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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The principal purpose of p.o.v. is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Studies at the University of Aarhus. We will also invite contributions from colleagues in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.

All March issues of p.o.v. are devoted to the short film (with only one exception, in March 2007). And as of the present issue, p.o.v. is peer-reviewed.

p.o.v.

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The Mercy Seat as Inescapable Heat – *The Proposition* and Ideas of Justice in the Australian Outback

Henrik Bødker

It began when they come took me from my home
And put me in Dead Row,
Of which I am nearly wholly innocent, you know.
And I'll say it again
I ... am ... not ... afraid ... to ... die.

...

In Heaven His throne is made of gold
The ark of his Testament is stowed
A throne from which I'm told
All history does unfold.
Down here it's made of wood and wire
And my body is on fire
And God is never far away.

...

And the mercy seat is waiting
And I think my head is burning
And in a way I'm yearning
To be done with all this measuring of truth.
An eye for an eye
And a truth for a truth
And anyway I told the truth
But I'm afraid I told a lie.

1st, middle and last verse of
Nick Cave's "The Mercy Seat," *Tender Prey*, 1988

The protagonist of *The Mercy Seat* embodies the struggle that is at the centre of Nick Cave's song-writing and musical universe, namely a constant warring with the darker sides of being human, and subsequent issues of guilt, truth, justice and redemption.¹ But although "God is never far away," this is a moral battle, or predicament, which the individual must fight alone and from which death is an alluring release – "[a]nd in a way I'm yearning/to be done with all this measuring of truth." Nick Cave's universe is, on the other hand, also full of intensity, humor, beauty and love, and it is this mixture of the fatal and the beautiful, or perhaps, the fatality beautiful, that has

¹ Given such a preoccupation, as well as a liking of American "roots"-music, it is no coincidence that Nick Cave and Johnny Cash felt connected somehow. Cash did a cover version of "The Mercy Seat" in 2000 (on *American III: Solitary Man*) and Cave appeared on *American IV: The Man comes Around* (2002).

secured Nick Cave and his band The Bad Seeds a steady following. And it is also this mix, as well as its ensuing moral issues, that Cave brought with him to “his original take on the western genre set in the sweaty, dusty Outback of Queensland, Australia in the 1880’s,”² namely *The Proposition* (2005) for which Cave wrote the screenplay and the music (together with Warren Ellis).³

That Cave should turn towards the Western genre seems in retrospect an obvious move. Cave grew up in Wangaratta, less than fifteen miles from Glenrowan, which, according to biographer Ian Johnston, “is shrouded in the legends surrounding the final stand of one of Australia’s most enduring folk heroes, ‘the last bushranger,’ Ned Kelly,” of whom the young Nick Cave was very much enamoured.”⁴ Ned Kelly has obviously also made it to the movies and in a 1970-release, the hero is in fact played by Mick Jagger. One could indeed make a number of interesting parallels between the mythologies of the West and those of rock music. Cave’s fundamental connection to the western genre comes, however, not merely from his being related to a specific genre of popular music but rather through the issues dominating his universe. Seen from this perspective the western seeks out more or less metaphorical times and locations in order to treat issues of individual responsibility, community and justice. By peeling away, or reducing, the material and societal layers of (Western) civilization, we can more openly be confronted with that which lies beyond, and/or deep within, ourselves and our value systems.

A focus on frontier justice is in a sense an economical way to deal with what it means to be human in a complex world (although all Westerns cannot be said to have fulfilled this potential). Part of this

² Review by Avril Carruthers in *Australias Online Movie Magazine* (<http://www.infilm.com.au/reviews/theproposition.htm>).

³ The film is directed by John Hillcoat and the cinematography is by Benoît Delhomme.

economy is, as already hinted at, connected to images, and although the Western is not dependent on a specific location it is highly dependent on specific types of landscape through which moral and societal issues can be given a tinge of the primordial. What Jean Baudrillard writes in a rather grand interpretation of America could, if not applied to the Western genre as such then at least to *The Proposition*: "Culture, politics – and sexuality too – are seen exclusively in terms of the desert, which here assumes the status of the primal scene."⁵ Contrary to other Westerns in which land is something fought *over* the natural environment in *The Proposition* is something fought *with*, a place where (Western) people in a sense are not meant to be, but which they – through a mix of fate, attraction and human nature – cannot escape.

The Mercy Seat, the golden throne that is supposed to cover the Arc containing the Ten Commandments, and on/in which "God is never far away," is in *The Proposition* not "made of wood and wire" but simply consists of the heat, light, dust and flies making up the Australian outback. Thus, while the protagonist of the song is left to "measure the truth" in the electric chair, the main character of the film is caught in an inescapable moral ambiguity in the sweltering desert. Out here, one is left alone with both ambiguity and maker; this is, in other words, a great visual representation of the confrontation with the strong light or gaze of the "primal scene," the inhospitable place that is the earth and human life also, and which can only be endured but never survived.

What may seem like a moral ambiguity is, however, rather a piece of complex frontier justice, namely the proposition given to the main character Charlie (Guy Pearce), one of three Irish outlaw

⁴ Ian Anderson, *bad seed — the biography of Nick Cave* (London: Abacus, 1995), p. 25.

brothers, and around which the film revolves. Sought for the slaying of a settler family, a crime they have or have not committed, Charlie, his younger brother Mikey (Richard Wilson) as well as some other outlaws are – in one of the opening scenes – holed up in a shack with some Asian prostitutes while engaged in a shoot-out with the police; and beams of light produced by the bullet-holes forebode justice in a different way than simply death.



Charlie and Mikey are caught by the police. They no longer ride with their older brother Arthur (Danny Huston), apparently the most ruthless of the three, and it is him that the police captain is really after. Captain Stanley, who is in charge of the operation, consequently “enforces” a proposition upon Charlie: the only way that he can prevent the hanging on Christmas Day of Mikey is to find Arthur and kill him.



⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London/New York: Verso, 1994 [1988]), p. 28.

No matter what, Charlie, sitting to the left in the frame above, is forced to inflict death on his own. This narrative premise is thus rather different from that of many Westerns where the order of a frontier community is to be restored through violent confrontations with unwanted evil elements.⁶ And it is not a regenerative violence either, as Richard Slotkin has emphasized with regard to representations of violence on the American frontier, and which David M. Wrobel characterizes thus:

Slotkin's analysis revolves around the "regeneration through violence" theme: the civilized must themselves engage in acts of outright barbarism to defeat savage foes, and in doing so are spiritually regenerated.⁷

The slaying of a settler family is, apart from being a barbaric crime, an act slowing down the advance of Western civilization, an act so often in (early) American Westerns, attributed to indigenous people. In *The Proposition* such a crime – involving rape – is attributed to the Irish Burns gang. An Irishman is, however – according to one of the characters in the film, a bounty hunter brilliantly played by John Hurt – “nothing but a nigger turned inside out.”

On both a real and metaphorical level this is Western civilization fighting with itself; and the unwanted element that Charlie is left to purge is of his own blood, and by implication part of his psyche. Seen in this light, regeneration is not possible. What we are confronted with in *The Proposition* is rather a line of people, most of whom are suffering in different ways (apart, perhaps, from Arthur – to whom I will return): the police captain Stanley is suffering from recurrent headaches and/or some unnamed occurrence in the past, as well as the

⁶ To purge both means to get rid of unwanted people and to get rid of evil.

