Manifest Density: Decentering the Global Western Film

Michael D. Phillips

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MANIFEST DENSITY:

DECENTERING THE GLOBAL WESTERN FILM

by

MICHAEL D. PHILLIPS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Manifest Density: Decentering the Global Western Film

by

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The Western is often seen as a uniquely American narrative form, one so deeply ingrained as to constitute a national myth. This perception persists despite its inherent shortcomings, among them its inapplicability to the many instances of filmmakers outside the United States appropriating the genre and thus undercutting this view of generic exceptionalism. As the Western has migrated across geographical boundaries, it has accrued potential significations that bring into question its direct alignment with national ideology and history. Rather than attempting to define the Western in terms of nation or myth, we should attend to how each new text reconfigures the genre.

Because of the repetitive and accumulative nature of genre storytelling, each new use of a genre inevitably engages with previous uses, creating a densely intertextual network. Following Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance being comprised of prior, historically situated utterances, I argue that each new use of a generic convention carries with it the echo of past uses, which it also retroactively reframes. This phenomenon produces a transtemporal exchange of potential meanings between existing uses of a convention and each new use, through which the latter is
able to alter and expand the potential readings of all prior uses. In this sense, Western films are neither exclusively about the past nor simply a reflection of contemporary contexts and concerns. Generic texts necessarily engage with their semiotic genealogies, belying the notion of genre as a static, ahistorical structure or as a series of symptomatic historical reflections subject to a linear process of evolution.

Because genres are not monolithic, it is essential to attend to the peculiarities of each text in order to see how a genre’s various users employ and interpret generic elements in sometimes quite idiosyncratic ways. Analyzing a diverse range of films from Japan, Brazil and the United States, I show the need for a more expansive model of genre analysis, one that attends to the transgeographical, transtemporal, and transmedial elements of genre. I argue that the drawing of boundaries around a genre that is itself about interstitial spaces can lead to misreadings of the Western as a hegemonic formal structure rather than a dialogic relationship among generic media artifacts.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In his 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer invites Anwar Congo, one of many small-time gangsters employed by the Indonesian Army in death squads that carried out a massive purge of alleged communists following a failed 1965 coup, to reenact his role in the massacre by directing himself in a film within the film. Eschewing the conventional realism of the fictionalized historical film, Anwar elects to stage his memories through the Hollywood genres—musical, gangster, horror, Western—that he had absorbed in his youth as a “movie theater gangster” selling black-market tickets for American films. Curiously, Anwar chooses in one sequence to display his “method for capturing and killing communists” in a rural location shoot far removed from the urban setting where the actual murders occurred. In one remarkable shot, Anwar and his captive, both arrayed in cowboy finery, play out a scene of torture and murder, with a horse looking on from each lateral edge of the frame. The image should therefore be entirely legible as invoking the conventions of the Western genre, until one notices the two elephants, apparently unconcerned about their generic inappropriateness, grazing in the background [fig. 1.1].

Later, as Anwar and his compatriot Herman Koto watch the footage on a small television, he remarks on the “wonderful scenery,” adding, “It really shows what’s special about our country.” This statement seems incongruous with the intuitive and oft-repeated presumption that the Western is a uniquely American genre, one that continually reanimates a national

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1 The scene under discussion only appears in the director’s cut of the film, though the theatrical cut features some additional footage from the Western location shoot not included in the extended version.

2 Quotations are taken from the subtitles on the Drafthouse Films DVD release. The subtitles on the Netflix streaming version differ slightly: there Anwar states that “the view” suggests “the particularity of some region.”
mythology that is necessarily played out in the desert and mountain environments of the southwestern

United States. Anwar’s claim that his Western displays the unique and particular qualities of the Indonesian landscape suggests a local analogy with this idea of geographical specificity. This spatial transposition could then be extrapolated to the temporal sphere by aligning the chaotic transition between the Sukarno and Suharto regimes in the mid-1960s to the tumultuous post-Civil War era portrayed in many American Westerns. From this perspective, we might see Anwar’s outdoor assassination as invoking the age-old Western convention of “frontier justice,” according to which the lack of an established judicial system permits and even compels the righteous hero to take the law into his own hands and summarily lynch a suspected cattle rustler or other wrongdoer. It could also be that Anwar is presenting himself as a “town-tamer” who rides in from the wilderness to eliminate those corrupt elements of society that are preventing the instantiation of a just system of governance.
Standard plot elements such as these have led John Cawelti and others to see in the Western (among other popular narrative genres) a social ritual that promotes group cohesion by facilitating the adaptation of traditional ideological constructs to unpredictable historical contingencies that tend to expose contradictions in existing belief systems. This theory would also seem to apply to Anwar’s filtering his version of history through the Western in the interest of legitimating a political regime that was founded on misinformation, intimidation, and mass murder. Such an analogy is implicitly posited by Anwar’s accomplice in the 1965-66 massacres, Adi Zulkadry, when Oppenheimer asks him about his perpetration of atrocities. Adi responds, “‘War crimes’ are defined by the winners. […] Why focus on the communists? Americans killed the Indians. Has anybody been punished for that? Punish them!” This association is again invoked in the aforementioned scene in which Anwar and Herman watch the Western footage: leaning against the wall behind them is a mounted display of the head of a cigar-store Indian above an array of arrows and a caption that appears to read “Apache” [fig. 1.2].

The analogy between the decimation of American Indians and the Indonesian massacres of leftists and ethnic Chinese rhetorically invokes the Western as justification for genocide, equally applicable under local circumstances.

At the same time, this analogy gestures toward an oppositional reading of the Western as an inherently imperialist genre. Oppenheimer offers a sustained subtextual suggestion that the omnipresence of American movies in Indonesia, as elsewhere in the Global South, parallels the involvement of the United States in fomenting coups and propping up dictatorships in those same regions. In this sense, the film can also be read through a critical tradition that sees the ideological structures of Western films as closely aligned with the contemporaneous foreign

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policy interests of the nation.⁴ Recent studies of globality in the Western have modified this historical reflection approach, though their reframing of the Western still tends to view the genre from a U.S.-centric perspective, finding ideologies of globalization symptomatically expressed in American films rather than focusing on responses to the Western in various geographical contexts.⁵

Fig. 1.2: Anwar and Herman

The above may be a valid reading of Oppenheimer’s framing of the Western in *The Act of Killing*, but what about Anwar’s film? To view the latter through the lens of American genre theory would suggest that Anwar reads Westerns in the same way that critics do and that he is employing generic conventions in ways that align with their theories. Steve Neale has identified some of the problems with this approach: “Ritual theory is heavily dependent on the assumption

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that audiences are or were American, that American audiences are representative of the American population, and that the American population as a whole is always preoccupied with the same cultural issues and dilemmas.” Attention to international audiences and filmmakers who engage with American genres foreground these theoretical drawbacks: “while it is likely that […] many sectors of the world’s population were and are aware of the cultural issues dealt with on a regular basis in Hollywood’s genres, it is also likely that their understanding of those issues and their relationship to them varied and continues to vary enormously.”

Neale’s contention is aptly demonstrated by Anwar’s explicit statements about genre films and the kinds of pleasures they provide to audiences. In a scene that appears earlier in the film but that seems to have been shot at the same time as the screening of the Western footage, Anwar proclaims, “Why do people watch James Bond films? To see action. Why do people watch films about Nazis? To see power and sadism. We can do that! We can make something even more sadistic than what you see in movies about Nazis.” Anwar’s claim about Bond films seems axiomatic, but his reading of “films about Nazis” viscerally controverts an intuitive presumption that Holocaust films are an important historical testimonial to the experience of the victims of genocide. Anwar thus reconstitutes an entirely different genre from the same body of films. This rather disturbing example suggests the extreme malleability of generic constructs and points toward the possibility of widely variant readings and categorizations of the same material among diverse global audiences.

Despite his brutal subject matter, Anwar dies not simply set out to make a sadistic film, but rather one that blends genres and modes to gain broad appeal. In so doing, he says, “We can attract a big audience! Humor? It’s a must. A love interest? We’ve got it. Because if the audience

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7 It is possible that he is referring to grindhouse/exploitation films featuring Nazis, but it is not hard to imagine reading, for instance, the character of Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes) in *Schindler’s List* (1993) in this manner.
is tense the whole time, with nothing to entertain them, it will never work!” In his position as newly minted movie producer, Anwar displays a savvy attitude toward the cinematic marketplace that is no doubt influenced by his formative experience working the exhibition side of the business as a ticket scalper. When he declares his production “a good family movie,” Oppenheimer asks, “Will the communists’ children be able to enjoy this film?” Anwar replies, “Sure, but if they know what this film is about, they won’t want to see it. But if they don’t know, they’ll want to see it.” Here the disjunction becomes very clear between the film Anwar thinks he is making—a blockbuster historical drama for an Indonesian audience—and the film Oppenheimer is making—a festival-oriented social-issue documentary for an international audience.

Similarly, the function of the Western for each is vastly different. For Anwar, whose everyday wardrobe often includes cowboy hats, bolo ties, and pointy-toed boots, the Western is a style and an identification (he cites John Wayne as a particular favorite) through which he presents himself as a powerful, important person who played a key role in his nation’s history. For Oppenheimer, the Western is a genre that celebrates genocide and is thus a fitting vehicle for his condemnation of Anwar and the other perpetrators. The Act of Killing, then, directly illustrates a key point made by Rick Altman: “The perceived nature and purpose of genres depends directly and heavily on the identity and purpose of those using and evaluating them.”

This shift in focus from narrative structures and sociological reflection toward the embodied, material existence of generic discourses is a radical departure from earlier genre theory. Alongside the rapid growth of audience studies and affect theory, this turn has provided valuable insights into how film industries and fan cultures actually use genres, but it also tends to

8 Rick Altman, Film/Genre (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 98.
de-emphasize textual analysis. By and large, the more aesthetically-oriented subdisciplines of cinema studies have continued to rely on outmoded structural conceptions of genre, sometimes uncritically, but more often despite overt disavowals of certain presumptions that continue to underlie much of the discourse around genre. This is particularly true of studies of the Western, whose supposed property of shepherding “traditional” American values makes it uniquely susceptible to theories that attempt to locate a holistic, hegemonic ideology within a genre by analogy to the mythology of “traditional” societies seen as not particularly complex.⁹

The Western in particular has long been treated in much the same way that Claude Levi-Strauss conceived of myth, as a discursive field in which certain fundamental conceptual dichotomies are perpetually played out.¹⁰ In his extremely influential 1969 monograph Horizons West, Jim Kitses posits that all Western films are animated by the overarching ideological tension between wilderness and civilization.¹¹ This formulation borrows heavily from Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land of 1950, which traces the historical vicissitudes of the shifting, ambivalent public perceptions of the Western frontier as utopian garden and barren desert.¹² Subsequent theorists have continued to employ the uneasy combination of a synchronic approach that identifies a deep-seated, essentially unchanging binary ideological structure and a diachronic application that attempts to show how that structure is variously articulated in different historical moments.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Richard Slotkin’s massive “Frontier Myth” trilogy. In the first volume, Regeneration through Violence, published in 1973, the myth is an expression of the

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⁹ The seminal critique of the ideology of tradition is Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., The Invention of Tradition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
kind of universal archetypes propounded by Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell.\textsuperscript{13} Two decades later, in \textit{Gunfighter Nation}, Slotkin revised his method to trace the myth’s survival underlying each successive shift in twentieth-century American political ideology.\textsuperscript{14} The apparent transition from a synchronic to a diachronic approach belies a continuity of method and a persistent presumption that the myth survives intact throughout the vicissitudes of American history. In the absence of a systematic reappraisal of the Western genre in the past quarter-century, much recent scholarship has relied extensively on Slotkin’s trilogy.

In \textit{Gunfighter Nation}, Slotkin locates the demise of the Western in the fragmentation of U.S. national ideologies concomitant with the Vietnam War. He goes so far as to argue that “[t]he return of the last American combat forces from Vietnam in 1973 marked the sudden end of the pre-eminence of the Western among the genres of mythic discourse.”\textsuperscript{15} It should be noted that the death of the Western, in Slotkin’s accounting, was precisely contemporaneous with the publication of \textit{Regeneration through Violence}. Ironically, the Vietnam era that Slotkin sees as the last gasp of the Western was precisely the period in which he and others, including Kitses and Cawelti, were formulating the still-predominant theory of the Western genre. It may therefore be instructive to dwell in this moment of the first wave of Western cinema scholarship, dating from the publication of Kitses’ \textit{Horizons West} in 1969 to Cawelti’s \textit{Adventure, Mystery, and Romance} in 1976. A review of the content and context of film genre studies in this period allows us to recognize some problematic yet persistent paradigms, as well as to tease out some alternative possibilities that may provide generative avenues for rereadings in our own moment.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 627.
The historical-reflective approach employed in *Gunfighter Nation* is essentially a speeded-up version of the quasi-anthropological literary theory known as the myth and ritual school. This method, most famously espoused by Northrop Frye, argues that shared narratives arise from and explain the significance of rituals or other communal cultural practices. By analogy, then, mass media genres come to be seen as an expression or historical reflection of popular attitudes toward current affairs. For instance, in *Gunfighter Nation*, the postwar Western is invariably seen as a public, imaginative working-through of American foreign policy, which ideological state apparatuses rhetorically justify through an appeal to the necessity of “savage war” for the rejuvenation of a moribund society.

Slotkin’s version of myth-and-ritualism, like Kitses’s binaristic structuralism, is heavily influenced by *Virgin Land*, the foundational text of American Studies as an academic discipline. Smith’s “myth and symbol” method acts as an evolutionary link between myth-and-ritual and historical-reflection theories by eschewing primordial archetypes and replacing them with political discourse and mass media. The name itself suggests that the first generation of Americanists, faced with a modern, democratic, pluralistic society as opposed to a traditional one, retained myth while jettisoning ritual. This move transferred the anthropological grounding of popular narrative from an actually existing communal practice to dimly defined collective symbols which are themselves difficult to differentiate from myth. It also skirted the question of the causal primacy of myth vis-à-vis ritual (or vice versa) that has occasionally consumed

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16 While this term has a narrow meaning that restricts its application to a few classical scholars known as the Cambridge ritualists, here I use the term in its usual, broader sense to encompass any theory that attempt to explicate the nature of the relationship between myth and ritual. This includes theories that analogize the two terms into the broader spheres of popular narrative and public ideological institutions, respectively. For a concise history of these theories, see Robert A. Segal, “Myth and Ritual,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnells (New York: Routledge, 2010), 372-96.

folklorists. In fact, it seems to do away with temporality altogether by equating symbols with the Platonic realm of ideas rather than observing culturally specific ideologies in action.\textsuperscript{18}

For a theory that attempted to explicate the relationship between collective ideas and concrete historical realities, this shift proved problematic. The drawbacks of this method are concisely critiqued in Bruce Kuklick’s 1972 article, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” which, though well known in that discipline, is sadly neglected in the literature on film genre. Kuklick rejects the myth-and-symbol method (or lack thereof) on the grounds that its reliance on Platonic ideas that “circulate independently of the people who think them” implies a “crude Cartesian view of mind” that draws “a strict dichotomy between consciousness and the world.”\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, it cannot be a satisfactory tool for explaining social behavior. At best, “For images and symbols to become collective is simply for certain kinds of writing (or painting) to occur with relative frequency in the work of many authors” (76). Given this tautological line of reasoning, “it is fallacious to infer from the popularity of … pulp fiction that the contents of … books are accurate indicators of people’s beliefs. This is a nice instance of the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy” (80). In other words, correlation is not causation. Hence, Kuklick rejects the implication that “the work of art ‘reflects’ or ‘expresses’ historical truths about the period in question,” or that “it is a source of knowledge about some body of extraliterary experience” which provides “a shortcut around masses of historical data” (83).

While Kuklick’s trenchant analysis has not been generally applied by theorists of film genre, Cawelti found it compelling enough to address it directly in \textit{Adventure, Mystery, and Romance}. Noting that his own approach is “essentially a variation of the myth-symbol method of

\textsuperscript{18} The latter approach is exemplified by Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures} (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87-125.

interpretation,” Cawelti attempts to differentiate his position by an appeal to structural rigor. Admitting the validity of Kuklick’s problematic of Cartesian dualism, Cawelti sees the solution lying “in replacing the inevitably vague and ambiguous notion of myth with a conception of literary structures that can be more precisely defined and are consequently less dependent on such implicit metaphysical assumptions as that of a realm of superpersonal ideas.” Substituting for myth and symbol the notion of structure or “formula,” a term essentially synonymous with genre in the sense used by cinema scholars, Cawelti believes he has solved Kuklick’s problem because “the relation between formulas and other aspects of life can be explained more directly and empirically as a question of why certain groups of people enjoy certain stories.”20

Beyond the immediate objection that an empirical grounding for an answer to this question would necessitate extensive ethnographic research into cinema audiences that is outside Cawelti’s purview, the substitution of formula for myth creates another wrinkle in Kuklick’s problematic rather than assuaging it. Structural narrative conceptions of genre are themselves constructed post hoc, reverse-engineered by academic discourse, and are therefore just as metaphysical as the notion of myth that Kuklick identified. Moreover, Cawelti maintains the major assumptions of the myth-and-symbol school, and by extension the myth-and-ritual theorists, that collective narratives are containers of and supports for the commonly held ideological beliefs of a given society.

Cawelti’s key innovation is in suggesting that the moviegoing experience is itself a kind of ritual, a material practice that affects generic narrative structures through the film industry’s market-based responses to audience behavior. The analogy might run something like this: religious practices in traditional societies prompt the creation of orally transmitted myths that explain and justify those practices; consumer choices in (post)industrial, capitalist societies

prompt adjustments to mass media genres in aid of the continuation of consumer interest in those products. Hence, in a limited sense, genre films are in fact agents of social reproduction insofar as they are intended to promote certain types of economic behavior. Turning texts into rituals seems to provide a material basis for genre research, but this move remains subject to Kuklick’s charges of tautological reasoning, with agency here being shifted from the author to the audience.

In this symbiotic relationship between audience and industry, it ultimately becomes difficult to discern which party is the driver of the structural innovations that comprise the history of film genres. In his famous 1984 essay on the “Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” Altman identified two schools of thought on the subject: the ritual approach, typified by Cawelti, in which audience demands produce shifts in story patterns; and the ideological approach, which applies the “hypodermic model” of mass media, popularized by the Frankfurt School, to argue that film genres are cynically employed by the industry to maintain the status quo.21 Neale has noted that the difference between the two is not terribly substantive, beyond the latter school’s far greater “pessimism.”22 Neale seems to directly address Cawelti when he states that “the assumption that all those who pay to see films always like or approve of them is not [obvious]. There are all kinds of reasons why people pay to see films. And there are all kinds of reactions to them.” Hence, “there are no grounds for assuming that [audience] approval is ideologically based” (225). In order to escape the Cartesian conundrum, Neale proposes a “production of culture perspective” involving empirical research into the “economic factors and industrial decisions” that determine the ebb and flow of genre cycles (229). While Neale’s premise that box-office numbers are no guarantee of ideological piety on the part of the audience

21 Rpt. in Altman, Film/Genre, 216-26.
22 Neale, Genre and Hollywood, 228. Further references in parentheses.
is well taken, his conclusion that we should focus on the industry over the audience presents its
own problems. Certainly the dearth of evidence about historical audiences inhibits empirical
research, but the greater archival availability of industrial records should not be allowed to swing
the pendulum of genre research so far toward the empirically verifiable that we neglect the
contingent and idiosyncratic aspects of embodied film spectatorship. Here I am in agreement
with Christine Gledhill that this “renewed historicism threatens to undo much of the valuable
work achieved in theorizing generic textuality” and that “reliance on industrial and marketing
categories threatens to return us to the taxonomic trap” of endlessly debating generic boundaries
and definitions.  

In a book published roughly contemporaneously with Neale’s, Altman likewise shifts
toward an emphasis on archival research of marketing and promotional materials, industry
publications, and other paratexts. At the risk of oversimplifying both scholars’ nuanced and
rigorous work, it could generally be said that, where Neale presents an empiricized version of the
ideological approach, Altman does the same for the ritual approach. While providing key
interventions in the historiography of cinema by demonstrating the inherent hybridity of and
continual flow among genres, Altman retains the presumption that the main cultural purpose of
genre is to foster social cohesion. As an illustration of the affinities between his conclusions and
Cawelti’s, compare the following:

The basic assumption of this theory is that conventional story patterns work because they
bring into an effective conventional order a large variety of existing cultural and artistic
interests and concerns. [...] Successful story patterns like the western persist ... not
because they embody some particular ideology or psychological dynamic, but because

23 Christine Gledhill, “Rethinking Genre,” in Reinventing Film Studies, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams
24 Altman, Film/Genre. Further references in parentheses.
they maximize a great many such dynamics. Thus, in analyzing the cultural significance of a pattern, we cannot expect to arrive at a single key interpretation. Instead, we must show how a large number of interests and concerns are brought into effective order or unity. (Cawelti 30)

And:

Genres are not only formal arrangements of textual characteristics; they are also social devices that use semantics and syntax to assure simultaneous satisfaction on the part of multiple users with apparently contradictory purposes. That is, genres are regulatory schemes facilitating the integration of diverse factions into a single unified social fabric. As such, genres operate like nations and other complex communities. (Altman 195)

As the juxtaposition of these two passages should make clear, Altman’s view of the social functions of genre revises Cawelti’s stance without drastically altering it.

Altman’s final sentence also begs the question of the location (geographical or conceptual) of this “single unified social fabric.” For Cawelti, as for the myth-and-symbolists, this community is unambiguously conceived of as the nation, though his emphasis on diversity of opinion has proved a useful intervention in the hegemonic thinking of his forebears. Altman expands this notion of interpretive multiplicity to such an extent that genre itself becomes the new location of community after the dispersal of traditional, organic human interaction concomitant with the coming of modernity and coterminous with the birth of cinema. Thus, “With the growth of cinema culture, favored not only by commercial interests but also by the need to constitute constellated communities in response to a loss of presence, genres concretized cinema’s promise of community” (187). Film genres provide an “affective home” by offering “pseudo-memorials” that construct a “common past provided by the genre itself” through ever-
increasing intertextuality (187-90). This move circumvents Kuklick’s Cartesian conundrum, avoiding the necessity of demonstrating the relationship between community and genre by locating the former within the latter. Moreover, Altman’s suggestion that “genres operate like nations” implies that the operative boundaries of the communities addressed through generic narratives are still those of nation-states.

In contrasting mass media pseudo-memorials with traditional religious theater like the passion play, Altman clearly engages in the intellectual lineage on genre and ritual that I have outlined. His narrative of loss and replacement is typical of this theoretical trajectory, as is also demonstrated in Slotkin’s narrative around the end of consensus and the failure of the Western to model national unity in the wake of Watergate. His periodization is more specific and his scope of application more modest than Altman’s, but the story he tells is a familiar one: the historical supercession of traditional imaginative structures forces their displacement into other avenues of expression. Hence, in Slotkin’s treatment, the transition from myth to mass media is synecdochized in the dispersal of thematic interests previously endemic to the Western—violence, justice, territorial expansion—into diverse genres: the Vietnam film, the urban vigilante film, science fiction (633-43).

In this view, the purported demise of the Western in the 1970s is one in a long series of historical ruptures leading from a holistic society animated by a shared mythology to an increasingly fragmented population seeking a lost unity in mass media simulacra of mythology. This narrative itself constitutes a kind of mythologizing. In positing the interchangeability of myth and mass media, it presumes a universal need to model social behavior through narrative constructs that remain largely the same even as genres change over time. It stands to reason, then, that much genre theory begins from a presumption of continuity. This is reflected in the
widespread tendency to identify generic evolution through a series of influential, canonical works that can be connected along a linear chain that upholds similarity over against difference.

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Constructing this Western canon, so to speak, involves on the one hand denoting a group of actually existing texts, and on the other fabricating an ideal text, as is suggested by the singular definite pronoun. This Platonic Western, which would somehow contain all of the conventions and connotations that are indexed by the term, is clearly not materially existing or accessible to empirical perception. As Edward Buscombe has noted, in any attempt to strictly define the genre, “one is inevitably on dangerous ground, for unless one has seen all the westerns ever made (or, to be absolutely logical, all the westerns that ever could be made), there cannot be any certainty that generalizations will hold.”25 In essence, each utterance of the term Western constructs a new implied group of texts whose individual characteristics are always idiosyncratic, ironically making the Platonic Western an extremely fluid and elusive concept. The Western only truly exists as a discursive formation that is conceived variously by different consciousnesses acting within different contexts. Rather than conjuring an ideal text, then, we should attend to how each new text reconfigures the genre.

If we examine the Western not from the center, by taking films like Shane (1953) or The Searchers (1956) as our canonical models, but rather from the ostensible margins, then we begin to see how the boundaries of a genre are more like a permeable membrane that admits of any number of transgeneric maneuvers. This is true not only of the process of textual construction from the industrial and authorial end, but also in terms of reception. In emphasizing the need to attend to the material uses of genre, Altman draws on Wittgenstein’s concept of “family

resemblances,” though he stops short of taking this notion to its logical conclusion. Using the example of games, Wittgenstein argues that there is no one common, defining trait that we can ascribe to card games, board games, ball games, etc., but that the term itself comprises “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing.” If, as Wittgenstein suggests, a class or category of objects denoted by a particular term is continually reconstituted through use rather than prescriptively defined a priori, then the persistent problem of where to draw generic boundaries becomes far less urgent.

This insight allows us to avoid the intractable conundrum already identified by Andrew Tudor in 1973:

To take a genre such as a “Western”, analyze it, and list its principal characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the “principal characteristics,” which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated. That is, we are caught in a circle that first requires that the films be isolated, for which purposes a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films.

These concerns echo those of Wittgenstein’s imaginary interlocutor, who demands that abstract categories have essences and limits. But, as Wittgenstein demonstrates, we constantly use concepts in everyday communication without needing a rigid definition to be already in place. The meaning and the persuasive cogency of a term such as Western therefore lies in its availability and malleability in discourse rather than in an inherent essence. “In short,” Tudor continues,

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to talk about the “Western” is (arbitrary definitions apart) to appeal to a common set of meanings in our culture. […] In other words, the crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating. And unless there is world consensus on the subject (which is an empirical question), there is no basis for assuming that a “Western” will be conceived in the same way in every culture.28

To take this argument a step further, there is likewise no basis for assuming that all audiences within a given culture (another abstract category without clearly defined boundaries) exhibit consensus on the terms of generic discourses.

Just as it is impossible to put forth a definition of a genre that would encompass every member of the class, it is untenable to identify within a genre the expression of an overarching, dominant ideology that is equally effective for all members of an audience. Following Foucault, I hold that culture (for instance, a national culture) is not monolithic or hegemonic, but rather a polyvalent concatenation of interests and attitudes that may align, conflict, or do both at the same time.29 The effort by reflection theorists to identify a direct linkage between a given genre and the society that creates and consumes it implicitly involves isolating and homogenizing each term in the equation. This constriction of terms is an exertion of hermeneutic force over the elusive complexity of material reality, an attempt to contain contingency and institute order over an inherently disordered field. If each usage of generic discourse activates a particular circuit of associations, a set a family resemblances, some of which are commonly associated with that genre and others of which extend either to other genres or to other areas of experience entirely,

28 Ibid., 139.
then constricting analysis to the dominant genre will inevitably provide an oversimplified reading of the text in question.

It may also cause us to misconstrue transgeneric or extrageneric elements as instances of authorial innovation, societal accommodation, or increasing generic hybridity. Any of these approaches connotes some kind of narrative, whether that of the auteur’s biographical development, the genre’s progressive evolution, or an overarching trend from national generic purity to globalized, hybridized postmodernity. The imbrication of a text into such a narrative provides a false impression of linear progress that perpetuates the kind of Hegelian, teleological historiography that undergirds both imperialism and neoliberalism. The Western genre is a particularly apposite example in this regard because it is so often taken to be the narrative expression of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, of the glory of the institution of civilization in the wilderness, of the expansion of democracy and free markets into uncharted territory. In this sense, the genre has already embedded within it a model of historical evolution that has been mirrored in theories of generic evolution.

In general terms, the master narrative of the Western film genre is the gradual disenchantment of the American public with its foundational myth, exhibited through an ever-increasing pessimism and the turn toward the anti-hero starting in the 1960s. The critical construction of such a trajectory posits a direct correlation between the shifts in narrative genres and the overall tenor of American culture. Whether these developments are thought to be caused by the needs and desires of consumers (ritual theories) or those of the motion picture industry (ideological theories), there is in both cases a suggestion that there is at any given historical moment a clear and direct correlation between the dominant tendencies in film genre and the
dominant tendencies in society more generally. These cinematic and societal trends “reflect” one another and project a mutually reinforcing vision of the state of American culture in a particular temporal context. Writing a history of generic evolution entails writing national history as well.

As we have seen, the global spread of the Western troubles the theoretical alignment of genre with nation. The geographical, transnational implications of Tudor’s statement also carry over to the temporal, historical realm. Because Western is a term that is in continual use, its meaning is constantly changing. Each new film, each new review, each new marketing campaign, each new scholarly article or monograph has the effect of expanding the existing uses of the term, which is only amenable to a retroactive contraction in a particular instance of use and not in terms of an overall definition. Once the proposition has been made, for instance, that Star Wars (1977) is a Western, it is still possible to argue the opposite, but it is no longer possible to exclude it completely from the discourse on the genre. Given this trend toward expansion and accretion, as opposed to evolution, it becomes ever more increasingly untenable to attempt a prescriptive definition of the Western. While we may still be able to recognize and examine prior definitions in their own historical contexts, later accretions retrospectively color our perception of those definitions.

Recognizing the temporal interplay between past and present that is involved in theoretical claims about genre also complicates the notion that Westerns are always more about their contemporary historical moment than about the mid-to-late-nineteenth century. Of course, historical accuracy has never been a hallmark of the Western genre, despite filmmakers’ and marketers’ frequent appeals to authenticity. However, to see genre films in general, and Western films in particular, as primarily reflecting their immediate context elides the ways in which formulaic popular narratives are always also about the past, though not solely or even primarily
about the period they are ostensibly representing. Because of the repetitive and accretive nature of genre storytelling, each new use of a genre inevitably engages with previous uses, creating a dense network of intertextual communication. This also suggests that generic histories are not teleologically evolutionary but rather are continually reframed according to which particular stakeholder in the generic game is using the genre at a given moment, as Altman suggests. Because generic history is not monolithic, it is essential to attend to the peculiarities of each text, not in order to find its proper place in a systematically evolving canon, but rather to address how its various users employ and interpret generic elements in sometimes quite idiosyncratic ways.

Due to the polyvalence and fluidity of genre and its significations, the Western’s engagement with history reaches far beyond the question of accurate representation of a particular historical moment or particular reflections of contemporary historical contexts. Genres are accretive not only as a whole but also in terms of individual consciousness and memory. If one way of defining a genre is through the kinds of expectations it sets up in its audiences, then it can also be described as an intensely personal process based on the accommodation of new experiences to prior ones.30 In this sense, any first viewing of a genre film activates memories of previous viewings of other films that a particular viewer believes to fall into the same category, however that might be construed. This is not merely an evaluative process of forming a critical judgment of a film through preexisting generic models. It involves a revision of generic expectations going forward but also a retrospective recalibration of one’s assessment of films already seen. Viewings of new films create transtemporal associations and connections through which discrete generic conventions (horses, shootouts, landscapes) accrue new potential significations that remain available on re-viewings or re-rememberings of films previously seen.

30 Barry Keith Grant has described such a process in terms of his own initial viewing of Night of the Living Dead (1968) in “Experience and Meaning in Genre Films,” in Film Genre Reader IV, 133-47. See also Tudor, Theories of Film, 143-44, and Neale, Genre and Hollywood, 31-39.
This is true not only for distinctly Western conventions but also for transgeneric and extrageneric elements.

Through a complex process of recognition, testing against expectations, and revision of existing attitudes, the effect of a particular generic trope is rarely a definitive communication of an intended meaning but rather the activation of a diverse and diffuse network of associations that have accrued across the user’s past experiences. On the individual as well as the social level, the Western is endlessly reconstituted in order to accommodate new information and experiences. In the process, the concept of the genre as a whole is continually shifting and is therefore not amenable to rigid definitions and categorizations that would assume some readily identifiable Platonic form of the genre or some original essence that is subject to linear processes of evolution.

Following Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance being comprised of prior utterances, I argue that each new use of a generic convention is “furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes” of past uses.31 (This theoretical point will be argued more thoroughly in the second chapter.) The resultant transtemporal exchange of potential meanings between existing uses of a convention and each new use thus allows the new utterance to alter and expand the potential readings of prior instances. In this sense, Westerns are neither exclusively about the past nor about their ostensible historical settings. Because of the familiar and repetitive nature of generic filmmaking, new instances also engage the historical moments of each previous usage. As an example, _Unforgiven_ (1992) is as much a revision of the immediate post-WWII period, through its invocations of such films as _The Gunfighter_ (1950), or the post-1968 cultural malaise, through its

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climactic revival of Eastwood as Dirty Harry, as it is a revision of nineteenth-century frontier history for the multicultural 1990s.

Though all genres are to a certain extent nostalgic, in that they inherently refer back to previous cinematic experiences, the Western is doubly so in that it simultaneously refers back to its nineteenth-century setting. This genre’s most salient (though not universal) feature is that it is set in the past. This makes it a key example to demonstrate how genre storytelling engages our understanding of the past and pastness. I do not wish to discount completely the relationship between genre narratives and their contemporary contexts, but rather to introduce into those contexts the palimpsestic complexity of transtemporal intertextuality. This approach follows Russell Reising’s maxim that “literary and cultural analysis properly recognizes and integrates the concerns of several historical eras—that of the work’s ostensible historical setting, that of its construction, and our moment of interpretation.”32 My method of approaching texts is accordingly “to investigate their absorption and compression of a massive array of discourses, agendas, and energies which their own echoic systems engage.”33

This transtemporal method is bound to come into conflict with both synchronic/structural and diachronic/evolutionary theories of genre. While Altman and Neale successfully give the lie to the former, certain problems remain with their wholesale adoption of the latter. For both scholars, Gledhill notes, “history is conceived as a series of successive shifts, leaving the past as done with, thus blocking perception of generic continuities.”34 To the contrary,

33 Ibid., 19-20.
34 Gledhill, “Rethinking Genre,” 225.
of past exemplars of any form. ‘Old’ films still circulate amongst us still, enabling film and critical production to hook back into the past and dust off apparently worn-out formulae for present uses and possible renaming. So the western did not die in the 1970s….35

Gledhill thus recalibrates the focus from Neale’s industry-centered, teleological “production of culture perspective” toward a more inclusive, archaeological approach. This move maintains the centrality of material factors to generic history while also allowing for consideration of the similarities among producers, critics, and consumers of culture. Moreover, it suggests that the evolutionary teleology of the new generic historicism elides the integrally transtemporal nature of genre storytelling.

