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18. WAGON MISTRESS

Andrew Patrick Nelson

Meek's Cutoff may look like a Western, but Reichardt eschews the conventions of the genre by using long takes, medium and long shots, ambient sound, and much silence. Consequently, her wagon train carries no echoes of a film like John Ford's *Wagon Master* (1950)—no romance, no violence, no rough frontier humor, no simply good or evil characters, and no majestic landscape . . . Reichardt has taken all the grandiosity out of the Western.

Leonard Quart, *Cineaste*, 2011

As scholars increasingly begin to use the massive resources which are in fact available for the study of the American west and its social history, a fair number of myths and theories will have to be re-evaluated. One of these is the tendency to imagine that the frontier, and the west, were inhabited largely if not exclusively by men.

Christianne Fischer, *Let Them Speak for Themselves: Women in the American West*, 1977

Judging by the frequency with which the term has been used over the past decade or so, we find ourselves in a veritable golden age of "feminist Westerns." From the Coen Brothers' remake of *True Grit* in 2010, through *The Homesman* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2014), *The Keeping Room* (Daniel Barber, 2014), *Jane Got*

a *Gun* (Gavin O'Connor, 2016), and *Brimstone* (Martin Koolhoven, 2016), to the Netflix series *Godless* (2017), recent Westerns have made clear, concerted efforts to foreground strong women characters—the frequent appearances of whom are all the more striking given, one, how few new Westerns grace our screens nowadays, and two, the genre's reputation as a masculine form.

Observing this trend of Western films focusing on female protagonists, Matthew Carter notes how, with one exception, “female *directors* of Westerns remain largely and lamentably absent” (2018: 38, original emphasis). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that nearly as often as recent Westerns have been described as “feminist” have their feminist credentials been called into question. *Godless* has fared worst in this respect. While the show's promotion emphasized the novel premise of a town populated solely by women after a mining accident kills all of the men—“welcome to no man's land,” announced the advertising—critics were quick to point out that the plot in fact centers on a blood feud between two men; that the male characters are active while the female characters, though not passive, are always *reacting* to the actions of men; that most of the cast are men; that the majority of the dialog is spoken by men; and that, in the words of one critic, “[t]he show is filled with unnecessary rapes, voyeuristic violence against women, and frivolous female nudity” (Gutowitz 2017).

To greater and lesser degrees, one could make similar criticisms of the recent Western movies named above, in particular how their central female characters are usually dependent upon and defined by relationships with the various men in their lives. Commenting on the new *True Grit*, Thirza Wakefield fairly sees “the punishment it deals to its teenaged runaway protagonist” as “proof of the impossibility of the self-sufficient female in this setting” (2014). And we might add another criticism to the list, one that links these new works to a longer trend in Western movie-making: a frontier heroine's strength and agency is predicated upon her ability to shoot, ride, and otherwise act like a man.

There is a long history in the Western of what Pam Cook calls “shady ladies”: women who “threaten to upset the applecart by challenging men on their own ground; adventurers all, they demand equal status and refuse to take second place, at first, anyway; they wear pants and brandish guns, own land, property and business, demand sexual independence” (2004: 45). Yet even the most subversive of these shady ladies—Joan Crawford in *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954) or Barbara Stanwyck in *Forty Guns* (Samuel Fuller, 1957)—end the movie shorn of their masculine trappings and relegated to being the lesser half of the good, heterosexual couple.¹ “[I]f the tomboy has not abandoned her transvestite garb for the hero by the end of the movie,” Cook writes, “then she comes to a sticky end” (45). Think of Mercedes McCambridge in *Johnny Guitar*, or Stanwyck in *Maverick Queen* (Joseph Kane, 1954), or Marlene Dietrich in *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952).

That commercial movies made in the 1950s in the end conform to societal and industrial norms is to be expected, of course, and genre criticism—of a scholarly bent, at least—has by and large avoided reductive interpretations of the role of women in the post-war Western.² What an empowered Western femininity that doesn't require wearing pants, carrying a gun, and riding a horse looks like remained an open question in subsequent decades, however.

