

The American Western has been in an elegiac mood for so long that it comes as something of a shock to encounter the budding range of the films collected on *The West: 1898-1938*, the fifth installment of the National Film Preservation Foundation's *Treasures* DVD series. The dates are somewhat misleading since nothing is included from the embryonic years of 1899-1909 (the sole film from 1898, *Sunset Limited*, *Southern Pacific Railroad*, is a beautiful Kinetoscope short) and the years after 1926 are represented only with sponsored films and travelogues. I initially assumed the set was fenced off at 1938 in deference to *Stagecoach* (1939), but series curator Scott Simmon isn't interested in sketching a teleological development towards Ford's reinvention of the cavalry movie. Aside from *Bronco Billy and the Schoolmistress* (1912) and *Legal Advice* (1916), a couple of faint one-reelers featuring early cowboy stars Gilbert M. Anderson and Tom Mix, hardly anything here rates as a "typical" Western (for an early feature that goes right to the dark heart of the genre, see 1916's *Hell's Hinges* on the first *Treasures* set). At

WAY BACK WEST THE WEST: 1898-1938

BY MAX GOLDBERG



The Lady of the Dugout

times Simmon seems willing to entertain deviation for its own sake, but for the most part his sequencing intelligently realizes the shifting contexts of Western motifs in early American cinema.

The dramatic potency of the Western setting is strikingly evident in one of the earliest and most refined films on the set, D.W. Griffith's *Over Silent Paths: A Story of the American Desert* (1910). Shot over two days during one of the Biograph Company's California winters, Griffith's film sustains a vivifying tension between story and landscape. Its general outlook is conveyed by the second shot: an old man sifting for gold in the very bottom of the frame, desert earth rising above his dusty hunched figure. In his astute commentary on the film, Tom Gunning makes the point that cinematographer Billy Bitzer's waist-level camera position elevates the horizon and transforms the relatively flat desert floor into an imposing landscape. Griffith compounds this by staging much of the important action along the same bottom strip of the frame. It's where our eyes are drawn for the man's fatal encounter with a thieving drifter, his daughter's discovery and desolate burial of his body, and her rescue of the same drifter from the unforgiving desert.

The climactic reckoning comes after the daughter has accepted the smitten wanderer's marriage proposal. Wanting to assure her of their bright prospects, he produces the pouch of gold he filched from her father. She accuses him, but then seems to soften upon hearing his confession. Then, in a devastating long shot, she embraces him tenderly while her hands search his waist. The moment she has the gun, she yanks away and levels her stare (so many femme fatales followed). The "divided performance," as Gunning calls it, is as much Griffith's as the daughter's. By depicting the killing as accidental and showing us the drifter crazed with guilt, he lays the groundwork for us to accept the man's redemption, dangling the story's outcome over competing logics.

For the exotic "original participant" films included on *The West* treat, realism is as much an article of faith as an aesthetic. A forgotten three-reeler called *Ammunition Smuggling on the Mexican Border* (1914) is nearly pathological in its insistence on being an "accurate reproduction" of events. It was produced by Eugene Buck, former sheriff of a small Texas town who had been taken hostage while in hot pursuit of a band of gun-running Chicanos (and one Anglo, IWW organizer Charles Cline) sympathetic to General Zapata's campaign against Victoriano Huerta's dictatorship. The revolutionaries were later captured, but not before Buck's Mexican-American colleague Candelario Ortiz had been killed. Buck formed the Elk Photo Play Company in the weeks after his embarrassing performance on the witness stand. Having misidentified several of his captors in court, he sought a definitive condemnation on celluloid. The film was released with several of the band's trials still pending, printing the legend as it polluted the jury pool.

Ammunition Smuggling on the Mexico Border is an exceptionally pure instance of the genre's impulse to rewrite history, but its thrill at the immediacy of its representations is emblematic of the early films collected on the set: the Western

adventure confirmed by the instrument of reproduction as much as the voice of experience. The film draws upon cowboy-movie convention to naturalize Buck's version of events at the same time that its matter-of-fact style renders these same conventions strange. The killing of Ortiz, for instance, is an assassination as might appear in a newsreel. A townsman tromps through horseshit and other folks mill around expectantly as two riders approach from the distance—but however roughshod the road, it's framed at that magic diagonal that makes it a powerful Western symbol of independence and escape. The original members of the posse and criminals both get their close-ups in the end, but while the Texans look off into a romantic distance, the revolutionaries peer back at the documentary camera with derision and dignity, undoing all Buck's spade-work with nothing more than a look.

The relaxed pacing and wistful spirit of *The Lady of the Dugout* (1918) seems a reproach to the score-settling agendas of films like *Ammunition Smuggling*. Turn of the century Oklahoma was a nexus of outlaw myths, and lawyer-turned-stickup man Al Jennings was one of many notables on either side of the law (others included the Wild Bunch gang; Marshal Bill Tilghman, one of the "Three Guardsmen" and the creative force behind another film on *The West* included for historic contrast; "Hanging Judge" Isaac Parker, recently fictionalized yet again in the Coens' *True Grit* [2010]; and Sheriff James Thompson, father of hardboiled Jim). Pardoned by Rough Rider president Teddy Roosevelt, Jennings honed his redemption narrative as a preacher, politician, and memoirist. He also became an authority in Hollywood: "If you wanted something done in a Western the way it ought be done," said Allan Dwan, "you asked him."

