Sam Peckinpah Killed Randolph Scott (But Somehow the Duke Survived)

Regeneration and Genre Tradition in the Final Westerns of John Wayne

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Abstract

Although John Wayne is one of the most recognizable figures in the history of the movie Western, his later output has been largely neglected in writing on the genre. This project seeks to amend this omission through an examination of his final eight Westerns, beginning with *Chisum* and *Rio Lobo* (both 1970) and concluding with *The Shootist* (1976). This analysis reveals a transtextual dimension where individual films draw on the genre's conventions – both long-established and contemporary – in order to engage in a dialogue centered on the question of the Western's future. Rather than using the genre to allegorize contemporary politics or deconstruct the myth of the Western hero, these films argue for the enduring relevance of the values embodied by that hero – while acknowledging that, in changing times, if those values are to survive they must be successfully passed on to a subsequent generation.

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And finally: This project was completed in the presence of the Duke – or as close as a graduate student in Ottawa can get to a deceased Hollywood movie star. From stacks of DVDs on my desk to an officially licensed coffee mug emblazoned with his likeness staring at me as I typed away into the evenings, John Wayne was never far away. Studies centered on stars or filmmakers rarely (if ever) acknowledge those individuals, which seems to me a little odd given that, without the fruits of their labors, we would have

nothing to write about. So thanks go to Wayne. The good Lord only knows what he would think about what I have produced, but if we should chance to meet one day in that big saloon in the sky, I'll be sure to ask.

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1

The Only Movies I've Really Understood in Years

The Statler Brothers' 1974 song "Whatever Happened to Randolph Scott?" is a lamentation, of sorts – not only for the scores of cowboy matinee idols like the eponymous Scott who had, by the 1970s, long since rode off into the sunset, but also for the state of moviemaking in general at the time. As the quartet's bass vocalist Harold Reid intones (in a rather cheerless monotone) in the opening verse:

*Everybody knows when you go to the show
 You can't take the kids along
 You've gotta read the paper and know the code
 Of G, PG and R and X
 And you gotta know what the movie's about
 Before you even go
 Tex Ritter's gone and Disney's dead
 And the screen is filled with sex*

In the chorus, all four Statlers go on to inquire (in perfect harmony) as to the whereabouts of their white Stetson- and silver spur-wearing heroes:

*Whatever happened to Randolph Scott,
 riding the trail alone?
 Whatever happened to Gene and Tex
 and Roy and Rex? The Durango Kid?
 Whatever happened to Randolph Scott,
 his horse plain as can be?
 Whatever happened to Randolph Scott
 has happened to the rest of me.*

The combining of tongue-in-cheek commentary on the present-day with a nostalgic longing for the past is a hallmark of the Statler Brothers' music, and places them firmly in country and western tradition of salty social commentary dating back to the original

“cowboy philosopher” Will Rogers. In this particular song, the contrasting vocal style of the verse and the chorus – monotone v. harmony – is a clever stylistic touch that helps to emphasize the song’s opposing of present and past. In this sense, the opposition plays out at both the level of form (vocals) and content (lyrics).

Away from formal and historical observations, a question we might entertain is whether, if we look beyond the surface opposition of monotonous cynicism and harmonious wistfulness, there might be something *more* to this song than a humorously reactionary country music statement about how the past was good and the present ain’t. The song seems to imply that the absence of Randolph Scott and his pistol-packin’ brethren is not only indicative of but also, in a way, *responsible for* the lamentable condition of the movies in the 1970s; implying, as it were, a causal relationship between the Western film and the American film industry. Without Scott and his plain white horse standing dependably as a signifier of quality family entertainment, movie going becomes an adult exercise in planning and research. So goes the cowboy, so go the movies. And more, perhaps, as the line “*Whatever happened to Randolph Scott has happened to the rest of me*” could be read as implying an overarching connection between the Western and society – as though the absence of the traditional cowboy figure in contemporary cinema is reflective of a larger societal deficiency. Whatever “happened” to Scott has also “happened” to us, and so the state of the movies is ultimately a reflection of the society that produces and consumes them.

Of course, such an interpretation may represent something of a stretch given that the song in question is still, ultimately, about old movie cowboys and the preponderance

of dirty movies in the 1970s. And not to take anything away from the Statler Brothers, but this is a musical group who, a few years prior, warned listeners of the dangers of dating two women at the same time in the amusing “You Can’t Have Your Kate (And Edith, Too).”

Turning to the second verse of “Whatever Happened to Randolph Scott?” (again delivered by Reid’s monotonous bass vocals) we find more of the same surly humor:

*Everybody’s trying to make a comment
About our doubts and fears
True Grit’s the only movie
I’ve really understood in years
You’ve gotta take your analyst along
To see if it’s fit to see
Whatever happened to Randolph Scott
Has happened to the industry*

While the seemingly-knowing jab at the psychoanalytically-inflected nature of 1970s filmmaking could cause us to reconsider (or perhaps affirm) our earlier dismissal of a symptomatic reading of the song, of greater interest is the reference to Henry Hathaway’s 1969 film *True Grit*. In a song that alternates between specific references to old Western film actors and general commentary about the state of the movies, *True Grit* is the only film singled out for attention by name.

Without venturing out too far on an interpretative limb, there are two implications to be drawn from this reference. First, *True Grit*, in its comprehensibility, is more like movies used to be – however that was. This is a suggestive idea, but the song itself does not provide much more than that: a suggestion. The second implication is weightier, given the subject of the song. In a moviemaking climate where all the frontier heroes of

yesteryear have hung up their spurs, a lone cowboy remains: the star of *True Grit*, John Wayne.

As much as the Duke may be synonymous with the Western, he is unlikely to come to mind when discussing the moviemaking period the Statlers are poking fun at. Instead, one term has come to dominate the discourse, both critical and popular, surrounding the Western genre during the 1960s and 1970s: *revisionist*.

The standard account of the Western's development from the late 1960s onward tends to go something like this: After the genre's signature filmmakers had either retired or moved on to other genres, a new generation of directors took the Western in a different, far more violent direction; away from the simplistic frontier morality plays of an earlier age to scenarios that both critically engaged with the ideological meanings bound up in the genre's conventions and wrestled with contemporary politics disguised in turn-of-the-century dressings.

During this same period, however, John Wayne continued to star in Westerns: eight of them, in fact, between 1970 and 1976 – a detail rarely commented upon in existing literature on the genre. Of course, the fact that John Wayne continued to even *exist* in the 1970s may come as a surprise to some. “I stay away from psychoanalyst's couch scenes,” Wayne once said. “Couches are good for one thing.”¹ And yet, in a time characterized by analysis of “doubts and fears,” the Duke remained: older, but still in the saddle.

¹ Quoted in “John Wayne as the Last Hero,” *Time Magazine* (8 Aug 1969) 56.

The continued neglect of Wayne points to a limitation in existing scholarship on the Western: that the genre is still seen as developing in an “evolutionary” manner, lockstep with socio-cultural developments, and any films which do not conform to this model are excluded from study. While the Western genre clearly had room for its aging icon, and audiences continued to patronize Wayne’s films throughout the 1970s, the critical models that have sprung up to account for this “revisionist” period either relegate his films to the sidelines or neglect them altogether. To help us to understand why this is so, some observations about the nature and history of scholarship on the Western are in order.

In scholarly writing on the Western, the idea of the frontier as the site of contestation between the competing values of civilization and wilderness continues to resonate. This critical conception of what defines the Western, especially as a film genre, draws on the influential early work of scholars John G. Cawelti and Jim Kitses, but also owes an often-unacknowledged debt to the work of Henry Nash Smith and, going even further back, Frederick Jackson Turner – in particular his historically-disproved yet enduringly-resonant Frontier Thesis.

The disparity between critical and popular conceptions of the genre presents a problem, of course, as it is unlikely the average moviegoer would say the Western is about Levi-Straussian antinomies rather than, say, cowboys.

Instead of focusing on questions about the fundamental character of the Western, significantly more critical attention has been paid to divisions *within* the genre and how the genre has changed over time. André Bazin wrote at length about the “evolution” of

the Western.² Philip French categorized Westerns in the 1950s and 1960s as extensions of the respective ideological postures of John F. Kennedy, Barry Goldwater, Lyndon Johnson and William F. Buckley.³ Will Wright linked changes in the plot structure of Western films to changes in the organization of the American economy.⁴ Thomas Schatz analyzed the Westerns of John Ford to show how the genre evolved from a state of formal transparency to one of opaque, self-conscious formalism.⁵ More recently, Michael Coyne has delineated two fundamental types of Westerns, “Odyssey” and “Community,” and shown how these forms have been used to allegorize changes in American politics,⁶ while Alexandra Keller has tied the decline of the Western as a popular genre in the late 1970s to rise of Ronald Regan.⁷

As this small sampling serves to indicate, the challenge of working on the Western today often lies less in the actual films than in sorting through the diverse and voluminous literature that has been generated on the genre over the past fifty years. Since the 1980s, a standard tactic in many examinations of the Western has been to provide a classification of previous critical approaches to the genre as a launch point for an author’s own study. Whereas most genre analysis involves providing a taxonomy of films, analysis of the Western now seems to require a taxonomy of taxonomies.

² See especially Bazin’s essays “The Western, or the American Film *par excellence*” and “The Evolution of the Western,” both included in *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Grey (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2001).

³ Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre* (London: BFI, 1973).

⁴ Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1975).

⁵ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1981). See especially pp. 36-42 and 63-80.

⁶ Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 1997).

⁷ Alexandra Keller, *Re-imagining the Frontier: American Westerns Since the Reagan Administration* (Diss. New York University, 1998).

These classifications prove to be highly subjective, however. Different writers provide divergent accounts of how scholarship – and thus the genre – has developed. A given study could be alternately called “mythic,” “structuralist” or “socio-cultural,” or even ignored altogether, depending on whose account you are reading. Yet, in sorting through this maze of grouping and gradation, a key similarity begins to emerge.

Although once the archetypal film genre of study, the Western has in recent years fallen out of favor. At present, very little academic study is being carried out on the genre. While this work is often of high quality, it remains in a tradition of scholarship centered on examining the relationship between films and the larger culture from which they emerge. Alan Williams has summarized this approach:

The repetitive nature of genre production and consumption produces active but indirect audience participation; successful genres are ‘stories the audience has isolated through its collective response.’ Hence genre filmmaking can be examined as ‘a form of collective cultural expression.’⁸

The work of the critic then becomes to interpret, or “read,” the films in question for subtext or hidden meaning. Kristin Thompson has described this critical method as follows:

We also use interpretation to create meanings that go beyond the level of the individual work, and that help define its relation to the world. When we speak of a film’s non-explicit ideology, or of the film as a reflection of social tendencies, or of the film as suggestive of the mental states of large groups of people, then we are interpreting its *symptomatic* meanings.⁹

This particular methodology, at times called “reflectionist” or “genre as ritual,” has been criticized on a number of grounds. As Steve Neale has pointed out, not only does such an

⁸ Quoted in Steve Neale, “Questions of Genre,” *Film and Theory: An Anthology* eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 200) 172.

⁹ Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) 12.

approach ignore the role of institutional determinants, but the assumption that consumer decision-making, with its own multiplicity of determinants, can be considered a form of “cultural expression” is doubtful.¹⁰ Despite such criticisms, the Western continues to be largely examined and debated in reflectionist terms. Rather than questioning or critically examining the premises of earlier studies, contemporary scholarship is content to simply list them and continue along the same path.

It is this conception of the genre that gives rise to the “revisionist” moniker associated with Western films of the late 1960s and 1970s. Under this model, the changes we can note in films of the period – graphic violence, increased cynicism, the hero as hired gun rather than moral protector – are attributable to societal changes: civil unrest; anti-Vietnam sentiment; Watergate; and so on.

A question we should ask, though, is if the Western undergoes a revision at some point in the late 1960s, what was it doing for the previous twenty years? Depictions of affirming frontier valor found in films like *Stagecoach* (directed by John Ford, 1939), *My Darling Clementine* (directed by John Ford, 1946), *Shane* (directed by George Stevens, 1953) and Budd Boetticher’s Westerns starring Randolph Scott have always been accompanied by pictures that take up more critical or ambiguous stances on the issues of justice, morality, heroism and historical accuracy, including *The Ox-Bow Incident* (directed by William A. Wellman, 1943), *Red River* (directed by Howard Hawks, 1944), *High Noon* (directed by Fred Zinneman, 1952) and *Warlock* (directed by Edward Dmytryk, 1959). Psychology appeared in the Western long before the 1970s – consider

¹⁰ Neale 172-173.

Anthony Mann's cycle of Westerns with James Stewart – as did psychoanalysis (Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* [1954]) and sex (*Destry Rides Again* [directed by George Marshall, 1939], *Duel in the Sun* [directed by – among others – King Vidor, 1946]). Sam Peckinpah's first contemplation on the end of the west came not in 1969's *The Wild Bunch* but seven years earlier with *Ride the High Country*, Randolph Scott's final feature. That same year John Ford released his own meditation on the subject, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

The fact of the matter is that genres are in a constant state of revision. Their financial viability depends on it. That the Western was able to remain a popular genre from the late 1930s up until the 1970s indicates it was able to accomplish this far more successfully than most other genres. In this way, what may have seemed like an appropriate term for a temporally specific generic cycle is, in fact, a misnomer – one that inadvertently homogenizes the previous thirty years of genre filmmaking.

To be fair, the majority of studies on the Western do take account of the changes the genre underwent throughout the 1940s and 50s. Yet even those studies most sensitive to cultural and historical change place undue emphasis on the revisionist turn of the late 1960s. To help explain why, we would do well to recall that the perceived change the genre undergoes corresponds to a change in who is making Westerns. Ford, Hawks, Mann and Boetticher give way to Peckinpah, Altman, Leone and Penn.

A conception of genre as ritual thus combines with an emphasis on authorship to produce the following: collective cultural expressions of the societal instability of the 1960s and 70s mediated through a socially and politically conscious New Hollywood

auteur filmmaker who transplants those expressions to a narrative set it in the western United States between 1870 and 1905. This is the model for the so-called “revisionist” Western. As we shall see, the model is problematic on a number of levels. Thompson’s remarks on the nature of psychoanalytic film criticism are instructive here:

Such reductive schemata are tautological, since they assume that any film will fit these patterns, and the patterns are simple enough that any film can be made to fit them.... Such a method...ends up dictating a narrow range of meanings ahead of time, which the analyst will necessarily find present in the film.¹¹

As is also sadly often the case with such highly refined analytical models, any films that do not conform to that paradigm are either neglected altogether or treated as the exceptions that prove the rule. This is the case with the later films of actor John Wayne.

In the few instances where Wayne’s later Westerns are discussed, one term is repeatedly used to describe them: *traditional*. As Neale has summarized this conceptualization:

The traditional Westerns that were still produced in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s catered for a traditional but dwindling adult audience. They were almost solely reliant on the ageing John Wayne, and Wayne was to make his last Western, *The Shootist*, in 1976.

The word “traditional” certainly has an ideological dimension. It brings to mind terms like old-fashioned, establishment, simplicity, even boring – all of which could be used to describe a particular film’s style, theme or subject matter. But therein lay a problem: when used to describe a film (or group of films), “traditional” tends to come across, however unintentionally, as pejorative. The films against which “traditional” ones are contrasted are usually described in superlatives, and this is certainly the case with the

¹¹ Thompson 14.

“revisionist” Western – a cycle with films uniformly progressive, innovative, stylish and youthful. Furthermore, the success of any “traditional”/John Wayne Western is explained to be the result of an aging star’s enduring appeal to an audience that is dwindling – literally dying off. Times changed, but the Duke kept making Westerns like it was 1956, giving the old folks what they wanted to see. As a result, these movies can be discounted with relative ease as remnants of an earlier age – and of a filmmaking time that has already been accounted for.

This is a clever move, because it allows the critic to both characterize and dismiss a group of films without having to closely analyze them. When thorough evaluations of genre classics like *Red River*, *Rio Bravo* (directed by Howard Hawks, 1956), *The Searchers* (directed by John Ford, 1952) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* already exist, there is little need to look at “outmoded retreads” like *Chisum* (directed by Andrew V. McLaglen, 1970), *Rio Lobo* (directed by Howard Hawks, 1970), *Big Jake* (directed by George Sherman, 1971) or *The Shootist* (directed by Don Siegel, 1976). Michael Coyne’s treatment of Wayne’s later films is typical of this approach. Noting superficial similarities between the character types found in *Rio Bravo* and four of Wayne’s subsequent films, he writes: “This knee-jerk dependence on tried and tested movie formulae was commercially safe, politically conservative and artistically unadventurous.”¹² Which is to say, everything “revisionist” Westerns were not.

In addition to being overly dismissive and critically evasive, the approach also relies on an unspoken assumption regarding the existence of some common

¹² Coyne 137.

understanding about what Westerns were like before the revisionist turn of the 1960s. When the term “traditional” is applied to John Wayne’s later Westerns, its meaning is thought to be implicit. Yet the Western films of the previous twenty years, as was noted above, were if anything diverse. This is not to say that a genre, even over such a long period of time, could not have core set of themes. But that repetition will inevitably be accompanied by an equal measure of variation and difference if a genre is able to endure.

If we wish to properly discuss Wayne’s later films, we need a more refined conception of what these works were doing that distinguished them from other Westerns at the time. As a signifier of difference, Wayne may be a powerfully suggestive figure, but that is no reason to excuse his films from analysis. The difference needs to be examined and articulated in a more concrete fashion.

What follows is an analysis of the final eight Western movies made by John Wayne, beginning with *Chisum* and *Rio Lobo*, both released in 1970, and concluding with 1976’s *The Shootist*. Wayne’s prolific production during this period – which also included a brief, two-film foray into another genre – provides the analyst with a substantial body of work from which to draw conclusions about not only the “traditional” Western but also the nature of the Western genre as a whole.¹³

In working through the existing scholarly writing on Wayne’s later films we consistently come up against two forms of interpretive criticism. The first attempts to apply pre-existing models of genre analysis to the films; the second seeks to understand them biographically, as reflections of Wayne’s personality and private life. A close

¹³ A list of Wayne’s films, with release dates and box office earnings, is included for reference as an appendix.

analysis of the movies not only calls the productivity of these methods into question, but also reveals a *transtextual* generic consciousness that challenges the prevailing wisdom that these movies were insular attempts by Wayne or others to defy change and progress.

