West of "Them": Classical Antiquity and Identity Politics in the American Western

Recent scholars have demonstrated a significant kinship between Western film and classical antiquity (Bakewell 2002; Blundell and Ormand 1997; Day 2008 and 2016; Rubino 2014; Winkler 1996, 2001 and 2004). While this relationship for the most part runs through the genre as a subtle undercurrent, its presence throughout much of the genre's history has also made itself felt in explicit references and allusions, seen in works from classics like John Ford's 1939 *Stagecoach* and Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) to Westerns of the new millennium like *Deadwood* (2004-06) and (*Longmire* (2012-). The importance of this relationship is further signaled by the yoking of "the Old West" to the world of Greco-Roman antiquity in extra-generic films from 1973's *Westworld* to the *Night at the Museum* trilogy (2006, 2009, 2014) to *The Lego Movie* (2014).

The persistent association of the United States' immediate mythic-historical roots, which lie in narratives of the "Wild West," with the Greco-Roman world suggests an unconscious attempt to reinforce the position of the classical past as a more distant but nonetheless direct cultural ancestor, a notion very much in line with the idea that Greek and Roman antiquity form the foundation and basis for Western civilization more generally. This broad division of the world into the binary categories of "West" and "East" is consonant with the "us vs. them" mentality crucial to the foundational narratives of a nation eager to justify the extermination of native peoples and the appropriation of lands already occupied as a triumph of civilization over savagery that was divinely sanctioned by the tenets of Manifest Destiny.

As today's scholars are increasingly calling into question the reduction of cultural heritage, values, traditions, and ideologies into an East/West binary (i.e. Appiah 2016), it is important to recognize where, and examine how, our popular narratives unconsciously work to

establish or reinforce these long-held assumptions as an important step in helping to challenge them. By doing so, we can better understand our cultural identity, not just as it is presented in the stories we tell, but in the world beyond the big screen as well.

Word Count: 569

Bibliography

Appiah, Kwame Anthony (2016). "There is No Such Thing as Western Civilization." *The Guardian* 9 Nov. 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/western-civilisation-appiah-reith-lecture.

Bakewell, Geoffrey W. (2002). "Oedipus Tex: *Lone Star*, Tragedy, and Postmodernism." *Classical and Modern Literature* 22.1: 35-48.

Blundell, Mary Whitlock and Kirk Ormand (1997). "Western Values, or the Peoples Homer: *Unforgiven* as a Reading of *The Iliad*." *Poetics Today* 18.4: 533-569.

Day, Kirsten (2016). *Cowboy Classics: The Roots of the American Western in the Epic Tradition*. Edinburgh UP.

Day, Kirsten (2008). "'What Makes a Man to Wander?': *The Searchers* as a Western *Odyssey*." *Celluloid Classics: New Perspectives on Classical Antiquity in Modern Cinema* (=*Arethusa* 41.1): 11-49.

Rubino, Carl A. (2014). "Wounds That Will Not Heal: Heroism and Innocence in *Shane* and *The Iliad*." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 1.1. http://journaldialogue.org/issues/issue-1/wounds-that-will-not-heal-heroism-and-innocence-in-shane-and-the-iliad/.

Winkler, Martin M. (1996). "Homeric *Kleos* in Western Film." *Syllecta Classica* 7: 43-54.

Winkler, Martin M. (2004). "Homer's *Iliad* and John Ford's *The Searchers*." The Searchers:

    Essays and Reflections on John Ford's Classic Western, Arthur M. Eckstein and Peter

    Lehman, eds. Detroit: Wayne State UP. 145-170.

Winkler, Martin M. (2001). "Tragic Features in John Ford's *The Searchers*." *Classical Myth and*

    Culture in the Cinema, Martin M. Winkler, ed. Oxford: Oxford UP. 118-147.