



"Where a man settles his own problems"

Inspired by Thomas Wartenberg's (South Hadley, MA) lecture: Narrating History in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a BA student decided, that movies are more than mere entertainment. Closely interwoven with the American history and identity, they represent a society, popular ideas and historical interpretations that might first be hard to see but eventually lead to a better understanding of American culture. This 1962 western classic is no exception. It is the first of a series of movie interpretations based roughly around a current lecture series organized by the excellence cluster "normative orders" at the Goethe University in Frankfurt.

The movie is a historical narrative about the westward movement of the United States. Most of the movie is told in a flashback from the time when the main character, Senator Stoddard (played by James Stewart), first came to the western town of Shinbone. Then a fresh law graduate, he wants to bring law and order to the west. Instead, he is confronted with violence and a raw western masculinity – personified in Tom Doniphon (played by John Wayne) and Liberty Valance (played by Lee Marvin).

Valance attacks Stoddard's station wagon and beats him up badly. Doniphon, as it turns out, is actually a good guy; he helps Stoddard after he's been attacked and explains to him that the Wild West has different rules. He basically tells him that his education and all his law books are nothing out there, "where a man settles his own problems" – preferably with guns. However, Stoddard refuses to learn how to shoot and is depicted as weak, even feminine (especially at the restaurant where he serves food wearing an apron – a job usually done by women).

Nevertheless, he succeeds in building a school and bringing education and literacy to the town. In the end, he's nominated for senator – with Valance as his adversary. The night before the election, Stoddard faces Valance in a showdown. Once again he's depicted as weak and completely inferior to Valance's power. Valance plays with him, Stoddard fires one shot (in self-defense) – and Valance is dead. Later on, the same scene is retold by Doniphon. He reveals that it was actually him who shot Valance (in cold-blooded murder). However, when the movie switches back to the given reality in 1910, where the flashback is told as a story to the local newspaper, the editor insists on keeping the legend – that Stoddard shot Valance – as the truth, saying "when the legend becomes fact, print the legend".

The movie paints a very plausible picture of the westward journey and the struggles along the way. I like how Ford managed to show the difference of east and west in the portrait of the different male characters. However, one of the most interesting parts was Pompey, the black servant Doniphon has.

Even though Doniphon claims, he deals with his problems alone, he never faces Valance without Pompey – and if he did he would most certainly lose. As Thomas Wartenberg suggested – and I think it's an interesting idea – Ford wanted to show how dependent America is on its black workers and how black slaves had been a part of the history and development of the United States. After all, there is no black slave in the accompanying book.

But that is not the only sociopolitical criticism that resonates in this 1962-classic: the story of how Valance got killed shows how the law system is actually based not only on false information but even on unlawful actions. The fact that Valance was not killed in self-defense but in cold-blooded murder undermines the proposed victory of law and order in the west and shows that, in the end, violence and the belief in a legend is still more important than the truth.

On a more subtle level, the depiction of the east in the character of Stoddard as weak and dependent gives the west power over the "old states" and underlines the attractiveness that the westward journey held for many Americans. After having left Europe to find a better place, a free country to live in, they once again move westward in search of freedom and adventure; freedom not only in the face of decreasing land availability in the east but also freedom from the law and order that reigned in the eastern states. And even nowadays, the west coast still holds the promise of adventure and wide open spaces and California still attracts many people with the promise of a better future.



See also a New York Times interpretation of "[The man who shot Liberty Valance](#)"

(text: Carolin Schmitt)