

Healthy Doses of Realism

by Earl P. Holt III

Films that debunk or de-romanticize myths found in prior films have always interested me. Martin Scorsese's ***Goodfellas***, Clint Eastwood's ***Unforgiven***, John Irvin's ***Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy***, Fred Zinnemann's ***High Noon***, and John Ford's ***The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*** are five that come immediately to mind. Each dumps cold water on romanticized myths found in earlier films of a similar *genre*.

Goodfellas was a popular film that de-romanticized the ***Godfather*** films by introducing an uglier but more authentic version of the Italian Mafia and organized crime. ***The Godfather*** and its first sequel portrayed the *Corleone Crime Family* in a manner suggesting "old world" traditions and principled chivalry. Based loosely on the *Gambino Crime Family* of New York, the Corleones were portrayed as classy, elegant and even restrained at times. That was ***HARDLY*** the real mafia.



Goodfellas

When things are going well for the mobsters portrayed in ***Goodfellas***, it's all laughs and friendship and back-slapping and celebrations of their successful "*heists*" of property belonging to others. However, once law enforcement begins to investigate their activities and things sour, mob loyalties are quickly abandoned and paranoia reigns as they begin "*whacking*" each other to prevent former associates from "*ratting*" on them. Based on the Gambino Family's extensive body count, ***Goodfellas*** was the more accurate depiction.

Likewise, ***Unforgiven*** is probably a more authentic portrayal of the lives of many notorious and sometimes celebrated gunslingers who prowled the west during America's "*Westward Expansion*." Like *Billy-the-Kid*, their notoriety often stemmed from the number of men they killed in cold blood, before they met a similar and inevitable fate. However, in real life, their lives were anything but glamorous, and instead were usually "***solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,***" to steal a phrase from Thomas Hobbs.



Eastwood in *Unforgiven*

Eastwood once described ***Unforgiven*** as a film about loyalty -- and it clearly is -- but the film also took the opportunity to debunk the glamor surrounding fabled gunslingers and hired guns portrayed in many Westerns. In ***Unforgiven***, two retired gunslingers and former partners-in-crime come out of retirement to commit a murder-for-hire. After enduring cold, rain and other deprivations, one is eventually whipped to death by a particularly sadistic town Sheriff, and the other humiliatingly beaten to a pulp by the same sadist. Any glamor surrounding the depiction of these gunslingers is conspicuously absent. It's also worth noting that both men express regret over their misspent youths.

Here's another example: I recall spy-novelist John le Carre` telling a BBC interviewer back in the late 1970s that his purpose in writing spy novels was to correct the inauthentic portrayal of espionage as it appeared in the preposterous and glamorized James Bond films, based on Ian Fleming's novels. In ***Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy***, an elderly and retired former British spy named George Smiley is coaxed out of retirement to expose the mole (or deep-cover Soviet agent) who is subverting British Intelligence from the upper echelons of MI-6.



Alec Guinness in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*

According to le Carre`, the version of espionage practiced by British Intelligence "***rests on a kind of gentleness,***" by which he clearly meant *subtlety*. Unlike James Bond, George Smiley is anything but glamorous. He is elderly, fat, chronically betrayed by his beautiful wife, and often shown disrespect by far lesser men. Yet, it is also the case that he has no peer when it comes to the "*arithmetic*" of his unique craft. In successfully exposing the Soviet mole, his triumph avoided the "*tedious*" devices and athletic feats found in the Bond films: it was achieved exclusively through the nobility of his mind, and his meticulous and painstaking analysis of the activities of former colleagues in MI-6.

Another example is ***High Noon***, which has been called the first "*adult western*." Its characters are not the one-dimensional caricatures of earlier and more traditional *Westerns*, where "*good guys*" wear white hats and villains wear black hats to make them more easily distinguishable. Instead, the characters in ***High Noon*** are far more complex, more interesting and more human than those usually found in previous efforts. In this sense, they are a good deal more authentic.



Marshall Will Kane in ***High Noon***

Hadleyville's Marshall Will Kane is informed that the leader of a murderous gang has been pardoned, and he and his gang will be arriving on the Noon train intending to avenge themselves against everyone who participated in their criminal trials. When no one will help him, Marshall Kane realizes that he's been abandoned by the very townspeople for whom he risked his life to bring law and order. He experiences a number of emotions rarely found in heroic figures, emotions that begin with despair over the town's betrayal, soon progress into self-pity, and finally end in anger and disgust. After the Marshall successfully dispatches the gang, he symbolically drops his badge into the dusty streets of Hadleyville as he prepares to leave the town forever.

Finally, John Ford's film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, is also an iconoclastic film. The romanticized version of a courageous and unimpeachably honest sheriff -- who fearlessly guns down the town's evil and vicious predators in its final scene -- is replaced by a more realistic scenario. The town's cowardly sheriff hides at the sight of Liberty Valance, so the task of ridding the town of *Shinbone* of this psychopath falls on the hero (John Wayne) who secretly shoots him. Another man (Jimmy Stewart) wrongly receives the credit for shooting Liberty Valance and -- based on that reputation -- later becomes governor of the territory and eventually, a U.S. Senator.

Rather than a scenario in which a steely-eyed sheriff valiantly risks his life in a shoot-out on main street -- and perseveres through courage and cunning as in *High Noon* -- the real hero in *Liberty Valance* shoots the psychopath clandestinely and from the shadows in what can only be characterized as cold-blooded murder. As John Wayne's character later told Jimmy Stewart's character, who mistakenly received credit for the deed, *"I can live with it."* Ford was suggesting that many of the bravest men who helped settle the West remain unsung heroes, but their heroism rarely resembled the romanticized and choreographed gunfights found in Hollywood *Westerns*.



The Man Who (REALLY) Shot Liberty Valance

It's NO coincidence that three of the five films examined are "*Westerns*." In a final scene from ***The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance***, the U.S. Senator unburdens himself to *Shinbone's* newspaper editor by confessing that he wasn't really the man who shot Liberty Valance, and then identifies the hero who actually did.

The editor has been taking copious notes throughout the interview, but then crumples and discards them. When the Senator asks if he intends to publish the true version of the incident, the editor replies, "***No, sir. This is the West, sir: when legend becomes fact, we print the legend.***"