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Old Hollywood: Tough Guys and Mad Dames

Rich Johnson

Week 6

GREGORY PECK: AMERICAN PATRIARCH

Gregory Peck (April 5, 1916 – June 12, 2003) garnered a reputation over the years as a fatherly figure – *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962), *Cape Fear* (1962), *The Omen* (1976) – often cast in roles that would balance both a stoic *and* sympathetic side. Although known as being amiable and a fun-loving man at home, Peck’s persona onscreen was one of a stern nature that only fed into his role as patriarchs. He was *tough*... but also caring, often seen as anything from the good-looking romantic lead (even in his later years) to a rugged World War II hero. Peck was all of this; the measurement of Americana; his heroic features all part of his movie star qualities. No surprise then that Peck was once described as “the most decent man in Hollywood”; rising to stardom at a time when dignity and fair play *made* a hero. His son, Anthony Peck, summed him up the best: “My father never let me down. He is totally like the lawyer he plays in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Gregory Peck is Atticus Finch.”

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Main:

Duel in the Sun (1946)

Director(s): King Vidor

Studio(s): Vanguard Films

Twelve O’Clock High (1949)

Director(s): Henry King

Studio(s): Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation

Cape Fear (1962)

Director(s): J. Lee Thompson

Studio(s): Universal Pictures

References to:

Days of Glory (1944)

Director(s): Jacques Tourneur

Studio(s): RKO Pictures



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Spellbound (1945)

Director(s): Alfred Hitchcock

Studio(s): Selznick International Pictures / Vanguard Films (distributed by United Artists)

The Gunfighter (1950)

Director(s): Henry King

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

Roman Holiday (1953)

Director(s): William Wyler

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures

Moby Dick (1956)

Director(s): John Huston

Studio(s): Moulin Productions (distributed by Warner Bros.)

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)

Director(s): Robert Mulligan

Studio(s): Pakula-Mulligan / Brentwood Productions

The Omen (1976)

Director(s): Richard Donner

Studio(s): Twentieth Century Fox

The Boys from Brazil (1978)

Director(s): Franklin J. Schaffner

Studio(s): ITC Films (distributed by Twentieth Century Fox)

Notes:

“I don’t lecture and I don’t grind any axes. I just want to entertain.” — Gregory Peck

Young Eldred

Eldred Gregory Peck was born on April 5, 1916 in San Diego California. Peck's parents divorced when he was five, and he was brought up by his maternal grandmother, who took him to the movies every week.

Catholic military school at 10, he learned discipline from a very early age. Sadly, during this time, when he was 14, his grandmother passed away and he moved back to San Diego to live with his father.

Peck had a number of ambitions, one of which was to become doctor, transferring to the University of California as a pre-medical student. His height (standing 6 ft 3) set him up as an excellent rower.



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As a Roman Catholic, he also considered joining the priesthood. His distinctive, commanding voice was noticed early on gaining him attention. This made him participate in a public speaking course which led to acting.

From religion to politics. As a staunch democrat, Peck deploring the House Un-American Activities Committee, even signing a letter in support of those blacklisted. In 1970, he was even suggested as a possible Democratic candidate to run against Ronald Reagan for the office of California Governor.

He was married twice. His first wife was Greta Kukkonen (m. 1942; div. 1955), whom he had three sons with. His eldest was tragically found dead in in June of 1975 just before, uncannily, he accepted his role in *The Omen* (1976).

His second was Veronique Passani (m. 1955). They became inseparable and had a son, Tony, and daughter, Cecilia, together. Cecilia Peck acted briefly and went onto to become a film producer.

Even though his son, Stephen fought in the Vietnam War he was outspoken about the conflict.

Stephen's son, Ethan Peck is the image of his grandfather. Most well known as the latest incarnation of Spock from the current series *Strange New Worlds*.

First appearances

He debuted in Jacques Tourneur's *Days of Glory* (1944)

Some notable works include: *Roman Holiday* (1953) and the overlooked 1945 film, *Spellbound*, from Alfred Hitchcock, *Spellbound* from 1945 shows all of his trademarks, but, most notably a crucial segment designed by Salvador Dali. Unfortunately, he hardly referenced the work during the course of his career. After the trauma of WWII, *Spellbound* capitalized on the growing public interest in Freudian psychology; in fact, the film is one of the first major Hollywood productions to rely on psychoanalysis and mental illness as a driving force for the plot. During his first marriage, Peck had a brief affair with *Spellbound* co-star Ingrid Bergman.

