

MYTHOLOGY AND ANTI-MYTHOLOGY IN JOHN FORD'S *THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE*

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Abstract

John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is usually seen as a sceptical indictment of American mythology – the first in a continuous streak of films that revise the conquest of the frontier and the archetypes traditionally presented in this kind of story. If that is true, then *Liberty Valance* invites a radical shift in our political relation to American cosmology, system of symbols, and communal culture. Is it right to present this film in this light, though? For me, the answer is no. To answer this question, I investigate what position *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* holds in John Ford's filmography, concluding that in light of his previous and subsequent works, it is not possible to see in this film any indictment of American mythology, since the picture uses symbols and archetypes of typical narratives of the western genre in a positive light.

Keywords: myth, symbolism, politics, cinema, narrative, western, classic Hollywood.

Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

To many, John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)¹ the picture that laid the foundation for the trend that lasts to this day, of what is generally called "revisionist western." As the western is probably the most political genre in the Hollywood canon (closely followed by the gangster picture), it was only natural that during the political and social upheavals of the 1960s, if we are going to see indictments against American politics and the American society, it would be in this genre we can find the most subtle, but sharp criticism. If that is right, we should take a close look at this picture, John Ford's next-to-last full-fledged western.

Liberty Valance shares many similarities with other "revisionist westerns." Like in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), its protagonist ends up dazed, with a seemingly unrequited love. Like *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *Pat Garret & Billy the Kid* (1973), and *Blazing Saddles* (1974), it seems to question, and even mock, the morality or the actions of what appear to be heroic figures on the surface. This trend, as I said, continues to this day, with films like *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *Dead Man* (1995), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and *Meek's Cutoff*

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¹ Based on the story by Dorothy M. Johnson (1905–1984), a successful author of western fiction.

(2010) as some examples of works that carry on the questioning of the history of the American West *Liberty Valance* started. That's what they say, at least.

In this article, I will analyse the images, symbols, and intentions John Ford proposes with this picture, cross-examining the objective archetypal figures I identify in the film with what I believe to be Ford's personal politics and vision of America and the western genre. My aim is to discover if *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is, indeed, a proto-revisionist western or not.

Serpentining toward Death

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance tells the story of Senator Ransom "Ranse" Stoddard (James Stewart). After killing the ruthless criminal Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin), he launches a prosperous political career. But one day, he and his wife Hallie (Vera Miles) return to Shinbone, their town. The journalists of the *Shinbone Star* learn of the visit and want to know why they are in town. They are here to bury Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), an old cowboy. But why is a senator of the United States in Shinbone to bury an old cowboy? The truth is that Tom Doniphon is the man who actually shot Liberty Valance. Stoddard, then a bookish young man fresh out of college who came from the East, did not even know how to handle a gun. All these years, Stoddard has been enjoying popularity on a feat that was not his, while Doniphon languished in obscurity. Worse, he even married the woman Doniphon loved, though his love was unrequited.



Ill. 1. John Wayne as Tom Doniphon and James Stewart as Ransom Stoddard in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

Joseph McBride describes *Liberty Valance* as a “profoundly skeptical reexamination of American history and mythology, a prophetic quality in anticipating the public’s loss of faith in government.”² That it came out the year before President John F. Kennedy’s murder has not been unnoticed: Professor Matheson says that the “parallels between Ransom Stoddard and John F. Kennedy.... are deeply disturbing when one considers the canonizations of Stoddard’s character at the movie’s end and Kennedy’s after his assassination.”³ America was preparing itself to a time of profound agitation and chaos, a deep reconfiguration of its inner self. In other words, *Liberty Valance* seems to herald this long descent into self-questioning and self-doubt.



Ill. 2. Lee Marvin as Liberty Valance.

The fact that John Ford (1894–1973) directed it also led many scholars to wonder if he had changed his mind regarding American mythology. Perhaps, now reaching the twilight of his

² Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, Jackson, Miss., 2011, p. 623 (first published 2001).

³ Sue Matheson, *The Westerns and War Films of John Ford*, Lanham, 2016, p. 262.

life – the “Age of Mortality”⁴ – Ford had it in his mind that it was time to strip the drapes of divinity that he had shrouded America with during his career. Perhaps the history of the United States and, above all, the conquest of the frontier were not made of good-natured straight shooters like Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach*, or of benevolent and disciplined Cavalry captains like Nathan Brittles in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949). Perhaps John Wayne, who leads the two pictures just mentioned, was not a hero at all. To many, *Liberty Valance* is the result of this change of mind.