On this note, a brief explanation of the term transtextual is needed. In neoformalist film analysis, transtextual is one of four possible forms of *motivation* found in narrative film (the other three being compositional, realistic and artistic motivation); that is, it is one kind of rationale a film might suggest for the presence of a textual element.¹⁴ Thompson describes transtextual motivation as when “[t]he work introduces a device that is not motivated adequately within its own terms, but that depends on our recognition of the device from past experience.”¹⁵ Transtextual elements are those that are part of traditions of representation that pre-exist any individual film.

As used in this project, the term is to be distinguished from the more prevalent “intertextual.” While intertextuality has recently emerged as a popular concept in genre theory, in some cases as a proposed alternative to more accustomed conceptions of genre, transtextual is here preferred for two reasons. One, there are implied differences in scope between the two terms; whereas intertextual tends to connote a fixed relationship *between* a limited number of works, transtextual suggests a more fluid relationship *across* multiple works. Two, transtextual lacks the metaphysical baggage that intertextual has accrued in academic discourse; for better or worse, intertextuality is bound with notions about

¹⁴ Compositional motivation is in play when the inclusion of a device is justified as it being necessary for the construction of narrative causality, space and time; realistic motivation calls on the viewer to appeal to notions from the real world to justify the presence of a given device; artistic motivation involves the withholding of the other three forms of motivation, where an element is presented for its own sake, focusing attention on the form and materials of the artwork. For a more detailed discussion of motivation in narrative movies, see Thompson, especially pages 1 to 46.

¹⁵ Thompson 18.

postmodernism, self-reflexivity and in particular media saviness – where references to other works are seen in and of themselves as marks of value; this risks a genre snobbery no better than asserting that to truly “get” a Western requires situating it in its proper socio-cultural context.

It is not enough to simply note that a film has introduced an element that we are able to account for by our recognizing it from other films. We must always ask, *to what end?* What is the *function* of this device? In posing these questions, an analysis of Wayne’s later Westerns reveals a transtextual dimension where individual films draw on the genre’s traditions of conventions and representations – traditions both long-established *and* contemporary – in order to engage in a dialogue centered on the question of the genre’s future. In this way, the movies reveal themselves as keenly aware that the Western is at a generic crossroads. Rather than using the genre to allegorize contemporary politics or deconstruct the myth of the Western hero, these films argue for the enduring relevance of the values embodied by that hero – while acknowledging that, in changing times, if those values are to survive they must be successfully passed on to a subsequent generation. Instead of revision, the aim is *regeneration*.

2

Nixon Liked It**Genre and Transtextuality in *Chisum***

John Wayne began his sixth decade of Hollywood moviemaking with *Chisum*, released in June of 1970. Directed by Andrew V. McLaglen – who first worked with Wayne on *McLintock!* (1963) and had helmed his preceding two pictures, *Hellfighters* (1968) and *The Undefeated* (1969) – the movie is a (very) loose adaptation of the events of New Mexico's 1878 Lincoln County War, which famously involved Pat Garret and Billy the Kid. Wayne stars as John Chisum, a self-made cattle-king who leads a group of ranchers in the fight to protect their land from scheming, monopolistic developer Lawrence G. Murphy. Chisum and neighboring rancher Henry Tunstall first try to contend with Murphy through commerce, opening their own rival bank and general store – much to the frustration of Chisum's longtime friend Pepper (played by Ben Johnson), who would rather answer Murphy's misconduct with his Winchester rifle. After Tunstall is murdered, however, and appeals to the law prove useless, Chisum leads his allies against Murphy's gang in a final confrontation in the streets of Lincoln.

The film opens with a striking, four-minute credit sequence. A series of amber-hued paintings by Western artist Russ Vickers pass before the camera, set to a forceful musical theme by composer Dominic Frontiere. After an opening shot of the Kinney National-era Warner Bros. logo, the music swells over rapidly cut shots of men on horseback and painted cattle, the first credit announcing Wayne as the film's (only) top-

billed star. The musical theme then erupts into a sweeping harmony at the presentation of the film's title. An accompanying chorus of baritone voices further emphasizes the title, bellowing: "*Chisum! John Chisum! Weary! Saddle-worn!*" The song goes on to alternate between the sung chorus and spoken verse telling of the trials Chisum faced moving his herd of cattle westward from Texas to New Mexico, eventually establishing his "empire 'neath the sun."

This use of song and painting draws on two artistic traditions complementary to the Western film genre. Vickers' paintings are part of a practice that originated with painter and sculptor Frederic Remington (1861-1909) at the turn of the century. Portraying in his work the "moments of danger and conflict that came to define the archetypal romance of the West,"¹ Remington's depictions of stoic cowboys and heroic cavalry officers set against the sweeping vistas and natural landscapes of the American West captured the public's imagination at the time and influenced a generation of artists and, significantly, filmmakers. Looked at today, Remington works like *Fired On* (1907) and *A Cold Morning on the Range* (1905) resemble stills from classic Western films. As director John Ford described the look of his Technicolor *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1948): "I tried to copy the Remington style there. You can't copy him one hundred per cent, but you can get the color and the movement."²

In *Chisum*, paint and celluloid merge as Wayne's character is introduced. As the opening credits draw to a close, we are shown a painting of a ranch house, still under

¹ *American Masters: Remington*, PBS (online). Available: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americansmasters/database/remington_f.html

² Quoted in Paul Simpson, *The Rough Guide to Westerns* (London: Rough Guides Ltd., 2006) 16.

construction, situated at the base of an expansive valley. The camera pans rightward across this painted scene, coming to rest on a solitary cowboy. He is on horseback beneath a large pine tree, overlooking the valley below. The frame seamlessly switches from canvas to film, and the camera zooms in on the lone cowboy: it is Wayne. Cut to the original view of the valley: the large ranch house is now complete, and as the camera pans we see herds of cattle grazing on the valley floor.

The song that accompanies the opening credits, “The Ballad of John Chisum,” has a more recent progenitor than Vickers’ canvases. While country and folk music have always figured prominently in Western films, the popular success of the Frankie Lane’s rendition of “High Noon (Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darlin’)” in 1952³ made the addition of a lonesome ballad to a Western’s opening credits a common – though not always welcomed – practice. Budd Boetticher reportedly detested (with good reason) the awkward, studio-mandated song added to the opening credits of *Seven Men From Now* (1956).⁴ In other cases, the opening credit ballad is used to great effect. There is no question that Stan Jones’ theme to *The Searchers* – with forlorn voices asking, “*What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam? What makes a man leave bed and board and turn his back on home? Ride away...ride away...*” – aids considerably in establishing the appropriate tone of longing.⁵

³ The version heard in the film is sung by Tex Ritter.

⁴ This according to Jim Kitses in his commentary track for the film’s DVD release.

⁵ This practice takes a more pop-oriented turn in the late 1960s following the improbable success of Burt Baccarat’s “Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head” from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1970). The opening song to *True Grit*, sung by “Rhinstone Cowboy” Glenn Campbell (who also co-starred in the film) is typical of the more pop-oriented approach to the credit ballad. *Chisum* features a comparable number mid-way through the picture with the sappy “Turn me Around.”

While the traditions of Western illustration and song are an important part of the film genre's history and development, the actual pairing of a credit ballad with painted scenes is quite rare. Prior to *Chisum*, the most recent example of this practice is found in Howard Hawks' *El Dorado* (1966), also starring Wayne. At the start of that film a series of Western scenes by artist Olaf Wieghorst (who has a small role in the movie as a gunsmith) pass before the camera, set to the steady beat of the eponymous title song (as sung by George Alexander and the Mellomen).

With its deliberate pacing and baritone vocals, the song is stylistically similar to many other Western credit openers. Unlike "The Ballad of John Chisum" (or "The Searchers" or "High Noon"), however, it is only tangentially related to the narrative it prefaces. In the film, the character Mississippi (played by James Caan) recites Edgar Allen Poe's poem "Eldorado," but the poem's refrain of "ride, boldly ride" becomes a comic battle cry. Rather than speaking directly to *El Dorado*'s story or characters, the title song is a generic (though still rather stirring) ode to the unending search for an elusive promised land. The sentiments embodied in such a song are certainly appropriate for a Western, but in a very general way.

Likewise, Wieghorst's paintings, while undeniably handsome, are not *about* the film in the way that Vickers' scenes actually depict events from John Chisum's journey to New Mexico. Moreover, they are all images of man in nature – cowboys on the range, a wagon train in a deep valley – whereas the action of *El Dorado* takes place primarily in a town setting.

In the opening credits of *Chisum*, the paintings and title song function as devices that narrate Chisum's back-story. After the title credit, the camera moves over a painted scene of cattle being driven across a river. A close-up draws our attention to a cowboy on horseback perched on a hill high above the herd. Wearing a tan vest, he and another rider direct the ranch hands and herd below. Over these shots the first verse is spoken:

*They say that you can't make it
Will you hark to what they've said?
Or will you move your beeves to Texas
Across the River Red?
They say that you can't make it
But you've bet your life they're wrong
So keep moving t'ward the Pecos
To find where you belong*

The story then continues as we are shown subsequent events from Chisum's cattle drive, culminating in the sweep across the painting depicting him overlooking his spread and incomplete ranch house. As the camera focuses on the ranch house, the verse states that, even after winning "*a hundred battles*," for Chisum the "*fight keeps goin' on*." As we pan across the valley, the final line of the song asks: "*Chisum! John Chisum! Can you still keep goin' on? Can you still keep...going on?*"

In some instances, we are able to fill in parts of the story depicted in the credits with information learned later in the film. As a basic example, it is possible that a viewer may not gather that one of the figures portrayed in the paintings is Chisum. Despite the close-up shots, the painted likeness of Wayne is admittedly rough. But the distinctive tan vest – seen on the lone cowboy as the credits shift from painting to film and then worn by Chisum for the remainder of the film – will enable viewers to retrospectively figure him as the protagonist of the painted scenes. Another scene in the credits depicts a battle

between Chisum's company and a band of Comanche Indians. Alternating close-ups juxtapose Chisum with a Comanche in a white feather headdress. We are later able to identify this character as Comanche chief White Buffalo, a respected rival now "pent up on a piece of desert the government calls a reservation." "That's the end of his way of life," Chisum tells his niece, adding: "Pretty good way, too" – his remarks recalling similar ones made by Wayne's character at the end of *Hondo* (directed by John Farrow, 1953).

In addition to drawing on the traditions of Western painting and song to narrate the title character's history, another transtextual element is apparent in the *Chisum*'s opening credits. Watching and listening to the sequence, viewers familiar with the genre cannot help but think of *Red River*, Howard Hawks' classic Western about a troubled cattle drive from Texas to Missouri. As R. Phillip Loy notes in *Westerns in a Changing America: 1955-2000*, *Chisum* could be viewed as either an alternative to *Red River*, where the hero heads further West for a fresh start rather than east to Missouri, or as *Red River*'s ultimate ending, with the hero moving his herd to New Mexico when the market in Texas goes bust.⁶ Other connections between *Chisum* and earlier Wayne Westerns are made as the film progresses. We learn that, like his character Tom Dunson in *Red River*, Wayne's Chisum also left a girl behind in Texas. Like Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, that girl married the hero's brother.

⁶ R. Philip Loy, *Westerns in a Changing America: 1955-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2004) 159.

What are we to make of these references? Do they simply confirm the charges of Michael Coyne and others that by the 1970s Wayne had resorted to acting out the same old stories over and over again?

There is, again, a strong tendency in genre criticism – and in particular criticism of the Western – to try to “read” films for underlying meaning. It is this concentration on interpretation that gives rise to the critical models associated with the Western genre: broadly, the concept that Western narratives are “about” the epic moment of confrontation between wilderness and civilization; more specifically, the “revisionist” model explicated in the introduction that sees Westerns of the late 1960s and 1970s as reflections of societal change. Kristin Thompson also notes a further problem with this kind of interpretative criticism: even if a movie makes its meanings very explicit, the critic must deal with them as symptomatic. “Otherwise, what would he or she have to talk about?”⁷

Of those critics who do comment on Wayne’s 1970s Westerns, few are able to get past the possible implications of his mere presence in a picture – as if the physical “monumentality” of Wayne described by Deborah Thomas⁸ has grown beyond the bounds of the screen, taking on an extra-filmic dimension. Wayne’s artistic and political conservatism are seen as affecting (or infecting) every aspect of the production of his movies, from the choice of scripts to the selection of directors. As Kim Newman remarks in *Wild West Movies*: “[In the 1970s] the Duke is just going through the motions in an era

⁷ Thompson 15.

⁸ Deborah Thomas, “John Wayne’s Body,” *The Book of Westerns*, eds. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1996) 75-87.

when the West was the province of Leone and Peckinpah not lazy comics like Andrew V. McLaglen and Burt Kennedy.”⁹

In this way, the Wayne films are actually appraised in a manner similar to how the “revisionist” Western is interpreted. While the intended ends are certainly different – proving irrelevance rather than relevance – social and cultural factors external to the films proper still act as the critical barometer.¹⁰

To cite a more specific example: in the sparse writing – critical and otherwise – that does exist on *Chisum*, American President Richard Nixon’s admiration for the film is mentioned repeatedly – often as an underhanded way of criticizing the movie. This anecdote is always relayed without any citation, however, so some investigation is in order.

Nixon mentioned *Chisum* publicly on one occasion, at the Federal Building in Denver Colorado on August 3rd, 1970, in remarks given before the press on the subject of law enforcement. Nixon praised Wayne’s performance, calling him “a very fine actor,” and assessed the film as “far better than average movies, better than average Westerns.” The President continued:

[Watching the film] I wondered why it is that the Western survives year after year after year. A good Western will outdraw some of the other subjects. Perhaps one of the reasons – in addition to the excitement, the gun play, and the rest, which perhaps is part of it, but they can get that in other kinds of movies – but one of the reasons is, perhaps – and this may

⁹ Kim Newman, *Wild West Movies: How the West was found, won, lost, lied about, filmed and forgotten* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990) 195. With these comments in mind, it is more than a little ironic that both the front and back covers of Newman’s book feature images of Wayne taken *The Train Robbers* and *Rio Lobo*.

¹⁰ This method has also the curious, unintended effect of affording Wayne the status of a powerful *auteur*. We shall return to this idea in the following two chapters.

be a square observation – is that the good guys come out ahead in the Westerns; the bad guys lose.¹¹

Nixon's commentary on Wayne's latest picture was a prelude to a larger points about the role of the law in a civil society and the President's ongoing concern with the media's glorification of criminals and its effect on America's youth. In their candidly "square" emphasis on the need for the traditional values of civility and order in the face of changing times, such comments are in many ways typical of Nixon's appeals to the "silent majority" of socially conservative Americans thought to have voted him into the White House in 1968 and who would usher him to a landslide re-election victory over George McGovern in 1972.

Given his remarks on the Western genre, at first one might question how familiar the President was with the contemporary movie scene. Nixon's identification of moral certainty as the essential reason for the Western's enduring success may seem questionable in light of the direction the genre had taken in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Rather than "good guys coming out ahead," as they do in *Chisum*, many Westerns of the time featured their protagonists being violently gunned down at film's end (as in *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* [directed by George Roy Hill, 1970]), or they portrayed traditional Western heroes like the United States Cavalry as ruthless villains (as in *Little Big Man* [directed by Arthur Penn, 1970] and *Solider Blue* [directed by Ralph Nelson, 1970]).

¹¹ John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* (online) (Santa Barbara, CA: University of California [hosted], Gerhard Peters [database]). Available: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2608>.

In actual fact, Nixon was an avid movie watcher, screening over *five hundred* films during his six years in office.¹² Records kept by the Secret Service show that *Chisum* was one of the few films Nixon watched twice: first on July 31st, 1970, and then again on August 31st. While his taste did favor classical Hollywood films (Westerns, in particular), Nixon frequently viewed newer releases, including *Dirty Harry* (directed by Don Siegel, 1971), *Funny Girl* (directed by William Wyler, 1968) and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (but not *Little Big Man*, *Soldier Blue* or *The Wild Bunch* – though he did screen *The Professionals* [directed by Richard Brooks, 1966]).¹³

It is also important to point out that the Nixon of 1970 was not the morally problematic figure he would be revealed as in 1974, especially in terms of public perception. When critics note how “Nixon liked *Chisum*,” it is the criminal, paranoid, profane Nixon exposed in subpoenaed White House audio tapes that automatically comes to mind. As unpalatable as it may seem in light of the events of Watergate, the Nixon of 1970 was a President who, while still a polarizing figure, enjoyed high approval ratings and a connection (however improbable) with a majority of the American people. This was also the Nixon who would go onto to the second-largest presidential victory in American history in 1972. What is more, *Chisum* was a successful film, earning \$6 million in rentals within six months of its release.¹⁴ Without discounting that general curiosity about how Wayne would follow-up his acclaimed performance as Rooster

¹² For a detailed analysis of Nixon’s movie watching, see Mark Feeney, *Nixon at the Movies: A Book about Belief* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

¹³ The appendix to *Nixon at the Movies*, listing all films screened by Nixon during his presidency (including date and screening site), is available for viewing on-line at: <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/16457.crl>

¹⁴ Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *John Wayne, American* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 577.

Cogburn in *True Grit* no doubt added to *Chisum*'s appeal at the box office, the film's earnings indicate that a significant number of moviegoers were still interested in seeing the bad guys fall at the hands of the good guys – or at least at the hands of John Wayne.

Under scrutiny, then, what was initially an attempt to color a film by associating it with a politically charged historical figure results in the opposite of the desired effect. This should not, however, be seen as an affirmation of a reflectionist approach to genre criticism where, once we get the facts straight, the causal relationship between films and society becomes clear – in this case, that a successful Nixon (somehow) meant a successful *Chisum*. On the contrary, that *Chisum* could find success in the same year that Westerns as diverse as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (directed by Don Siegel) and *The Cheyenne Social Club* (directed by Gene Kelly) also met with audience approval points to the complicated nature of the Western genre. Jack Nachbar has observed how the early 1970s were a time when Westerns such as *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (directed by Robert Altman, 1971) and *The Wild Bunch* were being acclaimed as classics at the same time millions of dollars were being spent making epic Westerns starring Wayne.¹⁵ Moreover, in 1970 an individual viewer may have seen each of that year's popular Westerns – or only one, or none at all, for a variety of possible reasons.

