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"Refocusing the Western"

Edward Countryman and Evonne von Heussen-Countryman

Shane
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The lamentably scarce attention paid George Stevens's most important film receives a major corrective with the appearance of this slim volume in the BFI Film Classics series, which sets out to honor 360 'key works in the history of the cinema'. Edward Countryman, University Distinguished Professor of History at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, and Evonne von Heussen-Countryman, a medical researcher and victim's rights advocate in the United Kingdom, have admirably reviewed the available documentation and literature on the film and sought the perspective of the filmmaker's son and biographer, George Stevens, Jr. The result is a study that offers a close reading of the film, informative details of its production, and a multi-faceted framework for its understanding.

The simplicity and power of _*Shane*_ (1953) stands like a totemic image in need of interpretation. How could a film with so few characters -- filmed in such a majestic yet spartan setting, weaving an uncomplicated narrative through laconic dialogue -- nonetheless have such impact? It must be because the dramatic foci of the film have deeply resonant meanings. The narrative of the film is simple: a lone rider descends from the majestic Grand Teton mountain range of Wyoming to a valley farmstead maintained against great odds by a man, his wife, and small son. The rider seeks only a drink of water, but soon is drawn into the lives of the family, for a time sharing their status as persecuted farmers subjected to the bullying of armed ranchers who covet their property. The rider, the eponymous *Shane* (Alan Ladd), is a gunfighter who would relinquish his weapons if he had the chance. Finding mutual magnetism with the golden-haired wife of the farmer (Van Heflin), played by Jean Arthur, he lingers in their domestic world and becomes a role model for their pre-pubescent son (Brandon De Wilde). In the stresses caused by the ranchers' terroristic raids upon the settlers, and those placed upon the family by the presence of such an alluring and charismatic outsider, Stevens finds his theme of individuals buffeted by personal and historic forces.

The Countrymans are at their best when setting forth the film's historical context. They recognize that the West of the post-Civil War period was a place in which control of property was everything. In this they pay not unexpected homage to the Turner Thesis, the view of historian Frederick Jackson Turner that upon the defeat of Native Americans the old frontier -- the nineteenth century romantic ideal of an Edenic paradise -- was defunct. [1] What remained was an unseemly scrabble for control of property and the presumably unlimited resources of the West.

The Countrymans also rightly point out that race is not an issue in the film. They acknowledge Stevens's personal belief in civil rights, and linger briefly on the possible relevance of the film to Martin Luther King, and end up steering possibly too widely around another epochal pronouncement (by W. E. B. DuBois in _The Souls of Black Folk_) that the challenge to America in the twentieth century is the problem of the 'color line'. Stevens's film is not about race, but it is about an inseparably connected issue: the need for resolute communal resistance to evil. In this the film also bears relevance to another film, inexplicably ignored by the Countrymans: Fred Zinnemann's _High Noon_ (1952), produced one year before the Stevens picture.

Stevens relentlessly pares away extraneous elements to focus intently on matters that concern him, matters about which he is at times more sensitive than articulate. For example, the possibility that the *Shane* character might fit neatly into a mould of 'giant killers', turning the film into a fairy tale rather than a drama, was cancelled by Stevens in the editing process. Scenes in which the story of Jack the Giant Killer are read to young De Wilde were dropped along with allusions to the absence of giants in the contemporary world. (This did not deter critic Pauline Kael from dismissing the film as a shallow medieval epic). Even a cursory reading of the film reveals a motion picture with sets and cast so minimized as to be reaching for something universal.

Detecting this essence gives the Countrymans their greatest challenge. Seemingly trying to cover all their bets, they hang interpretive overlays on just about every character and element of the film. The villainous rancher Rufe Ryker suggests to them a 'pagan god', as evidenced by his use of the expletive, 'By Jupiter!' They find his accent New Yorkish instead of Bostonian. Victor Young's music, solidly in the tradition of elaborated American folk music going back to Virgil Thomson, Ferde Grofe, and Darius Milhaud, is heard by them as 'Wagnerian'. Even before we learn of their identities, the Heflin-Arthur-De Wilde trio appear to the Countrymans to 'carry an overtone of the Christian Holy Family' (14) (they do not, however, explore the possibility that *Shane* might be a Christ-figure, which is some ways he is).

