JOHN FORD'S

By Richard W. Evans

John Ford is generally (and rightly) esteemed for his westerns. But Ford was interested in other variants of the epic as well. In the essay below, Richard W. Evans deals with Ford's adaptation of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. The clash of artistic temperament between these two men is understood by the fact that Ford is one of America's most conservative directors, while The Grapes of Wrath is clearly a Marxist novel. Perhaps predictably, Ford refashioned Steinbeck's material, de-emphasizing its Marxist and religious elements, and stressing the themes of family and community, two typically Fordian concerns. In developing the differences between literary and cinematic communication, Mr. Evans suggests that Ford's film is weakest precisely when it adheres too closely to the original, particularly in some of the political speeches.

Many times one emerges from the blackness of a movie house to overhear a comment such as, "I thoroughly enjoyed the film, but I wish it had stuck to the book." Such statements raise the ire of even the amateur film critic: the popular compulsion to see film adaptations as in some way a lowly reproduction of the novel. Such thinking has caused a number of critics to step forward to explain the proper relationship between the two forms. The classic explanation is that they are in fact two distinct forms, each having its own strengths and weaknesses, powers and limitations. Many such discussions move from here to obscurity. Unfortunately, our critical tools do not always serve us well in dealing with the problem. Furthermore, many critics are skilled in the analysis of literature, but not flexible and sophisticated enough to appreciate the filmic qualities of an adaptation. Too often, such critics cling insecurely to the word.

The so-called foreign "art film" actually poses less of a methodological problem for the critic. Antonioni, Bergman, or Fellini are quite conscious artists, and their movies are often overtly symbolic. They are not "entertainment" films in the same way that most American movies are. In WILD STRAWBERRIES or 8½, the sensitive viewer cannot help but respond on a number of poetic and filmic levels at once. But "popular" cinema poses a problem, for deeper meaning is not always self-evident, perhaps because the complex elements are embedded in the narrative structure of the film.

Part of this problem is based on the nature of popular films. Fellini and Bergman draw from techniques and conventions that occur commonly in literature, symbolism being the most obvious. The use of literary conventions allows the viewer to make a literary type of analysis of a film. On the other hand, popular cinema tends to use literary conventions less. Part of the reason is that "entertainment films" are concerned much more with telling a story. The average American viewing public wants primarily to "enjoy a movie." The result is that popular cinema is much less open to "literary" analysis.

A few film critics are beginning to understand this, especially those who find a certain interest in directors who, because they are so popular, have not been considered seriously as artists. In an attempt to explain the work of Alfred Hitchcock, Robin Wood points out the direct emotional relationship film has to its audience, as contrasted to the cognitive and interpretive experience literature must generally depend on:

It seems to me a fair representative specimen of that local realization that one finds everywhere in recent Hitchcock films, realization of theme in terms of "pure cinema" which makes the audience not only see but experience (experience rather than intellectually analyse) the manifestation of that theme at that particular point. (1)

The implication of what Wood contends is far reaching. He is saying in essence that film has managed to "short circuit" the long-standing relationship between exerience, intellect and art. All people are able to experience, and thus through film, all people are able, regardless of training or sophistication, to experience art directly. This is not to say that the critic is obsolete, for his job is not so much to point out meaning as to refine and embellish one's perception of meaning. But it does mean that the essence of a film should be accessible to all. Though the average man could probably make little sense of Joyce's Ulysses, the proper translation of Joycean themes into "purely cinematic" terms should render them accessible, on the experimental level, to all. And Joseph Strick's ULYSSES seems to come very close to realizing this accessibility. The truth of this statement can be seen in the powerfully libralizing effect cinema has had on American society, an effect which probably could not have been accomplished with popular literature.

The usefulness of this perspective might become clearer if we consider a single film, John Ford's THE GRAVES OF WRATH. This movie is unquestionably an example of "popular cinema," and is also an adaptation of an at least respectable piece of literature.

In his critical study, Novels into Film, George Bluestone asserts that the film and the novel are two distinct and somewhat incompatible media. Given the limitations and conventions of each medium, an attempt to reproduce literature in film (or vice-versa) is doomed to failure. This is especially true of what Bluestone calls "content," as distinguished from subject or story. Content is too organic, too tightly linked to the medium (words) to survive adaptation. It is from the other dimensions — the crude "subject matter" or "story" — that the film director must draw: "He looks not to the organic novel, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language, and, like the heroes of folk legends, have achieved life of their own." (2)

There is much in Steinbeck's novel that fits into
THE GRAPES OF WRATH was photographed by Gregg Toland, who also shot Orson Welles’ CITIZEN KANE. Welles has called Toland the greatest cinematographer in the history of film.

this category. In writing the novel, he alternated chapters throughout the work, one set carrying the story line quite literally, the other set developing a more complex matrix of imagery and theme. In the story chapters, Steinbeck de-emphasized those traits of literature which usually anchor theme and character to language. He vigorously avoided ever getting inside a character. We never perceive thought in the book: the point of view is always external, and (as in the film), we are required to infer emotions, thoughts, and motivations from what is done and said. Indeed, the narrative chapters of Steinbeck’s work are presented as if they were meant to be filmed: he rarely relies on metaphor or analogy, and his realistic descriptions are clear and literal. Possibly Steinbeck’s realism is derived in part from the influence of the American documentary film makers of the thirties, notably Pare Lorentz, whom Steinbeck knew well.

