'm sure you can think of many such examples of science fiction films they borrow from and utilize Western conventions.

So that's one feature-- that certain kinds of hybridization in which some of the features of a Western begin to appear in other genres. But, of course, the Western-- because of the resonance of the form, it continues to be a space in which gifted directors are able to make statements about the nature of American society. And exactly, again, because of the familiarity of it and because of the long history of the themes and discourses we associate with the Western, every new Western is always implicitly in a conversation with its ancestors.

And we have in the 1990s a series of interesting films. Some of you may have seen them-- Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*, two more versions of the Wyatt Earp story-- *Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp*.

Just a couple of titles from more recent times-- in 2007, *3:10 to Yuma*-- a remake of an earlier film that I listed earlier-- a 1957 film. If you compare those two films, you can see how much more violent, how much more anarchic, how much less idealizing and romanticizing the Western has become. *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*-- a wonderful title which replicates exactly the title of one of those dime novels appeared in 2007.

And let me mention two astonishingly rich and interesting examples from television. Television by the '80s and '90s is already a rival to the movies-- has really replaced the movies in many ways in terms of complexity and richness as well as having replaced the movies somewhat earlier as our consensus form-- as our central form. But two films, especially-- one, the well-known miniseries *Lonesome Dove* made from the Larry McMurtry novel-- one of the best television-- one of the best Westerns ever made-- a wonderful multipart story utilizing the serial nature of television to tell a Western with an expansiveness that the movie screen can allow but that the conditions of exhibition in the movies do not allow.

You can't go back to the movie. You can't watch a movie for six hours or eight hours. And it's much less convenient to go once a week for two hours for seven or eight weeks to see the same story. Television's a perfect environment for that in that sense. The reduced visual scale of television is what keeps the television from being really as powerful a medium for the Western as the movies are. But still, great Westerns are made.

And the greatest of all television Westerns-- one of the great Westerns-- one of the greatest Westerns ever made-- is the ongoing series-- David Milch's great series, *Deadwood*, that appeared on HBO from 2004 to 2006 was abruptly cut-off by the HBO bosses. In my view, it's the equivalent in the history of television to the story of what happened to the *Last Laugh*, in which the producers damaged a work of art.

But even in its damaged form, *Deadwood* is one of the most remarkable Westerns ever made. And it is deeply, deeply, deeply anarchic, dissenting, skeptical about human values and about motives. It's the opposite of an idealizing Western. It sees the West as emerging-- and Western society as emerging from human greed, from entrepreneuring violence and viciousness, from fear. From a historical and intellectual standpoint, it's a far more persuasive understanding of how history evolves, I think, than earlier idealizing forms-- a deeply disturbing and powerful text.

So the Western remains even in its vestigial condition-- even though it's now faded. It's no longer as central a format for an urbanized and technologized society. Remember, the United States before the Second World War was mostly a rural society. We only became a suburban and a fully urban society after the Second World War. And the growth of the suburbs is the great event, of course, after the Second World War-- so that more and more of the population found rural spaces alien, and didn't grow up in big spaces, and couldn't identify in the same way with the Western story.

And the conditions of experience-- the conditions of life in the United States-- underwent a transformation that made the Western much more of a traditional-- a vestigial voice-- a vestigial form than a central one. And we can trace the progress of that-- of the Western genre's movement-- from the center to the more marginal or peripheral parts of the society in this history that I've briefly shown you.

I have a few things to say about John Ford. Can you put him up? I won't spend a lot of time on this, but I want to mention some things about him. This is a list of some of his significant films. Not all that I've listed here are Westerns, but you can see a number of them are. He begins in the silent era. He continues robustly through the sound era-- one of the great directors of the sound era. And you can see a film like *Young Mr. Lincoln* is not quite a Western. *Drums Along the Mohawk*-- half a Western-- but he made other films that were not Westerns. But the Western was his signature form.

He was a very unpretentious man. And when he was introduced to people he often said, hello, I'm John Ford. I direct Westerns. I make Westerns. He didn't say, I'm a film director. He didn't say, I'm a cineaste. He didn't say, I'm an artist in the movies. He said, I make Westerns. And I like the unpretentious of that quality in him. He was the 13th child of Irish immigrants-- born in Maine. His father was a saloon owner. And at the age of 18, in 1913 after high school, he followed his brother Jack to Hollywood where his brother was a writer and a director. He began to work in his brother's films as a prop man, and a stunt man, and a bit actor.