This leads us to a radical predicament. Let us not forget that the western is the most *American* of all genres, and Ford is the poet laureate of this genre (he considered himself primarily a director of westerns, ironically or unironically⁵). From a macro standpoint, this means that the primary artist of the primary genre of American art is about to reconfigure the artistic genre that is the very translation of the American *forma mentis*. As Rouben Mamoulian put it, “The Western is a deathless epic, it’s American folklore, it’s the great American myth. As a myth it is as important as the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*...”⁶

The great cultural change that *Liberty Valance* seems to represent marks a deep redesign of the American mind. Culture is the crystallization of the rational and non-rational impulses and patterns of behaviour and beliefs of any given society,⁷ especially those of a more “primitive” or traditional bent, since the kinds of art those societies produce normally reflect the communal experience of a culture or a society. Culture, says Christopher Dawson, “is a living whole from its roots in the soil and in the simple instinctive life of the shepherd, the fisherman, and the husbandman, up to its flowering in the highest achievements of the artist and the philosopher.”⁸ On account of that, Mircea Eliade stated that to archaic societies, “the destruction of an established order, the abolition of an archetypal image, was equivalent to a regression to chaos, into the pre-formal, undifferentiated state that preceded the cosmogony.”⁹

The chaos of the 1960s certainly is analogous to this return to the chaos before the cosmogony of which Eliade speaks. According to the critics, even the main character, Stoddard, is a denial of all of what Ford upheld as good and praiseworthy in the West. He is the antithesis of Tom Doniphon – who represents the good and traditional West, the West of Nathan Brittles or Ringo Kid. Stoddard, the new American, is “hysteric,” “fraudulent,” and “cynical”;¹⁰ he wants to fight fascism with words, not guns;¹¹ he is an indoctrinator who pompously corrects everyone’s ways self-righteously.¹² Sue Matheson has the most radical view on Stoddard. To her, he is a liar through and through, emphasizing that his version of his gunfight with Liberty Valance is a pathetic implausible showdown. She says,

⁴ Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: The Man and His Films*, Ca., 1988, p. 466.

⁵ See Joseph McBride, *op. cit.*, Ch. 11.

⁶ In George Stevens, Jr., *Conversations with the Great Moviemakers of Hollywood’s Golden Age at the American Film Institute*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2006, p. 174.

⁷ See Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn, eds., *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, Columbia, Mo., 2008, p. 245ff; Charles R. Embry, *The Philosopher and the Storyteller: Eric Voegelin and Twentieth-Century Literature*, Miss., 2008; Glenn Hughes, *A More Beautiful Question: The Spiritual in Poetry and Art*, Miss., 2011; and Lee Trepanier, “Culture and History in Eric Voegelin and Christopher Dawson”, *The Political Science Reviewer*, XLI, 2 (2017), p. 211–242.

⁸ Christopher Dawson, *Progress & Religion: An Historical Inquiry*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 2001, p. 45 (first published 1929).

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (tr. Philip Mairet), Sheed & Ward, New York, 1961, p. 38 (first published in France in 1952).

¹⁰ Joseph McBride, *op. cit.*, p. 632.

¹¹ Claude-Jean Philippe, “L’Amérique par excellence,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 137, 1962, p. 42.

¹² Tag Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

the dance hall band playing in the saloon down the street, the villain winning his last game of poker with the Death Hand, the decent law-abiding man doing the right thing, the Colt .45s, the deserted streets and the emptied sidewalks.

That is, it is a “dime novel gunfight.”¹³

Stoddard and Doniphon are two Americas in opposition. The latter is the wild and “natural” America, the America according to the book of nature. “Doniphon’s attractiveness lies in the fact that his self-rule, gentleness with friends, and harshness toward enemies seem to have arisen naturally... He is as natural and beautiful (and thorny) as the blossom on the cactus rose, albeit rarer.”¹⁴ Stoddard, on the other hand, seems unnatural; he is a product of the American society. Stoddard’s rise is the demise of the real America, the hypocritical America of our forefathers. It is the end of all that was good that Ford sang about in over forty years of film directing. Stoddard’s triumph over Doniphon has all the hallmarks of injustice: a puppet of the system triumphed over a real man.

