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## Review of *Western Movies* Edited by William T. Pilkington and Don Graham

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*Western Movies*. Edited by William T. Pilkington and Don Graham. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979. Illustrations, notes, and bibliography. ix + 157 pp. \$13.95 cloth and \$6.95 paper.

Western movies have been around so long and captured such wide audiences precisely because they reflect and comment upon some of the most enduring features of American culture. We have all grown up with the commonalities (and banalities) of the stock western: the noble hero, the comic or weakling sidekick, the schoolmarm, the villain. If these stereotypes were all there were to it, the western genre would long since have gone the route of, say, the novels of Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth.

The value of westerns, like that of many other genres, is that they speak to present concerns as well as to a mythic past. What puts westerns in the forefront in this regard is their tendency to paint the American experience in bold and unabashed strokes. The best and worst in our past is usually on dress parade: heroic action, romantic adventure, and ringing calls to duty; racism, indiscriminant violence, and undiluted badmen.

In this slim collection, the editors bring together discussions of fourteen westerns, including two versions of *The Virginian* (1929 and 1946). In writer's time these pieces date from an excerpt from Robin Wood's biography of Howard Hawks (1968) dealing with *Rio Bravo* (1959) to analyses of *Fort Apache* (1948) by William Pilkington and of *High Noon* (1952) and *The Great Northfield Minnesota*

*Raid* (1972) offered by Don Graham—all three written especially for this volume. In screen time the films range from the first *Virginian* to Arthur Penn's weird and woolly *The Missouri Breaks* (1976).

As with most collections, these articles form a disparate lot. The editors contribute a useful introduction which, while overstating the case for the western by calling it "America's unique contribution to that body of mythic lore familiar to most of the human race" (p. 1), nevertheless correctly sees the genre as multifaceted and rich in interpretative opportunities. Various analytical approaches are offered, including "auteur," allegorical, "structural," and "genre." A possible cavil is that the articles may have been selected as much for their variety as for their strength of analysis.

The only straight historical interpretation is that of Dan Georgakas, who aptly punctures

the smug and pretentious "Indianness" of *A Man Called Horse* (1970). Other thoughtful articles are presented by Graham on *High Noon* and Jack Nachbar on *Ulzana's Raid* (1972). The clinker in the collection is an attempt by David Clandfield to examine *Stagecoach* (1939) by onomastics, playing a word association game that almost parodies scholarship.

Overall, this book offers a representative group of articles, contributed mostly by scholars in the humanities and fine arts. Fourteen films do not a genre make, but the film choices have been well made and the varying approaches are generally insightful if not profound. But then, profundity and the motion picture have waged indecisive war for three-quarters of a century.

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