

- Russell, *American Artist* (St. Louis: Jefferson National Expansion Historical Association, 1982), p. 84. Russell expressed much the same sentiment in another letter to Joe Schaurle, possibly around 1916: "The Red man was the true American. They have almost gon [sic]. But will never be forgotten. The history of how they fought for their country is written in blood, a stain that time cannot grind out"; from *Good Medicine: The Illustrated Letters of Charles M. Russell* (New York: Doubleday, 1929), p. 127.
27. Edward D. Castillo, review of *Dances with Wolves: Film Quarterly* 44 (Summer 1991), p. 16.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
30. Michael Blake's novel (*Dances with Wolves* [New York: Fawcett Gold Medal Book, 1988]) makes Dunbar's cultural anxiety even more apparent than the expanded film does. Some relevant passages: "Suddenly it was clear as a cloudless day. The skins belonged to the murdered buffalo and the scalps belonged to the men who had killed them; men who had been alive that very afternoon. White men. The lieutenant was numb with confusion. He couldn't participate in this, not even as a watcher. He had to leave." (p. 167). The scene concludes with Dunbar racked with existential anxiety over his indeterminate place in the world: "More than anything he wanted to believe that he was not in this position. He wanted to believe he was floating toward the stars. But he wasn't. He heard Cisco lie down in the grass with a heavy sigh. It was quiet then and Dunbar's thought turned inward, toward himself. Or rather his lack of self. He did not belong to the Indians. He did not belong to the Whites. And it was not time for him to belong to the stars. He belonged right where he was now. He belonged nowhere. A sob rose in his throat. He had to gag to stifle it. But the sobs kept coming up and it was not long before he ceased to see the sense in trying to keep them down" (pp. 167-168).

## WOMEN AND THE WESTERN

Pam Cook (1988)

Recently, the American West has once again become disputed territory. Historians have turned their attention to women's participation in the westward trek and have discovered, to no great surprise, that their real contribution was far more extensive and diverse than traditional histories and literature have led us to believe.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to movies, the picture is much the same: the impoverished range of female stereotypes on offer (mother, schoolteacher, prostitute, saloon girl, rancher, Indian squaw, bandit) never matches up to reality. In the epic battle between heroes to tame the wilderness, the heroines who fought to change the course of history (the suffragettes, farmers, professional women) fare badly—even the maligned American Indian has been afforded the dubious luxury of liberal reassessment.

It's tempting to put this down, as many critics have,<sup>2</sup> to the male oedipal bias of the Western, a narrative based on a masculine quest for sexual and national identity which marginalizes women. Fruitful though this approach may be, it has not really come to terms with the dual, contradictory role of women. On the one hand she is peripheral (Budd Boetticher: "What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one ... who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance?"). On the other hand she is central (Anthony Mann: "In fact, a woman is always added to the story because without a woman the Western wouldn't work?"). By the same token, the demand for more realistic images of women does not account for the fact that what lingers in the memory, refusing to be dismissed, is a series of extraordinary heroines, from Mae West's



Feminine ideal and adventure: Phoebe Titus (*Jean Arthur*) in Arizona.



Klondike Annie and Doris Day's Calamity Jane, to Joan Crawford's Vienna and Barbara Stanwyck's Jessica Drummond. The search for realism is perhaps rather self-defeating in a genre which is more concerned with myth than historical accuracy. It might be more illuminating to shuffle the deck (bearing in mind that female card-sharps in the Western are few and far between) and see what permutations emerge.

Following Henry Nash Smith, the frontier has often been seen in symbolic terms as a boundary or barrier between opposing ideas: the Garden/Wilderness dichotomy translating into Culture/Nature, and so on. This formulation has both a relationship to actual events (the breaking down of the barrier between East and West under pressure from eastern expansion), and also a link with psychic and social reality (the loss of boundaries of sexual difference, as eastern "feminine" values came into contact with the "masculine" Wild West). Not surprisingly, then, many Westerns work away at the problem of re-establishing sexual boundaries: it's unusual for the woman who starts out wearing pants, carrying a gun and riding a horse to be still doing so at the end of the movie. Suitably re-clad in dress or skirt, she prepares to take her place in the family, leaving adventure to the men.