Such metaphors need not be blocked, as the old _The New Yorker_ might have put it, given that they are offered as speculations by the authors and are quite innocuous, although a reader seeking for the gist of the Countrymans' interpretation can be led down some unproductive paths. The sheer number of interpretations do, however, betray a reverence for Stevens that misses, somewhat, his true achievement as a director and credits him for things he did not achieve alone.

Although George Stevens was not, as one might conclude from the Countrymans' book, single-handedly responsible for the film's austerely beautiful cinematography (Loyal Griggs won an Oscar for it, as the book mentions but does not elaborate). Undoubtedly, 'Stevens paid great attention to the costumes on the film' (34) and may have vetoed Van Heflin's request to wear an expensive Abercrombie and Fitch shirt as part of his costume, but nowhere in the book is the name of costumer Edith Head even mentioned. Likewise, the total mise-en-scene of frontier austerity so marvellously achieved by the film must have owed some debt to the art direction of Hal Pereira and Walter Tyler.

Such omissions, however well-intentioned, fail to recognize one of Stevens's most admirable traits: his distinguished career as a producer-director, marked by an uncanny ability to select and work well with talented collaborators who could help him realize his purposes. Stevens produced all but one of his own films between 1938 and 1965 (he co-produced _Giant_). His genius lay not in hang-loose improvisation but in a clear understanding of what he wanted to achieve, combined with a dedication to work and re-work his films in post-production with a thoroughness bordering on the obsessive.

I don't believe this is news to the Countrymans. I think in their effort to honor George Stevens and to recognize the fullness of his achievement they have placed him on a pedestal slightly different from the one he deserves.

The Countrymans are right-on in their view that the film is centered on the Turnerean problem of property use. To their excellent discussion of this I would only add that they sketch, but do not fully delineate, the argument that the film makes about the need for communal action in the face of evil. Given that the use of open space is the critical challenge facing American expansion, Stevens also hints that little help is to be found from rank capitalists in the process. The store owner in the film, a man with the suggestive name of Grafton (Paul Mc Vey) who is fond of inquiring, 'What can I do you for?', is actually the one unqualified villain of the film. Even the hired gunman, Wilson (Jack Palance), is viewed more as the professional opposite of *Shane* (both are referred to as passe) than as the film's true 'heavy'. Jean Arthur is described in the book as having found

'the heavies . . . the most interesting people in the picture' (56). In fact the true 'heavy' of the film is indifference, as exemplified by the store owner Grafton's willingness to trade with both sides of the divided town without taking a stand. He tells the ranchers that he 'likes' Joe Starrett, the Heflin character, but his affections prove meaningless in the face of violence.

Violence, of course, is central to the film and to Stevens's intent, which the Countrymans dutifully report. 'We had a shooting . . .', they quote Stevens as saying in 1973,

'that we wanted to make something out of (notice the generous and accurate use of the inclusive pronoun), because the film was really about shooting. The film was really for the de-glamorizing of the six-shooter that was becoming a graceful object in the fictional hands of the illustrators and particularly the film people. And it was a time, I remember, when kids had gone very Western. There were Western chaps and hats and cap guns everywhere . . . . We wanted to put the six-gun in its place, visually, in a period, as a dangerous weapon. And we did.' (42)

Stevens's intentions are realized through some of the most stark, corporeal violence ever filmed, in which bullets entering men's bodies propel them across rooms or into the mud, and the sounds of gunfire, both real and simulated (by De Wilde) are amplified by echo chambers and the use of Army howitzers.

Stevens's concerns about violence gain contemporary urgency when one considers the role of handguns in American life. In the film one of the townspeople remarks, 'I don't want no part of gun-slinging. Murder's a better name for it.' In fact, as Michael A. Bellesiles reports in _Arming America_, [2] the myth of America as having been 'settled' with the aid of guns is countered by the fact that side-arms were largely unreliable until the invention of the Colt revolver after the Civil War, and virtually every call to arms issued in the United States until after World War II revealed a largely unarmed citizenry. Murder, indeed, was the principal function of the handgun, then and now.