And they may or may not have been a Republican.

¹⁵ Jack Nachbar, "Riding Shotgun: The Scattered Formula in Contemporary Western Movies," *Focus on the Western*, ed. Jack Nachbar (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) 111. Nachbar does ultimately attribute this fragmentation within the genre to an ideological fragmentation of American society begun in the 1960s.

With all of that said, Nixon's comments might still provide a valuable insight into *Chisum*, in particular the movie's relationship with the Western genre. Given the voracious appetite for Hollywood films he displayed during his years in the White House, Nixon had likely seen hundreds of Westerns in his lifetime.¹⁶ His "square observation" that, in Westerns, the good guys usually win the day is a basic but important point. As noted above, at that time many other Western movies of note did not conclude in such an upright, affirming fashion. What Nixon is identifying, then, is a part of the genre's tradition – a tradition that is carried on in *Chisum*. Here a clear trend begins to emerge.

From its opening credits onward, *Chisum* clearly (and repeatedly) invites audiences to view it not in the context of Wayne's politics, or even as a reflection of societal tendencies, but in relation to earlier Westerns – and not only those starring Wayne.¹⁷ In this and subsequent Wayne Westerns we find a systematic effort to tie these films to the established traditions and conventions of the genre. As such, criticizing the transtextual elements found in these (or any) films without examining the *function* those elements serve within those works is an exercise of dubious critical value.

Rather than being seen as invocations of the genre's rich cadre of conventions, the transtextual elements that appear in later Wayne Westerns are instead often interpreted as acts of self-consciousness: essentially as Wayne making deliberate references to his past acting achievements. Wayne's longevity as a Hollywood leading man and his equally

¹⁶ And if not, he still saw more films in his first two years in office (132) than many see in a decade (or longer).

¹⁷ *Red River* certainly does not hold a cinematic monopoly on cattle drives. There is a long history in the genre of building Western narratives around the drive, both prior to and after *Red River*. Examples include *Arizona* (directed by Wesley Ruggles, 1940) and *The Far Country* (directed by Anthony Mann, 1954).

lengthy association with the Western genre are unique in this regard, as both he and the characters he played are bound up with the genre's history. Difficult as it may be, it is important to examine not the man but the characters. Douglas Pye has argued that, after *Red River*, characters like Wayne's Tom Dunson became increasingly common in the genre: "anachronistic, morally problematic figures stranded in some sense by historical change, whose assertions of identity are increasingly undermined."¹⁸

Disapproving of Wayne's 1970s Westerns on the grounds of generic self-referentiality is also odd in light of other recent developments in the genre. In the rather limited Western oeuvres of both Peckinpah and Leone, for example, we find many of the same themes played out time and again. Clint Eastwood also managed to escape censure despite playing nearly the same character in six Westerns between 1964 and 1973¹⁹.

As we have seen, appeals to a genre's traditions for purposes other than deconstruction are often viewed as knee-jerk reactions against change and progress. Yet, in the later Wayne Westerns, this transtextual dimension clearly demonstrates not only a high degree of knowledgeability of the genre's history but also an awareness of its more recent developments.

One of the villains of *Chisum* is a "half-crazy bounty hunter" named Dan Nodeen (played by Christopher George); a merciless killer with a pronounced limp that resulted from a wound inflicted by Billy the Kid (played by Geoffrey Deuel). In appearance and demeanor, Nodeen is an obvious play on Eastwood's familiar "Man With No Name"

¹⁸ Quoted in David Lusted, *The Western* (Essex, England: Pearson Longman, 2003) 208.

¹⁹ After developing the "Man With No Name" figure in Leone's first three Italian Westerns, Eastwood went on to play similar characters in *Hang 'Em High* (directed by Ted Post, 1968), *Two Mules for Sister Sara* and *High Plains Drifter* (directed by Eastwood, 1973).

persona.²⁰ Perpetually sporting two-day's growth and holding a steely-eyed glare, Nodeen squints frequently and rarely speaks more than three sentences at a time. After bringing in a wanted man dead rather than alive, Sheriff Brady (played by Bruce Cabot) says to Nodeen, "You just had to kill him, huh?" Nodeen replies: "No. Less trouble that way." The prospect of exacting revenge against Billy prompts Nodeen to accept an offer from Murphy to install him as the new Lincoln town sheriff. Ultimately, Nodeen is revealed to be a coward. At the end of the film, after Chisum and his allies have defeated Murphy's gang in a lengthy shoot-out on Lincoln's main street, Nodeen throws his badge in the dirt. "I resign," he says as he rides away. "No more paydays around here." That Nodeen not only survives the final melee but also gets away suggests that *Chisum* is very much aware of the continuous presence in the genre of the "Man With No Name" character. Yet he is but one conventional Western character among many others, most of who have been around for significantly longer – as illustrated by the opening credit sequence. In this way, the film explicitly refers to other contemporary genre trends as both existing and rhetorically useful, but those trends are situated within the much larger tradition of the Western.

From its opening credits, where Western painting and song are used to give the main character a history which links him to past heroes of the Western genre, *Chisum* draws on elements and conventions of the Western genre from both past and present to

²⁰ By this point a persona also familiar to many Western audiences through countless imitations in (non-Leone) Italian Westerns. Franco Nero's performance in *Django* (directed by Sergio Corbucci, 1966) is one of the best known.

fashion a new narrative. Which is, of course, one of the primary ways in which genres *work*.

An investigation of *Chisum*'s invocation of the conventions of the Western's artistic tradition draws attention to the richness of the genre. Yet it is undeniable that a large measure of that richness comes from the genre's age – or rather durability over a considerable span of time. It is easy to forget that *Chisum*'s release came twenty-two years after *Red River*. While knowledge of other Westerns is not necessary to comprehend or enjoy *Chisum*, its transtextual dimension is far more pronounced than in most films.

A reliance on this increasingly vast body of knowledge may have contributed to Western's decline as a popular genre. Even those 1970s Westerns critical of the genre are drawing upon the same lengthy tradition of narratives, conventions and representations. Perhaps, then, "revisionist" Westerns share more in common with the Wayne Westerns – and are more *about* the Western genre – than normally thought?

3

The Third Time Around**Genre and Authorship in Hawks' *Rio Lobo***

For his second movie of the “me decade” John Wayne reunited with producer-director Howard Hawks for *Rio Lobo*, released in December of 1970. This marked the fifth collaboration between the star and filmmaker, following *Red River*, *Rio Bravo* (1959), *Hatari!* (1962) and *El Dorado*. It would be Hawks’ forty-fourth and final film.

In scholarly writing on classical Hollywood cinema, Hawks is one of the most celebrated *auteur* directors. As a result, the tendency is often to take up his (few) Western movies less as constituents of that genre than as part of Hawks’ own corpus of film. The inevitable product of this inclination is an understatement of the degree to which Hawks’ Westerns both draw on and contribute to the transtextuality of the Western genre.

The standard line on *Rio Lobo* is that it is Hawks’ second remake of (or variation on) *Rio Bravo* – the film famously made as a somewhat-belated response to 1952’s *High Noon* and, less-belatedly, *3:10 to Yuma* (directed by Delmer Daves, 1957). What Hawks disliked most about these films was what he perceived as an un-heroic, almost cowardly portrayal of their respective protagonists. About the actions of Marshall Will Kane (played by Gary Cooper) in *High Noon*, Hawks said:

I didn’t think a good sheriff was going to go running around town like a chicken with his head off asking for help, and finally his Quaker wife had to save him. That isn’t my idea of a good Western sheriff. I said that a good sheriff would turn around and say, ‘How good are you? Are you good enough to take the best man they’ve got?’ The fellow would

probably say no, and he'd say, 'Well, then I'd just have to take care of you.' And that scene *was* in *Rio Bravo*."¹

In *Rio Bravo*, sheriff John T. Chance (played by Wayne) rejects the help of all but an eclectic group of gunmen – numbering a recovering alcoholic, an old coot and Ricky Nelson – and a mysterious dancehall girl named Feathers to defend his town's jail against a hoard of outlaws determined to break in and free their boss's murdering brother. The picture was a success, and helped to reinvigorate the genre at a time when its popularity was waning.²

Rio Bravo also marked an important shift in the kinds of stories Westerns films tell. As detailed most notably by Will Wright in his structural study of the genre *Sixguns & Society*, beginning with *Rio Bravo* Western movie narratives increasingly centered on groups of “professionals” who defend society only as a job they accept for pay, for love of fighting or out of friendship. Becoming less common were solitary heroes purely committed to the ideas of law and justice.³ In these “professional” Westerns, Wright argues, “[t]he social values of justice, order and peaceful domesticity have been replaced by a clear commitment to strength, skill, enjoyment of the battle, and masculine companionship.”⁴ In this regard, *Rio Bravo* can be viewed as the forerunner to later

¹ Quoted in Joseph McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1982) 161. In interviews Hawks mistakenly refers to Van Heflin's character in *3:10 to Yuma* as a sheriff. The character of Dan Evans is, in fact, not a lawman but a small-time rancher who has volunteered to help bring in outlaw Ben Wade (played by Glenn Ford) – which helps motivate his nervous, timid behavior in the face of danger.

² While 1958 had seen the release of a number of notable Westerns, including the sprawling *The Big Country* (directed by William Wyler) and *The Left Handed Gun* (Arthur Penn's directorial debut, which Hawks thought was “silly”), there were no popular successes on par with 1956's *The Searchers*. 1957 had only seen the release of one hit Western, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (directed by John Sturges).

³ Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1975). See especially pages 85-123.

⁴ Wright 86.

Westerns like *The Magnificent Seven* (directed by John Sturges, 1960), *The Professionals* and, surprisingly enough, *The Wild Bunch*.⁵ As Hawks put it, “[*Rio Bravo*] was very popular, and started Westerns all over again.”⁶

Hawks returned to the Western seven years after *Rio Bravo* with *El Dorado*. The three films he made in the intervening years – *Hatari!*, an adventure film about big game hunters in Africa starring Wayne; *Man’s Favorite Sport?* (1962), a fishing comedy with Rock Hudson and Paula Prentiss; and the race car drama *Red Line 7000* (1965) – had largely failed to connect with either audiences or reviewers. *El Dorado*, however, was an unexpected and, for Hawks, much-needed critical and commercial hit. The picture garnered favorable reviews and earned \$12 million in rentals, making it the twelfth-highest earner of 1967.⁷

El Dorado is very much a return to familiar territory; indeed, it is difficult to provide a concise plot summary that does not make it seem like a straightforward remake of *Rio Bravo*. The action again centers on a group of four men holed up in a jail, on the defensive against a group of hired gunman who want to break in and free their land baron boss. *El Dorado* is, however, quite different from *Rio Bravo* – enough so that, as Hawks

⁵ Many critics both contemporaneous and subsequent to Wright have pointed to problems in his structural study of the genre, and this analysis will follow suit. On the nature of society within Westerns films, Wright contends that in “professional” Westerns society is portrayed as weak and in need of help. Unlike in “classic” Westerns, however, Wright contends that society is no longer portrayed as particularly good or desirable. While perhaps true for some Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s (in particular those considered “revisionist”) this is certainly not the case in any of Hawks’ Westerns, where society is both unquestionably good *and* desirable. Of Wright’s study, it should be said that while both the methodology and the attribution of changes in Western structure to changes in the organization of the American economy are problematic, such objections should not overshadow the skill with which he is able to detect and articulate often-subtle changes in Western film narratives (even if his model does ultimately generalize those changes into four overarching plot variations).

⁶ Quoted in McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* 138.

⁷ Todd McCarthy, *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood* (New York: Grove Press, 1997) 625.

biographer Todd McCarthy and others have noted, the film's resemblance to *Rio Bravo* went largely unnoticed by critics at the time.⁸ Many of the differences stem from changes to the main characters, which create new and different narrative possibilities. Wayne plays a hired gunman who turns down a job offer from the malevolent land baron. The sheriff (played by Robert Mitchum) is now the drunk, and Ricky Nelson is now James Caan, only he can't shoot worth a damn.

Rio Lobo is an even greater departure from *Rio Bravo*, but it does tread into familiar territory. The four main character types – Wayne in the lead, complemented by a slightly weaker second man, an eccentric old timer and a young gunslinger – are present, and the protagonists do, briefly, barricade themselves in the town jail (even though they must *break in* first). Such similarities to earlier Hawks Westerns, overlooked in the initial response to *El Dorado*, became for critics deficiencies in *Rio Lobo*. As Joseph McBride writes, “[Hawks’ final three Westerns] are so obviously variations on the same plot that even the reviewers began noticing the third time around.”⁹

The movie begins with a lengthy prologue set during the American Civil War – a total departure from its predecessors. Wayne stars as Cord McNally, a Union colonel overseeing the transportation by train of a gold shipment. A company of Confederate soldiers led by Cpt. Pierre Cordona (played by Jorge Rivero) and Sgt. Tuscarora Philips (played by Christopher Mitchum, the son of Robert Mitchum) steal the shipment in a fast-paced, well-choreographed action set piece that sees the Rebels using a nest of

⁸ McCarthy 626.

⁹ Joseph McBride, “Introduction,” *Focus on Howard Hawks*, ed. Joseph McBride (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1972) 3.

hornets to clear the guarded rail car of Yankee soldiers while the train is still in motion. In the process of stealing the gold, many Union soldiers are injured and one, McNally's friend Lt. Forsythe, is mortally injured. McNally ultimately captures Cordona and Tuscarora, but they refuse to give up their informants. The three soldiers meet again at the War's conclusion, and the Rebels tell McNally about two unknown Union officers who sold them information about the gold shipment. One year later, McNally reunites with Cordona in the town of Blackthorn, Texas. They cross paths with one of the traitors, now a deputy from nearby Rio Lobo, trying to arrest a seemingly innocent girl named Shasta (played by Jennifer O'Neill). The traitor is killed in a shootout, and McNally accompanies Shasta and Cordona to Rio Lobo. They find the town's citizenry, including Tuscarora and his eccentric father Philips (played by Jack Elam), under the tightening grip of a mysterious landowner named Ketcham and his vicious sheriff, the former outlaw "Blue Tom" Hendricks. The heroes eventually learn that "Ketcham" is, in fact, the other traitor: Gorman, a former sergeant from McNally's unit. As this synopsis suggests, it is not until McNally and co. reach the town of Rio Lobo that the familiar "assorted group v. corrupt baron and his men" story begins in earnest.

While not a troubled production by Hollywood standards, two casting decisions caused Hawks increasing frustration as the filming of *Rio Lobo* progressed.¹⁰ Hawks' longstanding practice of casting unknown ingénues as his leading ladies and then fashioning them to his will backfired when he was forced to hurriedly cast O'Neill, a fashion model with little acting experience, in the role of Shasta when his first choice, a

¹⁰ For a detailed account of the production of *Rio Lobo*, see McCarthy pages 626-640.

German actress, was denied entry to the United States.¹¹ This left Hawks with no time to groom O'Neill in his favored manner as he had done with Lauren Bacall, Angie Dickinson and other actresses, and O'Neill's limitations are apparent in *Rio Lobo*. The best (or worst) examples come in two scenes where she is called upon to deliver emotional (and fairly lengthy) expository dialogue. In each the viewer is hard-pressed to discern in her ham-handed performance much difference between even the most basic of emotions.

The story's requirement of a second leading man to stand alongside Wayne also presented challenges. Working with a limited budget, an actor of Robert Mitchum's caliber was out of reach. Rivero, a star in Mexico (and a former Olympic swimmer), seemed to Hawks to have the stature to compete with – or at least come a close second to – Wayne onscreen. Rivero was even given top billing next to Wayne in the film's credits and advertising. The results, however, were disappointing. While clearly adept at action scenes, dialogue was Rivero's principal weakness. "[I]n order to do anything," Hawks recalled, "he had to think it in Spanish, and then transfer his lines mentally to English. He was really too slow, and he didn't have any authority at all."¹² Hawks was also notorious for re-writing scenes up until just before the cameras rolled, which no doubt proved an added challenge.

While the rest of the cast acquits itself well enough (Elam being particularly entertaining), O'Neill and Rivero's unconvincing portrayals of their respective lead characters puts a damper on the film. Neither seems comfortable on screen, and their

¹¹ McCarthy 633.

¹² McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* 171.

interactions with the other actors come across as forced and unnatural. The film makes a noticeably greater use of cutting than in either *Rio Bravo* or *El Dorado*, particularly in dialogue-heavy scenes. It is clear that in these situations Hawks was unable to employ his favored technique of using long takes to allow the actors to perform at length in relation to each other rather than in isolation. As such, *Rio Lobo* is largely devoid of the lively banter and sense of spontaneity that characterizes most of Hawks' work. In *The Films of Howard Hawks*, Donald C. Willis describes the film as Hawks' version of *Topaz* (1969), "Alfred's Hitchcock's late contribution to amateurishly-acted films by highly professional directors."¹³

When examined in the context of both the lineage from *Rio Bravo* to *Rio Lobo* and Hawks' directorial practices and preferences, these missteps become more comprehensible – which is not to say they are excusable. Criticisms of the acting in *Rio Lobo* are often, in fact, related to a larger charge: that Hawks was "copying himself."

The first point to be made here is that Wayne, despite being inextricably linked with Hawks' Western movies, is largely excluded from this indictment. Unlike in *Chisum*, or subsequent Wayne Westerns of the 1970s, here it is not Wayne the actor but Hawks the director who is opportunistically repeating himself.