What is more, the last scene of the picture seems to highlight that Stoddard and Hallie know that: after revealing to the newspapermen of the *Star* that he did not shoot Liberty Valance, Stoddard and Hallie board the train back to Washington, DC. The engine driver states that the railway company is rescheduling its trains so Stoddard can return to Washington as fast as he can: “Nothing is too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance.” Stoddard and Hallie are speechless and remain in silence as the picture dissolves into its final shot, with the train serpentine away.

Ford appears to reserve his last comment about the future of the U.S. in this last shot: he filmed it using a handheld camera. Today, films featuring handheld shots are common, but in 1962 the practice was reserved for avant-garde or amateurish pictures. The highly exposed and blurry image of the shot suggests that it was made with a 16mm film blown up to 35mm. Some scholars have stated that this is Ford in dialogue with *cinema vérité*, then in blossom in the early-1960s,¹⁵ but probably this shot recalls Ford’s experience with handheld shooting in *The Battle of Midway* (1942), his documentary on the homonym World War II battle during which he was wounded. He later said,

The image jumps a lot because the grenades were exploding right next to me. Since then, they do that on purpose, shaking the camera when filming war scenes. For me it was authentic because the shells were exploding at my feet.¹⁶

Handheld, thus, has to do with anxiety, uncertainty, and the spectre of death. Undoubtedly, in choosing to end the picture with this shot, Ford is stating that Stoddard and Hallie and the United States as a whole are heading toward mortality – that is, Time.

¹³ Sue Matheson, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

¹⁴ David W. Livingstone, “Spiritedness, Reason, and the Founding of Law and Order: John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*”, *Perspectives on Political Science*, XXXVIII:4, 2009, p. 220.

¹⁵ Dalila Martins, “Um estranho interlúdio,” *Revista Cinética*, February 17, 2014, <http://revistacinetica.com.br/home/o-homem-que-matou-o-facinoira-the-man-who-shot-liberty-valance-de-john-ford-eua-1962/>. On a contrary opinion, Joseph McBride told me in a personal communication that he believes this shot was filmed in 35mm.

¹⁶ John Ford, in an interview by Axel Madsen, qtd in Tag Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

A New Mode of Existence

If we are talking about mortality, then it is certain that *Liberty Valance* is indeed not about *myths*. At this juncture, we may have to agree with those who state that this film is Ford calling into question his own work about Western and American mythology, thus placing him in line with the political and cosmological revolution of the American society during the 1960s.

But is it? Maybe, maybe not.

Two Figures

The first objection to the vision above lies in his filmography. If Ford no longer believed in American heroism or in the higher values of mankind, or at least the higher values of a good American man, then the religious morality *Donovan's Reef* (1963), the heroic and tragic saga of *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), and the tale of redemption and self-sacrifice *7 Women* (1966) would not exist. And yet, they do.¹⁷

Liberty Valance is aesthetically diverse from Ford's other pictures. Some of his symbolic images are missing, the main example being his *omphalos*, Monument Valley, Ford's centre of the world. There are other aesthetic differences: the photography is flat, set to mid-greys; characters have more expository dialogue, etc. As McBride put it, *Liberty Valance* resembles more a Carl Theodor Dreyer picture than a Ford western.¹⁸



Ill. 3. Stoddard contemplating a remain of the past.

¹⁷ Though it is true, as Robin Wood observed, that of these three pictures, only *Cheyenne* is set in America ("Shall We Gather at the River? The Late Films of John Ford", *Film Comment*, vol. 7, no. 3, Fall 1971, Film Society of Lincoln Center, p. 9); but that would amount to say that *The Long Voyage Home* (1940) and *The Quiet Man* (1952) do not symbolize American existential views simply because they also are not set in the U.S. Symbolisms are universal, but they are conditioned to certain local and geographical prerogatives. See Christopher Dawson, *op. cit.*, passim, and Lee Trepanier, *art. cit.*, p. 225.

¹⁸ Joseph McBride, *op. cit.*, p. 626.

However, we cannot forget that the word “aesthetics” means, above all, “superficial.” Even though there are *aesthetic* differences between this film and Ford’s other works, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* shares the same substantial and archetypal view of the West. Ford’s West is an eternal *now* where things might change their shape, but not their essences.