From this perspective, periodization becomes somewhat arbitrary. While my selection of primary texts includes films from the immediate post-WWII period up to the 21st century, I mainly focus on the 1960s. This decade also saw some of the first serious attempts at theorizing the Western, from Cawelti’s “Prolegomena to the Western” in 1962 to Kitses’ *Horizons West* in 1969.36 These two dates respectively mark two supremely significant developments in the traditional, evolutionary history of the genre: 1962 is the year of the elegiac Western (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Ride the High Country, Lonely Are the Brave*) and 1969 is the year of the counterculture Western (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, The Wild Bunch, Paint Your Wagon*). This tonal progression from wistful to nihilistic is central to the persistent historical-reflection narrative of mirrored societal and generic decline.

This is also a moment in which the actual industrial decline of the Hollywood studio system aligned with greatly increased domestic distribution of foreign films. These two trends

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would find their synthesis in a spate of transnational co-productions like *The Leopard* (1963), *Zorba the Greek* (1964), and *Blow-Up* (1966).\(^{37}\) Despite its usual association with American exceptionalism, the Western was certainly no exception. From some early indications in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), a remake of *Seven Samurai* (1954) shot in Mexico, this trend reached its apex in *Red Sun* (1971), a Columbia-distributed Italo-Franco-Spanish production, directed by a Briton, Terence Young. The plot concerns a train robbery by a bandit (Alain Delon) who absconds with a samurai sword, intended as a gift for President Grant, carried by the Japanese ambassador and his bodyguard (Toshirô Mifune), who subsequently teams up with a betrayed member of the bandit’s gang (Charles Bronson) and a kidnapped prostitute (Ursula Andress) in a manhunt to retrieve the purloined property.

Telling a narrative that leads from *The Magnificent Seven* to *Red Sun* is fundamentally different from the evolutionary trajectory that would place the roots of the genre’s increasing violence and cynicism in *Yojimbo* (1961), tracing it through the Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone back to the United States in *The Wild Bunch*. Akira Kurosawa is central to both of these narratives, but the latter makes him a vehicle for the story America tells itself about itself, where the former acknowledges the manifestly transnational nature of 1960s cinema. However, as the foregoing discussion implies, I am not setting out to rewrite generic history, nor to offer a new perspective on the Spaghetti Western, which has been amply analyzed by Christopher Frayling and Austin Fisher.\(^{38}\)

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Rather, what attracts me to the global Western in the 1960s is the startlingly overt polyvalence of the genre in that period. From the burlesque-dancing Zapatistas of *Viva Maria!* (1965) to the polyamorous household of *Paint Your Wagon*, some very strange things were afoot on the frontier. Rather than attempting to incorporate marginal films like these into the mainstream narrative of the genre, I take my texts on their own terms as complex engagements with, rather than straightforward expressions of, the Western. Curiously, for an era that seems bursting with novelty and innovation, the peculiarities of the films under discussion are more often a product of an encounter with the past than a reflection of the present.

My second chapter reconsiders the relationship between authorship and genre through the work of Kurosawa. Because of his reputation as a central figure in the teleological evolution of the Western, he offers a particularly rich site through which to question that narrative. Instead of focusing on his samurai films and their inspiration from and influence on the Western, I examine his 1963 police procedural *High and Low*, which uses the ancillary marketing materials that accompanied the global spread of television Westerns as a major plot point. The centrality of children’s cowboy costumes to the film suggests that his engagement with the Western goes beyond circuits of aesthetic influence to incorporate a critical stance toward global audiences’ material interactions with the genre. Arguing against traditional auteurist conceptions of genre, I combine Bakhtin’s insights into the social situatedness of polyphonic textual construction and Michel de Certeau’s formulation of the tactical manipulation of institutional materials to show how genre filmmakers negotiate their liminal position between being producers and consumers of culture. Kurosawa’s critique of television involves a corresponding valorization of celluloid, with the two media acting as figures for abstract finance and concrete manufacturing, respectively. In this sense, the film is an assertion of the materiality of media as well as an
attempt to reproduce his own childhood experiences of viewing Western films through a process that I call nostalgic transmediation. This phenomenon is not solely the province of filmmakers but was also a driving factor in the early history of Western genre theory, as I show through a critical genealogy of the canonization of *Shane* (1953).

In the next chapter, I take up the question of American dominance over global movie screens and the responses by filmmakers from the Global South. Glauber Rocha’s *Black God, White Devil* (1964) and *Antonio das Mortes* (1969) incorporate some of the visual iconography of the American Western but juxtapose it with Brazilian folklore and a Brechtian mode of address. This bricolage method is employed in service of a political critique of its source materials. Rocha’s ire is directed toward American cinema but also toward the Brazilian film industry’s attempts to replicate Hollywood fare, specifically in *O Cangaceiro* (1953), a straightforward translation of the Western into a Brazilian setting that I also discuss in detail. Through his strategy of appropriating and repurposing rather than simply adopting or rejecting the visual and narrative tropes of Hollywood Westerns, Rocha troubles our understanding of the supposed hegemony of American cinema and of the usefulness of isolating cinema in national frames. Further, a more nuanced appraisal that moves beyond the notion of leftist repurposings of the Western as purely oppositional might allow us to decenter the supposedly hegemonic, “classical” genre by pointing toward radical potentials already present, if latent, in canonical Westerns.

This decentering analysis can then also be applied to Hollywood films, as I show in a reading of *A Man Called Horse* (1970). A comparative analysis with the better-regarded Brazilian film *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (1971) brings into the question the initial sense that these “Indian captivity narratives” are interested in deconstructing racial boundaries.
Rather, both rely on the figure of the Indian as a foil for ideological constructions of dominant national and ethnic identities. An examination of the short story from which *Horse* is adapted shows that the film is deeply concerned with the maintenance of the protagonist’s whiteness. The film hinges on a set-piece derived from the writings and paintings of George Catlin, whose touring “Indian Gallery” transformed indigenous religion into public spectacle for European audiences in the 1830s. In the scene in question, the white captive undergoes a gruesome rite of passage that one of the film’s posters called “the most electrifying ritual ever seen.” This moment of the captive’s “going native” raises important questions about the racial politics of embodied spectatorship, which I trace through the film’s aesthetic genealogy in the nineteenth-century mediascape in which Catlin worked. The filmmakers cite Catlin as an eyewitness and tout the use of Native American actors in order to prop up their claims of historical accuracy. This purported authenticity relies not on the veracity of the source text or the faithfulness of the adaptation, but on the embodiment of history underwritten by the indigenous actors’ labor, the white protagonists’ ordeal, and the spectator’s somatic responses. This analysis shows that the film does not simply reflect Hollywood’s opportunistic interest in the contemporary counterculture. Rather, it engages with the deeply complex transtemporal nexus of generic narrative, pictorial representation, and racial ideology.

A brief final chapter returns to the broader theoretical questions raised here to show how my approach applies to contemporary films. My case study is a cartoon called “Chimp Riding Goat” that appears in Werner Herzog’s 2007 Antarctic documentary, *Encounters at the End of the World*. Placing the eponymous primate in the desert space of Monument Valley activates a centrifugal pull toward John Ford’s Westerns and the teleological ideology of Manifest Destiny, but a countervailing centripetal force evokes television commercials, *2001: A Space Odyssey*,...
and Krazy Kat comics. By juxtaposing this image with other generic frames including the nature
documentary, the art film, and science fiction, Herzog figures the Valley as a temporally fluid
space that could be a prehistoric playground, a post-apocalyptic hellscape, or a utopian Martian
settlement. In the process, it becomes a multivalent node through which to imagine alternative
histories.

In sum, rather than attempting to define the Western in terms of nation or myth, we
should attend to how each new text reconfigures the genre. In working outward from specific
uses in discrete texts rather than working inward from broad categorizations, I hope to provide a
more expansive model of genre analysis that attends to the transgeographical, transtemporal, and
transmedial elements of generic discourses. Drawing boundaries around a genre that is itself
about interstitial spaces can lead to misreadings of the Western as a hegemonic form rather than
a surprisingly malleable network of interrelated texts and material practices.
A curious thing happens about ten minutes into Akira Kurosawa’s 1963 police-procedural drama High and Low. As shoe-company executive Kingo Gondo (Toshiro Mifune) dismisses his fellow corporate board members upon refusing their request to participate in a hostile takeover, his son Jun barges into the living room, outfitted in a store-bought Western sheriff’s costume, toy rifle blazing. His playmate Shinichi, the son of the family’s chauffeur, falls to the floor in mock death throes, then immediately springs back to life as the boys chase each other out of the room [fig. 2.1].

The boys’ violent game interrupts the ongoing explication of the film’s first act and also creates a generic juxtaposition between the Western and the crime film. Given the former genre’s intrinsic association with the United States and its apparent incongruity with the film’s cultural milieu, it is tempting to read this moment as Kurosawa’s commentary on the Americanization of postwar Japan. Matthew Bernstein has argued that the motif of the cowboy costumes “connects predatory capitalism to the West,” and more generally that the film’s Yokohama setting is
represented as “a city infiltrated by Western culture.”¹ He further states that, in this cinematic adaptation of an American pulp novel, the “narrative has been transposed from West to East and from low to high culture.”² Bernstein’s implicit presumptions regarding nation and social class pivot on a conflation between global hegemony and aesthetic populism, often taken to be characteristic of the Western. In this sense, the cowboy costumes become an empty signifier that can only be filled by Kurosawa’s auteurist critique of pernicious American influence. This allegorical reading presupposes the fixity of nation and genre that leaves the Japanese auteur in a position of assimilation or opposition to the products of American cinematic hegemony.

Yet, as Christina Klein has argued, a more complete understanding of transnational film cultures requires us “to see Hollywood as an object rather than an agent of globalization, a reservoir of symbolic resources from which [non-U.S.] filmmakers draw as they navigate their way through their own globalized cultural economy.”³ In this respect, Kurosawa is not that different from the boys in their costumes, playing with the Western. In fact, Kurosawa holds a privileged position in the history of the transnational flow of the Western genre. His influence on the Spaghetti Western is unquestionable, with Yojimbo (1961) providing the template for Sergio Leone’s A Fistful of Dollars (1964), the catalyst for the wave of European productions over the following decade. The subsequent innovations in form and content in the Westerns of American filmmakers like Sam Peckinpah, particularly in his kinetic visual style and cynical worldview, are clearly traceable back to Kurosawa.⁴ Seven Samurai (1954) and its American remake, The Magnificent Seven (1960), instantiated a new subgenre, the “Group Western.” The shift from the

² Ibid., 176.
conventional lone protagonist to a cadre of adventurers, each of whom possesses a special skill, was further elaborated in films like Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969).

Also well known, if less widely acknowledged, is the inspiration that Kurosawa drew from Hollywood Westerns, especially those of John Ford. Kurosawa himself famously, if somewhat equivocally, stated, “I have learned from [the] grammar of the Western.”

This cinematic education is most clear in *Yojimbo*, which appropriates and reconfigures certain key elements of the genre: the wandering hero, the one-street town, the climactic showdown. Despite the clear circuits of allusion and influence stretching from Ford through Kurosawa to Leone and Peckinpah, auteurist scholars like Stephen Prince and Joan Mellen have insisted on disassociating Kurosawa from the Western. Such arguments are often based on the incommensurability of the historical contexts of the settings of samurai films or *jidaigeki* (period films) and American Westerns, particularly the question of class stratification vs. social mobility. This conclusion relies on the absolute difference between a traditional, hierarchical Japanese culture and a modern, democratic American culture, a difference that is mirrored in the absolute purity of the two nations’ respective characteristic film genres. The distinction between Kurosawa’s *jidaigeki* and the Western is at its core Bourdieuvian. That is, it expresses an aesthetic judgment that upholds the position of the critic as the arbiter of good taste while simultaneously freeing the auteur of the potential taint of the low-culture associations of popular genres like the Western. The question of social class thus underlies the most pernicious dichotomy of auteurism, that between elite and popular culture.

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The overt manifestation of the Western in *High and Low* poses some problems for a reading that would maintain both generic boundaries and Kurosawa’s status as an auteur untainted by the low-culture associations of the Western. However, the boys’ outfits could easily be recuperated into a traditional auteurist approach by reading them as a hermeneutic signal guiding a holistic interpretation. If the Western is taken as the consummate example of melodramatic moral Manicheism, Kurosawa’s persistent trope of character doubling matches that model. This is immediately apparent in the film’s title, whose evocation of a hierarchical spatial relationship is expressed in the film’s mise-en-scene, with Gondo’s chic, modern house being situated on a hill overlooking the city, while the villain, medical intern Takeuchi, resides in a modest shack in the low-lying slums. In his attempt to kidnap Jun, Takeuchi mistakenly abducts Shinichi. Realizing his error yet undeterred, Takeuchi demands that Gondo pay an exorbitant ransom for the safe return of another man’s child. After initially resisting, Gondo ultimately submits to his altruistic conscience, and the child is restored to the family. The second half of the film is devoted to the police’s efforts to track down the kidnapper, who is eventually caught and sentenced to death.

From a structural point of view, the apparent opposition between the protagonist, Gondo, and his antagonist, Takeuchi, is typical of Westerns. More specifically, as one might expect in a standard Western, the final scene of the film is a solitary confrontation between the hero and the villain. Kurosawa’s two immediately preceding films, *Yojimbo* (1961) and *Sanjuro* (1962), similarly end in showdowns. Yet, instead of facing off at twenty paces in a dusty thoroughfare, Gondo and Takeuchi meet in a prison visiting room, separated by a pane of glass. As the sequence alternates between over-the-shoulder shots from either side of the glass, Gondo’s reflection is overlaid on the image of Takeuchi’s face and vice-versa. The glass thus serves
simultaneously as a barrier between the two and a medium through which their apparent duality is rendered as an ultimate unity [fig. 2.2].

This apparent equivalence between the two characters is rather troubling in the sense that it does not offer the kind of thematic resolution and spectatorial satisfaction that the standard Western ending would, instead upholding the narrative ambiguity that is characteristic of auteurist film. Such ambivalence may seem inimical to the Western genre, in which the truism holds that good guys wear white and bad guys wear black. That *Yojimbo* is often credited with inaugurating the trend toward increased moral flexibility in the Western hero, particularly in Spaghetti Westerns but also in subsequent Hollywood productions, would support such a notion. Yet Kurosawa’s frequent strategy of blurring moral distinctions between hero and villain through doubling, in *Yojimbo* as elsewhere, has a long genealogy in the genre.

The uncomfortably close similarity between bandit Doc Holliday and lawman Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) is typical of the play between enemy and compatriot found in many Western films. This is true not only of canonical examples like Anthony Mann’s *Winchester ’73* (1950) but also of Poverty Row B-Westerns like the John Wayne vehicle
Westward Ho! (1935), in both of which the villain turns out to be the hero’s brother. Roy Rogers likewise faces off with his estranged brother in Saga of Death Valley (1939), and in Jesse James at Bay (1941), he plays a dual role as the titular outlaw and his nefarious lookalike. These few examples, from a list that could easily be much longer, show that a blurred distinction between hero and villain is by no means foreign to the Western, even at its most formulaic. In fact, this is precisely the generic trope that is signaled by the confusion between Jun and Shinichi. The reason that Takeuchi nabs the wrong boy in the first place is that the two are playing “sheriff and outlaw,” alternating roles indicated by costume.

The interpretive difficulties that arise from separating the auteur from the genre system are nowhere clearer than in the discourse around Kurosawa’s most entertaining film, and accordingly one largely dismissed by critics, The Hidden Fortress (1958). For auteurist scholars like Donald Richie, this film’s overtly crowd-pleasing tenor and apparent lack of any deep humanistic significance are taken as the exception that proves the rule. Richie writes that the film’s plot, involving a samurai general and two peasants transporting a disguised princess and a trove of gold bars through enemy territory, “sounds like any of the hundred-or-so period pictures which the Japanese industry annually turns out—and that is just the point of the film. […] If Seven Samurai and The Throne of Blood were, in part, a criticism of the standard period film, The Hidden Fortress takes the bigger step of beating it at its own game. It is as though Buñuel had made The Mark of Zorro.”7 Both poles of this analogy (genius director/disposable genre picture) extend to the extremes of the elite/popular dichotomy that is at the heart of auteurist criticism. Even within the Western genre, Zorro films are marginalized, likely due to their embarrassing proximity to the B-movies and TV serials whose inclusion would detract from the genre’s claim to critical validity.

The necessity of moral ambiguity in characterization for auteurist scholars is amply illustrated by Richie’s befuddlement at the film’s Japanese title, which translates literally as *Three Bad Men in a Hidden Fortress [Kakushi toride no san akunin]*. Of course, he acknowledges, the two peasants are bad: “Sly, cowardly, greedy, they include all the vices.” Yet the other main character, General Makabe, is “properly impassive, properly loyal, properly active with the sword. There seems no indication of badness at all.” Richie works around this problem by resorting to an auteurist application of a theme that is overt in many of Kurosawa’s films but in little evidence here: “Villains and heroes are, as always in a Kurosawa picture, equated. All three men are bad.” Richie, the consummate humanist, will not even let arithmetic stand in his way, pointing out that “[l]ater on a fourth is added” in the form of an enemy general, Tadokoro, who ultimately has a change of heart and aids in the princess’s escape. The moral reversal of the villain here is necessary to Richie’s argument—despite the fact that Tadokoro is never anywhere near the eponymous fortress—because Makabe is not sufficiently bad or even ambiguous to support it. The moral? “By the end of the picture we are calling the men good. The title, then, is to be understood as so many of Kurosawa’s titles must be—ironically.”

Richie’s convoluted analysis could have been avoided if he had recognized that the title is not Kurosawa’s, but John Ford’s, from his 1926 silent Western, *Three Bad Men*. Beyond this literal reference, certain compositions in *The Hidden Fortress* are vividly reminiscent of Ford’s style. For instance, Kurosawa’s blocking in depth in the film’s opening scene distinctly recalls one of Ford’s signature aesthetic techniques [figs. 2.3-2.4]. *The Hidden Fortress* features a number of wide-angle, deep-space shots, far more characteristic of Ford than of Kurosawa, who,

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from *Seven Samurai* (1954) onward, increasingly adopted field-flattening telephoto lenses [figs. 2.5-2.6]. This initial allusion gives way to wholesale homage in a later scene where the two peasants first encounter the samurai general in the rock quarry that envelops the eponymous fortress [fig. 2.7]. The overall composition, weighted to the right three-fifths of the Tohoscope widescreen frame, recalls the boxy aspect ratio of the silent era, while Makabe’s enclosure in a narrowly vertical mountain pass exhibits a consistent hallmark of Ford’s visual style [Figs. 2.8-2.9].

Despite such clear aesthetic echoes, the cinematic touchstones that critics have deployed in analyses of *The Hidden Fortress* rarely include Ford or any Hollywood products, despite the common acknowledgement that the film is at least implicitly related to them by virtue of the less-than-desirable qualities usually ascribed to it. Instead, reference is made to Lang’s *Die Nibelungen*, Olivier’s *Henry V*, or Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*.9 In making the Eisenstein connection, Prince cites an extensive list of films in Kurosawa’s autobiography that the director remembers having seen between the ages of nine and nineteen. Prince picks out for special mention such canonical auteurs as D. W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin, Erich von Stroheim, Victor Sjöström, and F. W. Murnau, leaving out Hollywood hands like Cecil B. DeMille, Raoul Walsh, William Wellman, Maurice Tourneur, and Ford himself, whose two entries in the list are *The Iron Horse* (1924) and *Three Bad Men*.10 Otherwise, Prince gives short shrift to *The Hidden Fortress*, dismissing it as “lightweight” and “frivolous” in the space of half a paragraph. He does, however, return briefly to the film in the revised edition to discuss its influence on George Lucas in the making of *Star Wars* (1977).11

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9 The first two are mentioned in Richie, *Kurosawa*, 137, the last in Prince, *Warrior’s Camera*, 21.
Fig. 2.3 Blocking in Depth in The Hidden Fortress

Fig. 2.4: Blocking in Depth in *Three Bad Men*

Fig. 2.5: Deep Space in My Darling Clementine

Fig. 2.6: Deep Space in The Hidden Fortress
Prince cites as an instance of Lucas’s borrowing from Kurosawa the device of starting the film *in medias res*. Yet the opening of *Star Wars*, which curiously calls itself “Episode IV,” is more specifically meant to evoke the 1930s serials that later became popular fodder for local television broadcasts. Beyond Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, a particular influence seems to have been *The Phantom Empire*, a bizarre science-fiction/Western hybrid starring a young Gene Autry. By drawing a direct line from Kurosawa to Lucas, Prince elides their common ancestors, the Fordist products of the classical Hollywood studio system. While it is generally accepted that American filmmakers of Lucas’s generation freely cribbed aesthetic techniques and narrative
devices from their Hollywood forebears, this is often seen as a new development specific to the 1970s.\textsuperscript{12} The presence of \textit{Three Bad Men} in \textit{The Hidden Fortress}, similar in many respects to the presence of the latter in \textit{Star Wars}, suggests the tardiness of this periodization.

In the same way that Kurosawa’s title references Ford’s Western in order to invoke kinship with the adventure films of the silent era, 20\textsuperscript{th} Century-Fox’s marketing campaign for the 1978 re-release of \textit{Star Wars} emphasized the film’s nostalgic pleasures. The ads acted as “a reminder to older moviegoers of the fun of the Saturday matinee, Errol Flynn swashbuckling entertainment experiences of their younger moviegoing days—or how to be a kid again for two hours.”\textsuperscript{13} Fox’s promotional efforts are thus perfectly in line with Fredric Jameson’s argument that \textit{Star Wars} is a “nostalgia film.” For the target market of this campaign, the draw of the film was precisely the nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again. This film is thus \textit{metonymically} historical or nostalgia film: […] it does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period (the serials), it seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects.\textsuperscript{14}

Jameson importantly identifies the survivals of previous media artifacts in contemporary cultural productions, though it is far from certain that this is a new phenomenon. The foregoing analysis suggests that such practices are more deeply rooted in cinematic history.

\textsuperscript{12} The canonical expression of this argument is Noël Carroll, “The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond),” \textit{October} 20 (Spring 1982), 51-81.
\textsuperscript{13} Olen J. Earnest, “\textit{Star Wars}: A Case Study of Motion Picture Marketing,” \textit{Current Research in Film}, vol. 1 (1985), 17.
The tendency to identify cinematic nostalgia with late capitalism and postmodernism implies a simulacral false consciousness whereby the symbolic is mistaken for the real. This view negates the palpable fact that mediated experiences have always involved embodied encounters with material objects. The filmography of Kurosawa’s adolescence is not simply a concordance to his cinematic allusions; it is a capsule memoir notating actual past events. The centrality of Kurosawa’s formative moviegoing experiences to his later filmmaking practice suggests that his relationship to the Western is less a question of “grammar” than it is of reactivating past pleasures by manifesting media artifacts of an earlier period in a contemporary context. While the most obvious instances involve borrowing aesthetic techniques, this phenomenon also extends to the nostalgic transmediation of extracinematic artifacts, as in the case of Kurosawa’s cowboy costumes. While these outfits are a material manifestation of the contemporary mediascape, they also act as a figure for childhood experiences of media consumption.

Before returning to a specific analysis of these costumes and *High and Low*, I want to examine some broader ramifications of nostalgic transmediation for theories of genre and authorship. In troubling the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, meaning and matter, this practice has the capacity to decenter the abstract structures of both the Platonic Western and the cinematic auteur. To further draw this out, I turn to the work of John Ford himself, specifically *My Darling Clementine* (1946), a film often placed at the center of the Western genre. Some of the similarities between Ford’s and Kurosawa’s work are neither a factor of generic narrative structure nor of ideological binaries but are rather manifested in their assemblages of existing media artifacts into a polyphonous ensemble. Ford’s opus likewise incorporates media of a bygone era, including early silent film, Victorian stage melodrama, and Ford’s childhood
experiences of Shakespeare. In this sense, the children’s Western costumes that appear in *High and Low* function in much the same way that Shakespeare does in *My Darling Clementine*.

**Shakespeare for Tavern Louts: Decentering *My Darling Clementine***

Granville Thorndyke, a travelling thespian scheduled to perform at Tombstone’s Bird Cage Theatre, has been accosted by the murderous Clanton gang. They force him to recite atop a table in the bar of the town brothel, but they are unsatisfied with “them poems” and make their displeasure known with gunfire. Undeterred, Thorndyke trots out “To be or not to be,” which only makes the Clantons more irritable. When the actor reaches “shuffled off this mortal coil,” one Clanton interrupts in disgust, but Doc Holliday intervenes and implores Thorndyke to continue. The actor’s memory fails him, so Doc picks up where he left off, carrying the speech from “the undiscover’d country from whose borne no traveler returns” to “thus does conscience make cowards of us all.” Without quite finishing his monologue, Doc experiences a tubercular coughing fit and runs out, leaving Wyatt Earp to escort Thorndyke to his scheduled performance at the theater. The actor thanks Wyatt, exclaiming, “Shakespeare was not meant for taverns, nor for tavern louts.” Ike Clanton attempts to bar their exit, demanding, “Yorick stays here,” but Wyatt shoots his gun from his hand. Pa Clanton emerges through a back door and apologizes for his sons’ behavior. Once Wyatt and Thorndyke have left, Pa beats all three boys with a bullwhip, chiding, “When you pull a gun, kill a man!”

If we read this scene according to Jim Kitses’s overriding wilderness/civilization dichotomy, the alleged master key to the semiotics of the Western, the role of Shakespeare in Tombstone is immanently clear. Doc, the transplanted Easterner, represents a refined but corrupt civilization; hence his knowledge of the text of *Hamlet*. The barbarous Clantons, conversely,
receive the soliloquy as pearls before swine, demanding to be entertained rather than edified. Wyatt, as the mediating term between the two poles, observes politely, only intervening when force is threatened. In a scene that was to occur immediately following this one, included in the shooting script but not extant in the finished film, Wyatt visits Doc in his room and offers his appraisal of the soliloquy: “First time I heard it. Parts I could understand makes a powerful lot of sense—especially that last about conscience makin’ cowards of us all.” Wyatt suggests that, though Shakespeare’s antiquated diction may be dense, he is a poet of human nature who is universally comprehensible, even to the uneducated. This of course is the same rhetoric that academic Shakespeare-boosters have employed since the Victorian era in an effort to transform a writer of popular plays into an ethereal, eternal genius.

A typical rehearsal of this view can be found in Peter Stowell’s book on Ford, in which Doc is described as having “escaped from Eastern civilization. Though he hates it, he is drawn back from time to time. Shakespeare’s ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy returns him to his past and deeper self. But he will have to stumble upon it in a rough saloon, for the Clantons, those ‘tavern louts,’ have kidnapped the actor, thereby denying Tombstone Shakespeare’s civilizing influence.” This analysis is obviously correct from Kitses’ standpoint, but it does not withstand close scrutiny. As so often happens in genre studies, Stowell seems to read the Platonic Western rather than the specific text. The idea that Thorndyke exerts an edifying influence on the town is contradicted by a number of mitigating factors, the most notable being that Thorndyke is too drunk to remember the words of the most well-known passage in English literature. Again referring to the shooting script, there was to be a running gag revolving around Thorndyke’s

15 “Notes on the Shooting Script,” in Robert Lyons, ed., My Darling Clementine (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 116. Whether the scene was shot is unclear, though there was supposedly a much longer version edited by Ford prior to Fox studio head Darryl Zanuck’s excisions.
repeated mislaying of Yorick’s skull and various citizens’ successively returning it to him.\textsuperscript{17} This would explain how he comes to be called Yorick by the Clantons, after initially being addressed as Mr. Shakespeare by Mac the bartender. This shift in nicknames indicates his decline in the town’s estimation as he shows himself to be more closely related to the drunken fool than to the eminent poet. It also suggests the complex polysemy that accompanies the concept of Shakespeare in the film. Far from simply connoting civilization’s advance into the wilderness, Shakespeare is a site of negotiation around issues of class and performance.

This complexity is signaled in Thorndyke’s initial appearance in Doc’s saloon, where he has headed directly from the stagecoach rather than repairing to the theater for his appointed appearance. With literal fanfare from the house band, he enters accompanied by Dad, the town factotum who acts as porter for the actor’s carpetbags. Significantly, Dad is portrayed by Ford’s older brother Francis, who preceded the younger Ford as a successful director in the silent era. He plays minor, non-speaking roles in many of John Ford’s sound films, usually as an affable but mute drunkard. This has been taken as an outgrowth of sibling rivalry, with baby brother Jack finally taking advantage of the opportunity to lord it over his elder sibling.\textsuperscript{18} Yet Frank’s association with an earlier era of Hollywood history and Dad’s fast friendship with Thorndyke, emphasized in their sentimental farewell later in the film, suggest a close affinity between the Shakespearean stage and the silent film.

Remarkably, a vast number of Shakespeare adaptations were produced prior to the advent of the sound film.\textsuperscript{19} The popularity of silent Shakespeare belies the insistence of many literary

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 115-16.
scholars on the integral nature of Elizabethan diction and declamation to faithful adaptation. The Shakespeare that these films present is not the transcendental genius of literary-academic discourse but rather a popular attraction for the masses. According to biographer Joseph McBride, the teenage Ford’s first jobs were working as an usher in both a movie theater and a playhouse. The numerous productions McBride lists as being performed at the latter include the most popular of the nineteenth-century melodramas, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Girl of the Golden West*, but no Shakespeare. On the other hand, a 1912 advertisement for the local nickelodeon placed “Dramas of Shakespeare” at the very top of its wide-ranging list of the genres it exhibited.\(^{20}\) It therefore seems likely that Ford’s early exposure to Shakespeare in performance actually came more often in the form of silent films than of theatrical productions.

Francis Ford’s survival in his brother’s films after the sharp decline of his own career during the transition to sound frames him as a ghost of a previous era, making his appellation of “Dad” quite appropriate in the context of *Hamlet*. Despite John Ford’s self-mythologizing as a wayward youth who worked as a ranch-hand on a sojourn between his childhood home in Maine and fame in Hollywood, it was actually Francis who was the pioneer in the family. After attempting rather unsuccessfully to break into stage acting in New York City in the first decade of the twentieth century, Francis found himself working for the Méliès company, which sent him to Texas to make Westerns. From there he moved to the Bison 101 company in San Bernardino, and then south to join Universal shortly after its founding. By the time the teenaged John Ford arrived in 1914, the editing innovations of D.W. Griffith were rapidly changing the conventions of filmmaking, while Los Angeles was quickly becoming the permanent center of the American motion picture industry. The thirteen-year age difference between the brothers straddles a period when production and distribution contexts as well as narrative and visual styles were rapidly changing.

evolving. John would absorb and expand on the new techniques, while Francis would fade from view, never directing a sound film. McBride reports that the elder brother’s “work did not display the same kind of artistic development as that of other directors of the period, when the Roaring Twenties were sweeping away the old Victorian attitudes that found such vivid expression in early silent melodrama.”

In this light, the camaraderie between the grandiloquent Granville Thorndyke and the pantomimic Dad evokes the pre-Griffithian era of silent filmmaking and its close relationship to stage melodrama. Such a connection is reinforced by the fact that Thorndyke is actually in Tombstone to present *The Convict’s Oath*, “A Blood-Chilling Drama,” as a placard outside the theater advertises. This is often overlooked, with undue emphasis placed on the *Hamlet* scene. The common but mistaken attribution of the oft-quoted line “Shakespeare in Tombstone” to either Wyatt or an anonymous bystander, as well as the inaccurate appending of question and/or exclamation marks at its end, is typical in this regard. The very presence of Shakespeare on the frontier and in the film fogs the actual dramatic situation.

On Thorndyke’s entrance to the saloon, Wyatt identifies him to Doc as the actor in that night’s show, to which Doc replies, “Shakespeare in Tombstone.” Victor Mature’s inflection here could be read as wistful, surprised, and perhaps regretful at the rapid advance of civilization. In any event, what is not usually appreciated about this famous line is that Doc, who has just returned to town after an extended absence, seems to be unaware of the actual program for the evening or that there is even a show scheduled, as is suggested by Wyatt’s informing him of

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21 Ibid., 94.
such. It is Doc who makes the assumption that Thorndyke intends to perform Shakespeare, and his subsequent remark, “Been a long time since I heard Shakespeare,” suggests a hope as much as an expectation. Mac the bartender’s response to Thorndyke’s demand for drinks—echoed by Dad’s mutely banging on the table—“Coming right up, Mr. Shakespeare!” also suggests the association of actors with Shakespeare, but in this case it seems more derisive than deferential. Thus, the Shakespeare that Doc acclaims and the one that Mac invokes are quite different. In Doc’s case, it is a token of the refinement he left in the East, while for Mac it is a sign of pomposity to be lampooned.

Despite the contradictory attitudes of Doc and Mac toward Shakespeare, they share a certain slippage between the term’s connoting a body of work that carries a concomitant network of cultural associations and its denoting an author in its sense as a proper name. This is clearly suggested by Mac’s addressing Thorndyke as Mister Shakespeare. Of course, neither Doc nor Mac actually believes that William Shakespeare (1564-1616) has just traipsed into the saloon. Nevertheless, the conflation between the author and the author-function favors the image of the historical author, for Shakespeare perhaps more than for any other literary personage. As Douglas Lanier has argued, popular culture “typically locate[s] the meaning of Shakespeare’s works firmly within the man himself, in his personal life or his individual genius rather than, say, in the source texts which he imitated, the collaborative conditions of the playhouse, or his posthumous reinvention by posterity.”23

In this connection, an anecdote related by Henry Brandon, who played Scar in The Searchers, is illuminating:

Ford knew I did a lot of classical acting, Shakespeare and such. One day at lunch our eyes met at the table—his one eye and mine. He said, “You know Shakespeare didn’t

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write those plays at all, it was that guy Francis Bacon.” I immediately turned my back and started a conversation with a guy next to me. I didn’t want to get into that subject at all; I knew there would be an argument.24

On its face, this is just one of the innumerable instances in which Ford antagonized actors, perhaps on the theory that this would elicit better performances, perhaps simply out of spite. Yet Ford’s endorsement of the Baconian theory merits consideration as it relates to the Shakespeare sequence of My Darling Clementine. Alternative authorship theories tend to rest on the presumption that William Shakespeare, a provincial arriviste to the culturally questionable London theater scene with little formal education and aspirations to receiving a title, could not possibly have penned some of the greatest works in world literature. It seems paradoxical that a populist filmmaker like Ford—a saloonkeeper’s son born in a farmhouse in Maine who set out to join the culturally questionable motion picture industry in Los Angeles and aspired to become a naval officer—would invoke a theory meant to imbue the canonical plays with the legitimacy of aristocracy.

