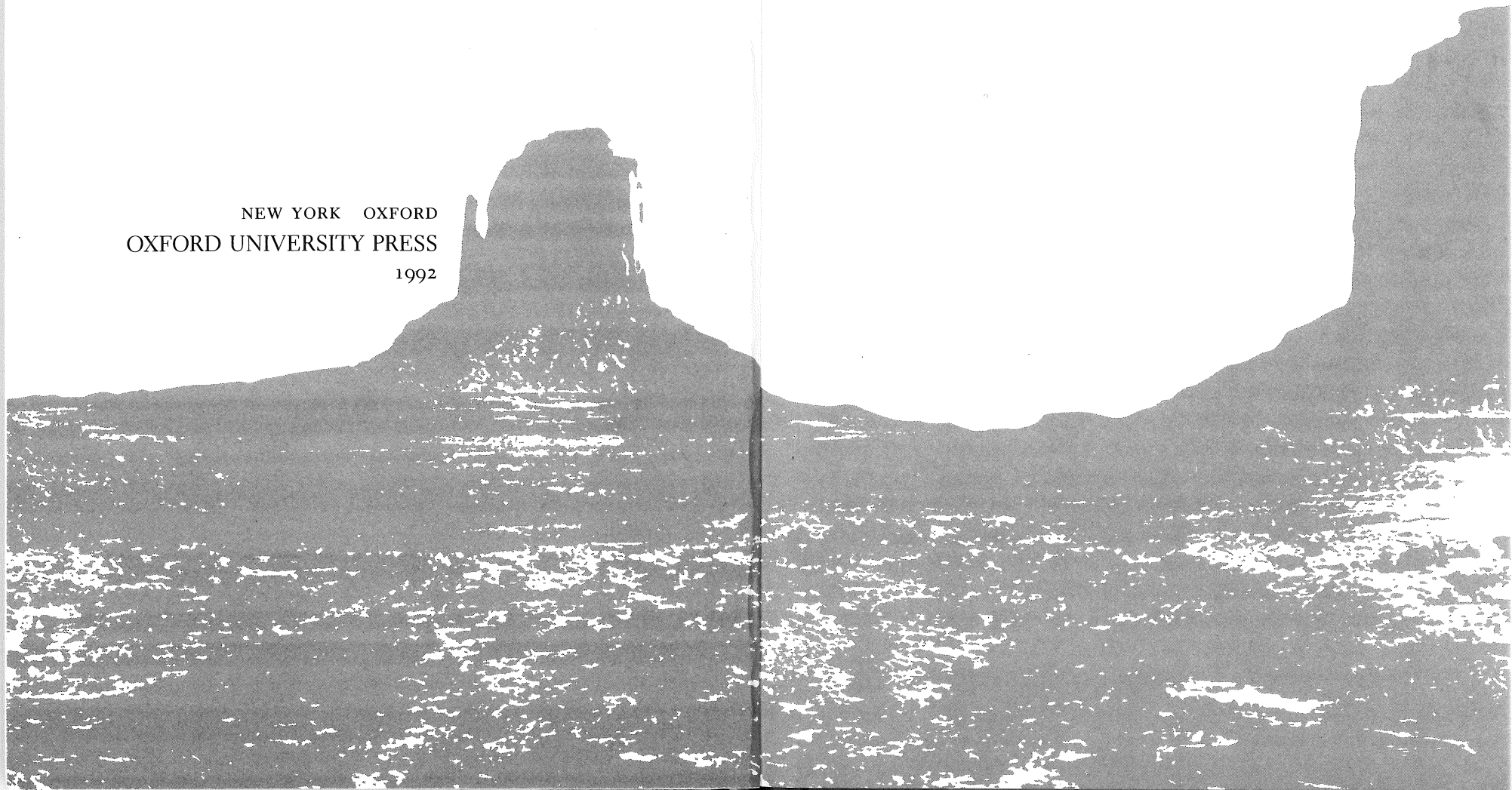


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West of Everything

The Inner Life of Westerns

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Still from *Red River* (United Artists, 1948).
Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive, New York.