The 1990s, for example, witnessed some significant shifts in American genre filmmaking, as “many genre movies aimed to open up genres to more progressive representations of race and gender, addressing the growing acceptance of a more liberal political correctness by often deliberately acknowledging and giving voice to groups previously marginalized by mainstream cinema” (Grant 2005: 62). The decade also saw the release of the first sustained cycle of new Western movies since the mid-1970s, spurred on by the critical and commercial success of *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), and *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992). In keeping with the larger trend shaping commercial cinema at the time, the 1990s cycle of Westerns notably focused on groups the genre had arguably neglected in the past, like American Indians (*Geronimo: An American Legend* [Walter Hill, 1993] and *Dead Man* [Jim Jarmusch, 1995]), blacks (*Posse* [Mario Van Peebles, 1993]), and especially women (*The Ballad of Little Jo* [Maggie Greenwald, 1993], *Bad Girls* [Jonathan Kaplan, 1995], and *The Quick and the Dead* [Sam Raimi, 1994]). I've argued elsewhere that many of these films, intent on correcting the genre's earlier slights, do so by drawing upon time-honored conventions and narratives of Western heroism in order to elevate their consciously gendered and raced protagonists to the level of myth, with the (surely unintended) consequence of reinforcing many of the values the films initially seemed set on challenging (Nelson 2013: 25–7). This, too, is in keeping with larger trends. As Barry Keith Grant observes, whatever their progressive intentions, many 1990s genre movies simply inserted minorities into roles usually reserved for white men. He writes:

[I]n merely reversing conventional gender representations, many of these movies fall into the trap of repeating the same dubious values of the patriarchal system they want to critique. Thus, the question of whether female action heroes [of the 1990s and 2000s] are progressive, empowering representations of women or merely contain them within a masculine sensibility has been a matter of considerable debate. (Grant 2005: 64)

While the Western may have prompted this question decades ago—“Is there no place for women on that ritual frontier between civilization and wilderness in any function greater than a prop in the male game of revolt and choice? Can the conventions of the western permit women to be ‘westerners’ without at the same time destroying the genre?” asked Jacqueline Levitin in 1982 (62)—recent Westerns seem no closer to answering it with any certainty.

Despite serious questions about its feminist credentials, *Godless* was a hit, and many commentators did see its representations of women as empowering, even as the series restaged many of the Western's conventional conflicts and scenarios. In series creator Scott Frank's telling, this was the intention all along. "I really set out to embrace every single western cliché I could think of and that was the fun of it," he told *Deadline Hollywood* in 2018:

That's why I wanted to write it. I wanted to write about the gunfights. I wanted to write about breaking horses, all of the train robberies, all of the old tropes were really . . . it was really fun for me to try and weave all of it into a new story. That was really it. I knew I was gonna take a lot of old ingredients and then try and locate them in somewhat of a fresh context. (Raymos 2018)

That "fresh context" is the all-woman Old West town, a rare but real phenomenon Frank learned about in the early 2000s while researching what he initially envisioned as an epic feature film. *Time*, and Netflix's marketing strategy, transformed what was intended as a traditional Oedipal drama with an unusual, historically documented backdrop into a "feminist Western." For his part, Frank resists this characterization: "I wasn't interested in making a giant feminist statement. I don't know that I have the right to" (Birnbaum 2017).

If *Godless* is a case of opportunistic marketing creating false expectations, it is also an example of one of the enduring challenges of Western storytelling: balancing myth and history. The Western dramatizes a mythical conflict between civilization and savagery, in which the forces of progress triumph through the exercise of socially sanctioned violence. Generally speaking, the genre's dramatic depictions of this conflict—showdowns at high noon, wagon trains besieged by Indians—were far removed from the historical West, where duels were rare (and often impulsive and chaotic) and pioneers were several hundred times more likely to die from disease than an Indian's arrow. Nevertheless, the Western is constrained by a need to retain a certain historical plausibility. This presents difficulties when it comes to depictions of women. "The genre demands action in order to dramatise the conflict, but in the 19th century women did not, on the whole, go rushing round on horseback shooting at Indians," writes Edward Buscombe; "So all too often women's roles are confined to supporting the menfolk, rather than being more actively engaged" (2011: 40).

