

John Ford, who directed his first film in 1917 and his last in 1966, is the only major American artist to recreate virtually the entire course of American history from the Revolutionary War (*Drums Along the Mohawk*, 1939) to contemporary politics (*The Last Hurrah*, 1958). While World Wars I and II, social problems like the plight of the Okies, and other aspects of twentieth-century history take up a large part in his extensive body of work, the portrayal of the history and myth of the American West in the 1800s is Ford's greatest and most famous legacy. "My name is John Ford; I am a Director of Westerns" – this is how he once defined himself on a memorable occasion.¹

"Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" – the title of Emanuel Leutze's painting of 1861, on display in the US Capitol and one of the best-known examples of Manifest Destiny, is perhaps the fundamental expression of the nature of American history both in fact and in the popular imagination about this history.² So it is in Ford, but with a complexity that is likely to surprise all those who consider the cinema to be merely "the movies" and Westerns to be no more than horse operas or shoot-'em-ups.

1 The Courses of Empire

A brief summary regarding empire may be instructive about the similarity between American and Roman foundation histories and the myths accompanying them.³ In both, small but intrepid groups of emigrants are more or less forced to abandon their home (Troy, England) and, after a long and

¹ This was a meeting of the Screen Directors Guild on October 22, 1950, concerning a loyalty oath and the blacklist. Since there was only a stenographic record, Ford's words have been reported in different versions, and eyewitness accounts vary in a number of details. My quotation is from Brianton 2016: 67. This book now supersedes all earlier accounts and commentaries, which it lists in its bibliography. Ford speaks at length about himself in Bogdanovich 1978 and Peary 2001.

² The title of Leutze's painting is a quotation of line 21 in Bishop Berkeley's poem "On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" (1752); an earlier version dates to 1726.

³ Concerning Virgil see, e.g., Miles 1999, with brief comments on Roman and American parallels and on other ancient versions of Rome's foundation. On the wider context see Quint 1993; Waswo 1997, especially 308–324 (chapter titled "The Epic as History: John Ford's Westerns"). On the spellings *Virgil* and *Vergil* see the comments by Gransden 1996: xxxv.

dangerous sea voyage westward, land in a new world (Latium in Italy, America). They find a partly friendly and partly hostile reception among the aboriginal tribes. Against all odds they survive hardship, setbacks, and wars. To a certain extent they eventually merge with the native population, but the tribes are mostly conquered or destroyed and leave only minor traces in the new dominant culture. In retrospect the natives, nearly vanished, become highly romanticized by their conquerors. Their newly established society soon begins an expansion that will turn it into a global power. Its conquests are by force of arms. The Roman legions were a nearly invincible military machine in antiquity, and so was the American military-industrial complex during and after World War II.

The rise and eventual fall of Rome has provided Americans with much soul-searching about the rise and possible fall of their own superpower. Are they Rome?⁴ Throughout their history Americans have considered themselves spiritual descendants of the ancient Romans. A revealing early illustration is the series of five paintings by Thomas Cole, collectively called *The Course of Empire* (1834–1836). The individual images are “The Savage State,” “The Arcadian or Pastoral State,” “The Consummation of Empire,” “Destruction,” and “Desolation.” They chart a symbolic course of all empires. Cole gives his series the look of the Roman Empire, the archetypal or paradigmatic empire in Western history and imagination. All architecture in the series is Roman, rather bombastically so in the third and central painting, which is also the largest. The first painting, however, shows what appears like a small village of tents or tepees arranged in a semicircle. The point this makes is understated but obvious. What Virgil said about the Romans’ course of empire in the proem of the *Aeneid*, Rome’s national epic as it has sometimes been called, may be applied to the course of the American empire with a few adjustments of geographical terms, with emphasis less on one leader and more on his people, and with the omission of a Roman deity’s name and involvement:

Arms and the man I sing of Troy, who first from its seashores
Italy-bound, fate’s refugee, arrived at Lavinia’s
Coastlands. How he was battered about over land, over high deep
Seas by the powers above! Savage Juno’s anger remembered
Him, and he suffered profoundly in war to establish a city,
Settle his gods into Latium, making this land of the Latins
Future home to the Elders of Alba and Rome’s mighty ramparts.⁵

⁴ I here refer to the title of Murphy 2007. Cf. also Williams 1980.

⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.1–7; quoted from Ahl 2007: 3.

As from Troy to Rome, so from Plymouth to Plymouth Rock; as from Italy to east and west (and north and southeast), so from the New World's east coast to its west coast; as from the Tiber and all around the Mediterranean, so from sea to shining sea. At least if painted on a large enough canvas, history does repeat itself in certain of its aspects. Just as the ancient Roman prototype had been the *agricola militans*, the farmer-soldier, so the modern *homo Americanus* had begun as a farmer and Minuteman. Increases in power and advancing technologies in both societies then replaced the militiamen with standing armies and brought about large estates: *latifundia*, an early form of plantation economy, to the Romans; huge farms, plantations, and cattle empires to the Americans. The Roman quasi-ancestry of the Americans is evident in crucial ways. Among the most prominent examples are the Constitution and the government, replete with a senate, now fifty-one capitol, and an eagle as symbol of power, and the neoclassical architecture of Washington, DC, which is consciously modeled on that of ancient Rome.⁶ Essayist, novelist, playwright, and screenwriter Gore Vidal, who grew up in Washington, once memorably observed:

I was steeped in Rome. I also lived in a city whose marble columns were a self-conscious duplicate of the old capital of the world. Of course Washington then lacked six of the seven hills and a contiguous world empire. Later, we got the empire but not the hills . . . There was the temple [the Lincoln Memorial] . . . at the heart of the city. Once I got interested in Rome and Greece, I used to haunt that part of Washington, imagining myself in ancient Rome.⁷

2 Frontiers

Conquest, with its subjugation of native peoples and its taming of the wilderness, is the precondition for new arrivals to establish a stable and enduring society. The frontier of imperial expansion is also a place of

⁶ Work on the close analogies between American and Roman history and culture, especially in connection with the Founding Fathers, is extensive; I here list only a few noteworthy studies: Gummere 1963; Eadie 1976; Reinhold 1984; Wills 1984; McDonald 1985; Vance 1986; Wiltshire 1992; Richard 1994 and 2009; Bederman 2008. Adams 1931, a classic work, is silent on Rome.

⁷ Vidal 1992: 51–52 and 67–68. Cf. Vidal 1993b: 1057–1060, especially 1059 (“an imperial Roman – literally, Roman – capital”) and 1060 (“a capital that [had been] little more than a village down whose muddy main street ran a shallow creek that was known to some even then as – what else? – the Tiber”). This essay first appeared in 1982. Vidal's own works set in ancient Rome are *Romulus: A New Comedy, Adapted from a Play by Friedrich Dürrenmatt* (1962) and the novel *Julian* (1964). He was among the uncredited screenwriters on William Wyler's epic film *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1959). Cf. Tatum 1992, where correct “*Mons Capitolium*” (209) to *mons Capitolinus*.

conflict, where nature and culture, savagery and civilization meet and clash. The Americans' view of their frontiers in the nineteenth century is comparable to that of the Romans of theirs, as a modern historian of the Roman Empire makes evident:

Frontiers were always dividing lines between civilized and barbarian worlds . . . and it has been in this light that Roman frontiers have often been conceived . . . The opening up of the West in the United States was in many respects the closest parallels to the Roman experience of a moving frontier . . . Americans were preoccupied by frontiersmen and their influence on the ideals of American manhood, and less with the interaction of frontier communities and native populations. At root lies an inherent admiration for the pioneer ever pushing outwards and a distaste for static borders. That, too, has had its influence on historians of antiquity.⁸

The West, to Ford especially the mesas and buttes of the American Southwest, is the area that will change from a wilderness into a garden. In particular Monument Valley, which one Ford scholar has aptly called "his own moral universe," is the setting that witnesses the near-mythic conflict between *physis* and *nomos*, *chaos* and *kosmos*, to put the matter in classical terms.⁹ The pictorial beauty of Monument Valley, simultaneously mysterious, seductive, and forbidding, lends itself particularly well to Ford's exquisite sense of visual poetry, both in black-and-white and in color.¹⁰ To Ford and most Americans of his generation, an agrarian society, mainly consisting of farming and ranching, is the perfect beginning for the development of the American Adam. Infused with a manageable and non-threatening degree of industrialization, this kind of society will progress to an ideal state for twentieth-century Americans, joining together domestic stability and foreign power.¹¹ But the combination of agrarianism and benevolent industrialism is only an intermediate stage, one that will in turn be forced to yield to more advanced capitalism and technology. Ford, born in 1894, could witness this development during his lifetime. The populist American view of social and political development parallels traditional Roman views about the origin, progress, and decline of their own *imperium*.