Of course, the hero's destiny is also circumscribed: rather than remain a nomad, he has to become civilized and participate in building a new society inside rather than outside the law. In both cases, the rehabilitation can be ambivalent, but the results are different. Over and over again, the woman relinquishes her desire to be active and independent, ceding power to the hero and accepting secondary status

as mother figure, educator and social mediator. If she is allowed to be active, it is in the hero's cause rather than her own; in *High Noon* (1952), the young Quaker wife puts aside her pacifist principles to support her husband's heroic stand.

This pattern is remarkably consistent, but the most interesting Westerns explore its inherent tensions. *Stagecoach* (1939), directed by John Ford, whose reverence for motherhood and family is legendary, produced some significant reverberations: the East/West conflict is centred on two women, the respectable Lucy Mallory and the prostitute Dallas, and is played out at the point of life and death as the stagecoach and its motley group of passengers come under attack from savage Apaches. The hope for future civilization (revolving around who is a "good mother": Mrs. Mallory, who gives birth during the journey, or Dallas) lies not with the effete, class-conscious visitors from the East, but with the westerners, who in spite of their "illegality" have an instinctive compassion and sense of right and wrong. Dallas herself, reviled by the snobbish easterners, is presented as a more "natural" mother than Lucy Mallory: shots of her cradling Lucy's baby while the stage is under attack are quite transgressive, since prostitutes are outside the family and the law. It's true that the resolution is entirely conventional: Dallas is the civilizing force that brings the outlaw Ringo back into society. Nevertheless, she remains an ambiguous figure, half prostitute, half wife, partly because of the positive value attached by Ford to renegades and social outcasts.

Similar tensions are worked through in *My Darling Clementine* (1946), where East meets West in the confrontation between schoolteacher Clementine and westerner Wyatt Earp. Clementine is a civilizing influence on Earp, but he makes the passage from Nature to Culture unwillingly, as though resisting the colonizing impetus of the East; and while the wild saloon girl Chihuahua is banished from the scene, her memory lurks in the shadows as a reminder of what civilization represses.

Male ambivalence towards home and family is also at the center of *The Lusty Men* (1952), but here Louise Merritt's resistance to the virile, itinerant world of the rodeo to which her husband Wes becomes attached is given a positive critical force. Jeff West friend, wants to quit that world, and is attracted to Louise; tragically, he is unable to escape either the rodeo's competitive ethos or the male alliances on which it is based. The film's focus on its heroes' crisis of identity paradoxically allows space in the masculine Western scenario for Louise's own problems with her wife/mother role.

A mother who resists her secondary status is Ma Callum in *Pursued* (1947), a film noirish Western which approaches its subject in an unusually introspective way. The hero, Jeb, is prevented from achieving proper manhood by Ma Callum's refusal to give him essential knowledge about his past. Only when she tells him the truth, in effect relinquishing the control she has guarded so jealously, can he pass into adult masculinity. Simultaneously powerful and powerless, mothers in the Western do indeed reflect the two sides of the Mann/Boetticher coin.

If the good mother represents the feminine ideal in the Western, what then of the "bad girls," the law-breakers against which the ideal is measured? These shady ladies threaten to upset the applecart by challenging men on their own ground; adventurers all, they demand equal status and refuse to take second place. At first, anyway, they wear pants and brandish guns, own land, property and business,

demand sexual independence. It's true that this is usually only temporary—if the tomboy has not abandoned her transvestite garb for the arms of the hero by the end of the movie, then she comes to a sticky end. (In *Arizona* [1940], Phoebe Titus' independence is revealed as masquerade and she cedes the struggle to laconic westerner Peter Hunsey.) Nevertheless, the passage to femininity is not always smooth; the bad girl's vacillation between tomboy and wife, with its attendant cross-dressing games, offers some interesting possibilities.