Cattle

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Humane slaughter. In both the United States and Europe the desirability of stunning was recognized before the end of the 19th century. . . . Cattle may be stunned by means of a captive-bolt pistol or a pneumatic gun. Sheep and pigs may be stunned by pistol, by electric shock, or by anesthetizing in a carbon dioxide chamber. After World War II, compressed-air stunners were commonly used for cattle and gas chambers for smaller animals.

Cattle slaughter. After stunning, the carcass is vertically suspended by one or both hindlegs, and the carotid arteries and jugular veins are severed. The carcass is then skinned with an air-operated or electrically operated skinning knife. In old or small operations this is accomplished with the aid of a "stationary bed" on which a pointed stick helps hold the carcass on its back on the floor. Large modern plants use "rail dressing," employing platforms and hide-pullers.

Evisceration and splitting are similar to methods used in hog slaughter. Shrouding, performed on many beef carcasses, involves soaking a muslin cloth in warm water and stretching it tightly over the outside surface, securing it with metal pins. The carcasses are then placed in the cooler; and, after 24 hours, the shrouds are removed, and the carcass fat remains smooth and trim.

"Food Processing," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*,
vol. 19, pp. 356–57.

In *High Plains Drifter* one of the villains, who've just been let out of jail, says to the others in a moment of vicious hilarity, "When we get to Lago, I'll have the mayor's horse, fried and barbecued." We know this is a joke and suitable for a villain because in our society it's all right to eat cattle but not all right to eat horses, at least not under most circumstances. Such a distinction, when you give it a little thought (which Westerns do not), loses its self-evident quality. Why is it OK to eat cattle and not horses? Why do we keep cats and dogs as pets but behave differently toward, say, raccoons, using their pelts for fur coats, while treating rabbits both as pets *and* as food and clothing? Why isn't it all right to barbecue the mayor's horse? Why doesn't Roy Rogers eat Trigger?

Once you start thinking about horses in Westerns, sooner or later you end up thinking about animals in general, especially cattle, a subject that leads to considerations most people would rather avoid. The way we behave toward animals stems partly from the fact that they occupy mutually exclusive categories in our thinking: person and thing, organism and machine, companion and slave, friend and food. Animals are both like us (person, organism, companion, friend) and not like us, treated as if they were objects (steaks, vehicles, lab specimens). That's why it's hard to read descriptions like the ones printed above of the process of slaughtering cattle.

There is no sense to be made of the contrary labels—and functions—we assign to animals without getting entangled in debates about the propriety of people's ingrained tastes and habits (e.g., eating meat, wearing leather, using products tested on animals), or becoming embroiled in arguments that threaten to upset most people's unquestioned beliefs about the uniqueness of being human (e.g., having language, being self-conscious, making moral choices). For the difficulty of thinking about animals has to do primarily with the slipperiness of who "we" are, as opposed to who we are not (e.g., two-legged vs. four-legged, rational vs. instinctual).

Or, to put it in a slightly different way, the problem stems from our difficulty in deciding how far and in what directions we are willing to extend a sense of identification, a difficulty in deciding where "we" begin and end. The gray area begins inside the body and extends outward from there. Do we identify ourselves with our minds or with our bodies? With certain thoughts (or feelings) rather than with others? With an eternal soul? Do we identify ourselves with our possessions (a car, a pet, a wedding ring, a book we've written), with our friends, members of our own family, people who belong to the same region, class, profession, nationality, gender, ethnic group, race? Do we identify ourselves with other species and, if so, which ones—the "higher" mammals, dolphin but not tuna? With other life forms? The universe? Where do we draw the line between self and not-self? And do we draw it in different places at different times?

It's not my intention to go deeply here into the highly charged issues these questions raise, but rather to point out how the assumptions that underlie our behavior with respect to animals are fundamental to the Western and crucially shape its vision of the heroic life.

I suggested earlier that the body of the hero is the analogue of the horse he rides. What happens to the horse happens to the rider, and vice versa. The politics of the horse-rider relationship, in which the horse is subordinate to the rider, is reflected in the intrapsychic politics the Western sets up between the body and the will. The body is an instrument, designed to do the will of its master, schooled to obey commands without demur, no matter how painful or violative of its natural function they may be. This model is reproduced in even starker form in men's behavior toward cattle in Western movies. For cattle in Westerns are not broken and ridden, they are raised exclusively to be killed for food that humans eat.

