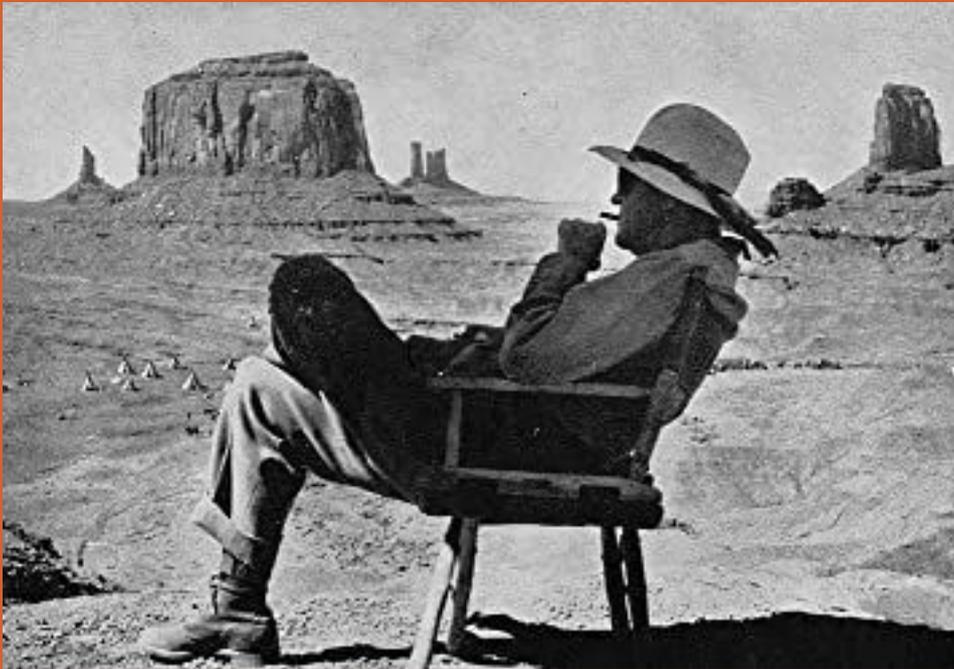


**Cowboys & Westerns**

# **How Nostalgia shaped the Identity of the West**



**Liberty Warner**



# Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Landscape and Myth.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Cowboy, Wayne and Ford.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Monument Valley.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Nationalism.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Neoliberalism and the Cowboy.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Reagan and Revisionism .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>27</b>

## Introduction

Last year I became interested in the image of the cowboy. Visually, cowboys became the subject of my personal practice. But it was the turbulent political events in America over 2020 which solidified my decision to explore further the myths of nationalism created by the Western genre, and the figures who facilitated these ideas which are so prevalent in the American consciousness.

This essay explores how the cowboy has developed as an integral part of American identity, and how myths of nationalism and false narratives have been fuelled by the development of the Western genre. The prolific Western genre has helped cement imagined narratives and myths of nationalism. Critical to this essay is the unpacking of the landscape within the genre, and how it shaped the American dream, taking into account the narrative structures which facilitated the spread and development of these ideas. The investigation moves to untangle the relationships between narrative forms and how cultural imaginations of frontier and the New World have affected the landscape, thinking about perceptions of empty landscapes and the exploitation of native peoples. The role of Monument Valley is examined in depth. The discourse takes into account the influence of the figures who promoted these myths for their own political gain, such as Ronald Regan.

Underpinning these broader themes is the role of nostalgia and ways in which nostalgic narratives have been exploited for political influence in neoliberal America. This idea, of nostalgia, is one that recurs and underlies much of the research and thinking. Merriam-Webster defines nostalgia as a ‘...wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition’ (Merriam-Webster). The cowboy and the Western fuels an examination of relationships and historical narratives, of how nostalgia might fuel the capitalist narrative and ultimately, how the early Western is a nostalgic view of a vanished world.

Methodology is research based and has made use of a range of sources, from academic and populist writing to Westerns. Nomenclature focuses on ‘the West’, as in, the geographical American West. The ‘Western’, refers to the film-genre of the Western. The ‘Frontier’, the ‘Old West’, the ‘Wild West’, and the ‘Land of Opportunity’ are used interchangeably, and refer to the era in which the American West was settled, widely believed to from the 1860s-1890s. The Western genre spanned the early 20th

century, peaking in the 1950s and 60s. There have been many more since then including recent 21st century interpretations, some of which are far more self-aware and satirical. For the purposes of this study, I have made use of case-studies, beginning in 1939 (see appendix). The focus has been mainly on early examples of the genre, especially John Wayne and John Ford Westerns, and the ways in which they have shaped the medium and their wider influence. When taking this subject on, I did not fully realise the enormous reach and breadth of its themes. There have been a range of ideas and images which informed my thinking, from which I have moved away but which retain a vestigial shadow in the following essay. There are many themes that I would have liked to explore further, such as women in the Western, and black cowboys.

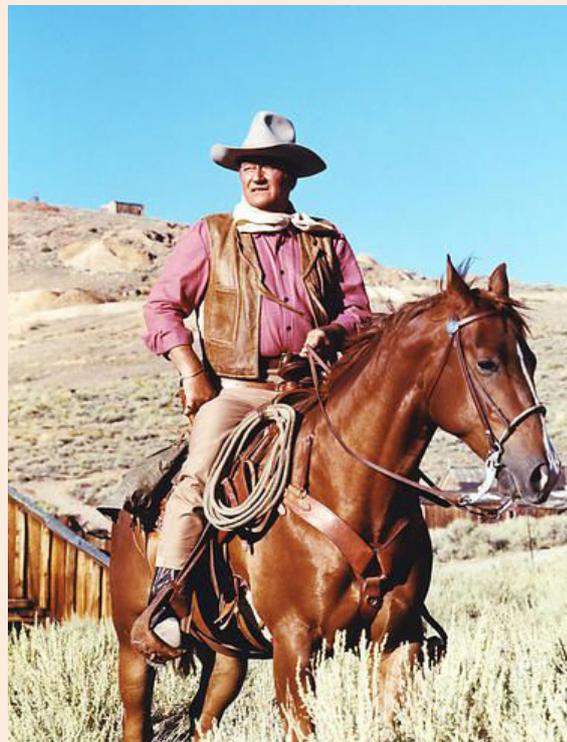


Figure 1, John Wayne's Tribute to America (1970)

## Landscape and Myth

Nostalgic images of landscapes, people, and the role of the cowboy travel through the Western genre, and have influenced political thinking and perceptions of space, explained well by Massey:

‘...thinking about space in this way can also challenge some influential conceptualizations of place. Since the late 1980s the world has seen the recrudescence of exclusivist claims to places – nationalist, regionalist and localist. All of them have been attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one’s own. Within the academic literature as well as more widely there has been a continuation of the tendency to identify ‘places’ as necessarily sites of nostalgia, of the opting-out from Progress and History.’ (Massey, 2013).

