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Book Review: Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000

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Westerns in a Changing America, 1955-2000. By R. Philip Loy. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004. viii + 320 pp. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paper.

This is a survey of Western movies made over the past half century which attempts to

plot their meanings against the social and political history of America during that time. Using his own personal observations and the ideas of a small number of historians, the author finds that the films closely reflect changes in American society during this period.

Loy's account of these changes is mostly unexceptionable. He notes developments in racial attitudes and in the position of women, and he points to the effects of the Vietnam War and the rise of the baby boomer generation, with its questioning of authority. Unfortunately, the book's organization leads to a lot of repetition. Thus a chapter on Sam Peckinpah's films inevitably leads to a discussion of Vietnam, but so does a later chapter on John Wayne. Loy might have made better use of his material had he decided to organize it thematically.

It's a book that seems to have been written in innocence of what has happened in film studies over the last thirty years. Authorship is a question that concerns him not at all. Loy moves from a chapter on the work of a movie star to one on the work of a director without any recognition that these are different categories. At times he seems almost to imply that movie stars are responsible for their own lines. Thus *Jubal* is hailed as "an excellent example of how [Glenn] Ford used dialogue to assist viewers in understanding his character." When it comes to a star who also became a director, Loy attributes the nature of the Eastwood hero entirely to the star's own choices, made even before he became a director: "Eastwood's major contribution, then, to Westerns is the appearance of a new kind of hero. . . ." Yet Eastwood himself has frequently acknowledged the influence of his two early mentors, Don Siegel and Sergio Leone.

At times Loy's observations descend to the banal, as when he tries to argue that because *How the West Was Won* focuses on a family, it therefore reflects the country's fascination with the Kennedy family. There is surely a problem here in Loy's unquestioning employment of the notion that films simply "reflect" society. The cinema is not a mirror but an institution, subject, like all institutions, to multiple determinations, including economics, other

films, and the talents of individuals. Among these are, undoubtedly, broad social forces, but these never appear unmediated in films. Some recognition of the complexities of these relationships might have avoided some of the more simplistic connections that Loy asserts.

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