Ford’s statement is all the more curious given his tendency to shoot down any suggestion that he himself might be an auteur. In his interviews with Peter Bogdanovich, Ford famously described his profession as “a job of work” as opposed to an aesthetic pursuit.25 His resistance to attributions of hermeneutic authority over his own work is most tellingly illustrated in Bogdanovich’s 1971 documentary, Directed by John Ford. In response to a question about the ideological message of the ending of Fort Apache, Ford looks directly into the camera and barks, “Cut!” Ford’s usurpation of Bogdanovich’s directorial prerogative here ironically transforms the film’s title from an auteurist citation of Ford’s screen credit into a literal description of the

24 Qtd. in McBride, Searching for John Ford, 566.
25 Qtd. in Peter Bogdanovich, John Ford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 50, 69.
production of the documentary itself. Through this performative act, Ford jettisons the author-function and reinstatients himself as an historical agent who claims authority over the film set, but not authorship in the auteurist sense.

Ford’s invocation of the Baconian theory performs a similar function. Because Shakespeare can no longer merely act as a proper name, the discursive field it connotes overwhelms our meager knowledge of the historical playwright. This lack of biographical information leads to a virtual anonymity, and per Foucault, “Since literary anonymity is not tolerable, we can accept it only in the guise of an enigma.”26 It is therefore necessary to project a better documented person, e.g. Francis Bacon, into the biographical lacuna. Filling that gap with a materially existing person, a body, is a strategy of discursive containment that assuages the incertitude of near-anonymity.

Baconian and other non-Stratfordian authorship theories also remove the composition of the texts from the material conditions of Elizabethan and Jacobean show business and place them into the realm of courtly poetry and intellectual treatises. They are transformed from playtexts, manipulable scripts intended to be reworked for the practical purpose of performing to a paying audience, into closet dramas, texts written by lone artists intended to be published unaltered and read silently by educated individuals. This transformation is figured in My Darling Clementine when Thorndyke falters and hands off the soliloquy to Doc. Visually, the professional actor is framed either in a wide shot including the interior of the saloon and its makeshift audience, or from an exaggeratedly low angle, emphasizing the exaggerated theatricality of his performance [fig. 2.10]. Doc, conversely, delivers his monologue in a tight close-up, his expression more or less blank, in the minimal, naturalistic style typical of Hollywood realism after the introduction

of sound [fig. 2.11]. As diametrically opposed as these two performances appear, echoing the break in film style discussed above, the scene can also be read as expressing continuity between the two.

As Thorndyke embarks on his recitation, he requests musical accompaniment from the brothel’s piano player. This places Thorndyke squarely within the tradition of Victorian stage melodrama (literally “drama with music”), but the occlusion of the pianist from the frame also suggests the live accompanist in silent-era film theaters. As Doc takes up the soliloquy, the music continues, but now suggesting the extradiegetic score that acts as the sound film’s disembodied replacement for the obsolete accompanist. Doc’s integration into the melodramatic mode, an association strengthened by the consumptive coughing fit that cuts short his speech, blurs any clear distinction between embodied, gestural stage performance and psychologized, minimal screen performance.

Ford also brings into question the related binary between public and private Shakespeares. The movement from playtext to closet drama, noted above, is also suggested in Doc’s multiple personae. His current identity as dangerous criminal is undercut by the scene in which Clementine examines the detritus of his prior life in Boston—neatly shelved books,
college athletic photographs, medical diplomas—that adorn his private room in the hotel. This is a rare use of private space in a film that is largely concerned with the formation of a public sphere. We know that Doc has “heard Shakespeare” before, but presumably much of his knowledge of Hamlet would have come from his New England education and private reading. This version of exposure to Shakespeare is in line with the traditional readings of Doc as the representative of Eastern decadence. Yet as we have seen, the positioning of Doc vis-à-vis Shakespeare as a cultural construct is more complex.

One additional factor that mitigates against the Kitsesian reading is the curiosity of Victor Mature’s casting in the role. As one contemporary reviewer noted, he “is hardly an obvious choice for the role of a tubercular gunman concealing under silken menace his despair at the loss of a Boston medical career, and his recital of a soliloquy from Hamlet does not suggest college speech.”27 The suggestion here is that Mature, whose father was an Italian immigrant, is too swarthy and unrefined—frankly, too ethnic—for the role. It seems to bother this critic less that Doc Holliday has been transplanted from Valdosta, Georgia, to Boston than that Mature physically and aurally does not fit his conception of the character’s class position. According to the wilderness/civilization binary, Doc’s soliloquy should work to uphold Shakespeare’s cultural status. That it instead poses a range of possible uses and experiences of Shakespeare presents the reviewer with a problem. His expectation that Shakespeare should be delivered in “college speech” even on the frontier is indicative of an elitism that a close reading of this sequence does not sustain.

The civilization/wilderness dichotomy is further troubled by the juxtaposition of the brothel and the theater. On the surface, the Hamlet scene appears to rely on the incongruity of Shakespearean oration in the saloon. As Thorndyke proclaims, “Shakespeare is not for taverns,

nor for tavern louts.” This statement seems a natural summation of the scene’s thematic thrust, if we take that to be the thwarted attempt by the barbarous Clantons to block the inevitable progress of civilization into the wilderness. Yet this reading relies on an undue emphasis on the final portion of a three-scene sequence that begins with Thorndyke’s entrance to the saloon and ends with his departure from the brothel. The middle scene takes place in the Bird Cage Theatre, a space that resembles nothing so much as an extremely rowdy tavern, one far more crowded and chaotic than Doc’s relatively sedate Oriental Saloon [figs. 2.12-2.13].

Figs. 2.12 & 2.13: The Orderly Oriental and the Raucous Bird Cage

The carnivalesque environment of the theater is typical of Ford’s presentation of various social spaces, here and in his oeuvre more generally. Even in the “Cavalry Trilogy” (Fort Apache [1948], She Wore a Yellow Ribbon [1949], and Rio Grande [1950]), where space is literally regimented, many opportunities for playful inversion of social roles present themselves. This is most apparent in Fort Apache, where Henry Fonda is cast against type as the fastidious and pretentious Colonel Owen Thursday, who attempts to enforce rigid class and rank distinctions and is consequently seen as a disruptive force in the informal, fluid egalitarianism of outpost’s existing social structure. Although Wyatt, as town marshal, would seem to share with
Thursday the duty of containing the town’s populace within their proper spaces, he tends toward an improvisational and pragmatic approach to this task.

The theater seems an appropriate venue to illustrate the spatial containment of class, with the patrons’ seating arrangement reflecting their social status. Wyatt and Doc, the town’s most prominent citizens, share a box off stage right, but Doc’s criminality undercuts the conventional significance of this privileged location. Further, the town madam, Kate Nelson (Jane Darwell) and her employees occupy a large box at the front, abutting stage left. The bulk of the audience, seated on benches at ground level, show no respect to the proscenium’s division between the audience and the stage, accosting the theater’s proprietor when he attempts to fill in for the missing Thorndyke with an act consisting of bird imitations. The ironic aptness of the manager’s chosen mode of performance presents a humorous juxtaposition with Thorndyke’s drunken dismay at his first hearing the name of the theater from Wyatt: “You’re incarcerating me in a birdcage?” The motif of imprisonment is repeated in the title of that night’s scheduled entertainment, “The Convict’s Oath.” The strict delineation of space and bodies in the prison is thus contrasted with the extreme flexibility exhibited in the theater. Although its architecture is static, the social and imaginative arrangement of the theater is continually shifting. Thorndyke’s misunderstanding ironically and aptly encapsulates the malleability of all social spaces in Tombstone, where a tavern may become a theater or vice versa.

Even an unquestionably canonical Western like *My Darling Clementine* is irreducible to the wilderness/civilization binary promoted by the structuralist, auteurist theories that continue to exert enormous sway over scholarly analyses of Westerns. The foregoing reading has identified a number of other dichotomic relationships in that film—elite/popular, theater/cinema, silent/sound—and argued that such an expansion in scope not only reveals alternate thematic
fields but also brings into question the absolute polarization of apparent opposites. While the structuralist model posits an unrelenting tension between antinomic notions, it seems more accurate to say that this film, and genre films more generally, provide a syncretic habitat for a concatenation of contradictory concepts. In *My Darling Clementine*, the overarching antagonism between the Clantons and the Earps adumbrates a polyvalent space for the elaboration of a heteroglossic environment that cannot be contained by any binary system. It is crucial to recognize, however, that it is not the author who creates and contains the polyphony of the text. This is a function of the accretion of echoes of prior media artifacts that accumulate within a given text rather than an expression of the singular consciousness of the author.

**Back in *Rashomon* All Over Again: A Materialist Approach to Media Authorship**

In the epilogue to his autobiography, Kurosawa describes his consternation on seeing the first airing of *Rashomon* on Japanese TV, around 1980. In an interview broadcast alongside the film, the former president of the Daiei movie studio, “after showing so much distaste for the project at the outset of production, was now proudly taking full and exclusive credit for its success! […] Watching the television interview, I had the feeling I was back in *Rashomon* all over again.”28 In the transposition between media, Kurosawa has lost control over his work, which he attempts to reinstantiate through his autobiographical authorship.

It is ironic that a film that famously presents divergent accounts of the same event is often thought an outstanding example of a work clearly fashioned by an auteur’s singular consciousness. Kurosawa certainly supported this view, always maintaining that *Rashomon* did not question the epistemology of empirical truth, but rather concerned humanity’s proclivity toward self-deception in self-representation. This reading is supported by the film’s denouement,

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28 Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 188.
in which a simple woodcutter who witnessed the event in question chooses to adopt an abandoned baby despite his despair at discovering the inscrutability of ultimate truth. This final unification of the film’s moral perspective thus contains indeterminacy and upholds the author as the subject who unifies.

However, *Rashomon* bears some unexpected resemblances to *Fort Apache*, John Ford’s barely veiled retelling of Custer’s Last Stand, released two years earlier. The Custer character, Lt. Col. Owen Thursday (Henry Fonda) is presented as a pompous and imperious careerist. He acts as a foil for the upright and fair-minded Lt. Kirby York (John Wayne). After Thursday leads his disastrous charge, Kirby takes over command of the cavalry post. In the final scene, he tells a group of reporters that Thursday was a hero in order to protect the regiment’s honor and preserve its *esprit de corps*. His speech, accompanied by “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” is clearly meant to be taken as the correct moral decision, despite the viewer’s awareness that it contradicts what has transpired onscreen over the previous two hours. York then embraces a newborn infant, Michael Thursday York O’Rourke, named after the two officers and a beloved sergeant who died in the ill-fated charge. This device was repeated from *Three Bad Men*: as we have seen, a favorite film of Kurosawa’s. 29 Just as in *Rashomon*, the baby seems to contain the manifest polyvocality of the preceding narrative.

David Desser accordingly writes of Kurosawa’s work that “a shift among multiple voices implies the presence of a narrator who undertakes the analysis or permits the multiplicity of voices to be heard,” thus “implicating a directorial presence speaking the action…” 30 Yet there

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is a logical contradiction in the notion that a film’s polyphonic characteristics imply the presence of a unifying narrator. Rather, I would tend to agree with Stephen Prince: “The inner stresses and contradictions of Kurosawa’s work, as he attempts to conjoin differing cultural traditions and sets of values, the inability to achieve closure, the style that celebrates polarities of line and movement, all this prevents the formation of a stable and fixed authorial perspective.”

Both Desser and Prince are glossing Bakhtin, who displays a profound ambivalence regarding the position of the author vis-à-vis any particular utterance. In “Discourse and the Novel,” Bakhtin writes,

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. […] Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process.

Such difficulties and complications arise because the author can never fully exclude the unwanted meanings and connotations that have always already accrued to the word in question.

In “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Bakhtin extends the manipulable linguistic entity at the author’s disposal from the word to the utterance, “the real unit of speech communication,” whose “boundaries […] are determined by a change of speaking subjects.” For Bakhtin, words have no discrete, intrinsic signification and are ultimately “neutral.” Utterances, by

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contrast, are context-specific activations of language, derived from and addressed to others.

Hence,

any utterance, when it is studied in greater depth under the concrete conditions of speech
communication, reveals to us many half-concealed or completely concealed words of
others with varying degrees of foreignness. Therefore, the utterance appears to be
furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes of speech subjects and
dIALOGIC overtones, greatly weakened utterance boundaries that are completely permeable
to the author’s expression. (93)

This raises a potential contradiction between the supposedly singular expression of the author’s
“work-utterance,” and the various intentionalities imbued in the prior utterances of which the
work is comprised. On the one hand, the fading away of the concrete situation of the original
utterance allows for its appropriation by the author in a new context. On the other, the contextual
echoes of that utterance continue to reverberate, however faintly, undermining the privileged
position of the author.

It should be noted that an utterance can be any instance of language use, from the
simplest verbal interjection to the heteroglossic novel. This leads Bakhtin to use the term genre
quite differently from its generally accepted meaning in cinema studies. For him, everyday
speech involves a kind of code-switching among “primary genres” of communication that are
determined by the social context attending a particular utterance. These primary genres in turn
constitute “secondary genres,” and here the term is used in the more traditional literary sense of,
for instance, the novel and drama, but also including critical, technical, and scientific modes (61-
62). Bakhtin defines genre according to the specific social situation in which that type of
communication is appropriate, and not by reference to narrative structural characteristics.
This socially determined oscillation among genres is central to Bakhtin’s conception of the echo. Because utterances are material instances of communication, embedded within a particular sociohistorical context and comprised of prior utterances, they carry with them the echoes of their own prior embeddedness, even as they are revived in new contexts. While this hermeneutic surplus is too diffuse to be determinative of meaning in the new utterance, its survival across an iterative temporal chain implies a vast extensivity of potential significations that ultimately elude any discrete intention of the author. At the same time, Bakhtin’s insistence on the utterance as a manipulation (in the etymological sense of making-by-hand) of previous utterances means that the author leaves material traces in the text. The concrete existence of the utterance in a given material medium is evidence that some work has been performed by a particular agent.

Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance provides a path beyond both humanist and poststructuralist conceptions of authorship. While the latter school proclaimed the Death of the Author, they also believed in an afterlife known as the author-function. This transubstantiation of the author as human body performing work in the world into a discursive entity, just one of many intertexts, has proven conceptually valuable in asserting the indeterminacy of textual signification and the reader’s role in constructing meaning. Yet I would argue that it throws out the baby (the author as body with agency) with the bathwater (the author as sole signifier and holder of cultural capital). Bakhtin, particularly as glossed by Julia Kristeva, has often been invoked in theories of intertextuality, but the materialism of “Speech Genres” is rarely emphasized.³⁴ Whereas intertextuality examines the relationship between texts, conceived as units of discourse modeled on a Saussurean concept of language as a purely abstract system,

³⁴ See e.g. James Goodwin, Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 9.
Bakhtin’s notions of utterance and echo point toward the indissoluble imbrication of language and materiality.

In bridging this gap, Bakhtin’s treatment of the relationship between everyday speech (primary genres) and institutionalized or “ideological” uses of language (secondary genres) presages certain aspects of the work of Michel de Certeau. 35 In The Practice of Everyday Life, Certeau critiques structuralist semiotics, which he argues “extracts […] documents from their historical context and eliminates the operations of speakers in particular situations of time, place, and competition.”36 His proposed remedy carries echoes of Bakhtin:

Like tools, [discourses] are marked by uses; they offer to analysis the imprints of acts or of processes of enunciation; they signify the operations whose object they have been, operations which are relative to situations and which […] thus indicate a social historicity in which systems of representations or processes of fabrication no longer appear only as normative frameworks but also as tools manipulated by users. (21)

Moreover, Bakhtin’s distinction between secondary and primary genres is paralleled in Certeau’s delineation of strategies versus tactics. The former constitute the “calculus of force-relationships” deriving from the isolation of power into “a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it…. The latter are the techniques adopted by those who lack a “spatial or institutional localization” (xix). In essence, strategies belong to the producers of culture, while tactics belong to consumers or “users.” For Certeau, tactics are inherently provisional maneuvers that manipulate and repurpose elements of a hegemonic system of cultural products: “The actual

35 For a lucid comparison of the two theorists, see Ben Highmore, Michel de Certeau: Analyzing Culture (New York: Continuum, 2006), 122-26.
order of things is precisely what ‘popular tactics’ turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon” (26).

While there are many agreements in their thought, the direction of the causal relationship between everyday speech and institutional discourse is essentially inverted between Bakhtin and Certeau. The former argues that ideological secondary genres are comprised of organic primary genres, whereas the latter posits that tactical maneuvers necessarily employ the materials imposed by institutional strategies. Moreover, Bakhtin tends to prioritize the interpersonal aspect of communication, while Certeau emphasizes unequal power relationships as the grounds for expressive possibility.

Most importantly for the present discussion, Bakhtin maintains the primacy of the author, where in Certeau the author tends to disappear altogether, assimilated into the vast category of producers of culture. Nevertheless, these two approaches can be integrated if one conceives of the author as caught in a liminal state between producer and consumer. This approach respects the material existence of authors while continuing to deny their semiotic sovereignty. By combining Bakhtin’s insights into the recombinatory aspects of textual construction with Certeau’s formulation of tactics as the repurposing of institutional materials, we can begin to see how an author as an actually existing person might negotiate this precarious position.

Kurosawa offers an apposite illustration because of his fraught liminality between the binary terms of elite and popular cultures. He is often cited as an example of the consummate auteur: like Hitchcock or Kubrick, he had little compunction about faithfulness in adaptation, was known to be meticulous and imperious on set, and had little patience with studio interference. This image of the auteur, propounded in popular as well as academic discourse, tends to elide the position of these directors as employees of major film studios financed by large
banks. The heroic narrative of the director dismissing the demands of executives, summed up in well-worn phrases like “not beholden to studio interests,” suggests that auteurs create great films despite institutional pressures rather than precisely through access to institutional structures. In Certeau’s terms, auterism “creates the fiction of a place of [the author’s] own (un place propre)” (44). This “proper place,” on the analogy of a military base—though just as applicable to a movie studio—is a defining attribute of the power requisite for deploying a strategy (36). Thus, the heroic ideal of the studio auteur relies on a displacement of the actual power of the film industry onto the director, who is in reality a sort of middle manager tasked with overseeing a potentially profitable venture.

Here, another concept of Certeau’s comes into play: la perruque, “the wig,” which he defines as “the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (25). Douglas Sirk, for instance, ostensibly made potboiler melodramas that would be reliable if modest moneymakers, but he has come to be seen as a master of insinuating subversive undertones through his strikingly excessive mise-en-scene. One can imagine the disbelief of a studio executive faced with such a reading of Sirk fitting nicely into the following formulation of Certeau’s: “The ruling order serves as a support for innumerable productive activities, while at the same time blinding its proprietors to this creativity (like those ‘bosses’ who simply can’t see what is being created within their own enterprises)” (xxii).

The well-documented incomprehension of the Daiei studio executives on first screening Rashomon forms an important part of Kurosawa’s auteur narrative, particularly as the film would become the first postwar international success for the director and for the Japanese film industry. Masaichi Nagata, then president of Daiei and presumably the person later Kurosawa

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37 For a nuanced reappraisal of this conventional narrative, see Scott Nygren, Time Frames: Japanese Cinema and the Unfolding of History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 99-114.
saw interviewed on TV, reportedly walked out of the preview and uncharacteristically declined to have his name appear in the film’s credits. Stories like these are key to maintaining the image of Kurosawa as iconoclast, a figure who transcends the small-mindedness of his superiors to express a profoundly personal vision. Nagata’s televised cooptation of Kurosawa’s text (as auteurism would have it) is troubling to the director not simply because it undermines the public persona that has been created by and for him since the release of *Rashomon*. For Kurosawa, beyond the question of Nagata’s role in the film’s production lurks a more insidious distortion involving the translation of *Rashomon* from cinema to television.

Regardless of the relative veracity of Nagata’s account of the production, his broadcast appearance is a powerful reminder of Daiei’s legal ownership of *Rashomon*, its “proper place” from which to package and market the film in any way it sees fit. This assertion of corporate power over against the director as employee is mirrored in the material moment of Kurosawa watching “his” film on TV. When he says, “I had the feeling I was back in *Rashomon* all over again,” the intended reference to Nagata’s misinformation elides the literal reference to the film itself and to the fact that Kurosawa was in fact re-experiencing *Rashomon* through the television set. In another echo of the film’s form, one can imagine the aging director sensing that he was watching something uncannily like the film that he made in 1950, yet not quite identical to it.

In this moment, Kurosawa is violently ejected from the proper place of the producer class and forced into the contingent environment of a media consumer. This strange event encapsulates the fluidity between these two poles that is characteristic of the position of film directors (and to varying degrees, the other workers involved in the making, marketing, distribution, exhibition, reception, criticism, study, and preservation of a film). At the heart of

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Kurosawa’s encounter with the TV double of Rashomon is the question of the materiality of the film text as a physical product of human labor and the anxiety resulting from its transmission over a broadcast medium, a dematerialization that produces an unwelcome awareness of Marxian alienation. It is precisely this question that is figured in High and Low’s cowboy costumes.

**Hats Are Decoration: Convergence and Capital in High and Low**

In High and Low, Kurosawa moves beyond Yojimbo’s visual and structural affinities with the Western to incorporate the material culture surrounding the genre into his film text. This move suggests that generic hybridity is as much a function of the material processes of economic globalization as of the intertextual dialogue of transnational film culture. Reframing the cowboy outfits as a phenomenon of transmedial convergence, as opposed to strictly aesthetic intertextuality, I show that their presence in the film constitutes a critical engagement with globalization and financialization rather than a symbolic, symptomatic reflection thereof. These costumes are not merely an allusion to the Western genre as a narrative structure. Rather, they constitute a textual manifestation of the material context of the emergence of television, posed as a figure of the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy. The cowboy outfits that Jun and Shinichi wear are material artifacts of the value produced through access to children’s attention and their influence on their parents’ purchasing power.

While U.S. Western films had been popular in Japan since the silent period, the explosion of television ownership between the 1959 royal wedding and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics brought the genre into popular consciousness to an unprecedented degree. In a 1962 Film Quarterly article on The Magnificent Seven (1960), John Sturges’ remake of Kurosawa’s Seven Samurai (1954), Joseph L. Anderson noted the film’s “impressive Japanese returns” at the box office.
“Oddly,” he added, “in Japan at the moment, there is a craze for fast-draw skills, side-arms collecting, and cowboy and gunman stories. As both a cause and an effect of this, dubbed versions of every major U.S. Western videofilm series now play on Japanese television…."

Among these was *Rawhide*, which ran on the Nippon Education Television network from 1959 to 1965. It is curious to consider that Kurosawa likely saw Clint Eastwood as Rowdy Yates on television prior to the production of *Yojimbo*, long before Sergio Leone cast him as the Man with No Name in his unauthorized remake, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964).

All of this would seem to support Bernstein’s notion of television as a marker of American infiltration, but it is not necessarily the case that television is intrinsically occidental. The widespread popularity of U.S. programs belies the fact that they accounted for under five percent of the content broadcast over Japanese networks at the time. In fact, there had been independent televisual experiments in Japan dating as far back as 1924. While there was a strong element of self-conscious Americanization driving the adoption of household electrical appliances, the growth of the electronics industry in postwar Japan became a point of national pride. The impossibility of disentangling Americanization from postwar Japanese identity is amply demonstrated in the common colloquialism “three sacred treasures” (*Sanshu no Jingi*), referring to the essential appliances for making a modern home in the 1950s: washing machine, refrigerator, and television set. As Shunya Yoshimi points out, “The original ‘three sacred treasures’ (a sword, jewels, and a mirror) were national symbols for authenticating the position

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42 Ibid., 169-70.
of the emperor as the ruler of Japan’s archipelago, and they were much emphasized during the formation of the modern nation-state.”

Syncretizing new, foreign ideas with existing cultural touchstones is by no means exclusive to Japan or to modernity, though it does point toward the need for a reconsideration of the linkage between auteurism and national cinema. The academic discourse around Japanese filmmakers commonly makes an axiomatic distinction between Kurosawa, the “most Western,” and Yasujiro Ozu, the “most Japanese.” Ironically, while Kurosawa’s films are often read as allegories of the nation-state, Ozu’s have been seen as transcendentally untethered from national specificity. If the adoption of television is a sign of American cultural imperialism, it is surprising that Ozu made a film about it, while Kurosawa assiduously avoided the subject. Ozu’s Good Morning (1959) also has two children at the center of its narrative, though their quest to persuade their parents to buy a TV set stems their desire to watch sumo matches rather than American Westerns. Their silent-treatment strike against the recalcitrant adults is precociously rebellious and therefore seems characteristically Western. Their reentry into society through renewed deference to their elders, stereotypically an Eastern trait, only occurs once the Japanese-manufactured set is finally delivered.

During this period, children in both the U.S. and Japan were in fact becoming increasingly influential on their parents’ purchasing decisions. In 1960s Japan, where television had until recently been primarily a public medium, viewed mostly in train stations, retail stores, and restaurants, children’s series could also be a marketing tool for television sets themselves. One particularly cynical example is National Kid (1960-61), which unabashedly sought to exploit children’s persuasive power over their parents’ pocketbooks. National Electronics, now

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Panasonic, was one of the first and most successful Japanese manufacturers of TV sets. The Matushita Corporation, which marketed its appliances under the National (Nashonaru) brand, launched the series after its consumer research arm discovered that 57% of household electronics purchases were initiated by children.44

The increased influence of children over household finances is indissolubly linked with the emergence of television and particularly television advertising. Marc Steinberg has convincingly argued for resituating the rise of convergence, in the sense of the flow between “interconnected media and commodity forms,” as emerging not in the digital age but in the 1960s. In the Japanese context, the anime series Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atomu), which premiered two months before the release of High and Low, can be seen as marking an epochal shift from “advertis[ing] and sell[ing] a product based on its content” to the new method of “overlapping the commodity image with a character image.” Astro Boy thus figured a larger shift in Japan from a manufacturing economy to a service economy.45 Kurosawa’s cowboy outfits are a textual manifestation of precisely this historical moment, when the emergence of television in Japan coincided with larger trends toward deindustrialization, financialization, and globalization.

Michael Kackman’s research into the Hopalong Cassidy brand further demonstrates the intersection of these three developments within the media industry but points toward an even earlier periodization for convergence. In 1948, William Boyd, who had played Cassidy in dozens of films over the previous decade, bought the rights to the films and the character. His independent distribution company moved aggressively to expand his brand internationally, long before it became standard practice for the major American media corporations. By 1955, Boyd’s

45 Marc Steinberg, Anime’s Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), viii-ix.
distribution contracts extended across Latin America and Europe and reached as far afield as Australia, Hong Kong, and Japan.\footnote{Michael Kackman, “Nothing on but Hoppy Badges: ‘Hopalong Cassidy,’ William Boyd Enterprises, and Emergent Media Globalization,” \textit{Cinema Journal} 47, no. 4 (Summer 2008), 89.} A 1950 \textit{Coronet} magazine profile claimed that “fully a quarter of Cassidy’s fan mail, now well over 2,000 letters a week, comes from such unlikely places as Malta, Gibraltar, India, Africa, China, Turkey, and the Fiji Islands,” and that “[a]bout half the foreign mail comes from parents who want to know where they can buy Hopalong outfits.”\footnote{Ibid., 88.} Kackman argues that, in Boyd’s case, “merchandise was not used to extend the viability and popularity of the primary texts; instead, in both economic and cultural terms, it eventually became the primary text, supported by the films, television programs, and other adaptations.”\footnote{Ibid., 83.} Consequently, his business model “was not a Fordist \textit{extraction} of value through distribution of a finite commodity” (i.e. his film catalog) but rather “involv[ed] the ongoing \textit{creation} of value through extending the reach of an intellectual property” via merchandising and sponsorship deals.\footnote{Ibid., 79.}

If ancillary marketing materials can become primary texts, then Kurosawa’s cowboy outfits need not be taken as an allusion to the conventional narrative structure of the Western genre film. Nor are the costumes to be automatically read as a condemnation of Americanization, given the intensive imbrication of Japanese popular culture and ostensibly American cultural forms. These considerations also reframe Kurosawa’s decision to adapt an American pulp novel, Ed McBain’s \textit{King’s Ransom} (1959). Bernstein has astutely argued that \textit{High and Low} is not approached as an adaptation in the same way as Kurosawa’s film versions of higher-pedigreed literature. Despite the frequent dismissal of the source novel as a boilerplate potboiler, Bernstein posits that “Kurosawa took the McBain novel just as seriously as he took Shakespeare and

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\footnotetext[47]{Ibid., 88.}
\footnotetext[48]{Ibid., 83.}
\footnotetext[49]{Ibid., 79.}
\end{thebibliography}
Gorky.” 50 Yet Bernstein retains some problematic assumptions in his suggestion that “McBain’s narrative has been transposed from West to East.”51 This statement implies an essentializing notion of national culture that does not reflect the intricacies of the material situation.

The intuitive sense that the Western costumes in *High and Low* are a survival from its American source novel, constituting an imperialistic impurity, must be recontextualized in light of the transnational hybridity of media consumption practices relating to the emergence of television in postwar Japan. The striking thing about the shift from page to screen is that the Western theme is not simply borrowed but actually expanded. In *King’s Ransom*, the boys, Bobby King (Jun) and Jeff Reynolds (Shinichi), are playing “Cavalry and Indian,” but they are only toting toy rifles, not sporting prefabricated costumes. McBain also emphasizes the boys’ physical difference, stating that they “did not really resemble each other in the slightest.”52 If there is a suggestion of interchangeability, it is in Gondo counterpart Douglas King’s statements that in order to win this game, his son “needs assistance from a professional scalp hunter” (40). While scalping’s generic associations are usually with Indian savagery, King’s use of the adjective “professional” alludes to the amoral bounty hunters, embodied conflations of hero and villain, who would later become staples of the post-*Yojimbo* Western. King’s quip thus properly belongs to the realm of the “adult Western”—programs like *Gunsmoke* and *Rawhide* that premiered in the second half of the 1950s—as opposed to the children’s Western evoked in the boys’ play.53

50 Bernstein, “*High and Low,*” 173-4.
51 Ibid., 176.
The latter subgenre is directly referenced by the kidnapper, Sy, who introduces his captive to his accomplices, Eddie and Kathy, as “King—of the wild frontier!” This epithet was applied to Davy Crockett in the theme song of the three-part 1954 Disney TV series that launched a craze for coonskin caps among American youth.\(^{54}\) Jeff is notably not wearing one, again showing that the inclusion of ancillary consumer products is an innovation of the screenplay. In *King’s Ransom*, it is the kidnappers themselves who tend to make televisual allusions. As Bernstein notes, McBain’s novel displays “an artistic self-consciousness about its generic sources.”\(^{55}\) One particularly overt instance is a long interior monologue that reveals Kathy’s conflicted feelings guilty ruminations on her complicity in the crime:

What she wanted to sob out was the criminal’s straight-man dialogue designed as a setup for Jack Webb’s devastating closing punch line.

“Give me a break, will you?” …

And the taciturn spokesman for the Los Angeles Police Department answers, “Did you give him one?”

There are no punch lines in real life. (187)

In King’s final, violent confrontation with the kidnapper, so obviously unlike the subdued ending of Kurosawa’s film, his brutal retribution is glossed by the narrator as exactly the kind of thing one would never see on *Dragnet* (236).

This contrast is foreshadowed in a remark that King makes to a police detective as they drive toward the ransom rendezvous: “The mean witch who turns into a lovely princess, the toad who turns into a prince, the rotten louse who suddenly sees the error of his ways and vows to do good for the rest of his life, fairy tales, pap for the television viewers of America. I’ll never


\(^{55}\) Bernstein, “*High and Low*,” 175.
change” (223). In juxtaposing the kidnappers’ and King’s attitudes toward TV, McBain draws a stark distinction between mass-media melodrama and gritty, novelistic realism. McBain’s evocation of verisimilitude is a two-pronged attack: one negative, directed toward television, and one positive, whose strategy is the integration of multiple print media into his book to produce a sense of documentary authentication. Included on the immediately following page is a reproduction of Eddie’s electrical diagram for contacting King’s carphone by radio (224).

Elsewhere, the novel reproduces a typewritten police memo with handwritten annotations (25) and a file card showing the tire tread patterns of the make and model of the kidnappers’ car (152). In this way, McBain upholds printed material as superior to audiovisual media in ascertaining and exhibiting truth.

The power of motion pictures to distort reality is deftly posited in a scene in the police station, as tips regarding the kidnapped boy’s whereabouts cascade in. One call comes from a citizen who claims to have seen him in a movie—not in the audience, but on the screen. At this point, McBain adopts a textual layout akin to cinematic montage as the calls continue:

The phone on Brown’s desk rang.

“Eighty-seventh Squad, Detective Brown speaking…”

“Eighty-seventh Squad, Di Mateo…”

“Eighty-seventh Squad, Detective Willis…”

“Eighty-seventh Squad, Hernandez…”

“Eighty-seventh Precinct, Sergeant Murchison…”

“Eighty-seventh Precinct, Captain Frick…”

“Headquarters, Lieutenant Vinnick…”

“Arson Squad, Detective Hopkins…”
“You say the boy, sir?”

“The boy was with three men, ma’am?”

“You saw the boy…”

“When, sir?”

“What street was that, sir?”

“Where, sir?”

“Where, ma’am?”

Where?

Where?

Where? (131)

McBain repeatedly associates chaos and confusion with film and television, valorizing his own version of novelistic realism over against the mystifications of Hollywood.

