

Hollywood in the 1950s

October 31, 2005

- John Ford, *The Searchers* (1956)
- The Western
- Decline of the studio system
- End of the Hays Code
- Other genres: widescreen epics, naturalism & the problem film, musicals, science fiction

John Ford (1894-1973)

- Started directing in the silent era
- Credited with 146 films (IMDB)
- 1930s: made both action films, and art films with social and historical themes, both for Fox and independently
 - *The Informers* (1935)
 - *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)
- *Stagecoach* (1939) was his breakthrough Western

John Ford (continued)

- Late 1940s: Cavalry trilogy, made for Argosy (Ford's own independent company)
 - *Fort Apache* (1948)
 - *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (1949)
 - *Rio Grande* (1950)
- John Wayne, Monument Valley (Arizona)
- Later, somewhat revisionist Westerns
 - *The Searchers* (1956)
 - *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)

Ford's Westerns

- Mythology of the landscape, and of America
- Theme of civilizing the wilderness
- Iconic presence of John Wayne
- Gender: masculinity & action
- Gender: women & the domestic sphere
- Race: treatment of Indians and of other non-white ethnicities (e.g. Mexicans)

The Searchers

- John Wayne as Ethan Edwards
 - Doggedness and bitterness
 - Hatred of the Indians
 - Knowledge of Indian customs
 - Alienation, exclusion from domesticity
- The frontier community
- Rites of passage
 - Marriage
 - Funeral
 - Two men fighting over one woman

Transformation?

- Does Wayne change in the course of the film?
- Wanting to kill Debbie
- Actually rescuing her, instead
- Link between Wayne and his enemies
 - As a wanderer or nomad, with no stable home
 - He speaks Spanish and Comanche
 - His racism as a form of “savagery”

History of the Western (1)

- Ford's canonical & revisionist Westerns
- Howard Hawks, revised view of Wayne
 - *Red River* (1948, with Montgomery Clift)
 - *Rio Bravo* (1959, with Dean Martin & Angie Dickinson)
- Pro-Indian revisionism (Robert Aldrich, *Apache*, 1954, Burt Lancaster)
- “Social conscience” liberal Westerns
 - *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952, Gary Cooper)
 - *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953, Alan Ladd)

History of the Western (2)

- Anthony Mann/James Stewart: sublime landscape and moral dilemmas
 - *Winchester 73* (1950)
 - *The Man From Laramie* (1955)
- Budd Boetticher/Randolph Scott, existential uncertainty
 - *Seven Men From Now* (1956)
 - *Decision at Sundown* (1957)
- Delirious Westerns
 - Samuel Fuller, *40 Guns* (1957)
 - Nicholas Ray, *Johnny Guitar* (1954)

1950s Hollywood: New Challenges

- Antitrust ruling of 1948
 - Studios forced to divest themselves of their movie theaters
 - End of block booking & automatic revenues
- McCarthyism: Anti-Communist witch-hunts
 - HUAC hearings of 1947; the Hollywood Ten
 - Additional hearings in 1951-1952
 - The Hollywood blacklist
- The arrival of television
 - Lowered movie attendance as early as 1949
 - Dominance of TV from 1953 on
 - Lucille Ball buys RKO in 1957

New Technologies

- Need to provide what TV still couldn't
- The conversion to color
- New Widescreen formats
 - Standard widescreen (1.83:1 instead of 1.33:1)
 - CinemaScope (2.35:1)
 - Cinerama (multiple cameras and screens)
 - Aesthetic effects of these new aspect ratios
- 3-D films
- The new widescreen blockbusters

Widescreen Epics

- Ancient world and/or Biblical settings
- Maximum spectacle on the wide screen
- Charlton Heston
- William Wyler, *Ben Hur* (1959)
- Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments* (1956)
- Even Howard Hawks did one! (*Land of the Pharaohs*, 1955)

Naturalism & the Problem Film

- Social problem films, dealing with:
 - Anti-Semitism (*Gentleman's Agreement*, Elia Kazan, 1947)
 - Racism (*No Way Out*, Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950; *The Defiant Ones*, Stanley Kramer, 1958; both starring Sidney Poitier)
- Marlon Brando, the Actors' Studio and the Method: "naturalistic" acting
 - *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951)
 - *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954)

1950s Musicals

- MGM's musical unit, headed by Arthur Freed: from 1944 (*Meet Me In St. Louis*) to 1958 (*Gigi*)
- Directors" Vincente Minnelli, Stanley Donen
- Dancers: Fred Astaire, Gene Kelley, Cyd Charisse
- Much greater attempt than in earlier musicals to integrate the song & dance numbers into the plot
- Musical numbers don't stop the action, but rather directly forward character development and plot
- Long, self-contained dance sequences
- Singin' in the Rain (Gene Kelley, Donald O'Connor, Debbie Reynolds, dir. Kelley & Stanley Donen)
- Beyond MGM: Otto Preminger, *Carmen Jones*, Fox, 1954) (all-Black cast, starring Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge)

Science Fiction in the 1950s

- Often lower-budget films (hence b&w)
- Cold War allegories
 - Alien invasion = Communism
 - Mutants = threat of nuclear annihilation
 - Anxieties about science
- *The Thing From Another World* (produced, and perhaps directed, by Howard Hawks, 1951)
- *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951)
- *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954; giant ants)
- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956)