

Lecture 14 - Ford and *The Searchers*

- I. The Western film - a quick history
- II. John Ford (1895-1973)
- III. *The Searchers* (1956)
 - Damaged hero
 - Setting: Monument Valley
 - Plot: founding story, captive's tale
 - A turning point
 - The title: ambiguity

Disclaimer: The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.

Film viewing tonight:
Ford, John. *The Searchers*. 1956.

- The role of the Western movie
 - We need to think of the Western as not only a consensus narrative, but a form of our national theater
 - Like a national repertory theater
 - It involved a relatively fixed number of actors appeared over and over again
 - Display: a John Wayne poster. Note the epic quality.
 - Science fiction films and television today fulfill a lot of the same epic qualities that Westerns used to address.
 - *Serenity*, for example
 - The power of the Western mythology is partly useful to us because other genres can borrow or piggyback on their resonance
 - Even though fewer Westerns are being made today, they're still relevant
 - We live in a much more technological environment today, and so a lot of the nature-based aspects of the Western have now become residual in some way
 - A lot of doubling goes on in Westerns
 - A result of all these genre qualities is that even the worst Western can be interesting for us – bad movies are very revealing culturally – they tell us about the society they come from
 - Films that aren't self-conscious about their own role are even more emblematic of the culture they come from
 - This is not a triumphal story of film getting better and better – consensus narratives aren't necessarily good or effective. They can be a site for great and rich art, but they aren't necessarily.

- The main function of these consensus systems is to propagate the belief systems of their society. They may or may not produce great art, but that is secondary to their creation.
 - If we look at Western movies of the 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s in order, we can actually chart the changes in the value system of American culture
 - It's not an accident that Ronald Reagan was a star in Westerns, and it's not an accident that his political policies sometimes resembled a Western.
 - The Western investigates and often celebrates individuality and antisocial qualities
 - There's always an implicit racism in the classic western – the villain looks dark and semitic, the hero rides a white horse, etc.
 - All the value systems and assumptions about human nature come alive here
 - Clip: “the hero saves the day” – everything you expect gets turned on its head when instead the hero is murdered meaninglessly.
 - All the audience's expectations of masculinity and values are switched.
 - It's an astonishing work of art
 - The murder is motivated only by the villain's empty embarrassment that he didn't hit an empty bottle earlier in the scene
 - The murderousness and simplemindedness of the classic Western gun fight is exposed
 - The conventions of Westerns and genre in general provide an excuse to study how they have changed
- Western Film, a history
 - Westerns existed in penny arcades, even before the apparatus of the movie camera was developed
 - Before the advent of television, 25-30% of all films were Westerns
 - It was by far the largest genre category
 - Even after the advent of television, nearly half of all films set in the past were Westerns
 - Bronco Billy Anderson – the first Western hero and star
 - He helped establish the system of great Hollywood stars
 - First appearance was in *The Great Train Robbery*
 - Even today, when Westerns are less common, they continue to be hugely influential on movie form
 - The genre of the Western is associated with many of the first technically revolutionary early films
 - Some of the first narrative films and the first two-reel film
 - 1913 – *Battle of Elderbush Gulch*
 - 1914 – One of the very first feature length films – *The Virginian* (three reels)
 - In the 1930s, most Westerns were not major works of art

- Lots of these early sound films were too easily attracted to gimmicks
- There were lots of singing cowboys
- A lot of this was because these films were B films – they were made to be given second billing
 - In those days, when you went to the movies, you would see:
 - A couple of animated cartoons
 - A news reel
 - A serial
 - A feature film (“A” film)
 - A second-billing film (“B” film)
 - These serials were important:
- The 1940s are often thought of as the classical age of the Western film
 - 1940s were the time of WWII
 - In the 1930s, during the Depression, Americans weren’t feeling good about their country
 - With the War, Americans got much more nationalistic
 - Imperialistic Westerns came along with the 1940s
 - 1944: *Buffalo Bill* (Henry Ford)
 - This was one of more than a dozen movies with Buffalo Bill in the title
 - 1946: *My Darling Clementine* (also Henry Ford)
 - The murder of the Clantons by the Erps
 - The taming of savagery by civilization
 - There have been at least six films retelling this same historical story.
 - The early films are heroic, while the later films are increasingly skeptical
 - 1943: *The Oxbow Incident*
 - A film about lynching and the evils of majority rule
 - An innocent man is hanged
 - 1949: *Red River* (Hawks)
 - Undercurrents about homosexuality
 - Montgomery Cliff stood for a kind of decency and tenderness
- By the 1950s and 1960s, the Western has become more urban
 - Billy the Kid, for example, is a misunderstood kid who plays hooky all the time
 - 1961: *One-Eyed Jacks*, with Marlon Brando
 - Undermines traditional notions of macho masculinity
 - 1962: *Hombre*
- By the 1970s, Westerns became very different
 - A series of Westerns were made by Sergio Leone – he was Italian, not American
 - His conception of the Western was very different

- He brought forms of European anarchy to his films
 - He cast Henry Fonda, the all-American hero, as an evil villain
 - The genre gets turned on its head
 - 1970: *Soldier Blue*
 - The native Americans are the heroes, and the cavalry are bad guys
 - 1971: *Little Big Man*
 - Again, the Indians are the good guys
 - The change in the political structure reflected by Westerns during this period had to do with the breakdowns caused by Vietnam and Watergate
 - However, this change in the revolutionary quality of Western films had even more to do with the fact that TV had already come along, and film was no longer a consensus narrative
- John Ford
 - His career is various
 - He made a huge number of films
 - The Western was his signature film
 - He appeared as an actor in *Birth of a Nation*, where he also worked as an assistant director
 - His career spanned both the silent era and the sound era
 - *The Searchers*
 - The hero/star: John Wayne
 - However, John Ford has begun to problematize his character
 - He's a damaged character
 - He's racist
 - He's admirable, but also deeply un-admirable
 - Space/Setting
 - This film doesn't lie about the nature of the West – you see the snow and the rain
 - Filmed in Monument Valley, Arizona – it came to be known as John Ford's theater
 - This setting, with its looming rock formations, makes all human endeavors seem small in comparison
 - The human buildings seem transient in comparison with this forbidding landscape
 - Time: visual style
 - The film spans many many years
 - Watch for the transitions
 - You begin to feel like you're in a space of endless quest
 - It's like an otherworldly space, that operates according to different rules
 - The visual style reinforces this

- Note the use of doorways to look into a building or out onto a landscape
 - What is implied by this contrast of enclosure and infinite expanse?
- Story
 - Remember that the story is a racial one
 - It acts out one of the oldest American narratives – captives tales
 - There's this uncertainty of what John Wayne will do if he finds this girl – will he rescue her, or will he kill her for having been polluted by Indians?
 - Note the doubling that takes place via the character Scar – he's a kind of hero double for Wayne, similarly damaged
- A turning point
 - The scene where Wayne and his partner are riding down a steep hill in the snow
 - The Indian village they ride towards has just been annihilated and massacred by the white cavalry
 - The moral center of the film pivots
 - This is not an imperialist film that is simply celebrating white folks
- The Title
 - What are they searching for? Why are they searching?
 - The longer you watch, the more pointless the whole thing comes to seem
 - The older clarities of the Western form are no longer present
 - There is a terrible, compelling critique of earlier Westerns