⁷ David M. Wrobel in a review of the last of Slotkin's frontier mythology in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3 (Jun., 1994), p. 989. The idea of regenerative violence was put forth by Slotkin in *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (New York: Atheneum, 1973).

problems stemming from a deep urge to “civilize this land;” his wife (played by Emily Watson) is suffering from her displacement from England; Mikey is suffering imprisonment and fear; and finally, Charlie is caught in a painful stretch between guilt, family love and justice. And Stanley’s proposition is in itself the product of similar conundrums about justice: I will, Stanley says to Charlie in one of the opening scenes, “give you the chance to expunge the guilt beneath which you so clearly labour” while, as he says later to his wife, to impose his “idea of justice... for the town, for the country, for you, for you.” The proposition Charlie is left with is indeed a fatal inescapability of choice, a sentence of purgatory, which no acts of violence can purge – only sustain; and it is with this predicament that we follow Charlie into the outback.

Obviously, Charlie cannot escape his situation and/or himself. By the end of the movie Mickey is dead from the flogging he received in prison (in order to satisfy the community’s sense of justice) and Charlie shoots his brother Arthur as he and another gang member are engaged in a violent and sadistic punishment of Stanley and his wife (who is being raped as her severely mutilated husband is forced to watch). The last shot, however, shows us Charlie and Arthur – shot in the gut and gasping for air – sitting together against a setting sun in a landscape that plays a significant role in the film.

The landscapes of *The Proposition* is, as hinted at already, very different from the quintessential monumental backdrop often associated with the American Western where church-like rock formations reach majestically into the sky (as if to underscore the heroic and pre-ordained nature, or manifest destiny, of the venture into the wilderness). The land of *The Proposition* is on more than one occasion called “Godforsaken,” a ‘situation’ explained by the bounty hunter when asked by Charlie whether he prays: “I used to be a believer,” he says,

“but in this beleaguered land, the God just ... evaporated in me.” And there is indeed plenty of heat in *The Proposition* for evaporations of our Holy Spirits. The Australian desert is here thus not only landscape but Nature, our nature, in the sense of continuous decay, struggle and survival. “Australia – what fresh Hell is this?” exclaims Stanley when looking out the window at the shimmering silhouettes of his men digging; and the outback is somehow a perfect place for showing how we continuously seek to demarcate this (inner) “Hell” from our better selves. Houses are shown as insignificant bumps only occupying small parcels on the surface of something rather inhospitable. The most pointed example is here the police constable’s small house surrounded by a patchy rose garden and a fence beyond which the land is untouched and desert-like.



The only ones at ease in the landscape are the aboriginals and the Burns gang, who occupy a gorge in the “Badlands” (where not even the “blacks” will go). Apart from the young and imbecile gang member Samuel (played by Tom Budge), Arthur is the only character taking pleasure in violence and apparently feeling no guilt. According to Stanley Arthur is a “monster,” an “abomination” somehow connected to this “fresh Hell,” a perception visibly underlined by Arthur’s dark frame against the sky in our first sight of him.



Conventional justice will not do here. Apparently Stanley knows where Arthur is, and he is certain that the bounty hunter will get him eventually. That is, however, not enough. "I have other plans," says Stanley, and continues: "I aim to bring him down. I aim to show that he is a man like any other. I aim to hurt him." And the way to do just that, to show "he is a man like any other," is to make him suffer through love and family ties. Being shot by his brother will touch him.

Quite a few scenes show Arthur watching the sunset, and his association with the barren but beautiful landscape poignantly exposes contradictory facets of human nature: "You never get your fill of nature," he says to Samuel when contemplating the stars, and continues, "to be surrounded by it is to be stilled. It salves the heart. Every man can be made quiet and complete. Even the lowliest misanthrope or the most wretched of sinners." Is "that what we are, misanthropes," asks Samuel. "Good Lord no," Arthur replies, "we're family." All of us are together, and none of us can be sure to escape our evil selves. This comes out in a final beautiful symbolic sweep, which is not subtle but effective. When Arthur, after having been shot by Charlie, stumbles out of Stanley's house and staggers through the rose garden he crashes through the fence, leaving a bloody trail. As we had known all along, that fence is frail, and will be broken from time to time. This fence is,

however, not simply a question of civilization, or of evolution, but rather of a line with which one constantly has to struggle. It is, as Cave's fellow traveller Johnny Cash sings, a matter of dealing with "The beast in me/[which] Is caged by frail and fragile bars/Restless by day/And by night rants and rages at the stars/God help the beast in me."⁸ When Mikey is taken into the small town of Bayon after being taken by the police, we follow the drive into town from within the horse-drawn cage.



We are, Cave seems to say, sentenced to being (human). The ability to feel guilt, and thus to seek justice – as well as to sin – is something we must endure. This is, however, not only a bleak sentence; it also holds beauty and love – precisely as Cave's lyrics and music. A blog-entry put this rather well: "If you know his brilliant Murder Ballads album, you'll have a good idea of what this film feels like... Highly recommended if you're in the mood for something at once poetic and brutal."⁹ This mood is what we are left in outside the broken fence where Charlie sits next to his dying brother. As this shows, there is plenty of story-telling potential in the genre aiming to catch the experiences out there where the sun is setting.

⁸ The song appears on *American IV: The Man comes Around* (2002).

⁹ http://wemadethis.typepad.com/we_made_this/film/index.html



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The Shape of a Western

– Visual Design in *Winchester '73* and *The Man from Laramie*

Jakob Isak Nielsen

This essay addresses an overarching question: How did the transition from Academy ratio (1.37: 1) to CinemaScope (2.66, 2.55 and 2.35: 1) affect the compositional principles of the Hollywood Western?¹ Space prohibits me from answering this question in relation to the entire genre so I will limit myself to the Westerns of Anthony Mann and single out two of these – *Winchester '73* and *The Man from Laramie* – in order to explain how Mann and his crew use the possibilities facilitated by the two formats for characterization, articulating character relationships and for incorporating Western iconography into the films' visual design.

Mann was one of the most prominent directors of Westerns during the transition from Academy ratio to various forms of wide-screen presentation and directed a total of ten Westerns during the 1950s.² Three of these were in CinemaScope (*The Man from Laramie*, *The Last Frontier* & *Man of the West*), two were in widescreen formats

¹ What I will have to say about CinemaScope will be more or less valid for other widescreen formats. The points made will mostly have to do with the dimensions of the frame – i.e. frame ratio – and less with other technical differences, e.g. whether it is an anamorphic process or not.

² The films are *Winchester '73* (1950), *The Furies* (1950), *Devil's Doorway* (1950), *Bend of the River* (1952), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *The Far Country* (1954), *The Man from Laramie* (1955), *The Last Frontier* (1955), *The Tin Star* (1957) and *Man of the West* (1958). Mann's final Western was *Cimarron* (1960). These are the films referred to as Westerns by Jim Kitses in *Horizons West* (London: Thames & Hudson/BFI, 1969), p. 30. All of these films are also registered as Westerns at imdb.com although other genres are sometimes included. I have been able to see all of these except for *The Furies* and *Devil's Doorway*.

1.75-1.85: 1 (*The Far Country & The Tin Star*)³ and the rest were in Academy ratio. *Winchester '73* was Mann's second Western after *Devil's Doorway* but the first to be released (consequently his first in Academy ratio) and *The Man from Laramie* (1955) was Mann's first Western in CinemaScope. James Stewart is the star of both these films as he was of three other Westerns directed by Mann but *Winchester '73* and *The Man from Laramie* also share a number of traits at the level of narrative organization. Jim Kitses argues that at the formal level these are the only Westerns directed by Mann to have revenge at the *centre* of their narrative design (p. 33).⁴ In both films Stewart's character hunts a man for revenge with a persistence that borders on obsession.