By using the literal descriptions of the narrative chapters for a basis, Ford could have adapted Steinbeck’s novel by simply condensing what is already there. The art of such a film would be in the skill with which the photography was carried out. And certainly on that level, Gregg Toland’s superb cinematography succeeds in translating Steinbeck’s “directions” into cinematic reality. But both the novel and the movie contain much more than a simple story line.

Blustone argues that the novel contains at least six motifs, including (1) a preoccupation with biology and organic metaphors, (2) the juxtaposition of natural morality and religious hypocrisy, (3) the socio-political implications inherent in the conflict between individual work and industrial oppression, (4) the love of the regenerative land, (5) the primacy of the family, and (6) the dignity of human beings. (3) Blustone notes that the first two are absent from the film; the third is muted; and the last three are articulated strongly. This is unquestionably true: Tom’s encounter with a turtle is dropped, as are dozens of references to pigs, cows, birds, and the images of seeds and fruit. No hint of Ma Joad’s encounter with the “Jehovites” or Mrs. Sandry’s damnation of Rose of Sharon can be found. And the purposeful exploitation by local government, police, and farmers is exchanged for a more nebulous injustice which seems to have no real source, or is the
action of a few evil and selfish individuals.

On the other hand, Ford encompasses the other themes of the novel with a great deal of subtlety and skill. One could hardly forget Grandpa kneeling near the old homestead, a handful of dirt in his hand, crying, "This here's my country. I belong here. (Looking at the dirt) It ain't no good — (after a pause) — but it's mine."(4) Nor Ma, sitting in the empty house, strong yet gentle, pushing memories of life in Oklahoma into the fire, as the family prepares to leave. Nor Tom, as he steps over the horizon near the close of the film, in the hope that "maybe I can jes' fin' out sump'n.'"(5)

But in his analysis of themes, Bluestone and a number of other critics have missed the major thematic movement of the novel. Family is important, and one of the major themes of the novel is created by the gradual disintegration of the family: loss of the family homestead, the death of Grandpa, then Grandma, Noah's walk into oblivion, Connie's desertion, Al's proposed marriage and move to the city, and finally Tom's flight from the law. From a sociological perspective, Steinbeck's point must be that in the family, man's most human institution, cannot long survive within a hostile social environment. But comment is not totally pessimistic. Early in the novel, Ma Joad challenges Tom and Pa with a tire-iron when they suggest that the family split up: "All we got is the family unbroke. . . . I ain't scared while we're all here, all that's alive, but I ain't gonna see us bust up. . . . I'm a-go'in' cat-wild with this here piece a bar-arn if my folks busts up."(6)

But by the closing chapters, Ma urges Tom to leave, with the realization that even with the disintegration of her family, a broader sort of community is possible. This awareness is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Ma reins of the community is granted by the bank. Ma has bestowed a favor which might cost him his job. "I'm learnin' one thing good. . . . learnin' it all a time, ever' day. If you're in trouble or hurt or need — go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help, the only ones."(7) The disintegration of the family has been compensated for by the coming awareness of a greater class community. From this standpoint, the "pessimism" of the novel's conclusion becomes muted, for a partial compensation of the loss of family is a gain of community. Rose of Sharon, in offering her milk-laden breast to a starving old man, is extending an intimate family gesture to a large class family.

Ford emphasizes this theme in the film. Community has long been recognized as a central preoccupation with Ford: his films repeatedly illustrate the humanizing effects of community, particularly in times of threat. STAGECOACH is the classic example. Thrown into the context of a dangerous coach ride across Indian country, a group of derelicts, outcasts, and weaklings draw together in close community, and through that experience derive new strength and dignity. In his later film, MY DARLING CLEMENTINE, Ford couples the theme of community with the idea of family lost. The Earp brothers, driving a herd of cattle to California are stopped in Tombstone, Arizona, where the youngest brother is murdered and the cattle rustled. In an attempt to gain vengeance, Wyatt accepts the job of marshal, only to find that though his own family is disintegrating (another brother is murdered, and Wyatt remarks that the news will destroy his father), there is strength and comfort to be found in the emerging frontier community of Tombstone. This new found sense of community is most strongly symbolized in the Sunday meeting square dance, a recurring motif in many Ford films.