Scholarship on the Western has traditionally placed a heavy emphasis on the role of the director. While cinematic genre study is often conceived of as a kind of antidote to authorship studies for its ability to bring attention to films that do not have the benefit of an *auteur* director, in the case of the Western the two approaches often work hand-in-

¹³ Donald C. Willis, *The Films of Howard Hawks* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1975) 67.

hand. As noted in the introduction, a significant change that corresponds with the supposed “revision” of the genre is a passing of the torch: from established directors, many of whom worked in the genre for twenty years, to a younger generation of filmmakers. By 1970, of the old guard only Hawks was still making Westerns – which was not necessarily seen as a good thing. As George K. Fenin and William K. Everson lament in *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies*:

[W]e are still being saddled with conventional Western opuses, such as the inept *Rio Lobo*. Veteran director Howard Hawks, the creator of some of the most distinguished Westerns in the past, put together a film using the most fundamental elements of the genre: the land and guns, the conventional tragic-comic style, and the imperishable John Wayne. What makes this film so disappointing...is that it is frozen in tradition and does not pretend to use any modern approach.¹⁴

Even with the uncomplimentary reference to Wayne’s presence in the picture, we can note how, as was the case with Wayne in *Chisum*, it is Hawks who is *responsible* for the appearance of the “traditional” *Rio Lobo* – a film that resists the apparent sway of popular taste and culture.

Given this emphasis on authorship and strong personalities, it is not surprising that Hawks’ “copying” of himself is defended on authorial, rather than generic, grounds. In an article originally published in *Film Comment*, Greg Ford questions, fairly, why artists like Matisse and Faulkner are permitted to revisit the same subjects while Hawks is not.¹⁵ Hawks himself used a similar tactic when responding to questions about his “remakes”:

¹⁴ George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973) 365.

¹⁵ Greg Ford, “Mostly on Rio Lobo,” *Focus on Howard Hawks*, ed. Joseph McBride (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1972) 151.

Did you ever read Hemingway? Did you ever find any similarities between stories? Hemingway always stole from himself. He always wrote a certain kind of a thing he was good at. If we make a picture that's a top-biller, that the people like, we're inclined to want to do a different version of the same picture. And if a director has a story that he likes and he tells it, very often he looks at the pictures and says, 'I could do that better if I did it again,' so I'd do it again. I'll keep on doing them, in a different way. I'm not a damn bit interested in whether somebody thinks this a copy of it, because the copy made more money than the original, and I was very pleased with it.¹⁶

Taken along with some of Hawks' earlier remarks, the recourse to comparisons with artists in other mediums points to the tensions inherent in author-based criticism: on the one hand, sameness is a mark of integrity, indicative of a unity of vision that transcends an artist's body of work; on the other, charges of "copying" often imply a lack of creativity, energy or awareness. We can contrast this with genre criticism, where the creativity of an individual movie is often judged as how well it negotiates the competing demands of convention and innovation.

Hawks' inclination toward exploiting the potential of more minor variations in characterization rather than exploring larger changes in setting or narrative is a sign of the director's somewhat limited view of the genre's broader possibilities. Said Hawks: "You can probably say that western [*Rio Lobo* after the Civil War prologue] is a lot like the other two. Sure. You've got fellows with guns, one of them is the sheriff...you know, there isn't much you can do."¹⁷ This idea has been further reinforced by scholarship on the filmmaker, particularly in the (early) work of Robin Wood. Wood conceives of the Western genre as offering two broad possibilities to filmmakers. First, the Western offers

¹⁶ Quoted in McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* 162.

¹⁷ Quoted in McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* 164.

“scope to a director with a feeling for America’s past, for the borderline of history and myth, the early stages of civilization, primitive, precarious, and touching.”¹⁸ John Ford’s Westerns are given as examples. The second possibility, embodied by Hawks, has a director using the genre’s “collection of convenient conventions” to “express certain fundamental human urges or explore themes personal to him.”¹⁹ Wood’s articulation of Hawks’ practice proved to be a highly influential idea in subsequent scholarship on the Western genre, as the conception of an *auteur* director using the Western’s conventions towards personal ends is often how authorial- and genre-based approaches are fused in criticism on the Western.

With this in mind, it is easy to arrive at the impression of Hawks’s Westerns as less about the generic transtextuality noted in *Chisum* than the introspective work of an individual artist. Yet for all his personal explorations of minor variations in theme, Hawks was responsible for two major interventions that demonstrably altered the Western’s development – and this despite a comparatively limited involvement in the genre (only five films).²⁰ As noted in the preceding chapter, following *Red River* the prevalence of morally problematic characters like Wayne’s Tom Dunson increased significantly, giving the genre an added depth and complexity. As noted above, *Rio Bravo*, by emphasizing the camaraderie between a group of professional gunmen rather than the quest of a lone hero, effected a fundamental shift in the kinds of stories Western movies told. And both of these interventions significantly involved John Wayne.

¹⁸ Robin Wood, “Rio Bravo,” *Focus on Howard Hawks*, ed. Joseph McBride (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1972) 118-119.

¹⁹ Wood 119.

²⁰ We contrast this with John Ford, who directed thirteen sound Westerns between 1939 and 1964 (and at least 40 silent Westerns prior to that).

An issue raised by McCarthy is a lack of “motivation and background” in *Rio Lobo*. He writes: “[A]fter two hours of the finished film, one knows absolutely nothing about John Wayne’s character except that he was in the army; he exists as a completely abstract creation, a functional figure only.”²¹ At first glance this seems like a valid point. In Wayne’s later Westerns – and most Westerns, in general – the hero rarely speaks about himself. We instead rely on other characters to talk *about* the hero, his past in particular. Supporting characters in Westerns have often had a long history with the hero, or were saved by him at some point in the past, and their stories and recollections speak of his bravery and benevolence. By having other characters speak about the hero – in effect, for him – he is further distinguished as proud, strong and silent.

It is in this regard that *Rio Lobo* differs significantly from Wayne’s other 1970s Westerns. McNally does not have an extended history with any of the other characters, nor do any of them know him by reputation. During their first encounter we learn that McNally and Cordona have met once in the past: “Four or five years ago, in Abilene” as McNally says, in a gambling dispute over a horse. But this anecdote remains just that: an anecdote, providing little insight into the characters and establishing no more than a coincidental link between them. This could be seen as Hawks tinkering with the formula, where it is now the hero rather than the young gunslinger who is the newcomer to the group, but little is done to flesh out the relations between Cordona, Tuscarora and Phillips (beyond establishing army hierarchy and familial bonds). The film is, in fact, nearly devoid of references to the past lives of the characters. As we saw in *Chisum*, references

²¹ McCarthy 631-632.

made to past events, especially in later Westerns, often bring to mind other Western films. Yet neither McNally nor the other characters make any mention of past deeds or battles.

One could argue, if only half-seriously, that Wayne's history of starring in cavalry pictures helps make the notion of him as an active officer in the Union army at the rotund age of sixty-three somewhat more believable. Again, it is *Rio Lobo*'s opening act set during the Civil War that is the greatest departure from *El Dorado* and *Rio Lobo*, starting the movie in territory most often associated with the Westerns of John Ford. While McCarthy's criticism of a lack of "background" certainly has merit, the prologue provides patent motivation for McNally's actions in the remainder of the film: the death of his friend Lt. Forsythe.

When the two Confederates and McNally briefly reunite at the War's conclusion, Tuscarora asks the Yank an obvious question: "Colonel, we killed your friend but you don't seem to hold that against us." McNally replies: "Well, what you did was an act of war. But selling information, that's treason. Rotten treachery for money." McNally's rationale, entirely reasonable within the confines of the narrative, can also be understood in relation to generic tradition; specifically, a change instigated by Hawks.

With the shift of Western heroes to being professional gunmen comes, as noted above, a concomitant change in what motivates the actions of those heroes. *Rio Lobo* follows *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado* in presenting a hero who is motivated more by loyalty to friends (both old and new) than a sense of right and wrong in the greater scheme of things. While Gorman's treason violates the rules of war, it is first and foremost a

betrayal of the men he has sworn to fight alongside, and results in their injury and, for Lt. Forsythe, death. Morality, as it were, is based on relationships between characters, rather than on more intangible rules of ethical behavior. This proves to be a key difference between the Westerns of Hawks (and many Westerns after *Rio Bravo*) and the Westerns of Ford, where codes of conduct usually stem from a sense of a “natural order.” For example, the common Western convention of having former rivals or enemies unite for a shared cause is rarely employed in Ford’s films. Instead, old divisions and conflicts often continue to cause tension in the present. In this regard, *Rio Lobo* continues the Hawks tradition. Like its predecessors, the movie includes a trade of captives between the heroes and the villains, coming this time at the film’s conclusion. McNally, Tuscarora and Phillips walk Gorman through the town’s deserted, dusty backstreets to trade their turncoat prisoner for the kidnapped Cordona, being held by Hendricks and his scores of men. As they head into the final confrontation, with strains of Morricone-like electric guitar punctuating the film’s score, the odds are certainly not in the heroes’ favor. But unlike their counterparts in *The Wild Bunch* or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the heroes do not ultimately find themselves alone and outnumbered. Instead, when they arrive at the rendezvous they find a half-dozen of the town’s men, former soldiers all, waiting to help.

As we have seen, there is a strong critical tendency to see Hawks in isolation from the Western genre, when his films are in fact an integral part of the genre’s tradition and development. This emphasis on Hawks reveals the longstanding inclination towards author-based criticism, even in genre study. As we saw in the previous chapter, in writing

on Wayne Westerns made in the absence of an *auteur* director like Hawks it is Wayne who dominates the discourse. This is not surprising given the aforementioned emphasis on “strong personalities” in criticism of the genre, but it begs an important question: does that make Wayne the “author” of these films?

4

“I Thought You Were Dead”**Revision, Resurrection and Regeneration in Three Wayne Westerns**

The issue of regeneration is central to genre filmmaking. As we have established, a genre’s viability – financial and otherwise – often depends on how well its constituent films are judged to counterbalance convention with innovation, using elements from a genre’s canon to fashion a new-yet-familiar narrative. Given that genre practice would seem to be one big Catch-22, this is no small feat. Again, that the Western was able to endure as a popular film genre for well over thirty years indicates its ability to negotiate the “paradox of genre” more successfully than some other, more short-lived genres. This also, again, calls attention to the problematic designation of most Westerns of the 1970s as “revisionist.” While the term as it is generally understood – as a description of films that adopt a critical stance towards the genre’s traditions (and their attendant cultural and ideological aspects) – is arguably suitable, it has the unfortunate side effect of mischaracterizing most other Westerns as a unified, unchanging mass – a thirty-year-long “classical” phase of the genre’s “evolution,” if you will.¹ In this way, later Westerns that do not so explicitly scrutinize the genre’s conventions are viewed as relics of an earlier stage of the Western’s development.

¹ The influential concept of “genre evolution” draws largely from Thomas Schatz’s seminal study *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (1981). With that said, the prevalence of this abstraction today likely owes less to Schatz’s original work than to problematic distillations of the model found in many introductory film study textbooks. The Western is a favored example in such texts, where the genre is often described as “evolving” straightforwardly from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to *Stagecoach* (1939) to *The Wild Bunch* (1969) to *Blazing Saddles* (1974).

A few points need to be made here. First of all, the implication that the Western suddenly becomes culturally aware in the late 1960s is wide of the mark. If we wish to read it as such, 1956's *The Searchers* is a meditation on racism in post-War America – a complex one at that, making it a more sophisticated engagement with the cultural concerns of its day than any Western released in the 1970s. And lest we forget 1952's *High Noon*: Boring? Yes. Politically conscious? Certainly.

Second, in the early 1960s the Western began to fall as a proportion of Hollywood's annual output.² Steve Neale has noted that while the genre's numerical decline was periodically halted or cloaked throughout the 1960s and 1970s – by the production of successful Western television series, the impact of the Italian Western, and by the “visibility, notoriety and critical or financial success” of a several cycles and films – this downward trend continued until the late 1980s.³ No matter how in tune the films may have been with the zeitgeist, the “revisionist” Western did not stave off the genre's decline.

Third, and most importantly, as we have seen in both *Chisum* and *Rio Lobo*, what may on first glance seem to be anachronism is actually *awareness* – not only of the Western genre's traditions, but also its more contemporary developments.

In a popular sense, the later Wayne films did little more (and sometimes less) than other Westerns of the time to forestall the genre's falling off with audiences. While *Chisum* was a modest success, *Rio Lobo*, released in December of 1970, generated only

² Edward Buscombe, “The Western: A Short History,” in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, ed. Edward Buscombe (London: BFI, 1998) 48.

³ Steve Neale, “Westerns and Gangster Films Since the 1970s,” in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: BFI, 2002) 27-28.

\$4.25 million in rentals, just enough to exceed production costs and earning it twentieth place among pictures for the year.⁴ This can be compared with *Little Big Man*, released at the same time, which pulled in \$15 million. That sum is still a far cry, however, from the \$48.7 million and \$45.22 million netted by the 1970's top earners *Love Story* (directed by Arthur Hiller) and *Airport* (directed by George Seaton), respectively.⁵

While a detailed investigation of the wane of the Western as a popular genre is beyond the scope of this project, in existing scholarship the generally accepted explanation holds a combination of changing demographics and changing attitudes responsible. In light of race riots at home and the growing conflict in Vietnam, the “imperial” ideology apparently embodied in the genre’s frontier mythology seemed increasingly archaic, even dangerous. As such, baby boomers “traded in their toy pistols, chaps, spurs, cowboy hats, and coonskin caps for long hair, bell-bottoms, beads, and protest placards.”⁶ The (increasingly few) Westerns that did find success were then those that responded to these specific conditions. Writes Neale:

The trends that were to prove especially successful were those with a marked degree of postwar youth appeal: those which appeared to mock, reconfigure or renew the Western’s conventions in a cynical, disillusioned or parodically self-conscious way; those which appeared to key in to an increasingly politicized counterculture; and those whose aesthetic characteristics keyed into contemporary, high-school or college-educated notions of art. In other words...revisionist Westerns of all kinds.⁷

⁴ Todd McCarthy, *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox of Hollywood* (New York: Grove Press, 1997) 640.

⁵ “Revenue Database – 1970,” *Box Office Report* (online). Available: <http://www.boxofficereport.com/database/1970.shtml>

⁶ Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *John Wayne, American* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 584.

⁷ Neale 29. Neale’s repeated use of the word “appeared” is taken to be deliberate.

The “changing demographics and attitudes” argument could use some inspection, however. Many aspects of the Western that were deemed objectionable in light of the cultural climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s – from the use of violence as a problem solving tool to simplistic representations of other cultures – continued unabated in other Hollywood genres like horror, comedy and the police-action movie.⁸ Moreover, the Western does not “return” following the demise of the counterculture movement in the latter half of the 1970s. As was suggested at the end of the chapter on *Chisum*, an alternative explanation for the Western’s diminution could be its dependence on an increasingly large stock of genre traditions and conventions that went back nearly thirty years, the transtextual weight of which may have become too much for audiences to bear.

Concerning Western genre filmmaking in the period in question, a distinction may also be required between revision and regeneration. While all Hollywood films obviously have financial imperatives, the critical project of many “revisionist” Westerns is in some ways inimical to the subsistence of the genre. Indeed, certain films appear to cynically mock the genre’s history and traditions to such a degree that the intent seems to be the *opposite* of prolongation. With the exception Sam Peckinpah, no American filmmaker (or star, for that matter) who emerged during the 1960s or 1970s is associated principally with the Western. Instead, many “revisionist” Westerns are short-lived visitations to the genre by New Hollywood directors. In the case of Robert Altman, his two Westerns,

⁸ Consider the quick-drawing protagonists of police-actioners like *Coogan’s Bluff* (1968) or *The French Connection* (1971), or the representations of the other, alternately comic and horrific, in films like *The Aristocats* (1970) and *Deliverance* (1972) – all high-earning films in their respective release years.

McCabe & Mrs. Miller and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), are part of a larger project aimed at deconstructing the classic Hollywood genres.

So what about the 1970s Wayne Westerns? While they invoke the genre's conventions in a much different way than other Westerns of the time, what do they say about the genre's *future*?

Given that a sexagenarian actor of considerable girth and with a history of cancer headlines the films in question, the prospects for regeneration – of any kind, as we shall see below – might not strike one as encouraging. What is more, the movies make no secret of Wayne's aging. In a scene midway through *Rio Lobo*, McNally awakens to find the young Shasta sleeping next to him at their campsite.

McNally:	How did she get here?
Cordona:	Why don't you ask her?
McNally:	Hey, you! How'd you get here?
Shasta:	What? Oh. When you were asleep. It was cold.
McNally:	Well, why me? Why don't you pick on him [Cordona]?
Shasta:	Well, he's young and...well, you're older. You're comfortable.
McNally:	Comfortable? Been called a lot of things, but "comfortable"...

Similarly, in *The Train Robbers* (directed by Burt Kennedy, 1973) Wayne's character rejects the advances of a younger woman by remarking that he has a saddle older than she is.

This recognition that things have inevitably changed with time is not unique to the Wayne Westerns. In the article "Riding Shotgun: The Scattered Formula in Contemporary Western Movies," Jack Nachbar takes up the long-established critical approach to the genre described in the introduction by isolating no less than four distinct

variations within the Western in the 1970s. He argues, however, that the common, prevailing theme for all of these Westerns is an acknowledgement of the passage of time, replacing the “epic moment” of confrontation between civilization and wilderness articulated (in varying formulations) by John G. Cawelti and Jim Kitses. Nachbar observes how

Western movie makers are becoming...more and more obsessed with the multivariied tensions contained within a new moment in history when progress overcame the fundamental aspirations of the old pioneer and transformed him into someone suddenly irrelevant and out of place.⁹

While the theme of “time as a traitor to Western legends” is certainly present in the later Wayne pictures, it does not define them in the way that old-fashioned heroism is mowed down by machine gun fire (or how “historical accuracy” reveals officers of the U.S. Cavalry to be raping, pillaging rogues). Instead, the films contend that their Western heroes, while perhaps out of place, are decidedly *not* irrelevant. Whether or not this contention for the continuing significance of the genre’s traditions imbues the films with any sense of regeneration remains to be seen.

Big Jake: Wayne as Godfather

Writing in 1973, Cawelti himself discerned two major trends in what he called the “new Western.” In his view, the majority of contemporary Westerns drew heavily on the formulas of Leone’s Italian Westerns: major departures in theme, story and style from

⁹ Jack Nachbar, “Riding Shotgun: The Scattered Formula in Contemporary Western Movies,” *Focus on the Western*, ed. Jack Nachbar (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) 108-109.

tradition, with detached, revenge-obsessed heroes navigating “dark, corrupt, and treacherous” worlds.¹⁰ The second, more minor trend emerges in a formula Cawelti terms the “return of the rugged individual.” Noting that these films “dominantly” star John Wayne, he describes them as “generally attempts to restate the *traditional* western themes in a slightly new fashion.”¹¹

The “return of the rugged individual” is certainly an apt description of Wayne’s third Western of the 1970s, *Big Jake*. The first of four pictures Wayne made in quick succession after wrapping up *Rio Lobo* in June of 1970, *Big Jake* was filmed under the direction of George Sherman between October and December of that year and released in May of 1971. Wayne stars as Jacob McCandles, a Texas rancher who sets out with two of his sons (neither of whom he has seen in ten years) and an Indian scout to deliver a \$1,000,000 ransom for the safe return of his kidnapped grandson (who he has never laid eyes on).