Kurosawa’s adoption of McBain’s mixed-media approach provides further evidence for the film’s status as a serious adaptation, but the shift in medium demands a different means of expressing similar ideas. Primarily, it requires the audiovisual to accrue truth value. Oddly, the media technologies that are represented in the film all distinctly separate the aural (telephone, tape recorder, radio) and the visual (8mm film, still photographs, newspaper). Taken alone, each of these two types of evidence is insufficient to identify and locate the kidnapper. Breaks in the case only come when the two senses act in concert, as when the sound of a trolley heard in the background in a tape-recorded phone call is matched to Shinichi’s crayoned drawing of a view from the kidnapper’s safe house. Like McBain, Kurosawa intimates that only his chosen medium can faithfully represent reality, and that not the novel but cinema is superior to that other, newer audiovisual medium, television.
In light of the rapid emergence of television as an integral aspect of everyday life in Japan at this time, it is remarkable that a film that thoroughly integrates so many other media shows little trace of TV. Considering the class position of the Gondos and the ultra-modern design of their house, it is all the more striking that there is no television in their living room, particularly since corporate executives were early adopters of the new technology.\textsuperscript{56} In fact, the film’s media mix includes only one shot of a television, a turned-off set that appears in a long tracking shot that introduces Takeuchi, walking along a polluted river near his modest abode. As the camera stops and Takeuchi exits into an alley in the background, his distorted reflection appears in the blank cathode ray tube of the one set on display outside a small electronics shop, among a stack of washing machines, radios, rice cookers, blenders, and electric fans [fig. 2.14]. Bernstein argues that this shot portrays Takeuchi’s environment as “cluttered with discarded electronics and the residue of modernity—TV sets in particular,”\textsuperscript{57} but the consumer items we see are advertised as new, Japanese-made, Sanyo-brand products for purchase.

As with the cowboy costumes, Kurosawa adopts the association of the villain with television from McBain’s novel but again expands upon the theme. When the police first identify Takeuchi in the hospital where he works, they spy him through a window frame, shaped in the 4:3 aspect ratio of contemporary TV sets. Such 4:3 frames multiply in the “Dope Alley” sequence when he enlists a strung-out addict as a test subject for the lethal dose of heroin that he plans to administer to his accomplices in order to silence them. This boxy shape is identifiable in the background as well as in his mirrored sunglasses, whose convex curve and reflective surface echo the appearance of a cathode ray tube [fig. 2.15]. The gaunt specter of Takeuchi, agent of

\textsuperscript{56} Kato provides a list of the “Occupational distribution of initial [TV] receivers in 1953” that places business executives (at 249 sets) behind only electronics retailers (303). Those two categories made up more than half of the total number of 866 sets. “Japan,” 171.

\textsuperscript{57} Bernstein, “High and Low,” 187.
television and finance, draws an association between the two that is more than coincidental. A film broadcast on television exponentially multiplies in value in much the same way that financial speculation produces value without labor. Whereas McBain’s argument is against the mystification of televisual narratives, Kurosawa’s dispute with TV has to do with the ephemerality of the broadcast medium as opposed to the materiality of celluloid.

Fig. 2.14: Takeuchi Passing Electronics Store

Kurosawa’s personal animosity toward television is well documented. Late in life, the director told an admiring American audience, “The way television films are made and the way
theatrical films are made are fundamentally different, and I only know how to make theatrical films.”\textsuperscript{58} Yet the first half of the film, which has often been compared to a stage play, takes place entirely within a stark, interior, domestic set that is strongly reminiscent of early teleplays. According to Donald Richie, who observed the shoot, “The method of filming was something like that used in TV with [three] different cameras using different lenses, changing position from time to time.”\textsuperscript{59} Kurosawa’s multi-camera method, requiring extensive rehearsals and diffuse lighting schemes, also produces an echo of the “liveness” effect of television. But rather than switching feeds between cameras and broadcasting ethereal signals, his crew was producing a physical product that had to be manually reconstructed in the editing room.

One particularly memorable sequence powerfully evokes the materiality of celluloid. Seen from within the Gondos’ home, a plume of pink smoke appears on the Yokohama skyline, emitted from a pouch of powder sewn into the lining of the ransom briefcase that Takeuchi has burned to destroy the evidence of his crime [fig. 2.16]. This small stroke of color in a black-and-white film is often remarked upon as a unique innovation, but film tinting was extremely common in the silent period (e.g. blue for night scenes, red for a fire). While this usually involved treating the entire filmstrip in a chemical bath, some early films were meticulously spot-tinted by hand. The appearance of this technique in \textit{High and Low} connotes not only an earlier era of filmmaking, but more importantly, the manual labor that this process entailed. Indeed, it would be more precise to say that it manifests that labor by acting as material evidence of the physical manipulation of the filmstrip.

\textsuperscript{59} Richie, \textit{The Films of Akira Kurosawa}, 168.
This association between silent cinema and labor grows out of Kurosawa’s formative relationship with his older brother, Heigo, who was a prominent *benshi* or *katsuben*. During the silent era, rather than featuring musical accompaniment, Japanese movie theaters employed these narrators, who “not only recounted the plot of the films, they enhanced the emotional content by performing the voices and sound effects and providing evocative descriptions of the events and images on the screen…”60 Heigo particularly “stressed high-quality narration of well-directed foreign films,”61 and Akira’s early exposure to American Westerns like *Three Bad Men* would undoubtedly have included *benshi* narration.

These performers became so entrenched in local film culture that they successfully lobbied to resist the transition to sound film well into the 1930s.62 Heigo’s suicide, brought on by the failure of the *benshi* union’s strike against synchronized recorded sound, plays a pivotal role in Kurosawa’s autobiography. This tragic event marks the end of Kurosawa’s youthful

61 Ibid.
reminiscences and the transition to his career in film. “During the three-year interval” between these two events, he writes, “nothing very noteworthy occurred in my life.”63 The death of his brother and the defeat of the benshi union were results of a systemic change in the industry that seemed to have been stronger than human will or collective action. The large amount of capital necessary to fund the purchase and installation of electronic sound equipment placed finance at the heart of global film industries. The resultant contradiction between the embodied labor of the benshi and the depersonalized abstractions of financial capitalism is thus expressed in the pink smoke scene.

Significantly, the pink-smoke pouch has been manually sewn into the lining of the leather briefcase by Gondo himself. In this scene, the emphatic composition and blocking stresses the other characters’ surprise at seeing this powerful executive taking a seat on the floor as he dumps out the old leatherworking tools from his youth as a lowly apprentice. As Aoki, the family chauffeur and father of the kidnapped Shinichi, observes Gondo’s labor, he stands upright and bows his head, embarrassed by the humility of his employer [fig. 2.17]. A moment earlier, he had been dictating to a detective endless serial numbers from a stack of ransom money. These murmured chains of numbers paradoxically indicate the individual identity of inherently interchangeable bills. Like Jun and Shinichi, the paper currency exhibits an unsettling fluidity between similarity and difference.

The evocation of an earlier, humbler time in Gondo’s life aligns precisely with Toshiro Mifune’s rags-to-riches star text, revolving around the idea that he had never forgotten where he came from.64 Gondo’s history as a manual laborer would have been further emphasized in an alternate ending that was cut from the final version. As Gondo and Tokura, the lead detective,

63 Kurosawa, Something Like an Autobiography, 88.
64 Galbraith, The Emperor and the Wolf, 352.
shake hands in parting, Tokura notices that Gondo’s hands have the rough, calloused feel of a worker’s.65 Throughout the film, manufacturing is held up as a positive value, while speculation is condemned. In this light, the wound on Takeuchi’s hand that enables the police to identify him suggests a further connection and distinction between the two men. While Takeuchi also works with his hands as a doctor-in-training, his criminal labor is not productive. The kidnapping plot involves creating value without production, a hallmark of financial rather than industrial capitalism.

This network of associations around labor and finance recontextualizes Jun and Shinichi’s cowboy outfits, which are the material cause of the boys’ becoming equivalent in monetary value and thus interchangeable. The costumes that the boys wear are, importantly, not functional. They are even less so than the shoddily made ladies’ shoes being pumped out by Gondo’s company, following a trend toward disposable fashion and planned obsolescence. In the opening scene, Gondo rips one of these shoes apart, pointing out each defect as he disassembles

Fig. 2.17: Gondo at Work

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65 See *Akira Kurosawa: It Is Wonderful to Create*, a Japanese television documentary included on the Criterion home video release. Some footage from this scene is included in a trailer also available on that disc.
it. Gondo’s stated motive in buying out the majority of the stock is to effect a return to making sensible, durable shoes. As a former worker, he is particularly attuned to everyday ergonomics. Dismissing another executive’s comparison of shoes to hats, he proclaims, “Hats are decoration. Shoes carry all your body weight.” This statement nods to Jun’s cowboy hat, a material manifestation of the proliferation of the Western genre on television and the creation of value through access to attention and the subsequent desire for conspicuous consumption.

*High and Low* is filled with further echoes of television. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto points out, a neon sign for the aforementioned National Electronics is clearly visible on the Yokohama skyline under the film’s opening credits. He sees the repetition of this word in the name of Gondo’s company, National Shoes, as supporting his reading of the film as an allegory for the Japanese nation. Yet the connection between the two Nationals is more literal than symbolic. The neon sign is featured even more prominently in the opening shot of the film proper. It appears at far screen left, clearly visible through the glass sliding doors as Gondo rises from his seat and enters the frame from the right. The camera pans to follow him through the darkened living room as he goes to turn on the light. Returning to his previous position, his reflection is now clearly visible in the glass due to the change in lighting. This shot has the effect of repeating the National Electronics logo in such a way that the name National Shoes will be instantly associated with the Matsushita Corporation. Additionally, the flipping of the light switch and the subsequent appearance of Gondo’s reflection is similar to the effect of turning off a cathode ray tube, whose screen more clearly casts reflections once it is powered down.

This effect is repeated in the film’s final scene, earlier discussed as a showdown in terms of structural genre theory. Having more closely examined the incorporation of the material culture of the Western in the boys’ cowboy costumes in relation to the film’s general attitude

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60 Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa*, 324.
toward television as a narrative medium and as a consumer product, a new reading of this famous sequence presents itself. The superimposition of Gondo’s reflection on Takeuchi’s face, and vice versa, recalls the uncanny phenomenon of viewing simultaneously both the televised image and one’s own reflection hovering in the glass over the screen. As Gondo watches a metal shutter slam down between him and Takeuchi, he is left with only his reflection, as if he had just switched off the TV set [fig. 2.18]. This final image of the film thus encapsulates the struggle between cinema and television that is central to the text. The fundamental conceptual difference between the two media—the materiality of the filmstrip, associated with manual labor, versus the ephemerality of the TV broadcast, associated with speculative finance—is figured in the fleeting reflections that haunt *High and Low*.

![Fig. 2.18: Turning Off the TV](image)

*Shane, Come Back!*: Transmedial Nostalgia as Structuring Absence of Generic Criticism

This reading of *High and Low* as an excursus on the relationship between cinema and television, figured through the transmedial manifestations of the Western genre, has reframes some of the major presumptions of film genre theory. The image of a child playing with a toy
gun brings to mind a more canonical Western, *Shane* (1953). While *Shane* has, to my knowledge, never been spoken of in relation to *High and Low*, it has been closely linked to Kurosawa’s immediately preceding film. In his analysis of *Yojimbo*’s sequel, *Sanjuro*, as an “Eastern Western,” David Desser goes so far as to call it “basically a remake of George Stevens’ *Shane*.” This argument rests on the applicability to both films of a narratological model outlined by Will Wright in his influential *Sixguns and Society*. Wright’s Classical Plot, whose vagueness allows it to encapsulate such radically divergent films as *Cimarron* (1931), *Duel in the Sun* (1946), *Yellow Sky* (1949), *Vera Cruz* (1954), and *Hombre* (1967), relies heavily on *Shane* as its center of gravity.

Desser finds in *Shane* the ultimate expression of the genre’s common “teacher/disciple” theme. Though he argues persuasively for the frequency of this device in the Western, citing *Red River* (1948), *The Searchers* (1956), and *Ride the High Country* (1962), there is a specific aspect of *Shane* that sets it apart. Desser’s other examples all deal with the relationship between middle-aged men and adolescents on the verge of maturity, but in *Shane*, the disciple is eight years old. This eccentricity has not hindered the film’s canonization, even though it is extremely unusual for a Western even to include a child character, much less to grant him the film’s structuring perspective. How has so idiosyncratic a film as *Shane* come to be almost universally accepted as the “locus classicus of the American Western”? An interrogation of the now-axiomatic canonicity of *Shane* illuminates how the emphasis on childhood media consumption practices in

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67 David Desser, “Kurosawa’s Eastern Western: *Sanjuro* and the Influence of *Shane*,” *Film Criticism* 8.1 (Fall 1983), 55.
*High and Low* offers an alternative basis for analyzing the critical genealogy of Western genre theory.

Concomitant with the institution of cinema studies as an academic discipline in the late 1960s and early ’70s, the emergence of film genre theory required the construction of a canon that would provide a hermeneutic center of gravity for the foundling field. The proliferation of television serials intended for child audiences over the previous two decades posed a problem for the Western genre’s aesthetic reputation. Early genre theorists sought theoretical methods that would shield their subdiscipline from accusations of solipsistic, fandom-based interest. Their various modes of recuperation uniformly emphasized the work of recognized auteurs like John Ford and elided the material base of the genre’s popularity in other, less prestigious media.

The centrality of *Shane* in the Western canon is all the more puzzling in light of the derision it suffered in two foundational critical essays that constitute the first wave of Western criticism. In “The Evolution of the Western” (1955), André Bazin cited *Shane* as the most egregious offender in the postwar cycle of the “superwestern” (*surwestern*), “a Western that would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence—an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, or erotic interest, in short some quality extrinsic to the genre and which is supposed to enrich it.”70 In “The Westerner” (1954), Robert Warshow similarly argued, “The highest expression of this aestheticizing tendency is in George Stevens’ *Shane*, where the legend of the West is virtually reduced to its essentials and then fixed in the dreamy clarity of a fairy tale. […] The mere physical progress of

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the film ... is so deliberately graceful that everything seems to be happening at the bottom of a clear lake.”71

By the time of the second wave of Western criticism, coincident with the emergence of cinema studies as an academic discipline in the late 1960s and early ’70s, a new and opposite consensus had been reached. In *Horizons West*, Jim Kitses glowingly avers that *Shane* “weld[s] together in remarkable balance historical reconstruction and national themes with personal drama and archetypal elements.”72 George Fenin and William Everson place *Shane* among “the best Westerns of recent memory,” which “have still been Westerns basically in the old mood, stressing the austerity of the frontier, and telling their stories in a superbly pictorial manner.”73 A tectonic shift in critical attitudes toward *Shane* seems to have occurred during the late 1950s and early ’60s, begging the question of why this should have happened at that specific moment.

One possible explanation lies in the dramatic change in the aesthetic practices, narrative content, and media technologies prevalent during critics’ formative exposure to the genre. Bazin compares *Shane*’s Alan Ladd unfavorably with Tom Mix, one of the biggest Western stars of the silent period. For Bazin, “*Stagecoach* (1939) is the ideal example of the maturity of a style brought to classic perfection.”74 Ford’s first sound Western is the apotheosis of the silent Western of the 1910s and ’20s, while *Shane* has a similar relationship to the B-Western of the 1930s and ’40s. In this light, note that Bazin was roughly twenty-one years old when *Stagecoach* was released, while Everson was about twenty-four when *Shane* premiered. Bazin, born in 1918,

74 Bazin, “The Evolution of the Western,” 149.
would have seen only silent films for the first decade or so of his life, while sound film was already becoming the norm by the time of, for instance, John Cawelti’s birth in 1929.

In *The Six-Gun Mystique* (1975), Cawelti is refreshingly forthright about the origins of his interest in Westerns: a childhood addiction to the Lone Ranger radio program. More characteristically of the second wave, he only anecdotally mentions this notably formulaic series as an exemplar of the structural unity of all Westerns, regardless of the medium of a particular text. If medial specificity was irrelevant to the academic work of structuralist critics, it was nonetheless a substantial factor in their personal media consumption practices. The ambivalence that critics felt toward television Westerns was nicely encapsulated by Ralph Brauer in 1973: “*Shane* is the ideal Western for a generation of critics who relegated Ken Maynard [star of many B-Westerns in the early sound period] to a Saturday TV matinee and then secretly watched him themselves—wishing they could be kids again at the Saturday Picture Show with popcorn and a double feature all for only a dime.” In other words, the TV Western could fairly be considered the structuring absence of the second wave of Western criticism.

Writing in 1969, Everson described *Shane* as “a film that makes its greatest impact the first time around—unless, of course, one has only seen it on television, in which case the vistas that suddenly unfurl on a large theatre screen and in color make a second viewing a genuine revelation.” For him, *Shane*’s “diminishing returns” are largely an effect of the translation from one medium to another, and of the repetitive nature of broadcasting practices. He argues, “Much of it holds up extremely well as film,” that is, as *not television*. Fenin and Everson’s chapter on the TV Western concludes with a lament:

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The television Western can never hope to compete with the grandeur of such theatrical Westerns as *The Searchers* (1956) and *Shane* (1953). And television has taken over the “B” Western completely, has compressed it into its own peculiar formula, and at the same time rendered it commercially useless in a theatrical sense. The grand thrillers of the type made by Buck Jones, Tom Mix, Ken Maynard, and Fred Thomson are in this way taken from us for all time, and the loss is one for which the grand-scale epic of Ford or Vidor, no matter how well done, can never really compensate.\(^7^8\)

The phrase “for all time” here evokes the irrevocable erasure of the bygone cinematic exhibition practices that Bauer noted, but it also suggests a retroactive diminishment of the early B-movie stars. Perhaps Everson’s derision of *Shane* arises from a sense that the film’s self-awareness mocks the memory of the B’s that it invokes. In addition, the spate of TV Western series that had glutted the airwaves in the 1950s and ’60s had themselves participated in *Shane*’s diminishment, their derivativeness being retrospectively read back into the film.

It should be noted that Everson was a film historian and preservationist who held a material interest in espousing the primacy of cinema over television. Cawelti, a literary scholar, was far more sanguine about the relative merits of the two media:

The Western story *Shane* is not exactly the same in a novel as it is in a movie; there are even significant differences between the movie version of *Shane* as seen in a theater and on the television screen in one’s home. The method of formula analysis has little to offer in the investigation of this kind of difference, because it must inevitably focus on that which is common to creation in these different media, the basic story patterns.\(^7^9\)


\(^{79}\) Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, 297-98.
Here the stakes are the applicability of structuralist narrative theory to all media, so their material incommensurability is irrelevant.

Beyond Cawelti’s enlightened self-interest, the structural method was also eminently apposite to the outlook of third-wave, baby-boomer genre scholars like Desser (b. 1953). For critics of this generation, the first who could not remember a time before television, the transmedial malleability of the Western would have been so obvious as to seem natural. Lying at the crux of the B-Western’s migration from the movie house to the suburban home, *Shane* can only be seen as representative of the entire genre once that transition has been completed. Indeed, *Shane*’s narrative content mirrors this shift quite remarkably. In the opening sequence, as little Joey watches the eponymous drifter approaching the Starrett homestead, it is as if he is riding off of the big screen and into the living room, just as Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers were doing through that new piece of domestic furniture that was so essential to suburban settlers: the television.

The reminiscences of Patrick McGee in his recent poststructuralist monograph on the Western, *From Shane to Kill Bill*, are particularly enlightening in this regard. “In my childhood,” he writes, “*Shane* was a minor event that cannot be separated from my blue-collar background and the context of the nuclear family that was the primary institution of my socialization in the fifties.” The year of McGee’s birth, 1949, also marks two milestones in the Western genre: the publication of Jack Schaefer’s novel *Shane* and the premiere of *The Lone Ranger*, the first nationally successful Western television series. A rash of repackaged B-films and new telefilm

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80 Patrick McGee, *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), xv.
81 *Shane* was originally published serially in *Argosy* magazine in 1946 as “Rider from Nowhere.” For a thorough history of the story’s transmedial permutations, see Michael T. Marsden, “*Shane*: A Story for All Media,” in *Shane: The Critical Edition*, ed. James C. Work (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 338-53.
productions rapidly followed, nearly all of which were marketed toward children. This trend was so marked that it became frequent fodder for psychologists and sociologists studying the effects of mass media on youth audiences.

Seen in this context, the trajectory of Shane’s canonization takes on a new import. Shane as a text exhibits certain qualities that only become indicative of its “unusual representativeness” in the light of its relationship to television Westerns. Again turning to McGee’s recollections: “The thing I remember most about seeing Shane as a boy is the face of Alan Ladd. It was the medium close-up shot at the beginning of the movie when he pauses on his horse and looks across the river at the boy on a fence.” While it is true that many Westerns open with the hero’s emergence out of the wilderness, riding toward (semi-)civilization, his movement in this establishing shot is nearly always lateral, commonly from right to left, suggesting westering. Shane is extremely unusual in presenting the protagonist riding toward the camera, intercut with little Joey’s reaction shots. Of course, the famous opening sequence of The Searchers, another film whose unquestionable canonicity elides its eccentricity, exhibits close parallels to this one, though Ford’s camera never gets closer to his characters than a medium-long shot. By comparison, Stevens’ intercutting of a medium close-up of Shane and a larger close-up on Joey appears much more televisual. This is particularly so when viewed in the original 4:3 aspect ratio, as opposed to the widescreen matte often imposed on the film since its cinematic release at the inception of Hollywood’s transition to widescreen, itself inspired by competition with television.

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84 Wright, Sixguns and Society, 33.
85 McGee, From Shane to Kill Bill, 1.
The manifest invocation of subjective point of view is also rare in Westerns, which tend instead to emphasize the vastness of space as an arena for action. Rather than placing the spectator at a seemingly objective remove from the ostensibly historical setting, *Shane* immediately situates its vantage within the Starrett family. In this sequence, we can see how Shane’s approach echoes the arrival of the Western hero in the home via the television. This is especially evident in the transition from the cinematic grandeur of the landscape in the credit sequence, in which Shane does move laterally across the frame in an extreme long shot, quickly gives way to the televisual constriction of Shane’s entrance into the homestead. The targeting of early TV Westerns to children is echoed through the alignment of spectatorial point of view with Joey, who often watches Shane through window frames and doorways.86

The centrality of *Shane* to the Western canon is largely a function of the affective resonance it achieves by mimicking the situation of a child watching television. To cite one further instance of the generational shift between the first and second wave, compare Warshow’s description of Joey as “the wondering little boy who might have imagined the whole story” with Philip French’s (b. 1933) perception of a “deprived, yearning child.”87 Warshow’s take suggests the detached, long-shot, cinematic attitude, whereas French’s characterization points toward the immediate, close-up, televisual situation. For later scholars like McGee or Desser, for whom Shane had always already arrived, Stevens’ film became their *ne plus ultra* through its symbiotic relationship with television Westerns. At the same time, the structural narratology outlined by second-wave scholars like Kitses and Cawelti allowed *Shane* as text to stand in for those TV

86 This framing device is initially associated with Joey’s mother, Marion, as she observes the approaching hero through the kitchen window. This pleasant distraction from her domestic labor and the subsequent suggestions of her romantic desire for Shane suggest that he can also be read through Marion’s point of view as a manifestation of contemporary soap operas. This points toward the multi-genericity of a given text relative to various spectators, a concept further developed in Chapter Four.

series through a process of transmedial equivalence. It thus became unnecessary and, given the ongoing professionalization of film studies as an academic discipline, untenable to treat such programs as discrete media phenomena or even in comparison to cinema.

Shane’s generically unconventional focus on nuclear domesticity and on the child as center of spectatorial desire clearly engage with the media-historical context of the emergence of television. In this sense, the film evinces a return of the repressed of cinematic genre theory through its textual echoes of the reception situation of contemporary children’s TV Westerns. A genealogical excavation of Western genre studies reveals its roots in these theorists’ childhood media consumption, which had to be disavowed in the interest of the institutional legitimation of the discipline. Ultimately, it is less the structural rigor of Shane’s narrative that placed it at the heart of the Western corpus than its transmediation of these nostalgic guilty pleasures.
CHAPTER THREE
WEST BY NORTHEAST: THE WESTERN IN BRAZIL

In this chapter I examine the relationship between American Westerns and a parallel Brazilian genre, the *Nordestern*. This term, a portmanteau of *nordeste* (Portuguese for “northeast”) and *Western*, is itself indicative of the close relationship between the two national genres. Rather than attempting a general comparative analysis, I look closely at three Brazilian films that exhibit different tactics for appropriating the visual and narrative tropes of the Western: Lima Barreto’s *O Cangaceiro* (1953) and two films by Glauber Rocha, *Black God, White Devil* (1964) and *Antônio das Mortes* (1969) [figs. 3.1-3.3]. While the first of these features a wholesale adoption of Hollywood modes, the latter two engage in a dialogic relationship with American Westerns.

Where Barreto and his employer, the Vera Cruz Studio, aimed to mimic American cinema, Rocha forged a radically new cinematic style that nonetheless involved allusions to dominant forms. Vera Cruz and the Cinema Novo movement, in which Rocha was one of the key participants, both struggled against the overwhelming market dominance of Hollywood product in an attempt to raise the status of Brazilian national cinema. Their shared interest in fostering homegrown film production was inevitably played out in a global arena, where film festival accolades and prestige among European critics were just as, if not more, important than Brazilian box office. An appreciation of the complex circuit of international film distribution leads to a reconsideration of the relationship between these Brazilian films and the Hollywood forms with which they are in dialogue.

In order to better understand the stakes involved for Brazilian filmmakers, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of cinema history in Brazil, particularly in the context of the
widespread dissemination of Hollywood films there. The ubiquity of American cinema in Brazil dates back at least to the First World War, when Hollywood took advantage of the halt in European film production to become the undisputed leader in the global cinema market. American studios could recoup expenses domestically due to the sheer number of exhibition outlets, allowing them to spend more on production than foreign competitors and to export their product virtually risk-free. While many European countries instituted policy measures to limit American dominance of their markets and to rejuvenate domestic film production, the floodgates were left open throughout the Global South.

Figs. 3.1-3.3: Posters for Three Brazilian Westerns

Two magazine articles published in 1926 convey the early importance of the diffusion of American films, especially adventure stories, on the international market. Charles Merz’s “When the Movies Go Abroad” takes issue with the image of America presented on foreign screens: “The American movie is caricaturing us cruelly enough to lay the basis for a libel suit.”1 C.J. North, “motion-picture specialist of the Department of Commerce,” is more optimistic in “Our

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Silent Ambassadors,” but both agree that the exportation of American films had become an increasingly important aspect of American foreign policy and commerce. More specifically, both cite the broad appeal of Western films. According to North,

[I]t may be stated in general that the lower classes everywhere—lower as to intelligence, education, and culture—lean strongly toward slapstick comedy, Wild West melodrama, and serials. […] [T]he direct action of the broad comedy and of the Western drama appeals at once. Slipping on a banana peel needs no interpretation; neither does the cowboy’s dash to save the damsel in distress.

He goes on to contrast this type of audience with the “cultured classes in Latin America,” who “have always liked pictures which are primarily concerned with wealth, fashions, and jewels. Under this heading fall most society dramas and problem films.”

Some of North’s comments echo Merz’s description of the Japanese silent film narrator known as a *benshi*,

whose idea of each picture was essentially his own, and who, unable to read the titles in English, made up titles to suit his fancy as he went along. Sometimes, under his deft touch, comedy turned tragedy and tragedy turned comedy; but the net effect, provided each reel had its share of action, was apparently as pleasing as if everyone had understood the story. Why not? After all, who needs to be told, when the bullets fly, that this is an open space where men are men?

The key similarity between these analyses is the assumption that Westerns are immediately accessible to any audience. This is seen as a natural trait of the genre rather than a result of audiences’ repeated exposure to this type of film.

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Several recent analyses of viewing conditions in colonial Africa question this assumption, preferring instead to examine audiences’ active responses to American films, especially Westerns. Peter J. Bloom presents the popularity of Westerns in Algeria as an extension of their popularity in France, while Charles Ambler and James Burns both describe a far more paternalistic situation in the British colonies of the Rhodesias (now Zambia and Zimbabwe).4 In the mid-twentieth century, Algeria had movie theaters in several cities, while cinema in Rhodesia was still largely a traveling show. Yet the two regions shared many similarities in viewing conditions and audience responses. In general, screenings were talkative affairs, with loud comments directed toward the screen and conversations about the film conducted among the audience. Viewers even became physically involved in screenings, whether by pantomiming actions performed on the screen or by throwing hats into the air in celebration of the hero’s triumph. This participation on the part of colonized audiences shows that they were hardly passive spectators and that they were actively and collectively creating interpretations even during screenings. Audience interaction went beyond the movie theater to appropriations of Western tropes in everyday life and the interpretive application of the antagonisms of Western narratives to contemporary political realities. Ambler’s conclusion can serve as a general summation of these essays: “[M]oviegoers sought in films not only entertainment and sources of style but also an opportunity to engage and critique the colonial order they inhabited and to appropriate and synthesize notions of modernity….”5 These studies show that, even in a colonial

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situation, meanings presented in dominant media are not fixed and often produce different outcomes than intended.

Latin America of course presents a very different picture from colonial Africa. Brazil has a similar historical patrimony to the United States in that its population is a mixture of the descendents of European colonizers, African slaves, and indigenous peoples, though ethnicity is generally concerned more fluid there than it is in the United States. Although it became independent from Portugal in 1822, Brazil has long suffered from underdevelopment and American economic and cultural imperialism. Despite these mitigating factors, the history of cinema in Brazil is extremely rich. There has now been over a century of continuous film production in Rio de Janeiro, though there have been many periodic hills and valleys in terms of the volume of output.

The period between 1908 and 1911 is known as the *Bela Época* of Brazilian cinematic production, a golden age prior to the swift and overwhelming arrival of American cinematic hegemony. Brazil ranked sixth among foreign markets for American film exports in 1926 and fourth in 1929.\(^6\) While the U.S. exported a comparable number of films to European countries, the percentage of screen time was much higher in South American markets.\(^7\) During the silent era, American films regularly accounted for over 80 percent of the Brazilian market in a given year.\(^8\) It is hardly surprising, then, that Thomas Ince’s Westerns inspired the first short film of Humberto Mauro, generally the best-regarded Brazilian director prior to the Cinema Nôvo movement. Made in 1925, *Valadião, o Cratera* is sadly not extant, but according to Randal

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\(^8\) Johnson, *The Film Industry in Brazil*, 37. The available figures are for 1922-25.
Johnson and Robert Stam, “Mauro’s camera follows a band of desperadoes through the
mountains of Minas Gerais [a largely rural, interior state north of Rio de Janeiro]. After
kidnapping a young girl, the thieves are brought to justice and the girl is saved.”9 That same
year, a feature entitled Filho sem Mãe (A Son without a Mother) marked the first appearance on
the screen of the bandits of the Brazilian Northeast, known as cangaceiros. These two elements,
the influence of the American Western on Brazilian film and the use of the cangaceiro as subject
matter, would later combine in fascinating ways.

The coming of sound fostered optimism among Brazilian filmmakers, who believed that
the now unintelligible foreign product would not be able to hold audiences’ attention, thus
opening a space for homegrown films. To their chagrin, the American film industry proved more
resilient and flexible than they had expected. However, several Rio de Janeiro studios found
success with the widely popular chanchada. In response to the proliferation of these musical
comedies, a group of investors in São Paulo founded the Vera Cruz studios in 1949. They set out
to make a more sophisticated type of film that would be competitive on the international market,
despite the fact that Brazilian films made up only a small percentage of the domestic market.
American films were still ubiquitous, reaching almost 90 percent market share in the early years
of the decade.10

The heads of the studio, members of São Paolo’s industrial bourgeoisie with little
experience in film production, were enamored with the organizational integration of the
Hollywood studio system as well as its aesthetic techniques. Seeking to produce films that would

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9 Mauro’s second feature film, Tesouro Perdido (“Lost Treasure,” 1927), which was heavily influenced by the films
of D. W. Griffith and Henry King, also features a kidnapping plot. Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, “The Shape of
Brazilian Film History,” in Brazilian Cinema, eds. Randal Johnson and Robert Stam (New York: Columbia
10 Johnson, The Film Industry in Brazil, 61. The available figures are for 1941-52. Beginning in 1947, the percentage
of American films released in Brazil declined relative to the increase in European and Brazilian production, though
the number of American films released remained in roughly the same range that it had during World War II.
be viable in foreign theaters, the studio’s directors imitated the style of European and American films, from lighting to editing to musical scores. Disdainful of what they saw as the vulgarity of the chanchadas and of Rio-based productions in general, Vera Cruz put the cart before the horse by ignoring the logistics of distribution and assuming that high-quality productions would sell themselves. In its myopic obsession with making prestige pictures on the model of MGM’s, Vera Cruz had imagined that Hollywood’s dominance was a result of its production values and narrative codes rather than its control over international distribution circuits. The venture was doomed from the beginning, and the studio effectively signed its death warrant by entering a distribution deal with Columbia Pictures, which had no interest in promoting a potential rival.11

The only Vera Cruz production to turn a profit was O Cangaceiro, which won two prizes at Cannes in 1953 (for best adventure film and music), but by that time the studio was already going bankrupt. Nevertheless, Vera Cruz had produced the first international success of the Brazilian cinema, though the extent of its Braziilianness has been a matter of dispute. It takes as its subject the bandits who once terrorized the arid backlands of the Northeast, known in Portuguese as the sertão, but it puts them through the motions of a narrative clearly inspired by Hollywood Westerns. In their naïve belief in the persuasive power of production values and the meritocratic nature of the global cinematic economy, Vera Cruz wholeheartedly adopted the Platonic Western as they understood it. This practice of attempting to integrate Brazilian semantics into American syntax produced some instructive juxtapositions and dissonances that would ultimately inspire several aspects of Rocha’s subsequent engagement with the Western.

The opening shot fades in on a group of anonymous riders moving across the frame single-file, right to left [fig. 3.4]. Beginning with an unidentified man or group of men on horseback emerging from an undetermined place is fairly standard in American Westerns. The

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cangaceiros appear in a wide shot of open space, suggesting their nomadic and almost autochthonous nature. We hear folk singing with a call-and-response form, intimating that it may comes from the riders themselves. This is reminiscent of the singing cowboys of the 1930s, or of the prominent use of group singing in the films of John Ford. Interestingly, the opening sequence in the screenplay was radically different: on his release after spending thirty years in prison, one of the bandits recounts the story of his days in the *cangaço* (banditry) to a nun, setting up a frame for the story to be told in flashback. The first shots were to be of the streets of São Paulo leading up to the state penitentiary.\(^{12}\) The change between Barreto’s script and the finished product may have been prompted by the studio’s desire to make a film less reliant on local specificities and thus more accessible to international audiences who had been fed a steady diet of American Westerns for decades.

This suspicion only grows stronger in regard to the first proper scene, also not included in the screenplay. The folk song gives way to an orchestral recapitulation of its theme, which then leads into a fluttering, descending musical cue that is clearly modeled on Hollywood scores.