The only female-centered Western in recent years to avoid many of the traps detailed above is also the only one directed by a woman: Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010). The film is based on the true story of a wagon train of two hundred families bound for Oregon, who, in the summer of 1845, elected to leave the Oregon Trail and follow a mountain man and guide named Stephen Meek on what he claimed was a quicker, alternative route that avoided the perilous

Blue Mountains, the last mountain range American pioneers needed to cross on the journey west. Far from the shortcut Meek promised, the detour through the desert added forty days and four hundred miles to the original journey and cost the lives of twenty-three people. Reichardt and screenwriter Jonathan Raymond reduce the size of the wagon train down to Meek (Bruce Greenwood) and three families—the Tetherows, Whites, and Gatelys—but the perils the party faces crossing the punishing high desert of Oregon are in no way diminished.

The film opens with the wagon train crossing a river. The men drive the carts, while the women, chest-deep in the water, carry belongings on their heads. The relative tranquility of this scene—this is no raging river—is undercut by the film's first word: LOST. It is not spoken by a character, but carved by one of the pioneers, Thomas Gately (Paul Dano), into a piece of driftwood. We soon learn that what was supposed to be a two-week journey has stretched to five. Has the braggart Meek simply made a mistake he is unwilling to admit to? Has he purposely misled the settlers as part of a conspiracy to stem American emigration? The men of the party are uncertain, but they decide to give Meek more time. The days stretch on, the arid landscape appearing increasingly interminable. The supply of water runs low. Adding to the confusion, an Indian on horseback appears on the horizon, and is eventually captured by Meek and the men. Meek warns that the Indian, a Cayuse, is not to be trusted and should be killed, but the men, hopeful that the Indian can lead them to water, vote to keep him alive. Days pass, with no sign of water. No one in the wagon train, not even Meek, can communicate with the Indian. Is he indeed shepherding them to water? Are his stone carvings signals to his people? Uncertainty reigns, but the party presses on, following their new guide. Calamities continue to befall the group. In a tense moment, after the Tetherow wagon is destroyed descending a steep hill, Meek pulls his pistol on the Indian. Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams) draws a rifle on Meek. Meek relents. The following day the Indian leads the wagon train to a large tree, but as the pioneers gather around it and yet again debate their next step, he continues on, walking out into the endless desert.

What marks *Meek's Cutoff* as a feminist intervention into the Western is a combination of what we see and how we see it. Rather than simply revising its portrayal of Western women in accordance with contemporary sensibilities—the standard approach for "feminist Westerns"—the film both shows us in detail the "women's work" elided from many Western narratives and aligns our experience of the film's events with those of its three westbound wives. The subject and the approach to filming it were inspired by Reichardt's and Raymond's research into the history of the Oregon Trail and the role that women played in the nation's westward migration. Pioneer diaries proved especially influential. "It's when we began reading the diaries that we realized how little of [the women's] point of view was ever on screen," Reichardt explained to Leonard Quart of *Cineaste*: "The diaries also begin with big ideas and grand dreams



Figure 18.1 Mrs Tetherow (Michelle Williams) takes up arms against Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood) in *Meek's Cutoff* (2010).

when they start out, but as they go, the trip turns into a stripped-down, bare-bones list of chores (e.g. pitching a tent)" (2011: 41). Such observations about the historical writings of westbound women are in line with the work of historians like Christianne Fischer, who notes: "Writings by women are generally close to the basic elements and rituals of life, and only occasionally rise to the general; they present the stuff that daily life is made of. They seem to bring reality within reach and give it such a concrete aspect that one can almost feel it" (1977: 15).

The sensorial dimension of the feminine pioneer experience comes to the fore in *Meek's Cutoff*, which, again, aligns our experience of events with those of the women. Reichardt has explained her use of the more square 1.37:1 aspect ratio, rarely seen in cinema since the advent of widescreen technology in the mid-1950s, as intended to restrict the viewer's perception of the expansive desert in the same way that the bonnets worn by the women limit their peripheral vision.³ In key moments, the sound design denies us important information: we remain with the women, straining to hear the hushed, and increasingly desperate, conversations of their husbands huddled nearby. If the film is about,

in Reichardt's words, "the labor it takes to walk across the country and the chores involved" (quoted in Fusco and Seymore 2017: 63), conveying how such labor *felt* is a priority. A minority of reviewers may have decried *Meek's Cutoff* as "tedious" and "boring," but even they had to concede that this was precisely the point of the movie.