Here one finds a difference of perspective that, if readjusted, might have made the Countrymans' book even better. In their historical analysis, they focus largely on the relevance of _*Shane*_ to 19th century dilemmas, whereas in its heart and sensibility the film reflects Stevens's deeply felt ambivalence toward contemporary matters about which he has proven prescient. The issue of gun control has become an even more pressing matter for concern in our own day, and Stevens's call for morally driven collective action is central not only to the witch-hunting period of McCarthyism and the later civil rights movement through which he lived, but

his skepticism of the moral leadership of business raises questions about the contemporary benefits of a global economy.

Another of the interpretive overlays the Countrymans place on *Shane* is the lens through which the film views gender. Here, again, the authors offer valuable insight. Young Brandon De Wilde (who is identified in the book as 'the best child actor available', despite the fact that *Shane* was his first film) is wonderfully androgynous (which the Countrymans point out) as, indeed, is Alan Ladd himself (which they do not), and in the relationship between the male gunfighter and the impressionable boy-child the coming-of-age dynamic is fiercely at work. The boy identifies gunfighting and fisticuffs with being manly, and despite his obeisance to his more taciturn father, it is clear who the father-figure really is. The boy's reverence for the exotic older man has distinct homophilic undertones, lending significance to *Shane*'s parting advice to grow up 'strong and straight'.

At the same time Stevens continues his focus on independent women (*Alice Adams*, 1935,*Woman of the Year*, 1942) by evoking from Jean Arthur her most complex and interesting performance as the strong but discontent frontier wife who stands by her husband while at the same time recognizing his male pridefulness and the obvious allure of a beautiful rival like *Shane* who draws her femininity out like an opening flower. This is a wonderful dilemma: how, given marriage vows and dependent children, can two people made for each other find happiness? The potentialities are alluring. Young Joey (De Wilde) could have the real dad he wants, *Shane* could settle down and end his fugitive existence and Arthur could have a man who understands and loves her.

That Stevens draws this real-life conflict out with such power attests to its importance to him as the film's maker. He wanted to make a statement about the irony of relationships, about how in reality questions of fidelity and honor supervene strong human desires. Here the backward-looking orientation of the Countrymans' historical perspective causes them to miss a critical aspect of Stevens's sensibility. Stevens was profoundly influenced, as were so many of his generation, by the world war just ended. He had seen others make, indeed himself made, the difficult choice of leaving home and family for higher responsibility; he also experienced the pain of a dissolving marriage in his divorce from his wife, Yvonne.

Among the many intriguing documents referred to by the Countrymans is an interview with Stevens on deposit at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Motion Picture Academy. In it Stevens calls marriage 'the greatest of all human -- I'll say human problems. You know the problem of the male and female relationship . . . Now, the only solution we know in our community

is marriage and marriage takes much else with it. It means a lifetime of companionship and association, you know, not just for the purpose of bearing a child. So to protect the child, to conceive the child, you need a lifetime of association.' (62)

Clearly, the state of being married meant a lot to Stevens. It rendered ideal realignments of personal relations unrealizable, despite the pain their impossibility might entail or the greater good they might portend. This, exactly, is the point-of-view of *Shane*. It is, in a broad sense, a Kantian argument for the supervention of duty over pleasure.

Steven's personal beliefs found their way into the film in several ways. It is evident in the choice of the hymn, 'Abide With Me', which, curiously enough, is sung both on the occasion of the couple's tenth anniversary and at the funeral of a settler (Elisa Cook, Jr) shot down by the hired gun, Palance. Most forcefully they surface in the dialogue between Jean Arthur and Van Helflin when their marriage reaches the crisis point (when he decides to risk certain death to kill Ryker and she charges him with pridefulness and confesses that she hates their meager frontier existence and willingly would pull up stakes). Heflin's counter that honor is worth dying for is unflinchingly delivered along with a statement that his wife's attitude wouldn't 'make any difference' to his decision. This is stark domestic conflict. Its unvarnished realism places the film in the forefront of post-war, 'psychological' Westerns.