⁸ Quoted from Whittaker 2000: 293–294; footnotes omitted. He gives additional references.

⁹ The quotation is from French 2005: 64. On Ford and Monument Valley see also McBride and Wilmington 1974: 36–37 ("Monument Valley is a moral battleground"); Leutrat and Liandrat-Guigues 1998; Hutson 2004.

¹⁰ Cowie 2004 has an extensive collection of images in black-and-white and color.

¹¹ Marx 1964 is the classic work on the subject. On the American West see especially Henry Nash Smith 1950, another classic. See further Athearn 1986; Goetzmann 2009; Nash 2014.

Virgil had concluded at the end of the proem to the *Aeneid*: “Planting the Roman nation’s roots was a task of immense scale” (*tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*).¹² This finds a modern parallel in Ford’s body of work, especially his Westerns. With a slight if unmetrical change we could summarize the common theme of his Westerns in near-Virgilian terms: *tantae molis erat Americanam condere gentem*.

As the modern theory of the “two voices” in the *Aeneid* or “the other Virgil” indicates, Romans themselves were ambiguous about empire.¹³ The historian quoted above comments: “Roman historiography contained a deeply pessimistic consciousness of the fragility of imperial rule, if allowed to outgrow its own resources.”¹⁴ Similarly we can observe two contrasting and perhaps conflicting voices in Ford: first an affirmation of civilizing and benign empire while the country was advancing to take its place on the world stage, then disillusionment with modern society and its military and political system once the US had become a superpower. Ford’s portrayal of the Indians, controversial to many viewers, illustrates this point. His Westerns often require them to be the enemies of white culture, as in *The Iron Horse* (1924, an influential silent epic), *Stagecoach* (1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Rio Grande* (1950), or *The Searchers* (1956), to name only a few famous instances. But even then they are rarely unredeemable savages. The Apache chief in *Fort Apache*, modeled on the historical Cochise, is far nobler than the cavalry fort’s commander, whose arrogance leads to his own and his men’s death in a pointless battle that is patterned on the fate of George Armstrong Custer at the Little Bighorn. And Ford’s last Western, the epic *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), fully takes the Indians’ side with a story reminiscent of the Cherokees’ (and others’) Trail of Tears in the 1830s. The theme of white captivity, a crucial aspect in American frontier history, is addressed most famously in *The Searchers*, in which a young girl is reintegrated into her society, but it finds an ironic counterpoint in *Two Rode Together* (1961), in which a young white boy who has been “liberated” from a life among the Indians after years of captivity is desperate to return to them. The Navajos, who regularly acted in Ford’s films as Apaches, Comanches, Cheyennes, and others, made Ford an honorary member of their tribe, not least because on several occasions he was instrumental in rescuing them from economic hardship, even near-starvation. Ford, looking back, once said:

¹² Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.33; Ahl 2007: 4.

¹³ On this see in particular Parry 1963; Johnson 1976; Lyne 1986; Clausen 1995; Kallendorf 2007. Stahl 2016 presents the opposite view. All have further references.

¹⁴ Whittaker 2000: 298.

“My sympathy was always with the Indians.”¹⁵ On another occasion he commented:

I’ve killed more Indians than Custer, Beecher and Chivington put together . . . There are two sides to every story . . . Let’s face it, we’ve treated them very badly – it’s a blot on our shield; we’ve cheated and robbed, killed, murdered, massacred and everything else, but they kill one white man and, God, out come the troops.¹⁶

Ford’s attitude toward Indians conforms to white tradition, as two well-known nineteenth-century observations, among others, can tell us. Early in *A History of New York* (1809), the humorous account that Washington Irving wrote under the satirical persona of Diedrich Knickerbocker, we read:

Think you the first discoverers of this fair quarter of the globe, had nothing to do but go on shore and find a country ready laid out and cultivated like a garden, wherein they might revel at their ease? No such thing – they had forests to cut down, underwood to grub up, marshes to drain, and savages to exterminate.¹⁷

Irving’s personal view was quite different. While traveling in the West, he wrote in a letter to his sister: “I find it extremely difficult, even when so near the seat of action, to get at the right story of these feuds between the white and the red men, and my sympathies go strongly with the latter.”¹⁸

Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the treatment of Indians in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (1835) in terms both serious and sarcastic:

The Spaniards were unable to exterminate the Indian race by those unparalleled atrocities which brand them with indelible shame, nor did they even succeed in wholly depriving it of its rights; but the Americans of the United States have accomplished this twofold purpose with singular felicity; tranquilly, legally, philosophically, without shedding blood, and without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of the world. It is impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity.

¹⁵ Quoted from Gallagher 1986: 254.

¹⁶ Quoted from Bogdanovich 1978: 104. Besides Custer, Ford refers to the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre and the 1868 Battle of Beecher Island. Nabokov 1999 is a useful starting point for information about the other side of history.

¹⁷ Quoted from Irving 1983b: 404.

¹⁸ Letter written in St. Louis on September 13, 1832, with addendum of September 16; quoted from Pierre M. Irving 1883: 166–167; quotation at 167.

Tocqueville's sympathies go strongly with the Indians, as his melancholic conclusion reveals: "The Indians will perish in the same isolated condition in which they have lived."¹⁹

3 Ford's Cavalry Trilogy

The increasing degree of ennoblement of the Indians in Ford's Western films has its inverse parallel in his disillusionment with white society – that is, with all of contemporary America – in his mature work made after 1945, when the US had become a world empire.²⁰ That year a tone of resignation even at a time of victory marked *They Were Expendable*, a film about the American defeat in the Philippines in the wake of Pearl Harbor that Ford made around the end of the war. One of its most poignant moments occurs when an American shipwright stoically awaits his impending death at the hands of the advancing Japanese. The nineteenth-century folk song "Red River Valley," heard in several other Ford films but most memorably in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), links the story of World War II to the American West. The actor who plays the shipwright in *They Were Expendable* had played Pa Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He was also a regular member of Ford's unofficial "stock company" and frequently appeared in his Westerns. In this genre the turning point for Ford had come in what is unofficially known as his Cavalry Trilogy of 1948–1950, in which a strong sense of ambiguity about the role of the army in the settlement of the West becomes palpable.²¹

Fort Apache, first in the trilogy, shows the falsehood on which a myth about a famous hero is based and the silence of history about a genuine but unknown hero. The complex ending of this film, ostensibly an affirmation of a false legend or myth, is one of the most extensively debated issues in Ford scholarship. It is important for our context as well.²²

¹⁹ Both quotations are taken from Tocqueville 1904: 380. This translation, the first into English, dates to ca. 1839.

²⁰ On this see especially Wood 1971. "Shall We Gather at the River," quoted in the title of Wood's essay, is an 1864 hymn by American composer Robert Lowry. It is featured repeatedly in Ford's work and has become something of his signature tune. It is heard at the beginning of the church-dance sequence in *My Darling Clementine* and in *The Searchers*.

²¹ On Ford and the cavalry cf. now Cowie 2004: 72–119 and 215 (notes; chapter titled "The U.S. Cavalry and the Scars of War"); on the trilogy Matheson 2016: 143–199.

²² McBride 2001: 456–458 and Gallagher 2007: 314–317 account for the film's ending. On the subject see especially Poague 1988, with references to and discussions of earlier work on the film. Poague's essay elicited a reply from critic Robert Ray, on which Poague commented in turn (Ray and Poague 1988).

At Fort Apache on the Indian frontier and just before a new military campaign against the Apaches, several journalists are concluding an interview with Col. York, the cavalry regiment's commanding officer, about the heroism of his predecessor, Col. Thursday. Thursday, arrogant, bigoted, and eager for military glory, foolishly rejected the advice of York, an experienced officer, and caused an easily avoidable Indian war and the massacre of his men and himself. The journalists, however, do not know the truth. They report, mainly to us in the audience, that Thursday's Charge had brought glory to his regiment and that Thursday had become a national hero. "He must have been a great man, and a great soldier," one of them comments. York replies: "No man died more gallantly or won more honor for his regiment." Just as Custer's Last Stand was painted and widely published in newspapers and magazines, so a painting of Thursday's Charge is now on display in Washington. An excited reporter describes it, but the scene in that picture is pure fantasy. A stoic, almost brooding York affirms its accuracy, however, looking straight ahead in medium close-up as if seeing through the childish ignoramuses: "Correct in every detail."