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Galdino, the leader of the cangaceiro band, cuts an imposing figure as he rides toward the camera in a low-angle shot, deftly maneuvering his horse so that its body is parallel to the lens [fig. 3.5]. The stranger whom he has stopped to confront has been dispatched from Rio de Janeiro (then the capital) to survey in preparation for the building of a road. Galdino forcefully informs the surveyor that there will be no roads in his territory. This is a rather strange reframing of a common motif in Western films, the expansion of the railroad. Whereas in the Platonic Western, the encroachment of industry into pastoral lands would provide the central conflict of the film, here the surveyor is cursorily dismissed and never heard from again. We might take this as another instance of borrowing from American Westerns, but the actual situation is rather more complex, as we shall see.

Fig. 3.6: Galdino and Teodoro

Galdino and his men then raid a small village and kidnap the schoolteacher, Olívia, clearly a descendant of Molly in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. Galdino’s lieutenant, Teodoro, falls in love with her, and the two escape together. They are pursued by the other cangaceiros,
including Maria Clódia, the sole woman of the outfit, who is in love with Teodoro. As Sarah Sarzynski points out, the casting of Galdino (Milton Ribeiro) and Teodoro (Alberto Ruschel) was racially coded. Both actors would reprise these character types in a series of Nordesterns, with the darker-skinned Ribeiro often playing the villain and the phenotypically European Ruschel as the hero [fig. 3.6]. In American Westerns, this Lombrosian trope dates back at least as far as the dark makeup sported by the villain Trampas in DeMille’s version of The Virginian (1914). Maria Clódia (Vanja Orico) and Olívia (Marisa Prado) are likewise color-coded. Olívia has a fair complexion, while Maria Clódia is, as the screenplay states, “cabocla clara”: clearly mestiza. Again, this ethnicized casting is familiar in American Westerns, notably My Darling Clementine (1946) and High Noon (1952). The light woman/dark woman dichotomy carries with it certain narrative expectations, which are predictably fulfilled when Teodoro rejects Maria Clódia and is redeemed from his criminal ways by Olivia.

In a 1966 article on some recurring Nordestern tropes, Lucila Ribeiro Bernardet and Francisco Ramalho, Jr., note that the hero in these films is never the head cangaceiro, who in all six films that they discuss is played by Ribeiro. Rather, he is a member of the band who, like Teodoro, has been forced into banditry by circumstance and wishes to escape from it. The catalyst of his reformation is a character type they call the mocinha, the diminutive of moça, which usually means “young woman” but can also mean “love interest” or “virgin.” It is also the feminine form of mocinho: “hero” or “good guy” (as opposed to “villain” or “bad guy”). The mocinha is

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14 Barreto, O Cangaceiro, 48.
the elementary form of a romantic ideal that is not restricted to love: the concretization of this ideal involves, for the hero, the integration in—and recognition by—a community, its institutions, its authorities, and all its members—the people. It is the encounter or the expectation of reunion of the hero with the girl that provokes in the hero the process of opposing himself to the cangaceiro character, and that leads him finally to disconnect himself from the cangaço.15

While the specific relationship outlined here between the hero and the cangaceiro is specific to the Nordestern, the role of the redemptive woman is likewise displayed in many Westerns. Its earliest and most straightforward manifestation is in The Virginian, but it had continued to mutate, from the prostitute in John Ford’s Stagecoach (1939) to the tomboy in William Wellman’s Yellow Sky (1948). Olívia is just one in a long line of these redemptive women. One contemporary reviewer of O Cangaceiro was particularly ungenerous in this respect: “Not only is the story banal in the extreme, but the heroine would be perfectly at home in any conventional Western. Following in the tradition of the early movies, she remains incredibly respectable although she goes through the most harassing day with her well-combed hair loose and her dress torn.”16

During their escape, Teodoro and Olívia ford a river on horseback. Olívia remarks that she had been under the impression that such crossings were “much more difficult and dangerous.” Her aside alludes to the suspense normally attached to this recurrent situation in Western films, but its mildly satiric tone is only momentary. Suddenly, a lone Indian inexplicably appears in a canoe, accompanied by the obligatory extradiegetic drumbeats. This


16 Mary Gordon Williamson, “The Seventh International Edinburgh Film Festival,” The Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television, 8.3 (Spring 1954), 238.
scene is reminiscent of one in Thomas Ince’s *The Invaders* (1912), in which the viewer is introduced to the Sioux princess as she peacefully glides her canoe down the river. Plains Indians, of course, did not make canoes, but to many viewers, or indeed, filmmakers, canoes and tepees equally connote “Indian.” The appearance of an indigenous person here is just as arbitrary and almost farcical. He wears white linen pants and no shirt, but his chin-length hair is held by a slim headband, and around his neck is a jaguar-tooth necklace. Teodoro, who naturally speaks the indigenous language, strikes up a conversation. While they do not appear in the finished film, Barreto’s screenplay provides subtitles for their Tupi dialogue. They exchange phrases clearly reminiscent of Hollywood Indian-speak, like “Indian is much friend. White man happy.”

The appearance of the Indian again seems so distinctly unmotivated as to suggest a direct borrowing from Hollywood, yet he functions very differently here than he might in a Western. The place he would normally occupy as the savage adversary is already taken up by Galdino, as exhibited in his antagonism to the civilizing force of the surveyors. Instead, he embodies the communion with nature that Teodoro and Olívia experience at the river, which is set in opposition to the violence of the dry sertão, Galdino’s domain. The association of the Indian with the peaceful existence that Olívia represents is made concrete when Teodoro trades for the jaguar-tooth necklace to give to Olívia, leading to an extremely melodramatic kiss. As the two embrace, the camera tilts down to show Teodoro’s cangaceiro hat discarded on the ground, the objective correlative to his redemption from banditry.

Knowing that Galdino is bound to catch up with them, Teodoro bids farewell to Olivia in order to face the villain on his own. A shoot-out ensues, and Teodoro is eventually forced to surrender. Galdino orders him to walk toward a large rock in the distance, saying that if he reaches it without any of his twenty-three men hitting him with their rifles, he is free to go. Only

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17 Barreto, *O Cangaceiro*, 140.
Maria Clódia refuses to shoot. The camera tracks backward in front of him for over a minute as a succession of gunshots ring out. Several bullets hit Teodoro in the back, but he remains upright. In the end, he collapses by a small stream before he is able to reach the rock. Unable to escape the cangaço, he is metaphorically reunited with Olívia by the riverside.

The association of water with civilization is a familiar Western trope, memorably articulated in John Ford’s repeated use of the hymn “Shall We Gather at the River,” whose lyrics, communally sung, express the spirit of the pioneers attempting to forge a community in the barren atmosphere of Monument Valley. Sergio Leone took this water symbolism to a baroque extreme in Once Upon a Time in the West (1968), in which the railroad baron is monomaniacally obsessed with reaching the Pacific Ocean but dies, like Teodoro, next to a meager stream. This scene is juxtaposed with heroine Jill McBain’s quenching the workers’ thirst from a well as they build the railroad through the new town of Sweetwater.

In O Cangaceiro, the river is associated not only with Olívia but also with the Indian, who is seen not as a threat but in an idyllic mode. Here the conflict is not between civilization and wilderness but between violence and innocence. Teodoro has been so corrupted by the cangaço that his relationship with Olívia is, as she tells him, only a dream. He is unable to free himself from the land. Though it does not appear in the film, Barreto’s screenplay indicates a process shot in which the dying Teodoro has a vision of Olívia on horseback, beckoning him toward the horizon. Earlier he had said to her: “No, I can’t go. I was born here; I’m going to die here,” and this sentiment is echoed in his last words. As he clutches a handful of dirt, he exclaims, “Look at the earth! Look at the earth of my sertão!” The final shot of the film is a recapitulation of the first shot, the line of cangaceiros singing the same song, but now riding out

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18 Barreto, O Cangaceiro, 159.
of frame in the opposite direction, left to right.\textsuperscript{19} For reasons that will later become clear, this scene’s apparent activation of the wilderness/civilization dichotomy of the Platonic Western is rendered inoperative by the change in national context.

Rocha would later derisively describe Teodoro’s death scene as “a fit of nationalism.”\textsuperscript{20} His film \textit{Black God, White Devil} (\textit{Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol}, literally \textit{God and the Devil in the Land of the Sun}) is a radical response to the schematic mimicry of Hollywood in \textit{O Cangaceiro} and to the Westerns that inspired it. Rocha is the best-known and most theoretically articulate member of the Cinema Novo movement that arose in the late 1950s as an effort to make politically engaged, distinctly Brazilian films that were not beholden to the aesthetic and narrative standards of first-world cinema. The most immediate influences on this school were Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, but Cinema Novo directors were as likely to borrow from John Ford as from De Sica or Godard. This is especially true of the films of the early period of the movement, all set in the Northeast and therefore known as the sertão cycle, including Ruy Guerra’s \textit{Os Fuzis} (\textit{The Guns}, 1964) and Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s \textit{Vidas Secas} (\textit{Barren Lives} or more literally \textit{Dry Lives}, 1963).\textsuperscript{21} Rocha’s film, unlike those of his contemporaries, overtly addresses its American influences, making the spectator aware of them and through a Brechtian distancing effect. As Roy Armes has written, “Rocha’s work is […] a

\textsuperscript{19} The screenplay included a subsequent scene in which Galdino is finally killed at the hands of the police. The flashback story ends at that point, and the script ends with the nun, who we now recognize to be a much older Olivia, kneeling down to pray. Ibid., 159-61.


\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Vidas Secas} shares certain visual and structural similarities with Ford’s \textit{The Grapes of Wrath} (1940). Dos Santos said in a 1995 interview, “The first part of my formation was all American cinema, especially John Ford.” Darlene J. Sadlier, \textit{Nelson Pereira dos Santos} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 142. Dos Santos is discussed at length in the next chapter.
key example of Third World film making, which, while drawing on Western source elements, inverts and distorts these same elements so as to produce meanings that are radically new.”

The first shot of *Black God, White Devil* is anchored in the sertão, but it is a very different sertão from Barreto’s. This is so not only because Rocha actually shot in the Northeastern state of Bahia, of which he was a native, rather than on the outskirts of São Paulo, as Barreto did. Whereas Barreto’s first shot fills most of the frame with sky, Rocha is committed to the ground. A rare comparable opening shot in an American Western can be found in *3:10 to Yuma* (1957), but there the camera quickly tilts up to show us the sky and a coach racing diagonally through the frame. Here the camera also moves swiftly across the arid landscape, but only to the left, never upward, peering down at the barren land as if in dejection. The accompanying music is “Song of the Sertão,” the aria movement of *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 2 by Heitor Villa-Lobos, whose classical compositions were deeply influenced by Brazilian folk forms. This is in stark contrast to the conventional orchestral score that accompanies Barreto’s images. Rocha’s tracking shot continues under the opening credits for than a minute, emphasizing the barrenness of the land and making it seem as if it might continue on forever, both spatially and temporally.

This shot is a visual epitome of Rocha’s 1965 manifesto, “An Esthetic of Hunger”: “the hunger of Latin America is not simply an alarming symptom: it is the essence of our society. There resides the tragic originality of Cinema Novo in relation to world cinema. Our originality is our hunger and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually

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understood.” 24 Rocha’s conception of hunger has a threefold significance: as a metaphor for the bare, stark style of early Cinema Novo, whose “novelty is presented unambiguously as the output of underdeveloped film production structures,” 25 as a narrative element that defines the lives of the sertanejos (inhabitants of the sertão) presented in these films, and by extension as the “national shame” that characterizes Brazil’s paradoxical position between colonizer and colonized: “The Brazilian does not eat, but he is ashamed to say so.” For Rocha, the way forward involves recognizing and revolutionizing hunger: “only a culture of hunger, weakening its own structures, can surpass itself qualitatively; the most noble cultural manifestation of hunger is violence.” 26

This progression from hunger to violence occupies the first segment of Black God, White Devil. After the title sequence, the first cut reveals the desiccated muzzle of a dead cow, the only remaining skin surrounding its bared teeth [figs. 3.7-3.8]. After a second shot of its bleached skull, the sun glinting in its black eye, comes a close-up of the protagonist, Manuel, stoically regarding the corpse. This shot continues as Manuel rises and walks away from the camera to mount his mule. Here again is a character riding through open space. The presence of a dry cattle skull is also prevalent in Westerns, but it normally would be the completely shorn skull of a steer, signifying the barrenness of the land that is to be passed through in a test of endurance. In Rocha’s sertão, however, Manuel is not a transitory wanderer. When he gets on his mule, he is riding home.

On his way there, he encounters a small group of religious fanatics, or beatos, led by Sebastião, the “black God” of the English title. When he returns home, there is a long scene

25 Armes, Third World Film Making and the West, 257.
26 Rocha, “An Esthetic of Hunger,” 70. This essay was translated into French as “L’esthétique de la violence.”
showing the laborious process by which Manuel and his wife, Rosa, grind manioc roots into meal, the staple food of the Northeast. In the following scene, Manuel eats and then tells Rosa, who is sweating and clearly exhausted, how he will go to the market and try to sell two cows so that they might buy a plot of land that they can farm. “We might see a miracle,” he tells her. When he goes to market, we learn that the dead cow from the first scene was one of the small herd that Manuel was minding for a rancher, who takes the cost of the lost cattle out of Manuel’s pay. Furious, Manuel kills the rancher, thus enacting the radical transformation of hunger into violence.

Figs. 3.7 & 3.8: Dead Cow

Brazilian critic Paulo Perdigão referred to this film as “Greek tragedy filtered through the Western,” noting its indebtedness to Shane and Terror in a Texas Town (1958). Not coincidentally, both of these films revolve around range wars between settlers and ranchers. This type of conflict is clearly invoked in Rocha’s narrative, but it has very different stakes here than it does in American Westerns. In Shane, the settlers are seen as a force of progress, who could cultivate the land if only the retrogressive cowboys would let them. For the Northeastern Brazilian peasant, however, there is no question of prosperity due to recurring droughts and the

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reliance on meager pay from oligarchic ranchers, or *coroneis* (sing.: *coronel*). This power relation is even more starkly portrayed in dos Santos’s *Vidas Secas*, in which the peasant Fabiano is presented with the opportunity to rebel but decides against it. His intractable imbrication in a recurring cycle of poverty makes conflict with the ranchers unthinkable.

Rocha examines the possibilities for peasant rebellion through the character of Manuel, whose murder of the rancher begins a chain of events that will lead him into Sebastião’s millennial religious movement and then into the cangaço. He is finally liberated from these traditional, reactionary modes of revolt by the mysterious gunslinger Antônio das Mortes, who massacres both the sectarians and the cangaceiros. The film’s final sequence shows Manuel running through the open sertão, and then cuts to a shot of the sea, echoing the opening shot of the arid ground. This shot fulfills Sebastião’s prophecy: “The sertão shall become the sea, and the sea sertão” [figs. 3.9-3.10]. In the Platonic Western, the promise of prosperity and civilization symbolized by water has the nature of a dialectical progression through the conflict of opposing forces. In these two films, though, the *sertão* and the sea compose the two poles of an either/or proposition, echoing the cycles of drought and plenty that have inhibited the progress of agriculture in the Northeast for centuries. For both Teodoro and Manuel, the escape to the sea is ultimately an abstraction.

Rocha again takes up the problems posed in *Black God, White Devil* in a sequel produced five years later, *Antônio das Mortes*. In the intervening period, a military dictatorship had taken power in Brazil and had imposed increasingly strict censorship. Rocha still promotes a radical message in his characteristically operatic mode, but where his earlier film is earnest and bombastic, *Antônio das Mortes* is reflexive and carnivalesque. The titular character, who reprises...
his role from *Black God, White Devil*, is a *jagunço*, or hired gun, whose primary profession is killing cangaceiros for large landowners.

In the title sequence, Antônio carries out precisely this task. Rocha again begins in an overwhelmingly dry, forbidding, empty space, but the shot is framed in a much more conventional way than in the previous film. Antônio enters the frame from the right, already shooting, as if this is his only function [fig. 3.11]. As with so many Western heroes, his violence defines him. As he exits the frame, a cangaceiro enters from the opposite direction, clutching his belly in agony. His histrionic death throes mark the film as a baroque exercise, as does the score, which consists mostly of manipulated tape recordings of gunshots and church bells. In this short sequence, Rocha abstracts the mythological space of the Platonic Western to an extreme, boiling it down to its most basic form as an arena where some men kill and others are killed.

In the first sequence of the film proper, a disheveled male schoolteacher crouches amidst a group of small boys, prompting them to repeat the most important dates of Brazilian history. The scene takes place in the village square, with the professor and his students clustered in the foreground. Above the squat buildings behind them can be seen the mountains that surround the town, echoing the expansive depth of field in John Ford’s Monument Valley Westerns. As the
lesson progresses, a man on horseback leads a small group of cattle down the road in the middleground, right to left [fig. 3.12]. Behind him follow two more riders, leading an extra horse whose skittishness causes them to stop and circle in front of the Sudoeste (Southwest) Bar before moving on.

This would not be so remarkable, except that it is one of only three very specific instances in which horses are seen in the film. One of Rocha’s major complaints about *O
Cangaceiro was that Northeastern bandits very rarely went on horseback, so he saw the use of horses in Barreto’s film as a cynical instance of copying Hollywood Westerns. Since Rocha consequently placed such a premium on all his characters—sertanejos, cangaceiros, and jagunços alike—going on foot, we can assume that the appearance of horses in the film is an allusion to American Westerns. In this opening scene, the riders connote two enduring tropes of the Western in miniature: the cattle drive and the partnership of two cowboys.

The second instance occurs after the village’s political functionary, Matos, a variation on the corrupt sheriff, goes to a larger town on behalf of the local coronel to bring Antônio out of retirement to stifle a popular uprising. After Antônio tells his woman to pack his rifle and his hat for the journey, Rocha cuts to a long pan over the mountainous countryside, stopping at the village square that we recognize from the opening scene, the hills still looming in the background. Two riders cross the square and stop in front of the church. Cut to a shot of a large blue jeep pulling into the town, out of which step Matos and Antônio. The two riders are nowhere to be seen. Rocha thus juxtaposes two versions of “riding into town”: the two men on horseback of Western convention, and its generic subversion in the arrival of Antônio in an automobile [figs. 3.13-3.14].

Antônio eventually turns against his employer and decides to fight on the side of the peasants. His decision leads to a climactic showdown, with Antônio and the professor on one side and the coronel’s band of jagunços on the other. This highly theatrical shootout has been compared to the end of The Wild Bunch (1969), and Rocha himself said that the image of Antônio and the professor firing side by side was inspired by the final scene of an earlier

Peckinpah film, *Ride the High Country* (1962). The transtemporal allusive interplay between Rocha and Peckinpah is more complex than this acknowledgement initially suggests.

*Ride the High Country* is an early entry in a cycle of American Westerns that pushed the temporal boundaries of the genre past its conventional 1890 endpoint, the “closing of the frontier,” famously articulated by historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Along with *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Lonely Are the Brave*, it forms part of a trio of films released in 1962 that instantiated the “elegiac Western” subgenre, which simultaneously reified and problematized the wider genre’s intrinsic tendency toward nostalgia. All three films present parallels with Rocha’s: *Liberty Valance* revolves around the tenuous alliance between a gunfighter and an intellectual, and *Lonely Are the Brave* deals with an anachronistic cowboy in a contemporary setting. Like *Ride the High Country*, the latter juxtaposes the generic horse with the extrageneric automobile: the skittishness of the protagonist’s horse as they cross a busy highway in the opening scene foreshadows the horse’s (and probably the cowboy’s) ultimate demise after being struck by a tractor-trailer in the final reel. Peckinpah’s first scene instead

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strikes a comic note as aging Western fixture Joel McCrea, somewhat dazed at the sight of a camel racing down the main street of a fairly typical Western town, is nearly run over by a primitive motor-car. Edward Buscombe has argued that this scene neatly illustrates the operations of convention and expectation in a genre-savvy spectator’s viewing experience: “Significantly, the camel is racing against a horse; such a grotesque juxtaposition is painful. A horse in a Western is not just an animal but a symbol of dignity, grace, and power. These qualities are mocked by having it compete with a camel; and to add insult to injury, the camel wins.” Buscombe’s description of the potentially visceral response to the reversal of generic expectations is instructive in relation to Rocha’s jarring juxtapositions, which only become more striking as the film progresses.

The third appearance of a horse occurs at the very end of the film, after Antônio and the professor have slaughtered the jagunços. One of the leaders of the peasant rebellion, Antão, unexpectedly rides in on a white horse to kill the coronel with a lance [fig. 3.15]. The staging of this image echoes conventional representations of St. George slaying a dragon, a legend referenced in the original Portuguese title of the film, O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro (The Dragon of Evil versus the Warrior Saint). St. George, the patron saint of Portugal, has a devoted following in Brazil, not only among Catholics but also in the syncretic Afro-Brazilian Candomblé religion. Antão’s horse, then, calls up very different cultural associations from the earlier horses in the film. Through the device of associating horses with American Westerns, Rocha makes this horse that much more Brazilian by contrast. This is characteristic of the “tropicalist” phase of Cinema Novo, which drew its inspiration from Oswald de Andrade’s “Cannibalist Manifesto,” written at the inception of Brazilian aesthetic modernism.

in 1922. Tropicalism deliberately and self-consciously absorbed European, American, African, and indigenous influences to create a new synthesis that would be distinctly Brazilian. At the same time, the overexposure of this shot reflexively refers back to the blinding brightness of *Black God, White Devil*. This seemingly minor cinematographic maneuver also echoes Manuel’s liberatory transition from hunger to violence when he kills the exploitative rancher. Again Rocha draws a Brechtian correlation between aesthetic form and revolutionary politics.

![Fig. 3.15: Antão as São Jorge](image)

While I have thus far focused mainly on these films’ repurposing of visual and narrative generic conventions, they also share with the Western an integral engagement with history and time. One of the recurring conceits of the Western is a title card at the beginning of the film that situates the spectator within the historical period. It may simply state the year in which the action takes place, as in *The Searchers* (“TEXAS 1868”), but often there is a longer caption that provides context for the sociohistorical milieu. Anthony Mann was particularly fond of this type of caption, as in *The Furies* (1950): “This is a story of the 1870s… In the New Mexico
Territory… when men created kingdoms out of land and cattle… and ruled their empires like feudal lords.” O Cangaceiro likewise features an opening caption: “TIME: vague, when there were still cangaceiros. Any similarity with facts, incidents or persons alive or dead is mere coincidence.”

Of course, this text was not included in the screenplay, which was originally to open in the present, with a former cangaceiro’s release from the São Paulo state prison after serving a thirty-year sentence. The bulk of the action would thus have taken place in the early 1920s, when there indeed still were cangaceiros. Hence the odd contrast between the first half of the caption, which places the action in a remote, mythical past, and the accompanying disclaimer, which clearly indicates that there would still have been people living who could remember the time portrayed in the film and may even have been cangaceiros themselves.

On the one hand, this caption implies another change made to the screenplay by the studio to make the film more like a Western. On the other, this distancing of the cangaço from contemporary Brazil is a function of Vera Cruz’s self-consciousness regarding the image of the nation it was projecting to the world. As Maria Rita Galvão has argued, “too often the ‘Brazilian-ness’ consciously sought by the [Vera Cruz] filmmakers was limited to exoticism and folklore, while the real problems of the country were ignored.”32 Their attempt to show that Brazilians were capable of making world-class films was not done out of a disinterested regard for cinematic aesthetics but rather in the interest of disseminating the ideological construct of Brazil as a fully modernized nation. This required their disingenuous denial that the cangaço was within living memory. In this connection, borrowing from the Western also invoked a measure of historical distance from the present.

32 Galvão, “Vera Cruz,” 275.
At the same time, this move risks exposing certain socioeconomic similarities between the nineteenth-century West and the twentieth-century Northeast that could paint the latter as retrograde. The description of the New Mexico Territory at the beginning of *The Furies* does not seem all that different from the system of *coronelismo* that ruled Brazil’s Northeast for much of its history, up to and including the period of the cangaço (c. 1870-1940). According to Billy Jaynes Chandler, biographer of the most famous cangaceiro, Lampião, the system of *latifundia* or large estates created by royal land grants during the colonial period remained largely unchanged well into the twentieth century: “The cattle baron, who owned the land, was a backlands potentate equal in his own world to the sugar plantation lord of the coast. He ruled his world almost at will, often giving short shrift to the few officials sent to impose larger law and discipline.”

Historian Emilia Viotti da Costa paints a more nuanced picture of the European settlement of the sertão. During the colonial period, “virgin land was available in large quantities; anyone who was able to fight the Indians and survive in the wilderness could secure a piece of land.” The practice of homesteading increased after independence in 1822, when it ceased to entail trespassing on royal lands, and continued until Brazil passed the Land Law of 1850, which required all land to be purchased from the government and invalidated all claims gotten by squatting. The passage of the Land Law and another measure encouraging European immigration were directly related to the cessation of the slave trade that same year (though slavery would not be abolished until 1888). In effect, the legislature made it more difficult to obtain land so that plantations and latifundia would be ensured a source of free labor. As Da

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Costa shows, this is the mirror opposite of the situation in the United States that led to the Homestead Act of 1862.\textsuperscript{35} That law, of course, plays a large role in American expansionist ideology, in which homesteaders represent a renewal of the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer who lives free on his own land. The situation in Brazil’s Northeast, by contrast, was in effect a feudal economy where sertanejos were beholden to coroneis. This system of patronage is the context in which the cangaceiro arose. Rather than directly echoing the American West, it is actually closer to the Sicily portrayed in Francesco Rosi’s \textit{Salvatore Giuliano} (1962), a film that Rocha cited as one of the major influences on \textit{Black God, White Devil}.

The political and economic structure of the sertão is similar to the West primarily in its lawlessness and arbitrariness. However, other parallels exist in the upheavals in the region concomitant with industrial modernization. The confrontation between Galdino and the surveyor that begins \textit{O Cangaceiro} is a specific instance that may serve to illuminate the larger picture. Bernardet and Ramalho argue that this scene’s lack of narrative motivation suggests that it exists only so that the Brazilian viewer can recognize the popular image of the cangaceiro.\textsuperscript{37} Lampião, for instance, was known to burn down railroad stations.\textsuperscript{38} One of his predecessors, Antônio Silvino, waged a war on the British-owned Great Western Railway Company as it moved farther west into his stomping-grounds. He also frequently commandeered telegraph stations, and he was said to be able to sever telegraph wires with a shot from his rifle.\textsuperscript{39}

While the historical and legendary actions of real cangaceiros mirror certain conventions of Western movies, the contexts are starkly different. The arrival of railroads in the Northeast in

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 78-93.
\textsuperscript{36} Rocha, \textit{Deus e o Diabo}, 136.
\textsuperscript{37} Bernardet and Ramalho, “Cangaço,” 36.
\textsuperscript{38} Chandler, \textit{The Bandit King}, 9.
the late nineteenth century led to an expansion of agriculture for export, but farmlands were soon overcrowded and overused, making the region’s frequent droughts that much more devastating. The generally poor living conditions, combined with a lack of stabilizing legal institutions, are among the major factors that led to the rise of the cangaço.⁴⁰ Cangaceiros relied on the patronage of coroneis, who resisted the encroachment of federal troops and modern industry on their territory. The cangaceiros’ actions against the railroads can therefore be seen as an instance of their “actual historical role as an instrument for maintaining the established social order on behalf of local agrarian elites.”⁴¹

Of course, the image of the cangaceiro in Brazilian popular culture is only loosely related to historical reality. Thus, as historian Linda Lewin writes, the cangaceiro “has been adopted as a national figure of protest against what an earlier ‘modernizing’ generation defined as an economically backward and lawless past.”⁴² It is not for nothing that Lampião is often referred to as the Jesse James of Brazil. Certainly there are many parallels between the sertão and the American frontier as they are presented historically and cinematically: the concentration of power in the hands of large ranchers, the corruption of local politics, the general lawlessness and propensity towards extreme violence, the arduousness of eking out a living in an inhospitable terrain, the looming transformation of the land by industrial forces beyond the control of the individual or the community. Yet as I noted earlier in reference to Black God, White Devil, the sertão is most certainly not the frontier. The inevitable, triumphal march of modernization is implicit in the ideology of the American West, but the sertão still signifies cycles of hunger.

Just as Rocha employs the visual modes of the Western with a far different purpose from Barreto, he engages with history in a far richer way. Explicitly in Black God, White Devil, and

⁴⁰ Chandler, The Bandit King, 12-16.
⁴¹ Lewin, “The Oligarchic Limitations of Social Banditry in Brazil,” 118.
⁴² Ibid., 117.
implicitly in _Antônio das Mortes_, he conflates two of the defining events in the history of the Northeast and of Brazil as a whole: the Canudos War, waged by government forces against the religious community founded by Antônio Conselheiro in the 1890s, and the deaths of Lampião and his lieutenant Corisco in 1938 and 1940, respectively, which marked the end of the cangaço. Canudos is the subject of Euclides da Cunha’s 1902 book _Os Sertões_ (translated as _Rebellion in the Backlands_).\(^{43}\) The canonical stature of _Os Sertões_, not only a history of Canudos but a description of the geography and culture of the Northeast, attests to the place that the region holds in the ideological constitution of the Brazilian nation.

Lampião’s exploits, on the other hand, are still a popular subject in the _literatura de cordel_, verse narratives printed in chapbook form. Though the practice is now less widespread, cordels are still sold in the open-air markets of the Northeast by their authors, who sing their stories aloud to attract customers. As a genre, cordel literature is distinctly unconcerned with historical accuracy and often places historical and legendary personages, like St. George or Lampião, and contemporary figures in the same imaginative space.\(^{44}\) Both of Rocha’s Nordesterns achieve a similar measure of temporal ambiguity, particularly through Bakhtinian echoes of this popular literary form in the ballads that act as sung narration. As Ismael Xavier points out, the film’s highly selective and multiply allusive representation of history is itself indebted to the cordel genre: “The ‘figural’ method of the film transforms history into a referential matrix covered with layers of imaginary constructions.”\(^{45}\) The aesthetic benefit in

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\(^{44}\) See Candace Slater, _Stories on a String: The Brazilian Literatura de Cordel_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

using Canudos and the cangaço to structure these narratives lies in the two events’ polysemic valences, accrued over years of interpretation and reinterpretation.

At the beginning of *Antônio das Mortes*, the list of dates that the schoolteacher makes the children memorize is significant: discovery by Europeans (1500), independence from Portugal (1822), abolition of slavery (1888), foundation of the Republic (1889), and the death of Lampião (1938). The inclusion of Lampião’s death among the foundational dates of Brazilian national history signals the importance of the cangaço in Brazilian popular consciousness. As with the opening caption of *O Cangaceiro*, this dialogue places the cangaço in a legendary past. Unlike the earlier film, however, here the cangaceiro is revived as an integral part of contemporary Brazilian life.

In contrast to *Black God, White Devil*, which seems to take place in the recent past, *Antônio das Mortes* includes some notably contemporary aspects while retaining the earlier film’s sense of being located in a mythical time. Its ending is the densest instance of Rocha’s juxtaposition of historical, mythological, and contemporary elements. Over the aftermath of the final, Peckinpahesque shoot-out, the balladeer-narrator sings a rendition of perhaps the most famous *cordel*, José Pacheco’s version of “Lampião’s Arrival in Hell.” The ballad ends with the lines, “Lampião is not in hell / He never got to heaven / For sure he’s in the sertão.” (And if you don’t believe me, the narrator continues, if you want to find out the truth, write to hell.) In the context of the film’s narrative, these lyrics literally refer to the earlier death of Coirana, the last cangaceiro, but they also suggest that the cangaço is never really dead.

As Robert Warshow argued in an early exegesis on the Western, the situation in which we often find the hero is just “as the reign of law settles over the West and he is forced to see that his day is over; those are the pictures that end with his death or with his departure for some more
remote frontier.\textsuperscript{46} The end of the cangaço around 1940 can be seen as signaling a new modernizing order in the Northeast, but the dialectic of modernization and underdevelopment that produced the cangaço is a lingering contradiction in Brazil. Antônio das Mortes does indeed leave town at the end of the film, but the final shot shows him walking away along a highway, cars blaring their horns as he passes underneath a Shell gas station sign [fig. 3.16]. This shot echoes the tragic roadside ending of \textit{Lonely Are the Brave}, but it jettisons the earlier film’s nostalgic lament by stressing Antonio’s survival. This juxtaposition denies the rigid separation between a mythological past and a modernized present that Vera Cruz saw in American Westerns. Instead emphasizing the interconnectedness of the past with the present, Rocha creates a sense of temporal displacement that figures underdevelopment.

\textbf{Fig. 3.16: Antonio Leaves Town}

\textsuperscript{46} Warshow, “The Westerner,” 140.
The temporal multivalence of this final shot is matched by its invocation of the mutual imbrication of geographically distant spaces in the global capitalist economy. This is, of course, figured in the Shell sign. This is not simply a matter of metaphor for Rocha, who was keenly aware of the complexities of international film distribution and the dissemination of his work among various global audiences. “An Esthetic of Hunger” is a treatise on spectatorial positionality as much as it is a delineation of a certain Third-Worldist approach to film art. The urgency of forging a form outside of institutional economic structures is also a search for a global mode of spectatorial address.

Some of the conceptual roadblocks that plagued first-world readings of third-world films at the time are apparent in contemporary American scholarly analyses of the film. The earliest of these is Ernest Callenbach’s “Comparative Anatomy of Folk-Myth Films: Robin Hood and Antonio das Mortes.” It is clear from this title that Callenbach is not particularly interested in cultural specificity, and his pairing of Rocha’s film with a medieval European legend conflates economic underdevelopment with temporal regression. Callenbach’s analysis thus presents a concrete expression of Rocha’s statement that “For the European observer the process of artistic creation in the underdeveloped world is of interest only insofar as it satisfies a nostalgia for primitivism.” Callenbach’s allegorical analysis of the characters in Antônio das Mortes as directly representing the various sectors of Brazilian society (e.g. Antônio = the army) accordingly reduces the film to the status of primitive myth. Like a nineteenth-century German

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folklorist, he imagines that the core of the myth can be unlocked, if only an analytic cipher is found. In this connection, Ismael Xavier’s trenchant analysis of *Black God, White Devil* is just as applicable to *Antônio das Mortes*: “The film’s densely metaphorical style virtually pleads for allegorical interpretation even while its internal organization frustrates and defies the interpreter searching for a unifying ‘key’ or implicit ‘vision of the world.’ And this resistance to interpretation is by no means incidental; it structures the film and constitutes its meaning.”