When Stoddard starts to tell his story, he says that the old Overland stagecoach he sees is the same one that brought him into Shinbone. It is unlikely that it is the actual one, but that is of secondary importance; what is at stake here is that Stoddard and the film recognize that it is a *symbol*: the Overland stagecoach, the eternal way of transportation and communication of the West. Seen in this light, it *is* the stagecoach that brought Stoddard into Shinbone, even though it might not be the *actual* one. And it would not be an overstatement to say it *is* the same stagecoach that made John Wayne a star.¹⁹

The overall atmosphere of the picture, even if it is aesthetically different from other Ford’s westerns, is still archetypal. However, the main characters are uncomfortable in living in a mythological environment. This has to do with the fact that the film is a tale about the passage from innocence to experience, from *pistis* to *gnosis*, as Northrop Frye would have it.²⁰ Tom Doniphon is essentially a *mythic frontiersman*; a man who has a natural sense of justice, even if flawed:

Spiritedness is also the seat of anger... [Doniphon] is an individualist who initially has no interest in shouldering the larger burden of responsibility for cultivating and defending justice and natural rights... [and] is not particularly bothered by Valance’s conduct in general... Although Doniphon caricatures the ineffectual [Marshall] Appleyard as “Mr. Law and Order himself,” Doniphon has never – as far as we know – stepped in to take the role of town marshall.²¹

Ranse Stoddard, on the other hand, is a man of “intelligence” in the manipulative sense Richard Hofstadter gives to the word.²² He believes that law and order can spring forth into material existence only by the power of words. He represents a new phase of American civilizational development: with him, Shinbone gets a functioning school, organized elections, freedom of the press, and the consciousness of what being an American citizen means. He is not a mythical hero, but a *leader*.²³

All of this comes to a clash in the famous scene of the school, when Pompey (Woody Strode), Doniphon’s illiterate Black ranch hand, starts to recite the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence, but forgets the part that says “all men are created equal.” “A lot of people forget that part,” says Stoddard. Shortly afterward, Doniphon, who had been away, storms into the classroom, brings the day’s class to a close, and demands Pompey to get back to the ranch. This scene stresses the *epistemological* difference between Doniphon and Stoddard. It is not only a matter of being of “different stocks”; the course of communication between their souls is hindered by the contrary existential positions of Doniphon and Stoddard. Doniphon is a skillful frontiersman, but his change of attitude toward Liberty Valance is not “for the good of the work to be done,”²⁴ but out of a possessive love for Hallie. He is blind to the fact that Stoddard

¹⁹ Tag Gallagher says it looks like the one from *Stagecoach* (*op. cit.*, p. 479).

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 169 (first published 1957).

²¹ David W. Livingstone, *art. cit.*, p. 219, 221.

²² Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963, p. 24–25.

²³ As in Northrop Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 33–34.

²⁴ Plato, *Gorgias*, 503E.

actually believes in the rule of law, in order, and in a different, less violent life, and that Shinbone, as well as the whole territory, would profit if civilization were established in this environment. In other words, Doniphon cannot see how much more beautiful Shinbone would be if its wilderness were converted into a garden. Ford parallels this struggle for Shinbone with the struggle for Hallie, whom he associates with nature itself (consider the visit to the charred ruins of Doniphon's house – a scene clearly shot in the manner of a self-encounter – her putting the cactus on Doniphon's coffin, and the final line of the picture).

The opposition between “wilderness” and “garden” is a recurring symbolism in the picture. These two men clash in a world subjected to an unrestricted process of demythologization and disenchantment. The mythical Doniphon is about to collapse under the weight of time, positive justice, and reason, elements that Stoddard spouses and represents. Doniphon's vision of Stoddard's idealism is not very different from that of Callicles's toward Socrates and philosophy:

Philosophy, you know, Socrates, is a lovely thing... However well-endowed one may be, if one philosophizes far on into life, one must needs find oneself ignorant of everything that ought to be familiar to the man who would be a thorough gentleman and make a good figure in the world. For such people are shown to be ignorant of the laws of their city.²⁵

Doniphon's world *is* the wilderness, the images it is associated with the most. Stoddard, indeed, is civilization; his books represent it. Stoddard's existence represents a leap in being. When, *out of “love” for Hallie*, Doniphon decides to shoot Liberty Valance, allowing Stoddard to receive the credit, his whole *kosmos* is destroyed, and Doniphon's existence spirals down in decomposition. In the following minute, Doniphon sets fire to his own house, bringing about a process akin to *ekpyrosis* that raises his existence to the ground. To the day of his death, Doniphon becomes an ossified man – literally a fossil of a being that lived in a previous era.

