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## Review of The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western.* By Jon Tuska. Reprint; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988. Photographs, epilogue, notes, bibliography, index. xix + 303 pp. \$10.95.

German filmmaker Fritz Lang once observed that the Western is to America what the *Nibelungen Saga* is to Germany. Set during a relatively brief period in American history, the Western genre mythologized America's confrontation with a vast frontier. Themes center on the conflict between savagery and civilization, community and the rugged individual, lawlessness and social order. Many critics have argued that the Western is primarily a vehicle for American imperialist ideology, and thus, only peripherally about the historical settlement of the West.

Jon Tuska's concern in *The American West in Film* is primarily for the authenticity of the historical representation presented in Westerns. The book is rich in historical detail, comparing the people and events from the nineteenth century with their twentieth-century cinematic counterparts. Tuska's thesis is that Westerns have presented a "systematic distortion and misrepresentation of our past" and subsequently had a negative influence on our national character (p. xiv). Tuska's interest is in an evaluation of the ideological contents of the Western. His concept of "ideological evaluation," however, most closely resembles traditional humanistic

approaches found in historical criticism. Tuska expresses well-deserved moral indignation over the treatment of women and Native Americans in Westerns. The films he reviews are primarily products of the studio era of filmmaking, and prevailing racism and sexism in their content is unfortunate but common. As to the lack of realism in Westerns, Tuska seems to be conflating "realism" as a mode of Hollywood filmmaking and "realistic" in the sense of recreating reality. Westerns are among our most formulaic, highly-stylized genres; consequently Tuska's search for historical accuracy was likely to be frustrated.

Tuska reviews hundreds of films and his comparison to either their historical or literary sources is highly valuable. He tracks the evolution of creative work in great detail and through this process exposes the pressure of the genre to re-form the original.

*The American West in Film* may be of more interest to social historians than to film scholars. Tuska shows little awareness of the ideological critical work that has grown out of post-structuralism. Tuska's more idiosyncratic, historical approach is a highly entertaining view of the Western genre from a man with an astonishingly wide acquaintanceship with the films and personal friendships with the filmmakers.

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