André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker
American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s
R. J. Cardullo (Transl. and Ed.)

André Bazin (1918–58) is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit, as well as with being the spiritual father of the French New Wave. Among those who came under his tutelage were four who would go on to become the most renowned directors of the postwar French cinema: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol. Bazin can also be considered the principal instigator of the equally influential auteur theory: the idea that, since film is an art form, the director of a movie must be perceived as the chief creator of its unique cinematic style.

André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s contains, for the first time in English in one volume, much if not all of Bazin’s writings on American cinema: on directors such as Orson Welles, Charles Chaplin, Preston Sturges, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Huston, Nicholas Ray, Erich von Stroheim, and Elia Kazan; and on films such as High Noon, Citizen Kane, Rear Window, Limelight, Scarface, Niagara, The Red Badge of Courage, Greed, and Sullivan’s Travels.

André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s also features a sizable scholarly apparatus, including a contextual introduction to Bazin’s life and work, a complete bibliography of Bazin’s writings on American cinema, and credits of the films discussed. This volume thus represents a major contribution to the still growing academic discipline of cinema studies, as well as a testament to the continuing influence of one of the world’s pre-eminent critical thinkers.
André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker
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American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s

Translated and Edited by

R. J. Cardullo

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“R. J. Cardullo’s introduction to André Bazin’s life and work in André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s, together with his collecting so many of this French author’s ‘fugitive’ writings on American cinema and packaging them, in one volume, with ample credits and a comprehensive bibliography, finally makes accessible to lovers of film—and the art of film—an important, but hitherto scattered, body of reflection, criticism, and theorizing.”
– Chris Wagstaff, Senior Lecturer, School of Languages and European Studies, University of Reading, U.K.

“Cardullo’s choice of texts in this volume vividly recaptures the immediacy and excitement of André Bazin’s contemporary ‘discovery’ and promotion of the American cinema, while reflecting the critical intelligence that ensures the lasting value of Bazin’s insights. André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s is of compelling interest not only to teachers and students of film but potentially to a wider public of movie enthusiasts.”
– Keith Reader, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Scotland

“Cardullo’s introduction to André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s offers a succinct biography of André Bazin along with a stimulating reassessment of the importance of his work, unabashedly embracing its transcendental and spiritual qualities. This book is a valuable resource for scholars of cinema and American culture alike.”
– Douglas Smith, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, School of Languages and Literature, University College of Dublin, Ireland

“André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s is a very significant contribution to the field of film criticism. It presents the writings of an extremely creative, passionate, and intelligent specialist of the cinema who, in the 1950s, founded two highly influential journals still in existence: L’Esprit and Cahiers du Cinéma. R. J. Cardullo has chosen excellent articles here and done a remarkable work of translation. The credits of the films discussed, the extensive bibliography of Bazin’s writings, as well as the references to studies about him, make this volume a valuable document that will spur further research. André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s is a serious work deserving of the utmost praise.”
– Dina Scherzer, Professor Emerita of French and Italian, University of Texas at Austin, USA
“André Bazin is probably the most well-known and influential critic-cum-theorist in the history of film study. Any increase in the availability of Bazin’s writings, especially in English translation, is accordingly a matter of some academic consequence. Cardullo’s *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* is eminently readable; it is also, for someone like me, who has an interest in cinema studies in general and Bazin’s work in particular, not a little exciting.”

– Leighton Grist, Reader in Film Studies, University of Winchester, U.K.
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INTRODUCTION

André Bazin (1918–1958) may well be the most influential critic ever to have written about cinema. He is credited with almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit; and he can also be considered the principal instigator of the equally influential auteur theory: the idea that, since film is an art form, the director of a movie must be perceived as the chief creator of its unique cinematic style. Bazin contributed daily reviews to Paris’s largest-circulation newspaper, Le Parisien libéré, and wrote hundreds of essays for weeklies (Le Nouvel observateur, Télérama) as well as for such esteemed monthly journals as L’Esprit and Cahiers du cinéma (which he co-founded in 1951), the single most influential critical periodical in the history of the cinema. A social activist, he also directed ciné-clubs and, from 1945 to 1950, worked for the Communist outreach organization Travail et Culture. Moreover, Bazin befriended Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini, Orson Welles, and Luis Buñuel and was a father figure to the critics at Cahiers who would create the New Wave just after he died: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol. He even adopted the delinquent Truffaut, who dedicated The 400 Blows (1959) to him. Bazin’s influence spread to critics and filmmakers in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia, where today, for instance, Jia Zhangke salutes Bazin as formative to his artistic approach.

One of Bazin’s first essays, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), anchors much of what he would produce. It legitimates his taste for documentaries, for neorealism, and for directors who don’t use images rhetorically but instead to explore reality. Criticized by communists for writing “The Myth of Stalin in the Soviet Cinema” (1950), he would be posthumously attacked by Marxist academics for his presumed naïve faith in cinema’s ability to deliver true appearances transparently. Bazin was influenced, not by Marx, but by Bergson, Malraux, and Sartre. He specialized in literature as a brilliant student at the École normale supérieure, where he also was passionate about geology, geography, and psychology. Indeed, metaphors from the sciences frequently appear in his articles.

While many of Bazin’s acolytes are “humanists” or, in particular, devotees of the auteur theory, it is increasingly clear that Bazin attends equally in his published work to systems within which films are made and viewed, including technology, economics, and censorship. Of this published work—between 1943 and 1958, Bazin wrote around 2,600 articles and reviews—only 150 pieces or so are easy to access in anthologies or edited collections, be they in French, English, or another language. He personally collected sixty-four of his most significant pieces in the four-volume French version of What Is Cinema? (1958–62). Additional collections appeared later thanks to Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, and other devotees. Obviously, then, most of those who have written about Bazin have done so knowing only a fraction of his output.
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Still, that output is considered consistent, rich, and consequential. And Bazin’s impact will undoubtedly grow as more of his writing becomes available.

When the idea of “truth” encounters that of “cinema,” the first name that naturally comes to mind is that of Bazin. But over the past few decades, as pointed out above, this French film critic and theorist has generally been viewed as a naïve realist, someone for whom the essence of cinema lay in its mechanical, photographic ability to bring the “truth” to the screen without the all-too-partial and non-objective intervention of humans. As Noël Carroll wrote in 1996 in *Theorizing the Movie Image*, “Bazin held that the image from a film was an objective re-presentation of the past, a veritable slice of reality.” Carroll was by no means alone in identifying Bazin as someone who believed in the objectivity of the imprint that empirical reality automatically leaves on film. Jean Mitry, Christian Metz, 1970s Screen-magazine theorists, and most scholars adhering to semiological or cognitivist approaches have all dismissed Bazin’s ontological belief in film’s immediate access to, and correspondence with, empirical reality. Casting a retrospective glance at this almost unanimous rejection of Bazin, Philip Rosen has more recently argued, in “Change Mummified”: Cinema, Historicity, Theory (2001), that such a repudiation was a veritable collective obsession that allowed the then-new subject of film studies to be established as a consistent discipline in its own right. In other words, Bazin’s rejection was itself a kind of founding act.

Nowadays, it is perhaps easier to look back and discover what the writings by the co-founder of *Cahiers du cinéma* were really about. Yet, to repeat, these writings are still basically little known to date. Not long ago, Dudley Andrew and Hervé Joubert-Laurencin revived scholarly interest in this huge amount of neglected work by organizing, on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of Bazin’s death in 2008, two international conferences on the topic of “unknown Bazin.” One took place at Yale University (“Opening Bazin”) and the other at the Université Paris VII-Diderot (“Ouvrir Bazin”); and two-and-a-half years later, an edited collection (*Opening Bazin*) was published that gathered most of the talks given at those venues.

Indeed, reading the large number of “unknown”—unanthologized or untranslated—articles by Bazin leaves no doubt: he was not a naïve theorist. His was not a shallow and simplistic faith in some magical transubstantiation of reality directly on screen. Indeed, much of his writing prefigures the very theoretical movements, from the 1970s and after, which—importing concepts from disciplines like psychoanalysis, gender studies, anthropology, literary theory, semiotics, and linguistics to fashion structuralist, post-structuralist, Marxist, and feminist film theories—opposed what they saw as Bazin’s exclusively realist bias. Thus we can now dismiss the standard opinion according to which Bazin advocated cinema’s photographic ability to reproduce reality—a dismissal that has in fact already been validly formulated in various places by several scholars. One of the most interesting attempts to do so is Daniel Morgan’s “Rethinking Bazin” (2006), a careful review of all the excerpts in Bazin’s written works that talk about cinema’s photographic, replicative dimension. Morgan noticed that, on this subject, Bazin says different
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things in different places. Whatever definition of cinema we can infer from Bazin’s writings, photographic objectivity has no essential place in it.

