

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lee Clark Mitchell. *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 332 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-415-16585-7, \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-53235-6.

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Lee Clark Mitchell in *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* writes a cultural history of The American Genre, the genre that American authors, artists, and film-makers have been continually drawn to in defining what it is to be an American, and more to the point, what it is to be an American man. Mitchell is astute in realizing that, no matter how obsessed the Western is with masculinity, concerns with masculinity continually intersect and commingle with concerns of nationalism, honor, family, gender, the environment, and capitalism. At some points in Mitchell's study it might be surmised that the Western is equally concerned with women as it is with men, but the Western and Mitchell always return to the root question of "making the man" as the obsession by which examples of this genre are recognized—no matter how much the Western has been reconfigured over time.

*Westerns* is more of a genealogy than a history, providing formal analysis of key texts with rudimentary cultural context, rather than a detailed history of the Western, or even a history of the most "popular" texts. As he notes that most Western texts are actually the product of Eastern authors, he chooses as his origin a Western set in the East: Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*. Mitchell positions the Western, starting with Cooper's *Mohicans*, as expressing the Easterner's malaise with his society, a malaise that is resolved through the alternative landscape of the Western, a landscape that has continually been more an Eastern/urban fantasy than a historical reality.

In his exploration of constructions of American masculinities, Mitchell takes some interesting and nuanced turns. In his introduction to Western film in "A Man Being Beaten," Mitchell moves away from Mulvey's thesis

and explores the camera's intense interest in the male body in the Western. Under this gaze, the male body is punished and/or made prone, so that its recuperation and re-masculinization can be fully savored. Mitchell sees this film genre as deeply concerned with "looking at men," fully aware of masculinity as a construction, and enjoying watching this construction take place step by step before our eyes. This possibility of renewal Mitchell finds key to the spectator's pleasure, rewarding manhood not on looks alone but through determined behavior.

As fascinating as the individual chapters are, they are not equally developed. The chapters on Cooper and on Bret Harte and Ambrose Bierce provide a thorough biographical and historical context that the chapters on Zane Grey or Sergio Leone do not. These later chapters prefer to present a looser cultural context: for example, linking the childrearing advice of Dr. Spock to the "educating" Western films of the 1950. Perhaps Mitchell assumes that the more contemporary cultural context of Western films is shared with the reader and therefore less necessary. But his approach tends to privilege "canonical" authors, while implying that the biographical context of more populist authors and film-makers is less significant.

However, Mitchell's analysis never ceases to be fluid, insightful, and provocative and is a significant contribution to (and celebration of) the study of the Western and the making of the American man.

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