When the deaths of Thursday's men are mentioned, one of the journalists observes: "We always remember the Thursdays, but the others are forgotten." York now launches into a brief speech of praise for these men who, he says, live on in the memory of the regiment: "They'll keep on living as long as the regiment lives." Then he adds: "They're better men than they used to be. Thursday did that. He made it a command to be proud of." Whereas we had previously seen York with his back turned to Thursday's portrait on the wall, he is now looking directly at it, as if in agreement with his own words. We know better. But then comes a surprise. Before riding out on patrol, York puts on his cap, which has a piece of cloth in the back to protect its wearer from the sun. It is identical to the one Thursday had worn – the only officer in the film previously to don such a cap. Is York a new Thursday? Is this why he has not corrected the journalists' affirmation of the legend? Is he, too, perpetuating the lie? Rather, as a critic observed, York is "a fervid opponent of the official line. Yet he does not once disobey a command, and the lineaments in Ford's world become clear. Insubordination is acceptable in [certain regards], but not in serious military affairs. York is the obedient rebel."²³ He is caught between opposing senses of duty and responsibility. The tragic nature of the film rests not so much on Thursday or on Thursday and the Apaches as on York. From this point of view it makes sense that John Wayne, who plays York, should

²³ The quotation is from Campbell 1971: 10–11.

get first billing over Henry Fonda, who plays Thursday, although Thursday is on screen much longer than York.

Here we have an anticipation of the famous "Print the legend" theme that will be crucial in one of Ford's last Westerns, discussed below. Ford detested Custer, the model for Thursday, but Ford himself affirmed the usefulness of myth in connection with the ending of *Fort Apache*: "It's good for the country to have heroes to look up to. Like Custer – a great hero. Well, he wasn't. Not that he was a stupid man – but he did a stupid job that day."²⁴ A scholar comments:

Army-post pictures had been common enough in Hollywood . . . What Ford brought new to the genre was more characters, more individualized, more differentiated, more interestingly interlinked, and thus a community richer in detail and mores. The land, its inhabitants red and white, their daily rituals and furnishings, the sight of a horse, all have "mythic" emotions [and] evoke in all of us not only life itself, and what matters, but [also] the sense of eternally repeating what every person has done. Myth rules us.²⁵

Ford has shown us the exact truth, partly heroic, partly not, from which the myth derives, so the reason why York does not reveal what Thursday, who did a stupid job that day, had really been like is that the legend serves a necessary function. York lies when he affirms the correctness of the myth and only pretends to be a new Thursday even when he dons Thursday's cap, but he does so out of a sense of responsibility toward his men. Everything else he says about Thursday is not, strictly speaking, a lie, although it seems so. Thursday did die gallantly if, like Custer, foolishly and did, through his death, win honor or glory for his regiment. Thursday did make better men of the soldiers, if only indirectly by showing them how not to deal with the Indians. York has had to undo the damage Thursday had caused, presumably by providing more responsible leadership. Still, York may be skirting the truth when he says that his is a command to be proud of. On this frontier the *pax Americana* comes only after irresponsible behavior, death, and suppression of truth: *tantae molis erat Americanam condere gentem*.

The themes of *Fort Apache* are war and peace, honor and glory, responsibility, and, perhaps most of all, the price to be paid for all this. This thematic complexity finds its parallel in the film's style, a combination of documentary realism in its black-and-white photography with the poetic beauty of the Southwestern locations and of Ford's sense of elegance. One

²⁴ Quoted from Bogdanovich 1978: 86. ²⁵ Gallagher 2007: 308.

particular moment stands out. It may remind us of a line from the *Aeneid* which occurs as Virgil's identical comment on two separate heroic deaths which have just been told: "Life flutters off on a groan, under protest, down among shadows."²⁶ The epitaph-like formula, highly stylized in its vocabulary, word order, and rhythm, expresses the finality of death and appeals to our emotions. Both times the line closes the episode in which it occurs. Its second appearance is the final line of the entire epic. In *Fort Apache* Ford rises to a comparable visual height of emotional power and finality in connection with the disastrous battle in which Thursday and his men perish – but he does so before, not after the battle occurs. Thursday faces an Indian army led by several war chiefs; their leader is Cochise. In the company of his fellow chiefs, Cochise observes the approach of Thursday and his men from a rocky ridge; Ford films them in medium long shot from a low angle against a towering sky. As if in disbelief at and contempt for Thursday's foolishness and in anger at the unnecessary doom Thursday is about to mete out to his own soldiers, Cochise bends down and picks up a handful of dust from the ground. Looking straight ahead, he tosses it diagonally across his body into the ditch before him. Falling, the dust forms a small cloud that is immediately dispersed: Symbolically, life flutters off (Figure 6.1). Cochise turns and leaves. Well beyond illustrating the common *Dust to dust* sentiment, which it also contains, the gesture expresses by anticipation the inevitability of what is to come and the futility and finality of death: "the soldiers are already dead."²⁷ In this way Ford intensifies, through visual poetry and without a single word being spoken, the emotional power of the battle sequence, the film's epic climax. Once we see the dust scattering, we know what will happen. Virgil looks back on poignant deaths, Ford looks ahead; both ways, one verbal, the other visual, are unforgettable. What price heroism?

Ford's next film, however, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, affirms a positive view of the military, if without turning the Indians into mere fiends. Its closing shot shows a cavalry patrol riding out into the wilderness yet again and facing uncertainty and danger. The narrator comments:

So here they are, the dog-faced soldiers, the regulars, the fifty-cents-a-day professionals, riding the outposts of a nation. From Fort Reno to Fort Apache, from Sheridan to Stockton, they were all the same: men in dirty-shirt blue and only

²⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid* 11.831 (on Camilla) and 12.952 (on Turnus): *vitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras*; Ahl 2007: 293 and 327. Virgil's model is Homer, *Iliad* 16.855–857 and 22.361–363, on the deaths of Patroclus and Hector.

²⁷ Gallagher 2007: 312.



Figure 6.1 Cochise and the dust of doom in John Ford's *Fort Apache*.

a cold page in the history books to mark their passing. But wherever they rode, and whatever they fought for, that place became the United States.

This epilogue is a remarkable echo, if probably an unconscious one, of a brief characterization of the US army made by Theodore Roosevelt in *The Wilderness Hunter* less than two decades after the time portrayed in the film:

in campaign after campaign, always inconceivably wearing and harassing, and often very bloody in character, the scarred and tattered troops had broken and overthrown the most formidable among the Indian tribes. Faithful, uncomplaining, unflinching, the soldiers wearing the national uniform lived for many weary years at their lonely little posts, facing unending toil and danger with quiet endurance, surrounded by the desolation of vast solitudes, and menaced by the most merciless of foes.²⁸

The affirmation of military heroism in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* is followed in *Rio Grande* with a tale that could have been called *What Price Glory* (1952), the title of one of Ford's lesser films, which is set in World War I. *Rio Grande* is the story of a cavalry raid of questionable legality into Mexico against Apaches. The screenplay was based on a story

²⁸ Roosevelt 1904: 22–23. *The Wilderness Hunter* was originally published in 1893.

called “Mission with No Record.” Although telling an independent story, *Rio Grande* has several strong links to *Fort Apache* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, not least in the identical or near-identical names of some of its characters, played by the same actors. The two earlier films, the first shot in elegant black and white, the second in exquisite color, displayed a quintessentially Fordian visual beauty. By contrast, the realistic black-and-white look of the third film yields a much harsher portrayal of military service. The commanding officer of a desolate border outpost sums it up for his son, an inexperienced volunteer: “put out of your mind any romantic idea that it’s a way of glory. It’s a life of suffering and of hardship, an uncompromising devotion to your oath and your duty.” Shortly before, he had told his new recruits:

I don’t want you men to be fooled about what’s coming up for you. Torture, at least that. The War Department promised me 180 men. They sent me eighteen, all told. You are the eighteen . . . so each one of you will have to do the work of ten men. If you fail, I’ll have you spread-eagled on a wagon wheel. If you desert, you’ll be found, tracked down, and broken into bits. That is all.

Danger, harsh and inglorious service, and personal sacrifice are this film’s theme, although it does not lack the affectionate and humorous touches that make Ford’s films memorable.