The American West is so tied up in how it is depicted in film, that in itself the geographical West has become a site of nostalgia (see chapters The Cowboy, Wayne and Ford, and Monument Valley). Stewart writes about the ‘social disease of nostalgia’ (Stewart, 2007) implying a clouding of judgement, a fostering of inaccurate narratives, a lack of space for real identity to develop. These narratives, it could be argued, promote hyper-capitalism, which fosters certain ideologies which have been so polarising and yet so pervasive: the rights of the individual over community, the commercialisation of the landscape, the resources of the earth nothing more than a film set. Insular politics are fed by insular research in an increasingly digital world where algorithms promote radicalisation. The question is raised if the nostalgic world of the Wild West, developed in the 20th century and examined from a 21st century viewpoint, can be seen to have had a heavy influence on the imagination of Americans and have fed into the myths of nationalism and American identity, and how these myths manifest in the present day.

What, then, is the West, the Land of Opportunity? The American West is saddled with the pervasive idea of exceptionalism. The West is fixed in its identity, fixed in its own fluidity, in its perceived notions of novelty and opportunity, its vastness. The West is there to claim ‘...for one’s own’ (Massey, 2013). Critically, “The American West is often considered the birthplace of America, where Americans were distinct from their European counterparts,” (Searles, 2013). European settlers ‘imagined this hemisphere as pristine, static, waiting to begin when they arrived’; ‘...Native Americans had also been written out of the landscape –if their presence was remembered at all, they were represented as “ecological

eunuchs” who had long since vanished, though white people had proven pretty good at forgetting them altogether and imagining the North American continent as pristine, virginal, and essentially uninhabited before the European incursions’ (Solnit, 2014). The romance of the Wild West is in part a rewriting of the bloody and gruesome narrative in which white settlers snatched indigenous land and massacred indigenous people. Westerns ‘...relied on racist stereotypes of Native people as bloodthirsty savages and drew inspiration for stories about white heroes from the experiences of freed slaves in the West.’ (Williams, 2016). The Western is America’s origin story, spun from myths and fabrications, perpetuated and elaborated on by the media over the last century, starring the cowboy.



Figure 2, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) John Wayne, John Ford.



Figure 3, John Ford's *Fort Apache*: (1948) John Wayne and Uncredited Navajo Actor.

## The Cowboy, Wayne and Ford

The cowboy, written into Western consciousness through film and media, even now is an omnipresent figure in the cultural landscape. Originally a part of the expanding agricultural communities of the West, the cowboys drove cattle over the prairies, surviving the hostile landscape, lasso in hand. Lambert writes that ‘...the mythical cowboy still rides as the personification of the American dream of self-reliance, individualism, and freedom.’ (Lambert, 1967). The cowboy is a seminal figure of the West. This is, in a way, by his own volition. Wistfully telling tales around the campfire of days gone by and wandering stars, it has been argued that the Western has its origins in the ‘tall tale’: ‘The idea of a “New World”, the enormity of the wilderness and its demand for a type of physical labour correspondingly extraordinary, has been the locus for a particularly strong and widespread tall-tale tradition in North America. The tall tale is both a genre of the frontier, with its expansive form, and a genre of emigration.’ (Stewart, 2007). Typically, those who told tall tales were workers, like the cowboy, with ‘considerable distance between the workplace and the home. Often they are typified by solitary outdoor labour. They are “outside” positions in the sense that they are far from the domestic and the domesticated modes of sociability’ (Stewart, 2007). *How is it that such a figure, so far outside the everyday domestic realm, became so representative of a nation?*

‘Since the settlement of North America came into a postliterate period, oral and written forms exaggeration arose at the same time. But it was in oral contexts —the leisure contexts of the lumber camp at night, the general store, the community liar’s bench —that such tales arose. Once the written form predominantly supplanted the oral form, such tales were viewed nostalgically, even sentimentally.’ (Stewart, 2007).

The myths of the West developed from the oral to the written, and culminated in the Western. Christensen suggests that ‘...the very nature of myth is that it tells a story of how a people became a nation. Myth is about the formation of a national “I” pitted against a wilderness that is the national not-I, and the indigenous people rooted there before invasion and usurpation also form the not-I to be overcome, absorbed, used as a kind of fuel in the making of the nation’s selfhood.’ (Christensen, 2008). This timeline of story-telling indicates the evolution of the identity of the West, as America became a nation, shifts in identity can be perceived.

Stewart writes: 'Seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century settlers' accounts of mythical beasts and vegetation, of Native Americans possessing magic and sorcery, of the richness of the soil and the miraculous power of the water, were supplanted from the late eighteenth century onward by both oral and written occupational tales centering on the frontiersman' (Stewart, 2007). While it seems there has always been a focus on the landscape and environment of the West as an important aspect of identity, Stewart describes a clear shift in anthropological focus. This shift in focus, away from Native Americans, and onto 'occupational tales centering on the frontiersman' (Stewart, 2007) is the genesis of the cowboy as a significant cultural figure and a nostalgic myth-maker. '...nostalgia for the West changes into a form of generic nostalgia over time, as the object of nostalgia shifts from history to myth.' (Verhoeff, 2006).



Figure 4, John Wayne, James Caan, Robert Mitchum in "El Dorado" (1966)

*'Every nation's principal myths are about starting out, meeting the wilderness head-on and taming it, breaking the spirit of indigenous enemies and declaring the land and the inhabitants the food of this new collective self. Myth is...an account of the migration to a new world, and who the heroes were in the great struggle to make a home on someone else's property. Myths don't look for justification; the great thrust of each is the boldness and aggression needed to turn strange, unknown territory into a collective self.'* (Christensen, 2008).

Critically, in the minds of many, the cowboy represents the settling of North America. The idea of Going out West is, in the American consciousness, the last frontier in the quest for opportunity. 'The belief in the wilderness created the American - optimistic - self-reliant - superseded the Revolution as America's national nostalgia' (Wachhorst, 2013). This vision of the West is steeped in nostalgia, blind to the reality of the era. 'We romanticize a mythical West that never was, longing not for the hard facts of pioneer life but for the infinite potential of open land and unlimited option beyond the labyrinths of bureaucratic and technological constraint. We long for a sunrise over mysterious mountains and uncharted rivers, for the exhilarating adolescence of America, when the future stretched away to forever. We long, that is, for the lost clarity of our own youth, for a time when innocence and hope could carry the day.' (Wachhorst, 2013).

