

**Lassoed by the legend**

**Scotland On Sunday**

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**By Moira Jeffrey**

*The good, the bad and the ugly of the western film genre has left its mark on a new exhibition...*

WALK down Edinburgh's Market Street after dusk next month and you might just have a face to face encounter with John Wayne. The classic John Ford western *The Searchers* will be projected on an outdoor screen wedged into the gap site opposite the Fruitmarket Gallery. The drawback for those who like their films with a beginning, a middle and an end is that, if shown in its entirety, the screening would take some five years to complete. The benefit is a lingering new perspective on the western myth and the legendary landscape that informed it. For this is an artwork by Douglas Gordon, in which - through an act of time warp that makes his 24hr *Psycho* seem like the blink of an eye - the film is slowed down to a timescale that reflects Wayne's five-year search for his niece who has been abducted during a Comanche raid.

Five Year Drive-By (*The Searchers*) is part of a Fruitmarket exhibition *Print The Legend: The Myth Of The West*, which explores the western through its influence on contemporary art. The title of the exhibition comes from a quotation from the 1962 film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." There are works by Gillian Wearing and Peter Granser that explore the enduring appeal of western costume and role-playing, Cornelia Parker's chilling *Embryo Firearms*, a cast of a Colt handgun in an early stage of manufacture, and Isaac Julien's film installation *The Long Road To Mazatlan* which highlights those ever present, but highly sublimated, questions of race and sexuality in the cowboy movie.

While most of these works date from the last decade or so and none were made specifically for the exhibition, it's impossible not to see the issues explored by *Print The Legend* through the current lens of the Bush presidency with its explicit cowboy rhetoric. Patricia Bickers, the art historian and editor of the magazine *Art Monthly* who has curated the show, says: "When Dubya came to power, he was already making war noises. I remember a moment

when I was listening to Radio 4 in my car when I heard him and I had to pull over in my car because I was so horrified at what he was saying. The idea for this show came straight to mind because Ronald Reagan always used western analogies and now we were hearing them again."

Indeed the recent revival of the Hollywood western, in films such as the remake of *3:10 To Yuma*, explicitly mines the western as a metaphor for current US politics, with its corporate land grabs and its guns for hire. But it's a sign, perhaps, of national insecurity rather than triumphalism. "It's America's defining myth," says Bickers, "and it always revives at times of loss of confidence."

It is more than a century since the western genre first captured large audiences with the popularity of Owen Wister's 1902 novel, *The Virginian*. Dime Novels and later western movies emerged from the Wild West shows and staged gunfights that fed a growing tourist trade and the genre grew at precisely the moment that so-called 'empty' land ran out.

Bickers says the idea of the West took hold much earlier and much further east, in the

politics and philosophy of Europe. There is, she says, a line of European thought that brought together the notion of westward expansion with inaccurate images of an empty Eden. "In Europe there's always been this idea that you can start over somewhere." She emphasises the role of European immigrants and for local colour draws on the specifically Scottish examples that later fed the stock characters of the genre: the cattle barons of whom the Swan Land and Cattle Company headquartered in Edinburgh's Castle Street was the second largest in the world, and the Pinkerton Agency, founded by a Glaswegian and hired to track down some of the west's most notorious outlaws.

While George Bush may have been the unlikely midwife, Print The Legend had a 50-year gestation. Bickers attributes her love of the western to the moment in 1957 her father arranged for a screening of High Noon in what was then post-independence Malaya. "I'd like to say it was the first movie in English I'd ever seen, but actually it was the second," she says. "All the other films I'd seen had been Indian or Chinese. It strikes me as not at all incongruous that I was watching it in a British-built club in Malaya with a mixed audience of my friends

and neighbours. I was entranced."

Thus seduced, Bickers has spent a lifetime in fleapit cinemas watching westerns, note-taking in the flickering light. She was, she says, "delighted to come out of the darkened cinema and into the light of my living room" with the advent of video and DVD.

The western can be seen as both violent and extremely simple. "I think this is both the problem and the strength of genre," Bickers says. "You have types and stereotypes which are acceptable within genre, because everyone is in on it. It's not acceptable in real life, but in genre it is obviously a mechanism to drive the story and highlight issues. Some of those issues are extremely right wing, some of them are commendably liberal and some of them are, dare I say, left-wing, which of course High Noon was. And the western as a form can be used to address anything."

Where the western goes now may depend on the outcome of the forthcoming presidential election. It seems unlikely that, if nominated Barack Obama will look to the west for his inspiration. As Bickers points out, while Hillary Clinton has tried to shift the rhetoric by calling

for an end to "cowboy politics", John McCain grasped the violent metaphors of western language on a visit to a gun factory last year.

Bush's attachment to the cowboy myth has often made him look foolish. When he used the cowboy metaphor of "riding herd" about the prospects of a Middle East peace deal his remarks were widely derided as at best inaccurate and at worst a sign of his imperial distance from reality. Vicente Fox, the former Mexican president, described Bush as a "windshield cowboy", who was fonder of four wheels than four legs. Indeed, he claimed that, having offered the US president a ride on his finest Palomino, it appeared that Dubya was rather frightened of horses.

Bickers contends that women are both central to and utterly marginalised in most mainstream westerns, "they are male inventions and male self-justifications". Westerns are myths and the frontier was always far more complex.

Sarah Churchwell, an expert on American literature, recently argued that, while they are dramatically excluded from modern and so-called revisionist westerns, women were central to the original western novel and to many of the

movies.

And the most popular western of all time?  
Not anything starring John Wayne or Clint  
Eastwood but the first of a series of children's  
novels based on the life of real homesteader  
Laura Ingalls Wilder: Little House On The  
Prairie.