4 Ambiguity and the Price of Empire

The two films that are most significant for Ford’s increasingly darkening vision of the past came in 1956 and 1961. *The Searchers* is his undisputed if to some still controversial masterpiece, in which the previously idealized cavalry is satirized for brutality, inefficiency, and stupidity. A scene with General Custer as a massacring incompetent was, however, deleted. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is an elegy for a violent but heroic, romantic, and inspiring West. Since I have addressed both epic and tragic aspects of *The Searchers* in considerable detail elsewhere, I will limit my discussion of this decisive and influential film to a few comments later on.²⁹

In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* the West is personified in two antagonists. One is the psychopathic and ironically named outlaw Liberty Valance. The other is Tom Doniphon, a gunman-rancher (a significant

²⁹ Winkler 2001c and 2004b. On classical themes in the American Western see Winkler 1985 and 1996.

combination) who realizes that the days of the old frontier are numbered. The wilderness has vanished – better: has been conquered – and has been turned into a garden. But was it worth it? The film evokes an almost unbearable sense of loss, for viewers feel that the dignity and quiet honor inherent in the mythical West are irrevocably gone. The often intentionally drab if still strangely attractive look of the film reinforces its theme visually. What price civilization? Unavoidably for the betterment of society, guns have had to yield to the book of law. But the transition from gun law to true law is in turn followed by an early-twentieth-century world characterized by advanced technology, by social incivility representing the loss of chivalry and good manners, and by political and mercantile careerism and cynicism. What on the surface appears as a nostalgic look back at the West, made at the beginning of the last decade in which the Western genre was still popular, is much more: “it’s both the most romantic of Westerns and the greatest American political movie.”³⁰

The narrative arc of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is in strong contrast to the society-building process movingly described in *My Darling Clementine* (1946), especially in the earlier film’s famous sequence of a Sunday dance on the floor of a church that is being built. The visual composition of one particular long shot, as impeccable in its framing as Ford’s work invariably is, carries a powerful sense of symbolism. Two flagpoles with the Stars and Stripes screen right and near center balance the church’s bell tower screen left, with the rocks of Monument Valley in the distance (Figure 6.2). We watch an emerging society founded on the desert wilderness, held together by religion and morality (the church) and by its secular institutions (the flag): one nation indivisible. A comparable moment had occurred more briefly in *Drums Along the Mohawk*. In hindsight, the film that immediately preceded *My Darling Clementine* already hinted at what was to follow in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, for the very title of *They Were Expendable* indicates that the price of empire is high, perhaps too high.

Ford has often been regarded as a political conservative, not least through his long association with right-wing actors John Wayne and Ward Bond, the latter an extremist. But Ford is not that easy to categorize politically: “In his heart, he would always remain nostalgic, romantic, and, socially speaking, innately conservative, which makes his lifelong adherence to liberal principles

³⁰ The quotation is from Brody 2009. Cf. Giddins 2010b: 47; he concludes: “he [Ford] mourns . . . the rise of a new nation that will be no less self-deceptive (‘print the legend’) and painfully remade than the old one.”



Figure 6.2 The harmonious symmetry of nature and civilization in John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*.

even more startling.”³¹ And it is generally forgotten today how politically explosive Ford’s film of *The Grapes of Wrath* was at the time of its release only a few months after the publication of John Steinbeck’s novel.³² The enormous pressure of social and political – or capitalist – forces on what to Ford was the crucial unit in society, the family, is evident throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*. Alfred Kazin once observed about Steinbeck: “Steinbeck’s people are always on the verge of becoming human, but never do. There is a persistent failure to realize human life fully in his books.”³³ Such a failure is absent from the central characters in Ford’s adaptation, which “was single-handedly to transform [Ford] from a storyteller of the screen to America’s cinematic poet laureate.”³⁴

³¹ Eyman 1999: 19–20. The comments in Eyman: 135, 169, 186–188 (with 595), 199, 205, 225, 377, 386, 483, 497, and 511 enable us to trace the developments and variations of Ford’s political views. McBride 2001 discusses Ford’s political views throughout. But see also Brianton 2016: passim and 118–120 (concluding summary).

³² On this film see Gallagher 1986: 175–181 (= 2007: 217–223); Eyman 1999: 214–226; McBride 2001: 308–316.

³³ Kazin 1995: 394. For another early assessment cf. Wilson 1950b, revised and expanded from Wilson 1940.

³⁴ Sarris 1975: 90.

Only one year after *The Grapes of Wrath* the same theme appears again in *How Green Was My Valley*, an elegy set among a family of Welsh coal miners. Even as innocuous-looking a film as *Stagecoach* (1939), Ford's first Western filmed in Monument Valley and on the surface no more than a rousing adventure yarn, had exhibited darker tones throughout. So did several of Ford's films set in the twentieth century, such as *Dr. Bull* (1933), *Judge Priest* (1934), and the latter's remake *The Sun Shines Bright* (1953), one of Ford's own favorites. *Stagecoach* exposes the arrogance of class distinctions and hypocrisy. At the end Doc Boone comments when another outsider, the Ringo Kid, escapes to Mexico with the prostitute Dallas: "Well, they're safe from the blessings of civilization." The doctor had joined Dallas when she was being thrown out of town by the rather harpy-like ladies of the Law and Order League, one of Ford's most memorable indictments of "the foul disease of social prejudice," as Doc Boone calls it. Ford's final film, *7 Women* (1966), is set far from home in the China of 1935, but thematically it, too, is a Western – twilight's last gleaming.

In view of the preceding it is somewhat ironic that it was a Republican who awarded Ford the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1973, when Ford received the inaugural Life Achievement Award from the American Film Institute. Ford died a few months later. He lived long enough to see two decisive American debacles, one foreign, Vietnam, and one domestic, Watergate, although he did not witness the disgrace of President Nixon. Even if the history of the decline of the American empire did not begin in the Nixon years, the decline of the country's political and moral authority under President George W. Bush about thirty years later had at least some of its roots in that era. The portrait of domestic turmoil in *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936), Ford's film about the aftermath of the Lincoln assassination, now sounds and looks all too familiar. A particular scene deserves close attention for its words and images.

Over an image of Lincoln and with the Battle Hymn of the Republic briefly heard on the soundtrack, an intertitle introduces the sequence of the military trial of those charged with conspiracy and murder. It informs us that "the innocent as well as the guilty faced an angry and heart-broken people." Then we see a lynch mob and its agitators, ready to pass summary judgment. Before the trial begins, the Assistant Secretary of War instructs the officers who will form the court in the proper attitude:

I suppose you all realize that as members of the court martial for the trial of the conspirators in the assassination of our beloved president you have on your souls a grave responsibility. The object of this trial is not to determine the guilt or

innocence of a handful of rebels but to save this country from further bloodshed. The solemn truth, gentlemen, is that the federal union is on the verge of hysteria. That is why the trial of these conspirators has been placed in your hands rather than in a civil court, because men of the sword can be hard, and hardness is all that can save this country from riots, mob rule, even a resumption of the war itself.

He then offers two suggestions “to help you to be hard”:

First, you must not allow your judgment and decision in this case to be troubled by any trifling technicalities of the law or any pedantic regard for the customary rules of evidence. Second, and most important, you must not allow yourself [*sic*] to be influenced by that obnoxious creation of legal nonsense: reasonable doubt. Is that clear?

It is. Noise from the outside mob is heard off screen. The Secretary continues, his index finger raised dramatically:

Briefly, the voice of this court has got to be the voice of the people. [*More noise from outside.*] Before you start, I want you to hear that voice. [*He and the others move toward the open window.*] Listen to it.

They and we see the mob, shouting and burning the dummy of a hanged man. In medium close-up the Secretary meaningfully looks at the members of the court while wiping his hands on a handkerchief as if he were an American Pontius Pilate. The implication of his gesture is evident.

Ford now dissolves to the courtroom, with the Assistant Secretary moving among the people and commanding: “Bring the prisoners!” Armed guards (“Prisoners to the bar!”) then lead in the eight accused. They are in hand- and leg-irons, and their heads are covered by hoods (Figure 6.3). The accused stand behind the bar while the charge against them is pronounced; then they are identified by name, their hoods are removed, and they are roughly sat down. Most of them are guilty, but Ford’s images do not condone the way they are being treated, as when a helpless-looking old man wipes his eyes after his hood has been removed. This is Edward Spangler, to be found guilty but released in 1869. Hoods covering the heads of guilty and innocent, along with far worse treatment than what we see in this scene, were in the news again about seventy years after *The Prisoner of Shark Island* was released. A modern historian has made the analogy explicit:

Almost every account of the trial has focused on the treatment of the prisoners . . . this was a landmark event that spoke volumes about the times and – since September 2001 – about our own as well . . . It is not easy to put aside the



Figure 6.3 The accused in John Ford's *The Prisoner of Shark Island*.

barbarous image of people in hoods and chains. Prisoners had not been treated that way since 1696, and would not be again until 2001. But just as strange, in a way, was the fact that not all of the prisoners were forced to endure it . . . Still, the treatment was shocking, and after some of the commission members objected to it, the hoods were no longer worn in the courtroom.