He played a Ku Klux Klansman in *The Birth of a Nation*. So he's a man who's the first-- why is *Birth of a Nation* important? The first feature-length film in the United States-- D.W. Griffith. And it shows Ford's connection to the history-- centrality to the history of the American film. And he directed his first film in 1917 which was a bank robbery Western. And in that year he directed his first feature-- the film I listed earlier on our little history of the Western, *Straight Shooting*.

And then a series of films through his career-- 30 silent films by 1921 nearly all of which have been lost. So he was a very prolific director in the silent era. And, finally, at the end of his career he had directed more than 100 films-- over 60 sound features, 14 Westerns of which at least five to seven are among the greatest Westerns ever made. I won't single out any particular films here except to indicate that by the time we get to the late '50s-- to *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, *Seven Women*-- a new

kind of skepticism has entered into the idealizing and heroic tendencies that were characteristic of Ford's work in his earlier Westerns.

And one of the reasons that the film you're going to see tonight is so central is that it may be Ford's most profoundly ambivalent Western-- the Western in which his impulse to celebrate the heroic qualities of these pioneers and the resilience and survival qualities that were required to survive in these environments are very central. But he's begun to recognize-- begun to acknowledge-- what his earlier films had not acknowledged-- the moral complexities of the idea that the whites should come and take land away from the Indians. He's become to realize that the settlement of the West is not an unambiguous, triumphal story but a more complex and morally ambiguous tale.

And that moral ambiguity is at the heart of the film you're going to see tonight-- *The Searchers*. It has a damaged hero as you'll recognize. It's probably John Wayne's greatest role. John Wayne-- he plays a character named Ethan in the film. And it's interesting-- maybe Wayne didn't fully understand how ambivalently the central character is treated because he named his firstborn son Ethan. It's a strange thing because the Ethan that John Wayne plays here is not really an attractive person.

He has qualities that we admire and that John Ford surely admires. He's tremendously good with a gun. He's deeply knowledgeable about how to survive in the West. He knows a tremendous amount about the Native Americans. He can ride a horse like a rodeo rider. He's brave beyond belief, but he's also, as we discover, a racist. There's a danger all the way through the film that he may murder the young girl he's trying to find. He's searching for a young girl. There's some question all the way through the film on what his motive is-- whether he wants to find her to kill her or whether he wants to find her to rescue her.

Why does he want to kill her? Part of his damage-- the implication of the early part of the film is that he-- not just the implication-- the fact is he-- in the early part of the film, we discover that he fought on the Confederate side of the war, so he's coming home a loser. And there's an implication very early, as you'll see, that he committed various kinds of crime-- that he rode with outlaws. And that some of the loot that he has taken from the war may be ill-gained-- that he's a bitter and unhappy war veteran who feels that his side lost.

So he enters the film bitter-- as an embittered and damaged person. As the film continues, we recognize that, in fact, this family he's returned to-- his brother's family and his brother's wife

and his nieces and nephews-- there's a complexity there because of the looks that he exchanges with his brother's wife. You realize, not that they've ever had an affair or anything, but they had loved each other first and that the wife maybe still loves the John Wayne character even though she'll never act on it. Watch how that happens because not a word of dialogue is spoken, but Ford dramatizes this almost heavy-handedly. It's not all ambiguous even though the character playing John Wayne's brother is completely oblivious to this, but the audience knows this.

So he's an embittered, damaged-- a partial figure even from the beginning. And then as the story goes on, we discover other qualities in him that make us nervous. I said, for example, that he may be a racist. And we don't know whether he'll kill or save the person he's after. The film involves an Indian attack in which the John Wayne character's niece is taken by Indians. And most of the film is the John Wayne character and his sidekick's attempt to recover the stolen woman-- his niece.

She's stolen as a child, but it takes many years before they recover her. And by the time they recover her, she's a young woman. And she's been the wife of an Indian brave-- a character named Scar who was really, ultimately, a kind of double of the hero in certain ways as we come to recognize when we look closely at the film. And his search for this girl is ambiguous to us because he's so against-- he hates Indian so much.