*Calamity Jane* (1953), contains some extraordinary gender confusions which its somewhat arbitrary double wedding finale does not entirely iron out. Calamity's feminization is not quite complete—at the end of the movie she is back in buckskins as gun-toting guard of the Deadwood Stage, while her marriage to hero Wild Bill Hickok is haunted by the spectre of the scene in which, for the slightest of narrative excuses, he dresses as an Indian squaw. The combination of a comedy-of-errors with the utopian structure of the musical and Western conventions enables an egalitarian fantasy (one which the traditional Western mobilizes in order to undermine) to prevail.<sup>3</sup> In a different way, Marlon Brando's dressing up as a pioneer woman in *The Missouri Breaks* (1976) also brings to the surface some of the unspoken contradictions in the Western's privileging of masculine desires.

Both these films exploit and expose a potential perversity at the heart of the genre, its regressive drive to elude the law of the father, to play forbidden games. The tomboy offers a different sort of erotic pleasure from the mother, one focused on her bottom, and which provokes the desire of the hero to spank her. This sexual ruse, usually played for laughs, is a kind of parody of the father/daughter, father/mother power relations which will eventually put the tomboy in her place. In *Dodge City* (1939), Errol Flynn offers to spunk Olivia De Havilland when she has the temerity to want to work on the town newspaper and contribute actively to the town's political development. Their rough and tumble is a playful prelude to a more serious confrontation, apparently a reversal of roles, in which De Havilland lays out for Flynn the moral necessity of his defending the burgeoning community against the villain. De Havilland's passage to mother figure is played out against two other feminine stereotypes, seen as less than ideal: the saloon girl, who sides with the villain, and the comically ineffectual, repressive temperance league women. The heroine's successful putting aside of her tomboy identity brings the errant hero back into society, and so ushers in progress.

There are women whose status as good or bad Western heroines is less easily defined, sisters to the *femmes fatales* of film noir. These duplicitous creatures often inhabit revenge Westerns, which focus on the hero's obsessive drive to seek out and kill his *alter ego* for a crime committed against his family. The woman takes on a sphinx-like quality: she both represents, and holds the key to, the enigma he must resolve. In *Winchester '73* (1950), the neurotic hero, Lin McAdam, is matched by an ambivalent heroine, Lola Manners, who may or may not be a prostitute, may or may not be complicit with villain Waco Johnnie Dean, but is indirectly responsible for the latter's death at the hands of McAdam. Her ambivalent status is maintained until the end, as she and McAdam embrace, his long-time buddy High Spade looks on with a quizzical expression as if to question his friend's judgment.

Occasionally, the duplicitous heroine takes on a more sympathetic, tragic hue. In Fritz Lang's extraordinary Brechtian Western, *Rancho Notorious* (1952), the hero Vern's obsession with avenging the death of his wife turns him into a ruthless, inhuman monster whose sadistic attitude towards the woman, Alar Keane, whom he believes holds the secret to his wife's murder, turns out to be an error of judgment with dire consequences. Believing Alar to be complicit with the murderer, Vern realizes his mistake too late, after Alar dies saving his buddy Frency's life. Partly because of distancing techniques used in image, sound and narrative, this is one of a few Westerns in which the overriding male perspective is brought into question. Alar is explicitly seen as a victim of Vern's need to project on to an external image his own violent, destructive urges. In *Rancho Notorious*, women are finally evacuated from the scene completely, as Vern and Frency ride off together.

*Hannie Caulder* (1971) puts its heroine in the vengeful hero's place. Hannie sets out to avenge her own rape and her husband's murder, acquiring sharp-shooter skills and much-abbreviated masculine garb (a hat, boots and man-with-no-name-style poncho, but no pants). In spite of an obvious intention to titillate, *Hannie Caulder* also manages to produce some interesting reflections on male heroism. Hannie learns from her mentor (who later dies—no easy romantic transition here) the practical and emotional skills required to be a westerner. No room for compassion or love—Hannie must stand alone in the wilderness. She succeeds in killing the villains, satisfying justice, and at the end she is not returned immediately to home and family. But in an elegiac conclusion, she comes face to face with a mysterious man in black who has haunted her progress, and whose presence is a reminder of a final boundary Hannie can never cross. For women can never really be heroes in the Western: that would mean the end of the genre.