This historian comments on the outpourings of popular grief and anger at Lincoln's assassination in terms that fit reactions to the terror attacks on September 11, 2001:

The prospect of further attacks kept the nation on edge, and every citizen was on the alert for any sign that terrorists were in their midst. Hundreds of suspects were rounded up on the vaguest suspicions, and some were arrested on looks alone. Of those, many were kept in isolation, bound and hooded, to await a trial by military tribunal. The reaction was unprecedented.

Who did this, and why? How large a conspiracy was behind these attacks? Is this the end, or will more follow? How far can we bend the rule of law to find and punish the conspirators? These were the questions on everyone's lips.³⁵

³⁵ The two quotations are from Kauffman 2004: 354 and ix (beginning of "Introduction").

Secretary of War Edwin Stanton ordered prisoners held captive on warships to "have for better security against conversation a canvas bag put over the head of each and tied around the neck with a hole for proper breathing and eating but not seeing." Quoted from Kauffman, 330.

In the wake of 2001, the scene in Ford's film has been called "a prophetic brief on attitudes toward torture."³⁶ The condemnation and subsequent rehabilitation of Dr. Samuel Mudd, one of the eight and the man referred to in the title of Ford's film, is a clear, if somewhat romanticized, vindication of the necessity for customary rules of evidence.³⁷

Ford poetically chronicled the history of his country. So did Virgil, the Roman author who is closest in spirit to Ford and perhaps to all of America. In 1930 John Erskine published a revealing article titled "Virgil, the Modern Poet," on the occasion of the bimillennium of Virgil's birth.³⁸ The reason for Virgil's modernity is his affinity with American history:

Most of the international accord we dream of today, Rome had achieved at least temporarily, and, so far as Virgil knew, permanently. The known world was obedient to central control. The League of Nations was working . . . daily, from the last horizon, came reports and tributes to the government supreme on the seven hills, and over them in return Rome spread to the four quarters the arts, the sciences, the religions of mankind. Through Rome had arisen order, communication, peace. What more could one ask?

Well, Virgil asked what it cost. The question . . . makes him seem today the most representative of modern poets.³⁹

Later on, Erskine makes a specific analogy between Virgil's way of presenting the history of Rome and Carthage on the one hand and imperial wars in later history on the other:

Had the poet been the shallow kind of patriot, he would have boasted of this terrific victory [over Carthage in 146 B.C.]. He prefers rather to ask why the two empires might not have been friends, and whether Rome, which wiped out its rival, was necessarily a better empire. The question takes many forms . . . Why should the coming of the white man to our land have meant the destruction of the Indian? Why should American civilization already [!] seem ominous to other

³⁶ Giddins 2010b: 51.

³⁷ Robert Redford's film *The Conspirator* (2011), about the trial of Mary Suratt, in whose boarding house in Washington, DC, part of the conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln was planned, also emphasizes the modern parallels (hoods, military tribunals) of her trial. Secretary Stanton is the precursor of the modern Secretary of Defense: actor Kevin Kline "only won the part, I imagine, because Redford couldn't get Donald Rumsfeld." Quoted from Lane 2011: 130. The remark's flippancy is not without point.

³⁸ Erskine 1930: 280–286; here quoted from its reprint in Erskine 1935a: 315–332. A shorter edition of this book had appeared in 1928. We have encountered Erskine and his book before.

³⁹ Erskine 1935a: 317. Erskine's essay is a sobering antidote to the contemporaneous ideological use and abuse of Virgil in Fascist Italy. On this subject, which has received extensive scholarly attention by now, see the summary in Nelis 2011: 86–96. His book contains an exhaustive bibliography on the Fascists' views of Roman culture and history.

nations? The poet has no answer more than we, but he expounds the question with unique generosity.⁴⁰

After 2001, the following words by Erskine about Virgil acquire new urgency: "Now that we realize that . . . our imperialism is only a development of the Roman and carries with it the same or greater cruelties, Vergil lives afresh as our poet."⁴¹ So does Ford.

In Book 6 of the *Aeneid* Anchises shows Aeneas the spirits of future but by Virgil's time past Romans, while the scenes on Aeneas' shield in Book 8 summarize Roman history.⁴² In both passages the poetic effect is one of *chiaroscuro*. The Civil War is prominent in Book 6, and the shield displays villains like Mettius Fufetius and Catiline and shows the rape of the Sabine women, members of an indigenous Italic population. War, death, and suffering are the price to be paid for imperial power – this is the main theme especially of the second half of the *Aeneid*. It has its American counterpoint in one of the key moments of *The Searchers*. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, one of Ford's greatest films about twentieth-century America, Ma Joad had been the center of the family and the steady force that kept the Joads' exodus on track. We might say: "a bold coup, led by a woman" (*dux femina facti*).⁴³ Mrs. Jorgensen in *The Searchers* is a comparable figure for nineteenth-century America. She is an immigrant's wife whose son has been killed by Indians. In a crucial scene she voices what all of Ford's major work is about. Her husband yields to his grief over the loss of his son, killed by Indians: "this country . . . it's this country killed my boy." His quiet despair is then contrasted with his wife's stoic acceptance. She characterizes the pioneers' life on the edge of civilization as being "way out on a limb, this year and next, maybe for a hundred more, but I don't think it'll be forever. Someday this country is gonna be a fine, good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come." Awareness of the necessity for sacrifices gives Mrs. Jorgensen the strength to endure. Savagery and violence will eventually be overcome, and there is hope for peace in the future. Her words perfectly summarize the underlying theme of *The Searchers* and of most of Ford's other Westerns: the evolution from savagery to civilization, the change in the land from wilderness to garden. They point to her own generation's part in this process and to the knowledge that the settlers will not

⁴⁰ Erskine 1935a: 327.

⁴¹ Erskine 1935a: 321. Virgil, too, has been given renewed scrutiny since 2001; cf. in particular Thomas 2015.

⁴² Erskine 1935a: 331–332 has some pertinent remarks on Book 6 of the *Aeneid* in connection with American culture and society.

⁴³ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.364; Ahl 2007: 15.

live to see the task completed. The setting of this short scene, memorable for its peace and quiet, is the Jorgensens' porch at evening. In a touch typical for his reversals from seriousness to humor or vice versa, Ford avoids any melodramatic emotionalism by having Mr. Jorgensen explain his wife's surprising eloquence: "She was a school teacher, you know."⁴⁴ Adapting Virgil, we might add: *dux femina verbi*.

5 Darkness Visible

Is Mrs. Jorgensen's speech a thematic summation of Manifest Destiny, the equivalent of Virgil's "Destiny's spindles" or of Jupiter's prophecy concerning the Romans' *imperium sine fine*, an empire without end?⁴⁵ Not quite, because the one man who is crucial in bringing about the goal described in *The Searchers* is Ford's most complex and darkest figure. Ethan Edwards is a heroic Westerner but also at moments a neurotic, racist, obsessed, and irrational killer (Figure 6.4). The price to be paid for future peace and stability, a goal not easily reached in Ford's work, is emphasized by the film's moving poetic ending, which shows us that the man of violence cannot even become part of an incipient civilization, "the fine, good place to be." Instead of entering the garden, he is condemned to return to the desert (Figure 6.5). Mrs. Jorgensen was right: It needs their bones in the ground before the time of fulfillment can come. So there is darkness visible in the light of the West. *Darkness Visible* is the title of a well-known book on the *Aeneid*, taken from one of the poetically and thematically most resonant lines in the entire epic. In the Underworld, Virgil writes, Aeneas and the Sibyl, his guide, walked in such darkness: "Moving, blocked from sight under night's isolation, through shadows" (*ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram*).⁴⁶

Three crucial moments in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* are visual analogies to Virgil's line. In all of them Ford uses a highly expressive play of light and shadow. The first occurs when Tom Doniphon realizes that he cannot act otherwise than to save the man of law who is helpless against Liberty Valance, even if he does so at the cost of losing the woman he loves. The third is his destruction of his own home, an act of drunken despair by which he condemns himself to a life of loneliness and poverty. The most

⁴⁴ The preceding is taken from Winkler 2001c: 145–146.

⁴⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.22 (*sic volvere Parcas*; Ahl 2007: 3) and 1.279. On the context see Johnson 1976: 88–92.

⁴⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.268; Ahl 2007: 136. The book: Johnson 1976.



Figure 6.4 The dark side of the antihero in John Ford's *The Searchers*.