Another salient common denominator is the narrative significance of rifles in the two films. *Winchester '73* takes its title from the Winchester Rifle Model 1873 or "the gun that won the West" as the opening title informs us. *The Man from Laramie* is structured around Will Lockhart's (James Stewart) search for the man who sold repeating rifles to the Indians, which they in turn used to massacre his young brother on a routine cavalry patrol.⁵ I do not mean to say that the functions of revenge and rifles are identical in the two films. In fact I will come to argue that the Academy and Scope formats facilitate different staging strategies which *substantiate* the different narrative functions of rifles in the respective films as well as the different relationships between Stewart's character and the man he is hunting.

³ *The Far Country* was in 1.75: 1 and *The Tin Star* in VistaVision (1.85: 1). Mann's final Western *Cimarron* (1960) was in Panavision Anamorphic (2.35: 1) – the system which won out against CinemaScope.

⁴ Kitses grants that revenge also "affects the denouement of three others as well, *Bend of the River*, *The Far Country* and *Man of the West*" (p. 33).

⁵ Repeating rifles also play a role in *Winchester '73* during an Indian attack with Lin (Stewart) devising the defense strategy based on his knowledge of the recent battle at Little Big Horn where Custer's troops were equipped with single-shot Springfield carbines whereas some of the Indians had repeating rifles.

High and Wide

Considering what Jean-Pierre Coursodon refers to as Anthony Mann's "predilection [...] for stories involving prolonged journeying"⁶ one would expect to see in his CinemaScope Westerns the horizontal landscape vistas highlighted by Arthur Edeson who shot one of the first widescreen Westerns: the 70mm version of *The Big Trail* (Raoul Walsh, 1930).⁷ A number of scenes in *The Man from Laramie* are in fact played out in flat and horizontal landscapes: the opening shot (Fig. 1), Lockhart's first encounter with the young and reckless Dave Waggoman (Alex Nicol) at the salt lagoons, Lockhart's meeting up with Charlie (Wallace Ford) in the desert, and Lockhart's high speed pursuit of Vic (Arthur Kennedy) towards the end of the film (Fig. 2). Academy ratio on the other hand yields more opportunities for vertical staging.⁸ E.g., in the pursuit scenes in *Winchester '73* there is a stronger use of steep diagonals (Fig. 3-6).



Fig. 1. The horizontal landscape, lateral grouping of objects and lateral movement contrast with the opening shot of *Winchester '73* (see fig. 13).



Fig. 2. Pursuit at dusk. Lockhart's pursuit of Vic emphasizes movement across flat landscapes.

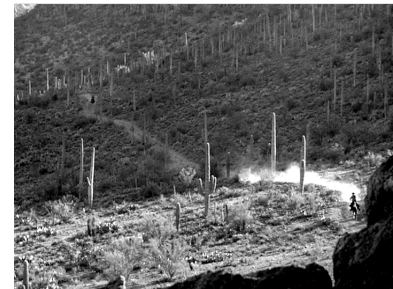
⁶ Jean-Pierre Coursodon, "Anthony Mann," in *American Directors vol. 1* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1983), p. 241.

⁷ Edeson describes the shoot in "Wide Film Cinematography." *American Cinematographer*, vol. 11, no. 9 (September 1930), pp. 8-9, 21. Two photographs accompany Edeson's article and illustrate shots that "call for 70mm" (p. 8). Both are long shots – one of a stampeding herd and another – not unlike the opening shot of *The Man from Laramie* – of a wagon trail.

⁸ Here one can also compare to the way the Rocky Mountains match the Academy ratio of *The Naked Spur*.



Fig. 3-6. Pursuit at dusk. The Academy ratio favors dynamic staging along steep diagonal lines. As the Indians chase Lin and High-Spade into the cavalry camp, Mann and his cinematographer William Daniels make use of the vertical dimensions of the image. They use the *height* of the image and let both groups ride up and down a hill. In Fig. 6 the diagonal plane of the format is again put to dynamic use but this time extended in depth: In the upper left corner one can glimpse Lin in the distance pursuing Dutch Henry whom we see in the lower right corner of the frame.



The differences of lateral staging in Scope and vertical staging in Academy are best illustrated by those key scenes in Mann's films where Stewart's character advances towards the man he has been hunting for the final showdown – facing a nemesis placed at a higher altitude from which he must take him down.

Mann's countless vertical set-ups during the final showdown in *Winchester '73* are not simply a way of accommodating the action to a taken-for-granted frame ratio. The vertical set-ups substantiate the psychological and physical relationship of two brothers – the younger of these about to take down his elder brother. Dutch Henry/Matthew (Stephen McNally) being perched on top of bluffs carries multiple meanings. It does of course substantiate that he is a cunning character – it's the cowardly position, the position of an ambush, the position where a criminal will seek refuge from the law or – as in this case – a big brother can gain an unfair advantage over his younger brother. In this sense it can be seen as a partial re-staging of child play just as Lin earlier had to relive the painful experience of being beaten by Dutch Henry (his big brother).



Fig. 7-9. Mann and Daniels make good use of the vertical prominence of the Academy frame. Not only are Lin and Matthew at the very top and bottom of the frame, they are virtually touching the frame lines. Since TV presentation slightly crops images these shots would hardly have occurred after TV became an important ancillary market for feature films.

As in *Winchester '73* (and *The Naked Spur*) James Stewart's character arrives at the final showdown in *The Man from Laramie* "below another man's gun." But as opposed to *Winchester '73*, which uses the vertical dimensions of the frame extensively and stacks the characters on top of one another (Fig. 7-9), Mann foregoes an encounter along vertical lines and instead lets Lockhart sneak into frame laterally by means of his own movement as well as that of the camera (Fig. 10-11).



Fig. 10-11. Lockhart steps closer to Vic as the camera tracks right.

The lateral staging used to bring Lockhart and Vic into the same frame for the final showdown in *The Man from Laramie* is revealing of Lockhart's relationship with Vic. In many ways these two characters resemble one another and are on an equal plane.⁹ As in *Winchester '73* the two nemeses had a fight earlier in the film but in this case the fight

⁹ There is a similar constellation of characters in Mann's *Bend of the River* (1952) where James Stewart and Arthur Kennedy play two characters with virtually identical backgrounds who become nemeses because they take a step onto the right and wrong side of the law.

ended in a draw. They are alike in other ways as well. They are in love with the same woman, Barbara Waggoman (Cathy O'Donnell). Lockhart even comes to take a job as foreman at The Half Moon ranch that is parallel to Vic's job as foreman on the Barb ranch. Neither is "an easy man" and their motives and moral integrity are not so far apart as they were in *Winchester '73* where Dutch Henry was guilty of shooting his father in the back.

As André Bazin writes about Vic in his review of the film: "It is not clear who the traitor is, nor even whether there is one at all."¹⁰ The calculated tyranny of his employee Alec Waggoman (Donald Crisp) to some extent excuses Vic's involvement in the business of selling guns to the Apache. As Bazin points out his involvement may look different in the eyes of Lockhart but to the viewer it is clear that Dave Waggonman is the more guilty of the two and that Vic "... did not will all the evil to which his first error condemned him" (op. cit.). Even the fact that Lockhart comes up from behind – as Howard Kemp (also Stewart) does in the opening shots of *The Naked Spur* – suggests that his motives may not be morally sound and that he would betray our sympathies by shooting Vic.