In THE GRAPES OF WRATH, Ford uses the Federal government camp as the scene of emerging community. The well ordered camp, which is depicted as a model of cleanliness, health, and renewed dignity, is in stark contrast to the savage exploitation outside the camp. The audience senses relief at the camp's clean grounds and white buildings, as contrasted with the dirt and dirgeyness of the squatters' camp and the peach ranch. Its democratic committees, governing and protecting themselves, are contrasted with the humiliating and brutalizing oppression of the "tin star fellas they got for guards" in other camps. And its cooperative and humanizing interaction between residents, demonstrated most poetically in the Saturday night dance, is contrasted with the hyper-individuality of the other camps.

But if the redemptive qualities of the government camp and the community it encourages are deeply understood by the audience, it is through Ford's characterization that this is accomplished. When Tom says to the caretaker, "Ma's shore gonna like it here. She ain't been treated decent for a long time," the audience sympathizes totally. Through Ford's development of Ma Joad, the audience has come to perceive her with respect and compassion, for he uses her as the centerpost of the family unit. We know what the loss family has meant to her, and agree with her that "some things ya jes' gotta do." With Tom we wish that this gentle yet heroic woman could be allowed the peace she deserves. The importance of the government camp, and the revitalizing effects of community are focused through the characters in the film. The camp allows Ma and Tom and the others peace, and eventually it allows them to achieve a almost heroic nobility.

From this perspective, even though Bluestone scoffs at script writer Nunnally Johnson's report that he chose Ma's speech for his final line because he considered it the real spirit of the novel (it appears in Chapter 20, about two thirds through the book), we must at least agree in part with Johnson. If the novel ends with a resolution between the themes of family lost and community gained, so does the film: Ma Joad's exchange of "we're the folks" for "we're the people" (that is, family, for community) is every bit the resolution that Steinbeck symbolizes in Rose of Sharon's act.

But regrettably, the actual utterance of that line lacks the power that Steinbeck put into the novel. It is singly the film's greatest flaw, ironically one of its most "literary" (and artificial) moments. Throughout the film, Ford has skillfully presented Ma's powerful attachment to the family and her gradual transfer of commitment to a larger community. Unfortunately, Ford and his writer Johnson yield to the temptation of verbalizing what is so obviously apparent in Ma's behaviour.

The roots of this problem lie in the Marxian myth of the proletariat-cum-intellectual. Such figures were popular with American writers, especially during the twenties: a working man becomes exceedingly disaffected with socio-economic system which is hostile
Tom Joad (Henry Fonda) learns of the thousands who are starving in California. He had thought, like 200,000 other dust bowl refugees, that California was the Land of Milk and Honey, the New Eden.

to his needs. Through his experiences, and sometimes with the help of a Marxist ideologue, the worker develops a class consciousness and comes to articulate a fairly sophisticated class analysis of his situation. Jack London's *Martin Eden*, and to a lesser extent, Frank Norris' *The Octopus* and Upton Sinclair's *Co-op* are classic examples.

Steinbeck's novel, though to a lesser degree, seems to fall into this general genre, and Ford's film follows suit. Both novel and movie use the road metaphor as a journey through several experiences which lead to socioeconomic enlightenment. Casey makes the journey first, followed by Tom, then Ma. Both Steinbeck and Ford fail to make the characterization fit in with this thematic development. The Joad family are people who experience directly. Rarely do they intellectualize their experience; they more often just feel it. Casey is the exception to this, and their response is that they don't quite understand him. But near the close of the film, Tom ceases to be a plain simple man of direct experience, and becomes a self-conscious, highly articulate Marxist activist.

Lifted almost verbatim from Steinbeck's novel, Ford shows Tom kneeling in the dark next to his mother's lighted face. With strains of "Red River Valley" in the background, he says:

**TOM** (laughing uneasily). Well, maybe it's like Casey says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on' a piece of a big soul — the one big soul that belongs to ever'body — an' then...

**MA.** Then what, Tom?

**TOM.** Then it don't matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where — wherever you look. Whenever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad — an' I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our people eat the stuff they raise, an' live in the houses they build, why, I'll be there too.(8)

Until this point in the film, Tom has never expressed ideas of such complexity and abstraction, and certainly he has never handled language with such facility. For the sensitive audience, the realism of Tom's character is immediately broken. To audiences thirty years later, the lines seem overwrought and ridiculous. Though

The death of Grandpa, along Route 66, the first of several deaths which will strike the Joad family on their way to California.

Steinbeck does the same thing in the novel, it is less offensive, perhaps because of the rhetorical language of the non-narrative chapters.