Economically cattle are the basis of the way of life that Westerns represent, but if anything they are even more invisible than horses are, in the sense of not being seen for themselves, or as they would

see themselves. With few exceptions (usually scenes of the branding or rescuing of calves), they are seen only from the viewpoint of their utility for humans: as factors in an economic scheme, as physical obstacles to be contended with in a heroic undertaking, or as the contested prize in an economic struggle. Although cattle are everywhere in Westerns, in the sense that their existence supports the livelihood the characters depend on, they are basically ignored. The reason for this is the same as the reason why it's hard to find out where stockyards are located in the United States or to find accounts of what happens to cattle between the time they are raised and the time their flesh appears in the supermarket. Cattle exist, from a human point of view, in order to die and become meat, and it's hard for people to look at that fact very closely.

Nevertheless it is a fact that has a profound influence on the way people live. The way people treat the world around them—animals, the land, other human beings—reveals something about themselves. This is an underlying theme in one of the greatest of Western movies, Howard Hawkes's classic *Red River*. The movie begins when Thomas Dunson, played by John Wayne, breaks away from the wagon train he has been traveling with and sets out with his friend, an older man named Nadine Groot (played by Walter Brennan), to look for land south of the Red River. He bids good-bye to his sweetheart, Fen, who begs to go with him, turns a deaf ear to the pleas of his companions, and heads resolutely south. Dunson's ruthless abandonment of people who both need and love him, here at the beginning, sets the pattern for his entrepreneurial ventures from this point on. He and Groot are attacked by Indians, one of whom Dunson stabs to death in the waters of the Red River. The next day, he and Groot find a young boy who is the sole survivor of an Indian attack that has wiped out the wagon train they deserted (good-bye fiancée and friends). Dunson knocks the boy down to teach him a lesson about not trusting strangers, but privately admits to Groot, "He'll do." (This testing inflicts a miniature version of heroic suffering; the boy who can take punches is good material.)

He becomes, in effect, Dunson's adoptive son. The boy, whose name is Matthew Garth, has a cow with him which they'll need to start a herd. This cow, the source of all Dunson's wealth, is virtually ignored.

When Dunson arrives at the spot where he's decided to put his ranch, he kills one of the outriders of the Mexican don who owns the territory and lays claim to it for himself. He boasts that in a few years the whole range will be covered with cattle—his. Fourteen years pass, and Dunson's prediction materializes. Much is made of how hard he's worked for this. The range is covered with cattle, but there's no way to sell them; the markets are too far away, and the ranchers are going broke. So Dunson decides to do the impossible: drive his cattle a thousand miles to the nearest rail head, something no one has ever done before. He takes not only his own cattle but those of the other ranchers in his district, whom he more or less bullies into the deal, promising them ten dollars a head if he makes it.

Dunson sets out on the drive with Matt as second in command (he's now a handsome young Civil War veteran, played by Montgomery Clift). Nadine Groot drives the chuck wagon. Hawkes films the drive in an epic manner, emphasizing the historic nature of the enterprise, the danger, the uncertainty, the raw energy of the cowboy recruits, the huge, lumbering mass of animals, the dust, dirt, commotion, sweat, and grueling physical hardship of the journey. They are beset by difficulties: rain and cold, short rations and long hours. There is a stampede in which a man is killed and cattle and food are lost. The men grow mutinous. Dunson kills a man who draws on him. The men grumble even more. Dunson's response is to drive them harder. The food is terrible; there's no coffee. They work into the dark and get up before daybreak. Hard as he drives the men, Dunson drives himself even harder. For several nights running, Dunson gets no sleep at all. He's wounded in a fight and drinks to kill the pain. Matt pleads with him to let up on himself and the men. Dunson refuses.

Meanwhile, the cattle are always present, being driven through all kinds of weather, over the rolling plains, across rivers, on and on. They are photographed so that we almost never see their faces; as the camera shows them to us, they are a living stream, slow, cumbersome,* potentially dangerous but ultimately docile, lowing their protests ineffectually against the journey, stumbling along.

