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Critic's Choice

Often the quietest, simplest films are the best. Of the three cavalry Westerns John Ford made in the late forties, forming a loose trilogy, **Rio Grande** (1950) was the most modest in terms of production values. It is also the least often seen, and the least well-regarded generally, yet it seems to me to be far superior to *Fort Apache* and even to an admitted masterpiece like *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*. A contemplative Western in which Ford affects a deceptively relaxed style, the film ambles along effortlessly while it deals with major themes of duty to country and family, the role of civilization in nature, the proper role of the warrior, and the conflict between impulses of decency and the requirements of

the social order, in all their full complexity. There's room for poetry, too, and the climax (the only real action scene in the film) boasts a metaphorical force as compelling as any in cinema. This masterpiece nips at the heels of the nonpareil *The Searchers*. John Wayne once again plays a grizzled officer, here confronted by his ex-wife who has come to take back her son (Claude Jarman Jr.) who has been assigned to his outpost. With Ben Johnson, Victor McLaglen, J. Carrol Naish, Harry Carey Jr., and Chill Wills. It plays for free Monday at UCLA's Melnitz Hall after Ford's *Tobacco Road*.—
Myron Meisel