What is perhaps more important is that Bazin himself repeatedly stigmatized the so-called “photographic objectivity” of the cinema. His articles are replete with warnings like the following: “It is not enough to shoot in the streets to ‘make it real.’ All in all, the script is more important than the fetishism of natural décor” (*Le Parisien libéré*, May 18, 1949); “Artifice and lie can walk down the streets as well as they can haunt the studios, because reality is not just in the appearance of things, but in man’s heart. Ultimately, it is also a matter of the screenplay” (*Le Parisien libéré*, November 16, 1949); “The realist destiny of cinema—innate in photographic objectivity—is fundamentally equivocal, because it allows the ‘realization’ of the marvelous. Precisely like a dream. The oniric character of cinema, linked to the illusory nature of its image as much as to its lightly hypnotic mode of operation, is no less crucial than its realism” (*Les Lettres françaises*, July 25, 1947).

In a word, cinema functions in such a way that we can believe (to some extent) that what we see on screen is true. But this does not mean that cinema can reproduce truth; on the contrary, its innate realism cannot be separated from its potential to create believable illusions. Hence, cinematic realism is not a naïve acknowledgement of what reality actually is; rather, it is dialectically linked to illusion—i.e., to its own fundamental condition. Indeed, in his one and only essay explicitly revolving around the subject of photography, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Bazin defines it as intrinsically surreal because it is a hallucination that is also a fact.

Only ostensibly the ultimate realist, the author of *What Is Cinema?* has in fact often been accused of being an idealist critic. This is not incorrect: in many ways Bazin does share the philosophical perspective of idealism, according to which matter does not exist in its own right; it is in fact a product of mind, and therefore all objects are mental creations and the whole world itself—the sum of all objects—is a mental construction. But the view that Bazin is an idealist is not correct enough, either, since one should assume all due consequences from such a premise. The most obvious (but also the least negligible) of these is that, precisely as an idealist, Bazin’s notion of reality is by no means simple. It is not limited simply to what can be found “out there,” either in the “real” world or the world as the mind projects it. Indeed, Bazin’s idealism quickly becomes a form of Catholic phenomenology, according to which any attempt at a faithful reflection of reality is really just a prerequisite—ultimately merely a pretext—for finding a transcendental or even theological truth that purportedly exists in reality and is “miraculously” revealed by the camera.

Despite common opinion from the 1960s through the 1980s—opinion that the 2008 Yale/Paris conferences, followed by the 2011 publication of their proceedings, have played a strong role in countering—Bazin paid a lot of attention to social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in his consideration of individual films, and the selections in *André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s* are meant to stress this component of his criticism. He frequently mentions in this volume, for example, the effect of the profit motive.
on the artistic quality of Hollywood productions and how, “despite its initially private character, filmmaking behaves, by reason of the target audience at which it ultimately aims, nearly like state radio” (Almanach du théâtre et du cinéma, 1951). Bazin also describes how technological developments change the expectations of audiences and how, as a result, one artistic form can become more convincing than another.

If cinema seems to be the quintessential realistic medium, according to Bazin, this is precisely because it can grasp economic, cultural, political, and psychological realities—every reality, in short, connected to the fact of human beings living together in one society. In other words, cinema’s ontological realism is not a matter of reproducing empirical reality as such; “reality” is much more than the sum of its empirical parts. As Bazin himself writes in “For a Realistic Aesthetic,” in French Cinema of the Occupation and Resistance (1975; English translation, 1981), “The cinematic aesthetic will be social, or else will do without an aesthetic.” Hence in the essay “Death on the Silver Screen” (1949), translated in my Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58 (2014), one can read of being forced “into a state of consciousness and then responsibility” in the face of impending death—the origin, according to Bazin, of both time and life—and clearly perceive the social underpinnings of postwar Sartrean existentialism. And, also in Bazin on Global Cinema, the reader will find new relevance in Bazin’s humorous defense of a 1950, American-made version of the French classic Cyrano de Bergerac (1897), so common has it become in the twenty-first century for the artists of one society or culture to recycle the artistic icons from another, sometimes quite different, one.

Related to this matter of cross-fertilization, and to return to a point I made earlier, Bazin loved to probe the system that brought films into being and sustained them in the cultural imagination, for as a daily critic he took in every sort of movie imaginable, if mainly mediocre features. Rather than try to filter from these a few crystals, he aimed to understand the entire process by which they got made, attained their shape, and achieved their value—whatever that might be. This meant genre study in the broadest sense. What psychological knot does each genre pick at? How have later variants grown out of earlier examples in the genre or drawn on contemporaneous types? What pre-cinematic avatars connect these films to longstanding cultural concerns? When, for example, in a 1951 article in L’Esprit titled “Marcel Carné and Disembodiment” (translated in my French Cinema from the Liberation to the New Wave, 1945–58 [2012]), Bazin wrote about this auteur on the occasion of his forgettable film Juliet, or the Key to Dreams (1951), it was not as a transcendent artist whose themes and sensibility deserved deep reflection; instead he used Carné’s career to ponder how genres and styles move into and out of phase with history and with the public taste.

To Bazin the cinema was thus a vast ecological system that was endlessly interesting in its interdependencies and fluctuations. He was always ready to celebrate the creativity of the director, but “the genius of the system” he found even more fascinating. Only an interdisciplinary or comparative approach could begin
to understand why even modest directors made such satisfying films during the so-called classical period, a period that Bazin could sense was on its way out. His protégés might exercise an elitist politique des auteurs, but he shamed them with their obligation to keep in mind technology, economics, sociology, and, yes, actual politics, alongside the usual approaches to film criticism borrowed from literary studies and art history.

Bazin knew quite a lot about each of these subjects and methods, but his particular genius lay in identifying some revealing textual attributes of whatever film was before him, then using these to leverage a weighty understanding of the work as a whole, or the filmmaker, or the genre, or the general conditions of filmmaking and reception. In effect, he searched for the questions to which films appear to stand as answers, letting stylistic details in the pictures themselves call up his extraordinary range of knowledge. No one before him, and no one since, has ever written about film in quite the same way, or on quite the same level.

In sum, Bazin, unlike nearly all the other authors of major film theories, was a working or practical critic who wrote regularly about individual films. He based his criticism on the film actually made rather than on any preconceived aesthetic or sociological principles; and for the first time with him, film theory therefore became not a matter of pronouncement or prescription, but of description, analysis, and deduction. Indeed, Bazin can be regarded as the aesthetic link between film critics and film theorists. During his relatively short writing career, his primary concern, again, was not to answer questions but to raise them, not to establish cinema as an art but to ask, “What is art?” and “What is cinema?”

In this Bazin was the quintessential teacher, ever paying attention to pedagogy, as is shown by his 1948 “lecture” or “presentation” on Carné’s Daybreak (1939), translated in Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58. Himself having failed to pass the French state licensing exam, after which he would have become an actual classroom teacher, Bazin was nonetheless teacherly in his belief that film criticism should help audience members to form their own critical conscience, rather than providing a ready-made one for them or merely judging films in the audience’s place. Through a kind of sociological psychoanalysis as much as through critical analysis, the film critic should educate moviegoers to deal consciously and responsibly with the “dreams” on screen that are offered to them as their own. (As a rule, Bazin’s “social psychoanalyses” through film were generated by a relevant and enlightening but barely discernible detail detected in the film’s texture, which then stimulated a more general “diagnosis” on his part.) And this is possible only if viewers get to know how those dreams, with their secret reality, work—that is, how they are expressed through every formal, technical, social, and aesthetic aspect of the cinema.

In other words, film criticism should not simply unveil how a cinematic text and the grand cinematic machine work; it should investigate how social myths and ideological formulations are foreign and intimate to the viewer at the same time. Such myths and formulations, albeit illusory, are “real” or “true” because they concretely affect the life and feelings of people, who respond accordingly. Hence
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the aim of postwar film culture in general, according to Bazin, was “to defend the public against this form of abuse of consciousness, to wake the audience from its dream … to render the public sensible to the needs or illusions that were created in it as a market, for the sole purpose of providing the opium sellers with an outlet for their drug” (Les Lettres françaises, July 25, 1947).

Regrettably, André Bazin, critic and teacher, died tragically young (he was only forty) of leukemia in 1958, an illness against which he fought bravely for years. Yet he left much material behind, in his seminal collection What Is Cinema? as well as in such magazines as L’Écran français and Les Temps modernes—some of the best of which I gathered in Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews From the 1940s and 1950s (1997), André Bazin and Italian Neorealism (2011), French Cinema from the Liberation to the New Wave, 1945–58, and Bazin on Global Cinema, 1948–58. To these earlier collections, André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s may be considered a complement. This new book contains, for the first time in English in one volume, much if not all of Bazin’s writing on American cinema: on directors such as Orson Welles, Charles Chaplin, Preston Sturges, Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, John Huston, Nicholas Ray, William Wyler, and Elia Kazan; and on films such as High Noon, Citizen Kane, Rear Window, Limelight, Scarface, Baby Doll, The Red Badge of Courage, The Best Years of Our Lives, and Sullivan’s Travels.