The psychological complexity of *Shane* is worked in two other ways the Countrymans only implicitly acknowledge: it daringly took the perspective of a child at a time when children were still thought of as better seen than heard (two years before Nicholas Ray's epochal acknowledgement of the 'generation gap' in *Rebel Without a Cause*), and it distilled to a chilling essence the World War II experience of facing death at the hands of tyrants. Loyal Griggs, Stevens's cameraman, no doubt at the director's bidding, filmed most of *Shane* from the point-of-view of the boy, giving audiences a subjective vulnerability only to be found elsewhere in the work of Yasujiro Ozu. This amplifies the empathy one feels for the young person and gives poignant resonance to De Wilde's plea at the end that *Shane* not leave, that his mother 'wants you, I know she does!'. Secondly, the film reflects in its inert citizenry both American reluctance to go to war (the isolationist United States entered over six years after Hitler took charge in Germany), and the particular horror, experienced in the jungle warfare of the Pacific island campaigns, of the difficulty of standing up against seemingly insurmountable odds. These lend *Shane* a maturity shared by many post-war films, whose anti-heroes and ambiguous good and bad guys reflected a world sobered by war.

Finally, there is the film-historical overlay. In this I feel the

Countrymans most unfortunately come up short. *Shane* is indeed a major film, but the yardstick used by the authors manages to diminish its stature. The Countryman's idea of film-historical scholarship seems to be to look up contemporary reviews of the film, which of course can be revealing. But one begins to squirm when reading that 'the other major film about end-of-the-frontier Wyoming is Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate'* (71), that 'Warren Beatty (and not Arthur Penn) drew on the Stevens howitzer technique for gunshots in *Bonnie and Clyde*' (74), or that Stevens was both a 'master improviser' and 'as in control as either Ford or Hitchcock' (26). One is tempted to completely lose heart at a statement like: 'If _Stagecoach_ marked the onset of the Western's great cycle and _Josey Wales_ marked its conclusion, *Shane*'s release in 1953 came at the cycle's mid-point, not strictly in chronological terms, but rather in terms of the genre's development.' (32) Please, _Stagecoach_ was made in 1939, and Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw-Josey Wales* came out in 1976, not at all a meaningful time-frame for understanding the Western.

It becomes apparent that the Countrymans believe that the film-historical significance of _*Shane*_ lies principally in the influences the film seems to have had upon filmmakers who came *after* Stevens, thus ignoring the fact that Stevens himself was an astute observer of film history and sought a role in it. Hence they note the debt of Sam Peckinpah, who in _The Wild Bunch_ tortured Stevens's pacifism into a blood-splattered travesty, or point out that Clint Eastwood, who has consistently respected film history, remade *Shane* as Pale Rider in 1985. This, however, is movie trivia. (I like to play, too, and wonder what the Countryman's would think of the transformation of *Shane*'s pre-fight remark, 'Are you speaking to me?' into Robert DeNiro's ominous inquiry in *Taxi Driver* (1976), 'Are you talkin' to me?') More importantly, *Shane* has a place in film history left undelineated by the Countrymans.

'Is it merely a coincidence,' William K. Everson and George N. Fenin wrote in their excellent study, _The Western_, 'that some of the best Westerns of recent memory -- particularly John Ford's superlative *Wagonmaster* (one of the few sound Westerns to really deserve the description, 'poetic') and George Stevens's *Shane*-- have still been Westerns basically in the old mood, stressing the austerity of the frontier, and telling their stories in a superbly pictorial manner? The other Ford Westerns of the same period (_Fort Apache_, _Rio Grande_, _She Wore a Yellow Ribbon_, _The Searchers_) and, to a lesser degree, Zinnemann's _High Noon_, Jacques Tourneur's simple and very pleasing _Wichita_, and John Farrow's _Hondo_, were also devoid of sensational eroticism and, significantly, can be counted among the best Westerns of the period.' [3]

It was Everson and Fenin who identified the skein within the Western genre that _*Shane*_ so admirably fits. *Shane* is what they would call a