When asked by Quart if she was consciously working against the Western conventions associated with John Ford and Howard Hawks, Reichardt responded by lamenting how "Westerns are so macho and masculine. They are collections of heightened moments." She makes a similar point about the connection between masculinity and action elsewhere. "There are a lot of Westerns that I like, except the macho element gets so tiresome," Reichardt told the *New York Times*, "These constant completely heightened moments, as if that's all a day is: moments of confrontation where people outman themselves. That part of the western is not interesting to me" (Rapold 2011). The reinscription of the dreary, historical experiences of women into an otherwise familiar Western scenario—the wagon train plot—is what produces the de-dramatization.

Timothy Hughes argues that Reichardt's various claims about the Western being a masculine form may be generally correct, but are also representative of a broader, reductivist tendency in revisionist approaches to classical film genres. He writes, "Revisionist Westerns in a sense practice the kind of thinking strenuously avoided in genre criticism, in which the generic tradition is oversimplified and innovations to its assumed formulas and structures are overemphasized" (2016: 142). Putting aside the degree to which genre criticism has, in fact, "strenuously avoided" reductive interpretations of older movies, this is an astute observation about the rhetoric that has accumulated around many of the most critically lauded Westerns of the past forty years or so—a rhetoric that is often initiated by filmmakers and furthered by critics.

Reichardt's interviews about *Meek's Cutoff* are peppered with references to older Westerns. On first pass, these both signal her knowledge of the genre and accentuate what her movie does differently. Consider this widely reproduced quote from *The Guardian*: "I always wondered what, say, John Wayne in *The Searchers* must have looked like to the woman cooking his stew" (Gilbey 2011). This comment succinctly conveys her aim to show the female perspectives and labor occluded from earlier Western movies. I have to wonder, though, *which woman* in *The Searchers* is Reichardt referring to? Which scene does she have in mind? There is no "stew cooking scene," per se, in the movie. Does she mean Carmen, who serves Marty a plate of beans after he and Ethan unexpectedly come upon Mose Harper in Mexico? Or perhaps she means Marty's Indian "wife" Look, whom Ethan sarcastically asks for a cup of coffee? Is she thinking of Mrs Jorgenson, or her daughter Laurie? Or is Reichardt instead making a more general, or generic, point about the role of women in the Western? Absent a follow-up query, it's hard to say. But the suggestion that we come away from

The Searchers not knowing how the many women around him perceive Ethan is certainly debatable. Or consider another example. While nearly every review of and article about *Meek's Cutoff* repeats Reichardt's explanation that the 1.37:1 aspect ratio was intended to approximate the restricted perception of her heroines—thereby denying viewers the sweeping widescreen vistas so associated with the Western—thousands of Westerns, including numerous classics of the genre, were produced prior to the wholesale adoption of widescreen technology by the American film industry in the mid-1950s. Reichardt has acknowledged this connection to the genre's past, telling *Filmmaker Magazine*, "I mean, Anthony Mann used a square in Westerns. I think *Yellow Sky* is a square, the [William] Wellman film" (Ponsoldt 2011). The implication here—surely unintended on Reichardt's part—is that shooting in the square aspect ratio was a choice, which it wasn't. Mann and Wellman (and Ford and Hawks and every other filmmaker) made Westerns in the 1.37:1 aspect ratio until the arrival of CinemaScope and VistaVision, after which they lensed their Westerns in widescreen.

Should we expect directors to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the genres in which they traffic? No, of course not. And any contemporary filmmaker who can reference an excellent but decidedly non-canonical movie like *Yellow Sky* (1947) in the course of an interview has probably seen her share of Westerns. Yet the overall impression, fair or not, is that Reichardt's understanding of the Western—or perhaps *conception* of the Western—is of the type one gains from a basic college film class, centered not only on canonical films, but canonical interpretations of them, emphasizing themes like race and gender. She is certainly not alone in this regard. That the majority of filmmakers today are introduced to the Western genre as a historical, academic subject in the course of their professional training is a context scholarly studies of the genre have yet to acknowledge, let alone grapple with the implications.