André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker: American Cinema from Early Chaplin to the Late 1950s also includes illustrative movie stills and features a sizable scholarly apparatus, including this contextual introduction to Bazin’s life and work, a complete bibliography of Bazin’s writings on American cinema, credits of the films discussed, and an extensive index. This volume thus represents a major contribution to the still growing academic disciplines of cinema studies and American studies, as well as a testament to the continuing influence of one of the world’s pre-eminent critical thinkers. Yet André Bazin, the Critic as Thinker is aimed, as Bazin would want, not only at scholars, teachers, and critics of film, but also at educated or cultivated moviegoers and students of the cinema at all levels. In his modesty and simplicity André Bazin considered himself such a student, such an “interested” filmgoer, and it is to the spirit of his humility before the “saint” of cinema, as well as to the steadfastness of his courage in life, that this book is dedicated.
I

THEMES AND GENRES
CHAPTER 1

WESTERNS AND AMERICANS

Howard Hughes’s *The Outlaw*

*Figure 1. The Outlaw (1943); director: Howard Hughes*

*The Best of Women Is Not Worth a Good Horse*

Even before it was shown in France, *The Outlaw* [Howard Hughes, 1943] had acquired a scandalous reputation that was bound to result in public disappointment and make it the subject of severe criticism. In the event, the film had a short run. The same people who had fought to get to see it during the first days of its run booed those sections from which they thought the most interesting scenes had been cut. They felt robbed. Reviewers for the most part adopted an indulgent and amused tone. It would have been undignified to show disappointment. One critic managed to see something else in it besides the absence of Jane Russell’s breasts. After all, he knew beforehand what he was dealing with: it would have been naïve to expect more from the Americans. But even the more aggressive critics did not make out a particularly
convincing case for seeing in the film yet another example of Hollywood’s decline and homogenization. To argue against the hypocrisy of American moralizing was too easy. And too easy also to extol the good old French bosoms of Rabelais’s nuns, Molière’s servant girls, or even the amorous stories of the eighteenth century, as opposed to this canned eroticism, as deceptive and flavorless as those California fruits that are insipid even to the worms. Surely, no one saw here the sinister hand of the Marshall Plan intending to replace the real bosoms of Jacqueline Pierre or Dany Robin with the deceptive pneumaticism of a Jane Russell. Undeniably, *The Outlaw* foundered in a sea of general indifference.

I am inclined to see in this limited attention paid to the Howard Hughes film first an injustice and second a tacit conspiracy of silence. The careless way in which the picture was dismissed in no more than a line or two, the unmistakable absence of any passionate critical feeling, seemed to me more assumed than genuine. I am afraid the assets of Jane Russell have been treated like the sour grapes in Aesop’s fable. If not, then how do we explain that one of the most erotic films ever made and one of the most sensational scripts ever filmed by Hollywood has been so little noticed?

*The Outlaw* is a western. It preserves the framework and the majority of the traditional themes of a western and some of the characteristic character types of the genre—particularly the lovable and devious sheriff whom we were so delighted to meet in William Wyler’s *The Westerner* [1940]. In a film that has retained such a purity of form as the western, any originality is measured by the slight changes that have been made to the traditional ingredients, the skill with which the screenwriter and director have succeeded in simultaneously remaining faithful to the basic rules of the genre and still renewing our delight in what we see. Jules Furthman, Howard Hughes [1905–76], and Gregg Toland have concentrated their efforts here on the style and on an unexpected switch in the female element, which in the Far West has generally been represented by two types of heroine, reflecting two complementary aspects of the same myth. The prostitute with the heart of gold in *Stagecoach* [John Ford, 1939] is on a par in the spectator’s judgment with the courageous virgin, rescued by the good cowboy from extreme danger, whom he will marry once he has proved himself and triumphed over evil. Frequently he takes the place in the girl’s life of her father or brother killed in a fight.

Thus we see clearly drawn in the western not only the obvious quest for the Holy Grail, but also, and to a more precise sociological and aesthetic extent, the mythology of chivalry founded on the essential goodness of woman, even the sinful woman. It is man who is bad. Isn’t he indeed the cause of her downfall, in spite of which the prostitute manages to preserve something of her original purity? It is the hero’s role to redeem the evil in man by undergoing trials, in order to win back the respect of womankind and to offer the protection that the female demands of him. It is this mythology that Hughes attacks, with a violence that I have found nowhere in the American cinema except in Chaplin’s *Monsieur Verdoux* [1947].

*The Outlaw* is based on contempt for woman. In contrast to their counterparts elsewhere, its heroes strive to deny the heroine their protection. They scoff at
her endlessly, abandon her, and refuse to undergo any trials. In this unbelievable anti-quest for the Holy Grail it is the woman who needs them and who undergoes the severest tests before her master will bestow even a kind glance on her. From beginning to end Jack Buetel and Walter Huston share Jane Russell, and these two sympathetic and courageous men, capable of killing each other over a horse, absolutely refuse to fight over her. It is clear that Hughes has knowingly given a general significance to his heroine. Yet Rio McDonald (Jane Russell) is not a woman who particularly deserves such treatment. The absence of any other female character who might save the good name of her sex, reminding us that “they are not all like that” through some comparison unfavorable to the heroine, is also significant. After all, Rio is not at all antipathetic. A woman of courage, she has sworn to avenge her brother, and it is only after having conscientiously tried to kill her lover, first with a revolver and then with a pitchfork, that she is raped by him. Chimène [the heroine of Corneille’s Cid (1637)], after all, did no better. One cannot reproach Rio for renouncing her vengeance after this sexual encounter. She will henceforth love with as much fervor and fidelity as she once sought vengeance. The man will even owe her his life on the night when, ill and shivering and at his last gasp from a deathly chill, the Russell character presses her naked body against his (in a scene reminiscent of The River [1929], by Frank Borzage. The crow is replaced here by a starving rooster that gobbles up eyes.)

To tell the truth, this woman is no worse than any other. There is nothing about her to give moral justification to men’s cynicism and contempt for her. In the logic of the film Rio McDonald does not deserve any particular treatment; these men simply think women are always treated better than they deserve. It is no accident, in fact, that the real scenario of The Outlaw is the story of three jealous males. Two of them, Billy the Kid (Jack Buetel) and Doc Holliday (Walter Huston), sleep with the same woman (and we know who that is)—but, after all, they love the same horse. On several occasions they come close to killing each other over the horse, but in the end they retain their friendship. This provokes the jealousy of Sheriff Pat Garrett (Thomas Mitchell), who thinks he is Holliday’s only friend. So it is that these men are incapable of jealousy except over a horse or over one another. They constitute a Spartan group in which women have no emotional role. Women exist only to have sex with or to do the cooking.

It is understandable under such circumstances that this film was banned by the American censors for four years. The official complaint had to do with the daring of some scenes, but the real objection, which was more or less admitted, was to the basic idea of the script. For it is forbidden to despise women. Even the misogyny apparent in the American crime film some years earlier is a far cry from the cynicism of The Outlaw. The blonde murderess of those crime pictures is presented as a kind of female criminal; even the men are bad. In The Outlaw no one is antipathetic; it is the order of the universe that confers his preeminence on man and makes a domestic animal out of woman—pleasant but boring, not as interesting as a real animal.
Still, *The Outlaw* should not disappoint a perceptive viewer, even on the level at which the censors tried to deal with it. I remarked earlier that those who were disappointed by the movie are either insincere or lacking in perception. Admittedly, one does not “see” very much. Objectively, if one sticks purely to what is offered for viewing, *The Outlaw* is quite the most prudish of American films. But it is precisely upon the spectator’s frustration that its eroticism is built. Suppose for a moment that the film had been made in some European country. The Swedes and Danes would have given us a front and side view of the heroine, naked; the French would have plunged the neckline of her dress to the navel and treated the spectator to some sensational kissing scenes; the Germans would have put Jane Russell into a little black nightgown and there would have been some sizzling love scenes. Altogether it is Hollywood alone that is capable of making such a picture without showing us a thing. Yet whether in a Swedish, French, or Italian version, *The Outlaw* would have much less effect on the viewer’s imagination. If an erotic film is one that is capable of provoking the audience to desire the heroine sexually and of keeping that desire alive, the technique of provocation is here brought to the peak of perfection—to the point where we see nothing but the shadow of a breast.