Figure 6.5 The poetic ending of John Ford's *The Searchers*.

important moment, however, comes in between. A flashback within the film's main flashback finally reveals the identity of the man who shot Liberty Valance and the unheroic way in which this showdown had occurred. An introductory close-up of Tom Doniphon's face shows us a social pariah



Figure 6.6 The hero as social outcast in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

(Figure 6.6). It reminds us of a comparable close-up of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (see Figure 6.4). The flashback itself begins with an image that expresses the character of Tom Doniphon in particularly stark terms. In close-up he emerges from darkness and pauses in the light while his hat casts a large shadow on the wall behind him (Figure 6.7). Then he moves back into the dark and commits what he himself will later describe thus: “Cold-blooded murder, but I can live with it.” The man who shot, from a kind of ambush, the vicious outlaw out of personal compassion and for the sake of advancing peace and civilization killed his own peace of mind, ruined his personal happiness, and condemned himself to a life of despair. *Ibat obscurus*: moving, blocked from sight.

The darkness that surrounds Ethan Edwards and Tom Doniphon is sometimes literal but more often figurative.⁴⁷ A scholar has put the case in terms that, with a few obvious changes, are applicable to Virgil nearly in their entirety, if without their modern references:

In his work, Ford's Irish melancholy manifested itself in a sense of loss – for a vanished innocence, for a lost love, for a community, for a home. Many of Ford's films are large-scale, even epic, yet they contain the same warmth, domestic detail, and intimacy of his small movies . . . Ford's deepest moments concern memory and loss . . . A good case can be made that America's sense of itself, as far as the movies are

⁴⁷ Eckstein 1998 traces the process by which the central character became Ford's own artistic creation far beyond what the novel's author and the film's screenwriter had conceived.



Figure 6.7 The *chiaroscuro* effect in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

concerned, derives from two people: Frank Capra and John Ford. Of these two men, it was John Ford who told the truth . . . Ford's social vision was every bit as intense [as Capra's], but far more nuanced and mature. America's humane idealism gave him his themes, and his best films are energized by his recognition of his country's internal conflicts . . . Although Ford had an affecting faith in both the idea and the people of America, he was never blind to the ongoing presence of bigotry and racism . . . Ford's Westerns have the feeling of life as well as the aura of legend.⁴⁸

Ethan Edwards and Tom Doniphon are mythic figures who may be even more ambiguous than Virgil's Aeneas is to many classicists. Ethan's confrontation with Chief Scar and Tom's with Liberty Valance are anything but the heroic climaxes of epic narratives, the showdowns that audiences expect from their Westerns, especially if the "hero" is played, as in these two films, by John Wayne. The protagonist of either film faces an enemy who is his own *alter ego*. But the showdowns are intended to subvert genre expectations. So did the climactic duel in the *Aeneid*, the showdown, as it were, between Aeneas and Turnus, chief of the Rutulians: "Aeneas' javelin pierces his [Turnus'] corslet, his shield, then his thigh. Turnus is not facing his foe (or does not have his shield in front of him) when the shaft hits, and he is struck from behind."⁴⁹

Aeneas hits Turnus in the back, then kills a suppliant Turnus in a fit of Achillean anger. He becomes as questionable a hero as his Homeric model

⁴⁸ Eyman 1999: 21–22. ⁴⁹ Ahl 2007: 441, on *Aeneid* 12.924–925.

had been. In *The Searchers* Ethan Edwards shoots several people in the back and scalps the corpse of Scar, an act never condoned in the American Western film or novel and parallel to acts of mutilation of dead bodies in the *Iliad*.⁵⁰ If we regard Ethan as a kind of American Aeneas, then Scar becomes a kind of Turnus, and Ford's Apaches, Comanches, Sioux, Cheyennes, and all the other vanished Americans are the equivalent of Virgil's Rutulians, Etruscans, Latins, Volscans, and all the other vanished native tribes we encounter in the second half of the *Aeneid*.⁵¹ In *The Searchers* we watch the native people's forced disappearance in images that evoke nineteenth-century documentary photographs, except for being in color. The aftermath of an Indian massacre by the US cavalry that appears in *The Searchers* will have reminded knowledgeable viewers of the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee.⁵²

Massacres occurred not only in wars or campaigns between the original settlers and the new intruders but also in battles between the latter, divided as they came to be into North and South. The American Civil War (1861–1865) is dealt with or alluded to in several of Ford's films and in his contribution to the gigantic widescreen and stereophonic epic *How the West Was Won* (1963). It was released by M-G-M and Cinerama and featured a host of popular stars, narration by a beloved actor (Spencer Tracy), extensive shooting on location, expensive sets, spectacular action sequences, a rousing musical theme, and a running time of two hours and forty-five minutes. Ford and two other directors famous for their Westerns, Henry Hathaway and George Marshall (whom we met in Chapter 4), shared the responsibilities of putting on this huge spectacle. The opening credits name Ford before the other two, although his segment, entitled "The Civil War," appears only after the film's intermission. This placement signals to viewers the special emphasis placed on Ford because of the prestige of his name. But Ford's portrayal does not fit the surrounding and nearly non-stop glorification of America all that well. It is only around twenty minutes long, and about half of it is shot on a sound stage. The segment incorporates footage from earlier films for its exteriors. And it is relentlessly dark, literally and figuratively. Just as the long and complex history of the settlement of the West is abbreviated even in this epic film, so Ford's Civil War sequence deals only with one episode – or rather, with its aftermath – which stands in for the war's entire blood-soaked history. This is the 1862 Battle of Shiloh, which had well over 23,000 casualties of men killed, wounded, missing, or captured on both sides. As such, it can hardly be expected to form

⁵⁰ Cf. on this my comments in Winkler 2004b: 155–156 and 166 (notes with references).

⁵¹ On the wider context cf. Shields 2001.

⁵² For comparison, see Jensen, Paul, and Carter 2011: 105–114 (photos 66–75). Jerome Greene 2014: 259 (ill. 37) provides an unusually intense photo, with illuminating caption.

the centerpiece of a triumphalist epic suitable for family viewing. A mass grave is being dug and then filled in; the water near the battlefield is red with blood, an unusual thing to be seen even in a more serious film than this. A Union army tent serves as a field doctor's makeshift place for surgery, chiefly amputations. It consists of a wooden table on which the dead and dying are roughly deposited after a bucket of water is poured over the blood left on it from a previous surgery. As often, Ford shows us the price of empire through the dissolution of a family: a father killed, two brothers separated, a mother dead from grief. A dissolve from a family cemetery to a young soldier, returned from war and sitting on the porch before leaving his home for good, makes him appear to be leaning against his mother's tombstone – a poignant moment. It may, however, not be by Ford.⁵³ The martial nobility sometimes found in the Civil War is completely missing. In *The Horse Soldiers* (1959), an earlier Civil War film, Ford had shown military chivalry to be futile and anachronistic in one of his most memorable poetic sequences. It shows the young cadets of a Southern military academy marching, with flags and fifes and drums, against a Northern contingent. "Nothing but children; they're schoolboys!" exclaims a Union officer. Ford commented later: "that happened several times."⁵⁴

"Human events stir tears" (*Sunt lacrimae rerum*): Aeneas' mournfully resigned words, one of the most famous and often-quoted winged words of the *Aeneid*, are uttered retrospectively and introspectively when he sees images of the Trojan War on the temple being built in the new city of Carthage.⁵⁵ They point out the frailty of the human condition. Such a melancholic spirit also exists beneath the surface heroism in Ford. The poetic affinities of Virgil and Ford become evident in the following assessment of the latter. With some obvious modification, it also expresses the essence of Virgilian epic:

Ford was a defiantly consistent filmmaker. His perspective, however, is neither static nor predictable, and he specialized in presenting two opposing ideas simultaneously. A brass band blasts military tunes and our first impression is: Ford patriotic blarney. Yet his military films are among the most devastatingly critical

⁵³ In the words of Henry Hathaway, who directed most of *How the West Was Won*: "He [Ford] shot the whole sequence on a sound stage." Quoted from Behlmer 2001: 236. Director Richard Thorpe filmed transitional scenes without receiving credit.

⁵⁴ Quoted from Bogdanovich 1978: 97. On the historical background and Ford's use of Jefferson Military Academy for setting and uniforms see McBride 2001: 596.

⁵⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.462; Ahl 2007: 18.

portraits of wartime lunacy made in Hollywood. Few American artists have addressed the myths with which we justify ourselves to the gods and our children with more trenchant analysis.