Diverging from the chronology of the novel (the government camp and peach farm episodes are reversed), Ford commits the same error with Ma in the closing scene:

**MA.** Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But we keep a-comin'. We're the people that live. Can't nobody wipe us out. Can't nobody lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa. We're the people.(9)

Once again, the unusual articulation of complex idea breaks the illusion of reality which is so carefully preserved in most of the rest of the film.

Lindsay Anderson has noted that "there is a sort of strain, apt to evidence itself in pretentiousness of style, about Ford's attempts with material outside of his personal experience or sympathy."(10) Ford is far from a Marxist, or for that matter even a political liberal. The "pretensions" of Ma's and Tom's speeches bare this out. But Ford is a humanist, and he does believe in the common man, in his courage, his tenacity, in his ability to endure. And these are the qualities that remain with us after seeing *The Grapes of Wrath*, not the few lapses.


(3) Bluestone devotes an entire chapter to *The Grapes of Wrath*.


(5)Ibid., p. 376.


(7) Johnson, p. 347.

(8) Ibid., p. 376.

(9) Ibid., p. 377.

When John Ford started his career as a director of westerns in 1917, he was heir to a genre which had already become a highly stylized and romanticized cliche. Yet while he has made enormous contributions to the perpetuation of that idiom, Ford's unique and poetic personal view of the old west has added dimensions to his films which raise them far above the general level of this genre. In the essay below, Amy Kotkin traces the development of western conventions and stereotypes up until Ford came on to the scene. In a detailed analysis of STAGECOACH, MY DARLING CLEMENTINE, and THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE, she suggests some of the reasons why Ford has been called the greatest living film director by Ingmar Bergman, Orson Welles, and Akira Kurosawa.

The western film as we know it today has its roots in nineteenth century literature, most specifically in the sentimental novels of James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper's Leatherstocking series unearthed both an enthusiasm and a mass market for popular fiction. In 1860, an enterprising publisher named Erastus Beadle started to capitalize on this popularity by publishing cheap western stories designed for a mass audience. Produced weekly by a staff of writers, these first "novels" were a direct throwback to the Leatherstocking series, depicting an old benevolent and nomadic hunter who, though unglamorous, was an expert marksman and Indian fighter — skills that were essential for survival in the rugged West. Although the "dime novels" were an immediate success, Beadle (and his newly-spawned competitors) realized that their continued popularity would depend on increasingly exciting and dangerous characters and situations.

As a partial response, the tough, moralistic, yet unstriking image of the old hunter was gradually eclipsed by younger, more exciting heroes. Typical of this new breed was Deadwood Dick, who proved to be one of Beadle's most popular and enduring heroes. In this character, we begin to see the prototype of the cowboy hero: part white knight and part individual in the grand American tradition. Dick's knight-like qualities lay in the spheres of skill and morality. True to the chivalric code (and in part, to his predecessor — the hunter), he was strong, brave and well-schooled in the skills he needed for survival, namely riding and marksmanship. He was also unquestionably pure; he neither smoked nor drank, and was both respectful toward and protective of virtuous womanhood. Furthermore, Dick was never violent unless challenged by the personified forces of evil. If he killed, therefore, it was usually a matter of defending his own honor or that of a woman.

Most importantly, however, Deadwood Dick embodied the ideal of the self-made man of humble origins who maintained a dignified lifestyle based on a personal code of bravery and humanity in a land where no chivalric tradition or codified law dictated right or wrong. In short, he confirmed the American belief that obstacles could be overcome by the courageous, virile and determined stand of the individual as an individual. This romanticized and idealized image has persisted, and in doing so has given America its major folk hero.

The dime novel heroine was also highly idealized. Corresponding to the chivalry of the western hero, the heroine was most frequently portrayed as a delicate and virtuous creature whose gentility and femininity were further emphasized by the fact that she generally came west only after men had paved the way. She was usually thought of as a carrier of civilized and settled eastern traditions such as the church, school, and the institution of marriage.

The legacy of these novels survived and was adopted into the cinema in the early 1900's for basically two reasons. First among these was the fact that the western story was still popular and thus offered both a successful formula and a potentially large market for the films. Secondly, the western was a perfect vehicle for early moviemakers who were just learning how to grapple with the principles of motion pictures. The western movie included a lot of motion (both of animals and people), and the majestic and melancholy natural scenery of the plains and mountains provided an inspiring backdrop. Needless to say, the early western films inherited the popularity of the dime novel and in doing so became heir to a venerable tradition of "reworking history to reflect ancient themes of liberty and nature." (1)

The early western remained in its purest sense a morality play. That is, the theme was usually dominated by a very obvious struggle between good and evil. The structure, too, became somewhat standardized, following largely the pattern of crime or conflict between the forces of good and evil, pursuit or chase (which had enormous cinematic and dramatic potential), and the ritualistic showdown.