This resistance to interpretation by no means suggests that the film cannot or should not be interpreted, as Thomas Kavanagh seems to suggest. Kavanagh correctly rejects Callenbach’s universalizing analysis, but ultimately succumbs to his own inability to penetrate Brazilian cultural codes. His call for “a readiness to allow this other to exist as other” is an understandable hedge that allows him to discuss the cultural products of an unfamiliar society, but his assertion that this constitutes “an objectivity” seems misguided. He implies that the way to approach other cultures is through a disavowal of the possibility of reciprocal understanding. Kavanagh and Callenbach thus present two radically different modes of analyzing Third Cinema, one seeking folkloristic parallels, the other maintaining absolute otherness. Curiously, both scholars make reference to the influence of the Western on *Antônio das Mortes*, but neither discusses it in depth. Yet it stands to reason that, for many viewers, the most accessible route into this surreal film is through those very generic elements.

It is Antônio himself who most of all echoes the Western in Rocha’s two films. When he is first introduced in *Black God, White Devil*, the balladeer-narrator succinctly defines Antônio’s character: “Cursed in ten churches / Without a patron saint / Antônio das Mortes / Killer of cangaceiros.” He is an ambiguous character colored by a troubled past and a deep moral sense, in

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49 Xavier, “*Black God, White Devil*,” 134.
the manner of many canonical Western gunfighters. In a discussion of the film at Cannes, Rocha cheekily confirmed this lineage: “To the disgust of many people, including you, the film was greatly influenced by the Western. It has a lot in it of John Ford, whom you don’t like but I love. Antônio das Mortes is himself a figure of Fordian quotation: the way he looks, the way he moves, the use of the landscape, the use of ballads.” In a 1969 Cahiers du cinéma interview, Rocha expanded on Antônio’s relation to the Western:

[H]e is linked to his own cultural tradition, that of the killer, and it also ties up with the whole tradition of the Western. Everything that makes him a Wild West hero is very true, whatever the country: Japan, Brazil, the United States, Sicily. This somewhat disturbing mystery of Western heroes is a tradition. You have reality and then a sort of questioning that goes beyond it. For us it is more complicated. In an American Western, there is already an established language. When the hero appears, you already know who he is because of his horse, because of what he’s wearing. He brings all the necessary information with him. In our case the hero can’t bring information with him that way because we don’t have a cinematographic or literary tradition that speaks of this. And this may be a limitation of our cinema.

When Rocha says that Brazilian cinema lacks an “established language,” he does not mean the purely visual cinematic grammar that Kurosawa invokes, but rather the collectively understood system of narrative and visual tropes that make up a genre. Antônio is thus the manifestation of a syncretic process through which Rocha borrows ostensibly American forms to tell his Brazilian story.

This mode of hybridization is, on the one hand, a strategy to engage audiences, Brazilian or otherwise, who have internalized generic expectations through continual exposure to Hollywood fare. On the other, it constitutes a reconfiguration of the very genre from which it borrows. *Antonio das Mortes* is a clear example of the capacity that Janet Staiger has recognized in cross-cultural generic filmmaking to trouble notions of generic purity and canonicity: “to recognize a hybrid forces the dominant culture to look back at itself and see its presumption of universality. Hybridity always opens up the discriminatory presumptions of purity, authenticity, and originality from which this textual hybrid is declared to be a deviation, a bastard, a corruption.”

Rocha’s appropriation of the gunfighter extends beyond homage to prompt a retrospective rereading of canonical Westerns and their manifestations of colonial violence.

Writing at the height of the genre’s popularity, Warshow concluded that the Western film “offers a serious orientation to the problem of violence such as can be found almost nowhere else in our culture. One of the well-known peculiarities of modern civilized opinion is its refusal to acknowledge the value of violence. This refusal is a virtue, but like many virtues it involves a certain willful blindness and it encourages hypocrisy.” Westerns tend to cover over their originary act of violence, the encroachment of Europeans on indigenous lands. Cowboys and Indians are always already involved in what Richard Slotkin calls a “savage war,” in which the perception of the natives’ inherent brutality leads the white settler to believe that he must himself become even more brutal if he is to emerge victorious. The simultaneous presence of violence and absence of its originating moment naturalizes the onscreen brutality to the extent that spectators barely notice it and are able to disavow the Western’s colonialist underpinnings.

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The operatic violence that characterizes Rocha’s oeuvre restores meaning to violence through its motivation in the liberatory aspirations of the colonized. As the death-dealing agent of the transformation from hunger to violence, Antônio teaches a lesson outlined by Rocha in “An Esthetic of Hunger.” In order to counteract the European observer’s “nostalgia for primitivism,” Rocha proposes an aesthetic assault:

Cinema Novo shows that the normal behavior of the starving is violence; and the violence of the starving is not primitive. [...] From Cinema Novo it should be learned that an esthetic of violence, before being primitive, is revolutionary. It is the initial moment when the colonizer becomes aware of the colonized. Only when confronted with violence does the colonizer understand, through horror, the strength of the culture he exploits.56

Here Rocha is apparently referring to the material fact of hunger leading to literal revolutionary violence, but of course Rocha was a filmmaker, not a guerilla. The violence of which Rocha speaks is first and foremost cinematic violence. Considered in that light, Rocha’s hunger is also Brazilian filmmakers’ relative lack of funding, equipment, and distribution. He incorporates this metaphorical hunger into the form of his films; for example, in the obvious overexposure of the scene in which Antão becomes St. George, which may at first seem to be a technical error. The heightened rhetoric of Rocha’s aggressive visual style thus also commits symbolic violence on the generic expectations of the spectator. By analogy with the real act of violence, the image of violence brings about the recognition of the colonized by the colonizer. Violent self-assertion recoups the humanity of the colonized person and also starkly mirrors the exertion of power that characterizes the colonizer. In acknowledging the colonized, the colonizer is in effect recognizing himself.

56 Rocha, “An Esthetic of Hunger,” 69-70. The manifesto was published in French as “L’esthétique de la violence.”
CHAPTER FOUR

A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE:

RACE AND SPECTATORSHIP IN CINEMATIC CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES

This chapter concerns a more-or-less forgotten Hollywood Western—at least, one relatively untouched by critical and scholarly discourse, though vividly remembered by cinephiles, both lay and professional. *A Man Called Horse*, released in 1970, is ostensibly an adaptation of a short story by Dorothy Johnson, first published in *Collier’s* magazine in 1950. Johnson is best known as the source author for another cinematic adaptation, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). John Ford’s film is often classed among the essential entries in the Western genre by those who locate its thematic core in Kitses’s structural binary system of wilderness vs. civilization. *Liberty Valance* is a variation on a plot structure that perhaps best typifies the Platonic Western, the “town-tamer”: a lone hero enters a lawless frontier town, makes it safe for women and children by killing the villain, and then rides out of town because his own actions in preparing the way for civilization have made his violent ethos obsolete.

While *A Man Called Horse* broadly fits the wilderness vs. civilization paradigm, it belongs to a much older subgenre, the so-called Indian captivity narrative, in which a settler of European extraction is kidnapped by indigenous people, lives among them for a time, and is eventually redeemed to white civilization. Evincing an ambivalence similar to that of the town-tamer plot, the captivity narrative fluctuates between an exoticizing fascination with the primitive and an ideological imperative that the protagonist withstand the temptation to “go native.” In order to ameliorate this contradiction, at least if the protagonist is male, his temporary encounter with this savage way of life is thought to metonymically rejuvenate his decadent culture, as is exhaustively elaborated in Richard Slotkin’s Frontier Myth trilogy.
Yet the captivity narrative presents some rather striking peculiarities that prevent its wholesale assimilation into the Platonic Western archetype. Foremost among these is its treatment of borders, both literal and conceptual. Let us suppose that the town-tamer is about the establishment of an orderly social arrangement, a prelude to the annexation by the nation-state of a previously chaotic and nebulous geographical space. In this context, its conventional resolution reflects a teleological understanding of history that underlies the Platonic Western’s ideological justification for Manifest Destiny. The captivity narrative, on the other hand, tends to problematize the very notion of borders—geographical, historical, racial, Cartesian. As Gary Ebersole has argued, “Captivity represents an ultimate boundary situation…. In such situations, the body is a painful register of the shattered or porous boundaries of inside and outside, self and other, past and present.”\(^1\) The redemption of the captive seems to reinstate those boundaries, but this narrative resolution cannot contain the troubling questions raised in the middle of the story about the legitimacy of scientifically dubious but ideologically necessary distinctions between ethnic identities.

The centrality of bodily sensation to the captivity narrative also presents complications for structural narratological theories that tend to dematerialize specific texts into instances of an abstract pattern. By contrast, *A Man Called Horse* offers a complex illustration of the materiality of processes of generic storytelling, literary adaptation, and cinematic spectatorship. Dorothy Johnson’s story provides a template for the film’s plot, which largely remains faithful to the original, but one crucial addition interrupts her narrative. The captive protagonist must undergo a spectacular and gruesome initiation ritual in order to achieve full membership in the tribe, in the interest of marrying a native woman as part of his protracted escape plan. This rite of passage

involves being hung from the ceiling of a medicine lodge by ropes attached to two bone splints pierced through the skin on either side of the chest. The design and staging of this ceremony, known as Okipa or the Vow to the Sun, are taken directly from the writings and paintings of George Catlin, a Pennsylvanian who went West in the 1830s to document what he considered to be rapidly vanishing indigenous cultures. It is this set-piece that spectators tend to remember, even if the film overall is not especially memorable. In what follows, I want to take seriously this discrepancy between the film’s general conventionality and this particular scene’s outsized resonance.

Affective impact likewise takes precedence over narrative structure in the film’s promotional materials, indicating that the ritual was in fact the film’s major selling point. The peculiar layout of the film’s one-sheet poster, which reveals key elements of the narrative in chronological order, graphically illustrates the relative importance of the Sun Vow scene by making its depiction massively larger than the other six plot points [fig. 4.1]. Initially reading the left side of the poster vertically from top to bottom, the viewer’s eye must then diagonally traverse the shocking central image in order to complete the narrative sequence from top right to bottom right. This visual progression suggests the spectacular nature of the scene as well as its disruption of the smooth narrative flow among the smaller images. At the same time as the vertical sequences on each side reveal more of the plot than typical film posters of the period, the central image hides from view the most gruesome aspect of the Sun Vow, Morgan’s wounds, prompting a desire to see more. Here, the ritualized conventions of the Western genre take a backseat to a literal ritual that is overtly marketed in terms of its novelty.²

² My thanks to Duncan Faherty for drawing my attention to the layout of this poster.
In this context, it is rather ironic that genre films, and Westerns in particular, have often been conceived of as rituals in themselves. According to this view, genre narratives, taken as holistic structures, foster social cohesion by imaginatively resolving intractable contradictions.
within dominant ideologies. Of course, the problem lies in demonstrating how exactly these imaginative narrative structures are translated into material agents of social reproduction. I have drawn on Bruce Kuklick’s early critique of the Cartesian dualism of ritual genre theory in order to interrogate the presumption that the Platonic Western is capable of performing work in the world. Expanding on that theoretical position, I argue that the ideological import of *A Man Called Horse* is to be found precisely in the film’s affective immediacy, rather than in the narratological structures that have often been posited as the common grounding of both genre and ideology.

The disjunction between the film’s conventional narrative structure and its spectacular set-piece also points toward a reconsideration of adaptation, conventionally conceived as the transposition of a preexisting narrative structure from one medium to another. Because most serious considerations of adaptation tend to focus on cinematic versions of canonical literature, they often participate in a narrative of loss and displacement similar to that of ritual genre theory. In this case, of course, the lack of the literary original is insufficiently compensated by its cinematic translation. As noted earlier, structuralist critics like Cawelti made an important gesture toward subverting the primacy of the verbal over the audiovisual, but their method presumed the interchangeability of all media vis-à-vis a particular narrative structure. I argue instead that we must take into account the material and embodied aspects of adaptation, conceived as an oscillation between two different states of presence as opposed to an illusion of presence designed to cover an absence.

This requires an approach that recognizes the multimedial, polyphonic nature of cinema as a technology that has the capacity to transmit verbal, musical, visual, and other signs simultaneously. Robert Stam has argued persuasively in favor of discarding the standard method
of assessing the value of a filmic adaptation in terms of its faithfulness to its literary source material and instead attending more closely to transmediality:

The shift from a single-track, uniquely verbal medium such as the novel, which ‘has only words to play with,’ to a multitrack medium such as film, which can play not only with words (written and spoken), but also with theatrical performance, music, sound effects, and moving photographic images, explains the unlikelihood—and I would suggest even the undesirability—of literal fidelity.³

This recalibration is essential to moving beyond a “profoundly moralistic” attitude to the primacy of literature in adaptation, in which, Stam writes, “Infidelity resonates with overtones of Victorian prudishness…” (54). Read in the context of embodied spectatorship, this attitude also negates the integral role that somatic responses play in media reception by positing the literary text as the pure and disembodied state of a given narrative.

As valuable as Stam’s insight is to troubling aesthetic “seniority, the assumption that older arts are necessarily better arts” (58), it also performs a familiar move in the tradition of humanistic cinema studies, whereby the hierarchy is not so much upended as amended to include cinema among the pantheon as the seventh art. Despite Stam’s recognition of the elitism involved in the reflexive valorization of the verbal source over its audiovisual adaptation, his comparison of the novel and cinema suggests the latter’s reenactment of the historical assimilation of the former, initially considered a vulgar, hybrid bastard of a genre, into the realm of legitimate art. To whit:

Cinema can literally include painting, poetry, and music, or it can metaphorically evoke them by imitating their procedures; it can show a Picasso painting or emulate cubist

techniques or visual dislocation, cite a Bach cantata, or create montage equivalents of fugue and counterpoint. Godard’s *Passion* not only includes music (Ravel, Mozart, Ferre, Beethoven, and Faure), but is conceived musically, and not only includes animated tableaux based on celebrating [sic] paintings (Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*, Goya’s *The Third of May*, and Delacroix’s *Turkish Bathers*), but also expresses a painterly concern with light and color. (61)

Despite his gesture toward a more democratic approach to adaptation, Stam’s chosen illustrations exhibit a continued preference for high art over popular forms, exemplified by his auteurist regard for Godard’s “painterly” mode of expression. *A Man Called Horse* also affords an opportunity to reconsider the relationship between cinema and fine art through its incorporation of George Catlin’s portraits of Native Americans as well as his controversial depictions of the Okipa. Catlin himself continually tried and failed to gain entrée into the world of academic painting and its institutional authentication, placing him in a liminal space between art and entertainment that characterizes narrative cinema in general and this film in particular.

Moreover, Stam’s statement that the novel and film are similar in that “[t]heir essence is to have no essence, to be open to all cultural forms” (61) displays a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, Stam rightly derides the idea that the literary source of an adaptation has a “transferable core” (59), a Platonic essence that could somehow survive the translation between media utterly intact. On the other, his deployment of poststructuralist theory transforms the material existence of a literary work into a numinous text that seems to exist as pure potentiality. “Film adaptations,” he writes, “are caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual reference and transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin” (66). While I would tend to agree that the
echoic networks that expand outward from a given text are in theory infinite, I prefer a genealogical approach to adaptation that attends to the materiality of media culture by tracing the series of situations that have undergirded previous utterances of the adapted material. In this sense, my application of Bakhtin departs from Stam’s emphasis on the transference of the social and historical situatedness of a given utterance into the abstract literary realm (64-65). Rather, I argue that the material situations of anterior utterances are echoed in new but no less material iterations of generic conventions. The same holds for the practice of adaptation.

To illustrate this theoretical distinction, I briefly turn to a comparative analysis of a film that shares numerous affinities with *A Man Called Horse* and that is roughly contemporary with it. This cinematic captivity narrative, Nelson Pereira dos Santos’ *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* (*Como era gostoso o meu francês*, 1971) is a key example of the Brazilian *Cinema Nóvo* movement, and one often cited by Stam as an example of the decolonization of the filmic gaze. It could therefore be seen as constituting the subversive, Brechtian good object in contradistinction to *Horse*’s normative, Hollywoodian bad object. A closer examination of both films, their manifold source texts, and their production histories upends these distinctions in unexpected and generative ways. *Frenchman*’s reputation as a polyvocal, postmodernist text belies certain centripetal aspects that contain its purported extensivity within the traditional conceptual boundaries of auteurist national cinema. Conversely, *Horse*’s appearance of generic orthodoxy does not withstand consideration of the centrifugal forces that destabilize conventional methods of genre analysis.

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Imagine the following scene: a nude, dark-skinned young woman crouches amidst a throng of natives chanting and whooping animatedly as they stomp and dance in a single-file, circular movement. She reaches down to grab a morsel of her grisly meal, the neck of a captive white colonist whom she has recently seduced, causing him to have second thoughts about escaping to reunite with his European compatriots. When he finally decides to escape, along with a load of pilfered gold that he has discovered buried outside the village and in a dispute over which he has murdered another white man, he finds that his canoe has been sabotaged and is immediately ambushed with an arrow attack from his erstwhile romantic companion. She then leads him to the slaughter, carried out in a gruesome, shocking ritual, ending with this barbarous barbeque.

Described in this way, the climactic scene of How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman could have been ripped off the screen of a 42nd-Street grindhouse or out of an Italian mondo trash film like The Man from Deep River (1972) or Cannibal Holocaust (1980). Despite the apparent affinities between Frenchman and these other stories of anthropophagic encounters between Europeans and indigenes presented in quasi-documentary style, dos Santos’s film enjoys a critical status that is largely foreclosed to cult exploitation movies. While Frenchman was sometimes decried as pornographic and sometimes lauded as radically innovative by contemporary reviewers, the scholarly consensus has tended toward the latter view. While I likewise hold the film in high regard, it is worth interrogating why it has garnered such effusive praise while largely avoiding further accusations of exploitation. This demands close attention to the rhetorical construction of critical readings of the film and their deployment of particular notions of authorship, genre, and audience address.
Like *A Man Called Horse*, *Frenchman* is an adaptation, though its primary source is a sixteenth-century historical narrative rather than a contemporary short story. Hans Staden’s first-person account of his voyage to Brazil and subsequent sojourn amongst the indigenous Tupi people, published in 1554, is among the earliest examples of the colonial captivity narrative. Despite having been written in German, Staden’s *True History* is among the foundational, canonical texts of Brazilian literature, more familiar and accessible to allusion than its closest analogue in the United States’ literary tradition, Mary Rowlandson’s *Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682). Staden’s stature in Brazilian culture might more aptly be compared with the myth of Pocahontas rescuing John Smith from her father’s wrath. As we shall see, both films also include a multiplicity of source materials, though they take markedly different approaches to negotiating their various incorporations.

In the case of *Frenchman*, Staden’s narrative, though altered in certain significant respects, provides a structure into which dos Santos interjects a number of other sixteenth-century colonists’ voices. The film begins in a cold open that is based not on the *True History* but rather the Huguenot colonist Villegagnon’s letter to John Calvin reporting on his progress in establishing the Protestant settlement of France Antarctique. As a news-anchorly voice-over reads the text in Portuguese translation over the theme music that accompanied the French newsreels then still shown in Brazilian cinemas, the image refutes each of the letter’s statements. Villegagnon describes a “barren desert” populated with “barbarous savages,” in the midst of which he and his “family” are beset on all sides by the bellicose Portuguese and

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5 Like Rowlandson’s narrative, and in the fashion of the era, the full title of Staden’s narrative is too long to comfortably include here, but it begins, *The True History and Description of a Country Populated by a Wild, Naked, and Savage Man-Munching People, Situated in the New World, America...*. See Hans Staden, *Hans Staden’s True History: An Account of Colonial Captivity in Brazil*, ed. and trans. Neil L. Whitehead and Michael Harbsmeier (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

6 Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism*, 250.
endangered from within by sinful conspirators. Meanwhile, the screen displays a land of plenty, peopled by friendly natives, in which the Huguenots conduct murderous raids on Portuguese ships and take vengeance on any settler who attempts to desert the colony and consort with the Tupi. This is precisely what happens to Jean, the eponymous Frenchman into whom Staden has been adapted. Villegagnon describes him as throwing himself into the ocean to evade punishment, but he is shown being shoved off a cliff with a ball and chain attached to his ankle.

This technique of the visual giving the lie to the verbal continues in a number of captions taken from contemporary accounts that are interspersed throughout the film. As Richard Peña notes, these “intertitles [are] used as ironic, ‘historical’ counterpoints to the events depicted. Often, the film makes us look at, or interpret, these quotations in a new light.” For this reason, Frenchman has often been used as a pedagogical tool to illustrate the unreliability of primary historical sources, particularly European reports regarding the colonization of the Americas. Yet the presumed decentering and distancing effect of this image/text juxtaposition is not necessarily as immanent in the film as is generally supposed. In fact, a number of dos Santos’ techniques lead the audience in the opposite direction, toward interpretive stability. The primacy of the visual over the verbal, implicitly propounded in the opening sequence, prompts an auteurist reading that contains the film’s presumed polyvocality. Rather than exploring the implications of a simultaneous negotiation among numerous points of view, dos Santos presents the audience with his version of events. Given the truism that “seeing is believing,” a notion buttressed by this sequence’s establishment of a true image/false text dichotomy, the director’s version becomes “what really happened.”

8 In this connection, Dos Santos’ film can be seen as presaging some of the tenets of the New Historicism as laid out in Stephen Greenblatt’s introduction to New World Encounters (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), vii-xviii.
It has often been noted that the film’s visual style, particularly the extensive employment of hand-held camera, is reminiscent of cinema verité. In an essay on the film’s pedagogical merits, Rachel Greenwald suggests that such documentary techniques produce spectatorial distancing because of “the disjunction between the early modern subject matter and the modern technology used to represent it.” While Greenwald rightly points out that these aesthetic choices cause the film to operate rather differently than epically staged period dramas, it is far from certain that they necessarily constitute a Brechtian or even a reflexive maneuver. Rather than achieving Brecht’s method of alienating the audience in the interest of political consciousness-raising, the use of documentary techniques seems rather to enhance the film’s sense of historical realism.

Compare, for instance, Peter Watkins’ 1964 historical documentary Culloden, which reenacts a 1746 military battle in the style of a television newsmagazine, complete with man-on-the-street, direct-address interviews with the combatants. Where Watkins employs an approach that exemplifies cinema verité per se, dos Santos’ film is closer to the related school of direct cinema. Though these two genres are often conflated, the distinction between the active participation of the filmmaker and the overt exposure of the production process in the former are in stark contrast to the apparent neutrality of the filmmaker and the attempted erasure of the production process in the latter. Despite the nod to Brecht in the opening sequence, whose placement prior to the credits sets it off from the rest of the narrative, the affirmation of photographic verisimilitude in contrast to verbal obfuscation serves to contain the potential distancing effect. Thus, when Peña writes that Dos Santos’ “camera [… ] declares its

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independence from the point of view of any character,”\textsuperscript{10} this amounts to the certification of objectivity rather than a refusal of realism.

The film’s closing sequence presents some further difficulties for a Brechtian reading. At first glance, the protagonist Jean’s ceremonial killing and ingestion by the Tupi seems a clear subversion of the narrative logic of the captivity genre through its denial of the redemption of the captive and its granting victory to the captors. However, the situation is made more complex by some difficulties in determining the film’s genre. Sebiopepe, the young widow who is Jean’s wife during his captivity, is shown munching on a piece of meat from her erstwhile companion’s neck and turning toward the camera as it zooms in on her eyes [fig. 4.2]. This breaking of the fourth wall is among the most common of Brechtian maneuvers. Yet the ideological significance of this mug to camera is complicated by the film’s comedic tone, which points toward an affinity with reflexive moments in the films of the Marx Brothers or Mel Brooks.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig42.png}
\caption{Sebiopepe Chews into Camera}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{10} Peña “How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman,” 193.
The interpretive uncertainty arising from generic indeterminacy was expressed rather unforgivingly by a contemporary Brazilian reviewer: “The fact is that I don’t really know what Nelson is up to. The film is not a comedy, it’s not an adventure film, it’s not an ethnographic investigation, it’s not a political parable, it’s not a historical relation. In the final account, the film isn’t anything.” Seen from another point of view, dos Santos’ film is all of these things. In fact, precisely the same genericity problem can lead to a far more positive appraisal, as the art film is often posed as the polar opposite of the genre film.

Lacking generic conventions and expectations to guide our reading of the film, the argument goes, we have no recourse but to look for a textual structure solely determined by the author. As David Bordwell has suggested, this presumption of “authorial expressivity” is a defining characteristic of the art film as “a logically coherent mode of cinematic discourse”—in other words, a genre. For Bordwell, the expressionism of the art film is always tempered by its realism, and the resultant interpretive tension constitutes the key aspect of what we might call the auteur genre. “Put crudely,” he writes, “the slogan of the art cinema might be, ‘When in doubt, read for maximum ambiguity.’” This reviewer’s stance on Frenchman, then, hinges on a judgment about dos Santos’ intentions and motivations (or lack thereof), in conjunction with a determination of the film’s genericity. If the latter question is answered in the negative, the film text can only be recuperated if the former is in the affirmative.

Ascribing authorial agency further complicates the question of Brechtian alienation because auteurist discourse is founded upon a liberal humanism that is ultimately antithetical to

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Brecht’s historical materialism. Dos Santos biographer Helena Salem notes the dry and rationalistic tone of the director’s two immediately prior films, Fome de amor (1967) and Azyllo muito louco (1971); “In Frenchman, on the other hand, emotion permeates the dramatic plot; there is a psychological-affective involvement between the characters.”14 In support of this position, she quotes dos Santos as drawing a distinction between “demonstrating and maintaining a position” in Frenchman and his previous approach, in which he “stayed at a distance.”15 This renewed interest in naturalistic affect, in combination with the aforementioned invocations of the mimetic relationship between cinematic realism and historical reality, encourages spectators toward emotional identification as opposed to cognitive alienation.

As dos Santos described in a 1977 interview, this led to some unexpected problems in the film’s public reception: “The audience did not identify with my ideas. They identified, for example, with the Frenchman, the colonizer. Everyone lamented the death of the ‘hero.’ They didn’t understand that the hero was the Indian and not the young man, to such an extent had they been influenced by the John Wayne shoot-em-ups.”16 Such reactions suggest that the scholarly consensus on Frenchman is not at all obvious to a general audience. Beyond the dichotomous options described above for approaching a film of uncertain genre, i.e. bewilderment and dismissal or appreciation and canonization, a third option allows spectators to read the film by provisionally and temporarily accepting various genre cues, each of which may be in effect or in abeyance at a given point in the film. Indeed, all of the genres that the reviewer lists as not defining the film are in play to varying degrees. Faced with this generic instability, it is not surprising that some viewers would have centered their readings on one genre that the reviewer curiously does not mention, the Western.

14 Salem, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 267.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
This is even less surprising when we consider Dos Santos’ statement to Salem that “Hans Staden for me was above all an adventure book. When I was thirteen or fourteen years old, I was crazy about those films with Errol Flynn and such.”

Scholars have rarely found allusions to or affinities with popular adventure films in Frenchman, though Darlene Sadlier has noted that an episode in which Jean kills another Frenchman in a dispute over buried gold plays like “a brutal miniature version of The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948).” The director also told Salem that his experience of seeing Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) transported him back to the sensations of his teenage fandom, but he misstated the title as The Treasure of the Lost Ark, suggesting that Sadlier’s parallel may be more apt than expected. Of course, Raiders features a panoply of borrowings from classical Hollywood films, including Huston’s as well as the Errol Flynn Western Virginia City (1940), another story about a dispute over gold. The addition of this scene to Staden’s narrative, then, is not simply an editorial comment on the avarice of the European colonizer but a way of reanimating the affective core of dos Santos’s childhood love for adventure stories.

This dynamic was also in effect on the set. According to dos Santos, the most important factor in the film’s success was the actors’ willingness to “play Indian.” (Here it should be noted that the verb in the Portuguese phrase brincar de índio does not carry the same pun as in English between childlike, undirected activity and representing a character; it exclusively

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17 Ibid., 258.
18 Darlene Sadlier, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Contemporary Film Directors (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 64.
19 Salem, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 258. The Brazilian release title of the film was Os Caçadores da Arca Perdida (Hunters of the Lost Ark).
20 Indiana Jones’s sartorial style seems to have been closely modeled on that of Fred Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) in The Treasure of the Sierra Madre. The stunt in which Indy falls from the front of a moving vehicle, is dragged under its chassis, and then climbs up its back, is clearly taken from Virginia City, though it is more often identified with a similar bit of action in Stagecoach (1939). Both were performed by Yakima Canutt, who was also the stunt director for A Man Called Horse.
21 Salem, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 263.
connotes the former.) The timeless, fountain-of-youth quality that he ascribes to the adventure megagenre would seem to contradict the film’s overt engagement with historiography, but this could also explain why certain spectators read it through the Western. Might this not be due precisely to the genre’s peculiar combination of adventure and history, closely bound up with its thematics of colonial encounters and nation formation?

Salem argues that “How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman was the first great [Brazilian] national historical film” and “the first to put on the screen Brazilian Indians in their specificity, in their cultural richness.” From a U.S. perspective, this statement seems peculiar since all of the significant Tupi roles were played by actors of European descent, and the authenticity of Hollywood’s representations of Native Americans is often presumed to hinge on the casting of indigenous actors. As we shall see, the participation of Sioux actors in the production of A Man Called Horse was explicitly employed as a marketing tactic to certify the film’s historical accuracy. In the Brazilian context, however, the focus shifts from embodied, racial authenticity to abstract, national authenticity.

In much the same way that writers of the early Republic like James Fenimore Cooper and Charles Brockden Brown employed indigenous motifs to distinguish American literature from its European forebears, Brazilian cultural producers have often taken recourse to images of the native as a counterpoint to the dominance of foreign influences. The notion of cannibalism in particular was an animating force of Brazilian modernism, as in Oswald de Andrade’s “Cannibalist Manifesto” of 1922. As I noted in the previous chapter, he proposed metaphorically ingesting various cultural resources in order to create a new synthesis that would be specifically Brazilian. This notion of cultural cannibalism was enthusiastically reinvigorated in the late 1960s and early ’70s in the Tropicália movement. Despite the overt cosmopolitanism of this method, it

22 Ibid., 267.
also strongly suggests that the conceptualization of Brazilianness has often relied upon the appropriation of indigeneity.

Dos Santos acknowledged as much in his account of the initial inspiration for Frenchman, which came during the production of his adaptation of Graciliano Ramos’s novel Vidas Secas in 1962-63. While shooting in the arid northeastern region known as the sertão, he encountered “a remnant of an indigenous tribe [...] on the edge of cultural extermination.” This experience resonated with the director’s knowledge of another Ramos novel, Caetés, which concerns the eponymous tribe’s cannibalizing a Portuguese bishop and their subsequent devastation at the hands of a colonial army. Dos Santos describes the novel as Ramos’s “attempt to return to Brazilianness, seeking to cry out ‘We are all Indians!’ and place himself in an internal situation of rediscovering in himself that which could survive of the Indian of the earliest history of Brazil—the Indian capable of devouring a bishop—in order to feel more ‘a man of his era.’” This dialectic of indigenous presence/absence, in which the historical moment of encounter, cannibalism, and retribution is continually reanimated, lies at the heart of Dos Santos’s vision of Brazilian national identity. In this sense, How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman is not that far removed from the American Western as it is usually conceived: the national myth of civilization overcoming the wilderness that valorizes the mediating term, embodied in the white hero, between these two dialectical poles.

This ambivalence concerning the supposed disappearance of indigenous peoples and their centrality to the continual imaginative reconstitution of the nation is apparent in the film’s closing sequence. The most striking divergence from Staden’s narrative in the screenplay is the Tupi’s ceremonial devouring of Jean. Probably the film’s best-known shot, sometimes

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23 Qtd. in Salem, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 257.
24 Qtd. in Salem, Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 257-58.
misidentified as its final image, is the aforementioned zoom in on Sebiopepe’s eyes looking directly into camera as she munches on a bit of her erstwhile companion’s neck. Peña ends his analysis here, describing “the film’s final act of cannibalism as a gesture of defiance.”25 In placing this shot at the end of the film, Peña may be thinking of the strikingly similar final shot of Godard’s Weekend (1967). There, a bourgeois woman who has been taken captive by a group of young anarchists, who are obsessed with Westerns and especially Indians, chews on a piece of her husband. If Frenchman actually did end on this shot, it would carry a much stronger Brechtian charge through the suggestion of an alternative history, leaving spectators to make conjectures that could subvert a teleological view of European colonialism.

The potential for such generative speculation is contained by a brief coda: first, a tracking shot across a group of Tupi men facing the camera and standing stock still, followed by a static image of soft waves lapping at an empty beach, then the film’s final intertitle. The caption is from Mem de Sá, the third Portuguese Governor-General of Brazil, recounting a 1557 massacre: “I fought on the sea so that no Tupiniquin remained alive. Laid along the shore, the dead covered almost a league.” The absence in the preceding shot of the bodies that he describes is by no means a refutation of his account, such as we see in the opening sequence. Rather, it serves as a confirmation of the annihilation of this particular tribe. The apparently irrefutable nature of the historical information in this caption and its confirmation through visual absence stands literally as the film’s ultimate statement. As such, it retroactively colors the juxtapositions of caption and image interspersed throughout the film and stabilizes their disjunctures.

If there are ideological contradictions being exposed in the aesthetic form of this final scene, they must be located, as in the opening sequence, between image and sound. The soundtrack here is an indigenous chant whose timbre suggests a field recording or other archival

source, though one of obscure provenance. Curiously, at precisely the moment where the historical and visual erasure of the Tupi is accomplished, the temporal cues in the audio track invoke a survival that troubles the Brazilianness/Indianness dialectic. The tracking shot that accompanies this recording is presumably an attempt to agglomerate the indigenous presence materialized in the audio tape to the painted bodies of the nonindigenous actors. In the interviews cited above, Dos Santos suggests that this sequence is not meant to produce dissonance, that by now we are supposed to believe that the phenotypically European actors are in fact Indians, just as “We are all Indians.” Yet an awareness of the actors’ ethnicity forecloses this synthesis. The presence of the recording and the absence of indigenous bodies give the lie to both of the common ideological presumptions that indigenous peoples have either been justifiably sacrificed for or generationally assimilated into Brazil’s “racial democracy.” These unidentified and disembodied voices on the tape, which cannot be contained by dos Santos’ authorial voice, constitute the film’s most radical locus of ideological rupture.