Probably Ford was not rationally aware of the ancient symbolism of the house as a “world,” but the correspondence between world, order, and the image of the house are archetypal figures; they are congenial to man's representation of his quest for order.²⁶ We also find this symbolism in Ford's work: in *Stagecoach*, Ringo Kid (Wayne) and Dallas (Claire Trevor) want to start a new life settling in Ringo's ranch; in *The Searchers* (1956), Ethan Edwards's (Wayne) lonely fate is sealed by the fact he cannot enter in the Jorgensens' house; in *Fort Apache* (1948), Lieutenant Colonel Thursday's (Henry Fonda) unfitness to live in the West is highlighted by the fact that he has to ask for other people's furniture to furnish his own house. The examples could be multiplied indefinitely.

If Doniphon is cracking under the pressure of the new stage of American life, Stoddard is the new man. He is the next stage in the history of the American society. But, in these times of transformation, we quickly notice he is too immature for the great task ahead of him.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 484C–D.

²⁶ “Then if regularity and order [*ara kai kosmou*] are found in a house, it will be a good one, and if irregularity, a bad one?” (*ibid.*, 504A). “A ‘new era’ opens with the building of every house. Every construction is an absolute beginning; that is, tends to restore the initial instant, the plenitude of a present that contains no trace of history” (Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* [tr. Willard R. Trask], Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1954, p. 76 [first published in France in 1949]). *Id.*, *Spezzare il tetto della casa. La creatività e i suoi simboli* (tr. Roberto Scagno), Jaca Book, Milano, 1988, p. 65: “The man of ‘primitive’ and traditional societies conceived his own world – the territory he occupies, his city, his own house – according to an ideal model, particularly that which God used to create the Universe.”



Ill. 4. The train and the railroad: symbols of a new era.

Here we have the film's predicament: Stoddard is not ready yet to take the stage, even as Doniphon is not ready to make way for the new mode of being in America. This ultimately means that he is not ready to sacrifice his life by living in memory. In Ford's cinema, and in the politics of myth, bodily death is by no means obliteration, which is in line with the philosophical principle of the timelessness of human nature.²⁷ To Ford, to live has to do with conservation, recollection, and observation.

The political implications of such a view are obvious: the struggle to keep the American society healthy passes necessarily through the conservation of the intentions and of the experiential ground that led to the creation of America and its symbols. This process is non-personal; that is, it is *ontic*, and usually, traditional or true societies are *ontic*.²⁸ It is dangerous that the subjective I might be the mastermind of a new symbolic creation. Granted, it is "legitimate" that one wishes to "create a *tabula rasa* and begin anew... when the symbolical language... has become doubtful, or... when a civilization and its symbols have fallen into a crisis";²⁹ but this new symbolic apparatus must express the *ontic contexts* of this society.³⁰ Within the *cosmion* of the picture, Stoddard cannot contradict the ontology of his society; therefore, he cannot annul the meaning of Doniphon's existence: he must extend it. Time and again, in Ford's pictures, we see that death does not mean the obliteration of existence. Perhaps the most pressing example comes from *Fort Apache*, when Captain Yorke (John Wayne) says the soldiers massacred in Thursday's Charge "aren't forgotten because they haven't died." (Often Ford's characters talk to graves as if they were animated beings; and, at the end of

²⁷ See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover Publications, New York, 1956, p. 124.

²⁸ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 41.

²⁹ Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (ed. David Walsh, tr. M. J. Hanak), *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, VI, Columbia, Mo., 2002, p. 81–82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

The Long Gray Line [1955], all of Sergeant Maher's [Tyrone Power] deceased loved ones are watching the parade in his honour.)