Hypersituated and Integrated Objects

In a seminal article published in 1963,¹¹ Charles Barr argues that Scope is not merely a format for epic spectacle but also facilitates subtle compositional effects. With the narrow image, especially when it was unaccompanied by sound, it was easier to make an impact by means of montage than it was within a single shot. With CinemaScope you

¹⁰ André Bazin. "Beauty of a Western," in Jim Hillier (ed.) *Cahiers du Cinéma vol. 1* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 166. Translated by Liz Heron. Originally published as "Beauté d'un western," in *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 55 (January 1956).

¹¹ Barr, Charles. "CinemaScope: Before and After," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4 (Summer 1963), pp. 4-24.

can orchestrate a complex image unfolding in time. Scope yields a greater range for “gradation of emphasis” (p. 18) within a single sustained shot. What about the depth of field classics of Welles and Wyler shot in Academy format?¹² Is Barr not merely replicating what André Bazin had to say about the sleeping pill-scene in *Citizen Kane* (1941) – the bringing together of multiple units of information within a single shot: the pills in the foreground, Susan asleep in the middle ground, Kane knocking on the door visible in the background? Not exactly. The difference according to Barr is that in Scope filmmakers can parcel out emphasis within shots in a way that does not look as unnaturally forced or crammed as it would in Academy: “...on the smaller screen it’s difficult to play off foreground and background within the frame: the detail tends to look too obviously planted” (p. 19). The empty glass and the bottle of pills in *Citizen Kane* are hyper-situated and look too obviously planted, Barr might say (Fig. 12).¹³

The dimensions of the frame provide different ways for incorporating the iconography of the Western into a film’s visual design. As opposed to the wide opening shot of *The Man from Laramie*, *Winchester ’73* opens with a unit shot: an insert of a rifle butt (Fig. 13). This shot would appear to substantiate Charles Barr’s claims about the Academy format being good for isolating and pre-packaging information to the spectator so that we are only given one motif per shot.

¹² In fact, the single unit/ single shot analogy is also a reductive view of Eisenstein’s compositional predilections. Already in the famous essay on the dialectics of montage from 1929, Eisenstein makes it clear that his notion of collision is not restricted to collision *between* shots but also *within* shots, e.g. contrasts of light and dark or graphically opposed shapes *within the same shot*. Although Barr does not directly acknowledge that Eisenstein’s *principle* of dialectical montage could include two units within one shot, he would no doubt find such formal contrasts too crude, contrived and schematic. Even in this case the image would be “predigested.”

¹³ This is problematic to Barr because he adheres to a type of realist expressivity that was most clearly articulated by V.F. Perkins in *Film as Film* (N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1972), pp. 69-70. I.e., a stylistic choice must be *credible* before serving a *significant* narrative function.



Fig. 12. The glass and the bottle of pills in *Citizen Kane*.



Fig. 13-14 (Shot 1a-1b). A combined tracking and panning shot changes the framing of the first shot from a close-up of the rifle butt to a shot of the whole rifle including a more prominent signposting of the day of the contest: July 4th 1876 – the centenary of Independence Day.

The subsequent shot, however, raises some interesting questions. In the first shot the rifle is the only point of interest. In the second shot the rifle is now the *reference point* for the conversations of the surrounding characters (Fig. 15-17). One might say that this second shot is *Winchester '73's* attempt at a complex image with multiple focal points. It is certainly revealing of the strengths and weaknesses of the Academy ratio in this regard. One sees the strength of Academy in the use of the vertical dimensions of the frame. Besides the rifle the frame now includes a sign which reiterates and reemphasizes the where, when and what of events to take place in the course of the day.¹⁴

But the first part of the shot (Fig. 15-16) also illustrates the very problems of grading emphasis within a single shot in Academy ratio. The Western is a genre – so Bazin reminds us elsewhere in his review of *The Man from Laramie* – that must not sing loud but sing true (p. 165) and such tight packing of several units of information into one shot looks too good to “sing true.” The shot does in fact – Barr was right – look unnaturally cluttered. Although aided by a camera movement it is mainly the *speaking voices* that provide the gradation of emphasis.

¹⁴ If one looks closely this information already appears in Fig. 13 inscribed on the rifle plaque.

They – rather than the compositional design – tell us where to focus our attention in the course of the shot.



Fig. 15-17 (Shot 2a-2c) A tilt brings another unit of information into shot: the three men at the back of the shot who are brought into the upper right corner of the frame. Then a rightward crane movement brings Lin and High-Spade into view.

When looking at various scenes throughout *Winchester '73* it is true that the rifle is occasionally isolated in an insert shot (Fig. 18) or overtly hypersituated in a multi-unit shot (Fig. 19) but there are two important things that we must keep in mind. First of all, the rifle has a *right* to be hypersituated in *Winchester '73* because it plays a more prominent role in the narrative (the film even bears its name) than repeating rifles do in *The Man from Laramie* – both as a structuring device and as the object of every male character's desire.¹⁵ Second, Barr largely forgets – or at least underestimates – the resources of depth staging that were particularly evident in 1910s European cinema, for instance pre-revolutionary Russian cinema and Danish cinema. If one looks at the first scene at Riker's Bar from where Fig. 18-19 stem, one finds that the filmmakers also use more subtle effects of staging such as Dutch Henry putting the Winchester down at the bar as he shares a glance with the Indian trader Lamont (John McIntire) (Fig. 20). Later in the scene Mann will return to the same set-up and use it as a springboard for a slight detour in the development of the scene: As Dutch

¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Coursodon even complains that Lin is “upstaged throughout the film by the prop and its successive ‘owners’” (p. 242) because the route of the rifle through several people's hands causes the film to contain several episodes without Lin: The rifle passes from Lin to Dutch Henry to the Indian trader Lamont (John McIntire) to an Indian chief (Rock Hudson) to Lola's cowardly

Henry and his men move over towards the guns that they wish to buy a subtle camera movement hides the rifle in off-screen space behind Lamont's shoulder (Fig. 21).

Throughout the scene Mann makes sure that we do not forget the significance of the rifle but he also makes sure that we sense that Lamont and Dutch Henry are fully aware of the real subtext of the situation – the ownership of the Winchester '73. However, Mann does not ram it down our throats. After the initial shot of Dutch putting down the rifle at the counter our attention is naturally drawn to the dialogue between Riker, Dutch Henry and Lamont about the guns – that they are missing and Lamont is selling. But Mann reminds us of the real subtext of the scene by letting the Winchester '73 pop up into the frame in the ensuing shot, a radiant gleam emanating from its barrel (Fig. 22). In fact, the same strategy can be witnessed in the second shot of the film (Fig. 15-16) and it is revived at the end of the film as the rifle rests in Lin's hands, its plaque radiantly gleaming to steal our attention (Fig. 23) before finally glances from Lin and High-Spade also come to rest on it.

Nevertheless, Barr was not altogether wrong about the deficiencies of the Academy format. Although the scene at Riker's is a veritable tour-de-force of staging it is nevertheless orchestrated in a series of relatively brief shots and not in complex long takes. Furthermore, Mann did not end the film on the shot of the subtly integrated object (Fig. 23) but concludes his film with a cut-in to an insert shot of the rifle butt – recalling the opening shot of the film.

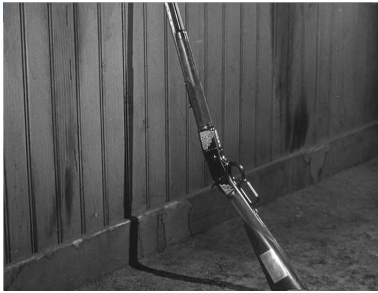


Fig. 18. While Dutch Henry and his men are busy inspecting Lamont's guns he steals a glance at the Winchester '73.



Fig. 19. The hypersituated object. Enhanced by glance.