Following the disappointing response to *Rio Lobo*, *Big Jake* proved to be a modest success, earning \$7.5 million in rentals and turning a healthy profit.¹² Today, the film is considered by some to be a minor, neglected classic. Wayne biographer Garry Wills considers *Big Jake* to be the best of Wayne’s post-*True Grit* pictures,¹³ and Paul

¹⁰ John G. Cawelti, “Reflections on the New Western Films,” *Focus on the Western*, ed. Jack Nachbar (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) 114-115.

¹¹ Cawelti 115. Emphasis added.

¹² Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *John Wayne, American* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) 583.

¹³ Gary Wills, *John Wayne’s America: The Politics of Celebrity* (New York: Touchstone, 1998) 289. Wills attributes the neglect of *Big Jake* in part to critics being “snobbish about its over-the-hill director [Sherman], who was second-rate even in his prime.” Wills writes that Wayne, displeased with early rushes from the film, took over much of the directing from Sherman. Wills credits this information as having come from an interview with Harry Carey, Jr., who starred in the film and choreographed the final shootout.

Simpson, in *The Rough Guide to Westerns*, enthusiastically remarks, “It’s hard to believe a Western this good can be so neglected.”¹⁴

The movie begins with the presentation of a series of black and white photographs, bordered in purple in the center of the frame, depicting, as a matter-of-fact voiceover narration tells us, the “genteel civilization” that had by 1909 firmly established itself in the eastern United States – including the wonders of both science (the telephone, automobile, airplane) and culture (Caruso, Toscanini, the Barrymores). The tenor of the credits then shifts dramatically. A view of Florenz Ziegfeld’s chorus girls smiling amiably at the camera is followed by a picture of a large crowd of men posed beneath a lynched man who hangs from a tall tree. “1909 in the western part of the forty-nine United States was not so refined,” we are told.

The sequence continues in this way, contrasting the mannerly east with the still-rugged west: whereas in the east a lady could purchase maxis and boots and “live in style,” out west “they didn’t care about style, just living”; the team of the east was Notre Dame’s football squad, led by Knute Rockne, while the team of the west was the rangers of the Arizona territory, “busy just trying to keep the peace”; eastern empire builders like the Vanderbilts and Carnegies are contrasted with the cattle empires of the west, such as “the great McCandles ranch” – the wellbeing of which depended on having enough men and guns for protection. The music that accompanies the images and voice-over narration also serves to underscore the dichotomy. The strains of classical violin that accompanied

¹⁴ Paul Simpson, *The Rough Guide to Westerns* (London: Rough Guides Ltd., 2006) 190

Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova as she performed in *Swan Lake* are contrasted with the lively pian'a that went with the dancehall girl of the Klondike gold rush saloon.

In its final example of the opposition between east and west, the sequence takes on a self-reflexive character. "By 1909, still photographs had come to life. Motion pictures had been born with *The Great Train Robbery*." We are shown a still image from Edwin S. Porter's 1903 film, which "comes to life" as a train passenger flees a group of bandits, only to be mercilessly shot down.¹⁵ The scene cuts to a (moving) shot of a group of riders crossing a river. As the shot expands in size to fill the entire frame, we are told that

While that make-believe drama was on the movie screens, nine men crossed the Rio Bravo into Texas. The turbulent years between the Civil War and the turn of the century brought out the best in some people, but in others it brought out the worst.

The voice-over narration proceeds to introduce the riders one by one, ultimately revealing them as the group – led by "sometimes solider and bounty hunter" John Fain (played by Richard Boone) – responsible for carrying out the "infamous McCandles raid" that follows.

The illustration in the credit sequence of the dichotomy between east and west is certainly forceful enough to bring to mind the structural models of critical analysis that had sprung up in the years prior to *Big Jake*'s release to account for the Western's formal operations and enduring appeal. But while it is naïve to think that filmmakers are unaware of happenings in academic circles, viewing the opening credits as an invitation

¹⁵ Curiously, the shot from *The Great Train Robbery* is presented inversed, with the passenger fleeing from left to right rather than right to left.

to simply apply existing interpretive schemata to the film would be imprudent. Instead, their function needs to be examined within the context of the movie as a whole.

As detailed in the introduction, “traditional” is a loaded term; in times of change, films designated as such are predictably seen as reactionary. The label of “traditional” applied to Wayne’s later Westerns could be seen as implying that the films can be analyzed in “traditional” ways – were they not so often dismissed outright beforehand. Although each deals with the themes of change and aging, neither *Chisum* nor *Rio Lobo* are about the ideological play resulting from the meeting of east and west (with their attendant, competing values, as structural models of analysis would have it). In the case of *Big Jake*, the credits are clearly designed to establish the fact that, even as late as 1909, the western part of the United States was still wild – which is to say that the west was still *the* west. And if the west was still *the* west, you can have a Western. In this way, the credits are illustrative of how variation is mixed with genre convention to establish one of the film’s central premises. The credits assure viewers that although *Big Jake* is set nearly twenty years after the frontier was officially declared closed by the United States census bureau, they can still expect Indians, rangers, ranches, hangings, guns and, of course, dancehall girls.

Also, to see the integrity of the west’s identity as dependent on its difference – or deviancy – from a refined, eastern other is to ignore the irony that underlies the juxtaposition as presented in the credits (and, perhaps, in the genre in general): that for all its trappings of sophistication and innovation, the east was really no more “advanced” than the west.

While the meanings ascribed to films by contemporary audiences are the hardest to recover, it is fair to assume that, even in the comparative context within which they are presented, the “wonders of the modern age” shown in the credits would have struck viewers as neither wonders nor modern. But this is only part of the point. By and large, the developments cited as examples of progress are, in fact, associated with frivolity and passivity: “genteel” civility, shopping, opera, the ballet. Even undeniable technological achievements like the automobile and airplane tend to pale in comparison to the more transcendent values embodied in the concerns for “just living” and “keeping the peace.”

The final comparison made in the credits, ostensibly between *The Great Train Robbery* and *Big Jake*, raises a question, however. Is the contrast between the “make-believe” drama of the former and the supposedly concurrent, “real” action depicted in the latter a claim to authenticity, or historical accuracy, on the part of the film? It would be easy to “read” it as such, especially given that a concern for historical fidelity is a large component of the critical cachet afforded to many “revisionist” Westerns. Yet such an interpretation relies on considering the brief comparison in isolation from the rest of the film. In keeping with the theme of the credit sequence, the final comparison in fact indicates that to many in 1909 the violent acts depicted in moving pictures like *The Great Train Robbery* seemed the stuff of make-believe. This motivates the lack of preparedness of the McCandles ranch for the onslaught that awaits.

Shortly after the conclusion of the opening credits and the introduction of Fain’s gang, McCandle’s wife Martha (played by Maureen O’Hara), conversing with her foreman, expresses disbelief that there is any threat to her ranch. “Bert, this is nineteen

hundred and nine. There...there just can't be rustlers." "Can be, Mrs. McCandles," Bert replies. "I'm forty-two years old, and I fought in the Lincoln County War. It's just not that long ago that...why it's just fifteen years ago, himself, Mr. McCandles hung...."¹⁶ At the mention of her husband's name, Martha gives Bert a stern look and he looks down apologetically. Martha ultimately agrees to consider Bert's request for more protection, and, as she looks out off the porch, notices something in the distance. A shot from behind Martha and Bert shows the riders approaching. The camera quickly zooms in on the riders to the degree that Martha and Bert are no longer in frame.

This is the second emphatic camera effect that punctuates the otherwise placid and mundane morning at the McCandles ranch. Earlier, we are shown a scene of a young, well-dressed boy playing the piano under the watchful eye of an instructor. The ranch maid, Delilah, enters the lavishly appointed room and opens the window. She, too, notices the riders in the distance, and the same quick zoom-in effectively transports us from inside the house to the field where the riders approach. Delilah proceeds upstairs, where one of Martha's sons, Jeff, refuses to get out of bed, despite it being mid-morning. Outside, ranch hands struggle with a stubborn horse. Servants pick flowers. On the whole, the ranch is decidedly lacking in both men and guns.

In the violent raid that follows, most of the ranch staff is killed, Jeff is wounded, and the boy – Jeff's son "Little" Jake – is kidnapped. In a subsequent scene both the U.S. Army and the Texas Rangers offer to deliver the \$1,000,000 ransom to the kidnappers in Mexico. Martha declines both proposals. She says: "It is, I think, going to be a very harsh

¹⁶ Not only does the reference to the Lincoln County War recall *Chisum*, but the actor portraying Bert, John Agar, had a brief role in that film as deposed shopkeeper Amos Patton.

and unpleasant kind of business, and will, I think, require an extremely hard and unpleasant kind of man to see to it.”

Cut to an extreme close-up of Jacob McCandles – looking straight at us down the barrel of a rifle. The next shot reveals his target: a man on horseback with a rope around his neck, about to be hung by three other riders. McCandles raises his weapon, saying to his dog (appropriately named “Dog”) that he had learned long ago not to go butting into anyone else’s business.

Formally, the first shot of Jacob evokes countless other images of Western characters taking aim “at the audience.” Examples range from Ernest Borgnine’s character in *The Wild Bunch* adopting the pose during that film’s train robbery sequence, all the way back to the original, iconic image of a cowboy firing his six-shooter at the unsuspecting viewer at the end of *The Great Train Robbery*. The scene’s set-up, with Jacob perched high on a ridge far away from the hanging, is also likely to bring to mind the hangman scenario exploited by Blondie and Tuco in Leone’s *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). Rather than using his rifle to free the hanged man from afar, however, Jacob first turns away. But when the riders begin to beat the hanging man’s son, Jacob decides to ride down to confront them in person – a decision both principled and, as it turns out, practical. We later learn that Jacob’s eyesight is beginning to fail him (and for that reason he now favors a Greener shotgun to a rifle or pistol).

Aside from the striking image of Wayne apparently taking aim at the audience, this introduction of Jacob is notable for the fact that it comes over nineteen minutes into the picture. While the time reinforces the physical and emotional distance between

Martha and Jacob, their separation is an inversion from the scenarios of Wayne and O'Hara's previous Western film pairings, *Rio Grande* (directed by John Ford, 1950) and *McClintock!*. In those films the separation between their characters is the result of O'Hara leaving Wayne, only to return and reconcile with him by each film's conclusion. In *Big Jake*, there is no such reconciliation between the former couple. The focus is, instead, on the growing camaraderie between Jacob and his two sons, James (played by Wayne's son Patrick) and Michael (Christopher Mitchum), as they endeavor to rescue "Little" Jake.

Wills notes that *Big Jake* contains "echoes" of earlier Wayne Westerns – *Red River*, *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and, curiously, *Fort Apache* (directed by John Ford, 1948)¹⁷ – the aim of which is to present Jacob "as the remnant of some older order, brought back for a limited mission in 'modern' times." Yet, according to Wills, this return is only a partial one. Jacob is called upon to "revive a bit of the old savagery," but only to the end of doing away with an even *older* savagery.¹⁸ Similarly, Cawelti argues that the return of the rugged individual is limited in scope, consisting of only "one more heroic quest or battle."¹⁹

In the film, Jacob's return is actually presented as something more supernatural. When he confronts the small mob about to lynch the fourth man (who is revealed to be a sheep farmer) Jacob demands they release him. After learning Jacob's identity, the hangmen comply immediately – but only after one of them remarks, "Oh, I uh...I thought you were dead, Mr. McCandles." This line becomes a running gag throughout the film.

¹⁷ Wills never elaborates on how *Big Jake* "echoes" *Fort Apache*, the first of John Ford's cavalry pictures. As noted above, in its presentation of the strained relations between the Wayne and O'Hara characters, *Big Jake* would seem to more strongly recall *Rio Grande*.

¹⁸ Wills 289-291.

¹⁹ Cawelti 115-116.

That Martha must “resurrect” her estranged husband from the wilderness after a ten-year absence is, like the comparisons presented in the film’s opening credits, certainly suggestive that a structural opposition between civilization and wilderness may be at work in the film. Although Wills seems to do so more explicitly, both he and Cawelti draw on this “traditional” model for their criticism. Both conceive of the Western hero as still emerging from the desert to purge the garden of evil so that it may grow and flourish – and in the process help to forge a community in which the hero has no place.

Wills’ observations of similarities between *Big Jake* and earlier Wayne Westerns are mostly valid, but their function as intertextual references is wholly different from the transtextuality being analyzed in this project. When Wills notes that *Big Jake* is like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* because both feature protagonists whose archaic frontier ruthlessness is needed to kill off an even older savagery, the point is that Wayne’s hero is doing the same thing in 1971 that he was doing in 1962. Instead of attempts to draw on genre tradition to say something new, these “echoes” are effectively seen as deliberate attempts to date the film. It is also questionable whether Jacob’s status as “belonging to an older order” is due more to *Big Jake*’s similarities to other Wayne pictures than to the movie’s more tangible formal and thematic features, from the hero’s delayed introduction to the portrayal of strained family relations resulting from Jacob’s ten-year absence.

For his part, Cawelti – without abandoning the savagery/civilization schema – has thought out the implications of the rugged, aging hero more thoroughly. On the later Wayne Westerns, he writes: “In none of these films is there much question of group

regeneration associated with the hero's purging action."²⁰ Because society in these movies is portrayed as frail and corrupt, and thus unable to protect the innocent, the only solution lies in the private action of a strong leader – one who is able to overcome both society's deficiencies and the villain's iniquity through his own superior force. It is in this respect, Cawelti argues, that "return of the rugged individual" Westerns resemble the new form of gangster movie typified in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. He writes:

Because society has failed to extend its protection and order to an adequate degree, the little man is constantly threatened by violence against which he cannot protect himself.

The fantasied solution is to fall back on the Godfather – or, in the case of the western, on the grandfather, Big Jake – and to create under his absolute authority a close-knit, small group, like a family, which in return for absolute loyalty will protect its members.²¹

Problems with chronology aside (*The Godfather* was not released until 1972), it is easy to find examples from the later Wayne Westerns that would seem to prove Cawelti's point.²² The residents of Lincoln are faced with corruption stretching from the town sheriff to the governor's mansion...until John Chisum (at last) leads his allies into battle. The town of Rio Lobo is under the rule of a mysterious moneyman and his bought law...until Cord McNally rides into town. In *Big Jake*, when James rails against his father's domineering nature, Jacob's Indian guide Sam Sharpnose (played by Bruce Cabot) rebukes him:

²⁰ Cawelti 116.

²¹ Cawelti 117.

²² The concept of the "Western Godfather" also ties into the history of scholarship on the genre in an interesting way. Cawelti is arguing, in a sense, that in the "traditional" Western of the 1970s the difference between the Western hero and the gangster, first articulated by Robert Warshaw in his seminal 1954 article "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," has collapsed.

You do what he tells you, every time he tells you and we might come through this alive! Might even save the boy. Otherwise you're gonna get yourself killed. Don't matter to me. But you'll probably get him [Jacob] killed too, and that does.

What Cawelti fails to take into consideration is the nature of the action in these films – specifically, how it is *group* action. As described in the chapter on *Rio Lobo*, Westerns from the late 1950s onward increasingly focused on groups of professionals whose allegiance was more to each other than to the ideas of law and order, while at the same time *Shane*-type instances of solitary heroes going it alone and successfully out-dueling a gang of gunmen were becoming less frequent.

As with *Chisum* and *Rio Lobo*, in *Big Jake* victory results not from the actions of a heroic individual but from cooperation and coordination among a company of heroes made up of members both young and old. Over the course of the narrative, talents are revealed in characters that come into play in the movie's finale. Jacob initially ridicules James for his use of a gas-operated Bergman handgun: "I'll bet you could almost get that fancy gun out of that fancy holster before some fast gentleman with an old-fashioned six-gun blew a hole in ya!" But James is later able to best two men in a fair fight in a saloon and then, in the final shoot-out, outdraw the kidnappers' fastest gun. James' brother Michael turns out to be a deadeye shot with a rifle, which enables him to pick off the enemy gang's own sharpshooter.

Although Cawelti does not explicitly say so, the inference to be drawn from his criticism of the "traditional" Western is that a reliance on an aging hero – indeed, one who is for many intents and purposes already dead – will lead to society's downfall. Yet this concern for regeneration would seem to imply that, even after the hero has completed

his final mission and purged the garden of evil, the specter of future malevolence remains – otherwise, what does it matter if a new hero fails to take Wayne's place?²³

While not the point Cawelti intends to make, that the qualities of the Western hero will always be needed is a major theme of the later Wayne Westerns. Consequently, the movies are replete with instances – such as the opening credits of *Big Jake* or the hilltop exchange between Chisum and Pepper in *Chisum* – that purposefully problematize fixed conceptual boundaries between east and west, wilderness and civilization, and even past and present. Concomitant to this focus on transcending symbolic demarcations is an emphasis on the passing of knowledge down from Wayne's characters to a younger generation. As Lusted has observed, in most of Wayne's final films

the issue becomes more one of learning from, rather than protecting, the memory. The central conflict in [these Westerns] is the struggle between honouring traditions and the figures that embody them whilst also recognizing the need to move on.²⁴

In *Chisum*, it is Pat Garrett who emerges as Chisum's successor (and suitor to Chisum's niece) because he understands what Billy the Kid does not: the difference between vengeance and justice. Cordona and Tuscarora represent the future of heroic action in *Rio Lobo*, not the "comfortable" McNally. In *Big Jake*, the skills of Michael and James are needed to make up for Jacob's deficiencies (not only his failing eyesight, but also the suggestion that he is not as quick on the trigger as he once was). It is only after they earn the respect of their father, however, and learn the values of humility and bravery that the two sons are able to put those talents to work in rescuing their nephew. Rather than

²³ Cawelti's disparagement of society's portrayal as weak in these films is also a curious criticism. On a purely practical level, society must be portrayed in Westerns – and, indeed, nearly all movies – as at least somewhat vulnerable to the forces of evil. Otherwise there would be nothing for heroes to do.

