Shane

Contemporary film students, as the authors of this monograph note, find *Shane* funny. They laugh at its deification of the white-clad gunfighter; its reverence for the domestic hearth, its saccharine sanctification of boyhood hero-worship. But what seems to us to be classical purity - even naiveté - is rather, as André Bazin noted, a studied and self-reflexive mythologization, such as could only take place well after such naiveté had exhausted itself: "it is clear that the costume of Alan Ladd carries with it all the weighty significance of symbol, while on Tom Mix it was simply the costume of goodness and daring" ('The Evolution of the Western', in *What is Cinema II*, 152). *Shane* is naive only in a second-order sense: willfully naive, naive in order to conceal its deeper skepticism and disappointment.

How curious, then, to read a book that presents the film as a straightforward exposition of traditional themes of family, land, heroism and violence - rather than as an attempted resolution of the crisis into which those themes had pushed themselves. We seem no longer able to see Shane as contrived, self-referential and *deliberately* stilted, as it was to Bazin: unable to differentiate between Alan Ladd and Tom Mix, we now believe that *all* "old" westerns were stilted and contrived without knowing it. Thus *Shane* now, strangely, seems to these authors to be the finest example of that genre from which Bazin, more cannily, recognized it to be the first cynical departure. To follow Bazin's reading, *Shane* is not the well-intentioned and honest distillation of John Ford and William S Hart, as the authors of this monograph would have it, but rather the start of that line of westerns - homage verging on the edge of parody - that would lead to Leone.

This latest contribution to the critical literature around *Shane* is a meticulous scene-by-scene analysis of the film. At its best, it unearths details that we might otherwise not know: that in a subplot edited out of the final-cut, the Rykers' henchman Chris Calloway conducted a courtship with one of the settlers; that in Jack Schaefer's original novel Shane's closeness to Marion is signified by his unusual familiarity with women's fashion. It is also painstakingly attentive to visual detail: capturing the significance of the arrangement of landscapes, buildings and poses with great care. I had, for instance, never registered that the settlers' nemesis, Ryker, appears to have no home, but lives always above the bar, thus cementing a neat opposition between his rootless commercialism and their domestic bliss.

And yet, its very care is also where its weakness lies. For as the previous example might suggest, *Shane* is framed in terms of (over)familiar western thematics. This reading never goes so far as to push an interpretation into new or unexpected territory. Images are interpreted in terms of the film's abiding moral questions: how to live in peace; how to preserve domestic life. In each case director George Stevens supposedly delivers a single, authoritative, coherent statement. In this account, *Shane* is a film without contradictions or ambivalences: it is the perfectly realized authorial vision. Any more provocative

readings are rendered impossible by this determination to read with, and never against, the grain of the text. Images mean only what they could reasonably be expected to have been intended to mean to a 1950s director, and a mainstream audience.

At many points, such an account lapses into banality: *Shane* is reduced to a series of trite (and distinctly literary) themes: "this shot makes several statements: about the grief that accompanies the end of a life, about guilt and callousness, and about the tinyness of individual experience within the greater framework of the world" (29). It may well be that we had not paused to think about how this close-up or that piece of framing conveyed those themes, but in its identification and exposition of the themes themselves there is nothing that would surprise an A-level student. The book's best use then is perhaps as a model of close analysis for students new to film studies (although whether it adds much beyond the standard textbook examples of Bordwell and Thompson is debatable).

We might also wonder whether the analysis represents a kind of nostalgic impulse to do away both with certain kinds of film and certain kinds of film criticism. When we hear Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* dismissed as a "critical disaster" (71), we can only imagine the kind of puritanical cinematic vision which the authors have - and the spare critical tools by which they ask us to approach the text. For in the face of film theory's transformation of the way in which we think about cinema, there is perhaps something heroic about a "back to basics" endeavor like this - the wish to write about cinema as if the last thirty years had never happened.

A Review by Jo Eadie,
Staffordshire University, UK.