I strongly suspect Howard Hughes and Gregg Toland of having played an outrageous trick on the censor. It is surely not an accident that the director of *The Outlaw* was an associate of the director of *Sullivan’s Travels* [1941]. Preston Sturges and Howard Hughes were made to understand each other. These two men knew how to structure their work on what for others would be a limitation. Preston Sturges understood that the mythology of the American comedy had arrived simultaneously at both the saturation point and the point of exhaustion. There was no way to make use of the genre other than to take its excesses as the subject of a scenario. Furthman [the chief screenwriter] and Hughes had fun here by forcing the censors into the realm of pornography. On reflection, the real director of *The Outlaw* was not Howard Hughes. It was Will H. Hays, of the infamous Hays Office and the Motion-Picture Production Code. If he had been as free as a novelist to use his medium, the director would not have been forced to proceed by way of hints, to suggest rape through noises in the dark and a woman’s body by the edge of a low-necked dress. In such a case the film would certainly have been improved aesthetically, but we would have been deprived of a delightful satire on censorship. Tartuffe’s handkerchief is placed on this particular bosom in so obvious a way that not even a three-year-old child could resist the temptation to pull it off. From unsatisfied desire to obsession, thus do we proceed …

And so it is that Mr. Hays caters to the erotic dreams of millions of citizens—all good fathers, good husbands, good fiancés. What leads me to believe that the makers of the film knew exactly what they were doing, is the staggering skill with which they were able to play along the fine edges of the censorship code and not overstep the authorized limits by a hair’s breadth, while constantly making us conscious of the moral prohibition that weighed on their undertaking. Otherwise *The Outlaw* would have been just a daring film, violent and realistic. It was the censorship code
that turned it into an erotic film. Gregg Toland, for his part, must have had great fun lighting the throat of Jane Russell, scrupulously focusing on that milk-white patch barely hollowed out by a shadow, whose mere presence had the frustrated spectators dithering with resentment. The critics themselves can perhaps be excused for not having understood The Outlaw. All they saw in the film, for the best of reasons, was what they did not see.

For those particularly interested in the phenomenology of Hollywood eroticism, I would like to draw attention to a curious shift of emphasis between the publicity for this film and the film itself. The posters for The Outlaw show Jane Russell with lifted skirt and generously low-cut dress. In reality it is only her bosom that counts in the movie. The fact is that in the past seven or eight years the center of eroticism in the American cinema has shifted from the thigh to the bosom, but the public is not yet sufficiently aware of this change of frontier to allow the publicity departments to dispense with their traditional sources of stimulation (Revue du cinéma, August 1948).

A Meta-Western: Fred Zinnemann’s High Noon

Of all the discernible genres in the history of cinema, the western is the only one whose development can be followed without interruption from the very origins of
cinema until the present day, without any indication of a decline in its favor with the public or, as a result, with the producers. Of the nearly 400 films produced every year by Hollywood, around ninety are westerns. It’s a fact that the majority of this output is of highly inferior quality, shot over just a few days with almost laughable means, and featuring editing that is completed with stock footage. The infatuation of television with the western, as well as TV’s consumption of cheap movies in general, is obviously bound to lower the already low bar of these cinematic productions, whose intellectual and formal level approaches that of the Sunday newsreels. But the proliferation of such mediocre films at least showcases the popularity of westerns, and their numbers do not exclude honorable products with sufficient stylistic means and accomplished actors—around twenty or thirty of which appear each year. It is in this latter category, which naturally has its own hierarchy of quality, where we find nearly all the westerns that make the rounds—however briefly—on the Parisian circuit.

What’s most stunning, however, is not so much the permanence of the western genre but its fidelity to itself. Where comedy is concerned, for example, the burlesque style of Mack Sennett didn’t survive at all beyond the mid-1920s. From that period only Chaplin managed to persevere up until *Limelight* [1952], yet at the cost of a series of radical evolutions to his style. But American film comedy hasn’t shined too brightly now for more than ten years. The crime thriller, for its part, has changed its skin many times, from *Underworld* [Josef von Sternberg, 1927] to *Naked City* [Jules Dassin, 1948], paying homage to its “noir” ancestor along the way. In spite of the evolution of film technique, beyond even the matter of individual taste or the wider context of historical events, only the western has remained true to itself—to the essence of its dramatic or moral themes and formal style—without interruption for nearly forty years. The western can’t be defined, then, only by the geographical or historical localization of its scenario. That is just the frame of an action whose limited variations are reduced in the final analysis to various combinations of intangible motifs given life by characters that exist only to fulfill their function.

Sometimes, it must be said, the unconsciously Corneillian side of westerns has been parodied. It’s true that a lot of these movies contain manifest analogies to *The Cid* [1637]. But on both sides, seventeenth-century French drama and the twentieth-century western, an implicit conception of women in relationship to ethical imperative—in short, a sense of chivalry—may be found. Being ambiguous, then, the parody serves at the same time to underline the greatness of the western by virtue of its allusive subject and style. Indeed, it could well be said that in our day the western constitutes the only authentic refuge for tragedy and the epic. For in it we find the very kind of transcendent moral ethos that serves as the basis for Corneillian drama.

It may seem paradoxical to talk about the greatness and seriousness of a genre that passes more readily for something puerile and naïve. In the theater as in literature, naïveté and courage may not go hand in hand anymore after one or two centuries. But in film, one can still find, between 1925 and 1935, some admirable and important
westerns that are both naïve and courageous—and as anonymous as the eleventh-century *Song of Roland*. (I remember one of them that Henri Langlois was quite proud of presenting at the Cinématèque Française back in 1947.) Without a doubt, it is necessary to consider such naïveté as a constituent part of the western: it wouldn’t be able to lose it without ceasing to be its courageous self, and this in fact has become the fundamental problem of the genre in the last fifteen years of its history.

We could consider *Stagecoach* [1939] as the high point in the evolution of quality westerns. What is wonderful about John Ford’s film is that it combines the force of naïveté, of simplicity, with the advantages of intelligence. Admirably laid out, his scenario never overwhets the themes that it introduces, just as the characters, in spite of their richness, never overwhelm the roles that they fill like eggs in their shells. From this classic point of equilibrium, it was surely inevitable that the crisis of the western would itself evolve. We owe to it a series of remarkable films between 1940 and 1946, among them William Wyler’s *The Westerner* [1940], Howard Hughes’s *The Outlaw* [1943], and Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* [1946]. What these films have in common is precisely the avowal of the impossibility of naïveté. Each of them tries in its own way to surpass the traditional western, whether through irony, like *The Outlaw*, through psychology, like *The Westerner*, or by means of brilliant formal variations, like *My Darling Clementine*.

It is as if great directors were aiming here at reevaluating a genre that had reached the critical point, at least among mediocre practitioners, where oft-repeated tradition becomes tired convention. For the best artists, it’s about staying on the same road but going in a slightly different direction. Just as we have been able to talk about the meta-novel, then, I’d readily call this type of film the meta-western.

The producer Stanley Kramer and the director Fred Zinnemann [1907–97] give us a great example of the meta-western today with *High Noon* [1952]. It certainly has been a long time since we saw—in the western or any other genre—an American film made with such vigor and intelligence. I would even say that the films of John Huston couldn’t compare with it. The marshal of a small town has married a young Quaker woman; out of respect for the convictions of his wife, who opposes the violence that comes with his job, he plans to resign and leave the area. It’s then that he learns about the imminent return, on the noon train, of a criminal he had captured five years ago and who has just been pardoned by the “Northern” authorities. Three members of his gang wait for him at the station, and they know that their first job will be to help their boss take revenge against the law officer who once jailed him. It’s 10:30 in the morning. As of now, the marshal is no more: he’s officially a civilian who has the right to leave this whole sordid affair to his successor. Even better, the entire town wants it that way: they’d like him to depart immediately with his wife, as intended.

However, the marshal *must* remain despite himself and his fear, against the will of his fellow townspeople and his wife, who rebukes her husband for breaking his promise to quit his post on the day of their marriage. At first the marshal doesn’t doubt that he can find the help he needs to face the four bandits, but little by little he succumbs to the evidence that, whether because of cowardice, self-interest, or even
fellow-feeling (on the part of those who encourage him to flee from a pointless fight), everybody shies away. He ends up completely isolated, abandoned by everyone to confront alone the four men sworn to kill him. Flight was still possible before the train arrived, but backing off now would mean running away and affirming the futility of any resistance on the marshal’s part. The private and public reasons for sacrificing himself to the law then become revealed one after the other, and because of them there is no acceptable course of action except to go in vain to the death that awaits him on the noon train. The marshal is Gary Cooper, whose old and weary mask slowly becomes one of fear, loneliness, and despair. The man who played the eccentric but winning Longfellow Deeds in Frank Capra’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* [1936] is now just a long, vacillating silhouette in tall cowboy boots as he wanders down deserted streets.