On screen, the land, in its vast and seemingly endless capacity for opportunity and wealth, and the characters of the land, like John Wayne, helped shape the American Dream and the identity of the West. 'In a world we understand early to be characterized by venality and doubt and paralyzing ambiguities, he suggested another world, one which may or may not have existed ever, but in any case existed no more—a place where a man could move free, could make his own code and live by it' (Didion, 1968). The prolific Western genre cemented imagined narratives in the American consciousness. Wayne, in the many decades he made Westerns, put forward an image of self-belief and the assurance, of liberty and freedom (see figure 1). As in *Stagecoach* (1939) (see figure 7), and *Rio Grande* (1950) (see figure 5), *the cowboy always shoots the baddies, saves the day, gets the girl*. Didion wrote: '...when John Wayne rode through my childhood, and very probably through yours, he determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams.' (Didion, 1968). The Western, and the cowboy who graces its screens, permeated the American Dream and shaped it, paying little mind to historical accuracy.



Figure 5, *Rio Grande* (1950) John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara

John Wayne is, for many Americans, the epitome of the cowboy. Wayne, his image and even his own identity were shaped by director John Ford's vision. Highly influential, Wayne and Ford created what the cowboy was, with its rigid idea of masculinity and nostalgic ideas about freedom and rugged individualism. This image of the cowboy projected little regard for minorities and promoted nostalgia for a time when things would have benefited them. While making these Westerns, these men lived the fictional experience of the Wild West, a nostalgic world of their own creation, blurring the lines between truth and fiction. An example of these blurred lines is described in Didion's essay 'John Wayne: A love song', (1968) where she writes about the casual off-set dialogue between fellow cast members shooting a Western. Wayne is asked what he would do if someone tried to kill him, and if they would end up in jail.

'Very slowly' Wayne 'wiped his mouth, pushed back his chair, and stood up. It was the real thing, the authentic article, the move which had climaxed a thousand scenes on 165 flickering frontiers and phantasmagoric battlefields before, and it was about to climax this one, in the commissary at Estudio Churubusco outside Mexico City. "Right," John Wayne drawled. "I'd kill him." (Didion, 1968).

The identity of the West was shaped by the Western, and characters like Wayne who were perpetually '...in search of a dream.' (Didion, 1968). 'They could still, for just as long as the picture lasted, maintain a world peculiar to men who like to make Westerns, a world of loyalties and fond raillery, of sentiment and shared cigars, of interminable desultory recollections; campfire talk, its only point to keep human voice raised against the night, the wind, the rustlings in the brush.' (Didion, 1968).

Didion writes of the romance of Wayne's image: 'the face across the table was in certain ways more familiar than my husband's.' (Didion, 1968). This sense of familiarity is an example of how far the influence of John Wayne has permeated into American consciousness. John Wayne, by the mid 70s, was on a TV screen in many American households. He moved from the big screen to the small, and with it brought some of the ideologies and visuals of the Western genre, including its vast landscape.

The physical attributes of the West, its deserts and rocks, plains and wide open skies, are so evocative of their depiction on screen that it is hard to separate the narratives, filmed or reality. In turn, the landscape has become an iconic resource. This leads to questions about how the landscape is represented as nothing more than a simple film set and the environmental ramifications of this attitude. Illustrating this commercialisation, Didion wrote: ‘There used to be a point I liked on the Malibu Canyon road between the San Fernando Valley and the Pacific Ocean, a point from which one could see what was always called “the Fox sky”. Twentieth Century-Fox had a ranch back in the hills there, not a working ranch but several thousand acres on which Westerns were shot, and “the Fox sky” was simply that: the Fox sky, the giant Fox sky scrim, the Big Country backdrop.’ (Didion, 2017) (see figure 1).

The West, as the ‘birthplace of America’ (Searles, 2013) is the perfect setting for founding myths to emerge. In the Western, the New World is represented as ‘a void, the vacuum domicilium the Puritans had imagined, waiting to be peopled. The apparent emptiness makes the land desirable not only as a space to be filled but also as a stage on which to perform and as a territory to master.’ (Tompkins, 2006). The Western, the ultimate perpetuator of myth, portrays the land just as the Puritans imagined their new home: empty and uninhabited. Thus, the landscape of the Western is not the green and fecund fields of Northern California, or the lush forests of the Pacific North West. It is the barren and jagged, filled with space and dust and enormous rock formations. It is Monument Valley, it is the Fox Ranch.



*Figure 6, Director John Ford on location in Monument Valley while shooting The Searchers (1956)*

## Monument Valley

Just as Twentieth Century-Fox's ranch was used as a set, so was Monument Valley. A unique red desert with tall rock-formations on the border of Arizona and Utah; Monument Valley's rock formations are huge and imposing, unlike anything else film goers would have seen. 'During the filming of his last major Western, *Cheyenne Autumn*, in Monument Valley. John Ford said "The real star of my Westerns is the land. A Western is all about the land." (Gagliasso, 2017) (see figure 10). Monument Valley was made famous by director John Ford when he used it as a set on which to film his iconic Westerns. *Stagecoach* (1939) starring John Wayne, was the first Western filmed in Monument Valley, possibly the first time this landscape caused unprecedented success. This earned the Western genre new-found respect and it emerged from B movie territory to the forefront of cinema. 'It's said that when John Wayne first saw the site, he declared: "So this is where God put the West." Millions of Americans might agree. The valley soon became fixed in the popular imagination as the archetypal Western landscape.' (Perrottet, 2010). Monument Valley enabled Wayne to become the archetypal cowboy, and Monument Valley's image has Wayne's face indelibly stamped on its rocky outcrops. John Ford brought Monument Valley into the American consciousness, developing the myth of the American West through his strong visual narrative and taciturn dialogue (see figure 6, 10). The value of the landscape to the Western, and thus to the cowboy, is a point well-made by Nanevski:

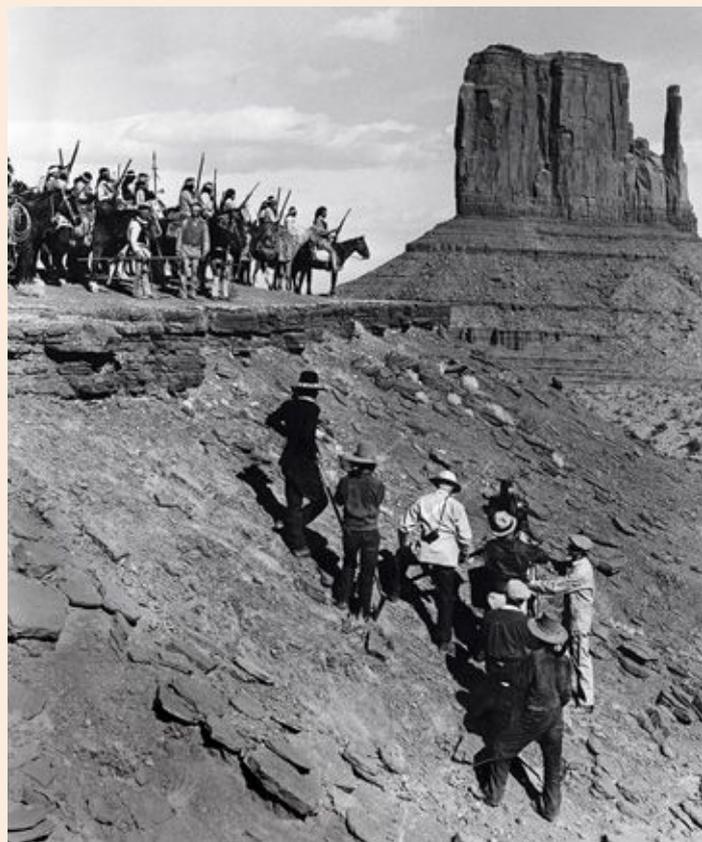
'While Ford to a large extent created the iconic image of the lonely cowboy standing in a wide open space, he didn't actually invent it. The shot was already there, he just needed to find the right place to do it. And the right place was at the eponymous Monument Valley, the colossal 92,000 acres of sandstone that helped forge the myth of the American West.' (Nanevski, 2017). The image of the American West was cast as Monument Valley, despite the fact that very few European settlers came through and stayed. "*This was Navajo territory...but as a metaphor for the American conquest of space and the continent, this is the American West.*" (Eyman, n.d.) In fact, 'Throughout the 19th century, white settlers considered the Monument Valley region—like the desert terrain of the Southwest in general—to be hostile and ugly. The first U.S. soldiers to explore the area called it "as desolate and repulsive looking a country as can be imagined" (Perrottet, 2010). This is a long way from the perceived narrative Ford cemented.

The success of these films and the newly iconic image of the West lead to the naming of John Ford Point. This was a rocky outcrop used as a motif in Ford's cinematography, so much so that it led to his name being attached to it (see figure 8)

Just as the American Continent was not '...pristine, virginal, and essentially uninhabited before the European incursions' (Solnit, 2014) as the Puritans believed it would be, nor was the West. "For centuries, only Native Americans, specifically the Paiute and Navajo, occupied this remote landscape, fielding conflicts with the U.S. government." (Vox, 2019). Massey writes of '...attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one's own' (Massey, 2013). Relayed through figures such as John Wayne, the narrative of the Wild West does not provide a complete or accurate analysis of its era. The Western is designed to sell a nostalgic dream, and it does so through its impact on collective memory. As Massey puts it, nostalgia is colonialization; and the Western is nostalgic for colonialization.

While the relationship the film industry has had with truth has never been precise, many of the films in the Western Genre were loosely based on real events, or people. This bending of reality to make a good film finds its way into the treatment of the local population. White settlers claimed the land of North America, marginalising and massacring indigenous people. John Ford fictitiously depicted this, decades later, in a landscape where it didn't happen, using Native Americans as extras. This point is described in 1997 by Gevinso, who noted that the local inhabitants of the region, the Paiute and Navajo (or Diné) peoples, were paid to act in some early John Ford/John Wayne films such as Stagecoach (1938) (see figure 7), Fort Apache (1948) (see figure 3), Rio Grande (1950) and The Searchers (1956), depicting conflict with white settlers who never settled. 'While on location in Moab, the crew brought fifty Navajo up from the reservation to play Apache in the film...Billy Yellow, one of the Indians selected for closeups, stated forty years later that the Navajo weren't told that they were portraying Apache.' (Staff, Gevinson, 1997). 'The valley and monument area is now home to the Navajo Nation, one of the largest American Indian tribes. Called "Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaili" ("Valley of the Rocks") by the Navajo...' (Patel, 2018). Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaili does not appear in any Western; native names are not valid or recognised in the American myth-making genre of the Western.

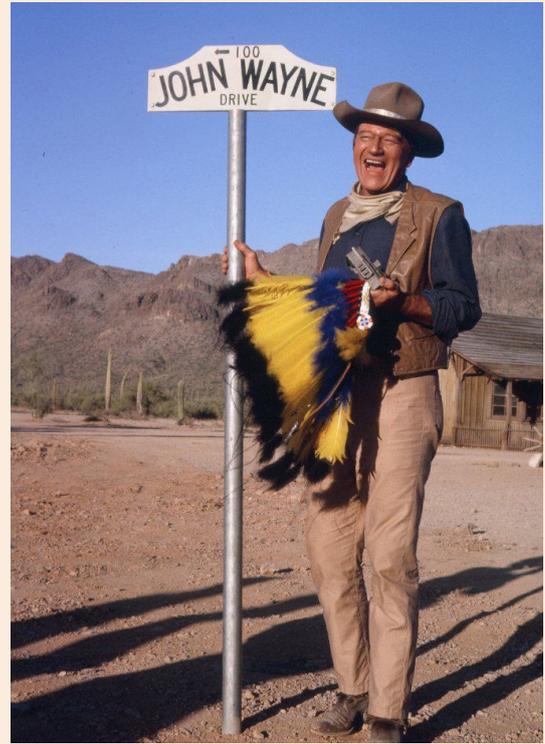
On film, the land is depicted as a resource for white settlers, whitewashing the real inhabitants of the landscape and exploiting their image. This is perhaps one of the few historically accurate narratives of the myth-making Western, ‘...the indigenous people rooted there before invasion and usurpation (are) also...to be overcome, absorbed, used as a kind of fuel in the making of the nation’s selfhood.’ (Christensen, 2008). Native Americans have been addressed in terms few now see as appropriate. Indigenous place-names are ignored, people are written in or out of storylines depending on the whims of artistic directors and script writers. Geographical locations, like John Ford Point, are named without any consideration, after directors who created imagery which fed into anti-indigenous narratives.