If it is dangerous to create a new set of symbolisms out of subjectivity and apart from the ontological ground of the common experience, then we can be assured that it is not Ford's intention to revise his previous efforts in the western genre (or in his career as a whole) with *Liberty Valance*. In fact, in comparison with *Stagecoach*, this picture is rather tame in its critique of civilization and moral hypocrisy. At any rate, Ford's intention is most perceptible in the overall atmosphere of the movie, as I mentioned earlier. I can agree in principle with Professors Mark W. Roche and Vittorio Hösle that *Liberty Valance* is about "the movement of history," but not that this movement replaces "heroes" with "men," as they suggest, as if we were watching a realistic picture.³¹ As I argued before, this is a tale that transits between two high modes of expression – the mythic and the high mimetic. Whatever Doniphon and Stoddard might possess of human come from their flaws, but they are by no means "men" in the low mimetic mode Roche and Hösle suggest. Doniphon is unable to give up his place in history and give in to the "leap in being" Stoddard represents.

This ultimately means is that the picture portrays two figures that are outmatched by the greatness of the time they are living in. Neither of them is attuned to the magnitude of their current days – these are the days of the foundation of a new society: they have to kill the snake of chaos to put order in the world. Doniphon was the wild warrior that conquered the earth (a direct heir to the Pilgrims, therefore),³² while Stoddard was a Lincolnian figure. Ford made pictures about both kinds of figures: *Drums along the Mohawk* (1939) is about the former; Lincoln, by his turn, casts his shadow as early as *The Iron Horse* (1924) and is pivotal to *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936). In these pictures, the protagonist rises above his situation and manages to build a new kind of environment. He either helps to drive the English crown away, connects East and West through a railroad, or fights an epidemic of malaria that scourges the guards of the prison to where he has unjustly been sent.

This means that, generally speaking, Ford's heroes are men who have their faces turned to the *summum bonum*. Even in later pictures – and especially in *7 Women* – Ford's protagonists have no doubt that they must work "for the sake of the work to be done." The same cannot be said of Stoddard – and certainly cannot be said of Doniphon. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is a tale about mythical actions: the building of a new society, the cosmicization of chaos. Ford even manages to introduce a snake or dragon of chaos – Liberty Valance himself. But the demise of this dragon of chaos was not due to an action that aims transcendence, but to a desire of nature itself. As I stated above, Doniphon shot Valance out of love for Hallie – a desire of nature itself. As Voegelin explains, this redirecting from the *summum bonum* toward nature is typical of periods of crisis.³³

American Matter-of-Factness

If Doniphon is a mythical hero falling under the pressure of demythologization, Stoddard is a leader in a rationalistic fashion, but the environment in which they live is fashioned is draped in a magical fashion. Then, what is the film criticizing?

³¹ Mark W. Roche and Vittorio Hösle, "Vico's Age of Heroes and the Age of Men in John Ford's Film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*," *Clio* XXIII, 1994, p. 147. *Apud* Sue Matheson, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

³² His calling Stoddard "Pilgrim" may be a projection of his inner self on his fellow.

³³ Eric Voegelin, "The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's *Gorgias*," *The Review of Politics*, XI, 1949, p. 485n8.

“Ford’s loss of faith in America’s future became increasingly plain to see as the social tensions of the 1960s deepened,” wrote Joseph McBride. “The values he most revered – home, family, justice, tradition, the military – were being mocked, attacked, or simply disregarded.”³⁴ As alluded above, Ford’s pictures of this decade somehow tackle issues that were otherwise seen as naïve or simply ignored in the growing cynical and paranoid days of the 1960s. Even in a film like *Cheyenne Autumn*, there is a heightened emphasis on the word. After *Liberty Valance*, Ford chose to underscore the bare archetype of the themes of his works; his characters seem to inhabit a world of pure being. He boiled down his cinema to the most basic aspects of his worries as an artist. From the Gothic, in the architectural sense of the word, nature of pictures like *The Searchers* or *The Quiet Man*, he has receded to a Romanesque urgency. If the values he revered were being mocked in society and in the arts, as McBride argues, then his message should be made *clearer*.

The cynicism of the 1960s did not spring out from nowhere. Rather, it is a new stage in the development of a basilar trace of American personality, and of the personality of the modern Western world as a whole – *empiricism* or *pragmatism*. To avoid compartmentalizing the issue too much, I will use the broader term “matter-of-factness,” that I believe can fuse those two words. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is, in a certain manner, Ford’s consideration of the matter-of-factly character of the American people.