South by Southwest: Race and Adaptation

As the foregoing analysis shows, beyond adding various other “tracks” to an ostensibly purely verbal text, cinematic adaptation is also colored by its agglomeration of various media practices that bring with them their own circuits of allusion, their own Bakhtinian echoes. Even when we can identify a discrete literary source—such as Hans Staden’s personal narrative or Dorothy Johnson’s short story—the process of adaptation also involves the relationships among these transmedial echoes in their material specificity. In the case of A Man Called Horse, this phenomenon is displayed through the cinema’s inheritances from some of its precursor media. In its emphasis on embodied experience, this film borrows from a nineteenth-century mediascape
that include the diorama, the stereoscope, the illustrated lecture, and the museum of oddities. These echoes are expressed through certain aspects of the film’s visual style and its incorporation of George Catlin’s depiction of the Okipa ceremony.

However, since “this bloody scene which really makes the movie,” as Dorothy Johnson referred to it in a 1978 interview, is a new addition made in the screenplay, I want first to turn to her short story.26 A very brief synopsis is appropriate at this juncture: John Morgan, an upper-class white man, leaves behind his privileged existence in order to test his mettle on the frontier during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Taken captive by a band of raiding Indians while bathing in the buff, he is treated as a slave and given the name Horse. Over time, and through many trials and tribulations, he partially adapts to native ways and eventually regains human status by killing a member of an enemy tribe and stealing his horses. He uses this newfound property as the bride-price to wed a native woman. After Morgan’s brother-in-law dies in battle, and his wife dies in childbirth, he must decide whether to stay and care for his mother-in-law, who now has no living relatives. This he somewhat reluctantly does, and after her death, he returns to civilization, having proved himself, as Johnson puts it, “the equal of any man on earth.”27

A Man Called Horse merits serious consideration as adaptation, not due to any particular claim to literariness, but rather because a comparison with its source material illuminates certain aspects of the genealogy of its racial ideology. When the film has been discussed in scholarship, it has been framed as old wine in a new bottle, its nods to 1960s youth counterculture merely a

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26 Sue Mathews and James W. Healey, “The Winning of the Western Fiction Market: An Interview with Dorothy M. Johnson,” *Prairie Schooner* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 165.
27 Dorothy Johnson, “A Man Called Horse,” in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Helena, Mont.: Riverbend Publishing, 2005), 24. Further references in parentheses. Where character names have been changed in the adaptation, I have followed a practice of referring to characters by the names used in the film (e.g. Johnson’s unnamed protagonist becomes John Morgan in the film).
masquerade meant as cover for a conventional plot. Yet the film and Johnson’s 1950 story display significant departures from the Platonic Western, in terms of geography (east of the Mississippi River), temporality (prior to the Civil War), and sociohistorical context (pre-industrial). These three peculiarities in the film’s setting point toward the largely neglected though manifestly abundant associations between the myth of the West and the myth of the South. Despite the clear historical linkage between the admission of new states to the Union as a result of Westward expansion and the political struggle over the question of slavery, this is almost never overtly addressed in the genre. The evacuation of this historical context also leads to a general (though not universal) absence of blackness in the genre’s racial ideology, in which whiteness is constructed through a negative binary relationship with indigeneity. As one of the few Western stories that features enslavement as a key narrative component, *Horse* complicates this notion.

One of the few scholars to link the myths of the South and the West, Richard Dyer, does so in the interest of contrasting their modes of conceptualizing whiteness. In his view, the former requires a constant reassertion of racial purity as a conscious refutation of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, “whereas the West takes the project of whiteness for granted and achieved.”28 This is a rather dubious generalization that is most certainly not applicable to the captivity narrative subgenre. *Horse* in particular, in the film as in Johnson’s story, revolves around the deconstruction and eventual restitution of the protagonist’s whiteness. I argue that whiteness in the Western is actually quite similar to Dyer’s conception of the Myth of the South. It is a category that is constantly in flux and in multiple relation to various non-white ethnicities, that is perpetually perceived by those who claim to hold it as being under threat of erasure, and that therefore must be continually reenacted in order to be preserved.

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Viewing *Horse* as a literary adaptation as well as through the lineage of its precinematic antecedents offers a new perspective on the imaginative construction of race in the Western as an embodied state, though not necessarily one that is biologically determined. Consider two of the foundational Western texts, Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* (1827-41) and Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902). While a few films like *A Man Called Horse* and *The Searchers* seek to combine the divergent thematic interests of the two authors, it is rather curious that they are seen as occupying the same linear trajectory toward the cinematic version of the genre. There are parallels in the sense that each reaches back over a recently crossed historical boundary: Cooper, writing in the days of the early republic, casts back past the Revolution to the colonial period; Wister, looking back from the beginnings of global American empire, traverses the closing of the frontier proclaimed in the 1890 U.S. Census. Yet Wister’s borrowing of plot devices from the melodramatic stage to build a narrative in which the hero ends up in a companionate marriage, metonymically ensuring the foundation of a white nation on the frontier, is a far cry from the doomed Romantic affairs involving a multiplicity of racial identifications to be found in Cooper.²⁹ The cold rationality of Wister’s Anglo-Saxon eugenicism also presents a stark contrast with the survivals of Gothic irrationality and its attendant ambiguities of identity that Cooper adopts from sentimental novels of the previous generation like Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntly* (1799).³⁰ The purity of whiteness in Wister thus skirts the problematic of hybridity that is ever-present in Cooper.


A key example is to be found in *The Last of the Mohicans*’ Cora Munro, an early instance of the “tragic mulatta” stereotype. Although this specific character type is not common in the later Western genre, Cora’s opting for death over a marriage to the villainous Magua is the ancestor of a few rote plot devices that allow the Western almost uniformly to avoid the specter of miscegenation. One of these is the “last bullet” trope, whereby a white woman (or her male companion) in a group of settlers under Indian attack will keep one piece of ammunition in reserve so that she can take her own life (or allow herself to be killed) rather than submit to “a fate worse than death.” While this device fell out of favor around the time of the Second World War, it is still common in Westerns for the Native American mother of a biracial child to die in childbirth. This generally results in an emphasis on the father and son’s (the child is nearly always male) struggle with their social outcast status, in a variation on the tragic mulatto type. This narrative survives from Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Squaw Man* (1912), regarded as the first feature-length film made in Hollywood, all the way to Alejandro G. Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* (2015). Often, though, as is the case in *Horse*, the child dies along with the mother, suggesting that miscegenation is a biological dead-end as well as a social taboo.

The disappearance of the “half-breed,” in combination with the survival of Cora’s self-sacrifice as narrative device, indicates that blackness may be a structuring absence of the Western genre. Seen in this light, the preference in the cinematic Western for the melodramatic realism of Wister over the Romantic Gothicism of Cooper and Brown accrues new significance. Discussing the relationship between the gothic and blackness, which Cora refers to as the “curse of my ancestors,” Diane Roberts notes that “[r]epresenting America’s racial history as a ‘curse’ is a common-place in American fiction”:

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Blacks haunt the officially-optimistic story America tells about itself: opportunity, equality, wealth, freedom. The wails of beaten slaves are never quite erased in the loud proclamations of democracy. Often invisible (like ghosts), blacks manifest themselves at uncomfortable moments as reminders of past crimes: the return of America’s racial repressed.  

The kind of official optimism to which Roberts refers is characteristic of the melodramatic mode as delineated by Linda Williams: “Melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a space of innocence,” usually located in a rural past, often in the antebellum South. Furthermore, “The greater the historical burden of guilt, the more pathetically and the more actively the melodrama works to recognize and regain a lost innocence.” In contradistinction to the gothic mode’s obsession with guilt, melodrama emphatically disavows culpability.

Of course, the most forcefully articulated expression of melodramatic racial ideology is to be found in D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation (1915), particularly the sequence in which the pastoral idyll of Flora, the youngest daughter of the plantocrat Cameron family, is disrupted by the violent sexual advances of the monstrous freedman Gus. In the tradition of Cooper’s Cora, the white woman throws herself from the cliff where Gus has cornered her, which in turn provides the justification for her elder brother, the “Little Colonel,” to form the Ku Klux Klan. Richard Maltby has argued that the controversy over the film’s overt racism at the time of its initial release forced the diversion of its ideology into more subtle expressions: “In this arena of

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34 Ibid., 61.
35 The intertitle immediately following Flora’s death reads, “For her who had learned the stern lesson of honor, we should not grieve that she found sweeter the opal gates of death.” A close reading of this sequence in its implications for audience studies is to be found in Manthia Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance,” in Film Theory and Criticism, 7th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 767-75.
malleable signifiers, the threat of the sexual Other migrated elsewhere, among other places, to its dormant position in the Western, where it is several times disguised.”

This process of displacement was already underway in *The Virginian*, whose nostalgic evocation of the vanished frontier shares close affinities with the myth of the Lost Cause. As Cawelti argues in the revised edition of his *Six-Gun Mystique*, “The very title of Wister’s novel symbolized the link between the modern Western and certain aspects of the Southern mythic tradition, as did the two central themes of pastoralism and justified vigilantism.” A major plot point in the novel is the interruption of the eponymous cowboy’s burgeoning love affair with Eastern schoolteacher Molly Wood when she develops reservations about his participation in a posse that tracks down and hangs the cattle rustler Shorty, previously the Virginian’s best friend. “The Judge,” who owns the ranch that employs the Virginian, engages in a Platonic dialogue with Molly in an attempt to justify the lynching:

> For in all sincerity I see no likeness in principle whatever between burning Southern negroes in public and hanging Wyoming horse-thieves in private. I consider the burning a proof that the South is semi-barbarous, and the hanging a proof that Wyoming is determined to become civilized. We do not torture our criminals when we lynch them. We do not invite spectators to enjoy their death agony. We put no such hideous disgrace upon the United States. We execute our criminals by the swiftest means, and in the quietest way.

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In disavowing any relationship between Southern and Western lynching, the Judge expressly denounces the fascination of the crowd with gothic spectacle and their subsequent implication in the guilt for this horrific deed. By framing the lynching of cattle rustlers as a positivistic, depersonalized expression of “popular justice,” the Judge maintains the innocence of the executioners and the Manichean morality of melodrama. The issue of embodied spectatorship that the Judge raises will be crucial to understanding how *A Man Called Horse*’s Sun Vow ritual brings into question the “dormant position” of raced sexuality in the Western.

While the gruesome initiation ordeal is not present in Johnson’s story, she does gesture toward the gothic in her repeated references to the practice of self-mutilation as mourning ritual (10, 20, 22-23). Overall, though, Johnson’s mode of storytelling is Wisterian and melodramatic. In particular, she adopts Wister’s Social Darwinist notions of “natural aristocracy,” a status based on individual prowess and virility rather than noble heredity. Johnson echoes Wister’s sophistic, antidemocratic notions of the superior specimens of mankind (“the quality”) possessing a natural right to rule over the unwashed, undifferentiated masses (“the equality”). As the Virginian tells Molly, “Some holds four aces […] and some holds nothin’, and some poor fello’ gets the aces and no show to play ’em; but a man has got to prove himself my equal before I’ll believe him.” As it so often does in Westerns, the game of poker becomes a metonymic field on which to play out much grander conflicts, in this case proving the superiority of skill (meritocracy) over luck (heredity).

Johnson’s narrator describes a similar realization on the part of Morgan, who goes West “to find his equals. He had the idea that in Indian country, where there was danger, all white men were kings, and he wanted to be one of them. But he found, in the West as in Boston, that the

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40 Wister, *The Virginian*, 144.
men he respected were still his superiors, even if they could not read, and those he did not respect weren’t worth talking to” (1). Among the men Morgan respects are those he hires for his existential expedition, though in Jack DeWitt’s screenplay they are downgraded to the status of drunken buffoons and stereotypical hillbillies. While Johnson barely mentions them, in the film they become the catalysts for Morgan’s abduction, having drunkenly shot holes in his bathing basin, leading him to wash in the river where he is captured. Their cinematic characterization plays on a longstanding prejudice in American culture against illiterate, inbred “crackers,” who in the Jacksonian period in which the film is set were often seen as congenitally retrograde, inferior even to Native Americans.41 Morgan, meanwhile, is transmogrified from Boston Brahmin to English lord, further distancing him from the condition of his employees and reinstituting the notion of social class as a matter of heredity as opposed to merit.

In an essay on British characters in Western films, Jack Nachbar argues that figures like Morgan “confront the primitive coarseness of the frontier and in doing so are reborn, shedding their class consciousness and stuffy manners for individualism, democratic classlessness, and invigorating informality.”42 The character exposition in the opening scene of the film shows that Morgan, despite having traversed the Northwest Territory for the past five years, is no closer to American egalitarianism than when he first arrived. He makes a clumsy attempt by imperiously demanding that his grizzled old guide, Maddock, call him by his first name rather than “Your Lordship.” When Maddock responds with “You may address me as ‘Joe,’” his toothless, hillbilly grin is played for a laugh, mocking any suggestion that the two men could ever be considered equals.

If the story were about Morgan’s Americanization, it stands to reason that he would exhibit a changed attitude toward mountain men at the end of the film, but their death at the hands of the Sioux raiding party at the outset of the narrative forecloses this option. Instead, according to Nachbar, Morgan’s aristocratic attitude is eventually corrected when, “in a dramatic gesture of democratic acceptance, [he] becomes the adopted son of the haggish old woman who initially had beaten him and made him perform the chores of an animal.”43 I would argue that this displacement of Morgan’s foil from Maddock to Buffalo Cow Head negates any attempt to read the film through the lens of democratization. Morgan’s desired equality is to be found not in the erasure of social class but in the transposition of racial identity. In their illiteracy, drunkenness, and general ill-breeding, Morgan’s guides hardly present an ideal model of a democratic citizenry. Instead, they project an undesirable, merely hereditary kind of whiteness that Morgan must reject in the attempt to construct a superior, meritocratic brand of whiteness that can legitimize the social status that he finds to be arbitrary yet inescapable.

Nor is Morgan’s becoming Indian a straightforward matter of accepting his adopted family. Rather, it takes a circuitous route through his abjection into the status of a beast of burden and subsequent restoration to humanity. In Morgan’s transitional stage between white and Indian, he becomes, for all intents and purposes, a horse. In arguing for the underlying connections between the myths of South and West, Cawelti also notes the centrality of the horse to both, particularly as a symbol of a declining socioeconomic system that is rapidly being superseded by industrialization.44 The historical role of the horse as a marker of nobility is clearly operative in the Western, as is evidenced in the return of the Spanish loan-word caballero (gentleman) to its linguistic roots to refer to anyone who rides a horse. Its etymological cousins,

43 Ibid., 172.
44 Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel, 76-77.
chivalry and cavalry, lie at the heart of the Southern ideologies of protecting white womanhood
and venerating the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, which itself is transposed into the Western
mythos as Custer’s Last Stand. However, Cawelti also suggests the ambivalence present in the
horse’s similarly close connection to Plains Indians and its “special linkage [with] black slaves,”
who are “often shown to have a special understanding or skill with horses….”

Beyond this literal association, one still operative in the 21st century in the form of Deadwood’s livery master
Hostetler, the analogical connections between horses and slaves in terms of social status and
economic function is a central subtext in both versions of A Man Called Horse.

In Johnson’s story, Morgan’s captivity teaches him “what it [is] to have no status at all”
(2). No longer a mere misfit among Boston Brahmins or mountain men, he now undergoes a kind
of social death that places him entirely outside of the kinship circles and status hierarchies of his
captors. When he is taken captive, he is “naked as a horse and poor as a slave” (22). By the time
he realizes that he is “the property of the … old woman,” he has already “considered coldly the
advantages of being a horse. A man would be humiliated, and sooner or later he would strike
back and that would be the end of him. But a horse had only to be docile. Very well, he would
learn to do without pride” (4). Morgan’s newfound identity as a horse, which he constructs for
himself rather than having it imposed upon him by his captors as in the film, also prompts a
feeling of solidarity with actual horses: “The captive was a horse all summer, a docile bearer of
burdens, careful and patient. He kept reminding himself that he had to be better-natured than
other horses, because he could not lash out with hoofs or teeth. Helping the old woman load up
the horses for travel, he yanked at a pack and said, ‘Whoa, brother. It goes easier when you don’t
fight.’” (6). Morgan’s fatalistic acceptance of his status as livestock is mirrored in the narrator’s
implicit legitimation of the situation: “The Indian who captured him lived like a lord, as he had a

45 Ibid., 77.
right to do.” (6). If we take the question of chattel slavery vs. “free soil” as a structuring absence of the Western, this statement becomes less an expression of cultural relativism than it is an ambivalent expression of the Myth of the South.

Morgan’s eventual elevation to human status within the tribe necessitates his obtaining horses in order to pay the bride-price to marry the chief’s sister. Because of his own horseness, this transition metaphorically involves Morgan’s self-mastery, a concept that has important connotations of whiteness.46 Crucially, the ceremony that follows Morgan’s successful horse-raiding involves the white man’s “smear[ing] his face with grease and charcoal” (13). Michael Rogin has argued that “blacking up” became a mode of assimilation for immigrant Jewish entertainers, a process that he refers to as “conversion by blackface.”47 This moment of Morgan’s accession to citizenship in the village mirrors the *The Jazz Singer’s* (1927) narrative of social mobility through interracial marriage.48 The displacement from Al Jolson’s transition into whiteness to Morgan’s transition into Indianness still maintains a shared third term of blackness. Yet in Morgan’s case this involves an abjection and an absolution that are not present in *The Jazz Singer*. The allegorical implication of Morgan’s debasement makes of the Indian village a plantation, an association which is confirmed in the story’s conclusion.

When Morgan’s brother-in-law Yellow Hand falls in battle and his wife Pretty Calf dies in childbirth soon thereafter, Morgan finds himself a free man. The fact that his mother-in-law has burned all of the family’s possessions and mutilated herself in mourning adds an additional incentive for Morgan to leave the village. But when Greasy Hand turns to him and plaintively

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addresses him as “Son,” he finds himself acknowledging her as his mother and deciding to stay to care for her in her remaining years (23-24). In an interview, Johnson describes this as the decisive moment at which her “neurotic” protagonist “becomes an admirable person. […] He finally changes when he joins in the suffering….⁴⁹ At the very moment of his emancipation, Greasy Hand’s former slave submits to her maternal authority in a pathetic gesture of self-sacrifice. In this way, the Indian village comes to occupy the nostalgic, maternal space of an idealized past, figured in the mythical plantation.

Just Looking: Transmedial Genealogy and Spectator Positioning

The intervening years between the publication of Johnson’s story in 1950 and the release of its cinematic adaptation in 1970 straddle the conventional periodization of the Civil Rights Movement, from Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 to the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. By the time Collier’s first printed the story, blackface and the plantation myth were already becoming taboo in Hollywood filmmaking.⁵₀ It is hardly surprising, then, that the film’s presentation of Morgan’s induction into the tribe jettisons Johnson’s oblique allusion to blackface. Despite the apparently radical departure of replacing this scene with the Sun Vow, the adaptation maintains and hyperbolizes Johnson’s theme of sacrifice and its concomitant racial coding. While the film retains Morgan’s acceptance of his adoptive mother as its denouement, the narrative logic of the source material is undermined by the far greater spectatorial impact of the ritual sequence, to the extent that the film’s ending is not only anticlimactic but almost incoherent.

⁵₀ Rogin suggests that the last successful blackface films (in terms of box office) were released in 1949, while Donald Bogle argues that Gone with the Wind (1939), the apotheosis of the plantation myth, marked “the end of a tradition.” Rogin, Blackface, White Noise, 169; Donald Bogle, Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, 5th ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 76.
Robin Wood has argued that the “incoherent text” is a hallmark of Hollywood filmmaking from roughly 1965 to 1980, a period in which “[s]ociety appeared to be in a state of advanced disintegration, yet there was no serious possibility of the emergence of a coherent and comprehensive alternative. This quandary … can be felt to underlie most of the important American films of the late 60s and 70s. […] Here, incoherence is no longer hidden and esoteric: the films seem to crack open before our eyes.” Both Wood and Richard Slotkin frame this ideological crisis as a reaction to the Vietnam War. For our purposes, the more pertinent context is the negation of the naïve assimilationist attitude toward American race relations that underlies Johnson’s story, alongside the societal failure to forge a viable solution.

In this light, the gothic irruption of Morgan’s torture within the melodramatic frame of Johnson’s story signals a frenetic attempt to conceptualize guilt without sacrificing innocence. The film’s incoherence can thus be attributed to an uncomfortable alliance among Johnson’s nostalgic activation of inherited ideological tropes, Catlin’s sensationalistic presentation of the Okipa ritual, and director Elliot Silverstein’s New-Hollywood aesthetic excess, apparently designed to attract the youth audience that had flocked to see Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and Easy Rider (1969). Wood’s optical metaphor is particularly apposite here because the film overtly renders visuality as its primary mode of signification. As I noted at the outset, the film’s poster addresses the prospective spectator in such a way that the narrative becomes an afterthought to the advertised spectacle. However, it is not only the centerpiece ritual that marks a departure from Johnson’s story, but the dispersal of point of view away from Morgan, the changes in racial coding that accompany this shift, and the manifestations of these phenomena as a mode of address to an embodied spectator.

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52 Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 631-32.
The question of embodiment in raced visual representations has been eloquently problematized by Dyer:

Biological concepts of race … reinforced the notion of the inescapable corporeality of non-white peoples, while leaving the corporeality of whites less certain, something that fed into the function of non-white … people in representation of being a kind of definite thereness by means of which white people can gain a grounding in materiality and “know who they are”…. At the level of representation, whites remain, for all their transcending superiority, dependent on non-whites for their sense of self, just as they are materially in so many imperial and post-imperial, physical and domestic labor circumstances.53

While Dyer emphasizes pictorial representation per se, I want to focus on the ways in which *A Man Called Horse* reflexively foregrounds the act of looking as itself embodied and raced.

The opening scene, some of whose departures from Johnson’s characterization have been noted above, is remarkable for its fragmentation of point of view and the associations this sets up between race and the gaze. When Maddock asks Morgan what he has been doing on his long sojourn in the wilderness, Morgan responds, “Looking, Joe. Just looking.” The shot situates Morgan in a combination of portrait and landscape that utilizes the full breadth of the Cinemascope frame [fig. 4.3]. The composition here is strikingly reminiscent of Thomas Gainsborough’s *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, which John Berger identifies in *Ways of Seeing* as epitomizing the relationship between the medium of oil painting, in its peculiar tactility, and private property [fig. 4.4]. “They are not a couple in Nature as Rousseau imagined nature,” he writes. “They are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions.”54 By analogy, framing Morgan in this way

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reinforces the notion of his nobility and subsequently the legitimacy of his control over the land. This is in contradistinction to Morgan’s disaffection about his inheritance of land, title, and military commission, which he complains about to Joe. The resultant ambivalence within the text between Morgan’s hereditary station and his still-to-be-won Wisterian “natural aristocracy” is mirrored in the form of this shot and its echoes of prior modes of pictorial representation.

Fig. 4.3: “Looking, Joe. Just looking.”

Fig. 4.4: Gainsborough, Mr & Mrs Andrews (c. 1750)
According to Berger’s theory, it is not only the manner in which the Andrews are represented but the means of representation itself that presents the illusion of legitimacy. The Andrews’ ownership of the painting, intended for private consumption, allows them to self-identify as the rightful owners of the land. Yet this occurs through a fetishistic disavowal of the mercantile origins of their wealth and the capitalist context in which the painting itself becomes a commodity. This maneuver maintains the notion that this image mimetically reproduces the natural order of feudalistic ownership. In *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Denis Cosgrove identifies such a disavowal as the ideological basis of landscape in general:

In a natural [read: precapitalist] economy the relationship between human beings and land is dominantly that of the insider, an unalienated relationship based on use values and interpreted analogically. In a capitalist economy it is a relationship wherein man stands as outsider and interprets nature causally. Culturally, a degree of alienation is achieved by compositional techniques – particularly linear perspective…. The idea of landscape holds both types of relationship in an unstable unity…. The origin of the landscape idea in the West and its artistic expressions have served in part to promote ideologically an acceptance of the property relationship while sustaining the image of an unalienated one, of land as use.\(^{55}\)

Whatever the actual ontological status of a “natural economy” might be, as an ideological concept it does seem to underlie conventional methods of landscape representation.

What is somewhat curious about the shot of Morgan, however, is a lack of the spatial contiguity between portrait and landscape that structures the composition of Gainsborough’s

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painting. Consequently, the appearance of depth in the image is significantly reduced, even to the extent that it may be perceived as comprising two non-adjacent planes. This is a radical departure from the deep-space compositions that are so characteristic of John Ford’s Westerns, notably My Darling Clementine. Ford’s dramatically perspectival optics recall fifteenth-century “ideal city” paintings, while at the same time juxtaposing an organically sublime backdrop that invokes an unalienated relationship to nature. Paradoxically, the film’s setting on the precipice of historical change is presented through two discrete yet noncontradictory images of temporal stability: the objective, universalizing subject position constructed through linear perspective and the eternal changelessness metonymized in Monument Valley. Cosgrove argues that “an important effect of linear perspective is to arrest the flow of history at a specific moment, freezing that moment as a universal reality,” and further that its conventional use in landscape “reinforce[s] ideas of individualism, subjective control of an objective environment and the separation of personal experience from the flux of collective historical experience.”

By contrast, the planar view of Morgan’s landscape/portrait is unsettling in its lack of clearly defined perspective lines. The presumed optical objectivity in both Gainsborough’s painting and Ford’s mise-en-scène is still operative, but it is further troubled by the interruption of a reverse shot of three Sioux who are secretly watching Morgan from the cover of some nearby brush [fig. 4.5]. Situating this vista from their point of view clashes with Robert Stam and Ella Shohat’s axiom that spectatorial positioning in the Western “consistently favor[s] the Euro-American protagonists; they are centered in the frame, their desires drive the narrative; the camera pans, tracks, and cranes to accompany their regard. […] The possibility of sympathetic

56 Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape, 26-27.
identifications with the Indians is simply ruled out by the point-of-view conventions; the spectator is unwittingly sutured into a colonialist perspective.”\textsuperscript{57} \textit{A Man Called Horse}’s departure from such conventions is less in the interest of shifting the locus of identification than in fragmenting it to the point of obtuseness. This diffusion is ultimately recouped through various modes of embodiment that are inherently raced and historicized, evincing a radical departure from the perspectival objectivity and synchronic stability of Ford’s pictorial approach.

![Image: Sioux Raiders Watching Morgan](image)

\textbf{Fig. 4.5: Sioux Raiders Watching Morgan}

This distinction is apparent if we compare the opening sequence of \textit{Horse} with the impending Apache attack at the end of the second act of \textit{Stagecoach}. A typically sublime extreme long shot of the coach traversing the valley, accompanied by the recurrent, bright orchestral theme, is transformed in a quick pan left to show Geronimo’s band of warriors peering at the white travelers. They stand on a cliff that encloses the previously unimpeded edges of the frame, as the score accordingly switches to faux-tribal drumbeats. This is followed by three shots of the Apaches, their eyelines leading offscreen right. Instead of a point-of-view shot from their

\textsuperscript{57} Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, \textit{Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media} (New York: Routledge, 1994), 120.
position atop the cliff, there is a cut to a visual and aural repetition of the first panning shot from a slightly different angle, this time showing the Apache mounted and riding offscreen. This recapitulation, particularly the slight but appreciable shift in camera position, threatens to undo the presumption of omniscience in classical Hollywood narration by making apparent the physical situation of the camera. In pragmatic terms, the conventions of continuity editing require a shot between the brief montage of the Apaches looking and their riding off to the ambush, necessitated by the time requisite for them to mount their horses. The least obtrusive solution would be to insert a point-of-view shot from atop the cliff, but Ford has opted instead for this excessive repetition of the objective landscape view of the valley. The risk of unmasking the apparatus inherent in this moment seems only to be warranted by its overt elision of the Apaches’ subjectivity.58

In Horse, subjective camera is not only acceptable but integral to the film’s mode of narration and spectator positioning. Encounter narratives, particularly early captivity narratives such as Hans Staden’s or Mary Rowlandson’s, conventionally rely on the first-person narration of an empirical witness in an alien culture. Dorothy Johnson’s limited third-person point of view generally follows this convention, refraining from editorializing about ethnographic details and using the protagonist’s initial bewilderment and gradual understanding of his captors’ culture to guide the reader. The film, by contrast, moves rapidly between omniscient, perspectival views and variously situated, subjective positions. These juxtapositions enact an embodiment of spectatorship that complicates Morgan’s presumed hereditary (racial) superiority, which is expressed in the landscape/portrait’s echoes of Gainsborough.

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The vantage of most of the subjective angles in this opening sequence is that of the Sioux chief, Morgan’s future brother-in-law, Yellow Hand, surveilling the white intruders. As Morgan and Joe conclude their bird hunting and ride back to the camp, the film returns three times to Yellow Hand’s point of view. In the last of these shots, the view of Morgan’s camp is initially blocked by a thicket of flowers, which then spread open as the camera zooms in on the horses corralled at the edge of the camp. A reverse shot reveals Yellow Hand and his compatriots, indicating their desire to obtain those horses. Similarly to the contrast between the first subjective POV shot and the perspectival view of Morgan’s landscape/portrait, the Sioux’s point of view here interrupts the conventional shot/reverse-shot pattern of the concurrent dialogue scene among the white men in the camp. Such contrasts proliferate throughout the film’s opening act, to the extent that the ideological stability of linear perspective, continuity editing, and character identification are unsettled and even parodied.

One of the film’s most playful moments occurs as Morgan is bathing in the river, framed in a long shot that integrates him into the pastoral setting in a similar manner to *Mr and Mrs Andrews*. An unexpected zoom disrupts this aquatic idyll and reveals that Morgan’s ablutions are being observed from the bank by a Sioux scout named Black Eagle (Eddie Little Sky, the only credited Native American actor in the film).59 The following shot, taken from Black Eagle’s point of view through the branches of a bush, reveals Morgan’s bare bottom as he rises from the water. The reverse close-up shows Black Eagle laughing at the naked white man, enjoying a brief moment of voyeuristic pleasure before Yellow Hand signals that the raid is about to commence. If the purpose of Black Eagle’s surreptitious observation is to build suspense through

59 This is not counting Iron Eyes Cody, an Italian-American actor who passed as Indian for many years. Little Sky was Oglala Lakota from the Pine RidgeReservation, nearby the Rosebud Reservation that was home to many of the film’s background actors. Both Cody and the Rosebud extras are discussed below. “Eddie Little Sky,” Internet Movie Database, accessed January 23, 2018, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0514507/.
dramatic irony, his laughter seems rather out of place. Instead, it inserts a reflexive note of whimsy into the proceedings at the same time that it introduces the spectacle of Richard Harris’s nakedness, whose place among the film’s attractions should not be underestimated.

That some spectators were intensely interested in Harris’s body is confirmed by a letter received by director Elliot Silverstein from one “R. J.” of Detroit. Dismayed to read of the potential for cuts in the interest of garnering a “G” rating, R. J. pleaded with Silverstein to leave the nudity in: “If Richard is exposed sufficiently, I’ll see the movie over and over. […] Please, all of Dick!”  

This moviegoer was clearly less interested in the film’s generic narrative structure than in an embodied, eroticized viewing experience, indicating the myriad motivations that drive film spectatorship. R. J. indirectly offers a rejoinder to a peculiar passage in Cawelti’s *Mystery, Adventure, and Romance* in which he defends the mental pleasures of genre films over the somatic pleasures of pornography. While Cawelti admits that “formulaic works necessarily stress intense and immediate kinds of excitement and gratification,” these kinds of pleasure are conceptualized as purely mental states. This becomes explicit when Cawelti differentiates his favored genres from pornography, which, though “perhaps the most completely formulaic of literary structures,” excludes itself from the generic pantheon by “creat[ing] in the audience a pleasurable state of sexual excitation that it is physical as well as mental….” He surmises that the spectator’s experience of pornography “consists of moments of pleasurable excitation interspersed with long stretches of boredom and frustration, rather than a sustained and completed experience that leaves one temporarily satisfied.”

Yet this description seems fairly apt of many non-pornographic moviegoing experiences, particularly that of viewing *A Man*  

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60 Letter from R.J. to Elliott Silverstein, February 22, 1969, Elliot Silverstein Papers, box 7, file 70, Margaret Herrick Library (hereafter, ESP).

Called Horse. As R. J.’s letter suggests, spectators are not always primarily interested in narrative cohesion or contemplative satiety.

The narrative plenitude that Cawelti invokes is properly presented through the kind of spatial cohesion to be found in Ford’s deep-space compositions, which invoke Renaissance perspective to construct a supposedly universal subject. Silverstein’s characteristic use of variable focal-length lenses, as in the two zoom shots of the white men’s horses and then of Morgan’s naked body, accrues a special significance by contrast. In the first instance, the zoom begins from Yellow Hand’s POV, overtly localized and inferentially embodied through the offscreen hands that spread the view-obscuring flowers, and ends at the object of his desire, the horses. The second zoom shot inverts the process by presenting the bathing Morgan in a classical composition from a seemingly objective point of view, and then negating that perspective by zooming in on the spying Black Eagle, himself obscured by the leaves of the bushes. In both cases, conventional spectator positioning is subverted through the emphasis, achieved through the technology of the zoom lens, on the embodied, situated looking of the Sioux.

While variable focal-length lenses were available to American filmmakers in the classical period, it was not until the 1960s that New Hollywood directors like Silverstein transported zoom techniques from the television studio to the film set. As John Belton has argued, the integration of the zoom into American cinema was not simply an instance of technological evolution but a radical shift in aesthetics with ideological implications. In the zoom, “[s]pace is no longer defined in terms of perspective cues and parallax, but in terms of changing image size and time. Its measurement of space in terms of time gives it an Einsteinian (as opposed to Eisensteinian) identity.”

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“reorganization of vision” that Jonathan Crary has identified in the initial move away from linear perspective in nineteenth-century visual culture. By virtue of its appropriation of the work of George Catlin, most active as an artist precisely during the 1810-40 period that Crary identifies as marking this shift, *A Man Called Horse* expresses Bakhtinian echoes of the material conditions of visual culture at that time.

In much the same way that the New Hollywood disrupted the conventional language and spectator positioning of the classical period, nineteenth-century technologies of visual reproduction like the diorama and the phenakistoscope offered an embodied, subjective experience that was radically removed from the abstract objectivity of aesthetic spatial construction emblematized in the camera obscura. Goethe and other Romantic-era optical theorists rejected the static, god’s-eye view of prior models to conceive of “perception and cognition as essentially temporal processes dependent upon a dynamic amalgamation of past and present.” Such processes necessitate a phenomenological interaction between the observer’s body and the objects of perception, whereas the subject’s entrance into the camera obscura theoretically produced a Cartesian separation of somatic experience from perceptual processes.