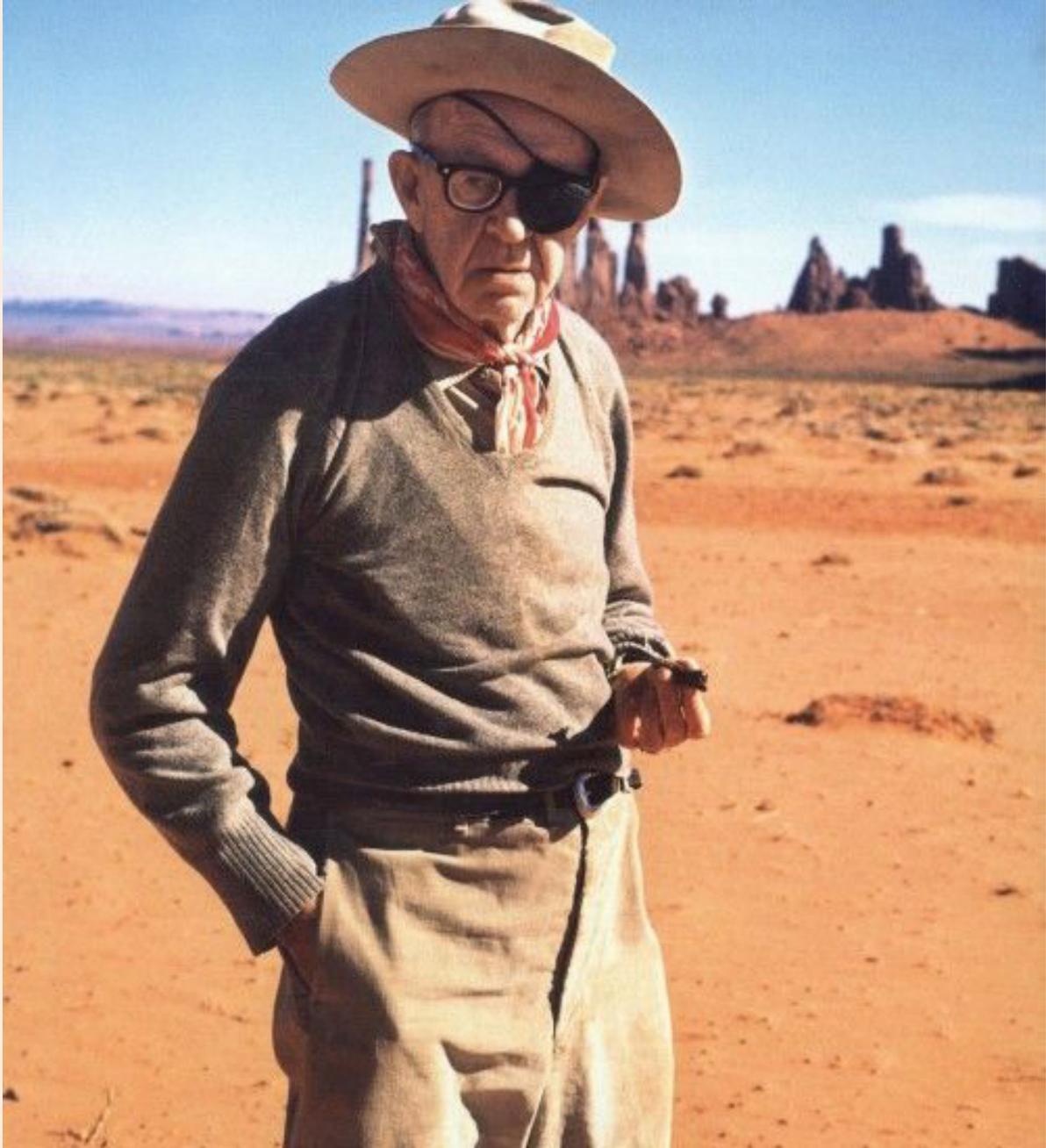
*Figure 7, Navajos and film crew on location in Monument Valley shooting John Ford's Stagecoach, (1938)*



*Figure 8, John Ford Point: Monument Valley.*



*Figure 9, John Wayne on the set of El Dorado (1967)*



*Figure 10, John Ford on location in Monument Valley while filming Cheyenne Autumn (1964)*

## Nationalism

While the landscape has certainly been stolen and used for profit, it was not just the work of money-hungry production companies: there was a demand for this content. Hungry between and after the wars for positive themes, romantic gestures, the triumph of good versus evil, the happy ending. Whether the evil was Mexican bandits or developers, there was a simplistic thirst for romantic lead men and beautiful landscapes, as well as patriotic and affirming myths of nationalism. Advertising was able to feed off this nostalgia. The Marlboro Man looked good. He sold cigarettes. The ideologies the cowboy evokes have made his image a visual shorthand. Commercialization becomes an embedded response. Hence the commercialization of the landscape.

Internationally, America wanted to stand tall as Europe failed and struggled post-war. The narrative of America saving the free-world from Nazism was repackaged into the tale of the cowboy ousting evil. Creating nostalgia has been crucial to America's leading world position, and World War Two provided the perfect film fodder for the good vs evil narrative, its successes creating a patriotic demand for American saviours like John Wayne. On film, rather than depicting Nazis as antagonists, post-war, the American people turned to the Western and its founding myths of nationalism for patriotic unity. As in John Ford's *Cavalry Trilogy: Fort Apache (1948)*, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)*, and *Rio Grande (1950)* native people or criminals were portrayed as baddies in contrast to the Cavalry. The Western reifies nationalism into the American subconscious, providing a glamorous narrative which supplants education in favour of a simplistic international outlook, and an emphasis on American isolationism.

The identity of the West, is, above all else, a capitalist narrative. John Ford and Twentieth Century-Fox's use of the landscape have turned it into an iconic symbol of the capitalist American Dream. Production companies have harvested huge profits from arid land which could not be made arable, planting seeds of nostalgia, depicting another era in which they used farming practices technology at the time had surpassed. In so many ways, the cowboy is no longer a relevant figure. Vocationally he hasn't been for some time; there is no real need for cross-country cattle herding in the USA today, as land has been fenced and bordered. One of the reasons the cowboy is so prevalent in the American imagination is due to his role in the use of the landscape for profit. In modern-day neoliberal America, everything is reduced to economics.

## Neoliberalism and the Cowboy

The poster boy for the most popular film genre, the cowboy stands for freedom and individualism. The Western genre, in turn exists as a nostalgic ode to the libertarian notion of freedom, used to promote hyper-capitalism. This, in turn, has facilitated the pervasive economic structure seldom named: neoliberalism. Neoliberal policy was introduced in America following its success in Chile in 1975. Led by the Chicago Boys and Milton Friedman, 'They reversed the nationalizations and privatized public assets, opened up natural resources (fisheries, timber etc.) to private and unregulated exploitation (in many cases riding roughshod over the claims of indigenous inhabitants), privatized social security, and facilitated foreign direct investment and freer trade.' (Harvey, 2007).