It is evident that, of the two protagonists, Doniphon is more empirically-inclined than Stoddard. In his eyes, Stoddard looks like a variation of the absent-minded professor (and indeed, he is a professor). He is the classic “egghead.” His knowledge is worth nothing in the West, something that both Doniphon and Liberty Valance make clear – the latter more than the former, for Valance, after slapping and whipping Stoddard, tears his law books apart. Stoddard only grows in Doniphon’s respect after the very concrete act of punching him in the face. Later, when endorsing him as a delegate for the statehood convention, Doniphon says that Stoddard “knows the law and throws a good punch.”

If, after shooting Valance, Stoddard takes Doniphon’s place, it also means that there is something of Doniphon in him. Equally, if the two of them represent a development of American character, then it also means that Stoddard grows out of Doniphon. The fact that Doniphon brought Stoddard unconscious after Valance flogged him in the desert to Hallie’s place symbolizes this. If it were not for Doniphon, Stoddard would have died. Doniphon’s drama begins when he notices that Shinbone is ripe enough to have him substituted; they have a new protector in Stoddard. Shinbone is ready to see Doniphon as a memory, or, better yet, to transform him from being a living hero into an old god.

Each of them fails to make their transitions. After the actual shooting – which symbolizes the actual transition – each of them starts to be corrupted by diverse feelings. Doniphon’s world falls apart; it crumbles under the self-started *ekpyrosis*. Stoddard, on the other hand, also chooses to suffer. First, by thinking that his “reputation” – that is, his biography, the “time” of his life – will be constructed on the murder of somebody, even if this somebody was an odious individual like Valance; then, by thinking that he stole Doniphon’s merits and due glory. Neither of the two men is prepared to see the metaphysical and cosmic resonances of Valance’s death. In real life, it would be highly unlikely that no one in a town used to shootings would notice the difference between the firing of Stoddard’s revolver and Doniphon’s rifle – but this is not real life; this is a film, a narrative, a *mythos*. Doniphon and Stoddard are blind, ignorant to that.

This is the actual object of criticism of the picture. Doniphon and Stoddard are blind men. If Ford works in a mythical fashion, and if all myths share basic prerogatives, basic units, and if

³⁴ Joseph McBride, *op. cit.*, p. 638.

myths share a common mythological “grammar,” then we can safely assume that what Ford demands from their character is that they act accordingly to the needs of the myths. One of the great characteristics of the grand mythological figures is the ability to intuit – to see with the ‘*ayn al-qalb*, “the eye of the heart.” The configuration of the myth is apart from rational thought: it is a symbolic, archetypal, intuitive, pneumatic, and intellectual *ambiance*. Matter-of-factness does not come at play in the mythological scenery, because the myth is, in part, the story of the resolution of the contradictions by intuition. As Luc Benoist explains, “Here we are entering a region where there are no longer opposites, conflicts, complementarities, nor symmetries, because the intellect is active in the realm of unity, and is in isomorphic continuity with all that really is.”³⁵

What Ford is truly censuring is *the anti-mythological character of the American society in the new era*, from where its proneness to mock and question myths, archetypes, and ideas spring. It is not a wonder that Ford begins his “Age of Mortality” with such a bleak picture. When the mystical storyteller starts to face death, he must highlight the imperfections of his environment, which is truly himself, so he can face death free of sins.

As I see it, this is a manner of anti-intellectualism. We have to understand “intellect” as a synonym of *soul – psychē, spiritus*. In *Timaeus*, Plato states that the intellect, i.e., the soul, is our actual *self*;³⁶ to take care of the soul is to save oneself, so it is absolutely required that we turn towards the inside to rise to the upper echelons of existence.

The matter-of-factness leads the American society to care about “sensible world of the bodies and of matter, which constitute the lowest point of the universe.”³⁷ This creates a grave existential problem, which also implies a *political problem*, because, as observed above, the direction of existence is no longer turned to the *Agathon*,³⁸ but to the material self – that is, to the “tomb of the soul.”³⁹ In the inability to make a truly intellect-spiritual contemplation of existence, we are led to care about *empeiria*, the “empirical knack” Socrates censures early in the *Gorgias*. We care about superficial actions that may not have deeper meanings. Caring about superficial actions also means that we care about particular pieces of *time* that, given their transitory character, are unique and particular; that is, they are devoid of archetypal resonances. This is why neither Stoddard nor Doniphon can contemplate the deeper meaning of Valance’s shooting.⁴⁰ All they can think of is “practical actions” in an anti-intellectual fashion.