²⁴ David Lusted, *The Western* (Essex, England: Pearson Longman, 2003) 215.

returning one final time to rid society of savagery – an act purportedly carried out countless times by the hero’s predecessors, but with less finality – the hero instead returns to assert the timeless nature of the values he embodies and pass those values on to his successors. *Big Jake* concludes with an emphatic statement to this effect. After defeating Fain’s gang and rescuing “Little” Jake, three generations of McCandles are assembled for the first time. James says to his father, “Let’s go home.” Jacob looks to his sons, then down at his grandson. “Good idea.”

The Cowboys: Wayne as Christ

Out of all of Wayne’s 1970s pictures, perhaps the strongest articulation of the need for regeneration came in his next film, *The Cowboys*, released in January of 1972. Directed by Mark Rydell, the movie tells the story of Wil Andersen, a 60-year-old rancher who hires on eleven young boys, ranging in age from nine to fifteen years, to help him drive 1,500 head of beef from Montana to Belle Fourche, South Dakota along the Bozeman Trail. While not dealing with the onset of “wonders of the modern age” like Jacob McCandles, Andersen is still a man in changing times. The boys are Andersen’s last resort after his hired hands, wanting to get in on a nearby gold strike, quit on him. “A fool comes to town with a fist full’a gold dust and every jackass in fifty miles around lights out after him,” Anderson laments to his wife, Martha. “In my day a man’d stay with you on a handshake.” “It’s a different day, Wil,” she replies.

The movie is a marked departure from the other films examined thus far in that the boys, while forming a close-knit group, are decidedly not professionals. When asked what he thought of *The Cowboys*, Howard Hawks pulled no punches: “Awful. I don’t like children too much in pictures. I like ‘em in real life, but in pictures they’re corny.”²⁵ Given the precedents found in the genre – from the uncanny performance of Brandon De Wilde as Joey Sterritt in *Shane* to the awkward young Patrick Wayne in *The Searchers* – it is hard to fault him.²⁶ But while Hawks is certainly entitled to his opinion, the young stars of *The Cowboys* – a mixture of professional child actors and children with ranching experience – are, in fact, all convincing.

In the picture, the boys are able to demonstrate the determination necessary to gain Andersen’s reluctant confidence. Like James and Michael in *Big Jake*, it is less a question of having ability than acquiring skill. Initially, Andersen takes a hard hand to the boys’ frontier education. “Now you’ll show up at my place first Monday, first Monday after school’s out at 5AM,” he tells them after hiring them on. “And come with grit teeth, ‘cause gentlemen, that’s when school really begins.” On the trail, the boys are roused each morning at 3AM to the sound of Andersen yelling, “Let’s go! We’re burning daylight!” Over the course of the cattle drive Anderson teaches the boys often-hard lessons about the values of hard work, sacrifice and bravery. As the boys earn Andersen’s respect, he begins to see them more as sons than employees. One evening he tells his cook, Mr. Nightlinger, that he lost two sons.

²⁵ Quoted in Joseph McBride, *Hawks on Hawks* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1982) 140.

²⁶ To his credit, the older Patrick Wayne gives a very strong performance in *Big Jake*. He delivers some of the best lines in the picture, including the priceless “They say ma kicked you out because you had a weakness for the ladies. Is that true?”

Andersen: Went bad on me. Or I went bad on them. I don't know. I
can't figure it out.
Nightlinger: You've got another chance.
Andersen: They're not mine.
Nightlinger: They could be.

The Cowboys is one of the few films in which Wayne's character dies on screen.

What is particularly notable about this case is that Andersen's death comes not at the film's climax, but three-quarters of the way through. When a group of rustlers try to take the herd, Andersen bests their leader Longhair (played by Bruce Dern) in a bloody fistfight. Enraged at losing to a man twice his age, Longhair pulls his pistol and guns Andersen down. After burying Andersen in the prairie that, as Nightlinger eulogizes, was like a mother to him, the boys exact justice against Longhair and his gang. With help from Nightlinger, they kill the rustlers and deliver Andersen's beeves to market in Belle Fourche. As they drive the cattle through the town's streets to the stockyard, adults stare in silence as children, no older than the cowboys themselves, run and skip alongside the slow-moving herd.

In the movie's final scene, the boys and Nightlinger return to mark Andersen's grave with a proper tombstone ("Wil Andersen: Beloved Husband and Father"), but are unable to find where they buried him, his grave having vanished. "Boys," says Nightlinger, "I think it's close enough." "Well, come on," says Slim, the eldest cowboy. "We're burnin' daylight." While the Biblical overtones of this scene – with Andersen as the Christ of the frontier and the cowboys as his apostles – are rather forced, the point that the heroic legacy of the Western hero has been successfully passed on to a new generation is made clear. The forceful articulation of the need for regeneration found in

films like *The Cowboys* also stands in stark contrast to (and thus bespeaks an awareness of) the critical project of the “revisionist” Western whose aim, again, often seems less the perpetuation than the destruction of the genre.

Cahill: United States Marshal: Wayne as...Wayne?

Like *Big Jake* before it, *The Cowboys* proved to be a minor success. Released in January of 1972, the film went on to earn \$7.5 million in rentals.²⁷ Such success did not, however, allay the concerns of all critics about the genre’s prospects. Nachbar, for one, is skeptical of the regeneration depicted in *The Cowboys*. Acknowledging that the film is intended as “a message of hope for lovers of old Westerns,” he instead finds most significant the acknowledgement in the film of Wayne’s advancing years, coming in a scene where Andersen tells Martha that he is “sixty years old”:

It is a shocking admission. As we hear Wayne say it we become fully aware that he *is* getting old. If this greatest of all Western heroes can age and die, so, obviously, can all others. Time has therefore finally caught up to and is destroying the Western myth of the eternally recurring moment of heroic action.²⁸

These comments are a good example of one of the most frustrating tendencies that emerges in writing on Wayne’s films. Nachbar’s skepticism of the potential for regeneration in the later Wayne Westerns is not based on the films or their characters, but on *Wayne*.

²⁷ Roberts and Olsen 583.

²⁸ Nachbar 109.

It is Wayne, the man, who often acts as the critical lens through which his films – in particular, his later films – are interpreted. Rather than analyze the films as aesthetic works or examine their relationship to the Western genre, a prevailing critical tendency is to read the movies symptomatically, either as expressions of Wayne's political personality or for biographical resonance. We can find examples of both routes in the limited writing that exists on Wayne's sixth picture of the 1970s, *Cahill: United States Marshal*. Released in July of 1973, the film was Wayne's fifth and final collaboration with director Andrew V. McLaglen. Wayne stars as widower J.D. Cahill, a United States Marshal whose professional success has come at the expense of his relationship with his sons, seventeen-year-old Danny (played by Gary Grimes) and eleven-year-old Billy Joe (played by Clay O'Brien, who starred in *The Cowboys*). In their father's absence, the boys rebel and fall in with a group of bank robbers. When the robbery goes wrong and two men are killed, Billy Joe hides the money. After four men are wrongly accused of carrying out the robbery, the two sons must decide whether to tell their father or turn the money over to the bank robbers.

R. Phillip Loy reads *Cahill: United States Marshal* as an example of Wayne's social activism. Loy argues that

As he neared the end of his career and his life, John Wayne was doing more than protesting changes in American culture that he abhorred; he also wanted to ingrain in younger cohorts a respect for the values around which he had built his public persona.²⁹

²⁹ Loy 153-154.

Cahill becomes, for Loy, a social commentary on the consequences of parents not spending time with their children. At stake, then, is not the regeneration of the genre but the regeneration of a way of life.

McLaglen adopts a similar view in his commentary track for the film's DVD release, stating that *Cahill* was the "first film where Wayne had to deal with a modern subject, taking care of your children while they were young." While McLaglen asserts that Wayne was an "attentive father," he speculates none-the-less that the question of "whether I spent enough time with my children" might have passed through Wayne's mind. Roberts and Olsen are less equivocal about Wayne being an absentee father. In their view, it was through his films that Wayne expressed his feelings for his children, *Cahill* being "very close to autobiographical" in its depiction of a father whose devotion to his work means time away from his family.³⁰

In their otherwise well-researched biography, these claims by Roberts and Olsen stand out as highly questionable. To argue that Wayne's choice of scripts was determined principally by their thematic resemblance to his personal life – as opposed to, say, choosing projects that were within the financial capabilities of his Batjac production company and could be filmed in favored locations like Durango, Mexico – is to rely on speculation, rather than analysis of the films in question or knowledge of their production circumstance. Likewise, to question the possibility of regeneration in these films because Wayne, in real life, was nearing death is to ignore what the films are saying. On the subject of *Cahill: United States Marshal*, we might ask what is more productive:

³⁰ Roberts and Olsen, 596-597.

considering the film to be a vehicle selected by Wayne through which he could make a personal statement on a modern subject that would resonate with both contemporary audiences and his own children, or examining it as a variation on the theme of regeneration detected in preceding later Wayne Westerns? Or, more specifically, as a variation on the depiction of relations between fathers and sons found in some of those films? Choosing the second path, we could note how *Cahill* takes the convention a step further by having those sons actually cross over to wrong side of the law. Depictions of the Western hero as father are actually rather rare in the genre. Instead, we more often find the hero acting as a surrogate father – setting an example either constructive (*Shane*, *Hondo*) or complex (*Red River*, *The Searchers*). That Jacob McCandles' sons stayed on the straight and narrow is likely due to the influence of their mother (as was the case with Yorke's son in *Rio Grande*). In *Cahill*, however, Danny and Billy Joe's mother has passed away, leaving them in the intermittent care of their father, who is continually called away on official duty. This dedication is construed by Cahill's sons – Danny, especially – as a preference for work over family, which leads to the boys' rebellion. Like Wil Andersen, whose boys also “went bad” on him, Cahill is offered a chance at redemption. After Danny is deputized and accompanies his father on the search for the bank robbers, he and his father come to a new understanding. Observing his father on the job, Danny gains a new appreciation for his father's integrity and principles. At the same time, Cahill acknowledges that his commitment to his job has cost him his relationship with his sons, which he resolves to rebuild.

The biographical interpretation of Wayne's films can be understood in relation to the tendency towards symptomatic interpretation, both author-based and reflectionist, in criticism of the Western genre. The explanation for genre films that do not apparently reflect prevailing social-cultural tendencies is that the films are the product of an auteur who is able to use the genre's conventions to shape the films to his vision. As observed in the chapter on *Chisum*, Wayne's later Westerns are actually explained in a manner similar to other Westerns of the time: by appealing to factors beyond the films proper. In this case, the difference detected by critics between "revisionist" and "traditional" Westerns of the 1970s is attributable to Wayne. A problem with this approach is that it is largely ahistorical, neglecting more concrete aspects of the films in question in favor of conjecture and interpretation. We can never know exactly what motivated Wayne to make this or that picture, but we can closely examine his movies to determine how they convey meaning and relate to the Western genre. Biographical interpretation, however, presumes to know the former while largely ignoring the latter, effectively placing the critical apparatus before the object of study. This is not intended as a repudiation of the value of star-based studies, nor of the value of analyzing the relationship between films and culture, but rather as a caution against ascribing meanings to films based on abstractions. Even if these movies do tell us something about Wayne, the man, that does not mean that Wayne, the construct, can tell us something about the movies.

5

Just Like Old Times**Going With the Flow: *The Train Robbers***

Falling between *The Cowboys* and *Cahill: United States Marshall*, *The Train Robbers* was filmed in the spring of 1972 under the direction of Burt Kennedy, who also wrote the film's screenplay. An underrated maker of Westerns, Kennedy had directed Wayne in *The War Wagon* (1967), one of the actor's stronger films of the 1960s. Kennedy also wrote the screenplay for Budd Boetticher's *Seven Men From Now* and directed the intelligent Western parody *Support Your Local Sheriff!* (1969) and its quasi-sequel, *Support Your Local Gunfighter* (1971). In *The Train Robbers*, Wayne stars as Lane, a Civil War veteran who enlists the help of two old war buddies and three younger men to accompany a young widow, Mrs. Lowe (played by Ann-Margret), to recover and return a gold shipment stolen by her late husband so she can clear his name before a gang of the husband's old partners beat them to the treasure.

The film opens with a sequence that strongly recalls the opening to Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). Behind the credit titles, a series of shots surveys the desolate town of Liberty, Texas. The town is comprised of only five buildings – a livery, saloon, hotel, railway station and a water tower with windmill – situated in the middle of a barren, sand-colored landscape. There is no non-diegetic music. Instead, the only sounds we hear are the blowing wind and whatever objects it animates. Signs creak

back and forth. Saloon doors bat open and shut. Rocking chairs sway slowly forward and back. Seated at the railway station is Jesse (played by Ben Johnson), awaiting the arrival of the train. He is the only person visible in the entire town. Like *Chisum*, this opening sequence clearly entreats viewers to see the film in relation to other, earlier Westerns. That said, the choice of so recent a Western as source, coupled with a formal mimicry far more obvious than *Chisum*'s references to earlier narratives, mean that the motivation behind the reference could be taken as opportunism. Yet the opening credits establish a stylistic and thematic minimalism that permeates the remainder of the film – a minimalism that actually risks a dearth of material (as evidenced by a conspicuous number visually striking yet increasingly redundant sequences of Lane and co. riding through the desert).

The frontier town of Liberty, as presented to us, has been in effect stripped down to its most basic elements. In one shot, as the camera tracks rightward following Jesse as he walks from the railway station to the water tower, we see the charred ruins of another building behind the saloon, suggesting the removal of a superfluous structure. The villains are not individuated in any way but are instead a faceless group of bad men characterized by a driving musical theme that contrasts with the more sweeping melodies that accompany the protagonists. Little is presented by the narrative to detract from its focus on the main characters, with the exception of a mysterious figure (played by Ricardo Montalban) who follows both the protagonists and their pursuers from a distance.

In *The Train Robbers* there is a greater emphasis on reminiscing about the past and acknowledging the passage of time than in any other film we have encountered thus far. Lane's friend Grady (played by Rod Taylor) laments feeling old, noting – among other things – his inability to recover from drunkenness as quickly as he once could. But the past may not be as far gone as the old men imagine.

The movie's focus on the past is in this case related to the ongoing concern in Wayne's later Westerns with the preservation of the legacy of the Western hero. While not the focus of the picture in the way detailed in the preceding chapter, *The Train Robbers* still includes scenes where Lane imparts knowledge (directly or indirectly) to the younger men of the group. One of these men, Calhoun (played by Christopher George), begins the picture at odds with Lane and the outmoded values he espouses, but is slowly won over both by Lane's honesty and Jesse's admiration of Lane.¹ The film prominently features the element lacking in *Rio Lobo*: other characters who are able to fill in the character's history. Jesse's stories about he and Grady's days serving under Lane in the War endear the older men to the younger Calhoun, who asks if he can stay on with them after the gold is recovered. Furthermore, when hearing these recollections in the context of present circumstance it becomes apparent that the "old times" reminisced about around the campfire are not so different from the present adventure. In this way, we again find an argument for continuity in the face of what are normally perceived as fixed boundaries (in this case, between past and present).

¹ The role represents a strange progression for George, who had played adversary to Wayne in both *El Dorado* and *Chisum*.

The only exception to the film's directness of theme comes at the very end, when the mysterious stranger, finally identifying himself as a Wells Fargo agent after following the heroes at a distance for the entire film, reveals the honest Mrs. Lowe as a scheming harlot intent on keeping the money for herself. This is something of an unfair twist, as the surprise is not so much as hinted at in the preceding ninety minutes. The only indication a knowledgeable viewer might have been able to glean is recognizing the character names Lane and Lowe from *Hondo*. In that film, the first thing Mrs. Lowe (played by Geraldine Page) does when she meets Hondo Lane (played by Wayne) is lie about her husband.

And Against It: *Rooster Cogburn*

Wayne's penultimate picture, *Rooster Cogburn* – also known as *Rooster Cogburn (...and the Lady)* – was a return in two senses. First, it was Wayne's return to the Western genre after two ill-fated attempts at hard-edged police movies in the mode of *The French Connection* (1971) and *Dirty Harry* (1971). Second, it was a return to the character that had won him the Academy Award for Best Actor of 1969: the ornery, hard-drinking, one-eyed United States Marshal of *True Grit*, Rooster J. Cogburn.

In an oft-repeated anecdote that happens to be true, Wayne was originally offered the lead as San Francisco police detective Harry Callahan in Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* in 1970. At that time, however, Wayne's hectic schedule – which included promoting *Rio Lobo*, shooting *Big Jake* and preparing for *The Cowboys* – prohibited him from accepting the role. The part went to Clint Eastwood, who had by that point made three films with

Siegel (which included playing a character similar to Callahan in 1968's *Coogan's Bluff*). While *Big Jake* and *The Cowboys* were minor hits, Wayne's subsequent two Westerns were his least successful of the decade. *The Train Robbers*, released in February of 1973, garnered some favorable reviews but earned less than \$4 million in rentals, while *Cahill: United States Marshal*, released in July of the same year, earned just over that amount.² By comparison, *Dirty Harry* took in \$18 million³ – a sum exceeded in 1973 by its sequel *Magnum Force* (directed by Ted Post), which earned just over \$20 million.⁴

Looking for new projects (and evidently regretting his decision to pass on *Dirty Harry*) Wayne tried his hand at tackling the urban frontier, first as a Seattle police detective who uncovers a ring of corruption within his own department in *McQ* (directed by John Sturges, 1974), and then as a Chicago cop sent to London to bring back an American mobster being held for extradition in *Brannigan* (directed by Douglas Hickox, 1975). Both pictures flopped. While each movie is far better (and more interesting) than their critical and commercial failure would indicate, the specter of Wayne as an active-duty police officer in his late sixties does stretch believability. Unlike in *Rio Lobo*, where a history of starring in cavalry pictures lends some credibility to his aging character McNally's position in the U.S. Army, Wayne had no history of playing policemen – which was actually intended to be part of the appeal. As the voice-over in the theatrical trailer for *McQ* proclaims, "John Wayne is McQ, and this time, for the first time, *he's a cop!*" Also not helping matters is how nothing is presented in the narrative of either film

² Roberts and Olsen 583.

