



WHY I HATE 'WESTERNS'

We've had a longstanding—let's call it a "discussion"—in our house over the fact that I won't watch cowboy movies---Westerns. My dear husband, who I am sure holds the same position as most of our readers, loves Westerns. He loves John Wayne's movies (he cites "The Shootist" as his favorite). He loves Clint Eastwood's ("The Outlaw Josey Wales" and "Unforgiven"). He loves TV miniseries Westerns (yes, "Lonesome Dove"). He owns a collection of Western movies that dwarfs all our assembled comedies, dramas, and documentaries. In another life, he would have been a horseman. In this life, he's confined to watch another man play one on TV.



We've had a longstanding—let's call it a "discussion"—in our house over the fact that I won't watch cowboy movies---Westerns. My dear husband, who I am sure holds the same position as most of our readers, loves Westerns...

To be perfectly honest, I don't even like the look of them. Displaying the diversity of colors between dung brown and sage green, the Westerns suck out the light from among the wider array of comparatively exuberant, bright DVD's. If it wouldn't represent a grave threat to the health of my marriage, I wouldn't mind dumping them all into a bag and storing them in the basement. Still, Jim is convinced that I, like the West, can be won by the right cowboy—if only I would sit down and watch.

And I'm pretty sure he's wrong about that.

I can think of four or five reasons why I dislike the genre so much—notwithstanding the simple, "I just hate them." But it certainly isn't that I dislike actual ranchers or farmers. To the contrary, I've enjoyed friendships with many people who live or work on the land. I chose to move to a rural corner of the prairie where I'm virtually surrounded by cowboys, and I've had no reason to regret it.

But Westerns are never about those people, who are deeply interwoven among their communities and generally in kinship and cooperation with their neighbors and their land. You see, I would gladly watch a movie with them as protagonists, facing down drought or financial hardships, the decline into further marginalization at the hands of industry and agribusiness. But Westerns are never about that. No, Westerns are always about THAT GUY.

You know exactly who I mean. Mr. Masculinity. Tall, silent, standing apart. Butch as all get out. Probably the biggest reason why I can't watch Westerns is that I've spent a bit of time reading up on film theory, and every time THAT

GUY saunters on screen, in my mind, he might as well be wearing a "Hello, my name is FASCIST" sticker on his leather lapel.

I should make clear what I mean by Fascist. I know we've all heard the word bandied about by pissed-off teenagers and tea party-types, usually as a vague substitute for "evil" or "enemy." I like the definition provided by Benito Mussolini in his 1932 entry to the Italian Encyclopedia on the topic of Fascism. Fascism, as described by Mussolini embraces the "State" as the ultimate personality; it rejects individualism in favor of collectivism; it looks upon imperialism and conquest as marks of health. Furthermore, the fascist state fears intellectualism. It draws clear distinctions between the pure and impure. And, for its motivations, Fascism looks to "holiness and heroism."

It's that "holiness and heroism" which Westerns have provided—both to Americans and to other imperialist powers over the past 150 years. As Mussolini wrote, "For Fascism, the growth of empire, that is to say the expansion of the nation, is an essential manifestation of vitality." The Western hero is always a white man, living in the days of American conquest. He is the "holy" figure of Westward Expansion. It's no wonder Stalin, Brezhnev, Hitler and Mussolini all shared a passion for American Westerns. He is the hero of a conquering nation—the only contemporary "myth." And a nation, especially a new nation, must have its myths in order to demand the fealty of its citizens.

But I really didn't draw the connections until I read this fantastic article by Susan Sontag on fascist aesthetics: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1975/feb/06/fascinating-fascism/?page=1>.

Though the article is essentially a book review of Leni Riefenstahl's "The Last of the Nuba" and Jack Pia's "SS Regalia," the larger discussion is of the intricacies of fascist aesthetics. With a mind to Westerns, certain phrases pop out: Discussing Riefenstahl's love of the Nubians, Sontag writes, "What is distinctive about the fascist version of the old idea of the Noble Savage is its contempt for all that is reflective, critical, and pluralistic." Is it just me, or does this sound like the "good Indian," the quintessential sidekick for American cowboys? As for THAT GUY, in a fascist society, the personification of the State is inextricably aligned with notions of masculinity. Masculinity, in turn, is defined by an ability to withstand pain and to restrain one's emotions and desires. As Susan Sontag wrote, "Fascist aesthetics is based on the containment of vital forces; movements are confined, held tight, held in." Woman, "The erotic," is "always present as a temptation, with the most admirable response being a heroic repression of the sexual impulse."