It's a form of-- remember when the film is taking place-- during the civil rights era. So we can read John Wayne's hatred of Indians as a form of the racism-- the anti-African American prejudice-- that is being dramatized-- that is being fought over in the civil rights movement in the United States in the '50s and 1960s. So it's a kind of metaphor for what's happening there. And we're not sure whether the John Wayne character is actually going to save her or kill her when he finds her because she's been polluted by her connection to an Indian.

And this theme-- it's not hidden because the John Wayne character's sidekick is really worried about this and even accuses him of this at some point. So he's a damaged and ambiguous character. There are things about him we admire, but there are things about him that disturb us. And at the very end of the film in what is one of the most famous images in John Ford's work, we get a shot of John Wayne from the back. He's been excluded from the community in a way. We see him from the back. He's standing like this. We see him through an aperture through a doorway. And he grabs his-- he makes this kind of a gesture-- a gesture of vulnerability in which we-- and he's standing isolated and alone.

There's a sense in which he's still-- this extraordinary hero has been, in some sense, excluded from the very community that he helped create, in part, because he doesn't deserve to be part of it. He's damaged. He's imperfect. But also because of the natural-- the mythic logic of the Western in which the savior figure is so tainted by the savagery he saved us from that he can't be included in the community that he helped to create. So it's a very clear example of this Western pattern, but it's morally complicated because it comes at such a late stage and because, by this time, Ford himself has begun to reflect on the implications of the much more simplistic stories he had told earlier in his career.

The setting of the film is important to talk about because it is filmed in a place that came to be called John Wayne's own special theater-- his own stage set-- Monument Valley in Arizona. Other directors have worked in that place, but it always feels as if they're plagiarizing John Ford. He made at least nine films in Monument Valley. And you'll see the power of that space-- the looming rock formations-- the sense you have all the way through the film that the human habitations are minimal structures that could be blown away in a second and that are dwarfed in comparison to the rock formations and the grandeur of the gigantic natural phenomena that we see around us. The human being seems small, and the human habitations seem marginal and far from permanent in this world of grandeur-- of what we might call inhuman grandeur. So the setting's important.

The plot-- very important to realize that it embodies two separate, important kinds of stories. The first-- the founding story-- what I've talked about earlier today. The idea that this is how a culture is founded. You create a society against warring elements, rescue it from the wilderness, and from savage-- not just savage nature but from savage antagonists-- the American Indians who don't want to give up their land and who are-- until we get to this film-- in John Ford's films mostly-- had been figured as anarchic figures of pure evil. They hadn't been humanized. They've been seen as part of nature. In this film, not so. There's a sympathy for the Indians that enters this film that helps to explain its complexity and its richness.

The second great story is the captive's tale-- one of the central and earliest forms of American narrative. The captive's tale that is told here is based on a true story. A woman named Cynthia Ann Parker was abducted at the age of nine by Comanches in Texas in 1836. A novel was written about that event by Alan Le May much after the event. And Ford's film is based on the novel.

One of the ironies is that the real Cynthia Ann chose her Comanche husband over her Anglo relatives when she was rescued. She didn't want to leave unlike the novel and unlike what happens in the film. And I mention this, in part, to remind you of the romanticizing tendencies of the American Western. But still, captives' tales-- stories of white people, especially white women, captured by Indians and raised by Indians were a staple of the popular cultures from long before the history of movies. And this movie, like other movies, dramatizes a version of that captive's tale.

The structure of the film is worth calling attention to, in part, because it's ambiguous. One way to organize the plot-- I mean, the structure of the film-- is to recognize that there are seven moments in the film that we might think of as chapters or bookmarks. And if you watch for these moments-- it's also a structurally significant device. If you watch for these moments, you'll be able to follow the-- you'll recognize that the film is progressing because its timeframe is intentionally ambiguous for reasons I'll hint at in a moment.

And these seven moments all involve a similar kind of shot. The camera looks through a doorway or an opening out into a rectangle of receding light. The very opening of the film has one such shot. And at seven different moments in the film, we see a shot from inside an interior space-- from a dark interior space-- and we look out through a doorway.

You might ask yourself why in a film that celebrates and that dramatizes the immense expansiveness of the Western environment, Ford would give us images-- such self-conscious obvious images-- that, first of all, refer to each other so you think about when they occur in the film. But why he would so intentionally restrict the visual range of what's available-- make you feel confinement. Why does he do that?