³ "Revenue Database – 1971," *Box Office Report* (online). Available: <http://www.boxofficereport.com/database/1971.shtml>

⁴ "Revenue Database – 1973," *Box Office Report* (online). Available: <http://www.boxofficereport.com/database/1973.shtml>

to explain why, exactly, his characters are still on the streets at an age when most officers are either pushing pencils or hitting the links.

Given the success of *True Grit*, it is not surprising that Wayne would want to reprise the character of Rooster Cogburn in a subsequent adventure. What is surprising is that it took over five years for this to occur. Directed by Stuart Miller, a producer on *Little Big Man* who had made his directorial debut with the 1972 adaptation of Hal Borland's novel *When the Legends Die*, *Rooster Cogburn* is the first and only screen pairing of Wayne and actress Katherine Hepburn. This time around, Marshal Cogburn is charged with apprehending a violent gang of gunmen responsible for the theft of a shipment of nitroglycerine from the U.S. Army. During their getaway, the criminals viciously ransack an Indian village run by a kindly old preacher, who is killed during the fracas by the gang's leader Hawk (played by Richard Jordan). The preacher's daughter, Eula Goodnight (Hepburn), insists that she and a young Indian boy named Wolf accompany the Marshal in his pursuit of the criminals – much to Cogburn's annoyance.

Gary Wills contends in his biography of Wayne that the role of Cogburn in *True Grit* provided the star with the last of three personas he assumed over the course of his filmmaking career, on-screen *and* off-. First came the naïve young hero, initially forged by director Raoul Walsh in *The Big Trail* (1930) and later epitomized in Ford's *Stagecoach*. Then came the older, somber authority figure of *Red River* onward. This persona began to wear thin, however. Says Wills: "During the 1960s [Wayne] was in danger of becoming a figure of fun until his last identity emerged – the lone survivor of a

past heroic time. The conscious anachronism.” According to Wills, it was this identity that Wayne was able to make use of throughout the 1970s.

Although his observation is in the context of Wayne’s career and not the development of the Western genre, Wills too notes the changes that Western/Wayne protagonists underwent beginning with *Red River*. In his formulation, however, the seemingly anachronistic characters we find in Wayne’s 1970s Westerns represent a *break* rather than a progression from characters like Tom Dunson – discontinuity rather than continuity. Such is the product of the orientation of Wills’ study, which seeks to understand Wayne’s films as a reflection of the man. Rather than observing the transtextual character of the Western genre, we instead see a star needing to reinvent himself in order to sustain commercial and cultural viability. Yet Wills’ idea of Wayne as “conscious anachronism” lacks precision. In spite of the significant thematic correspondences we find across Wayne’s 1970s films, Wills examines only three – *Big Jake*, *Rooster Cogburn* and *The Shootist* – as pictures that “gave him new symbolic vitality.”⁵ While a suggestive notion, Wills never elaborates on how these specific roles accomplished this. Moreover, no indication is given as to why these three Wayne Westerns qualify while the other five made during the decade do not.

Another, more specific drawback to positing *True Grit* as establishing the persona which Wayne adopted in his remaining films is that such a position unavoidably downplays how *unconventional* the character of Marshal Cogburn is. Without discounting the differences between Wayne’s other roles in the period in question, it is

⁵ Wills 284.

certainly fair to assert that Cogburn is without question the most idiosyncratic character he played in the latter part of his career (if not his entire career). Given how Wayne is often criticized for supposedly playing the same characters over and over again, it may come as a surprise that, following the success of *True Grit*, he did not seek out roles that afforded him the same opportunity for burlesque.

In *Rooster Cogburn*, it is the hero's eccentric personality that is emphasized, particularly in numerous dialogue scenes with Eula Goodnight. It is in this respect that the movie differs most greatly from Wayne's other 1970s pictures, as the stress placed on the opposition between the rascally lawman and the priggish preacher's daughter overshadows all other aspects of the picture, including those elements which would tie it to the Western genre's history.

The film begins in what seems like similar territory to that explored in Wayne's other recent work. Cogburn brings in three wanted men – dead rather than alive after they killed his deputy. In court, Judge Parker reprimands Cogburn for his excessive zeal and itchy trigger finger, noting that he has shot sixty-four suspects in eight years. Cogburn's protests – “None was shot but in the line of duty or in defense of my person or fleein' justice!” – fall on deaf ears, and Parker demands the Marshal's badge. “The west is changing,” he tells Rooster, “and you haven't changed with it.”

The Judge has a quick change of heart, however, after the shipment of nitroglycerine is stolen in the following scene. He appears at Cogburn's residence, tells him of the robbery, and entreats him to return to work – promising double pay and the

permanent restoration of his badge for the successful apprehension of the villains and the safe return of the explosives.

In *True Grit*, young Mattie Ross's need for a man with "grit" saw her identify in Cogburn the heroic qualities necessary to help her bring her father's killer to justice – qualities she was able to detect where others saw only depravity and debauchery. Yet when Judge Parker tells Cogburn he needs a man with grit, he comes across as opportunistic; what he really needs is man who knows the territory where the bandits are headed. Parker's change of opinion is given none of the weight of Martha McCandle's realization about what kind of man the task at hand requires. Instead, he simply appears two scenes later and offers Cogburn his job back. By doing so, the shooting of the wanted men and stripping of Cogburn's badge become inconsequential to the film's narrative. So why include these scenes at all? If they do not advance the narrative, what is their function?

Given what has been observed thus far in Wayne's 1970s Westerns, interrogating the scenes for features that may draw on genre history would seem to be a good place to begin. Problematic in this regard, however, is the scenes' separation from film's causal chain of events. Whereas the transtextual elements noted in the other Wayne Westerns are woven into their respective narratives, the opening events in *Rooster Cogburn* act as a kind of expository prologue, divorced from the narrative proper. In a way, the movie is actually working to counter the transtextual current that inevitably accompanies an actor with over forty years of Westerns under his belt. Not only is Cogburn one of Wayne's most unique characters, it had been five years (and seven films) since he had played the

role. Instead of drawing on a viewer's knowledge of genre conventions and traditions that preexist an individual film, then, the opening scenes serve to *remind us* of who Rooster Cogburn is. But where *True Grit* took a great deal of time in crafting a complex portrait of its surly protagonist, in the sequel we are provided what amounts to a quick refresher, reestablishing enough of the character so that the film can promptly proceed to its focus: the repartee between Cogburn and Goodnight.⁶

The removal of a peace officer's badge – voluntary or otherwise – is a familiar cinematic convention, though not of the Western genre. It is instead a device we expect to find in police-action films about maverick cops like the two Wayne had just made. Lon McQ, for example, turns in his badge early in the film despite the protestations of some of his colleagues. "Let him go," says his captain. "He was never part of the team anyway." That Cogburn's badge is restored two scenes after its removal means that the device does not carry out its expected function – where, only once freed from the strictures of police procedure and Miranda laws, can the hero cop exercise the (magnum) force necessary to bring the villains to justice. What it does hint at, however, is how *Rooster Cogburn* draws on conventions from *other* genre traditions.

As it turns out, the film also invokes elements from Hepburn's acting career, albeit in a different fashion. While the scenario of *Rooster Cogburn* – with Cogburn finding himself in the employ of a feisty female looking to avenge her father's murder – obviously evokes *True Grit*, parallels can also be drawn to *The African Queen*, John

⁶ That a sequel would presume its viewers to possess a certain amount of knowledge about elements from the preceding film is to be expected. In the case of *Rooster Cogburn*, however, the distance from both the release of *True Grit* and Wayne's more typical characters presents a challenge to such presumptions. The forceful reestablishment of Cogburn's character in the film's prologue would seem to indicate a degree of awareness of these challenges on the part of the filmmakers.

Huston's 1952 film starring Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart. In that picture, Hepburn stars as Rose Sawyer, the upright *sister* of a missionary in a small *African* village during the First World War. When the invading Germans kill her brother, Rose is rescued and returned to civilization by Charlie Allnut (Bogart), the ill-mannered, hard-drinking captain of a tramp steamer. Like Cogburn and Eula, Charlie and Rose butt heads as they journey through treacherous territory, their dislike turning first into a grudging respect and then love. Love does not blossom as romantically between the elder Cogburn and Eula, of course, but they nonetheless reach a state of shared fondness. Given that this was the first on-screen pairing of two of Hollywood's most famous political opposites, a desire to take advantage of this extra-film aspect no doubt motivated the selection of story. Furthermore, the extensive banter between their characters cannot help but recall the comedic pairing of opposites characteristic of screwball comedies like *Bringing Up Baby* (directed by Howard Hawks, 1938) and *The Philadelphia Story* (directed by George Cukor, 1940). Both Wayne and Hepburn are clearly game, but the potential for on-screen fireworks is undercut by lengthy, cumbersome dialogue, with nearly every exchange between the characters carrying on at least two lines longer than necessary.⁷

This emphasis on character over the Western genre also shapes the film in other ways. *Rooster Cogburn* does include facets encountered in the other Wayne films, but they are not realized in the same manner. The boy Wolf greatly admires Cogburn, and in one scene tells him that he wishes to be a Marshal himself. Cogburn replies that Wolf

⁷ In addition to this character arc, *Rooster Cogburn* also tries to transplant other elements of *the African Queen* to the Arkansas territory, often with mixed results. The heroes (and their explosive cargo) even take to the rapids of the Rouge River – rather improbably – for the film's climactic confrontation with Hawk's gang, mirroring the finale of *The African Queen*.

could probably find better role models to emulate, but he would be happy to help Wolf achieve his goal. Although this exchange is quite touching, the movie affords Wolf very little of the development seen in the young protagonists of *The Cowboys* or *Cahill: United States Marshal*. At the film's conclusion, as Eula and Wolf part ways with Cogburn and ride back to the Indian settlement, there is little sense that the Marshal's heroic legacy has been passed on to a subsequent generation. If anyone, it is mature Eula who has learned the most from Cogburn, making the prospects for regeneration next to nil.

Even Cogburn lacks the scope normally seen in Western heroes. The best example of this comes the evening prior to the film's climax where, seated around the campfire, Wolf asks Cogburn if he ever encountered Jesse James or Billy the Kid. Contrary to what we might expect, given that Wayne as John Chisum ran into Billy the Kid rather recently, Cogburn answers in the negative. He then says to his companions, "Did I ever tell you about the time Lucky Ned Pepper and his gang were chasin' me?" and proceeds to recount his final confrontation with Pepper from *True Grit*, to the delight of both Wolf and Eula.⁸ This is a far more explicit reference to a preceding film than is normally found in sequels, especially ones that feature recurring characters in adventures largely unrelated to the first film. Furthermore, that a Western hero of Cogburn's age and experience would choose to relate such a recent event – even in the context of a sequel – is out of the ordinary. Surely Rooster could have relayed a tale that would have had

⁸ While the recounting of past deeds and battles is common in the Western, it is rare for the hero to recount such stories himself. As noted above, normally this task is left to supporting characters who have a history with the hero. In this case, as in *Rio Lobo*, there is no one else to do the recounting, but here it is in keeping with Cogburn's boastful nature to tell a good yarn about his past glories.

greater significance for listeners both within and without the film. In this way, the picture is working *against* the transtextuality observed in Wayne's previous Westerns in order to place the focus squarely on a particular character and not invoke genre history too strongly. In order to accomplish this, the film goes so far as to draw heavily on conventional elements from not only other genres, but from an earlier moviemaking era – what might be termed transgeneric transtextuality.

Out of Wayne's 1970s output, then, *Rooster Cogburn* has the shortest memory when it comes to the Western genre. The "old times" reminisced about around the campfire are not old at all. Instead, the hero narrates a recent fight that, while referencing another well-known Western, lacks the transtextual resonance of tales of Civil War battles, cattle drives fraught with danger or confrontations with famous historical personalities. *Rooster Cogburn* would prove to be an anomaly in this respect, however, as Wayne's next picture would prove to have the longest memory of all.

6

*The Shootist***Somewhere Between Legend and Fact**

Like many other Hollywood icons of the classical era, John Wayne is today largely remembered less for the specific roles he played than for a more general collection of ideals and images that make up his “star persona.” The inevitable result of this selective condensation is an often-confusing conflation between stars and their roles. As an example of this, we can look to a line of officially licensed John Wayne giftware recently produced by the Lyon Company of Salt Lake City, Utah. Items ranging from a cigar box to a mechanical alarm clock are each adorned with Wayne’s image and, in many cases, a quotation. A 16 oz coffee mug, for example, features the quote: “A man’s got to have a code, a creed to live by.” While it is entirely possible that Wayne may have uttered this line at some point in his life, it just so happens that the character of John Bernard Books says nearly the exact same thing in *The Shootist*.

A star persona could be seen as forming kind of concentric circle around the more specific, smaller-scale components of an actor’s life and work. To get to those interior circles – be they individual films or biographical details – means having to pass through the outer layers, and once we arrive it can be difficult to discern where the star persona ends and the person, character or film begins. In some respects – commercially, for example – this is actually the desired result, and so it comes as no surprise that the quotation on the coffee mug is attributed to Wayne and not his character. Suffice it to say

that most folks are likely more inclined to purchase a “John Wayne” mug than a “J.B. Books” mug. In other respects, however, the value of the premise that Wayne was in effect “playing himself” is questionable, especially when used as a critical lens through which to interpret his movies. As we have seen, if the goal is to learn about these films, then it is more productive to begin one’s analysis *there*, at the source, rather than in the outlying regions of star persona or other explanatory models.

If there were, however, a case to be made *for* the symptomatic interpretation of the Wayne’s films, it would likely be found in *The Shootist*. Although his previous film, *Rooster Cogburn*, deviates from many of the trends observed up to that point in the later Wayne Westerns, those differences can be largely accounted for by appealing to the same generic transtextuality observed to be running through the other movies. In *The Shootist*, however, we find not only strong biographical overtones that the film itself seems to be promoting but also a climactic action that appears to confirm the applicability of the sort of structural analysis to this point called into question. In this way, the movie risks contradicting – and, in a sense, undermining – what has come before.

Directed by Don Siegel – whom Wayne had passed on working with in *Dirty Harry* – *The Shootist* concerns the final days of aging gunfighter John Bernard Books. In January of 1901, Books rides out of the mountains and into Carson City, Nevada, the site of a past skirmish, to visit his old friend Doc Hostetler (played by James Stewart). After an examination, Hostetler confirms what Books already suspects: “You have a cancer, advanced.” Books resolves to live out his final days in solitude in a boarding house run by the widow Bond Rogers (played by Lauren Bacall) and her teenage son Gillom

(played by Ron Howard). But word of Books' presence in the town, and of his looming death, soon spreads, and he must contend with a series of unwanted visitors. Attempts are made on his life; a prying newspaperman offers to write a series of "factual" stories about his exploits; even an old girlfriend appears hoping that a quick marriage will allow her to live off Books' name. During a subsequent visit to Hostetler's, the doctor describes the agonizing experience that awaits Books as he draws closer to death.

Hostetler: There's...there's one more thing I'd say. Both of us have had a lot to do with death. I'm not a brave man, but you must be.

Books: Ah...

Hostetler: Now...now this is not advice. It's not even a suggestion. It's just something for you to reflect on while your mind's still clear.

Books: What?

Hostetler: I would not die a death like I just described.

Books: No?

Hostetler: Not if I had your courage.

His determination to die on his own terms renewed, Books kindles relationships with both Bond and Gillom, and begins to orchestrate the scene of his demise.

As *The Shootist* is Wayne's final film, there is tendency to read it as a kind of final statement – about Wayne's career, or the Western genre, or both. That Wayne would pass away from cancer two years after the film's release makes such assessments come across as all the more apposite. Criticism of the film is marked by observations about an "air of finality" or how Wayne had at last accepted his age and fate - redemptive acts in the eyes of some of his detractors. Michael Coyne, who had before dismissed Wayne's later pictures as politically conservative derivatives of his early work, is highly complimentary of *The Shootist* and devotes part of the final chapter of *The Crowded*

Prairie to a discussion of the film. Unlike the other Westerns he examines, however, it is exempted from cultural interpretation due to its focus on Wayne's legacy. Writes Coyne: "*The Shootist*, however, is primarily concerned with a particular American personality rather than U.S. national identity."¹

Most appraisals like these are made in retrospect, with the knowledge that Wayne's own cancer was returning and that he would die shortly after the film's release. Just as J.B. Books is the "last shootist extant," Wayne was the last remaining Western star. And both were dying. Yet the correlation between Wayne and his character is not so straightforward. Lusted, for example, writes that Wayne was "suffering from the same cancer as the character he portrays in the film."² But this is not true: though not stated explicitly in the film, the suggestion is that Books is dying of prostate cancer, whereas Wayne's cancer afflicted his lungs. In making a rhetorical point about how Wayne's characters reflected his personal circumstance, Lusted unintentionally does the opposite: positing Wayne as the reflection of his character. Wayne had, in fact, beaten cancer in the 1960s – a fact he boasted about frequently – but in truth his health had been in decline for over a decade. As such, we might wonder how any of Wayne's other films from the 1970s might be remembered were they to have been his last, regardless of the degree to which they apparently evoked of his real life situation.

Through all of this one thing remains clear: whatever illness Wayne was battling off-screen did little to curtail his brisk production schedule. It would certainly be difficult to accuse an actor who had made ten films in six years of slowing down, let alone of

¹ Coyne 180.

² Lusted 212.

giving any indication that the sun would soon be setting on his career. The clear sense is that Wayne, who began working as an uncredited extra in silent Westerns in the late 1920s, intended to continue making movies for as long as possible.

An emphatic reminder of this cinematic longevity opens *The Shootist*. First, the Paramount Pictures emblem is presented not in color but shades of gray. As the music begins, we cut to a black and white shot that pans rightward across a range of snow-capped mountains. The camera stops as a solitary rider comes into frame in the distance, riding away from the sierra. The credit sequence then cuts to a series of clips from a number of Wayne's earlier Westerns. Shots of his characters in *Red River*, *Hondo*, *Rio Bravo* and *El Dorado* are appropriated to represent successive stages of Books' frontier career, narrated by Gillom. Even though the latter three films were color productions, they are presented in the credits in black and white (in contrast to the remainder of *The Shootist*, which is in color). Gillom's voice says that Books was not an outlaw but a lawman, and he lived by a strict creed: "I won't be wronged, I won't be insulted, I won't be laid a hand on. I don't do these things to other people, and I require the same from them."