The early western film hero was also patterned almost directly after his dime-novel counterpart. Tom Mix was the most obvious off-shoot of the Deadwood Dick character. Although he was jazzed up visually by fancy costumes and flashy trick riding, Mix embodied the chivalric code, was forever chaste, and never flinched from a challenge (as personified by the proverbial train robber, rustler, or corrupt banker) to his honor or his high sense of duty.

Because he was cast as a traditional folk hero, Tom Mix and other cowboy stars of his era personified the most primitive and nationalistic aspirations of a people. The plot of most westerns "though embedded in a kind of history, is really an accretion of fantastic and superhuman adventures." (2) Because the western's intention was moralistic, idealistic, and relatively simple, "the folk-hero cowboy's virtues tended to be those of physical strength, courage, singleness of pur-
pose and blind endurance.” (3) Inasmuch as he was seen more as a symbol than a person, the western hero became predictably flat and one-dimensional.

This rigid and dehumanized idealization had other consequences for the cowboy star. As a composite national image, he was not only totally good but by definition loomed above all others in his environment in terms of bravery, nobility of purpose and self-reliance. He was a complete man and thus had no real need for anyone or anything save his own sense of honor and integrity. Because he was self-sufficient, he was an individual in the highest sense, and therefore an outsider to the community by whose standards, then, he could not be judged. His individuality and freedom were heightened by the fact that in most cases he had no cultural roots and no family. He was a man without a past, a “new man,” or as R.W.B. Lewis terms him, an “American Adam.”

Because the Western hero evolved into such an idealized and one-dimensional character, the supporting players were consigned to no less stereotyped roles lest their individuality detract from our interest in the hero. Even the heroine, who matched the cowboy hero in goodness and purity, was curiously subordinated to him, a subordination that was insisted upon by the movie-going public which would tolerate no mush in their archetypal folk hero. In the first place, the hero does not really need her; she also represents a threat to his freedom and rootlessness. Marriage is thus left to those who were subject to societal pressures—and the cowboy hero, as I have noted, is essentially an outsider.

The formula which I have outlined led to a standardization of symbols, characters, themes, and structures which persisted for decades. Because of its predictability, the western has long been open to good-natured spoofing:

The west was won by the quickdrawing heroes of an earlier, less complicated day when Good (clean-shaven, white hat) pursued Evil (mustache, black hat) across a silent screen to the accompaniment of the William Tell Overture. Greed, buttoned into the town banker’s black frock coat, preyed on Innocence (an orphan in calico). Lust worked the saloon beat, hustling drinks in her spangled finery, and Death waited off-stage for justice to be served by the traditional shootout. (4)

Before I move on to a discussion of Ford, I think that it is important to note here that although the vast
majority of westerns followed this pattern or variations of it until quite recently, there was one significant and early break with this formula in the westerns of William S. Hart. Hart was originally a Shakespearean actor who came into film in 1914 because he was outraged at what he believed to be a misrepresentation of his native west in contemporary films. Although he held the limelight only briefly, Hart brought to the screen a measure of realism by introducing the concept of the strong, silent hero of great dignity who was nevertheless morally ambiguous. By humanizing the hero, Hart added a rugged, austere and poetic dimension to his films that was quite alien to the standard western of his time. By 1925, however, Hart's vogue had begun to ebb because the public demanded a return to the streamlined, flashy and knight-like hero of Tom Mix's ilk. Nevertheless, I believe that Hart's career had a great influence on Ford's later career in terms of characterization.

John Ford started directing westerns at a time when the director had very little choice as to his interpretation of the genre. Because most of his early works were studio assignments, which starred such stylized figures as Mix, Hoot Gibson or Ken Maynard, the films did not vary significantly from the framework outlined above.

As his career and reputation grew, however, Ford was given more freedom as to his choice of materials, and his films started to break out of these strict molds.

The most important break Ford made with the pattern of the early westerns, and the characteristic which I think puts his work on a higher level, was reducing the importance of the theme of good and evil. Ford saw, perhaps partially through the influence of Hart, that his theme was almost singularly responsible for forcing characters into the flat, heavily symbolic roles that offered so little room for development or deviation. Ford's break from tradition had many important repercussions. His later heroes no longer embodied the wooden, moral absoluteness of a Deadwood Dick or a Tom Mix: they became mortals and therefore more capable of need for other humans. They could also make wrong decisions, or work outside of the law. Because the hero was now a man among men, the supporting characters did not necessarily have to be stereotyped as weaker or more vulnerable. Rather, by playing down the western as a lesson in morality, Ford was able to see each character as a product of his environment which had molded his beliefs. In this way, Ford was able to meet each character on his own level, and deal with him accordingly. Because of this approach,
Ford was able to retain most of the popular stereotypes while giving them depth of characterization that were hitherto unknown, except in the films of William S. Hart.