What I will criticize about *High Noon*, in spite of its evident and even exceptional qualities, may be those qualities themselves. Without question, this is one of the three best westerns since *Stagecoach* (the other two being *The Westerner* and *My Darling Clementine*). But my admiration for it is not without qualification. More precisely, my admiration is for the film more than for its protagonist. I was certainly drawn in by the vigorous action, which respects the unities of time and place until it becomes a challenge to do so, but in the end my nerves and my intelligence were affected more than my heart. At no moment did I feel goosebumps because of any sincere, innocent attachment to the protagonist. Rather than as a “western in the shape of tragedy,” as the critic Jacques Doniol-Valcroze described *High Noon*, I see this film as a tragedy in the shape of a western—a tragedy whose relationship to the traditional tragic themes of the western is similar to that of Jean Anouilh’s 1944 play *Antigone* to Sophocles’ classic drama of the same name [441 B.C.]. No doubt adroitly, Zinnemann detours from the genre’s natural destination to arrive at a dramatic universe of which only the appearance and artifice remain.

I well understand that we could add such an asset to the film’s capital. But only if we suppose that westerns couldn’t survive as quality films except at the price of self-deception—which, in the case at hand, turns out to be nothing more than clever decadence. This is precisely what, in my opinion, is refuted by the twenty or thirty worthy westerns produced each year, of which I spoke above. I believe that, for the most part, the episode of the meta-western is ending and that we will see a return to the values of the classical western: that is, if the American studios don’t sacrifice quality to quantity by reducing the budgets for all of these films.

The last few months in Paris, we have been able to see two westerns very characteristic of the type of film in which adherence to the rules of the genre is respected, but only through the first half, which naturally results in a reduction in quality. In both these pictures we find a subject similar, in dramatic as well as moral terms, to that of Zinnemann’s *High Noon*. They are *The Gunfighter* [Henry King, 1950], with Gregory Peck, and *Along the Great Divide* [Raoul Walsh, 1951], with Kirk Douglas. In the first one, an aging gunfighter exposes himself during a three-
hour period to the danger of being killed; love prevents him from fleeing his fate on time. In the second, a sheriff stubbornly resists, against all apparent reason and moderation, an angry mob that wants to lynch a cattle thief and suspected murderer; this stubborn resistance on the sheriff’s part eventually costs the lives of several innocents and should cost him his life, as well.

Unlike in High Noon, the treatment of the scenarios in both The Gunfighter and Along the Great Divide sadly suffers from many concessions or gaps, and each picture’s mise en scène, sometimes admirable, is visibly cut off in other places. There is no intellectual perspective, no detachment on the part of either director from his subject such that we would be moved to see “something else,” or “something more” than a western: no psychological subtlety, no social thesis, invites us to look beyond the pure game of combining traditional themes with standard devices.

I certainly admire Zinnemann’s film, but I would have preferred these two to it had they been perfectly executed (France-Observateur, October 9, 1952).

The Western, or the American Film par excellence

Figure 3. Stagecoach (1939); director: John Ford

The western is the only genre whose origins are almost identical with those of the cinema itself, and which is as alive as ever after almost half a century of uninterrupted
success. Even if one disputes the quality of its inspiration and of its style since the
1930s, one has to be amazed at the steady commercial success that is the measure of
its health. Doubtless the western has not entirely escaped the evolution of cinematic
taste—or indeed taste, period. It has been and will again be subjected to influences
from the outside—for instance, those of the crime novel, the detective story, or the
social problems of the day—and its pristine simplicity and strict form have suffered
as a result. We may be entitled to regret this, but not to see in it a state of decay.
These influences are felt only in a few productions of relatively high standing and do
not affect the low-budget films aimed principally at the home market.

Furthermore, it is as important for us to marvel at the western’s capacity to resist
such influences as to deplore these passing moments of contamination. Anyway,
every influence acts on westerns like a vaccine; the microbe, on contact, loses its
deadly virulence. In the course of fifteen years, the American comedy, for its part,
has exhausted its resources. If it survives in an occasional success, this is only to the
extent that, in some way, it abandons the rules that before the World War II made
for successful comedy. From Underworld [Josef von Sternberg, 1927] to Scarface
[Howard Hawks, 1932], the gangster film had already completed the cycle of its own
growth. The scenarios of detective stories themselves have developed rapidly, and
if it is still possible to rediscover an aesthetic of violence within the framework of
the criminal adventure that they share with Scarface, we would nonetheless be hard
put to see in the private eye, the journalist, or the G-man a reflection of the original
hero. Moreover, if there is such a genre as the American detective film, one cannot
attribute to it the independent identity of the western; the literature that preceded it
has continued to influence the detective genre, and the latest interesting variants of
the crime film derive directly from that literature.

By contrast, the durability of western heroes and plots has been demonstrated
recently by the fabulous success on television of the old Hopalong Cassidy films.
The western does not age. Its worldwide appeal is even more astonishing than its
historical survival. What can there possibly be to interest Arabs, Hindus, Latins,
Germans, or Anglo-Saxons, among whom the western has had an uninterrupted
success, about evocations of the birth of the United States of America, the struggle
between Buffalo Bill and the Indians, the laying down of the railroad, or the
Civil War?! The western must possess some greater secret than simply the secret
of youthfulness. It must be a secret that somehow identifies the western with the
essence of cinema.

It is easy to say that because the cinema is movement, the western is cinema
par excellence. It is true that galloping horses and fights are its usual ingredients.
But in that case the western would simply be one variety of adventure story. Again,
the continuous movement of the characters, carried almost to a pitch of frenzy, is
inseparable from the genre’s geographical setting, and one might just as well define
the western by its set: the frontier town and its landscape. It’s true that other genres
and schools of filmmaking have made use of the dramatic poetry of landscape, for
example the silent Swedish film, but although it contributed to their greatness it did
not insure their survival. Better still, sometimes, as in *The Overlanders* [Harry Watt, 1946], a western theme is borrowed—in this case the traditional cattle drive—and set in a landscape, here central Australia, reasonably like the American West. The result, as we know, was excellent. But fortunately no attempt was made to follow up this paradoxical achievement, whose success was due to an unusual combination of circumstances. If in fact westerns have been shot in France against the landscapes of the Camargue, one can only see in this additional proof of the popularity and healthiness of a genre that can survive counterfeiting, pastiche, or even parody.

It would be hopeless, then, to try to reduce the essence of the western to one or another of its manifest components. The same ingredients are to be found elsewhere but not the same benefits that appear to go with them. For this reason, the western must be something else again than its form. Galloping horses, fights, strong and brave men in a wildly austere landscape—these could not add up to a definition of the genre nor could they encompass its charms. The formal attributes by which one normally recognizes the western are simply signs or symbols of its profound reality, namely its myth. The western was born of an encounter between a mythology and a means of expressing it: the saga of the Old West existed before the cinema in literary or folkloric form, and the multiplication of western films has not killed off western literature, which still retains its public and continues to provide screenwriters with their best material. But there can be no comparison between the limited national audience for western stories and the worldwide audience for the films that they inspire. Just as the miniatures of the Christian devotional *Book of Hours* served as models for the statuary and the stained-glass windows of the cathedrals, this western literature, freed from the bonds of language, finds a distribution on the screen in keeping with its size—almost as if the dimensions of the image had become one with those of the imagination.

Jean-Louis Rieupeyrout’s book *The Western, or the American Cinema Par Excellence* [for which Bazin was here writing the preface], by the way, will emphasize a little-known aspect of the western: its faithfulness to history. This is not generally recognized—primarily, doubtless, because of our ignorance, but still more because of the deeply rooted prejudice according to which the western can only tell extremely puerile stories, fruits of a naïve power of invention that does not concern itself with psychological, historical, or even material verisimilitude. True, few westerns are explicitly concerned with historical accuracy. True, too, these are not the only ones of any value. It would be absurd to judge the western figure of Tom Mix—still more of his majestic white horse—or even of William Hart or Douglas Fairbanks, all of whom made lovely films during the great primitive period of the genre, by the yardstick of archaeology.

After all, many current westerns of honorable standing—I am thinking of *Along the Great Divide* [Raoul Walsh, 1951], *Yellow Sky* [William Wellman, 1948], and *High Noon* [Fred Zinnemann, 1952]—have only a tenuous relation to historical fact. They are primarily works of imagination. But one would be as much in error not to recognize the historical references in the western as to deny the unabashed
imagine the freedom of its screenplays. Rieupeyrout gives a complete account of
the birth of its epic-like idealization, based on comparatively recent history, yet it
could be that his study, concerned to recall for us what is ordinarily forgotten, or
even not known, and confining itself to films that justify his thesis, discards by
implication the other side of the aesthetic coin. Still, this would show him to be
doubly right. For the relations between the facts of history and the artistry of the
western are not immediate and direct, but dialectical. Tom Mix is the opposite of
Abraham Lincoln, but after his own fashion he perpetuates Lincoln’s cult and his
memory. In its most romantic or most naïve form, the western is the opposite of
a historical reconstruction. And there is no difference between such figures of the
imagination as Hopalong Cassidy and Tarzan except for their costume and the arena
in which they demonstrate their prowess. However, if one wanted to take the trouble
to compare their delightful but unlikely stories and to superimpose on them, as is
done in modern physiognomy, a number of negatives of faces, an ideal western
would come through, composed of all the constants common to one such picture or
another: a western made up solely of unalloyed myth. Let us take one example from
among the many faces of the western, that of woman.