Not unlike the painted credits of *Chisum*, the opening sequence of *The Shootist* draws on elements from earlier Wayne Westerns to help fashion a back-story for its protagonist. Yet John Chisum's long journey to New Mexico is not represented using actual images from earlier films, even though there would have been plenty of examples to choose from. When *Chisum* invokes Western conventions like cattle drives and battles with Indian tribes in order to construct the movie's story, it gives those conventions *new*

representations: the painted scenes we see in the credit sequence. What *The Shootist* does instead is take images of Wayne in earlier roles and *re-present* them in a new context, asking the viewer to see existing representations as standing in for the history of one (new) character.

The foregrounding of Wayne's long association with the Western can be viewed at least in part as an attempt to add a certain prestige to *The Shootist* by drawing a lineage between it and some of the genre's most revered classics.³ This practice is, of course, not at all uncommon. But the notion that Wayne's previous roles were, in a sense, interchangeable cannot help but promote the stubborn idea that, in the end, he was always playing the same character: John Wayne. This conflation between star and character actually stands to work in the film's dramatic favor, because it is then not just Books who is dying, but all the Western heroes Wayne has portrayed over the course of his long career. It has all come down to this.

Or has it? A rather basic question we should pose before ascribing such a large amount of significance to *The Shootist* is: didn't Wayne already die in *The Cowboys*? Was that on-screen passing somehow less meaningful because the film's opening credits failed to appropriate scenes from *Red River* to represent Wil Andersen's past?

A number of points can be made here. While many of the Western heroes played by Wayne over the course of his career have clear similarities, to say they are "the same" lacks specificity. In this study, we have even encountered one character, Rooster Cogburn, whose difference was a key feature of the two films he appeared in. If we are to

³ The film's theatrical trailer did so explicitly, promoting *The Shootist* as the successor to classics like *Stagecoach*, *Red River*, *Shane*, *High Noon* and *The Magnificent Seven*.

assert that, even with some exceptions and while acknowledging that there are important though minor differences between Wayne's characters, the parallels are still pronounced, the question we need to ask is *why*? Why are the roles similar? What function does this serve? The usual answer is that Wayne was playing himself; that his individual roles were not really different characters but expressions of his own personality. But why this proposition necessarily follows the observation of similitude across his body of work is unclear. Taken on its own, the premise that Wayne's characters are similar because Wayne was playing all of the characters is a circular argument that offers nothing in the way of explanation. The idea that Wayne was playing himself cannot be justified by any evidence found within the films themselves, but instead requires appealing to aspects of Wayne's star persona.

An alternative approach to accounting for the continuity of characters we find across Wayne's films – more specifically, the recurrence of certain character types and traits – might be to consider his Western heroes as conventions of the Western genre. In this way, what we observe in the films is actually the same play of repetition and difference expected of other genre conventions. In Hawks' Westerns, it is through minor variations in character that new narrative scenarios are created. Much of the appeal of the character of Rooster Cogburn is how he alternately violates and upholds the conventions of Wayne's heroes (even though this play is at work more so in *True Grit* than *Rooster Cogburn*).

In opening credits of *The Shootist*, the series of excerpts are presented to us outside of their original narrative context. Yet the continuity between them is not simply

that they each feature Wayne (and thus Books) in a different stage of his career. The continuity is, instead, an understanding about the kinds of characters Wayne has played that results from our recognizing certain coded elements and actions. Each excerpt features Wayne dressed in familiar cowboy attire – buckskin for the first two instances, which take place in wilderness settings, and denim with familiar vest for the last two, which occur in towns – and each presents the same scenario: the hero faced with an armed adversary. In each case, the other man draws first. And in each case, Wayne draws faster. These devices are central components of the conventional Western representation of frontier heroism. In this way, the clips from previous movies do not merely show John Wayne, but actually stress the conventions of the Western that Wayne has happened to incarnate over the course of his long career. This not only shapes expectations about the character he will play in the present picture, but also gives us reason to expect that Wayne will play this kind of character again in the future. Importantly, these expectations are shaped less by Wayne's personal biography than by the films themselves.

Questions of which is a better movie aside, Andersen's death in *The Cowboys* is not afforded the significance of Books' in *The Shootist* less because of the latter's credit sequence – which is really just a more explicit way of drawing on a convention of the Western genre – than due to the significance the later film has taken on in light of Wayne's death. With the knowledge that this would be the last of Wayne's frontier protagonists, *The Shootist* is often read as *the* end, rather than a possible end. The unfortunate effect of this kind of interpretation is that it tends to overshadow the film

itself, which does an effective job on its own terms of conveying the finality of Books' situation – thanks in large measure to a superb performance by Wayne.

In a variation on a theme observed in each of Wayne's later pictures, Books is presented not simply as part of an older order, but as the last of that order. He has even outlived the historical personality on whom his character is based. After Carson City's undertaker offers Books his finest funeral services only "for the privilege," Books replies:

You're gonna do to me what they did to John Wesley Hardin. You're gonna lay me out, let the public come by and gawp at me for fifty cents a head, ten cents for the children. When the curiosity peters out you're gonna stuff me in a gunny sack and stick me in a whole you hurry to the bank with your loot.

Books has no friends from the Civil War; no companions to speak admiringly of his courage. His past is spoken about mostly by those who were not there to experience it, so do not understand it.

Following Hostetler's counsel, Books resolves to die a death befitting a man of his courage. Death is a far more abstract villain than a land baron or cattle rustler, however, and so Books engineers a final confrontation between himself and three of Carson City's most notorious personalities: Jay Cobb, Gillom's boss at the town's dairy; Mike Sweeney, a longtime resident of Carson City; and Jack Pulford, the faro dealer at the Metropole Saloon. His reasons for their selection vary. Books had a short verbal altercation with Cobb, who is routinely jailed for his brutality, upon his arrival in Carson City. Books is an old acquaintance, of sorts, of the derisive Sweeney; as he tells Bond, "I had some dealings with his brother Albert once." Finally, Pulford recently shot and a

killed a man – at a distance of over eight feet – who first took exception to Pulford’s assertion that he “could have taken” Books and then proceeded to shoot first.

While the film provides patent motivation for Books’ decision to die the way he lived, it is difficult not to conceive of the arranged final confrontation in mythic terms. At the start of the film, Books literally rides out of both the past and the wilderness and into the bustling streets of Carson City where he determines to rid that nascent civilization of three of its more scandalous characters. In spite of this, Books is viewed by most of the town’s residents as part of the problem, not part of the solution. He is referred to as “bloodthirsty” and “savage,” having no place in changing times. As Thibido, the town’s marshal, tell him: “Once we’re rid of people like you, we’ll have a goddamn Garden of Eden here.”

The character of Pulford presents a challenge to conceiving of Books’ final act as a symbolic purging of society’s evils. Although his impressive feat of marksmanship is later recounted to Books by other characters, Pulford only appears once prior to the film’s climactic shoot-out. While portrayed as confident in his abilities, he is nonetheless honorable in his actions: he fires second. Books’ selection of Pulford can be seen as drawing on a tradition of gentlemanly rivalry in the Western genre where two skilled gunmen will inevitably cross paths – less to settle the question of right and wrong than the question of who is faster. When that final confrontation occurs, however, Pulford breaks the cardinal rule of Western good guys: he shoots first. After Books has dispensed with Cobb and Sweeney, Pulford, rather than standing and challenging Books to a test of skill like we might expect, instead quickly fires and then ducks for cover. Not unlike the

irony that belies the opening credits of *Big Jake* or Jesse's recollections in *The Train Robbers*, Pulford's cowardice provides yet another example of how in the later Wayne Westerns the supposedly fixed conceptual boundaries between savagery and civilization are purposely undermined. It is Books, savage man of the past, who proves to be the civilized one. He is the one with the code to live by.

After Books kills Pulford, Gillom enters the saloon just before Books is shot in the back by the bartender – “revenge for all those shattered mirrors and wrecked saloons,” as Philip French has said.⁴ Gillom grabs one of Books' .45s and guns down the bartender. Books, bleeding to death on the floor, looks up at Gillom expectantly. Gillom looks to Books, and then to the gun in his hand. The music in the scene swells then goes silent. Gillom throws the pistol away. Books nods, then dies.

Books' approval of Gillom's final act indicates that, as in most of the other Wayne Westerns of the 1970s, knowledge has been passed successfully down from one generation to the next. Yet this legacy, involving a rejection of the way of the gun, is quite unlike those earlier instances. That a Western film would end with an explicit renunciation of violence is not uncommon, even if such assertions tend to be undermined by the fact that a large measure of nearly any Western's appeal is that very violence being renounced. There exists a long tradition of Western heroes who know their lifestyle should not be emulated. As Shane tells Joey after he rids the valley of hired guns: “There's no livin' with a killing.” This does not necessarily mean, however, that

⁴ Quoted in Newman 195.

Westerns that conclude in this way are intending to make larger points about the genre as a whole.

Books is unquestionably a heroic character, but unlike Chisum or Lane, he now finds himself alone in the world. Like McCandles, Andersen and Cahill, he is offered a chance at redemption, to recapture the things he has lost, but unlike those men his chance comes too late. His path has led to lying dead on a barroom floor, unceremoniously shot in the back by the bartender. This is not a legacy to be passed on to subsequent generations. As Books tells Gillom earlier in the film, “There’s more to being a man than handling a gun.”

Removed from the knowledge of Wayne’s terminal cancer, there is little reason see this end as *the* end – for either the Western hero or the genre. It is simply one of any number of possible ends, the result of a selected deployment of the genre’s conventions in a slightly new way.

7

What Makes a Hero?

Perhaps the most famous off-screen story from the production of *The Shootist* involves the composition of the climactic shoot-out in the Metropole saloon. Although the exact details vary depending on who is recounting the incident, it generally goes something like this: because Wayne's illness forced him to be away from the set for extended periods of time, Siegel and the rest of his cast had to shoot around Wayne as much as possible, including lensing portions of the final sequence that did not involve Books. Wayne was eventually able to return to work and film his parts of the movie's finale. When viewing the finished product, however, he took exception to the portrayal of Cobb's death, which included a shot filmed in Wayne's absence: Cobb being shot (by Books) *in the back*. The degree to which Wayne objected, again, varies by source. Whether he simply stated that he did not do that in his pictures, or whether he cited the fact that he had starred in over one hundred films and never once shot a man in the back is ultimately uncertain. But what is certain is that the final product was changed in accordance with his wishes: Cobb dies after being shot in the chest.

This is certainly an evocative story. It suggests that not only was there a patently moral, core motivation behind Wayne's acting choices, but that moral center could be interpreted as the difference between Wayne's Westerns and other films of the time.

Wayne would not shoot a man in the back, whereas other anti-heroes of the 1970s like Harry Callahan would.¹

Biographies of John Wayne are filled with anecdotes like this, providing a tempting source of rhetorical ammunition that could potentially be used to counter the kind of criticism – grounded in a more disparaging view of Wayne – encountered over the course of this study. Needless to say, selectively drawing on evidence on the grounds of it presenting Wayne in a favorable light would be more than a little hypocritical. Moreover, the productivity of using a more flattering abstraction of Wayne as a critical lens would prove just as questionable in the face of close analysis of the films.

The problem with the anecdote from *The Shootist* is that Wayne's characters have, in fact, shot men in the back. The first example to spring to mind would likely be *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* – although Wayne apologists would likely contend, with some merit, that Doniphon shot Valance not in the back but in the side. A better example comes from *The Searchers*. Mid-way through the film, Edwards shoots and kills three men attempting to ambush he and Martin. Any doubt as to where he hit them is erased later in film, when Capt. Clayton tells Edwards: “The fact that all three of them was shot in the back was the only thing that raised some question.” That a Western hero played by John Wayne would shoot a man in the back is certainly unexpected, but this transgression has an important function. In *The Searchers*, much of the complexity of Edwards' character comes from how he varyingly upholds and violates our expectations about how the conventional Western hero will behave. *The Shootist*, in contrast, places

¹ Callahan would even torture the target when he was down, if necessary.

great emphasis on the gentlemanly code of the Western hero, and it is for this reason – less than Wayne’s acting history – that we expect Books to face his adversaries head-on.

The more general point to be made here is a caution against the use of generalized models as starting points for examining films, as opposed to beginning with the films themselves. When the “traditional”/Wayne Western’s divergence from other Westerns of their time is not explained as being the result of Wayne’s political personality, the recourse is frequently to an accustomed interpretive schemata that posits the Western as articulating the conflict between binary oppositions: savagery and civilization, wilderness and society, west and east, past and present, *et cetera*. The justification for such a methodology is made on cultural grounds, where the recurrence of certain themes and meanings is taken as form of collective response, reflecting the American zeitgeist. The question must be asked, though: could the recurrent detection of the same meanings not be due to the recurrent use of the same critical model?

While many of the later Wayne Westerns do include elements suggestive of the oppositions listed above, a close analysis of the films reveals them to be functioning quite unlike we would expect based on those interpretive schemata. Contrary to critical models that conceive of the Western hero’s tragic role as vanquishing a savagery that threatens the establishment of society – a society in which the hero cannot himself be a part of – the later Wayne Westerns are about continuity across perceived boundaries. As the credit ballad from *Chisum* tells us, for these heroes “*the fight keeps goin’ on*.” There is a place for the aging Western hero in changing times, because the values he embodies will

always be needed, even *after* he is dead and gone. As such, the legacy must be passed down to successive generations.

If one of the dominant characteristics of Wayne's final eight Westerns is the passing on of his characters' heroic legacy, this does not mean that legacy will be the same in each picture. As with any other device found in a genre film, we should be expecting some form of variation. In differing ways, each film engages with the transtextual dimension of the Western genre, drawing on its history of conventions and representations in order to fashion new stories. While the movies provide different answers, contingent upon the differences inherent in each, these are all in response to the same question: what makes a hero?

The approach adopted in this study could be profitably applied to analyses of other popular film genres. As noted in the introductory chapter, the prevailing method of accounting for genres is to conceive of them as reflections of the larger culture from which they emerge and proceed to critically deciphering their meaning. Gangster and crime films, for example, are seen as reflecting equivocal attitudes towards capitalism, while the cycles of disaster films in the early 1970s and late 1990s supposedly articulate topical fears about man's toll on the natural world. Approaching the films of either genre not looking for symptomatic meaning but instead with an eye towards identifying transtextual elements and examining their function would be worthwhile investigations. Yet perhaps the best place to begin is with the Western.

As suggested over the course of this study, elements detected in the later Wayne Westerns may, in fact, be characteristic of the genre as a whole. The irony that the

supposedly incompatible binary oppositions found in the Western (and upon which much critical interpretation depends) are, in fact, not so disparate would not seem to be unique to the later Wayne Westerns. Given their frequent designation as “traditional,” that we would find affinities between these films and earlier Westerns is to be expected, but that these films may have more in common with the “revisionist” Western than normally thought would be an unforeseen finding. Again, even those 1970s Westerns most critical of the genre are invoking the same lengthy tradition of conventions as their “traditional” counterparts. A dependence on this growing tradition may have contributed, at least in part, to the genre’s decline.

The notion of addressing a “genre as a whole” – especially one as old as the Western – would likely strike most as naïve, and is contrary to the approach of many recent studies of other genres that instead isolate specific generic cycles or periods. But this should not preclude us from asking what it is that links this vast body of movies together. One of the benefits of a transtextual approach to genre is that the recognition of a particular device’s inclusion in a film as motivated on transtextual grounds does not necessarily mean that given device will serve the same function – or mean the same thing – as when previously encountered. Like the later Wayne Westerns, it could be that *all* Westerns are providing different answers to the same question.

For their part, the Statler Brothers might disagree – at least insofar as the “revisionist” Western is concerned. Three years after the release of “Whatever Happened to Randolph Scott?” the musical group overcame their dislike for contemporary pictures with “The Movies.” Opening with a catchy clarinet solo, the song is a laundry list of film

titles cleverly strung together in rhyming sentences, with verses separated by the memorable (if historically inaccurate) chorus:

*The movies are great medicine
Thank-you Thomas Edison
For giving us the best years of our lives*

While most of the movies mentioned in the song are Hollywood classics, recent pictures about contemporary “doubts and fears,” including *The Way We Were* (directed by Sydney Pollock, 1973) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (directed by Milos Foreman, 1975), are mentioned. When it comes to Westerns, however, the Statlers sing about classics like *Rio Grande* and *Shane* but do not mention any “revisionist” entries. Is there some underlying significance to this omission? Perhaps. But interpreting the Statlers’ refusal to go past *True Grit* in the genre’s development as telling us something about the fundamental character of the genre might be a bit of a stretch.

After all, what rhymes with *The Wild Bunch*?

Appendix

The Final Films of John Wayne

Chisum. Directed by Andrew V. MacLaglen. Released June 24th, 1970. Earned \$6.0 million in rentals.

Rio Lobo. Directed by Howard Hawks. Released December 18th, 1970. Earned \$4.25 million in rentals.

Big Jake. Directed by George Sherman. Released March 26th, 1971. Earned \$7.5 million in rentals.

The Cowboys. Directed by Mark Rydell. Released January 13th, 1972. Earned \$7.5 million in rentals.

The Train Robbers. Directed by Burt Kennedy. Released February 7th, 1973. Earned less than \$4 million in rentals.

Cahill: United States Marshall. Directed by Andrew V. MacLaglen. Released July 11th, 1973. Earned \$4.1 million in rentals.

McQ. Directed by John Sturges. Released February 6th, 1974. Earned \$4.1 million in rentals.

Brannigan. Directed by Douglas Hickox. Released March 26th, 1975. Earned less than \$4 million in rentals.

Rooster Cogburn. Directed by Stuart Millar. Released October 17th, 1975. Earned \$7.010 million in rentals.

The Shootist. Directed by Don Siegel. Released August 11th, 1976. Earned \$5.987 million in rentals.

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