When Dunson threatens to hang two men who have tried to get away, the hands finally rebel and Matt takes over. He gives Dunson a grub stake and leaves him behind to fend for himself. The ordeal continues. When a scout brings news of a wagon train ahead where there are "women and coffee," Matt allows everyone to stop a while but not for long. Not even the charms of the beautiful Tess Millay (played by Joanne Dru) are enough to keep Matt there. He has too much of the old man in him.

When they get to Abilene there is general rejoicing. The townspeople have been longing for the arrival of a herd like this; the cattle flood the streets. Dunson arrives on the scene. There are some tense moments when it looks like Matt and Dunson might kill each other, but after a brief fistfight, they become friends again. Dunson advises Matt to marry Tess, gives him a half interest in the ranch, and promises to change the brand, which had a *D* for Dunson and two lines for the Red River, to *D*, two lines, and an *M*. The music swells, marking the happy conclusion.

The movie is rich in symbols that radiate in many directions, but the central point is simple. Nothing gets in Dunson's way. Not his friends, not his sweetheart, not the Indians, not the Mexicans, not the rebellious hands, not his old pal Groot who scolds him repeatedly, not the rivers, not the land, not the thousands of cattle, not even his own body. They are all a means to an end, the realization of his purpose. The movie criticizes his persistence but ultimately sees it as heroic. Everyone benefits from it in the end. The ranchers make a profit, the hands get paid, the town of Abilene and the railroad are in business, Matt inherits half the ranch, Tess gets Matt, and Dunson gets to be a hero. Everyone is better off than

they were before—everyone, that is, but the cattle. They get to be herded onto boxcars and taken to the slaughterhouse in Chicago. "Good beef for hungry people," as Dunson puts it. The film takes account of the hero's excess in driving relentlessly toward his goal but never makes the connection between that drive and the driving of cattle.

The cattle are the film's unconscious. They surround the characters, often dominate the screen, pervade the atmosphere with the quiet, massive strength of their bodies, the slow, throbbing presence of their lives. Yet in some profound way they are totally unnoticed, even though they are a continual focus of energy and attention throughout the movie. The film's title, *Red River*, repeats the name of the river the characters must cross to get the cattle to market. And the name of the river refers, presumably, to its color. But besides the river and its color, the title of the film evokes the land's fertility, the blood of the Indians who gave up the land, the blood of the Mexicans from whom it was also taken, the blood of all the others who died to make Dunson's victory possible (the hands, his former companions on the wagon train, his sweetheart), but most of all—and inevitably, though it is never thought of in this way—it stands for the cattle. A river of living beings whose death is the uncounted cost of success. They constitute the story's economic base, they are its *raison d'être*, and they provide it, at twenty-one dollars a head, with a triumphant resolution. The sacrifice of their lives underwrites everything. *Red River* ends with the prospect of a gigantic river of blood, but that river is kept off-screen because it has no place in the consciousness of filmmakers or of the society they cater to.

That the film is rarely seen this way, and the history of the West seldom written from this point of view, is evidence of our cultural blind spot when it comes to animals. The extermination of the Indians has finally been faced by American historians, and the rise of ecological consciousness has made us aware of the near-extinction of the buffalo and the plundering of the land. But cattle cannot be

seen or thought about in these ways yet because their invisibility is necessary if our society is to carry on some of its taken-for-granted activities: eating beef, wearing leather, using animal products, and continuing to support the huge and lucrative cattle industry—blood for money. In the case of *Red River*, our blindness to the cattle makes possible a feeling of accomplishment at the end of the movie, of joy and relief when the men finally make it to Abilene. The sense of satisfaction in work accomplished, the financial reward, the founding of a dynasty, the fulfillment of a dream, the symbolic settling of a region, the opening of a vast new market—these triumphs all ride, so to speak, on the backs of the herd. In order for the story to work, we must believe at some level, in no matter how dim or incompletely imagined a way, that it is all right to make cattle walk a thousand miles to be herded onto boxcars, transported to stockyards, slaughtered, made into meat for human consumption and into dollars for people in the cattle business. On our acceptance of this process the entire story depends.