Ford earns his patriotism by seeing through veils of vast sadness; he understood why America is worth dying for and even forgiving, which can be a tougher chore. Battle hymns and bugle calls cannot drown out the misery of the broken families, disappointed lives, abandoned women, and expendable men he documents . . . His films isolate the individual and mourn each individual loss.⁵⁶

Ford is the pre-eminent popular American artist whose work first celebrates a past that was imperfect but that is worth believing in and remembering, then mourns its vanishing. A particular shot from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* elegantly and eloquently conveys this point in purely visual terms (Figure 6.8). On the wall of a make-shift schoolroom, screen left, a reminder of the country's foundation; on the extreme right, and in the same building, the frontier town's newspaper office, representing freedom of expression and progress; on the wall in the center and dominating the composition the flag, flanked by two different Americans: the man of the law and the man of the gun. The moment is not meant to impose its meaning forcefully; rather, it is understated and integrated into the story being told. But its composition is highly significant. "Ford represents pure classicism of expression in which an economy of means yields a profusion of effects . . . any of his compositions selected at random will reveal [his] attention to nuanced detail and overall design."⁵⁷ We may compare a particular late-ancient manuscript illustration of the *Aeneid*, which, in conjunction with the passage it illustrates, makes nearly the same point. It shows the embassy of the Trojans, new arrivals in a new land, to indigenous King Latinus before a magnificent palace-plus-temple, symbol of culture and civilization.⁵⁸ Its architecture is anachronistic, but this very circumstance refers us to what is to come as the culmination of a long and complex historical process: "Rome's mighty ramparts" (quoted above). Ford makes a similar point with the church in *My Darling Clementine*.

⁵⁶ Quoted from Giddins 2010b: 49. ⁵⁷ Quoted from Sarris 1975: 185.

⁵⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.170–193. Several details in this passage (e.g. *fasces*, *rostra*) indicate the Roman society to come. Wright 1993: 64–65 prints a full-sized color photograph of this illustration (folio 60 verso of Vat. lat. 3225), with annotation and Virgil's text in Latin and English. On the image see also de Wit 1959: 126–130 ("Pictura 41"). For the sake of greater visual impact, the illustrator moved Virgil's indoor scene to the outdoors.



Figure 6.8 A summation of American culture in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

6 History and Epic

Ford directed about 140 films, ranging from short one-reelers to at least one full-scale epic. Virgil wrote two shorter works, the pastoral *Eclogues* and the agricultural *Georgics*, before his mythic-historical epic. As dissimilar as the Roman and the American necessarily are across time and place, Ford and Virgil have one overarching artistic principle in common. Classical scholar Friedrich Klingner decades ago drew attention to the spiritual unity within Virgil's works.⁵⁹ One of the most important early critical studies of Ford points to the same phenomenon. Its chapter headings read as follows:

Early Days

1930–1939: The Storyteller

1940–1947: The Poet Laureate

1948–1966: The Poet and Rememberer of Things Past⁶⁰

What Klingner saw as fundamental to Virgil is fundamental to Ford as well:

the farmer's life does not only embody a general ideal, but it is [also] the original way of life in Italy. Rome's grandeur rests upon it. It is not only the ideal opposite of a devastated present [after civil war] but also a surviving remainder of one's own

⁵⁹ Klingner 1965b: 274. Klingner's essay was first published in 1930.

⁶⁰ Sarris 1975: 5 (table of contents).

purer origin and of a better past. The present is, on the whole, a decline from this right and appropriate way of life.⁶¹

Virgil's theme in the *Georgics* is, "more and more, the entire *res Romana*, of which the country life is an important part, and the decision of Roman destiny in the present."⁶² The artistic result is again comparable to Ford and the *res Americana*, as we may call it:

In Virgil's mind there arose a great historical image encompassing the entire Roman past and present and interpreting this present. Italy is the land of Saturn; its original and genuine essence had been realized in the peaceful and just conditions of the Golden Age. The farmer's life is a remainder of this, having survived until the present, a present destroyed by guilt and suffering. It is the basis on which Rome's majesty and world empire were erected.⁶³

In Virgil's case as well as in Ford's, the movements from early works preparing the way to large-scale mature achievements are clearly traceable and make for a strong cohesion overall. The separate developments of Virgil's and Ford's societies from agrarianism to world empire have certain implications in common. So do their artistic creations:

The art of [Virgil's] poetry ... contains within itself what moves and is of importance to all, the great common concerns of historical experience. But history changes and combines itself with the order of existence, in which the poet is at home, with myth. It does so in such a manner that the factual historicity of the present as it has been experienced is preserved but merges with myth, just as a park merges with a natural mountain landscape. The poet experiences history, but to such depths that he senses greater things permeating it – things that are beyond political and historical facts and even beyond ethical conditions, things that are more essential and encompass those facts and conditions.⁶⁴

Ford's body of work comes closest to the *Aeneid* when it expresses greatness and sacrifice, affirmation and resignation – that is to say, a strong sense of ambiguity and what in retrospect we might call the spirit of the end. In this regard, Ford's twentieth-century portrayal of the indigenous peoples conquered, pushed aside, or annihilated echoes nineteenth-century sentiments about them. A telling passage in *Charlemont*, a novel by William Gilmore Simms published in 1856, is worth quoting at some

⁶¹ Klingner 1965b: 284.

⁶² Klingner 1965b: 287. The Latin expression implies the totality of Roman life, history, culture, etc.

⁶³ Klingner 1965b: 285. ⁶⁴ Klingner 1965c: 303. This essay was first published in 1943.

length because it is barely known today. Simms wrote about the Indians of Kentucky:

The “dark and bloody ground,” by which mournful epithet Kentucky was originally known to the Anglo-American, was dark and bloody no longer. The savage had disappeared from its green forests for ever, and no longer profaned with slaughter, and his unholy whoop of death, its broad and beautiful abodes. A newer race had succeeded; and the wilderness, fulfilling the better destinies of earth, had begun to blossom like the rose. Conquest had fenced in its sterile borders with a wall of fearless men, and peace slept everywhere in security among its green recesses. Stirring industry – the perpetual conqueror – made the woods resound with the echoes of his biting axe and ringing hammer. Smiling villages rose in cheerful white, in place of the crumbling and smoky cabins of the hunter. High and becoming purposes of social life and thoughtful enterprise superseded that eating and painful decay, which has terminated in the annihilation of the red man; and which, among every people, must always result from their refusal to exercise, according to the decree of experience, no less than Providence, their limbs and sinews in tasks of well-directed and continual labor.

A great nation urging on a sleepless war against sloth and feebleness, is one of the noblest of human spectacles. This warfare was rapidly and hourly changing the monotony and dreary aspects of rock and forest. Under the creative hands of art, temples of magnificence rose where the pines had fallen. Long and lovely vistas were opened through the dark and hitherto impervious thickets. The city sprang up beside the river, while hamlets, filled with active hope and cheerful industry, crowded upon the verdant hill-side, and clustered among innumerable valleys. Grace began to seek out the homes of toil, and taste supplied their decorations. A purer form of religion hallowed the forest-homes of the red-man, while expelling for ever the rude divinities of his worship; and throughout the land, an advent of moral loveliness seemed approaching, not less grateful to the affections and the mind, than was the beauty of the infant April, to the eye and the heart of the wanderer . . . Though the savage had for ever departed from its limits, the blessings of a perfect civilization were not yet secured to the new and flourishing regions of Kentucky.⁶⁵

The vanished tribes of pre-Roman Italy, evoked in the second half of the *Aeneid*, are predecessors of the native tribes of Kentucky. The nineteenth-century novelist could still affirm the progress that comes with white settlement; the twentieth-century director, whose most profound restatement of the theme came exactly one century later, can no longer do quite the same thing. In different ways and from different perspectives, Ford's

⁶⁵ Quoted from Simms 1856: 14–15. The passage appears in the opening section of the novel's first chapter (“The Scene”).

The Searchers and, more explicitly, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Cheyenne Autumn* all echo Simms, who was a poet and historian as well as a novelist. But Ford's vision in the late works mentioned became far darker than Simms's had been. "Is our progress then genuine?" we might ask with John Erskine. "Is the spread of civilization after all a good thing?"⁶⁶

The fundamental implications in Ford are comparable to the last line Virgil ever composed, provided we are willing to widen that line's meaning and to apply it beyond its particular situation, as Virgil himself may have intended.⁶⁷ This line, translated and discussed above, can serve as a fitting epigraph for the fate of the Indians in *Cheyenne Autumn*, Ford's last Western, and for his eventual disenchantment with the West: "Life flutters off on a groan, under protest, down among shadows."

