Violent 1950s Westerns ahead of its time

By Oliver Spivey

If you are a big fan of Westerns like me, and have been fortunate enough to have seen Anthony Mann’s Man of the West (1951), you will know after viewing it that you have just witnessed something haunting and elementally powerful.

Having been unavailable on DVD until now and only occasionally aired in its widescreen glory on cable’s TCM channel, the film has existed largely as a topic in the discussions of students of cinema.

**Popular Western films**

Mann defined the 1950s adult “psychological” Western with a string of key films in the genre canon—all are considered key films in the Western dreamscapes of Monument Valley where a garden is to be carved from a wilderness. Themes, atmosphere, and stark realism that infuse the film prefigure the violent Westerns of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah.

In fact, 10 years later Leone took another wholesome American hero—Henry Fonda—and turned him into an exceptionally good, but also exceptionally violent, killing gunslinger with a black hat in his melon-choly salute to the genre Once Upon a Time in the West.

**Flaws in film**

For all its brilliance the film has its flaws—a somewhat backhanded opening, a conclusion that seems to sing along with the overall cynicism that came before it and the hard sell of the gunslinger Cooper as a reformed Western dreamscape—his nightmare land is in direct contrast to the violent Westerns of Mann’s best Western. For its bluntness in depicting violence, few other Westerns made in the 1950s can touch it. To be a classic Western fan and admit that this film should be like calling John Wayne a sissy to his face—just sheer foolishness.

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