The Western is haunted by the fear of miscegenation, the myth of the rapacious Indian bent on capturing and breeding with white women. When white women mate with Indians, the results are generally catastrophic: the woman is seen to be contaminated by the primitive (polygamous) laws of the wilderness and henceforth unfit for monogamous family life. It's different when a civilized white man mates with an Indian woman. Surprisingly, perhaps, Indian women are often quite positively portrayed as noble, brave, intelligent and self-sacrificing. But this is merely a variation on the mother figure, whose function is to smooch the way for the male transition to maturity. In *The Big Sky* (1952), Teal Eye enables the relationship between Jim and Boone to move beyond the latently homosexual to a mature friendship, also allowing the younger Boone to overcome his hatred of Indians, while in *Run of the Arrow* (1957) Yellow Moccasin supports O'Weara through his crisis of national identity, even to the extent of giving up her Sioux nationhood to return with him to the States when the crisis is over.

Sometimes, however, the race/sex/nation conflict is less easily resolved. Ethan Edwards, the hero of *The Searchers* (1956), is a classic westerner. Solitary, asexual and taciturn, he is driven to seek out and destroy his *alter ego*, the Comanche chief Scar, epitome of the primitive sexuality Ethan's culture represses. Ethan and his quest are imbued with epic overtones: nevertheless, his rescue of his niece Debbie from Scar's clutches is seen as a highly ambiguous act on a par with Scar's original act of

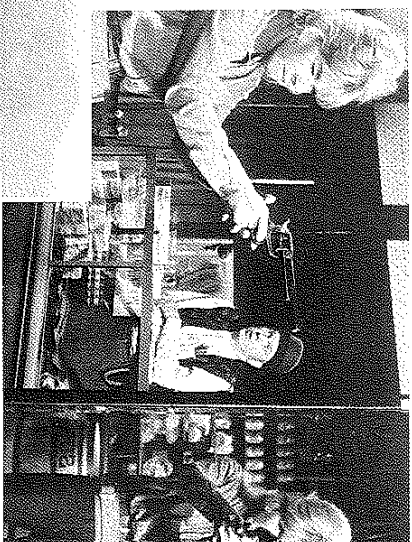
abduction, since Debbie makes it clear she wants to remain with the Indians. Debbie's refusal to see herself as a victim, or to accept a position as object of exchange between the two cultures, doesn't affect her final destiny; but it does allow a criticism of Ethran's racist puritan code to surface, a criticism not entirely erased by the elegiac overtones of the hero's final act of walking out alone into the desert. Five years later, in *Two Rode Together* (1961), Ford's criticism becomes more explicit. Marshal McCabe (James Stewart) rejects the racist attitudes of cavalry and white settlers by leaving for California with Elena, a kidnapped white girl turned Indian squaw.

King Vidor's magnificently melodramatic *Duel in the Sun* (1946) unusually focuses on a woman's crisis of identity. Its racially ambiguous heroine, Pearl Chavez (daughter of a white father and Mexican Indian mother) vacillates between two lovers (the "good" brother Jesse, epitome of civilized eastern values, and the "bad" brother Lewt, barbaric and brutal), who represent the struggle within herself between good and evil, wife and tomboy. Pearl is unable to accept her feminine role as Jesse's wife and pursues her transgressive desire for Lewt. On one level, the struggle is between the "primitive" Indian and "civilized" white in Pearl—her inability to control her sexual desire is partly responsible for her death. But melodrama's characteristic focus on female desire turns the normal moral order on its head: the forces of civilization become forces of repression which lead precisely to the excess which brings about Pearl and Lewt's deaths. Pearl Chavez's tragedy is that of all the Western's tomboys, writ large.