While *Red River* openly celebrates human courage and endurance, and is a haunting, powerful rendition of some of the great themes of Western novels and films, it also tacitly endorses practices of enslavement and massacre that neither the film nor its audience takes cognizance of. We do not recognize these practices as such because our culture has trained us not to. Habitually and self-protectively we turn away from what we cannot bear to see. Meanwhile, for the animals, as Isaac Bashevis Singer has said, every day is Treblinka. Lending their energy and life to the moving picture, epitomizing its goal, yet hardly ever recognized for what they are—sentient beings like ourselves, capable of pleasure and pain—cattle are an enabling condition of Western narratives. They *cannot* be seen for themselves. To do so would make the Western impossible.



To see animals as they see themselves would make the Western impossible not only because cattle and horses are economically essential to the society the Western depicts but because the relation humans have to them is the same one they have to their own bodies and emotions. To see animals differently would require human beings to see themselves differently also. Thomas Dunson drives his body the same way he drives his cattle. These are the terms on which he achieves success. Like the hero of *A Man Called Horse*, Dunson treats himself like a brute and in so doing is understood to be showing extraordinary willpower and determination. There is no sense that such treatment is degrading or injurious, that it might stem from insensitivity or lack of compassion. Thus, in a strange way, to recognize the suffering of animals would be to undermine the terms in which heroism is conceived. For if deliberately inflicting pain on sentient beings reflects a callous, unmerciful approach to life, then perhaps the hero's mortification of himself is not so admirable as we've been encouraged to believe.

The invisibility of cattle in Westerns—the invisibility, that is, of their terrible suffering at human hands—and the celebration of the hero's pain are intricately linked. Both depend on an instrumentalization of the body, turning living flesh into pieces of meat. The hero, who must take pain silently, learns to deaden his natural reactions to pain in order to survive his ordeal. And the habitual numbing of himself makes it easier for him to inflict pain on others, as Dunson does, and even to kill them when necessary. When Nadine Groot chides his boss repeatedly with the words "You wuz wrong, Mister Dunson," he is criticizing Dunson's insentience in pushing his men beyond their endurance, a form of stupidity, ultimately, which leads to Dunson's temporary downfall.

In *Red River* society is rescued from the tyrant's unbearably heavy hand by his adoptive son, who represents a gentler dispensation. But when Matthew Garth takes over it is a change only of degree, not of kind. The disciplinary order Dunson stands for is in full sway

father's sacrifices and self-denial weren't really necessary? . . . Without meaning to and without realizing it, the father treat[s] his child just as cruelly as he treat[s] the child within himself. (94-95)

"The child within himself" is the key here. Miller is saying that people (in this case, a father) treat others the way they treat themselves, and that they treat themselves the way they have been treated. The father who punishes the child for spontaneity is repeating what was once done to him and what he has long since learned to do to himself (the child within). It's easy to see, then, how the question of punishment central to the parent-child relation is also central to the Western. The hero's demonstration of mastery over himself is proof that he has successfully internalized the dictates of parental control. He has successfully subdued the child. And his mastery of himself makes him want to master others as he has been mastered. In this respect, and despite its reputation as an escapist, adolescent genre, the Western can be seen as a powerful reinforcer of socialization, in that it keeps in place structures of domination and control, of others and of the self. The hero suffers, makes himself suffer, causes suffering in others because this is what he has been trained to do.

Red River provides an excellent mini-case in point. Thomas Dunson punches the boy, Matthew Garth, the first time he meets him, to teach him a lesson (never trust a stranger) "for his own good." This blow might stand, metaphorically, for the passing on of pain from generation to generation that Miller's study describes. The rest of the film shows Dunson inflicting constant pain on himself and others, in response, presumably, to the blows that knocked him down when he was growing up.

In the process by which people learn to give and receive blows in Westerns, animals play a central though unobserved part. The horses and cattle that men variously drive, command, subdue, and often kill—though they sometimes rescue and love them as well—are an analogue to the child within. With their physicality, their

innocence, their helplessness to defend themselves, their spontaneity and wordlessness, horses and cattle are the exterior representatives of the old longings, needs, and urges of the physical and emotional body that still exist inside the hero. Given the code of behavior he must live up to, though, these impulses don't stand a chance. The slaughter of ten thousand cattle that awaits at the conclusion of *Red River* fulfills what the heroism of the drive has already begun.