John Huston's 1956 adaptation of *Moby Dick* is another iconic performance, but a film that wasn't a favourite of Peck's. There are numerous stories, one of which being left adrift in the Atlantic, in the fog attached to the whale!

Peck was very fashionable (he loved his suits, especially tweed)... and aged gracefully as one of the most handsome stars in history.

His most iconic (and defining) performance is that of Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). This led to his paternal influence in roles... obviously *The Omen* being another.

"I just don't want them fancy friends of yours to say you had a brother who shot you down in cold blood." — Lewt McCanles



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Producer David O. Selznick spent \$2 million on the promotion of this film, which was unheard of for the time.

'She came and went in that land without women with as little notice of a man...' — Niven Busch, *Duel in the Sun* (1944)

Based on Niven Busch's 1944 novel of the same name.

American director King 'Wallis' Vidor had an epic career bridging lines between the journeyman director and auteur. He directed the Kansas scenes in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

Selznick had originally intended for the film to be his artistic follow-up to *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Married to Selznick, lead actress Jennifer Jones was made to look as beautiful as possible, director Josef von Sternberg hired only as a lighting expert in order to give her an even more glamorous look. Selznick's constant rewrites and insistence on re-shoots eventually caused Vidor to quit and be replaced by William Dieterle, although Vidor and Selznick still remained friends.

According to IMDb, Peck worked on *The Yearling* (1946) at the same time as it overlapped with *Duel's* shooting for three or four weeks. He would work on *The Yearling* in the morning and *Duel in the Sun* later in the day.

Vidor's 67-year film-making career successfully spanned the silent and sound eras, his films often taking on a vivid, humane, and sympathetic depiction of contemporary social issues. You only need look at the shots in *Duel in the Sun* that showcase his vibrancy as a filmmaker and impeccable framing.

The film only broke even due to how much money was pumped into the promotion of the film. Adjusted for inflation in 2013, the film's US box office gross of \$20,408,163 would be \$410,714,300. At the time of its release, this was the most expensive western to be made and also one of the costliest films ever produced before 1946 due to numerous re-shoots, expensive Technicolor film stock and lots of location filming all compounded the escalating costs. It only turned a profit through rereleases over the years.

Commanding performance

"You've been looking at a lot of air lately... and you think you ought to have a rest. In short, you're sorry for yourselves. I don't have a lot of patience with this, "What are we fighting for?" stuff. We're in a war, a shooting war. We've got to fight. And some of us have got to die." — General Savage

Henry King directs Peck in another psychological drama – 1949's *Twelve O'Clock High* – the study of fractured individuals synonymous with post-War movies. Stationed in England in 1942, an American Air Force unit is plagued with morale problems until no-nonsense Brigadier General Frank Savage (Peck) assumes command. His tough leadership is initially resented by not only his pilots but his second-in-command, a West Point graduate and son of a general. But, with the help of



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a hotshot flying ace and a sympathetic administrator, the unit pulls together into a gung-ho fighting crew.

'Under the stress of combat, would Davenport try to spare the crew the ultimate hardships and sacrifices?'

Adapted from the 1948 novel by Sy Bartlett and Beirne Lay Jr.

Director Henry King and Gregory Peck made six films together including *The Gunfighter* released the following year in 1950.

The film is seminal for many reasons, mainly as one of the first Hollywood films to deal with the psychological effect of war on its soldiers. Beyond simply a piece of celluloid, it is interesting to note that it is used by the US Navy as an example of leadership styles in its Leadership and Management Training School. The Air Force's College for Enlisted Professional Military Education also uses it as an education aid in its NCO academies and Officer Training School. It is also used as a teaching tool for leadership at the Army Command and General Staff College and for leadership training in civilian seminars. It is used at the Harvard Business School as a case study in how to effect change in organizations.

It is also frequently cited by surviving bomber crew members as the only accurate depiction from Hollywood of their life during the war.