Fig. 20. The three men enter Riker's and Dutch Henry rests the rifle up against the counter in the centre of the shot.



Fig. 21. As Dutch Henry moves over towards the guns that they wish to buy a camera movement comes to conceal the rifle in off-screen space behind Lamont's shoulder.



Fig. 22. The barrel of the Winchester gleams in the bottom left corner of the shot.



Fig. 23. The subtly integrated object. Later enhanced by Lin and High-Spade's glances at the rifle.

A brief scene from *The Man from Laramie* illustrates how a rifle significant to the plot can be subtly integrated into the visual design of a CinemaScope Western. The scene in question occurs approximately five minutes into the film as Lockhart enters the Waggoman Mercantile to inform them about the three wagonloads of supplies that he wants to deliver. At this point in the film Mann has been stingy with information about Lockhart's goals and intentions. We know that he is out for revenge but it has not yet been fully revealed to us what or who it is that he is looking for. As Lockhart enters the Mercantile he steps over to the counter (Fig. 24). Given our limited knowledge we can easily miss the object of his glance: a repeating rifle hanging on the wall behind the counter. The scale of the CinemaScope frame yields a greater range for gradation of emphasis. The rifle does not seem squeezed into place. There is plenty of room around it. It exists there

for us to search out. Its place in the composition is realistically motivated (credible) before it is significant to the narrative. It recalls Charles Barr's analysis of the bag of belongings that we continue to see flowing down the stream in Otto Preminger's *River of No Return* (1954): "[T]he spectator is 'free' to notice the bundle, and, when he does, free to interpret it as significant [...] The act of interpreting the visual field – and through that the action – is in itself valuable" (p. 11).¹⁶

As opposed to *Winchester '73* we do not take the rifle to be significant because it has been singled out for us. In our scene from *The Man from Laramie* we are free to make a positive act of interpreting the significance of the rifle. In fact the rifle also has a slightly different function from the bundle of belongings in Preminger's film because there we pick out the bundle flowing down the stream in the background of the shot "because it is meaningful" (op. cit.); in our scene we can pick out the rifle because it has the *potential* of being significant.

One of the reasons why it is easy to miss the object at first viewing is that Mann cuts off our attention to Lockhart's doings by letting a hand slip into the left foreground of the shot (Fig. 25). This is where Mann reveals himself as being a filmmaker who uses the Scope frame differently from, say, Otto Preminger. Mann subtly integrates significant objects into the film's visual design but he does not want to relinquish the close foreground for dramatic accentuation.¹⁷ Note, however, that when Mann uses the Scope frame to orchestrate action in several planes, the foreground motif is less imposing – its interven-

¹⁶ Barr's comment is an elaboration of V. F. Perkins' remarks on the shot in an article from *Movie* no. 2.

¹⁷ It is the hand of an Indian employee. Another token of the aesthetic potential of the Scope is demonstrated by the way in which this Indian gains in prominence in the frame in the course of the film. He appears in the background of shots until at the very end of the film he pops out of the background and into bright sunlight – bare-chested and in warrior paint – as he is revealed to be the leader of the group that is buying rifles from Dave and Vic.

tion more subtle – than the ‘aggressively’ hypersituated foreground objects in the Academy frame (see Fig. 12 & 19).



Fig. 24. Lockhart enters the Mercantile. A pan follows him over to the counter.



Fig. 25. A hand intrudes into the frame. Our first glimpse of the Indian store employee whose stature in the frame increases in the course of the film.

Conclusion

Looking at Anthony Mann's career one can trace an overall development – regardless of genre – towards working with ever more epic formats culminating with Super Technirama 70 (*El Cid*, 1961) and anamorphic Ultra Panavision 70 (*The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1964).¹⁸ Nevertheless, there is no need to assume that the shift in image ratio necessarily reflects directorial maturation. Among critics as well as theorists both formats have their advocates and opponents. Various formats facilitate certain staging strategies. Nevertheless, Scope versus Academy ratio is not merely a discussion of stylistic alternatives. The

¹⁸ The latter process entailed shooting on 65mm film which incorporated an anamorphic squeeze of app. 1.25: 1. When “un-squeezed” during projection this would – under proper circumstances – yield an aspect ratio of app. 2.76: 1.

staging strategies involved are underpinned by important theoretical suppositions.

The comparative analyses presented here suggest that some of the characteristics suggested by Barr about Academy and CinemaScope are certainly at play in Mann's Westerns but also that we should be careful not to view these as formulaic. We should acknowledge that filmmakers can transcend or at least bend the formal properties to the particular needs of their story. Mann certainly transcends the possibilities of visual design suggested by Barr about the Academy frame but he also shows himself capable of exploiting the visual staging possibilities facilitated by both Academy and CinemaScope – taking full advantage of the format that he was working within.

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The Western Experience

Reflections on the Phenomenology of the Western

Edvin Vestergaard Kau

*There's guns across the river aimin' at ya
Lawman on your trail, he'd like to catch ya
Bounty hunters, too, they'd like to get ya
Billy, they don't like you to be so free.
Bob Dylan. Billy 1*



Fig. 1. Two stars: The location and the main characters.
Frame from *The Big Country* (William Wyler, 1958).

Iconography and myth

A man rides down a hillside and out of the woods, a waterfall streaming from the cliff beside him. As he crosses the bottom of the silver screen from left to right, he turns his head and watches his group of men follow him. Next, we see them cross a river on their way to join the rest of the gang in a secret cavern. A Western has begun, and we, the viewers, will follow the hero's fate in the minefield between good men and bad guys, civilization and nature, the lovely lady and loneliness. Standard elements in a standard formula are in place, as many accounts tell us, in traditional genre descriptions. But is it really as simple as this tradition has it, and has the genre developed so unequivocally from almost naïve simplicity, toward growing

complexity? In the following discussion and my analysis of characteristic elements of western examples I shall argue that this kind of description of the development of the genre is too simple. Furthermore, what are the title and the year of release of the film I have used as starting point? I shall come back to that in a moment, as well as to the discussion of the set pieces of the genre, or the media produced image of "the Western landscape." But first, a few words on the Westerns and the West.

In a good Western, landscape and people belong together, precisely as we see them in the example mentioned above. Nature plays its own part, and the characters have literally become one with their surroundings. "Western" is an American concept, and the Western has been described as the most American of all film genres. The West, about which we are told in the Westerns, is the North American continent. Even as the frontier closed, around the end of the 19th Century, its mythological concept was developed and coined, especially by Frederick Jackson Turner, as the westward-moving border between wilderness and civilization. Along this line the American way of life, the national character and ideas about freedom etc. were born, as different groups of people moved across the continent.

This main idea has even been incorporated in the John Ford Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), in which the owner and editor of the local newspaper, Mr. Dutton Peabody, sketches out his version of the myth, trying to persuade the delegates to vote for Ransom Stoddard (played by James Stewart), as their Congress representative. Stoddard not only is a lawyer and a teacher, "a champion of law and order," he is also supposed to have shot the villain, Liberty Valance (even though this was done by another man). According to Peabody, the development went like this: Originally the land was a wilderness, with herds of buffalo, and wild Indians, and to this vast

land without law and order came the pioneers, the buffalo hunters, and the adventurers. Soon, the cattlemen also reached the wild open ranges, and took it as their domain, and, according to them, the law was that of the hired gun. So, Peabody's conclusion is that ordinary people, the hardworking citizens and builders of cities, need statehood in order for their rights to be protected; therefore the delegates must vote for Ransom Stoddard. This frontier theory gave a kind of idealized picture of the development of the American society and its values, its heroes, and its villains. In fiction, from dime novels to feature films and television series, media versions of the pattern were cultivated into the Western genre as we know it.