Another important consequence of this change was that it left Ford free to explore other themes appropriate to the saga of westward expansion. These themes had been largely overlooked by earlier filmmakers because of their concentration on depicting the western as essentially an American morality play. Historically, the post-Civil War west, while still a loosely-knit and highly individualized society, stood on the verge of the inevitable march of civilization. Western society, then, was a society in transition, and Ford seized upon the dramatic potential of this change by exploring, as one of his basic themes, the consequences of the clash between the opposing forces of East and West. These forces are dealt with both symbolically and personally. Throughout Ford’s best westerns, a number of polarities emerge: the settler vs. the nomad, the individual vs. the community, charismatic authority vs. legal authority, savagery vs. civilization, tradition vs. change, etc.

In particular, Ford often seeks to show how a sense of brotherhood and community functioned in the West. The idea of a journey in search of a better way of life also takes thematic precedence in many of his films. But although Ford made a thematic breakthrough that gave his westerns depth and poetry, his artistry lies in the fact that “his work is a double vision of an event in all its immediacy and also in its ultimate memory image on the horizon of history.” (5) Thus, his themes and symbols never become heavy-handed or “messagey” because they are subtly woven into the plot and structure of his films.

It is difficult to pinpoint an exact time when this deeply personal interpretation of the West became apparent in Ford’s films. Doubtless it was an evolution that did not take place overnight. In Hollywood in the Thirties, John Baxter states that after THE INFORMER (1935), Ford’s “adventure stories were replaced by socially oriented dramas; many of them with historical themes. And when he returned to his old milieu, it was with a heightened sense of their true nature and a technique which allowed him to extract from traditional themes values nobody had sensed in them before.” (6)

I have chosen three of Ford’s films that were made after 1935 to discuss. The first of these is STAGE-
COACH (1939), which I think is important primarily in terms of how Ford added depth to the established stereotypes, and how his recurring themes appear in the narrative structure. The other two films are MY DARLING CLEMENTINE (1946) and THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE (1962), which illustrate Ford's personal vision of the West, and his evolving outlook over the years.

In discussing these films, I think it is important to bear in mind a statement made by Peter Bogdanovich in his book, John Ford. “What Ford can do better than any film-maker in the world is create an epic canvas and still people it with characters of equal size and importance — no matter how lowly they may be.” (7) This is especially true of STAGECOACH where, although Ford is working basically with a band of stereotypes, he meets each on his own level and balances their virtues and foibles in such a way as to make no one person (except the “greedy banker”) look totally good or bad. Dallas, the “tough but benign prostitute” in search of a new life is redeemed and indeed becomes the heroine by her selflessness and her love for Ringo. Ringo himself is a feared but respected outlaw who echoes the Hart prototype of a strong, silent, morally ambiguous yet dignified character. He, too, is redeemed by his heroic efforts in defending the stagecoach from a band of Apache mauraders, and is “humanized” by his need for Dallas. Mrs. Mallory, though straight-laced and condescending toward the rough-hewn westerners with whom she is traveling, is also respected for the stoic determination she displays in trying to find her husband in this rugged land. Even Dr. Boone is saved from sheer drunken buffoonery by the fact that in a pinch, he delivers Mrs. Mallory’s baby.

Thematically, the film involves a journey on two levels. The first is the literal journey of the stagecoach, and the second is the individual quests of the main characters to find a better way of life (or in Ringo’s case, to seek revenge) in Lordsburg. A second idea that Ford explores in this movie is the theme of an enforced community, how this collection of individuals are forced into a situation where survival may depend on cooperation. The process by which this sense of community finally does evolve is established primarily in visual terms.

At the beginning of STAGECOACH, Ford uses many one-shots inside the coach to emphasize the fact that these people are a group which is defined only by proximity, rather than any real sense of interaction. These one-shots are then contrasted by long shots of the tiny stage wending its way vulnerably through the monumental and foreboding landscape. The implication of this juxtaposition is that external forces may force cooperation if they are to complete their journey safely. By the time they arrive at the way-station for dinner, the characters are more aware of the danger imposed by the Indians and of each other. Each person has found someone else on the stage whom he can trust; some because of similar social backgrounds, others because of shared interests. These coalitions are depicted by a series of two-shots of Dallas and Ringo (the social outcasts), the drunken doctor and the whiskey sales-

man, Mrs. Mallory and Hatfield (the fellow Virginians), and the banker and his money. This limited camaraderie is made to look deficient by the way Ford photographs the characters: they are sitting around a dining table which acts as a contrast because of its symbolic suggestion of unity. The disunity is reinforced by the dialogue, when each member of the party gives reasons why he should or should not continue the journey based on pure self-interest. The unity which enables them to win is the Apache attack, which later, is achieved only with the birth of the baby, which functions as a symbolic birth of unity as well. Predictably, this is the first point in the film where Ford uses a group shot. Because the story of STAGECOACH is that of an eventual journey, its structure is episodic. The episodes, however, are woven together by an increasing sense of tension and awareness, of internal and external threats to survival.