In certain respects, film criticism, in the broad sense, is equally if not more at fault. Reading Reichardt's many interviews about *Meek's Cutoff* brought to mind interviews conducted with John Ford in the 1960s. Occasionally, Ford would discuss his Westerns in relation to the great Western artists who preceded him, describing, for example, his attempts to capture "the color and the movement" of Frederic Remington in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, or using a "Charlie Russell motif" in *The Searchers*. Never once was Ford, who knew these artists intimately, and even knew Russell personally, asked a follow-up question.⁴ Perhaps this was because interviewers were intimidated being in the presence of Ford. More likely it was because they didn't know what he was talking about, just as it is likely that those charged with questioning Reichardt about her engagement with the Western's history and conventions didn't have the knowledge to probe her about her references and influences—or to even make plausible claims of their own about her movie. For example, Quart's assertion that "her wagon train

carries no echoes of a film like John Ford's *Wagon Master* (1950)" is preposterous. If anything, *Meek's Cutoff* explicitly echoes *Wagon Master* in multiple ways, and could even be seen as a dark mirror to Ford's optimistic (uncharacteristically, for this period in his career) vision of westward expansion. The latter concludes with a triumphant river crossing by a wagon train of pious pioneers, while the former, as if in response, shows us the ominous fate that awaits the group on the opposite bank. Yet, so far as I've been able to find, Reichardt was not once asked about *Wagon Master*.⁵

As with Ford and his influences, unasked questions have consequences for our understanding of the Western. At worst, the discourse around a particular contemporary Western can perpetuate stereotypes about older movies and further impoverish the history of the genre. *Meek's Cutoff* was widely described as a "revisionist" Western on the same grounds as nearly every other acclaimed Western since at least the late 1960s, including historical accuracy, the destruction of naive myths, the restoration and elevation of the role of minorities in Western history, and a liberal commentary on contemporary politics. A paragraph from Mark Olsen's review in the *Los Angeles Times* offers a succinct example: "*Meek's Cutoff* is a revisionist western richly layered to consider the emergence of women's role in society, divisions of class and a nascent concern for native peoples as well as a bracing parable of what happens when one enters the desert with an uncertain leader" (Olsen 2011). Nearly the exact same thing was said of *Little Big Man* (1970) over forty years prior. And now, as then, critics often take their interpretive lead from filmmakers. Just as Arthur Penn in the 1970s was quick to speak of *Little Big Man* in relation to Vietnam, so did Reichardt discuss *Meek's Cutoff* with reference to Iraq. "It's an allegory for so much of what's happening right now," she explained to the *National Post*. "When these wagon trains started out they would hire people as pilots, and then they created these laws that had to be followed and hierarchy to enforce it" (Monk 2011: PM6).

In one sense, *Meek's Cutoff* in fact has less to do with the Western than it does with contemporary art cinema. Hughes argues that *Meek's Cutoff* achieves "a new form of genre revisionism, in which previously marginalized perspectives on traditional generic material are revealed primarily through formal strategies imported from outside the genre" (138). These formal strategies are those of the international "slow cinema" associated with filmmakers like Bela Tarr, Albert Serra, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Expectedly, however, these strategies are ultimately in the service of ideological critique. In their monograph on Reichardt's films, Katherine Fusco and Nicole Seymore (2017) argue that *Meek's Cutoff*'s slowness subverts the *pacing* of the Western (50), which in turn suggests the "noninevitability of western settlement" (51), decoupling temporal progress from ideas of success and productivity (56). Hence film's emphasis on "stories of those left

out, left behind by, or remarked upon in tales of U.S. progress" (57)—that is, on the stories of women.