Peck was a vocal opponent of the aerial bombing of cities in Germany, Japan, North Korea and Vietnam. In light of his Peck' opposing politics, it isn't hard to figure out why John Wayne turned down the role. Clark Gable was interested in the lead role. Gable actually served in the U.S. Army Air Forces during the war as a bombardier, achieving the rank of Major. *The New York Times* summarised, "Mr. Peck does an extraordinarily able job in revealing the hardness and the softness of a general exposed to peril."

After the film was made, Gregory Peck became great friends with the character he had played, Gen. Frank Armstrong, who clearly approved of Peck's portrayal of him. In terms of Peck's involvement in the war he was unable to serve due to a spinal injury.

"You shocking degenerate. I've seen the worst — the dregs — but you... you are the lowest. Makes me sick to breathe the same air." — Sam Bowden

Released two years after Hitchcock's *Psycho* and four months after *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, J. Lee Thompson's *Cape Fear*, from 1962, not only makes for a perfect triple feature but also shows two heavyweights at the top of their game. Douglas and Lancaster, , Newman and McQueen, Arnie and Sly... Mitchum and Peck – when we see two huge stars on screen together, it's more than often gold. This I a dark tale for its time and is perfectly placed between the Old Hollywood and the New. After an eight-year prison sentence for rape, Max Cady (Robert Mitchum) targets Sam Bowden (Peck), one of the lawyers who sent him away. When Max finds Sam and his family, he begins a terrifying stalking spree, intending to ruin Sam's life. Desperate to protect his wife and daughter, Sam makes every effort to send Max back to jail. But when his attempts fail,



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Sam realizes that he must take matters into his own hands if he wants to rid his life of Max for good.

Unfortunately the film was a financial failure and ended Gregory Peck's company, Melville Productions.

“If the law can’t protect us, then I’m dedicated to a myth, and I better wake up.”

Based on the 1957 novel *The Executioners* by John D. MacDonald. Peck didn't like the original novel's title. When thinking of a new one, he decided that movies named after places tended to be very successful, so he looked at a map of the U.S. until he happened upon Cape Fear in North Carolina.

The film boasts one of the greatest onscreen movie star collaborations of all time. Two powerhouse stars literally battling it out.

There is a 1991 remake from Martin Scorsese starring Robert De Niro and Nick Nolte.

You couldn't have two opposing personalities if you tried. According to IMDb, Peck later said regarding Robert Mitchum, "I had given him the role and had paid him a terrific amount of money. It was obvious he had the better role. I thought he would understand that, but he apparently thought he acted me off the screen. I didn't think highly of him for that."

It really adds to the bravado and power struggle and intensity on display here. As mentioned they were contrasting personalities with Peck always preparing meticulously for his roles, whilst Mitchum learned his lines only before a scene, because of his fantastic photographic memory.

In terms of domesticity and the American Gothic vibes, the film really plays into modern horror tropes and the home invasion elements that would become prominent in thrillers.

Prior to its release, the film was heavily censored with many key elements of the fight scenes removed.

Also deleted were numerous implications that Cady planned to sexually assault and then tortuously murder both Peggy and Nancy. These deletions were never restored.

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Both Peck and Mitchum have cameos in Scorsese's remake, reversing their roles – Peck aiding De Niro and Mitchum aiding Nolte.

Some overlooked classics include: *Yellow Sky* (1948), *To Have and Have Not* (1944), *The Big Country* (1958), *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *Mirage* (1965) and *The Boys from Brazil* (1978).



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Final years...

Peck's hobbies included gardening, reading and listening to music. His tastes included: classical, opera and jazz. Throughout his life and latter years he and his wife often hosted dinners in support of the arts and humanitarian or social justice causes.

His final screen appearance was in the 1998 *Moby Dick* mini series, playing Father Maple... somewhat of a bookend to his career – as cameo in the film he helped define the famous novel for the big screen setting up the Melville Productions the year the original film came out. The company – as you may have seen from the credits on some of the films presented – not only released *Cape Fear* but also *The Big Country* and *Pork Chop Hill*.

“Tough times don't last, tough people do, remember?”

On June 12, 2003, Gregory Peck died in his sleep from bronchopneumonia at the age of 87 at his home in Los Angeles with his wife, Veronique, by his side.