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THE FILMS OF JOHN FORD (40)

THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE 9:20

Probably Ford's greatest film. Along with four or five others, of course. But probably his greatest film. *LIBERTY VALANCE* is Ford's deepest statement on the coming of civilization, the closing of the frontier. And it's his first real farewell to John Wayne, whose metaphoric death here provides virtually the entire subtext of Siegel's *THE SHOOTIST*. John Wayne plays a gunman in *LIBERTY VALANCE*, and James Stewart plays a lawyer. As the film opens, Wayne is a leading citizen of his town, while Stewart, a man of law in the lawless West, seems foolish and out of place. By the end of the film, with the Territory voting for statehood (and Stewart as its first Senator) the men's roles are totally reversed, and Wayne fades into obscurity. There's no question that Ford favors civilization; the most joyous moments in all his films are the dances in which soldiers and sweethearts affirm their links with civilization through the measured figures of formal dances and Army etiquette. But just as clearly, he regrets the loss of Wayne's anarchic courage. Inevitably, the advance of "progress" will put Wayne in his historical place, so Ford is at great pains to emphasize his positive role. Several crucial scenes are set in a restaurant, where platters of two-inch-thick steaks are constantly passing in front of the camera. The image is as irresistible as Thanksgiving dinner, suggesting the bounty of the new land and the richness of frontier life.

To make the connection between Wayne and those steaks perfectly clear, Ford uses a steak as the pretext to get Wayne and Stewart on the same side. Badman Liberty Valance trips Stewart (who's working as a waiter until his law business picks up), causing him to drop a platter of steaks. Wayne draws his gun, Valance asks him why he's mixing in a private quarrel, and Wayne drawls one of those lines only he could get away with. "That's my steak," he says. It's a typically Fordian metaphor. The frontier gives you a two-inch-thick steak, but it also gives you Liberty Valance, who will take away your steak unless you shoot him. Wayne goes for his gun, Stewart goes for his law book—and at that moment their battle lines are drawn. The contradiction between these two attitudes is what makes *LIBERTY VALANCE* important. The ambivalence with which Ford pictures Wayne as civilization's champion and its victim (if Wayne kills Valance he helps to bring civilization, and hence his own inevitable decline) is what makes it great. —Michael Goodwin

Directed by John Ford. Script by Willis Goldbeck and James Warner Bellah, from story by Dorothy M. Johnson. Photography by William H. Clothier. Also with Vera Miles, Lee Marvin, Andy Devine, John Carradine, John Qualen, Woody Strode, Strother Martin, Edmond O'Brien. (1962, 122 mins, Print Courtesy of Films Inc.)