A country's greatness comes at a price. Virgil, "father of the West," as he has been called, showed this in the *Aeneid*.⁶⁸ Ford, "the American cinema's great poet of civilization," as he has been called, showed this in many of his films, primarily his Westerns.⁶⁹ "This is the West, sir. When the facts become legend, print the legend" – this famous pronouncement on history and myth in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* points to the close ties between history and poetry (i.e. all literary fiction) that Aristotle addressed in his *Poetics*. Aristotle valued literature more highly than historiography.⁷⁰ Klingner concluded about Virgil's epic and Roman history:

Admittedly, this is not history as a historian sees it. Fundamentally it is something quite plain and simple, something that exists before history in a narrower sense – myth. And it is this: the capacity to sense the whole of a fateful development, stretching from the distant past to a decisive present, to feel one with the past, to hallow one's origins.⁷¹

This again fits Ford's portrayals of history. To epic literature on important themes of the past we may now add historical epic cinema. As far as

⁶⁶ Erskine 1935a: 320 and 321.

⁶⁷ So, e.g., Quinn 1969: 276: "The relevance of the death scene [i.e. Turnus' death] to the events of their own times can hardly have escaped Virgil's contemporaries."

⁶⁸ So the title of Haecker 1934. The German original appeared in 1931.

⁶⁹ The quotation is from Wood 1971: 12. ⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a37–b32.

⁷¹ Klingner 1965c: 311. Even if the *Aeneid* is not a historian's work of history, Virgil's affinities with Roman historiography, especially Livy's account of early Rome, is well-known: "Virgil elsewhere [besides the historical events depicted on Aeneas' shield in Book 8] writes like an historian . . . it is tempting to believe . . . that in his description of Aeneas' shield Virgil is again resorting to the historian's manner." Quoted from Woodman 1989: 134 (= 2012: 150); additional references there in note 14. On the subject see further Feldherr 2014: 299–312, with extensive references.

America is concerned, this means primarily the Western.⁷² Within the Western it means primarily Ford. Unlike Virgil, whose *Aeneid* was immediately recognized as transcending even Homeric epic, the model it was built on, Ford, to a large extent, had to wait for due recognition. What one perceptive critic recognized early on about his last film, which had been widely dismissed as a failure upon its release, applies to Ford's work in general: "The beauties of *Seven Women* are for the ages, or at least for a later time when the personal poetry of film directors is better understood between the lines of genre conventions . . . [Ford is] one of the cinema's greatest poets, though he would be the last to say so himself."⁷³

An analogy between Ford and one of the greatest American poets may add another instance of proof to this proposition. In his collection *Drum-Taps* (1865), Walt Whitman included a poem entitled "Cavalry Crossing a Ford." Its text immediately conjures up parallel iconic moments in several Ford Westerns. The poem consists of only seven lines. But it is as evocative as Ford's cinematic images and sounds:

A line in long array where they wind betwixt green islands,
They take a serpentine course, their arms flash in the sun – hark to the
musical clank,
Behold the silvery river, in it the splashing horses loitering stop to drink,
Behold the brown-faced men, each group, each person a picture, the
negligent rest on the saddles,
Some emerge on the opposite bank, others are just entering the ford –
while,
Scarlet and blue and snowy white,
The guidon flags flutter gaily in the wind.⁷⁴

Each group, each person a picture: It is no overstatement to say that the majority of camera set-ups in Ford's Westerns are as pictorial as Whitman's poem and as the paintings of Frederic Remington, Charles M. Russell,

⁷² Political overtones in the Western appear with expected frequency. As director Sam Peckinpah, who is best known for his Westerns (and sometimes considered to be either the legitimate or the illegitimate successor of Ford), once put it: "The Western is a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today." Source of quotation: "Press Violent About Film's Violence, Prod Sam Peckinpah Following 'Bunch'"; quoted from Prince 1999: 212. The film in question is *The Wild Bunch*, to which I will briefly turn in Chapter 7.

⁷³ Sarris 1975: 185 and 188. With characteristic grumpiness, Ford always denied that he was a poet and maintained that he did not know what such an expression meant. Here is an example from 1973, when Ford could look back on his entire career: "I am not a poet . . . I'm just a hard-nosed, hardworking, run-of-the-mill director." Quoted from Wagner 1975: 54; rpt. as Wagner 2001, with quotation at 159. Ford deceived few if any, perhaps not even himself.

⁷⁴ Quoted from Kaplan 1982: 435.

Charles Schreyvogel, and a few others. If we modify the opening of the *Aeneid* – *arma virumque cano* (“Arms and the man I sing”) – we might put the matter of Ford into these terms: *arma virosque canit* (arms and the men he sings with his epic-historical themes) but also *arma virosque pinxit* (arms and the men he painted – on the screen itself).

7 Remembrance of Things Past

In Book 1 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas and some of his men barely survive a savage storm on the sea. Aeneas attempts to instill courage into them with a brief but justly famous speech. In its center Virgil places a sentiment that resonates across time: “Maybe the day’ll come when even this will be joy to remember” (*forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*).⁷⁵ Eventually even dire hardship may turn into a pleasant memory. The thought had been long familiar from Greek and earlier Roman literature but received its canonical form here. As has been well said, “it is authentic of human experience and resilient hope.”⁷⁶ Ford’s Mrs. Jorgensen implied much the same thing.

A particular film by Ford may be the best illustration of this Virgilian perspective ever put on the American screen: *How Green Was My Valley*, adapted from the 1939 novel by Richard Llewellyn. The harsh fate of a family of miners and that family’s eventual dissolution is as poignant and heart-rending as anything Ford ever put into images. *How Green Was My Valley* presents, in a narrator’s voice-over, the youthful memories of a young boy from a melancholic perspective of decades later. A biographer of Ford succinctly summarizes the film’s greatness:

the characters are . . . bathed in the golden glow of an adult’s remembrance of his childhood. And it is one of the most cogent statements of one of Ford’s deepest themes: the way that time’s flow destroys the old ways, which must die in order for the future to take hold.

He then refers to the “tenacity and universality” of the emotions portrayed in this film.⁷⁷ Thematic parallels to the *Aeneid* are self-evident. Black American writer Stanley Crouch provides us with corroboration. In an essay on Ford he wrote, more than fifty years after the film was released:

⁷⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.203; Ahl 2007: 10. Aeneas’ speech is at lines 198–207.

⁷⁶ Austin 1971: 84. Austin: 83–84 (on line 203) gives parallel citations ranging from Homer to the younger Seneca.

⁷⁷ Both quotations are from Eyman 1999: 242.

I watched it whenever I could because there was something in the tale that spoke to the world surrounding me even though the people, superficially, were so different. The cinematic depth gave me one of my earliest experiences of the meaning of the universal achieved through aesthetic form . . . I am back there just as the boy was in *How Green Was My Valley*, and nothing is dead, nothing gone, all is made perpetual through the regeneration of memory.⁷⁸

Most of this, too, fits Virgil. Everything that is superficially different and long gone is still here. The depth of artistic perception in epic and in the cinema virtually guarantees the eternity of the past in later memory: "All that is truly important is the flow of history, a new world being built on what has come before – on sacrifices made, loves lost, families broken, entire communities disintegrated." These words about Ford are an unwitting echo of Virgil's epic, for both are "connecting the past and the present in an eternal ribbon of remembrance."⁷⁹

The emotional appeal of the past as it is presented by a great artist guarantees that artist his eternity: a remembrance of poets past. Like many influential artists, both Virgil and Ford came to acquire near-mythic status themselves. Their respective apotheoses occurred in two twentieth-century German novels: Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil* and Peter Handke's *Short Letter, Long Farewell*.⁸⁰ "That's the pathway to heaven" (*sic itur ad astra*): Virgil's now proverbial expression may serve as my epigraph to this consideration of him and Ford side by side.⁸¹ But an observation about epic and film once made by Jorge Luis Borges is equally fitting: "I think nowadays, while literary men seem to have neglected their epic duties, the epic has been saved, strangely enough, by the Westerns."⁸²

⁷⁸ Quoted from Crouch 1998b: 270 and 288. The essay was originally published in 1996 (Crouch 1998a: 323).

⁷⁹ Both quotations from Eyman 1999: 341, in connection with *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

⁸⁰ Broch 1945, published simultaneously with the German original (*Der Tod des Vergil*); Handke 1974; the German original (*Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*) was first published in 1972. On the mythical Ford who appears at the end of Handke's partly autobiographical novel see my comments in Winkler 1988: 575.

⁸¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 9.641; Ahl 2007: 229.

⁸² Christ 1967: 123; rpt. in *The Paris Review Interviews* 2006: 111–159; quotation at 118.