The characters in MY DARLING CLEMENTINE are also familiar types, but again, refracted through Ford’s personal vision. As the hero, Wyatt Earp is essentially good and highly individualized. Although he is somewhat nomadic and footloose, he is not rootless. He is close to his brothers and has a sense of filial obligation, which forces him to return home at the end of the film to tell his father of his brothers’ deaths. Though Earp maintains honor and integrity in the best tradition of the western hero, Ford’s sensitive interplay of symbol and reality does not permit Earp to be stereotyped and limited by his code. Rather, he is a flexible, sensitive and friendly person who can cope with change because he is self-assured. Also, unlike the more austere and self-contained early cowboy hero, Earp is not viewed primarily as an outsider to society. He eats in the saloon, drinks with Doc Holliday, and plays poker with the townsfolk. Most importantly, he has a respect for legal authority which is accentuated by the fact that he becomes marshal to “do what he must do” in terms of avenging his brother’s death.

In the context of the story, these qualities make Earp a pivotal figure. Though a proud westerner, he accepts the coming of civilization as personified by Clementine. This process is best shown visually in the scene “after Wyatt Earp has gone to the barber (who civilizes the unkempt), where the scent of honeysuckle is twice remarked upon: an artificial perfume, cultural rather than natural. This moment marks the turning-point in Earp’s transition from wandering cowboy, nomadic, bent on personal revenge, unmarried — to married man, settled, civilized, the sheriff who administers the law.” (8) Thus Earp’s progress is an “uncomplicated passage from nature to culture, from the wilderness left in the past to the garden anticipated in the future.” (9)

Another way in which Ford adds depth to his characters in this film is by their subtle shifting relations with the other players. This is especially true of Clementine. In her clash with Chihuahua, Clementine appears as the paragon of virtue and gentility. But again, Ford counter-balances these qualities by stressing the fact that in all her goodness and idealism, Clementine can never understand, as the “town trollop” can, the man Doc has become. To Doc then, Clem-
WAGONMASTER (1950), like many of Ford's films, features a community dance as a symbol of the reconciliation of opposites: in this case, Mormon pilgrims, prostitutes, con-men, and ordinary cowboys.

In CHEYENNE AUTUMN (1964), Ford's vision of the New Eden turns sour. Gone are the images of the west as a Garden of Plenty, a Land of Milk and Honey. The film is told from the point of view of a tribe of Cheyenne Indians, who are forced by the white man to live on an arid reservation.
Clementine is a symbol of a past from which he has tried to escape. But to Earp and the larger frontier society, she represents the civilized future of the West.

In many ways, Holliday is more self-contained and independent than the hero, in that he has made a break with his roots and seems to have need for nothing except his self-image and sense of power. Ironically, though, his Eastern roots and his malady still confine him physically and psychologically. The futility of his escape, of course, is accentuated by Clementine's arrival. Doc's morality is also called into question by Earp's position as marshal. Despite their ideological differences, both men display a respect for one another which permeates the entire film and culminates in their union at the ritualistic and climactic showdown against the Clanton family.

In terms of structure, *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE* is very close to the classic pattern of crime pursuit (or in this case, a prolonged wait), and showdown. The theme of good and evil, then, plays a large thematic role, but it neither distorts Ford's characters nor predominates over his other interests. In a sense, the idea of individual quests or journeys is suggested by Earp's search for revenge, Clementine's quest to find the lost love of her youth, and Holliday's desire to start anew in his last days. Again, as in *STAGECOACH*, their journeys are united first by proximity and then by interaction.

The most forceful thematic imagery, however, remains that of the antithesis of East and West. In this film, Ford emphasizes not their irreconcilable differences, but how they can be united to form both better individuals (Doc, Earp, and Clementine) and a more perfect society.