Early nuances

Many theorists have described and analyzed the Western, and attempted to outline variations and developments within the genre and its history of approximately one hundred years. If we simplify a little, some of the key words have been the same as those used to describe genre and genre development in general: from the simple to the more complex, the naïve to the self-conscious, from one-dimensional fantasies to more realistic stories. One writer in particular has criticized traditional conceptions of the Western genre and its history. Tag Gallagher appropriately entitled his critical, and seminal, article "Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the 'Evolution' of the Western" (Grant, pp. 202-16). One of his criticisms is that too many genre critics

equate experience of a movie with analytic apperception of its narrative. Everything that can be, is abstracted into literature. An "icon" is catalogued, and is immediately stripped of its iconicity and transformed into a verbal symbol. [...] Genre criticism seems almost endemically anti-phenomenological. [...] It cannot recognize that extraction of a "narrative" is distant indeed from the experience of cinema, that narrative analysis of cinema, when divorced from a phenomenological

approach, is virtually as irrelevant to cinematic criticism, as narrative summaries of operas are to music criticism. Literary critics exalt the "idea", but they regard its actualization as a mere illustration" (Gallagher, p. 213).

Gallagher, of course, regards all the genre theorists he criticizes as literary critics, or people with a background in literary departments, and he argues that we *should look more closely for the actual experience of the cinematic world of the Western*. I shall exemplify this by analyzing how the space of the western universe is staged in some examples; this means that I concentrate on *the visual style of the films*.

What Gallagher asks for is that theorists and analysts pay more attention to the movies' appearance, the aesthetic qualities that the viewers experience when confronted with a Western. The key text in the tradition of phenomenological approach to cinema is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "The Film and the New Psychology" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, pp. 48-59), in which he develops the idea that a film is presented or played out to the audience as a gesture full of meaning. This means that the intentionally articulated cinematic meaning has to be examined on the level of style. The film stages a special look on its world, and this "viewing view" has been pointed out and theorised in the footsteps of Merleau-Ponty most prominently by Vivian Sobchack (Sobchack 1990 and 1992). Additionally this opens the field of the mutual interdependency between intention and attention, because what is shown as articulated space and time is what is seen as meaningful patterns by the viewer. The active viewer's meeting with the cinematic picture is at the centre of interest. The phenomenological approach points to the importance of analyzing and theorizing the level of style as the shaping of meaning.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The scene described at the beginning of this article is from the opening sequence of the William S. Hart Western, *The Toll Gate* (see Fig. 2 and 3; director: Lambert Hillyer, 1920), his first production in the name of his own company, after years of collaboration with Thomas H. Ince, and his biggest economic success. Hart wrote the script together with Hillyer. He directed a total of more than 70 other films, and Hart most probably also co-directed this one. The romantic tale of his good bad-man's (Black Deering) reformation, hopeless meeting with a good woman, killing of the bad guy, and return to the wilderness, is impressively, and perhaps surprisingly, realized without overt melodrama. As the boss of the gang of robbers, Black has an almost everyday, run-of-the-mill way of leading his men. Hart displays a rather downplayed acting style, and the use of locations is very functional, even economical. What we experience in Hart is not nearly the amount of sentimentality that some writers have accused him of practicing. Of course, it is stylized, but every Western is. The visual staging is the meaning, the film's gesture, to be received and interpreted by the viewer.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

While being, on the one hand, chased by two posses – the sheriff's and that of the villain and bounty hunter who has betrayed him – and, in fact, on the other hand chasing the latter, Black is shown "at home" in nature (Fig. 4). Yet, in the shadow of the ominous "hanging tree," present in so many Westerns, he has a nasty fall with his horse (Fig. 5). The landscape plays the part of both the good and the bad.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Toward the end, our hero must do the right thing: Black decides to leave, instead of staying with the good (and very beautiful) woman and her son (Fig. 6). Characters, location, and visualization tell the story, while he departs and disappears on the mountain ridge (Fig.7).

According to Gallagher, the Western was not only already well established as a genre before the First World War, but it was also sub-

divided into a fine-grained set of variations, made possible and developed within a huge production. He writes:

By 1909, and during the next six years, there were probably more westerns released each month than during the entire decade of the 1930s. Hyperconsciousness of the genre resulted. Almost all the observations of [the writers Gallagher criticizes] were commonplace in pre-World War I writings on the western. More subtly, westerns were then divided into quite distinct subgenres, each of which was known to possess its own specific conventions – among them, frontier dramas, Indian dramas, Civil War dramas, western comedies (Gallagher, p. 205).

William S. Hart's production, as actor, director, producer, and writer, is an example of how he continued this very conscious approach. He knew the land and he knew about film; in his movies, he stylized his visual story-telling into romantic, but also down-to-earth and even laconic stories, the kind that bring the Western experience to the audience.

Throughout the history of the Western, the backbone of the genre has been this meeting: the land and the people in it, their surroundings, and their fate. This, I believe, is what gives the Western its tremendous visual power; gives the directors and their cinematographers the chance to excel in compositions of frames, which, as sensual experiences, tell the better part of the Western stories. Precisely because the drama, action, and themes of the Western are articulated and staged in space, film is especially well suited to the production and development of the western genre. Cinema becomes the privileged scene for the phenomenological encounter between the stylized world of the Western movie and the audience, as I have mentioned it above. The Western movie is the visualization of the land and the people in it. The film medium brings it to life as a pictorial show and involves the seeing audience. Through the history of the genre different directors have cultivated different camera gazes on the universe of

the Western. Below I will point to examples of other directors' interpretations of the genre material and its aesthetic potential, specifically two films by William Wyler and Sam Peckinpah.

A big country

Above this article is a frame from William Wyler's *The Big Country*, showing the hero (played by Gregory Peck) watching a vengeful group, led by his father-in-law-to-be, leaving the ranch in order to come down on his neighbour and rival. Again, we see the conflicts and personal attitudes literally sculpted in the director's visualizations. Some of the sequences in this film belong to the most beautiful and effective in the history of the genre.

In some instances this film uses rather slow dissolves to combine some of the points to which I have drawn attention. The drama articulated through the use of elements such as landscape, other surroundings, characters and their physical positioning, special trees or cliffs, and so on – all this appears in new multilayered combinations within the time span of the dissolve. For instance, the main characters in the horse carriage on the free (and sometimes threatening) open range are brought together with a frame showing intimacy, see fig 8. Furthermore, Wyler combines this with yet another incarnation of the fateful “hanging tree,” here in anticipation of their subsequent harassment by the bullies from the neighbouring ranch.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9. Wyler's articulation of a situation, where the female main character is in a gloomy state of mind.

"Billy, they don't like you to be so free"

Following Gallagher's contention, I find that it is fair to say that the experience of the Western picture of the world has more nuances and grey tones than often acknowledged. From silent films like Hart's, through every decade, the Western has shown a wide range of variations, from comedies to solemn works, from standard entertainment to self-reflective innovation. One of the connections between Hart's good bad-man of the old times, and later principal characters is that they too live, or have lived, on both sides of the law. The idea of freedom and the ideal of being able to do the right thing, even if your actions are

not always right according to society, are part of the romantic world of the Western.