One reason for the Western's decline could be its resistance to the impact of social change. One attempt to capitalize on an emerging women's movement was *The Ballad of Josie* (1967), a comedy Western starring Doris Day as Josie Mirnick, the wife of a violent alcoholic in nineteenth century Wyoming territory, forced to become an independent woman after his death. After a succession of menial jobs, she uses her savings to set up a sheep farm in what has traditionally been cattle country, provoking a range war. The film attempts a blending of contemporary feminist issues (wife-battering, child custody, job discrimination) with historical material like prostitution and women's suffrage, set against the characteristic trajectory of the Western heroine from tomboy to wife; but the feminist influence sits uneasily with the Western narrative.

Perhaps the nearest Hollywood has come to a feminist Western, *Johnny Guitar* (1954), predates the modern women's movement by more than a decade and does not deal directly with social issues at all. Set in a timeless desert wasteland with only the most perfunctory signs of civilization in evidence, *Johnny Guitar* is overtly presented as myth. Vienna, the film's extraordinary heroine and one of the most compelling female images the Western has produced, has often been seen as a feminist ideal, a woman who survives on equal terms with men (though reservations have been expressed about the misogynist representation of Vienna's opponent, Emma Small, and the disappointing shoot-out between the two women).<sup>4</sup> Vienna is certainly unusual: a powerful combination of several Western heroines in one (a gunslinger, a musician and a successful entrepreneur who outwits everyone by buying up land to capitalize on the coming of the railroad, she is sexually independent but also mother to the disillusioned Johnny and the Dancin' Kid's gang). Feminine in her white dress, masculine in black shooting gear, she moves between tomboy and mother figure with

The Ballad of Josie (right), Hattie Cauder (below), Duel in the Sun (bot. right): "Women can never really be heroes in the Western; that would mean the end of the genre."



ease, demonstrating and maintaining a level of control allowed to very few women. But the film's feminism goes deeper than this, extending to a criticism of the Western's male values. Destructive masculine drives have gone out of control, creating a world dominated by death, betrayal and revenge. Emma Small is complicit in this process, while Vienna keeps a distance, speaking out against moral disintegration, expressing perhaps director Nicholas Ray's own disillusionment with the U.S. in the grip of McCarthyism. It is in this light, rather than as a failure of her positive qualities, that Vienna's half-hearted shoot-out with Emma Small can be seen. Vienna has had enough of death and revenge; she and Johnny leave the ranchers, bankers and outlaws to their own devices. At the end of *Johnny Guitar*, still in pants, still more than equal to any man, having successfully resisted all attempts to bring her down, Vienna bids farewell to the Western.

## NOTES

1. Sandra L. Myres, *Westerning Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979).
2. For example John Cawelli, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1971).
3. Mandy Merck, "Travesy on the Old Frontier" in *Move Over Misperceptions: Doris Day Reappraised* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).
4. Jacqueline Levin, "The Western: any good roles for feminists?" *Film Reader* no. 5, 1982.

## SALOON GIRLS AND RANCHERS' DAUGHTERS: *The Woman in the Western*

Blake Lucas (1998)

**O**f all the misconceptions which have come to attach themselves to the Western, none is more saddening or wrong-headed than the notion that women are unimportant in it. When they are conceded a place in accounts of the genre, it is customarily a marginal one or at best a significant but strictly symbolic role. The myth that the traditional heroine of a Western is a passive and pallid figure has inevitably led to the belief that her role must be subverted, and it can be interesting for a woman to literally shoot her way into the center of the action. But scorn of the more familiar types of Western women presents to us the depressing possibility that the classical Western—a genre without equal in its 1946-1964 golden age—may come to be undervalued and rejected as a model, and that along with this many Western heroines who have never been truly appreciated and celebrated will be forgotten. It's time to see the Western in a different light—not as a masculine genre but as one supremely balanced in its male/female aspect and one of the finest places for women characters in all of cinema.

Some kind of alchemy blesses artistic forms which are especially rich—think of the sonnet or the string quartet—and of narrative forms, the Western movie is one of the most satisfying. Its combination of landscape and dramatic motifs endlessly stimulating. Here and in the older forms cited, expressiveness and invention go hand in hand with a respect for the specific limitations of the form. So the best Westerns tend to cleave closely to familiar outlines, the same basic characters and situations steadily recurring but revitalized by individual artists and at times given the force of revela-