This freedom, exemplified by the cowboy trope, Solnit argues, is largely based in media fabrications. The idea that we exist only as individuals is an idea echoed throughout the Western genre; the reiteration of tropes and storylines centred on inaccurate historical narratives has blurred the line between truth and fiction. The extent of the symbiosis between consumption and perception remains a relevant question in this age of misinformation and algorithm-chosen news.

*'The cowboy is the American embodiment of this ideology of isolation, though the archetype of the self-reliant individual — like the contemporary right-wing obsession with guns — has its roots less in actual American history than in the imagined history of Cold War-era westerns. The American West was indigenous land given to settlers by the U.S. government and cleared for them by the U.S. Army, crisscrossed by government-subsidized railroads and full of water projects and other enormous cooperative enterprises. All this has very little to do with Shane and the sheriff in High Noon and the Man with No Name in Sergio Leone's spaghetti-western trilogy. But never mind that, because a cowboy silhouetted against a sunset looks so good, whether he's Ronald Reagan or the Marlboro Man. The loner taketh not, nor does he give; he scorneth the social and relies on himself alone.'* (Solnit, 2009).

The cowboy dream of freedom and opportunity exemplifies how nostalgia has been used as a device to manipulate and to sell dreams, changing the foundation of political language and landscape. 'The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as 'the central values of civilisation'. In so doing they chose wisely, for these are indeed seductive and compelling ideals.' (Harvey, 2007). The cowboy is representative of these '*seductive and compelling ideals*' (Harvey, 2007); the freedom of the cowboy lends itself to the support of free-markets, and the perceived opening up of opportunity. Neoliberal free-marketization is supported by the cowboy, inserting nostalgia where it does not belong.



Figure 11, Robert Altman's McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971)

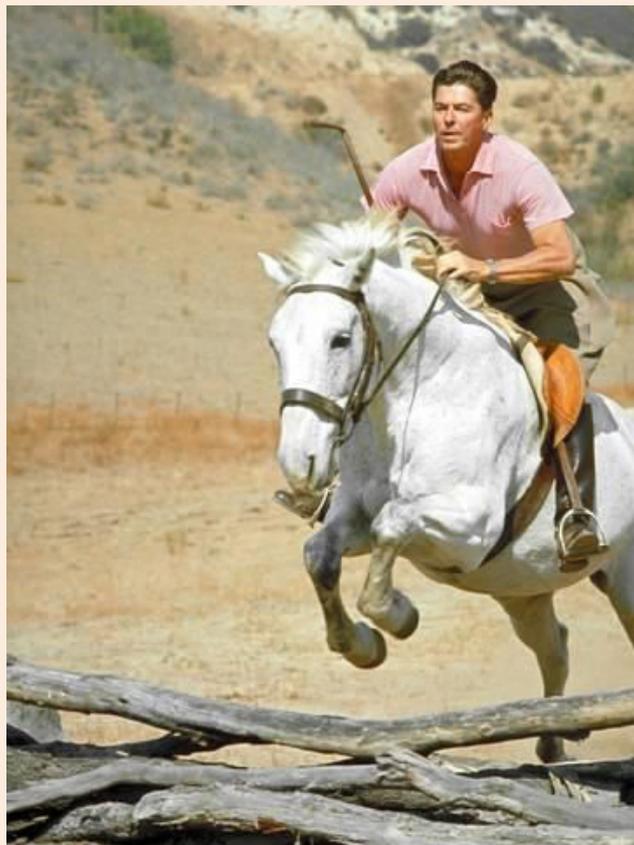


Figure 12, California Governor Candidate Ronald Reagan Riding Horse at Home on Ranch'

## Reagan and Revisionism

*“Why doesn’t he —run...for governor? He’s got all the ingredients to make a goddamned electable person. I don’t give a damn about how smart you are, if you’re not electable, forget it. You know. You’ve got the charisma to get elected...”* (Christina, 1964)

The American public remembered Ronald Reagan visually as a cowboy due to his roles in Westerns such as *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), *Law and Order* (1953) (see figure 13), and his role hosting the series *Death Valley Days* (1964-65). The ultimate American symbol of freedom and opportunity, Reagan capitalised on his cowboy persona to garner public support. Just as Trump was elected as a business man to fix the economy, Reagan was elected to restore American self-respect, following the perceived humiliations of Nixon and Carter. Reagan’s campaign, when running for governor of California in 1966, was advanced for its time in its emphasis on media marketing: ‘...in modern politics every candidate is invariably a media creation. The Reagan team was merely one of the first to recognise this inevitability and to exploit it fully.’ (De Groot, 1997).

Reagan ‘...seemed to sense that a cowboy persona would benefit him politically. To cultivate this image in the mind of the public, he often donned cowboy boots and jeans.’ Politically, ‘Reagan was able to capitalize on the romantic notion that cowboys and country folk are straightforward and trustworthy.’ (Tracy, n.d.) Reagan lays claim to the West, modelling himself in the image of the cowboy (see figure 14). This is an example of, as Massey suggests, ‘...attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one’s own’ (Massey, 2013). Reagan appropriated this identity not only to appear ‘straightforward and trustworthy’ (Tracy, n.d.) but to evoke the principles and ideologies fabricated by the Western genre. ‘His speeches played heavily upon traditional homespun values like self-reliance, hard work and the need to pursue one’s aspirations without interference by, or assistance from, the state.’ (De Groot, 1997). Reagan used the image of the cowboy to push his own agenda, just as the cowboy before him sat around on ‘...the community liar’s bench’ (Stewart, 2007) telling tall tales of his own heroism.

Using his image as a cowboy, Reagan appealed to a new demographic. ‘Reagan Republicans tapped a rich conservative vein among white workers of low to moderate income and low educational attainment. This social group usually voted Democrat...But innately conservative workers

had lately been alienated by civil rights and urban renewal programmes which Democrat politicians advanced... Thus, the instincts of white workers harmonized more closely with the policies of the Republican party... in order to woo workers to the right, the party had to change its image, had to address white working-class alienation.' (De Groot, 1997).

The people who were watching Reagan's Westerns were also the people he most appealed to as a politician. Americans identified more with idols than ideologies. '...he gave expression to the voters' profound estrangement from traditional politics.' (De Groot, 1997). Reagan utilised the image of the characters he played to create his persona, and to be elected as an American hero. The American people turned to their onscreen idols to fix their country, feeling alienated by elitist politicians. Nostalgia for the mythical cowboy and all he represents left the American people open to exploitation. Sensationalised politics, enabled by the newly accessible television, fed an appetite for the American Dream. 'It was perhaps fortunate that this alienation occurred at the same time as a communications revolution fuelled by television. Workers were the most avid television watchers. Television fed their alienation by bringing into their homes graphic pictures of the problems which most frightened them, chiefly race riots and student unrest. But television also presented a solution by providing the perfect platform for Reagan, a candidate who addressed the worker's fears and with whom they could identify.' (De Groot, 1997).

