

Garry Wills. *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. 380 pp. \$14.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-684-83883-0.



Reviewed by Gary L. Harmon

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John Wayne's America is a star persona study, one joining a growing scholarly effort to examine the ways in which certain film stars participate in the spread or alteration of ideological values in a culture. Star studies were once essentially popular biographies, some more serious than others, of a star's personal life and career as an actor. They satisfied film viewers' curiosity about the presumed personality behind the image, though too often they served simply to promote a star's image. But in 1979, when Richard Dyer, a British film scholar, published *Stars* (New Edition, 1998), star personae studies transformed to serious studies of ideology in gender and culture.

Through his critical lens, stars became products with particular signification, texts composed of signs that carried particular ideological meanings. Dyer followed with *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986) in which he explained the meaning and importance of Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland. This semiotic, cultural approach to film stars has led to further refinement by other scholars such as Jackie Stacey, Andrew Britton, or Christine Gledhill. And

a few scholarly books on stars such as Clint Eastwood ("a cultural production"), Mae West (as "a cultural icon"), Cary Grant ("comedy and male desire"), and Woody Allen ("New Yorker") have appeared. Joining these pioneers of scholarly works to explain what a particular star does is Garry Wills' investigation, which features the mythic, political values of John Wayne in his diverse portrayals of American masculinities.

Wills, the author of nineteen previous books, here applies his political and historical acumen to Wayne's mythic film persona as an icon with gendered cultural implications. The book establishes that Wayne and the image manufacturers ignored and distorted Wayne's real life in order to create his mythic male persona. Further, Wills shows that Wayne, through his film roles, filled the needs of his vast American audiences in crucial periods of America's recent history. He became the embodiment of their deepest myths. Wayne, both particularly and exceptionally, validated and repulsed values that came to mean what millions of Americans regard as "being American." But he also invented a mythic man. As Wills explains at

one point, "his body spoke a highly specific language of 'manliness,' of self-reliant authority. It was a body impervious to outside force, expressing a mind narrow but focused, fixed on the task, impatient with complexity. This is a dangerous ideal to foster. It is 'male' in a way that has rightly become suspect—one sided, exclusive of values conventionally labeled 'female'." He became the "figment of other people's imaginations," a "hollow triumph," as Wills judges Wayne.

He takes his readers on a tour of Wayne's varied male roles. As he puts it, "Wayne was not just one type of Western hero. He is an innocently leering ladies' man in his B films of the thirties, a naif in *Stagecoach*, an obsessed adolescent in *Shepherd of the Hills*, a frightened cattle capitalist in *Red River*, a crazed racist in *The Searchers*, a dutiful officer in cavalry pictures, the worldly-wise elder counselor in later movies. He is sometimes a hothead, more often the restrainer of hot-heads." So while Wayne was not one type of male, his main project, as Wills argues throughout the book, was to "build a persona full of portent." And he kept it out of danger, refusing to play a coward and never playing himself, for he was, above all, as a real man, very flawed and a very different man than the one he created. The book's sections deal with the facts of Wayne's life, moving through his actual relationship with the director credited with "making him," (he didn't) John Ford, to his work with the director Howard Hawks, and then to his directorial and producer dud, *The Alamo* and the film fiasco of *The Green Berets*.

In addition, he covers Ford and Hawks' work with Wayne in his later years; his final chapter argues that "Wayne is the most obvious recent embodiment of that American Adam—untrammelled, unspoiled, free to roam, breathing a larger air than the cramped men behind desks, the pygmy clerks and technicians." Wills calls Wayne "the avatar of the hero in that genre that best combines all these mythic ideas about American exceptionalism, contact with nature, distrust of gov-

ernment, dignity achieved by performance, skepticism toward the claims or experts." Never mind that the real-life Marian Morrison from Iowa was a lifelong Republican who tried to dodge his duty to the armed services in World War II when other actors of his age were joining and serving with honor. Even more, though his image was that of an anti-communist, he avoided taking a stand when other actors and Hollywood was unjustly under attack by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early fifties. In spite of this reality, Wayne's controlled manufacture of "John Wayne" resulted in people shaping their lives and adopting political stands to conform to him as a model of Americanism. To track this cultural phenomenon is to understand the breadth and depth of how a star personae can energize myths of gender, personal responsibility, and ideology to extend them farther and wider than anyone might suppose without Wills' well-documented explanation.

When Wills reminds readers that we Americans have not escaped "the myth of the frontier, the mystique of the gun, the resistance to institutions," he could be referring to almost any decade in this century and surely to the indefinite future. This is particularly true if we think of the ongoing resistance to the city and the machine in both movies and life or the continuing vigor of the NRA under the presidency of another politically conservative film star, Charlton Heston. The appeal of wide open spaces even as we fill them up or close them off is clear to all who can see how our culture works, with such mass-mediated personae reaching almost everyone in reach of a film theater or a television set. Wills' arguments may seem too far-reaching for some readers to accept. Even so, however, his 35-page section of notes and the graceful prose of 314 pages of well-documented accounts of Wayne's life and work should prompt most if not all readers to consider how Wayne's mythic image entangled filmgoers in his story, political values and all.

His film career now deserves a healthy dose of skepticism, for, as Wills argues effectively, "John Wayne" spoke to the needs of his audience over several decades, offering them the myths they cherished. His mythic images met widespread needs even as those myths diverted Americans from understanding a culture fractured by tensions regarding gender, age, class, and race diversities. Wayne becomes, for Wills, a mass of "unresolved contradictions," reflecting ourselves back on ourselves. Wills' examination is one of the most ambitious, intriguing star personae studies to date, demonstrating how one film star can consist of both many men and yet also represent a persevering model of manhood for an age. This book is a primer for anyone planning to conduct a star persona cultural study.

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