In the first third of many a western, the good cowboy meets the pure young
woman—the good and strong virgin, let us call her—with whom he falls in love.
Despite its chasteness we are able to guess that this love is shared. However, virtually
insurmountable obstacles stand in its way. One of the most significant and most
frequent comes from the family of the beloved—for instance, her brother is a sinister
scoundrel and the good cowboy is forced to rid society of him, man to man. A modern
Chimène, after the heroine of Corneille’s *The Cid* [1637], our heroine refuses to see
in her brother’s assassin any sort of a fine fellow. In order to redeem himself in his
charmer’s eyes and merit forgiveness, our knight must now pass through a series of
fabulous trials. He ends by saving his elected bride from a danger that could be fatal
to her person, her virtue, her fortune, or all three at once. Following which, since
we are now near the end of the film, the damsel would indeed be ungrateful if she
did not feel that her suitor had repaid his debt, and allow him to start dreaming of
fathering lots of children.

Up to this point, such an outline—into which one can weave a thousand variants,
for example by substituting the Civil War or cattle rustlers for the Indian threat—
comes close to reminding us of the medieval courtly romances by virtue of the
preeminence given to the woman and the trials that the finest of heroes must undergo
in order to qualify for her love. But the story is often complicated by a paradoxical
character, the saloon B-girl, who as a rule is also in love with the cowboy. So there
would be one woman too many if the god of the screenwriter were not keeping
watch. A few minutes before the end, the prostitute with the heart of gold rescues the
man she loves from some danger or other, in the process sacrificing her life and her
hopeless love for the happiness of her cowboy. This also serves to redeem her in the
eyes of the spectators.
There is food for thought here. Note, first of all, that the distinction between good and bad applies only to the men. Women, all up and down the social scale, are in every case worthy of love or at least of esteem or pity. The least little prostitute is redeemed by love and death—although she is spared the latter in *Stagecoach* [John Ford, 1939], with its resemblance to de Maupassant’s short story “Butterball” [1880]. It is true that the good cowboy himself is more or less a reformed offender, so that henceforth only the most moral of marriages with his heroine becomes possible. Accordingly, in the world of the western, it is the women who are good and the men who are bad, so bad that the best of them must redeem themselves from the original sin of their sex by undergoing various trials. In the Garden of Eden, Eve led Adam into temptation. Paradoxically, Anglo-Saxon puritanism, under the pressure of historical circumstances, reverses the Biblical situation. The downfall of woman only comes about as a result of the concupiscence of men.

Clearly, such a theory derives from the actual sociological conditions obtaining in the western’s primitive society, which, because of the scarcity of women and the perils of too harsh an existence in this burgeoning world, make it imperative to safeguard the society’s female members and its horses. Hanging was considered enough punishment for stealing a horse. To engender respect for women more was needed than the fear of a risk as trifling as the loss of one’s life, namely the positive power of myth. The myth of the western depicts, and both initiates and confirms, woman in her role as vestal of all the social virtues, of which this chaotic world is so greatly in need. Within her is concealed the physical future and—by way of the institution of the family, to which she is drawn as the root is drawn to the earth—it\textquoteleft s moral foundation.

The western myths, of which we have just examined what is perhaps the most significant example (next in line is the myth of the horse), may themselves doubtless be reduced to an even more essential principle. Basically each of them particularizes, in the form of an already specific dramatic plot, the great epic Manichaeism that sets the forces of evil over against the knights of the true, good cause. The immense stretches of prairie, of deserts, of rocks, to which the little wooden town clings precariously (a primitive amoeba of civilization), are exposed to all manner of possible menace. The Indian, who lived in this world, was incapable of imposing on it man\textquoteleft s order; he mastered it only by identifying himself with its pagan savagery. The white Christian, on the other hand, is truly the conqueror of a new world. The grass sprouts where his horse has passed. He simultaneously imposes on such a world his moral and his technical order, the one linked to the other and the former guaranteeing the latter.

The physical safety of the stagecoaches, the protection given by the federal troops, the building of the great railroads—these are perhaps less important to the western than the establishment of justice and respect for the law. The relationship between law and morality, which in ancient European civilization is just a subject for an undergraduate paper, was half a century ago the most vital topic confronting
the youthful United States. Only strong, rough, and courageous men could tame those virgin lands. Yet everyone knows that familiarity with death does not itself keep alive the fear of hell, nor do ethical debates or everyday scruples. Policemen and judges may be of most help to the weak, but it was the force of this conquering humanity that constituted its weakness. Where individual morality is precarious, then, it is only law that can impose the order of the good and the good of order.

The law is unjust, however, to the extent that it pretends to guarantee a moral society but ignores the individual merits, or demerits, of those who constitute that society. If it is to be effective, justice must be dispensed by men who are just as strong and just as daring as the criminals. Such virtues, as I’ve suggested, are in no way compatible with virtue in the absolute sense. The sheriff is not always a better person than the man he hangs. This problematic situation begets and establishes an necessary, inevitable contradiction: there is often little moral difference between the outlaw and the man who operates within the law. Still, the sheriff’s star must be seen as constituting a sacrament of justice, whose worth does not depend on the worthiness of the man who administers it. To this first contradiction a second must be added: the administration of justice, which, if it is to be effective, must be drastic and speedy—short of lynching, though—and thus must ignore extenuating circumstances, such as alibis that would take too long to verify. In protecting society, such a form of justice runs the risk of unkindness to the most turbulent, though not perhaps the least useful nor even the least deserving, of its children.

Although the need for law was never more clearly allied to the need for morality than in the world of the western, at the same time never was their antagonism more concrete and more evident. It is this that provides a basis, within a slapstick framework, for Charlie Chaplin’s *The Pilgrim* [1923], at the conclusion of which we see our hero riding his horse along the borderline between good and evil, which also happens to be the Mexican border. John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, which is a fine dramatic illustration of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, or the antagonism between law and morality, demonstrates that a prostitute can be more respectable than the people who drove her out of town and just as respectable as an officer’s wife; that a dissolute gambler knows how to die with all the dignity of an aristocrat; that an alcoholic doctor can practice his profession with competence and devotion; that an outlaw who is being sought for the payment of past and possibly future debts can show loyalty, generosity, courage, and refinement, whereas a banker of considerable standing and reputation runs off with the cashbox.

So we find at the source of the western the ethics of the epic and even of tragedy. The western is in the epic category because of the superhuman level of its heroes and the legendary magnitude of their feats of valor. Billy the Kid is as invulnerable as Achilles and his revolver is infallible. The cowboy is a knight-at-arms. The style of the *mise en scène* is in keeping with the character of the hero: a transformation into the epic is evident in the set-ups of the shots, with their predilection for vast horizons, all-encompassing images that constantly bring to mind the conflict between man and
nature. The western has virtually no use for the close-up, even for the medium shot, preferring by contrast the traveling shot and the pan, which refuse to be limited by the frame-line and which restore to space its fullness.

True enough. But this epic style derives its real meaning only from the morality that underlies and justifies it. It is the morality of a world in which social good and evil, in their simplicity and necessity, exist like two primary, basic elements. But good in its natal state engenders law in all its primitive rigor; and epic becomes tragedy on the appearance of the first conflict between the transcendence of social justice and the individual character of moral justice, between the categorical imperative of the law that guarantees the order of the future city and the no less unshakeable order of the individual conscience.

The Corneille-like simplicity of western scripts has often been a subject for parody. It is easy to see the analogy between them and the text of *The Cid*: there is the same conflict between love and duty; the same knightly ordeals on the completion of which the wise virgin will consent to forget the insult to her family; the same chaste sentiments that are based on a concept of romance subordinated to respect for the laws of society and morality. But this comparison is double-edged, for to make fun of the western by comparing it to Corneille is also to draw attention to its greatness—a greatness near perhaps to the childlike, just as childhood is near to poetry. Let there be no doubt about it: this naïve greatness in westerns is recognized by simple men in every clime (together with their children) despite differences of language, landscape, customs, and dress. The epic-cum-tragic hero is a universal character. The Civil War may be part of nineteenth-century history, but the western has turned it into the Trojan War of the most modern of epics. And the migration to the West is our *Odyssey* [800 B.C.].