Meek's Cutoff's altogether uneven engagement with the legacy of women in the Western produces some unintended consequences. Indeed, it seems appropriate to invoke the cliché that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

As much as the film prompts the viewer to identify with the women, it ultimately demonstrates that the women are no more reliable than their husbands. The film sees Emily take control of the wagon train, true, but she is just as prone to wishful thinking and speculation as any other member of the party. "He's saying we're close!" she exclaims in response to the mysterious gestures and unintelligible words of the Indian, "He's saying just over the hill! Just over there!" "Some have claimed the film as a feminist intervention," writes critic Susan Morrison, "but other than depicting women's work . . . and having Mrs. Tetherow confront Meek, verbally and in a standoff with a gun, it's worth noting that she herself opts for another male leader. If this is a feminist version, it's a pretty mild one." The film strongly imparts the experience of women, only to demonstrate, emphatically, that the words and actions of women do not alter the course of history—whether that be the history of the West or the Western. "We're all just playing our parts now," observes Meek at the film's conclusion. "This was written long before we got here."

NOTES

1. On the play of gender in *Johnny Guitar* and *Forty Guns*, see, respectively, J. Peterson (1996), "The Competing Tunes of Johnny Guitar," and A. P. Nelson (2013), "Only a Woman After All? Gender Dynamics in the Westerns of Barbara Stanwyck."
2. In addition to Cook (1988) and Peterson (1996), see, for example, P. Evans (1996), "Westward the Women: Feminising the Wilderness," B. Lucas (1998), "Saloon Girls and Ranchers' Daughters: The Women in the Western," T. J. McDonald (2007), "Carrying Concealed Weapons: Gendered Makeover in *Calamity Jane*," and the essays collected in S. Matheson (2013).
3. Explaining her use of the "square" frame, Reichardt additionally cites her admiration for the compositions of photographer Robert Adams (see, for example, Quart 2011: 41, and Ponsoldt 2011), as well as pre-widescreen Westerns of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The latter influence will be addressed later in this essay.
4. The best scholarly study of the influence of Western art on the films of John Ford remains William Howze's doctoral dissertation *The Influence of Western Painting and Genre Painting on the Films of John Ford* (University of Texas at Austin, 1986). Also see E. Buscombe (1984), "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," *Cinema Journal*, 23 (4), pp. 12–27.
5. Equally surprising is that Reichardt was never asked about William Wellman's *Westward the Women* (1951).

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- Brimstone*, director Martin Koolhoven, featuring Guy Pearce, Dakota Fanning, Emilia Jones (N279 Entertainment, 2016).
- Dances with Wolves*, director Kevin Costner, featuring Kevin Costner, Mary McDonnell, Grahame Greene (Tig Productions, 1990).
- Dead Man*, director Jim Jarmusch, featuring Johnny Depp, Gary Farmer, Crispin Glover (Pandora Filmproduktion, 1995).
- Forty Guns*, director Samuel Fuller, featuring Barbara Stanwyck, Barry Sullivan, Dean Jagger (20th Century Fox).
- Geronimo: An American Legend*, director Walter Hill, featuring Jason Patric, Gene Hackman, Robert Duvall (Columbia, 1993).
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- Jane Got a Gun*, director Gavin O'Connor, featuring Natalie Portman, Joel Edgerton, Ewan McGregor (1821 Pictures, 2016).
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- Maverick Queen*, director Joseph Kane, featuring Barbara Stanwyck, Barry Sullivan, Scott Brady (Republic, 1954).
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- Posse*, director Mario Van Peebles, featuring Mario Van Peebles, Stephen Baldwin, Charles Lane (Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1993).
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- She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, director John Ford, featuring John Wayne, Joanne Dru, John Agar (Argosy Pictures, 1949).
- The Ballad of Little Jo*, director Maggie Greenwald, featuring Suzy Amis, Bo Hopkins, Ian McKellen (Joco and Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1993).
- The Homesman*, director Tommy Lee Jones, featuring Tommy Lee Jones, Hilary Swank, Grace Gummer (EuropaCorp, 2014).
- The Keeping Room*, director Daniel Barber, featuring Brit Marling, Hailee Steinfeld, Sam Worthington (Gilbert Films, 2014).
- The Quick and the Dead*, director Sam Raimi, featuring Sharon Stone, Gene Hackman, Russell Crowe (Tristar, 1994).
- The Searchers*, director John Ford, featuring John Wayne, Jeffrey Hunter, Vera Miles (C. V. Whitney Pictures, 1956).
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