***Dances with Wolves.* Produced by T. I. G. Productions. Directed by Kevin Costner.**

Dances with Wolves concerns the odyssey of an accidental Civil War hero, Lt. John Dunbar, who requests stationing in the West and ends up living and marrying among the Lakotas (western Sioux). It is a movie set in the Western rather than the West, and that is as it should be. Westerns are not, and never have been, historical. They are about how we are, or how we should be, or how we fear we might be. They are a simple, but elegant and versatile, form of popular narcissism. We see ourselves in strange dress and in exotic places, but, in the end, all we really see is ourselves.

Structurally, little in *Dances with Wolves* will surprise those familiar with Westerns. The film creates the usual binary oppositions of the form: "civilized" vs. "savage," white vs. Indian, etc. It loads the desired moral values onto each pair as if they were so many cultural boxcars. The hero and heroine—Lieutenant Dunbar and his wife, Stands with a Fist—are, however, neither "civilized" nor "savage," neither fully white nor fully Indian. They stand between the movie's oppositions, and their dilemma provides the film's center.

Dances with Wolves has received attention largely because of its sympathetic treatment of the Lakotas, but in terms of the Western, it is most innovative in its treatment of nature. The West, the stunning, breathtaking place itself, has always been central to Westerns, and Costner makes the Black Hills and South Dakota plains a fitting rival to John Ford's Monument Valley or the Grand Teton backdrop to *Shane*. But Costner goes beyond this; he makes nature itself an actor. The movie is at times like a weird offspring of John Ford and Walt Disney. The people in this movie act like animals; the animals act like people. Whites look piggish and act worse than pigs. Characters kill and mutilate each other; they foul their own nests, and, in one scene, themselves. They eat greedily, ravenously; they slobber, belch, and fart. They and their surroundings smell. Dunbar distinguishes himself from other whites by cleaning up the mess they have left and by giving away, rather than consuming, food. In showing the conventional restraint of the western hero, he demonstrates that he is not a pig.

Animals, meanwhile, take on human personalities. The horse and the wolf in the film are not derived from adult Westerns but instead from Roy Rogers's Trigger and Rin Tin Tin. Dunbar's horse is smarter than both Dunbar and the Lakotas who try to steal him. Dunbar is initially, as Wind in His Hair explains, a foolish white man with a smart horse. And Two Socks, the wolf with whom Dunbar dances, mediates between nature and humans in the same manner that Dunbar and Stands with a Fist mediate between Indians and whites.

In order to make nature a character as well as a setting, Costner sentimentalizes the natural world. For unlike nineteenth-century Lakotas, most twentieth-century Americans can only personalize nature by sentimentalizing it. The result is often silly, but silliness has its compensations. In this Western nature does become a living, animate, and integral part of human affairs. Once personified, animals take over the roles usually reserved for humans in Westerns, and they echo actions first performed by human beings. Thus, Dunbar's horse escapes from the Lakotas as Dunbar had escaped from the army. And at the end of the movie, the wolf, dancing in front of the soldiers' guns, reenacts Dunbar's suicidal ride in front of the Confederate guns with which the movie began. The wolf dies aiding the Lakotas who rescue the captured Dunbar from the whites. Dying, the wolf co-opts a role previously given humans in the Western. The whole pace of the movie and the conventions of the genre lead the audience to expect the Indians to die at the hands of whites or Dunbar to die trying to save them. But the death of the Lakotas comes, as it were, off-screen after the movie ends. On screen, the animals preempt them. Two Socks, the wolf, and Dunbar's horse die the tragic deaths.

All this may be Rin Tin Tin in Ecotopia, but it is still the first important environmentalist Western. The film uses a mythic western past to criticize twentieth-century relations of people and nature and to present an imagined alternative. It uses Indians as conventional environmentalist symbols and creates animals as other, equivalent symbols. It is this twentieth-century environmentalist consciousness that should make the film significant to historians interested in seeing how and for what purposes popular culture reimagines our past.

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