Not only is the historicity of the western not at odds with the no less evident penchant of the genre for outlandish situations, exaggerations of fact, and the use of the *deus ex machina* (in short, everything that makes for improbability); it is, on the contrary, the foundation of the western’s very aesthetic and its psychology. The history of film has only known one other epic cinema, and that too is a historical cinema. My purpose here is not to compare epic form in Russian and American film, and yet an analysis of each one’s style would shed an unexpected light on the historical meaning of the events reconstructed in the two of them. My sole aim here is to point out that it is not their closeness to the facts that has given these respective cinemas their styles. For there are legends that come into being everywhere almost instantaneously, which half a generation suffices to ripen into an epic.

Like the conquest of the West, the Soviet revolution is a collection of historical events that signal the birth of a new order and a new civilization. Both the Soviets and the Americans have begotten the myths necessary for the confirmation of history; both had to reinvent a morality to rediscover, at the source and before admixture or pollution took place, the foundation of law that would make order out of chaos, separate heaven from earth. But perhaps the cinema was the only language capable of expressing such an idea, above all of giving it its true aesthetic dimension.
CHAPTER 1

Without the cinema the conquest of the West would have left behind, in the shape of the western story, only a minor literature; and, similarly, it is neither by its painting nor its novels that Soviet art has given the world a picture of its grandeur. The fact is that henceforth the cinema is the specifically epic art. (Preface to the book *Le Western ou le cinéma américaín par excellence*, 1953, by Jean-Louis Rieupeyrout)

The Evolution of the Western

By the eve of World War II the western had reached a definitive stage of perfection. The year 1940 marks a point beyond which some new development seemed inevitable, a development that the four years of war delayed and then modified, though without controlling it. *Stagecoach* [1939] is the ideal example of the maturity of a style brought to classic perfection. John Ford struck the ideal balance in this film among social myth, historical reconstruction, psychological truth, and the traditional *mise en scène* of the western; none of these elements dominated any other. *Stagecoach* is like a wheel, so perfectly made that it remains in equilibrium on its axis in any position. Let us list some additional names and titles for 1939–40: King Vidor: *Northwest Passage* [1940]; Michael Curtiz: *The Santa Fe Trail* [1940], *Virginia City* [1940]; Fritz Lang: *The Return of Frank James* [1940], *Western Union* [1941]; John Ford: *Drums Along the Mohawk* [1939]; William Wyler: *The Westerner* [1940]; and George Marshall, *Destry Rides Again*, with Marlene Dietrich [1939; a

*Figure 4. Shane (1953); director: George Stevens*
disappointing remake of this film was shot in 1954 by the same George Marshall, with Audie Murphy].

This list is significant. It shows that the established directors, having perhaps begun their careers twenty years before with serial westerns made almost anonymously, turn (or return) to the western at the peak of their careers—even Wyler, whose gift seemed to be for anything but this genre. Such a phenomenon can be explained by the widespread publicity given westerns between 1937 and 1940. Perhaps the sense of national awareness that preceded the war in the Roosevelt era was a contributing factor. We are disposed to think so, insofar as the western is rooted in the history of the American nation, which it exalts directly or indirectly. In any case, this period supports Jean-Louis Rieupeyrout’s argument for the historical realism of the western, as propounded in his book The Western, or the American Cinema Par Excellence [Paris: Collection Septième Art, Éditions du Cerf, 1953].

But by a paradox more apparent than real, the war years, properly so-called, almost removed the western from Hollywood’s repertoire. On reflection this is not surprising. For the same reason that westerns multiplied and were admired at the expense of other adventure films, the war film was to exclude them, at least provisionally, from the market. As soon as the war seemed virtually won and even before peace was definitely established, the western reappeared and was again made in large numbers. This new phase of its history deserves a closer look.

The perfection, or the classic stage, which the genre had reached implied that it had to justify its survival by introducing new elements. I do not pretend to explain everything by the famous law of successive aesthetic periods, but there is no rule against bringing it into play here. Take the new films of John Ford: My Darling Clementine [1946] and Fort Apache [1948] could well be examples of baroque embellishment of the classicism of Stagecoach. All the same, although this concept of the baroque may account for a certain technical formalism or for the relative preciousness of this or that scenario, I do not feel that it can justify any further complex evolution on the western’s part. This evolution must doubtless be explained in relation to the level of perfection reached in 1940 but also in terms of the events of 1941 to 1945.

Let us call the ensemble of forms adopted by the postwar western the “superwestern.” For the purposes of our exposé, this word will bring together phenomena that are not always comparable. It can certainly be justified on negative grounds, in contrast to the classicism of the forties and the tradition of which it is the outcome. The superwestern is a western that would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence—an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, or erotic interest, in short some quality extrinsic to the genre that is supposed to enrich it. We will come back later to these adjectives. But first we should indicate the influence of the war on the evolution of the western after 1944. The phenomenon of the superwestern would probably have emerged anyway, but its content would have been different had World War II not come along.
The real influence of the war made itself deeply felt after it was over. The major films inspired by it come, naturally, after 1945. But the world conflict not only provided Hollywood with spectacular scenes, it also provided, and indeed forced on the movie industry, some subjects to reflect upon, at least for a few years. History, which was formally only the raison d'etre of the western, henceforth will often become its subject: this is particularly true of Fort Apache, in which we see the beginning of the political rehabilitation of the Indian, which we continue to see in numerous westerns up to Apache [Robert Aldrich, 1954] and is particularly exemplified in Broken Arrow [Delmer Daves, 1950]. But the profounder influence of the war is undoubtedly more indirect, and one must look to find it wherever a film substitutes a social or moral theme for the traditional one. The origin of such thematic substitution goes back to 1943, with William Wellman's The Ox-Bow Incident, of which High Noon [Fred Zinnemann, 1952] is a distant relation. (However, in Zinnemann's film it is also a rampant McCarthyism that is under scrutiny.)

Eroticism in the western may also be seen to be at least an indirect consequence of the war, to the extent that it derives from the triumph of the pin-up girl. This is probably true of Howard Hughes's The Outlaw [1943]. Love itself, however, is for all intents and purposes foreign to the genre. (Shane [George Stevens, 1953] will rightly exploit this situation.) Which is all the more reason for the appearance of eroticism as a dramatic springboard, implying that henceforth the genre itself is just being used as a foil to set off the sex appeal of the heroine. There is no doubt that this is what was intended in Duel in the Sun [King Vidor, 1946], whose luxurious spectacle provides a further reason, albeit on formal grounds, to classify it as a superwestern.

Yet High Noon and Shane remain the two films that best illustrate the mutation in the genre as an effect of the awareness it has gained of itself and its limits. In the former, Fred Zinnemann combines the effect of moral drama with the aestheticism of visual composition. I am not one of those who turn up their noses at High Noon: I consider it a fine film and prefer it to Stevens' film. But the great skill exemplified in Carl Foreman's adaptation (from a story by John W. Cunningham) was his ability to combine a narrative that might well have been developed in another genre with a traditional western theme. In other words, he treated the western as a form in need of a content.

As for Shane, this is the ultimate in “superwesternization.” In fact, with it, George Stevens set out to justify the western—by the western. The other westerns do their ingenious best to extract explicit themes from implied myths, but the theme of Shane is the myth itself. In this film Stevens combines two or three basic western subjects, the chief one being the knight errant in search of his grail, and so that no one will miss the point, Stevens dresses him in white. White clothes and a white horse are taken for granted in the Manichean world of the western, but it is clear that the costume of Alan Ladd here carries with it all the weighty significance of a symbol, while on Tom Mix such clothing was simply the uniform of goodness and daring.
So we have come full circle. The earth is round. The superwestern has gone so far beyond itself as to find itself back in the Rocky Mountains. Indeed, if the western were about to disappear, the superwestern would be the perfect expression of its decadence, of its final collapse. But the western is definitely made of quite other stuff than the American comedy or crime film. Its ups and downs do not affect its existence very much. Its roots continue to spread under the Hollywood humus, and one is amazed to see green and robust shoots spring up in the midst of the seductive but sterile hybrids with which some would replace them.

To begin with, the appearance of the superwestern has only affected the more out-of-the-ordinary productions: those of the A-film and the superproduction. These surface tremors have not disturbed the financial nucleus, the central block of the ultra-commercial westerns, conventional or musical, which may now even have found a second youth on television. (The success of the Hopalong Cassidy series is a witness to this and proves likewise the vitality of the myth, even in its most elementary form.) Their acceptance by the new generation guarantees them several more cycles in the years to come. But low-budget westerns themselves never came to France, and we have to be satisfied with an assurance of their survival from the personnel of American distribution companies. If their aesthetic interest, individually, is limited, their existence is nonetheless probably decisive for the general health of the genre. It is in these “lower” layers, whose economic fertility has not diminished, that the traditional western has continued to take root. Superwestern or no superwestern, then, we are never without the B-western, which does not attempt to take refuge in intellectual or aesthetic alibis.