'reluctant gunfighter' film, a film about a proven warrior who wants nothing more than to lay down his weapons and settle in with wife and family. This, of course, is impossible. Everson and Fenin quote the actor Tom Mix, who spoke for all reluctant gunfighters when he said: 'I ride into a place owning my own horse, saddle, and bridle. It isn't my quarrel, but I get into trouble doing the right thing for somebody else. When it's all ironed out, I never get any money reward. I may be made foreman of the ranch and I get the girl, but there is never a fervid love scene.' [4] Stevens's film is among the great examples of the 'reluctant gunfighter' genre, a realistic streak of Westerns going back to the films of William S. Hart (*Hell's Hinges*, 1915, and *Tumbleweeds*, 1925) extending through the work of John Ford, which spanned both silent and sound periods, and distinguished by the films of Henry King, Fred Zinnemann, and Howard Hawks.

That Stevens was deliberately paying homage to this genre is evident in the austerity with which he approached his subject. Long ago William S. Hart, who grew up among the Sioux and spoke their language, had set an example of dedication to realism Lars von Trier and the Dogma group would admire today. He despised the glamorization of the West, the fancy chaps and movie six-guns that led to the fad for kiddie cowboy suits that stuck in Stevens's craw. He felt a need to portray the West straightforwardly, showing all the dust and heat and deprivation the Western settlers had experienced. George Stevens knew about Hart. It is apparent in his film. He also knew about the great Westerns to immediately precede him on the scene: Henry King's _The Gunfighter_(1950), in which Gregory Peck turns in what may well be the best reluctant-gunfighter performance of them all, and Fred Zinnamann's _High Noon_(1952), in which Gary Cooper 'get(s) into trouble doing the right thing for somebody else' (ref???)[5] as a sheriff trying to marshall a passive citizenry into action against a trio of killers coming in on the noon train.

What is fascinating is what Stevens adds to this: he amplifies the reluctant gunman theme by placing the hero in a mature domestic dilemma, and shows unflinchingly how guns and fists can harm a man, who is, after all, a mere mortal. He demythologizes the genre like nobody before him, and, also unnoticed by the Countrymans, he does so by giving the reluctant gunman a measure of revenge.

In 1950 Henry King had top gunslinger Jimmy Ringo, the Gregory Peck character, ride into town in hopes of anonymously paying a visit to his estranged wife and the child who never knew him. He sets up in the town hotel, and orders steak and eggs in the hotel bar from an old acquaintance (Karl Malden), now the town bartender. With his trademark cup of coffee before him, sitting with his back to the wall much as Jack Palance does in _*Shane*_, he coolly outfoxes young wannabe Skip Homier by calmly holding a gun on him from under the table before Homier can get the drop on him. Well

and good. Age and skill pays off. But after Peck has his visit with his family, and his hope of settling down proves as hopeless as does *Shane*'s, he is brutally shot down by a towns person seeking to make a name for himself. The fatal blow comes from a shotgun secreted on an upper story, a cowardly undercutting of the cowboy mandate to face one's opponent squarely and draw. George Stevens settles this score. His reluctant gunman is not leaving town humiliated. The De Wilde boy may call after him, and the boy's mother may want him badly, but *Shane* leaves town on the terms he rode in on: his own.

In a larger sense George Stevens himself is a victim of the auteur theory. The view that motion pictures are the product of a single mind, a director who also controls the total mise-en-scene, lingers on in the propensity of film scholars to elevate the director to the status of a god. But although many great films can be viewed from this perspective, and the theory itself can be illuminating, in fact a great deal of filmmaking is collaborative. It is naive to think that an art form involving the related fields of literature, drama, visual art, and music -- whose content can span the intellectual and historic spectrum -- can in all its aspects be controlled by one man or woman. The feature film is notoriously complex. As such it is time for us to acknowledge its true nature, and to recognize as one of the geniuses of collaborative art, George Stevens.

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Footnotes

1. See Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in Richard Etulian, ed., _Historians at Work: Did the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?_ (Boston, Mass.: Bedford-St Martins, 1999).

2. Michael A. Bellesiles, _Arming America: Origins of a National Gun Culture_ (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

3. William K. Everson and George N. Fenin, _The Western: From Silents to Cinerama_ (New York: Orion Press, 1962), p. 275.

4. Ibid., p. 117.

5. Ibid., p. 117.

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