Jennings produced *The Lady of the Dugout* independently with W.S. Van Dyke as director. The film begins playfully, with a London publisher reading *Beating Back* at a Beverly Hills hotel as Jennings and his brother Frank walk by. Al tells the Brit that he's working on a movie of his "as yet unrecorded" adventures called *The Lady of the Dugout*. From here we dissolve back to the dusty plains, where Jennings' gaunt face and stringy musculature make better sense (he was 55 playing 20 years younger). The brothers hear talk of a heist at a bar, and after a weak mea culpa ("What followed was done on spur of the moment—without premeditation") they head for the bank. Flush with cash, Al and Frank ride upon their noble cause in the titular woman starving with child in a bare dwelling dug out of the plain. Her husband only cares to drink in town, one of many such wastrels found in these films. Less typically, the woman's desperation registers as a dulled expression rather than an overwrought pantomime. If frozen the images wouldn't be so far from WPA photographs.

After fending off the husband's posse and returning woman and child to her pious parents, the brothers end the film back in the saddle. There's no repose in the story, only in its telling. The final intertitle is a surprising rebuke to the romantic audience: "In our lives there was much that was bad—some that was indifferent, and—maybe—a little that was good. Frank and I have paid for it all—paid more bitterly than you will ever know." The film doesn't return to Beverly

Hills to close the flashback, perhaps in acknowledgment that Jennings' personal attachment to the past was as much a restriction as an asset in movies. His authentications meant little once Westerns began to refer to themselves for a "true" sense of history. *The Lady of the Dugout* was his last starring role, though Dan Duryea had a go in *Al Jennings of Oklahoma* (1951). The real Jennings held on until 1961, long enough for the studio system to tumble and Kennedy to announce his "New Frontier."

The West is greatly enhanced by a few comedies that make hay of the Western's solemn projection of authenticity: a minor Mack Sennett short called *The Tourists* (1912), the Clara Bow vehicle *Mantrap* (1926), and the delicious extant hour of Gregory La Cava's *Womanhandled* (1925). All three posit Western conventions in relation to Eastern-bred fantasies, though La Cava's film goes furthest in upending this displacement. The thin plot is set in motion when Bill (a dapper Richard Dix) rescues Molly's (Esther Ralston) hellion child from a shallow pond in Central Park. She looks hopeful when she asks, "By any chance are you from the West?" He glances at the book she's cradling (Emerson Hough's *North of 36*, adapted as a film the year before *Womanhandled*) and begins babbling about his uncle's Texas ranch.

Once there, he finds replacement cowboys (all the real ones have become actors, the uncle explains) playing badminton, rounding up cattle in automobiles, and fondly reminiscing of New Jersey. Bill prepares for Molly's visit as if for a movie production: he offers 50 bucks for any horse the ranch hands can

find, dirties the house, and, in a razor-sharp parody of Hollywood's racial idiocy, casts the black maid's family as Indians. It's an indication of La Cava's fluidity that he's able to move so easily from this boisterous backstage musical atmosphere to the touching moment when Molly first sees Bill in his Western duds. We read the pinch of disbelief in her face: here she is finally being held by a real cowboy, and one with a face she already knows. The only comparable thing would be meeting a movie star.

Of course many of the other films on *The West* celebrate the way of the cowboy and the redemptive potential of the landscape in earnest. The best of these, like the three-minute *How the Cowboy Makes His Lariat* (1917), accomplish their simple tasks with rhapsodic detail. Many of the travelogues are remarkable historical documents in their own right: the views from *Copper Mines at Bingham, Utah* (1912) of immigrant settlements perilously perched over Bingham Canyon (all of it later engulfed by the expanding mine), or the surprising vision in *We Can Take It* (1935) of an integrated Civilian Conservation Corps (it would be segregated two years later). *Deschutes Driftwood* (1916) offers a peculiar take on the scenic film, attributing its travelling Central Oregon landscapes to the perspective of a hobo riding the rails. "The point of view is the basis of all scenery," the intertitle tells us, rather in the style of a theoretical text. This panoramic view may be absent of history (a bitter railroad war only recently concluded on these same tracks), but it sets itself apart by being scaled to the individual.

The West instructively follows *Deschutes Driftwood* with a 1936 Hearst newsreel reporting on the LAPD's extralegal crusade to prevent "criminals and relief seekers" (migrant workers and Dust Bowl refugees by the looks of it) from seeking their fortunes in sunny California. *A New Miracle in the Desert* (1935) reveals Los Angeles' imperial disregard for jurisdiction in the form of the Colorado River Aqueduct, a colossal boondoggle that presumed rights to the waterway running along the Arizona-California border. Even more florid is *Romance of Water* (1931), the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's song of itself and an unwitting source for later avant-garde investigations of the same geographic system including Pat O'Neill's *Water and Power* (1989), James Benning's California trilogy, and more recently Peter Bo Rappmund's *Psychohydrography* (2010).

In his introduction to the set, Simmon writes, "Over the past century the rugged western landscape has survived better than the early films that documented it." He's referring to the staggering number of lost films from the silent era, but the sentence inadvertently touches upon a basic kernel of Western landscape films like Benning's and Rappmund's: stunned amazement that after a century of abstraction the site remains, not inviolable and perhaps no longer the kind of "living monument" Buffalo Bill Cody advertised of his Wild West revue, but an undeniable physical thing. The adventure of location shooting and the magnetism of place still hold sway even as the guiding assumptions change. *The West* may not turn up any unknown masterpieces, but its prismatic program certainly illuminates the richness of the terrain. ■



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