Portrayed by the Western genre for over four decades, Reagan was able to utilise nationalist historical fabrications about the founding of the West. In the 1970s, the Revisionist Western gained traction as an antidote for the nostalgic and romanticised vision for the Old West. As the threat of nuclear war weighed heavily on the American consciousness, and backlash against the Vietnam war filtered into the mainstream, scepticism of nationalism spread. With this scepticism, the Western changed. 'By the time the seventies rolled around, the Western had just been through a revolution of its own with the creation of the Revisionist Western, where the West was not only wilder than ever but also now reflecting on its own existential crisis. The life of a cowboy was no longer the pure-hearted white hat whose actions were always lawful and true.' (Brigden, 2018).

The new and emerging portrayals of the West were less enamoured with the somewhat dire and gritty existence of the cowboy so often glorified in previous decades. The black and white good vs. evil narratives were overtaken by grey-areas. Though scepticism had become more common, the ideals so often portrayed before the Revisionist Western were very much tied up in the nostalgia of the Old West. These were very pervasive ideals. The values the cowboy exemplifies were indeed ‘...seductive and compelling...’(Harvey, 2007). The founding myths of Going Out West, of freedom and opportunity, of the cowboy in his big hat, wielding his lasso over the New World, were still heavily ingrained.

‘Nostalgia has a special relationship with progress. Paradoxically, since it aims to preserve, nostalgia is a phenomenon that transforms over time. It is an active response to a changing world, but this changing world also transforms the shapes, sizes, forms, and intensities of nostalgia. The instant variant fed by Westerns is typical of a specific moment in time.’ (Verhoeff, 2006). The emerging Revisionist Western ushered in more inclusive and diverse interpretations of the Wild West; placing greater importance on untold narratives. An example of this can be found in Robert Altman’s iconic 1971 Revisionist Western: *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, (see figure 11) which provides a more female-centric perspective. Reagan, and his conservative politics, were more in line with the Westerns produced in previous decades. Harking back to the more traditional Western, his image alone was enough to evoke the ideals of the cowboy he had acted as so often. *Did Reagan provide a nostalgic alternative to the more realistic Revisionist Westerns and their new-fangled ideas?*



Figure 13, Ronald Reagan, *Law and Order* (1953).



Figure 14, “California Republican Gubernatorial Candidate Ronald Reagan in Cowboy Attire, Riding Horse Outside” (1966)

The prolific nature of the Western genre has meant that current Westerns are more in tune with Revisionist ideas, or are more satirical in their portrayal of the Wild West. Some might argue that the tropes made so iconic by directors such as John Ford have run their course and are portrayed now only mockingly. Examples of this include *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (2014), directed by Seth MacFarlane and *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018), directed by the Coen Brothers. Perhaps this is due to the sheer number of Westerns produced in the 20th century, and an increased awareness of inaccurate narratives. However, the recreation of the cowboy as an heroic figure still reaffirms these founding narratives. There is little room in the Western for change. Even when portrayed mockingly, the lead character of the cowboy is still evocative of the founding myths of the West. The Revisionist Western was too late to stop the onslaught of neoliberalism, these imagined narratives were already cemented 'in the making of the nation's selfhood.' (Christensen, 2008).

In America, the land of freedom and opportunity, the words freedom and opportunity are always seen positively, but when introducing free-markets into public services, every decision is economised. 'The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking...' (Harvey, 2007). Words like freedom and opportunity are used to describe economic systems and markets, masking systems in place which benefit big business and exploit workers. The use of this rhetoric surrounding economic policy is deceptive. Monbiot writes: 'Freedom from trade unions and collective bargaining means the freedom to suppress wages. Freedom from regulation means the freedom to poison rivers, endanger workers, charge iniquitous rates of interest and design exotic financial instruments. Freedom from tax means freedom from the distribution of wealth that lifts people out of poverty.' (Monbiot, 2017). This is not freedom. The freedom neoliberalism 'embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital.' (Harvey, 2007) The shift in terminology does not define the actual policy being made, nor does it define the true wants of the people. 'Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling...' (Monbiot, 2017). Neoliberalism, in its lexicon, is supported by the cowboy's reification of freedom in the American imagination.

*In the Western, the baddie is so often the corrupt developer, business man, or land owner. Why is it then that the lexicon of the cowboy is used to benefit big business? The contradictions inherent in the use of the cowboy as a figure of capitalism are these: the cowboy lives off the land, working essentially as a farm-hand, he needs little to survive and in this sense, he is not a consumer. The cowboy is sceptical of big business, of townspeople and authority. He is most in his element out in nature, with his horse and his hat. The way in which the cowboy's narrative could be appropriated to fuel a capitalist agenda is through his rugged individualism. A figure of authority and freedom, the cowboy went from being representative of those who settled in the West, to a figure of individualism and capitalism. The mythic founding figure of the cowboy went from being an authority figure, to a trope.*

Under a neoliberal ideology, 'Attempts to limit competition are treated as inimical to liberty. Tax and regulation should be minimised, public services should be privatised. The organisation of labour and collective bargaining by trade unions are portrayed as market distortions that impede the formation of a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone. Efforts to create a more equal society are both counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures that everyone gets what they deserve.' (Monbiot, 2017).

The question must be asked: *What ideologies fed the myths of nationalism which convinced a liberal-leaning nation that no regulation equals freedom? While the Western genre did not cause neoliberalism, it certainly helped to promote its ideologies. The narratives pedalled by the Western genre are those which directly align with neoliberal values: this winner-loser narrative is evocative of the moralising good vs. evil narratives of many of the Westerns to come out of the first half of the 20th century. Another example of these values is the triumph of the individual over society, the cowboy is a figure-head for rugged individualism. In the Western, the baddie is often the corrupt Sherriff, as in Law and Order (1953) or the figure of authority in a 'civilised' town. The point made so often here, is of course that the town, though meant to be civilised, is the seat of corruption and vice; unlike the pure realm of the cowboy, who exists only alone, in the vast desert or the wide prairie grasslands.*

