

The Rider (2018)

“Ride it like it’s gonna be the last horse you ever get on”

Major Credits

Director: Chloé Zhao

Screenplay: Chloé Zhao

Cinematography: Joshua James Richards

Editor: Alex O’Flinn

Principal Cast: Brady Jandreau (Brady Blackburn), Tim Jandreau (Wayne Jandreau), Lilly Jandreau (Lilly Jandreau), Lane Scott (Lane Scott)

Production Background

Chloé Zhao (b. Zhao Ting) was born and raised in Beijing before graduating from Mount Holyoke and NYU film school, where she met the cinematographer, Joshua James Richards. Her first feature, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015), was shot on location at the Pine Ridge Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota. There she met Brady Jandreau, who taught her how to ride a horse. She was immediately struck by his photogenic quality and personal charisma, and when he suffered his accident, she decided to film his story, including the other members of his family and the rodeo wranglers. Zhao has plans to complete a trilogy about the Pine Ridge community.

The actors are all playing fictional versions of themselves, giving the film a remarkable authenticity. Zhao and her cinematographer (a fellow NYU film school graduate as well as her partner in real life) have acknowledged the influence of Terrence Malick, most evident in the long lens landscapes in the Badlands shot during the magic hour. Zhao also credits *The Wrestler* (d. Darren Aronofsky, starring Mickey Rourke) as inspiration.

Cinematic Qualities

1. Long takes: The extended shots of Brady training wild horses in real time contribute authenticity, validating his particular genius for the vocation. Note how the consistent height of the sun while he tames Bill’s horse confirms the effectiveness of his work, unmanipulated by the director’s intervention through editing.
2. Montage: By contrast with the long take, montage normally conveys the compression of time and space rather than its unity, yet Zhao’s frequent use of the technique (with the aid of editor Alex O’Flinn) serves a documentary purpose, bringing together, for example, the various elements of the rodeo community.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the film both respect the myths of the Western and deconstruct them?
2. The mythic American cowboy is normally a loner, an outsider. Here he has a family. What roles do Brady’s father and his sister play in his life? What do we learn about his mother? How does the presence—and absence—of these family members affect his lifestyle and critical decisions?
3. In philosophical terms, *The Rider* pits *stoicism* (“Cowboy up,” “Rub some dirt on it”) against *pragmatism* (“No more riding, and no more rodeo”), culminating in the film’s emotional climax. Brady makes his choice, but how does the filmmaker allow both positions to resonate—cinematically—at the end?
4. In a film replete with sorrow and loss, how does Zhao resist sentimentality, thereby “keeping it real”?
5. Coincidentally, *The Rider* appeared almost simultaneously with Gabriel Mascaro’s *Neon Bull*, which recounts the culture of the *vaquejada*, the rodeo in northeast Brazil. Compare and contrast the two films.
6. Alongside its anthropological specificity (the cowboys pray for Lane in their native language), *The Rider* altranscends the usual confines of documentary by expressing universal ideas (as when Brady rides silhouetted against the darkening sky). How does Brady’s story speak to the American experience—and even the human experience?