This is why they cannot grasp the spirit of the situation they are subjected to. For Ford, America is an enchanted land that requires heroes, mythic settings, and exemplar actions. There is little doubt that his vision of the United States is drenched in mythological and ritual significance. As I pointed out above, this is a land where people talk to the dead, and the dead will listen. This does not mean, however, that Ford is blind to the actual characteristics of his country. He knows very well that his vision of America is parallel to the actuality of his country.

³⁵ Luc Benoist, *The Esoteric Path: An Introduction to the Hermetic Tradition* (tr. Robin Waterfield), 2nd ed., Hillsdale, NY, 2003 (first published in France in 1965). See also Jean Biès, *Returning to the Essential: Selected Writings of Jean Biès* (tr. Deborah Weiss-Dutilh), World Wisdom, Bloomington, 2004, p. 96-7 (first published in France in 1986). Intuition, in this non-Bergsonian sense, is usually related to a kind of “esoteric” wisdom, of a stage preceding (or, better yet, “beyond”) the emergence of dialectical understanding.

³⁶ 90A-B. Also Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5, 1(10), 3–4.

³⁷ Mauro Bonazzi, *Il platonismo*, Turin, 2015.

³⁸ Eric Voegelin, *art. cit.*, p. 485.

³⁹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 493A.

⁴⁰ Though the public of Shinbone, even the younger generation, gets it. I do not think that Ford equals the people of Shinbone with the American people *per se*, but rather portrays them as good-willed people that know the importance of a foundational myth. Even when faced with the “factual truth” about the shooting, they still will choose the myth. Hence, “print the legend.”

In this sense, even though *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is not based on a true story, it is more factual about the realities of the United States than *My Darling Clementine* (1946), which is based on Wyatt Earp's story. Earp never danced with a lady named Clementine Carter in a religious gathering; this archetypal sighting (a ritual dance under the auspices of religion) is something that belongs to mythology, not to "actual life"; but to Ford that is how things should be in a good society.

This is not to say that *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is Ford's representation of a dysfunctional society, or even that he is making a revisionist western. It is more appropriate to say that the picture is his coming to terms with the fatal flaw at the heart of America: its insubstantial spirit, its merely rationalistic way of doing things. In this film, he is *underlining the importance of mythology for the good of society, and he is re-emphasizing the need for classical westerns*. He is struggling against the rationalism of western, which one can summarize in this particularly striking passage Professor Mark A. Noll quotes,

Charles Grandison Finney, one of the most effective of nineteenth-century revivalists, put it sharply in describing the best form of conversion: "where a sinner is brought to see what he has to do, and he takes his stand at once, AND DOES IT."⁴¹

If Ford is censuring anything in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, it is this: that the exigencies of the myth, of a substantial and deep existence, cannot go along with a merely rationalistic, anti-mythological mode of existence – and the real drama is that paradoxically the exigencies he makes for the reanimation of a mythical vision of America are at variance with the very principles of the American civilization.

Conclusion

Joseph McBride named the last chapter of *Searching for John Ford* "There's No Future in America." He probably sees Ford's last decade of life differently than I do, but I agree with him: the politics of the 1960s in America were incompatible with Ford's temperament and spirit. As I see it, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* offers Ford's last word on the ambivalence between the American civilization and the American myth: the myth is greater and more important than the civilization, at its root, could not live up to the demands of the myth. If *Liberty Valance*, and later *Cheyenne Autumn*, were poorly received by the public and the critics, that was because the evil aspects of the American civilization had gained the upper hand.

As I stated in the beginning, the Western is probably the most political genre in cinema, and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is one of the richest pictures in political symbolism. This tale of love, law, and death is one of the most enigmatic films ever made. But like every mystery, it has a luminous centre – only it is too bright to be perceived at first sight. It presents a deep ethical tale that draws its strength from one of the most ancient questions in political philosophy: What must be our behaviour regarding the *gennaion pseudos*? Must the "lie" of the myth sink over the empirical "reality" of the fact? It seems to me that only the myth can solve the apparent contradictions that grow inside Stoddard and Hallie, and in America as a whole. As it stands, we would be better off embracing the myth. That is what Ford seems to say, at least.

⁴¹ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Leicester, 1994; capitals Finney's.