However, other interpretations of the Western universe put it in a different light, and cause the ideals to freeze into an almost defeatist, apocalyptic tableau. Of course, this is especially evident in later Western movies, such as *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968) and *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992), but the dark side of Western life appears in many earlier Westerns too. We may think of elements in works by Budd Boeticher, Anthony Mann or John Ford, and individual examples such as *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, 1943), *High Noon* (Fred Zinneman, 1952), *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), *Cheyenne Autumn* (John Ford, 1964), and *Will Penny* (Tom Gries, 1967). The latter presents a tough and sensuous description of the cowboy's job and hard work, and neither the hero nor his rancher boss is young any more. Will is illiterate. Near-sightedness is seen more often, and the boss has to use spectacles when doing his paper work. Old eyes and an old body likewise are part of the Eastwood former gun-slinger in *Unforgiven*, and he even has a kind of family relationship to Charlton Heston's Will Penny, alluded to through his name: William Munny.

Sam Peckinpah is a director who takes this frozen picture of the romantic Western to an extreme, and the example I use is from *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), namely the scene which shows Billy against the setting sun, riding past a pond or a shallow river (Fig. 10 and 11). Peckinpah's interpretation of the mythology and ideas of the Western genre, complete with complexities and potential contradictions, is often built into visual compositions, which take the shape of beautiful, even stylish, tableaux. But they also contain a certain duality. The beauty demonstrates a positive valuation of *something* in the situations, but the very same gesture – that which makes the

pictures supremely beautiful – creates a conscious distance to them. They precisely display the ideals which in Peckinpah's films often are too good to be true. This duality of presentation and refutation of the ideals generates the unrest and embedded threads in these shots.



Fig. 10-11. Billy the Kid mirrored as the dying myth of freedom in Sam Peckinpah's mise-en-scène of self-destructing ideals in the Western tragedy.

As we see, another member of the “hanging-tree”-family plays a part in this shot. The sinister atmosphere comes from the black, contrasting shadows, especially the silhouettes of Billy and the tree. (Pat Garrett has, at this stage, been hired by the cattle barons to hunt down and kill his old friend, Billy!). Billy moves along a curve from left to right, through the frame, and is shown in silhouette like the tree, before he becomes one with the black horizon on the right. Simultaneously his

mirror image appears in the water. The reflection may be viewed as the myth-image of Billy, but at the same time represents the deadly flipside of the myth that can be said to be the “closing statement” of the film, and which is foreshadowed in the very composition and its chromatics. The shot is composed in the picture surface as well as in depth: Billy moves across-and-into-it, and becomes part of this classic Western-icon. It is also invested with consciously articulated meaning as a “Western-icon”: a beautiful sunset with silhouettes against the sky, etc. The conflict between ideal life and prosaic death is embodied in the picture we meet on the silver screen. Like other Peckinpah films (and a number of other Westerns), this one focuses much of its reflection on death, the death of both people and of ideals. However, as his film heroizes both the people and the background of their death-wish and resignation, Peckinpah ends up with this heroic death under protest.

Film: Born to be Western

The Western is a visualization of variations of a vision, including the myth of freedom. That is, the idea of the open range, where heroes and heroines, together with ordinary people, set off, settle down, start a family and build a society. But it is also a type of cinematically articulated reflection on the confrontations inherent to this process, as well as the moral conflicts and nuances in the portrayal of the main characters. The basic material may be the same, and it may even be difficult to pinpoint a single linear development within the genre. But as I think my reflections and ideas of analysis show, the phenomenological approach gives a solid basis for a kind of close analysis that is indispensable as a basis of theoretical reflection. As suggested by the examples I have chosen, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of variations in the attention that filmmakers pay to different aspects in indi-

vidual films over time. Perhaps the universe of the Western is best described as a cinematic tableau (and a moral landscape), in which the filmmakers throw ever-changing spotlights on different elements and colours in their fictional worlds of ideas. It should be no surprise, then, that the most excellent realizations of the interplay between Man and Land of the West were created in the cinema, through the visual art form that actually places this meeting before our eyes, as the Western experience.

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Jack Elam and the Fly in *Once Upon a Time in the West*



... a stakeout at a deserted station, Jack Elam and a fly – the most audacious credit sequence in film history.

Review in *Time Out*

Introduction

One of the scenes most often singled out for special mention even in the briefest discussions of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, involves a fly and the legendary character actor Jack Elam, the wall-eyed heavy who was aptly described as:

grizzled and stringy-haired and one of his eyes always seemed to be trying to roll around so it could look behind his head. He was the sort of shifty character who might shoot the family dog or dunk a bawling baby in hot water just for kicks.¹

In this film his character's name is "Snakey," which suitably evokes the reptilian quality of the part.

The extraordinary set-piece with the fly begins about six minutes into the opening credit sequence after the three gunmen, played by Elam, Woody Strode and Al Mulock, have taken over an isolated railroad station and are waiting for a train to arrive.

¹ Ron Miller, "Born to be booed, yet three earned Oscars." *The Columnists*, 14 Aug 2006. <http://www.thecolumnists.com/miller/miller542.html> A childhood fight left Elam blind in his left eye.

Elam is seated in a rocking chair on the porch of the station. His face looks chronically unwashed and is covered with beard stubble. Having just been annoyed by the ticker-tape noise of a nearby telegraph, he has reached over and ripped the wires out of the machine to silence it for good, and has now pulled his hat down over his eyes, trying to take a nap. Standing under a water tower and with his hat removed in order to fan himself with it, Woody Strode ("Stony") feels drops of water landing on his head, each drop making a loud splash as it hits his pate. He replaces the hat on his head, so that the drops that continue to fall now land just as audibly on his hat. And not far away, under the open sky, Al Mulock ("Knuckles") passes the time by cracking his knuckles as he waits for the train.

It is at this point that a fly lands on Elam's neck and Elam opens his eyes and tries unsuccessfully to blow the fly away, by directing his breath in its direction. After it has resettled near his lip, he finally shoos it off his face with a wave of his hand. He then turns to see where it has landed – on an adjacent wooden surface. With pistol now in hand, Elam slyly waits a moment, then rapidly turns and slamming the muzzle up against the wooden surface, captures the fly in the barrel of his gun. With an index finger blocking the muzzle so that the fly can't escape, Elam is visibly pleased with his exploit and holds the gun up to his ear, listening to the fly's desperate buzzing. He then looks down at the barrel of the gun with his one good eye, opening it exceptionally wide. And after holding the gun barrel to his ear once again to hear the buzzing of the imprisoned fly, he finally lets it go as the train approaches, by removing his finger from the muzzle and waving the gun in the air.

It is after this bit of action that the last of the opening credits appears on screen as the train pulls into the station, and "Snakey"

soon has his often-quoted dialogue with Harmonica (Charles Bronson):

Harmonica: Where's Frank?

Snakey: Frank sent us.

Harmonica: Did you bring a horse for me?

Snakey (laughing): Looks like we... Looks like we're shy one horse.

Harmonica (shaking his head no): You brought two too many.

This is followed by the shootout that leaves all three gunmen dead and Harmonica slightly wounded.

In order to complete the contextualization of the fly scene, the events preceding it should also be briefly summarized. At the very start of the film, when Elam, Strode and Mulock appear at the railroad station wearing their long "duster" coats, Elam soon grabs the toothless old station agent by the neck and pushes him into what is presumably the w.c., making a "shhhh" gesture with index finger and mouth, then signaling to Mulock to close the door. As that door slams closed, the screen goes black and the first credit – A SERGIO LEONE FILM – appears. Many of the remaining credits appear as the three gunmen take up their respective positions while waiting for the train to arrive.