*'Individualist anarchism had two faces. For the rich and powerful it represents the superiority of profit over law and state. Not just because law and the state can be bought, but because even when they can't, they have no moral legitimacy compared to selfishness and profit. For those who have neither wealth nor power, it represents independence, and the little man's right to make himself respected and show what he can do. I don't think it was an accident that the ideal-typical cowboy hero of the classic invented west was a loner, not beholden to anyone...'* (Hobsbawm, 2013)

Solnit suggests the 'ideology of isolation' (Solnit, 2009), is embodied by the cowboy. This Libertarian notion of staunch individualism is not only detrimental in its social cost, that is loneliness and lack of community, but in its environmental cost too. The unshakable belief in the individual above all else, particularly, heaven forbid, government intervention, has environmental ramifications. Solnit writes: *'The modern right may wish that every man were an island, entire of himself, but no one is wholly independent. You can't survive without taking air into your lungs, you didn't give birth to or raise yourself, you won't bury yourself, and in between you won't produce most of the goods and services you depend on to live. Your gut is full of microorganisms, without which you could not digest all the plants and animals, likely grown by other people, on which you rely to survive. We are nodes on intricate systems, synapses snapping on a great collective brain; we are in it together, for better or worse.'* (Solnit 2009) Solnit makes the point that there is no such thing as an individual, and therefore the myth of individualism is not and cannot be valid. The delicate ecological web in which we exist is cannot sustain this 'ideology of isolation' (Solnit, 2014).

## Conclusion

There can be little doubt as to the influence of the Western genre. There have been cowboy-Presidents, airports, and locations named after actors and film directors. The influence of the Western is far reaching. From this examination we can see how the Western, through its nostalgic myth-making, has exploited the landscape and its native inhabitants ‘...in the making of the nation’s selfhood.’ (Christensen, 2008). We can also see how the Western has facilitated the implementation of policy through the use of evocative and nostalgic imagery, and how Stetson-wearing politicians use costume and iconography to evoke feelings of identity and strength. The timeline of West has meant that the advancement of technology made sure these myths remained within the American psyche. Myth-making has rendered the cowboy, a figure of authority and freedom, a founding figure. Representative of those who settled in the West, he is an ideological figurehead, and a figure of rugged individualism and American Exceptionalism.

The ideals the image of the cowboy evokes, the freedom he promises, has lent itself to the glorification of the free-market, the privatisation of public services, the exploitation of the environment, and the slashing of welfare. The identity of the West, is, above all else, a capitalist narrative. The romance of isolationism has been so deeply ingrained in the American consciousness, that nostalgia for the cowboy, fed by decades of marketing, has been used to facilitate and justify capitalist policy. American nostalgia was exploited by sensationalised politics, playing on the fears and dreams of the people. As in the Reagan era, the dramatization of politics lives on even today through nationalist media outlets such as Fox News. The extent of the symbiosis between consumption and perception remains a relevant question in this age of misinformation and algorithm-chosen subjective news. These ‘synapses snapping on a great collective brain’ (Solnit 2009) are so enamoured by the cowboy and all he represents, and by those who used the image of the cowboy, figures like John Wayne and Ronald Reagan, that they believe in the idea that this freedom and opportunity makes us modern-day cowboys, when really we are just cogs in the wheel of capitalism, at the mercy of neoliberal policy.

Until we understand the narratives underpinning collective memory, we cannot understand the ways in which these modes of thinking can and have been exploited. The founding myths of the West are based in inaccurate visual prompts which cement imagined narratives, such as Monument Valley and the Fox Ranch, or Navajo unknowingly portrayed as Apaches. Through the Western, these visuals have become so representative that their inaccuracy is irrelevant; despite it, they are myths of nationalism. The early Western is a nostalgic view of a vanished world, the cowboy who graces its screens permeated the American Dream and shaped it, paying little mind to historical accuracy.



*Figure 15, John Ford's My Darling Clementine (1946) | Henry Fonda & Cathy Downs.*



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## Appendix:

Front Page - Director John Ford on location in Monument Valley while shooting “The Searchers.” [online] Available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/monument-valley-in-the-movies/6/> [Accessed 15 Jan. 2021].

Page 2 - (Full Spread) - John Ford Point: Monument Valley. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913913984826/> [Accessed 2 Jan. 2021].

Figure 1, John Wayne’s Tribute to America (1970)

Figure 2 - She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949) John Wayne, John Ford. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913914169743/> [Accessed 11 Jan. 2021n].

Figure 3 - John Ford’s Fort Apache: (1948) John Wayne and Uncredited Navajo Actor. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913914182987/> [Accessed 15 Jan. 2021].

Figure 4 - John Wayne, James Caan, Robert Mitchum in “El Dorado” (1966). [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/681662093570174905/> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2021].

Figure 5 - Rio Grande (1950) John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara, directed by John Ford.

Figure 6 - Director John Ford on location in Monument Valley while shooting The Searchers (1956). [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913913984867/> [Accessed 14 Jan. 2021].

Figure 7 - John Ford’s Stagecoach, (1938). [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913913984882/> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2021].

Figure 8 - John Ford Point: Monument Valley. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913913984826/> [Accessed 2 Jan. 2021].

Figure 9 - John Wayne on the set of El Dorado (1967) in Tuscon, Arizona. Directed by Howard Hawks - Paramount. ‘John Wayne was honored with the dedication of “100 John Wayne Drive” sign.’

Figure 10 - John Ford on location in Monument Valley while shooting Cheyenne Autumn (1964). [online] Alamy. Available at: <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-john-ford-cheyenne-autumn-1964-30947313.html> [Accessed 10 Jan. 2021].

Figure 11 - Robert Altman’s McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971): Julie Christie and Warren Beatty. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913914180335/> [Accessed 16 Jan. 2021]

Figure 12 - California Governor Candidate Ronald Reagan Riding Horse at Home on Ranch’ - By Bill Ray. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913914170016/>.

Figure 13 - Ronald Reagan, Law and Order (1953). [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913914170009/> [Accessed 17 Jan. 2021]

Figure 14 - “California Republican Gubernatorial Candidate Ronald Reagan in Cowboy Attire, Riding Horse Outside” (1966). By Bill Ray. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913914169547/> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2021].

Figure 15 - John Ford’s My Darling Clementine (1946) | Henry Fonda, Cathy Downs. [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913913984846/> [Accessed 2 Jan. 2021].

Last Page - (Full Spread) - John Wayne, John Ford, and Ben Johnson shooting She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949). [online] Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/436215913914169724/> [Accessed 12 Jan. 2021].

Note: I was not able to locate any images of Didion’s ‘Big Fox Sky’, therefore I have placed a visual emphasis on Monument Valley. I have referenced an image of John Wayne (figure 1) as it was filmed in California and is perhaps visually similar.

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