In Ford's *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE* a half-built church appears in one brief scene; yet it embodies the spirit of pioneer America. Settlers dance vigorously on the rough planks in the open air, the flag fluttering above the frame of the church perched precariously on the edge of the desert. Marching ceremoniously up the incline towards them, the camera receding with an audacious stateliness, come Tombstone's knight and his 'lady fair', Wyatt Earp and Clementine. The community are ordered aside by the elder as the couple move onto the floor, their robust dance marking the marriage ceremony that unites the best qualities of the East and the West. It is one of Ford's great moments. (10)

*THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALENCE* embodies a melancholy feeling that is missing from either of the two other films. Because it is structured essentially as a sentimental journey into the past, the viewer is immediately aware that Ford is telling a story which is antedated even within the context of the film. Thematically, the director is again concerned primarily with the dichotomy between the East and West. But, while *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE* brought us up only to the brief, optimistic instant where East and West seemed to combine to form a more perfect whole without serious compromise by either side, this later film deals with the ultimate historical consequences of the advance of civilization — namely the demise of the Old West and everything it stood for:

As the years slip by the darker side of Ford's romanticism comes to the foreground, and twenty years after the war — in *THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE, TWO RODE TOGETHER, CHEYENNE AUTUMN* — we find a regret for the past, a bitterness at the larger role of Washington, and a desolation over the neglect of older values. . . . The ringing of changes is discernible in the choice of star as well, the movement from the quiet idealism of the early Fonda (Earp) through the rough pragmatism of the Wayne persona (Ringo and Doniphon) to the cynical self-interest of James Stewart (Stoddart). As Ford grows older the American dream sours, and we are left with nostalgia for the Desert. (11)

Like Earp, Tom Doniphon is a man with a code who seeks not to extend his domain but only to assert his personal values. Also, though both he and Earp kill, neither is seen as a murderer, but rather as virile and virtuous men. Nevertheless, Doniphon comes much closer to the stereotype of the cowboy hero than does Earp. He is a self-contained, limited man who can function only in a sphere which tolerates a high degree of freedom and individuality. Though settled and hope-
ful of marrying Callie, Doniphon is essentially lonely and alienated. Hardnosed, self-made and serious to the point of coldness, the hero of this later movie is seen as an outsider to society. However, Ford's depiction of Doniphon as the archetype westerner is not merely a reversion to stereotype, but rather a device he uses to show how this man and the era he represents became so tragically archaic in their own time.

Interestingly enough, civilization in this film is represented not by the usual Eastern woman, but by the arrival of Stoddart, the Eastern lawyer. Nevertheless, because of his background, he reflects many characteristics that we traditionally associate with the genteel heroine: he despises violence and cannot see why the law of the gun must take precedence over codified and democratised law. He even takes on "woman's work," such as cooking and schoolteaching to support himself until he can open his law office. His white apron is a constant reminder to us that he cannot function as a man is expected to in this world where charismatic authority supercedes rational-legal authority.

Callie, as the object of both men's affections is sensitive and flexible; she is also the pivotal character in the film. She learns to read and write as readily as Earp is barbered, and she is no more out of place in the schoolroom than he is at the church site. Therefore, her decision to marry Stoddart, though more emphatic than the intimation Earp maes about returning to Tombstone, signals in both cases the ushering in of the new West.

Stoddart is clearly the underdog at the beginning of the film, and Doniphon at the end; but they are balanced throughout by the same kind of respect that is engendered between Earp and Holliday. Significant also is the fact that, like Earp and Holliday, they too unite at the climax of the film to overcome the forces of evil. This results in Holliday's actual death in CLEMENTINE and Doniphon's symbolic death in LIBERTY VALANCE. But the differences here are equally clear. The showdown in the first case is the ritualistic one of going up against great odds to defend themselves and their sense of honor. In the case of Liberty Valance, the showdown is an illusion. Doniphon shoots Valance from secluded darkness andcedes the "credit" and thus his authority to Stoddart. In this sacrificial act, Doniphon acknowledges and seals his own doom. This image of Doniphon is further reinforced when Stoddart and Callie, now in the present, return for Doniphon's funeral and find his one mourner, the faithful ranch hand Pompey, sitting by the hero's casket:

Doniphon, the epitome of the old west, dies without his boots on, without his gun, and receives a pauper's funeral, but the man of the New West, the man of books, has ridden to success on the achievements of the first, who was discarded, forgotten. It is perhaps the most mournful, tragic film Ford has made. There is nothing wrong with the New West—it was inevitable; yet as they ride back east, Stoddart and Callie look out their train window at the passing western landscape and Callie comments on how untamed it used to be, and how it has changed. But one feels that Ford's love, like Callie's, remains with the wilderness. (13)

(3) Ibid.
(7) Bogdanovich, p. 23.
(9) Peter Wollen, Signs and Meaning in the Cinema (Univ. of Indiana Press, 1969), p. 96.
(10) Ibid.
(11) Kitses, pp. 21-22.
(12) Ibid., p. 13.
(13) Bogdanovich, p. 34.

In his later period, which includes TWO RODE TOGETHER (1961), Ford's deepening pessimism was embodied in part by his new leading men (James Stewart and Richard Widmark), who are more complex, more morally ambiguous.

Orson Welles has called Ford "a great poet, and a great comedian." In WAGONMASTER, a superb comic scene involves the discovery of a stranded wagon in the middle of the desert, owned by a slick con-man and two hustlers.

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