Now that sounds pretty close to the heroes of the Soviet Union. As dissident Andrei Sinyavsky described him, the "Socialist Realist positive hero...firmly knows what is right and what is wrong; he says plainly 'yes' or 'no' and does not confuse black with white...Faced with the most complex of tasks, he easily finds the solution—by taking the shortest and most direct route to the Purpose." Basically, the fascist ideal is a man's man, for whom a woman is an unnecessary burden, unemotional and restrained—a fierce, tight wire of masculinity and potential violence. Why does that sound familiar?



Basically, the fascist ideal is a man's man, for whom a woman is an unnecessary burden, unemotional and restrained—a fierce, tight wire of masculinity and potential violence. Why does that sound familiar?

Oh yeah.
That's why.

Look, I could go on and on about this stuff. Basically, Westerns have been propaganda from the start. Wister's *The Virginian* was a defense of the superior white man subduing the Western frontier, just like Louis L'Amour novels had a lot more to do with the Cold War than they did with cattle. Soviets created "Easterns," using native Siberians or nearby Islamic Turks as stand-ins for Native Americans, as propaganda for their various conquests—to make Russians feel like "real men." One of the most popular of these Easterns, *White Sun* (1969,) was shown to Soviet Cosmonauts before they went into space. Yuri Gagarin apparently said that the film made him "feel like a real Russian hero." And that, precisely, is what Westerns are good for. They make men feel like conquerors and heroes. Or, rather, they make WHITE men feel like heroes. As Wister himself stated, "To survive in the clean cattle country requires a spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency; you will not find many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews in that district." In fact, you won't find many Poles or Huns or Jews anywhere in a Western. Apparently, the Jews are just too "intellectual" to save people.

I know, I know. I may be a little harsh. Westerns aren't, by nature, evil. (Or maybe they sort of are, a little bit, but I'll say for now that they aren't.) And obviously not everyone who enjoys them is a fascist. But, given a choice of what to watch on a Friday night, I think I'll throw in with the Poles and the Huns and the Jews on this one, and say Westerns just aren't for me.

So tonight, Sweetie Pie, let's just watch another comedy, okay?

If you're curious about the topic, (or you're having the same "discussion" in your house,) you may want to check out some of these sources:

Lucy Ash. "Wild, Wild East." *New Statesman*. <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2007/11/white-sun-soviet-russian/>

David A. Goldfarb "The Soviet Novel and the Western." Center for Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture, Rutgers University. *Popular Culture: An Interdisciplinary Conference for Graduate Scholarship*. <http://www.echonyc.com/~goldfarb/sovwest.htm>

Kevin Kreiner. *The Age of the Supermen: Fascism, Democracy and the Perception of the Heroic in the Mass Media, 1914-1945*. Diss. U. of New York-Binghamton, 2003.

Benito Mussolini "What is Fascism." *Modern History Sourcebook*. 1997. Fordham University. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/mussolini-fascism.html>

Susan Sontag. "Fascinating Fascism." *The New York Review of Books*. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/9280>

JULIE HANCOCK
Springdale, UT



ALAN JOSLYN
Highlands Ranch, CO



MELINDA PRICE-WILTSHIRE
Vancouver, BC



MICHAEL COHEN
Reno, NV



Stan Urycki
Cuyahoga Falls, OH



TOM WYLIE
Centennial, CO



GARY FERGUSON
Red Lodge, MT



SCOTT THOMPSON
Beckley, WV

Help us restore a masterpiece.
**THE GLEN CANYON
INSTITUTE**
www.glencanyon.org



**WE'RE YOUR FRIENDLY
GREEN DOCUMENT
SHREDDERS!**



Our new, smaller
PEA SHOOTER
trucks are more
energy efficient!



**...AND WE RECYCLE
WHAT WE SHRED...**



SCOTT FASKEN
970.464.4859
fasken@bresnan.net

**EVERY TON OF RECYCLED PAPER
REDUCES CARBON EMISSIONS
BY FOUR METRIC TONS!**

www.coloradodocumentsecurity.org