One possible-- and I might leave this for your section but think about why he does it. One effect is surely to make you even more aware of how expansive the outside is because you are in the outside for a lot of the time. By confining your vision in this way, it's a reminder of how much bigness is out there. But there are other reasons, as well, for why the perspective would be restricted to these aperture shots. In any case, there are seven of them through the film, and they mark the progress of the film.

The reason that the film is so hard to follow is, in part, that the timeframe is weird. And I'll come to that in a second. There is one turning point in the film that I want to mention to you that you should watch for. It's a moral turning point or a psychologically important turning point

because it's a moment in the film where the sympathy of the viewer is shifted-- is radically transformed.

It occurs about midway through the film where the John Wayne character and his sidekick, Martin Pawley, come riding down a-- not quite a mountain but a promontory through heavy snow. The weather in the film is interesting and powerful. That's one of the ways you can feel time passing. Their winters and summers go by. You can feel the seasons passing. But you're not clear how much time goes by.

By the end of the film, you know many years has gone by-- at least 10 years-- because the young girl who was stolen away in the beginning is a young woman at the end of the film-- the adult played by the actress Natalie Wood-- a very successful and important actress of the '50s and '60s. So she's a grown woman by the end, so we know that a significant amount of time has gone by. But it isn't clear as the story's going on exactly how much time has gone by, and that ambiguity's important.

The turning point occurs as they're coming down this hill. The horses are almost up to their shoulders in snow. And they come riding down this hill into a village-- an Indian village-- a Native American village. And it's a Native American village that's in smoking ruins. It has been decimated by American cavalry. And they go into one of the teepees, and they find-- dead in the teepee-- a Native American woman-- a squaw named Look who had been following them. And we've gotten to know her. And the Martin Pawley character-- the secondary character-- the sidekick-- says to the John Wayne character, why did they have to kill Look? She didn't do anything. And it's a moment in which the butchery of the white soldiers is dramatized in which your sympathy turns entirely away from the official American government account of the West towards something else.

And in the very next scene, something amazing happens. It's easy to miss because it happens so quickly, but it's very important, morally, to the film. We have a scene in which we see three Indian chieftains standing in-- they're captives-- standing in blankets looking on as another group of Native Americans-- Indians-- are being, essentially, herded into a compound-- into a hospital-type building. And they're being herded as if they're cattle, or sheep, or not fully human. And you can see-- there's no dialogue, but you can see the sadness and the unhappiness and the regret in the eyes of these sturdy chiefs as they look upon that.

And what happens in that moment is that the film's perspective has become that of the Native

Americans. And the audience's perspective has become that as well. And so the effect of these moments coupled with many other things in the film-- some of which I've mentioned, some of which I've not-- about the ambiguity of the John Wayne character's nature, come together here. And this is a moment in which something of the complexity of the Western story is being acknowledged by the text.

No longer are we getting a kind of simple celebration of these Western values. Something much more ambiguous and morally complex is happening here. A critique of those values is being embedded in this apparently classic Western. And it's one of the reasons it's such a remarkable film.

I'll conclude now. I apologize for running over.

The title itself clarifies some of the ambiguity of the movie. What are they searching for? I said before that the timeframe of the film is confusing, and it's not just that. Even the setting of the film-- the Monument Valley setting-- comes to seem almost like a lunar landscape before we're finished with the film. There's a sense that the quest goes on forever-- that they begin to lose a sense of why they're doing it. After all, so much time has gone by. She's lived with the Native Americans all this time. What's the point of the rescue even-- we might think.

The fact that the quest has gone on for such a long time, but it becomes more and more unclear why the search is going on-- what the purpose of the search is. There's a kind of ambiguity in it that is deeply disturbing and deeply troubling. And, of course, the sense we have at the end of the film that the search-- it is concluded, but almost until the very end we're not sure whether the John Wayne character is going to save or murder the object of his quest. And there's also the sense that even after he's done, what has been gained? So there's a deep ambiguity at the end of the movie as there is a deep ambiguity surrounding the alleged heroism of the John Wayne character.

So one of the reasons I emphasize these ambiguities and complexities is as a way of stressing the fact that even before we get to the era of what I'll call the anti-Western or the dissenting Western, the classic Western itself has reached a level of complexity and maturity, embodied especially in this film and others that we might cite from the 1960s, in which a kind of self-consciousness about the assumptions that lie behind and animate this central American form have already come to the surface and are being confronted by our best directors in our best films.

Goodnight.