Indeed, maybe the notion of the B-film itself is open to dispute, since everything depends on how far up the scale you put the letter A. The A-productions I am talking about are frankly commercial, probably fairly costly, relying for their acceptance only on the reputation of their leading man and a solid story without any intellectual ambitions. *The Gunfighter*, directed by Henry King [1950] and starring Gregory Peck, is a splendid example of this attractive type of production, in which the classic theme of the killer, sick of being on the run and yet forced to kill again, is handled within its dramatic framework with great restraint. We might mention, too, *Across the Wide Missouri* [1951], directed by William Wellman and starring Clark Gable, and particularly *Westward the Women* [1951] by the same director. In *Rio Grande* [1951], John Ford himself clearly returned to the semi-serial format or at any rate to the commercial tradition—romance and all. So it is no surprise also to find on this list Allan Dwan, an elderly survivor from the pioneer days who for his part has never forsaken the old Triangle [the combined production companies of Keystone, KayBee, and Fine Arts] style, even when the liquidation of McCarthyism gave him the chance to broaden the scope of long-standing themes (as in *Silver Lode*, 1954).

I still have a few more points to make. The classification I have used up to now turns out to be inadequate, and therefore I must no longer explain the evolution of the
western genre by the western genre itself. Instead I must take the auteurs themselves into greater account as a determining factor. It will doubtless have been observed that the list of relatively traditional productions which have been little influenced by the superwestern includes only names of established directors, who even before the war specialized in fast-moving adventure films. It should come as no surprise, then, that their work affirms the durability of the western and its laws. Howard Hawks, for one—at the height of the vogue of the superwestern—should be credited with having demonstrated that it had always been possible to turn out a genuine western based on the old standbys of drama and spectacle, without distracting our attention with some social thesis or, what would amount to the same thing, by the very form given to the production. To wit, Hawks’s *Red River* [1948] and *The Big Sky* [1952] are western masterpieces, and there is nothing baroque or decadent about them. In each of these pictures, the understanding and awareness of the aesthetic means matches perfectly the sincerity of the story.

The same goes for Raoul Walsh, all due allowances being made, whose *Saskatchewan* [1954] is a classic example of a borrowing from American history. But his other films provide me—and I am sorry if this is a little contrived—with the transition I was looking for: *Colorado Territory* [1949], *Pursued* [1947], and *Along the Great Divide* [1951] are, in a sense, perfect examples of westerns just above the B-level, made in a pleasantly traditional dramatic vein. Certainly there is no trace of a thesis in any of them. We are interested in the characters because of what happens to them, and nothing happens that is not in perfect accord with the idea of the western. But there is something about these movies that, if we had no information about their date, would make us place them at once among more recent productions, and it is this “something” that I would like to define. I have hesitated a great deal over what adjective best applies to these westerns of the 1950s. At first I thought I ought to turn to words like “feeling,” “sensibility,” or “lyricism.” In any case I think that these words must not be dismissed and that they describe pretty well the character of the modern western as compared with the superwestern, which character is almost always intellectual—at least to the degree that it requires the spectator to reflect before he can admire.

All the titles I am about to list belong to films that are, if not less intelligent than *High Noon*, at least without an ulterior motive or hidden agenda, and in which talent is always a servant of history and not of the meaning behind history. There is another word, maybe more suitable than those I have suggested or that provides a useful complement: it is “sincerity.” I mean by this that the directors play fair with the genre even when they are conscious of “making a western.” At the stage to which we have come in the history of the cinema, naïveté is hardly conceivable, but although the superwestern replaces naïveté with preciousness or cynicism, we have proof that it is still possible to be sincere. Nicholas Ray, shooting *Johnny Guitar* [1954] to the undying fame of Joan Crawford, obviously knows what he is about in this regard. He is no less aware of the rhetoric of the genre than the
George Stevens of *Shane*, and, furthermore, the script and the director are not without their humor; but not once does Ray adopt a condescending or paternalist attitude toward his film. He may have fun with it but he is not making fun of it. He does not feel restricted in what he has to say by the limits of the western, even if what he has to say is decidedly more personal and more subtle than its unchanging mythology.

It is with an eye on the style of the narrative, rather than on the subjective attitude of the director toward the genre, that I will finally choose my epithet. I say freely of the westerns I have yet to name—the best in my view—that they are “novelistic.” By this I mean that without departing from the traditional themes of the western, they enrich those themes from within through the originality of their characters, their psychological flavor, and an engaging individuality on each character’s part, which is what we expect from the hero of a novel. Clearly, when one talks about the psychological richness of *Stagecoach*, one is talking about the way psychology is used and not about any particular character. For the latter we remain within the established casting categories of the western: the banker, the narrow-minded woman, the prostitute with a heart of gold, the elegant gambler, and so on. In *Run for Cover* [Nicholas Ray, 1955] we have something else again. The characters and their situation are still just variations on the tradition, but what attracts our interest is their uniqueness rather than their generality. We know also that Nicholas Ray always treats his pet subject here, namely the violence and mystery of adolescence. The best example of this “novelization” of the western from within is provided by Edward Dmytryk in *Broken Lance* [1954], which we know is only a remake of Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *House of Strangers* [1949]. For the uninformed, *Broken Lance* is simply a western that is subtler than the others, with more individualized characters and more complex relationships, but which stays no less rigidly within the limits of two or three classic themes. In point of fact, Elia Kazan himself treated a psychologically somewhat similar subject with great simplicity in his western *Sea of Grass* [1947], with Spencer Tracy.

We can imagine many intermediate grades between the most dutiful B-western and the novelistic kind, and my classification is inevitably somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless I offer the following idea. Just as Walsh is the most remarkable of the traditional veterans, Anthony Mann could be considered the most classical of the young novelistic directors. We owe the most beautifully true western of recent years to him. Indeed, the author of *The Naked Spur* [1953] is probably the one postwar American director who seems to have specialized in a field into which others have made only sporadic incursions. In any case, each of Mann’s films reveals a touching frankness of attitude toward the genre, an effortless sincerity to get inside its themes and there to bring to life appealing characters and invent captivating situations. Anyone who wants to know what a real western is, and the qualities it presupposes in a director, has to see Mann’s *Devil's Doorway* [1950], with Robert Taylor, his *Bend of the River* [1952], and his *The Far Country* [1954], with James Stewart.
if the viewer does not know these three films, he simply has to know the finest of all, *The Naked Spur*. Let us hope that CinemaScope will not rob Anthony Mann of his natural gift for direct and discreet use of the lyrical, and above all of his infallible sureness of touch in bringing together man and nature, that feeling of the open air, which in his films seems to be the very soul of the western, and as a result of which he has recaptured—but at the level of the hero of the novel and no longer of the hero of the myth—the great lost secret of the Triangle days.

The above examples show that, within the genre, a new style and a new generation have come into existence simultaneously. It would be both going too far and naïve to pretend that the novelistic western is just something created by young men who came to filmmaking after the war. You could rightly refute such a presumption by pointing out that this quality is evident in 1940’s *The Westerner*, for example, and there is something of it in the veteran Hawks’s *Red River* and *The Big Sky*, as well. People assure me, although I myself do not detect it, that there is much of the novelistic western in Fritz Lang’s *Rancho Notorious* [1952]. In any event it is certain that King Vidor’s excellent *Man Without a Star* [1954] is to be viewed from this perspective, somewhere between Nicholas Ray and Anthony Mann. So we can certainly find three or four “novelistic” films made by the veterans to place alongside those that the younger men have made. In spite of everything, it is chiefly the newcomers who delight in the western that is both classic and novelistic: Robert Aldrich is the most recent and brilliant example of this with *Apache* and especially *Vera Cruz* [1954].

There remains the problem of CinemaScope. This filmic process was used for *Broken Lance, Garden of Evil* [Henry Hathaway, 1954]—which has a good script, at once classic and novelistic, but treated without great inventiveness—and *The Kentuckian* [Burt Lancaster, 1955], which bored the audience at the Venice Festival to tears. I know of only one film in CinemaScope that has added anything of importance to the creation of *mise en scène*, namely Otto Preminger’s *River of No Return* [1954], photographed by Joseph LaShelle. Yet how often I have read or even myself written that, while enlarging of the screen is not called for elsewhere, the new CinemaScopic format will renew the western, whose wide-open spaces and hard riding cry out for wide horizons. But this deduction is too pat and likely-sounding to be true. The most convincing examples of the use of CinemaScope have been in psychological films such as *East of Eden* [Elia Kazan, 1955]. I would not go so far as to say that, paradoxically, the wide screen is unsuitable for westerns or that it adds nothing to them; still, it seems to me already an accepted notion that CinemaScope will add nothing decisive to this field. (We have a reassuring example of this in *The Man from Laramie* [1955], in which Anthony Mann does not use CinemaScope as a new format in itself but as an extension of the space around man.)

The western, whether in its standard proportions, in CinemaScope or VistaVision, or even on a super-wide screen, will remain the western we hope our grandchildren will still be permitted to know (*Cahiers du cinéma*, December 1955).