

Drew Bassett

## Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues: BFI Film Classics: Red River

2002

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2002.1.2345>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bassett, Drew: Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues: BFI Film Classics: Red River. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 19 (2002), Nr. 1, S. 88–89. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2002.1.2345>.

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### **Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues: BFI Film Classics: Red River**

London: British Film Institute 2000, 72 S., ISBN 0-85170-819-6, £ 8.99

*Red River* (1948) is the epic tale of one of the first cattle drives from Texas to Kansas along the Chisholm Trail in the 1860s. It depicts the hardships of taking thousands of animals across rugged terrain, harassed by Indians and hindered by bad weather. The story is anchored by a sensitive psychological study of the journey's two leaders, Thomas Dunston (John Wayne) and his adopted son Matthew Garth (Montgomery Cliff). Dunston is a typical Hawksian character, tough, professional, committed to getting the job done, but taken to the extreme where his ruthlessness becomes a liability to the successful accomplishment of their mission. This results in the „softer“, more flexible, Garth taking over the leadership of the drive. Dunston promises revenge and the climax of the film is concerned with the resolution of this conflict.

The ending is the most controversial aspect of the film. During the showdown at the end Garth refuses to defend himself against Dunston, and Dunston refuses to shoot first. The promised shoot-out degenerates into a brawl which is finally broken up by the „love-interest“ Tess Millay (Joanne Dru), and Dunston decides to make Garth a full partner. The ending in the original story the film is based on, *Blazing Guns on the Chisholm Trail* (1947) by Borden Chase, had Dunston mortally wounded and taken back to Texas to die there by Millay and Garth.

Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues in her *Red River* contribution to the BFI Classics series feels Hawks' ending „completes the overall composition by re-establishing, at the opposite end to the story, a feminine presence in counterpart to Fen, Dunston's lost fiancée“. (p.25). Richard Corliss finds Hawks' modifications to Chase's tale catastrophic. I wouldn't put it as dramatically as that, and I wouldn't agree that Hawks' happy ending „panders to Hollywood“. However, this ending is clearly ill-judged, and it does affect the overall quality of the film and the way the audience receives it. The cowboys spend the last quarter of the film nervously looking over their shoulders, convinced that a man of Dunston's character would be following them. And of course they are right. Hawks includes one especially

effective scene which takes place on a night so dark and foggy you expect Lon Chaney Jr. to come loping out of the trees on all fours, which ratchets up the tension and the expectation of a violent confrontation. When the „happy ending“ comes you feel cheated and the film is diminished. This point illustrates the problem of writing about a film you love: you allow the good to overshadow the bad, you can lose your perspective.

Although you can learn much about *Red River* in particular, and Howard Hawks in general, you should be warned by the quote from *Uncut* magazine on the back of the book, „ . . . magnificently concentrated examples of freeform critical poetry.“ The book isn't written in a systematic manner. You can find relevant comments and observations about the historic events on which the film is based and the authenticity of their depictions, the qualities of the differing acting styles, music, cinematography, in fact discussions on all the formal aspects of the film-making. She gives some interesting background about Hawks' friendship with John Ford and the occasional on-set anecdote about the making of the film. However, you also get some more esoteric remarks about the significance of the colour „red“ and Hawks' use of water, („violence is inscribed by means of liquids or related metaphors p.57). Unfortunately, Liandrat-Guigues stays well clear of any homo-erotic undercurrents in the film. The scene where Garth and Cherry Valance (John Ireland) handle each others guns and compare sizes is surely worthy of comment.

When reading criticism about *Red River* (1948) it is the ending which is considered the most controversial. Most critics applaud its epic nature and the contrasting acting styles of John Wayne and Montgomery Cliff which provide for the film's dramatic tension.

Drew Bassett (Köln)