The entire opening sequence, which was clearly inspired by the start of *High Noon* as has often been pointed out, runs about 12 minutes up to the end of the gunfight, and was shot in Spain. The scene with Jack Elam and the fly was first attempted by placing a fake fly on the actor's face. When that didn't work, better results were achieved by smearing honey or jam on Elam's beard to attract flies kept in a jar just out of view and released one at a time.²

² Cinematographer Tonino delli Colli's comments in the DVD bonus film *The Wages of Sin*, and those of Christopher Frayling on the audio commentary track of the *Once Upon a Time in the West – Special Collector's Edition* DVD (Paramount, 2004).

The origins of the fly scene

The treatment of *Once Upon a Time in the West* was written by Dario Argento, Bernardo Bertolucci and Sergio Leone. However, the idea for the fly scene was not conceived until a later point and by Sergio Donati when he and Leone held brainstorming sessions prior to the writing of the screenplay. In response to my questions about the origins of the fly scene, Sergio Donati graciously replied:

forty years have now passed since Sergio and I, locked in a room, “told” each other images for the film. The fly episode was certainly born during those days and in effect, I believe it was my idea; Sergio had Jack Elam in mind, and the idea of those wall-eyes fixed upon the barrel of the gun with the fly imprisoned, appeared to me very ironically “Leonesque”!³

This recent statement is a perfect supplement to an earlier interview in which Sergio Donati is quoted as saying:

So I stayed with Sergio [Leone] for two weeks, together, to make the skeleton, the outline, to tell each other the scenes very clearly. [...] I never met Bertolucci and Argento at that time. The story they produced was not so gigantic. It was eighty pages. Then I wrote the whole script in twenty-five days, I think. Working like hell, scarcely getting up from my seat. And I had to rewrite just two things. If you read the shooting script, everything was shot exactly as in the script. Including the fly at the station.

And as the interviewer explains: “The reason Sergio Donati emphasizes ‘the fly’ is that Dario Argento subsequently claimed this aspect of the opening sequence as his idea.”⁴

The fly scene in the screenplay

NB. The screenplay for *Once Upon a Time in the West* has never been published, and I am grateful to Sergio Donati for generously making the relevant pages (18-21) available to me for publication here. Though I take full responsibility for the translation, I wish to thank Francesco Caviglia, Flemming Forsberg and Alexander Forsberg for their assistance, and Roberto Trapanese, Lars Ølgaard and Filippo Ciampini for kindly facilitating contact with Sergio Donati.

³ My translation of an email sent on May 27, 2007.

⁴ Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone. Something To Do With Death* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), p. 265.

96-98-

Zzzzz, a fly buzzes obstinately around the face of Snakey, who doesn't move but only follows the insect intently with his eyes.

99-100-

The fly lands on the wooden panel near Snakey's head. And suddenly, flashing like the tongue of a chameleon, Snakey's right hand quickly grabs the pistol and presses it against the panel.

101 -

The opening of the barrel is resting on the wall, in ECU [extreme close-up], and Snakey puts his ear against [the barrel] and with him we hear

THE BUZZING OF THE FLY IMPRISONED IN THE BARREL

102 -

Snakey reveals his gapped teeth in a smile. Carefully, he removes the pistol from the wall, blocking the opening with a finger, and approaches the barrel to his ear, listening with amusement to the furious buzzing of the imprisoned fly.

OVER THE BUZZING OF THE FLY IS SUPERIMPOSED FOR A MOMENT THE VERY DISTANT WHISTLE OF A TRAIN

103 -

Snakey's smile fades. His eyes focus in the distance, on the train tracks. He removes his finger from the barrel, the fly flies away.

A SECOND DISTANT WHISTLE.

Making sense of the scene

In an effort to find meaning in the fly scene, commentators have devised two main approaches.

One involves attributing to this scene a specific, definable purpose within the plot of the film. For example, after describing the interaction of Elam and the fly in some detail, one commentator writes:

At this moment, a train enters the station and Elam releases the fly. The object of the wait has arrived, and the victim of the dry run is no longer needed. The Man (Charles Bronson) appears behind the train and quickly guns down the three killers. Elam's gunman may have gotten the best of the fly, but in the real event he is unable to escape death. The intrusion of the fly serves to heighten the tension of the approaching showdown; the annoyance of the visitor foreshadows a much more dangerous encounter.⁵

While this is an admirable effort to make the fly scene meaningful in terms of plot, it could be argued that the scene tells us nothing about Snakey that we didn't already know from his treatment of the station agent, and nothing new that we need to know in order to understand and fully appreciate any subsequent event in the film, including the shoot-out with Harmonica.

The other and more common approach in the literature on the film is to link the buzzing of Snakey's fly to the drops of water splashing on Stony's head and hat, and the cracking of Knuckles' knuckles – this triad of the killers' sounds enmeshed within a broader sound montage which also includes a squeaking windmill, a slamming door, a quickly silenced telegraph, and the heavy chug of an approaching train. The fullest study of *Once Upon a Time in the West* characteristically deals with the fly scene primarily in a chapter devoted to "The Music of Sound and Dialogue,"⁶ and in one way or another, music often becomes a key concept in

⁵ Andrew Schenker, "Death, the Fly and Dickinson." *The Cine File*, 2 April 2007.
<http://aschenker.blogspot.com/2007/04/death-fly-and-dickinson.html>

⁶ John Fawell, *The Art of Sergio Leone's Once Upon a Time in the West. A Critical Appreciation* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2005).

discussions of the fly scene, as in the following delightfully extravagant assertion:

Jack Elam suffers the loyal attention of one fly (I think we know this is an Italian fly) – such a fly, a Caruso of an insect – which he captures in the barrel of his pistol, where it sings the aria of a furious and neurotic bullet.⁷

And in another discussion, also with music as the central concept, the fly scene is taken as emblematic of Leone's filmmaking, even to the point of drawing a parallel between Elam and Leone:

Leone is like the wall-eyed villain Jack Elam, who catches a persistent and ordinary fly in the barrel of his colt, and who smiles at the music produced by the insect inside the gun. Nothing is ordinary. You just have to know how to metamorphose flies into musical instruments.⁸

Intriguing as these claims may be, particularly since no musical theme was used in the opening sequence in order to let the montage of heightened diegetic sounds entirely fill the soundtrack, I believe that the real importance of the fly scene can best be understood in an entirely different perspective, more in keeping with the screenwriter's original inspiration (already cited above): "the idea of those wall-eyes fixed upon the barrel of the gun with the fly imprisoned, appeared to me very ironically 'Leonesque'!"

In contrast to the plot-related and largely sound-based approaches mentioned above, I would like to suggest that having a fly buzz around Elam's face and inside the barrel of his gun, provided a perfect opportunity to have the actor perform a series of facial gestures, some of which emphasized his bad eye, and for the filmmaker to lavish cinematic attention on that notorious physiognomy in action. Providing a pretext for Elam to enact that measured succession of largely under-

⁷ David Thomson, "Leonesque." *American Film*, 14 (September 1989), p. 26.

⁸ Michel Mardore, "Vive le western!" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 250 (25 August 1969), p. 35; my translation from the French.

played grimaces and grins without speaking a word and for Leone to film them in prolonged close-ups, is the most important function of the fly in this scene. And I would argue that for the approximately 100-second duration of this remarkable set-piece, Jack Elam's face becomes the story.

Both an homage to and a send-up of Elam's ominous screen presence, simultaneously celebrating and parodying his evil look, this scene, conceived by Sergio Donati, is unlike anything ever seen before in any Western. It is also a perfect illustration of Leone's characterization of himself as "a director of gestures and silences. And an orator of images."⁹

⁹ Sergio Leone, "I'm a director of gestures and silences." *American Film*, 14 (September 1989), p. 31.

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