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Book Review: Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood

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Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood. By Jim Kitses. London: BFI Publishing, 2004. 342 pp. Photography, notes, filmography, bibliography, index. \$70.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

First published in 1969, *Horizons West* was one of the early structuralist treatments of a Hollywood genre and a pivotal text in American writing on the Western. Borrowing from anthropological studies of myth, Kitses outlined a series of binary oppositions between the individual and the community, nature and culture, the West and the East, and wedded this thematic outline to a stylistic explora-

tion of three directors: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, and Sam Peckinpah. The book signaled serious academic consideration of Westerns not only as a legitimate art form but also as a complex and meaningful expression of American cultural history. Other studies followed—by authors such as Will Wright, John Cawelti, and Richard Slotkin—and criticism based on plots and themes in the films dominated scholarly conversations about Westerns for decades.

In this substantially revised and expanded edition, Kitses returns to this signature interest in both *auteur* directorial vision and the “collective ritual” of narrative form, adding chapters on John Ford, Sergio Leone, and Clint Eastwood. His mapping of the individual vs. the communal in Western themes parallels his methodological focus on the personal visions of the films’ directors within the shared conventions of the genre. The new chapter on Ford takes up almost a third of the new edition and focuses on the tensions between Ford’s primary themes of the “embattled community, the need for strong leadership and sacrifice” and “the promise of new life.” Kitses also argues for the centrality of Westerns to the directorial identities of Mann and Eastwood, who are known for other films as well as Westerns. He suggests that Mann’s heroes are “overreachers” in their violent, psychologically frayed sojourns in far frontiers, that Boetticher’s small-scale “miniaturist aesthetics” and thematic variations have caused his work to be underestimated and overlooked, and that Peckinpah’s somewhat uneven work as an “oppositional artist” contributes to the genre by “exposing the negative of the myth and its classical iconography.” The strength of the book is clearest in the chapters on Leone and Eastwood, which emphasize the conversations between filmmakers who have influenced and informed one another over time.

The new edition is a useful overview of six major directors, a densely descriptive homage to the genre, and a touchstone in the history of film genre criticism. Critics familiar with the 1969 edition will appreciate the way Kitses has

updated and elaborated on his initial premises. Readers new to Western genre criticism should see the work as an important strand in a broad range of critical discourses that now includes, among others, studies of gender in Westerns by Lee Clark Mitchell and Jane Tompkins, materialist, industry-based analyses by Peter Stanfield, Peter Lehman's extensive readings and re-readings of John Ford's *The Searchers*, deconstructive approaches to representations of Native Americans by Armando José Prats, and archival work on silent Westerns by Scott Simmons. For those who wish to understand the formative contributions of structuralism in genre studies, *Horizons West* is essential reading.

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