Of particular interest is the stereoscope, which conjured an uncanny visual tactility by exploiting the discrepancies in the parallax between the observer’s two eyes. Contrary to either perspectival painting or conventional photography, “the fundamental organization of the stereoscopic image is planar. We perceive individual elements as flat, cutout forms arrayed either nearer or further from us. But the experience of space between these objects (planes) is not one of gradual and predictable recession; rather, there is a vertiginous uncertainty about the

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64 Ibid., 98.
distance separating forms."\textsuperscript{65} Belton makes an analogous argument that “the zoom produces an ellipsis of space by both traversing and not traversing it.”\textsuperscript{66} In the unsettling planarity of Morgan’s landscape/portrait and the dislocations of point of view in Silverstein’s zooms, \textit{A Man Called Horse} echoes the peculiarities of the stereoscope and its negation of linear perspective. In a brief montage sequence showing Morgan’s increasing assimilation into Sioux society, this stereoscopic planarity is made explicit. Two drummers face each other in profile from the lateral edges of the frame as a group of men in the background dance [fig. 4.6]. Oddly, the dancers are initially out of focus, overtly signaling as a superimposition of separate planes what would otherwise be read as contiguous space.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{stereoscopic_superimposition.png}
\caption{Fig. 4.6: Stereoscopic Superimposition}
\end{figure}

Ultimately, Crary argues, “the stereoscope was dependent on a physical engagement with the apparatus that became increasingly unacceptable,” and so photography eventually superseded it and reinstituted linear perspective and the universal subject.\textsuperscript{67} Rather than a wholesale retrenchment into Renaissance spatial logic, however, the subsequent visual culture of modernity

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 125. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{67} Crary, \textit{Techniques of the Observer}, 133.
displays an uneasy amalgamation of the two forms: the older “geometrical optics” alongside the new “physiological optics.” The coexistence of these two perceptual schemes, usually subsumed under the film camera’s apparent reinstitution of linear perspective, is made explicit in the remarkable sequence of Morgan’s forced journey from his hunting camp to the Sioux village.

The moment of Morgan’s capture immediately follows a POV insert of a flock of geese flying overhead that Morgan espies from his perch on a large rock in the river. This is reminiscent of the only previous shot from Morgan’s point of view, when he is initially shown shooting a bird. (Significantly, both are long shots rather than zooms.) In the reverse shot here, Morgan is suddenly lassoed around the neck and dragged up onto dry land. As this action proceeds, the editing quickens, rapidly cutting between shaky handheld shots. In the midst of this confusion, there is a momentary but radical shift in the presentation of Morgan’s point of view. He flails and kicks against his captors, four of whom look directly into the camera, smiling as they taunt him/us [fig. 4.7]. A pan then reveals Yellow Hand, also laughing into the camera as he pulls on the rope around Morgan’s neck, which extends through the bottom of the frame, seemingly toward the spectator [fig. 4.8]. In contradistinction to the earlier shots of birds, which are seen through Morgan’s eyes only by virtue of the implications of the reverse shots, the vantage here overtly tethers the spectator to the camera itself. This bizarre moment, in which the spectator’s body becomes Morgan’s body becomes the apparatus, is precisely the moment of Morgan’s abjection, as he is reduced to a naked body whose will is effectively negated. When Morgan is finally subdued, panting on all fours, Yellow Hand gleefully bestows on him the new name of Shunkawakan: Horse.

If the contrast between this dangerous moment of spectatorial embodiment and the visual plenitude of Morgan’s landscape/portrait were not already clear, a subsequent brief return to
wide-angle, perspectival optics highlights the relationship between Morgan’s transition into
bondage and the subversion of classical point-of-view conventions. After an unsuccessful escape
attempt, the recaptured Morgan is again shown on all fours in the foreground as Yellow Hand,
mounted atop a black horse, looms over him in the middleground, effectively blocking out the
landscape in the background [fig. 4.9]. This shot is the culmination of a process whereby
Morgan’s status as legitimate occupier of the virgin forest, expressed through the echoes of
Gainsborough’s painting, is shattered by the Sioux as avatars of a quite different way of seeing.
By emphasizing the situatedness of the Sioux’s looking through physical obstructions in the
frame and by means of the zoom lens, Silverstein destabilizes the perspectival compositions
associated with Morgan. In this restaging of the portrait/landscape with a difference, Morgan has
undergone not only a narrative trajectory of debasement, but more importantly a transformation
from a detached observer into an embodied inhabitant of his surroundings. In this sense, he has
traversed Cosgrove’s distinction between viewing a landscape and existing in an environment.

At the same time, the reflexive elements of Silverstein’s visual presentation produce an
embodiment of spectatorship that decenters the comfortably objective viewing position evoked
by linear perspective and classical editing. Through such techniques, Morgan’s whiteness (and
by extension the presumed spectator’s) can no longer be taken for granted because the universal
subject position that underwrites that status is made untenable. From this point on, Morgan must
discover a way of recouping his whiteness by transforming it from an abstract concept into a
physically verifiable achievement. This is what ultimately leads him to undertake his Vow to the
Sun, which is not only the moment of highest spectatorial interest but also the nexus where
questions of race, spectatorship, and genre most violently collide.
Fig. 4.7: Taunting Sioux

Fig. 4.8: Tethered to the Apparatus

Fig. 4.9: Return to Perspective
The Most Electrifying Ritual: The Sun Vow and the Restitution of Whiteness

Unsurprisingly, much of the second act reverts to Morgan’s point of view as he grows acclimated to his new social role in the village. This is especially true of the conventional manner in which Morgan’s desire for Yellow Hand’s sister, Running Deer, is presented in basic shot/reverse-shot patterns constructed around the white captive’s subjectivity. An important exception occurs when Morgan stumbles upon his chance to rise above slave status by killing two Shoshone scouts and stealing their horses, which he can then present as the bride-price for his prospective wedding. As Morgan peers down from a cliff overlooking the Shoshone’s position, his observation of their two horses is presented in a zoom reminiscent of Yellow Hand’s earlier POV shot. This signals Morgan’s integration into the economic system of the Sioux by means of an aesthetic technique that, up to that point, is always linked to Indianness. As such, it also constitutes a threat to Morgan’s whiteness, figuring his increasing comfort with Sioux ways of seeing and relating to the material world. By extension, it presents a problem of identification in its disruption of the conventional framing and editing patterns that are employed once Morgan enters the village.

In theory, the horse raid should be the moment in which he rises to full citizenship in the village. As Johnson succinctly puts it, “This is the way the captive white man acquired wealth and honor to win a bride and save his life…” (12). But the film’s incorporation of Catlin’s Okipa forecloses the performative efficacy of Morgan’s acquisition. He presents the horses to Yellow Hand, who additionally demands that Morgan, to his chagrin (“I just bought her, didn’t I?”), undergo the Vow to the Sun. The chief’s pronouncement interjects this ordeal into the frame of Johnson’s narrative as a substitution for Morgan’s “blacking up,” overdetermining the spectacle’s significance. The white captive’s complete integration into Sioux society is forbidden
by the ideological imperatives of American mass culture, which simultaneously insist on his accession to citizenship according to his metaphorical role as immigrant. While Richard Harris’s Britishness plays into the notion of Morgan’s “going Indian” as figuring the Americanization of “white ethnics,” Rogin’s trope of conversion by blackface is no longer a narrative option.

The association between enslavement and blackness, figured as horseness, is retained, though Johnson’s fantasy of the seamless transition of former slaves into the new economy of the South (that is, their voluntary acceptance of a status that remains fundamentally unchanged) is no longer tenable. Instead, in this immediately post-Civil Rights moment, the contemporary white backlash is agglomerated onto the film’s echoes of the magazine story’s racial imagination. If Morgan’s integration into the Sioux economy by means of his acquisition of horses is read as the transition from slave to ostensibly free labor, the fact that this is inadequate to grant him access to marriage rights begins to make more sense. What Yellow Hand is demanding is akin to a lynching. This produces an ideological impasse between overt racism and its continual disavowal that can only be resolved by figuring the ritual not as a lynching but as a cleansing crucifixion.

Before dealing expressly with the Christological overtones of Morgan’s ordeal, it is important to examine the staging of the Sun Vow as pseudo-lynching and its positioning of spectators as witnesses to a public spectacle. Morgan’s zoom POV shot collapses the distance between the conventional identification with the protagonist and the alternative and separate system of visual alignment with the Sioux, thereby conflating white and Indian ways of seeing in a manner that is unsustainable according to the ideological policing of racial boundaries. The embodied (Indian) mode of spectatorship cannot be allowed to take precedence over the disembodied (white) mode. The staging of the Sun Vow reasserts the separation between the two and the stability and superiority of the latter. This is counterintuitively achieved by situating the
vantage within the assembled Sioux audience. In accord with the analogies among Indian point of view, embodiment, and the apparatus, the set design and lighting reflexively present the medicine lodge in which the ritual takes place as a motion-picture theater. Holes in the roof above Yellow Hand and his compatriots produce shafts of light protruding toward the center of the lodge where Morgan stands, his face brightly illuminated [fig. 4.10]. These rays are clearly reminiscent of those emanating from a projection booth, while the arrangement of the Sioux, with those in the back elevated above those in the front, recalls the sloped floor of a movie-house. In this way, spectators are prompted to assume the role of witness to the ceremony as opposed to identifying with Morgan.

As the captive prepares himself for the ordeal, he is taunted by the elder overseeing the ceremony. Morgan’s translator, Batise, delivers the message: “He say, because you white, you weak, you give up.” Batise, the son of a French trapper and a Flathead Indian woman, is a new character in the adaptation whose presence allows for expository dialogue in English and obviates the necessity of Morgan’s learning the Lakota language. At the same time, his very existence gives the lie to the filmmakers’ conceit that they are presenting a historically accurate
vision of native life prior to contact with Europeans—an imagined era of racial purity. His subservience to Morgan and his death in the third act reinstate the racial boundaries that might otherwise be brought into question. Meanwhile, the medicine man is played by Iron Eyes Cody, a son of Italian immigrants who not only played Indian roles in numerous films and television programs, but passed as Native American in his offscreen life. (While his heritage was not publicly revealed until after his death, it appears to have been an open secret in the industry.)

The presence of these two ambiguous figures at the center of the spectacle suggests the fissures that had arisen in the United States’ racial ideology over the previous two decades as well as echoing the porous ethnic boundaries of gothic frontier narratives.

The alignment of the film spectator with the Sioux audience invokes a determinate ethnic position that is removed from the discomfiting indeterminacy of Batise and Cody, but at the risk of making too overt the associations between the Sun Vow and a public hanging of the kind Wister’s Judge condemns. To circumvent this risk, the film must recapitulate Wister’s disavowal of Southern lynching as gruesome public spectacle and his reorientation of the Western toward Manichean melodrama. In this connection, Morgan’s retort to the medicine man’s doubt can only be expressed through his endurance of bodily suffering and the subsequent confirmation of his status as victim-hero. The Sun Vow marks the moment in which gothic excess becomes justified by its resolution into the melodramatic frame, as it enacts a process of expiation through which gothic guilt is transformed into melodramatic innocence. It is here that lynching’s ambivalent counterpart, crucifixion, comes to the fore.

The unsubtle messianic overtones of Morgan’s ordeal are even more manifest in the first draft of Jack DeWitt’s screenplay, which repeatedly refers to the Sioux as “pagans.” DeWitt has

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Morgan praying in preparation for the Sun Vow (“Look at me, God… I am humble”). When the intense pain of the ritual causes an out-of-body experience, Morgan has a vision of his spirit animal, a white buffalo, who informs him that “The truth alone can set any man free” (cf. John 8:32). As his hallucinations intensify, so swells the sound of a choir singing the Magnificat: “He has put down the mighty from their seats / and exalted those from low degree” (Luke 1:52). In the finished film, the only explicit remnant of DeWitt’s biblical bombast is Morgan’s guttural, elongated scream of “Jesus!” as he loses consciousness.

The peculiar layout of the film’s poster, however, reinstates the theological valences of the Sun Vow [fig. 4.1]. The image in the center features a spear seeming to poke into Morgan’s side, which is bound to bring up associations with Christ’s crucifixion and also guides the viewer’s eye from the lower left to the upper right as it traverses the various tableaux. In that context, the surrounding, smaller images are analogous to the Stations of the Cross in a passion play. As Alison Griffiths has noted, both medieval and modern “spectacular modes of representing the Crucifixion [foreground] an immersive and interactive gaze, the idea that the act of looking not only demands more of the spectator … but somehow delivers more.” The promised somatic experience, advertised in the diction of a carnival barker as “the most electrifying ritual ever seen,” highlights another element of the spectacular identified by Griffiths: “offering the spectator an experience that hovers between real and unreal, now and then, natural and supernatural,” in which “awareness of the performance as staged while simultaneously ‘real’ defines the experience as one of constant oscillation between two states of

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70 Jack DeWitt, First Draft Screenplay of A Man Called Horse (n.d. but incorporating revisions dated 2 August 1968), pp. 105-13, ESP, box 5, file 47. Additionally, a memo from producer Sandy Howard to Silverstein dated 30 September 1969 explains that “the shot with the cross apparently did not work” in the vision sequence (ESP, box 9, file 81). No such shot appears in the film.

being.” In the Sun Vow, this oscillation reaches a fever pitch. The reflexive presentation of Sioux spectatorship, untenable according to the conventional system of identification, gives way to the intense embodiment of Morgan’s excruciating pain, which he must overcome in order for an orderly return to a more stable and abstract point of view.

In a rare, trenchant analysis of *A Man Called Horse*, Jane Tompkins argues that the film is founded on the analogy “will is to body as man is to horse” and ultimately “celebrates … a triumph of the will.” This turn of phrase suggests how closely Morgan’s ordeal is connected to the ideology of whiteness, which, according to Dyer, relies on the paradox of “a vividly corporeal cosmology that most values transcendence of the body.” The ambivalent symbolic strands through which Morgan is both freed slave attempting integration and white captive veering perilously close to becoming Indian both threaten to undermine the strict taboo against miscegenation. In order to reinstate his whiteness, it is paradoxically necessary for Morgan to express sexual desire for Running Deer and simultaneously to deny that desire. Again, Dyer suggests why a metaphorical crucifixion is an appropriate method for concretizing this conundrum:

The divided nature of white masculinity, which is expressed in relation not only to sexuality but also to anything that can be characterized as low, dark and irremediably corporeal, reproduces the structure of feeling of the Christ story. His agony is that he was fully flesh and fully spirit, able to be tempted though able to resist. In the torment of the crucifixion he experienced the fullness of the pain of sin, but in the resurrection showed

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72 Ibid., 324.
that he could transcend it. The spectacle of white male bodily suffering typically conveys a sense of the dignity and transcendence in such pain.\textsuperscript{75}

The film presents Morgan’s transcendence in a literal manner, through the montage sequence portraying his out-of-body experience. In his vision, Morgan embraces Running Deer and tells her the truth that their language barrier prevents in the physical world: “I want you. My hunger is real. But freedom is what you mean to me. When the chance comes, I shall go.” She responds, “I know. I know.” This exchange allows Morgan to have it both ways: he can consummate his marriage to Running Deer while disavowing it by insisting that she is simply a means to an end, his eventual escape and “redemption” (as Mary Rowlandson would put it) to white civilization.

Just as this disavowal contains the threat of miscegenation, Morgan’s hallucinatory vision of Yellow Hand reinstates conventional modes of looking at bodies. During the Sun Vow, Morgan becomes the object of the gaze at the same time as he presents an excessive embodiment. According to the ideology of whiteness, both of these phenomena are generally attributed to non-white people. This raises another of Dyer’s paradoxes: “Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one’s corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal.”\textsuperscript{76} The juxtaposition of Morgan’s physical ordeal, framed as public spectacle, and his spiritual hallucinations, framed as private introspection, maintains both poles of this dichotomy while ultimately privileging the non-corporeal.

Morgan’s reclamation of point of view in the spirit-vision sequence is presented through an obvious recreation of one of Catlin’s paintings, itself an elaboration of a sketch that appeared in his \textit{Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians}

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{76} Dyer, \textit{White}, 45.
Yellow Hand, atop a rearing horse, reenacts the gallant pose of Catlin’s Crow chief, the finely detailed accoutrements of both horse and rider—fringed buckskin suit, circular headdress, feathered lance, embroidered bridle and saddle—closely matching the original. The reverse shot shows Morgan as he appeared prior to his capture, in full whiskers and pioneer dress, gaping at the sight of Yellow Hand. In this moment, conventional looking relations are reinstated by displacing the overt display of Morgan’s body, which engages the audience in what Paul Willemen described as “the unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated,” with a corrective presentation of the other in his proper place as the one who is seen.78

Morgan presents the same appearance here as in the landscape/portrait from the opening scene, highlighting by contrast the virtually featureless background that this cinematic tableau reproduces from Catlin’s painting. If situating a person in the foreground of a landscape is a means of figuring their ownership, as Berger famously argued, then the evacuation of the background here suggests dispossession, posing the subject as a free-floating concept in an abstract field. This presents a stark contrast with the Sioux point-of-view shots in the opening


scene, which are framed as situated vantage points in determinate space. The polyvalent looking relations of the film’s first act, recalled in Morgan’s zoom POV shot as he goes to acquire the horses, are finally contained as Morgan regains ownership of the gaze in this hallucinatory sequence.

At the same time as the tableau copies Catlin, it also pays homage to Johnson’s story, in which Morgan’s captors are Crow, not Sioux. The echo of Johnson is appropriate at this moment since the limited third-person point of view of her story, with a self-effacing narrator filtered through Morgan’s subjectivity, is roughly what one expects from classical Hollywood narration. But the echo of Catlin unsettles this question. His physical presence as eyewitness to the events he painted, described, and staged was not only central to his own public persona but is also invoked by the filmmakers in support of their claims of historical accuracy. Such claims also paradoxically rely on the material presence of Native American bodies alongside their actual or conceptual disappearance.

Horribile visu – et mirabile dictu!: Embodiment and Historical Authentication

While the mise-en-scene of the film’s Sun Vow sequence is clearly indebted to Catlin’s depictions and descriptions of the ceremony, there is a radical difference in point of view. Whereas the film presents a cacophony of shifts in point of view that disrupt spectatorial stability, Catlin maintains his position as white observer and narrator of indigenous life throughout his writings, paintings, and stagecraft. Catlin opens his chapter on the Okipa with an allusion to Virgil’s Aeneid: “Horribile visu – et mirabile dictu!” (“Horrible to see, and wonderful to tell.”) He continues, “Thank God, it is over, that I have seen it, and am able to tell it to the
world.” In his published account, released nearly a decade after the events he narrates and well into his new career as ethnographic showman, Catlin seems to have taken some artistic license, notably in his manner of foreshadowing the Okipa as the dramatic fulcrum of his encounter narrative. Similarly to the situation of moviegoers drawn to the film by the poster’s advertisement of the ritual, Catlin’s readers likely would already have been aware that this was the main attraction. He accordingly makes sure to intersperse assurances amidst the ethnographic details of his earlier letters that the Okipa is coming soon.

The veridical force of the film’s fidelity to Catlin’s letters and sketches is amply demonstrated on the cover of the October 1970 issue of the fan magazine Real West, whose title suggests the publication’s interest in historical accuracy. Juxtaposing a film frame enlargement with an image of Catlin’s Okipa, a caption prompts the reader to recognize a mutually reinforcing intertextual relationship through which each is posed as guarantor of the other [fig. 4.13]. A Man Called Horse’s incorporation of Catlin’s work is more complex than this straightforward presentation would suggest, however.

Today Catlin is usually classified as a painter, and in academia is best known to American art historians, thanks largely to the fact that many of his works are now housed in the Smithsonian. The official imprimatur of this cultural arm of the federal government is one that Catlin sought assiduously, continually attempting to deposit his paintings in the museum from its establishment in 1846 onward. Though he was repeatedly rebuffed throughout his remaining years, the receipt of his “Indian Gallery” by the Smithsonian was finally achieved posthumously by one of his benefactors. Horse borrows this institutional authentication in the captions that open the film, in which the Smithsonian receives thanks and Catlin is invoked as an eyewitness

79 Catlin, Letters and Notes, 155.
source [figs. 4.14-4.15]. This is rather ironic, considering that Catlin’s own veracity was often questioned by his contemporaries. Alongside his written account of the Okipa ceremony in *Letters and Notes*, he felt compelled to include a “certificate” signed by three other white observers testifying to the trustworthiness of his account [fig. 4.16].

Fig. 4.13: *Real West*

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The dubiousness of eminent ethnologists like Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who actively campaigned to keep Catlin out of the Smithsonian, stemmed at least in part from a distaste for the painter’s public persona. By the time Catlin self-published *Letters and Notes* in 1841, his failure to convert his artistic work into economic, social, or cultural capital had led him toward a
new career as a showman, first on the East Coast and then in Europe. Once the novelty of his illustrated lectures was rapidly exhausted among the British elite, Catlin began to modify his show for increasingly down-market audiences, incorporating tableaux vivants performed by London street urchins dressed in Catlin’s collection of indigenous apparel. As he later began staging reenactments featuring “real” North American Indians, he entered into a sponsorship arrangement with none other than P. T. Barnum, the reigning king of the curiosity. The transmutations of Catlin’s work from canvas to page to illustrated lecture to proto-Wild West Show constitute a process of adaptation as the artist accommodated the conventions of various media and the demands of various audiences.

Despite the skepticism about Catlin’s credibility among the intelligentsia, the sense of authenticity among his paying spectators seems not to have suffered much. One reviewer of Catlin’s show raved that “no book of travels can approach these realities.” As Catlin’s show evolved from ostensibly educational to unabashedly sensational, his audiences became more actively engaged. For the audience, the verisimilitude of Catlin’s presentation was presumably an effect of the somatic responses that this public spectacle provoked, the reality of which was verified by the spectator’s sensorium rather than any official sanction or expert certification. Even Catlin’s cosigners in the above-cited certificate are expected to be trusted specifically as eyewitnesses, as bodies who were present at the time of the ceremony. Their empirical experience is offered as an answer to Schoolcraft’s absent expertise. Engaging in a similar rhetorical move but now combining experience and expertise, the caption that opens A Man

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82 On Catlin and Schoolcraft’s contentious public debate regarding the veracity of Catlin’s account of the Okipa, see Dippie, Catlin and his Contemporaries, 322-44. On Schoolcraft’s machinations at the Smithsonian, see ibid., 167-68. On Catlin’s years in Europe, see Benita Eisler, The Red Man’s Bones: George Catlin, Artist and Showman (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 243-366, and George Catlin, Catlin’s Notes of Eight Years’ Travels and Residence in Europe (New York: Burgess, Stringer & Co., 1848). On Catlin’s illustrated lectures as a model for Wild West shows, see Paul Reddin, Wild West Shows (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1-52.

83 The Literary Gazette, 1 Feb. 1840, qtd. in Eisler, The Red Man’s Bones, 254.
Called Horse could be considered a ruse, though a deft piece of stagecraft in itself. While preemptively verifying its own veracity through the invocation of legitimate cultural institutions, the caption’s main purpose is to prime the audience to trust our own physical sensations in our role as Catlin’s new eyewitnesses. In this sense, the film is more in the tradition of the pageant of curiosities that Catlin found himself producing than it is an exhaustively researched historical recreation, as the filmmakers claimed.

The confidence game of institutional verification thus acts as cover for the substantive role played by somatic response in the spectacle’s attainment of truth value. Vivian Sobchack characterizes the mutually generative interaction between cognitive and somatic responses to a film as “commutative reversibility.”84 Similarly, Laura Marks argues for the capability of film to communicate interculturally through an evocation of tactility that she terms “haptic visuality.”85 While these two scholars provide a path to comprehending the meaning-making power of cinematic embodiment, they tend to focus on its benign or beneficial aspects. The sensory experience of the Sun Vow, in its somatic certification of the ideology of whiteness, seems closer to what Elaine Scarry has called “analogical substantiation”:

at particular moments when there is within society a crisis of belief—that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population’s belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation—the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura or “realness” and “certainty.”86

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Scarry further aids in determining why the audience is asked to place themselves in the position of the observing Sioux rather than that of the suffering Morgan: “instead of … the observer certifying the existence of the thing by experiencing the thing in his own body (seeing it, touching it), the observer instead sees and touches the hurt body of another person (or animal) juxtaposed to the disembodied idea, and having sensorially experienced the reality of the first, believes he or she has experienced the reality of the second.”87 Thus, Morgan’s body becomes the site on which white supremacy is reaffirmed in the face of contemporary challenges to its stability. At the same time, the visceral impact of the sequence deflects the problematic of racial brutality onto the past through its somatic suggestion of historical accuracy. As one contemporary reviewer put it, “Now-violence masquerades as then-truth.”88

In his stage shows, Catlin likewise invoked the power of analogical substantiation, using violence to certify truth. Faced with the problem of the experts’ incredulity and the impossibility of actually reenacting the Okipa on stage, Catlin needed to present his audience with an embodied experience that would support his own veracity. His solution was to preface the presentation of his paintings of the ritual with the story of Wi-jun-jon, an Assiniboine whose path had crossed Catlin’s as he returned from a trip to Washington, D.C. Initially, the tale is comical, marveling at the bemused reaction of Wi-jun-jon’s compatriots as he returns home decked out in a military uniform, top hat, and umbrella. Later, however, it becomes a parable for Catlin’s own difficulties in proving his reliability, as the Assiniboine mock the traveler in disbelief of his reports of railroads, steam ships, and hot air balloons. Eventually, as he reaches ever greater states of social ostracism and alcoholic dissipation, the tribe begins to see him as supernaturally

87 Ibid., 125.
possessed of the “lying medicine,” and one of them takes it upon himself to rid the world of this troublesome fellow. Catlin editorializes,

thus ended the days and the greatness, and all the pride and hopes of WI-JUN-JON, the “Pigeon’s Egg Head”—a warrior and a brave of the valiant Assineboins, who travelled eight thousand miles to see the President, and all the great cities of the civilized world; and who, for telling the truth, and nothing but the truth, was, after he got home, disgraced and killed for a wizard.89

It is probably at this point in his show that Catlin would produce (as he claimed) Wi-jun-jon’s scalp, brandishing it as material proof of the veracity of his story and of the immediate relevance of its moral.90 Catlin employed this dismembered remnant of an absent body to invoke the certitude of presence in preparation for his account of the Okipa. As we have seen, this dialectic of presence/absence is at play in both How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman and A Man Called Horse.

For Catlin, the resolution of this contradiction was of utmost importance because of the supposed extinction of the Mandan people, the actual practitioners of the Okipa ritual, who are transformed into the more generically familiar Sioux in the film. On the one hand, as Brian Dippie argues, the subsequent unrepeatability of the Okipa made Catlin’s paintings a unique commodity.91 On the other, it meant that Catlin’s report could not be independently verified. He thus poses Wi-jun-jon not only as avatar of empirical reliability but as allegory for the tragic impossibility of assimilation and the inevitability of Native disappearance. These last two

89 Catlin, Letters and Notes, vol. 2, 194-200. This version of the story, presented as a comic dialogue between the author and Ba’tiste—obviously the model for the film’s Batise character—is greatly embellished from a briefer version in Volume 1, 55-57, 67.
90 Dippie, Catlin and His Contemporaries, 322.
91 Ibid., 329-30. Dippie points out that, despite the decimation of the Mandans due to a smallpox epidemic, it seems that many survived and assimilated into neighboring groups.
notions are given full expression in one of Catlin’s best-known works, a before-and-after diptych of Wi-jun-jon [fig. 4.17].

Fig. 4.17: Wi-jun-jon, Before & After

Note that each of these versions of the portrait features a background that is the conceptual opposite of Wi-jun-jon’s costume, such that his appearance in traditional garb is presented in the context of his visit to the White House. According to Catlin scholar John Hausdoerffer, in the Jacksonian Era, “These delegations [of Native Americans to Eastern cities]

92 The painting’s complete title is Wi-jun-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington (1837-39), Smithsonian American Art Museum, https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/wi-jun-jon-pigeons-egg-head-light-going-and-returning-washington-4317. The picture appropriately graces the cover of Robert F. Berkhofer’s The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present (New York: Vintage, 1979). The two images were also used in at least one print advertisement for the Kickapoo Cough Cure patent medicine in the 1880s or ’90s. A reproduction can be found in Indians, the First Americans, ed. Bernard Mergen (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Scholastic Book Services, 1975), plate 1-16.
functioned for whites as a kind of Indian funeral march through a new American regime of truth”: that is, the legitimacy of Manifest Destiny and Indian removal. Wi-jun-jon’s sartorial incompatibility with each of the milieux presented in Catlin’s diptych suggests the absolute otherness of the Indian, the impossibility of assimilation, and the inevitability of disappearance.

For the makers of A Man Called Horse, as for Catlin, the tragic necessity of the “vanishing American” and the impossibility of the modern Indian are paradoxically expressed through the appearance of actual indigenous bodies in the performance. Forty-five members of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe were hired as extras and flown to the film’s location in Durango, Mexico, while others remained in South Dakota and manufactured props by hand. The claims to authenticity in the film’s promotional materials rely heavily on the physical presence of “real Indians” both in front of the camera and behind it. Yet there were inevitably clashes between the Sioux’s own views of what constituted authenticity and the filmmakers’ desire to create a milieu that would seem historically accurate.

Rather than having their generically derived concept of a “real Indian” confirmed, the filmmakers were instead forced to confront the much more complex situations and identities of contemporary Native Americans. After a trip to the Rosebud Reservation, Silverstein wrote to producer Sandy Howard, noting problems with casting various individuals due to insufficient Indianness. One “looks French,” another’s “eyes will photograph blue,” another “looks like a Madison Avenue executive,” and yet another “doesn’t really have the dignity.”

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94 The number of Sioux extras cast in the production was wildly exaggerated in press releases and subsequent news reports. A memo from Silverstein to producer Sandy Howard dated 31 October 1968, notes the total as forty-five, which is confirmed by a cast list in the same file. ESP, box 6, file 68. A master prop list of items manufactured on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation includes tepees, bows, spears, coup sticks, scalp sticks, carcass hangers, cradle boards, bladders, and buffalo chips. ESP, box 10, file 85.
95 Elliot Silverstein, memo to Sandy Howard, “Re: Indian Cast Members,” 31 October 1968, ESP, box 6, file 68.
apparently did meet one person who met his expectations, and he recounts the tale in a style reminiscent of Catlin’s story about Wi-jun-jon:

Henry Crow Dog, one of the elders of the tribe, with classical, handsome, Indian features, was threatening to withdraw all the members of the tribe from participation. I went to see this old man and begin a dialogue with him that seemed familiar to me. I had seen this scene before in countless movies. I felt I was playing a Jimmy Stewart type in one of those Western negotiation scenes with an Indian Chief. When I asked this old man what his problem was, he replied, “I want to be chief and not that Fiji [Manu Tupou]. I want to be chief or I not go and I take my people.”

Silverstein concludes the tale with a rather inappropriate joke about breaking treaties, framing the elder as an Indian giver. Whatever the veracity of this account, it contradicts Silverstein’s protestations that he was absolutely not making a Western and therefore did not want to present the audience with “movie Indians.” It would seem that the frustration caused by his dealings with the Rosebud Sioux could only be assuaged by conceptualizing them through the lens of generic conventions, with an additional, Day of the Locust-sized dose of Hollywoodian cynicism.

Presented with this unexpected resistance, the filmmakers quickly shifted from an anticipated reliance on the Sioux as consultants to their enlistment of Rosebud’s resident white archaeologist Clyde Dollar as historical advisor and tribal liaison. The presumption that indigenous bodies could ensure authenticity was quickly jettisoned in favor of Dollar’s institutional credentials. Production notes distributed to the press claim that “Dollar was hired by

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97 Script revisions dated 30 July 1968, incorporates the change from Johnson’s Crow to Sioux, noting that “Jack DeWitt will supply lines in English for translation by Rosebud.” ESP, box 5, file 49. All mentions of Sioux as consultants are revised to refer to Dollar in the Revised First Draft Shooting Script, 9 September 1969, ESP, box 6, file 59.
the Rosebud to teach them their own heritage.” Like Silverstein, Dollar’s perception of the people with whom he worked was filtered through the distorting lens of his own profession. When the American Indian Movement vigorously protested the film’s opening in Minneapolis, Dollar dismissed their outrage, explaining to Variety that the Winnebago, Chippewa, and Ojibwa members of AIM were motivated by “tribal jealousy” stemming from conflict with the Sioux dating as far back as 1680. Dollar had a general disdain for “urban Indians” like AIM’s Russell Means (“a good Indian name,” Dollar sarcastically intones in a letter to Silverstein), who accused Dollar of “bigotry against Indian people and … misrepresentation of Sioux tribal culture.” Means, himself Sioux (Lakota) from the Pine Ridge Reservation that abuts Rosebud, could hardly have been motivated by ancient intertribal feuds.

On location, Dollar seems to have been more interested in nitpicking details about props and costumes than he was in establishing a comfortable work environment for the extras. When the Sioux arrived in Durango, they had brought their own ceremonial outfits, which were immediately vetoed. One member of the costume department complained, “These guys don’t know the difference between 1830 and 1880. These are cornball Wild West Show outfits.” The disrespect implied in this statement seems to have been typical on the set, and tensions between the extras from Rosebud and the crew eventually came to a head. One obvious reason for shooting in Mexico was that the production could avoid paying union scale: background

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98 Cinema Center Films Production Notes, ESP, box 10, file 86.
99 “Sioux Spokesman Says Indian ‘Horse’ Pickets are Traditional Enemy,” Variety, 29 April 1970.
100 Clyde Dollar, Letter to Elliot Silverstein, 10 August 1970, ESP, box 10, file 87. Dollar closes his letter with a request for permission to provide Silverstein’s address to “several young Indian maidens.” He enclosed Means’s letter to the editor of the Rosebud Sioux Herald also quoted here but to be found in box 7, file 70.
actors received less than a quarter of the daily pay they could have expected in Hollywood.\textsuperscript{102} Faced with delays in receiving wages, among other “real and imagined broken promises,” the Sioux instituted a work stoppage, leading to the dismissal of some of the extras.\textsuperscript{103} This conflict between labor and management on the set reframes the Sioux extras’ breaking the fourth wall in the sequence of Morgan’s capture [fig. 4.7]. That shot encapsulates not only an unsettling vacillation between Morgan’s point of view and the spectator’s embodied look at the screen, but also a material engagement between exploited workers and the apparatus that transforms their physical labor into surplus value.

Much of the Sioux’s work on the production occurred offscreen, back in South Dakota. The notion of having Rosebud Reservation residents produce props is intended to imbue the film with an aura of authenticity, but the financial considerations that brought the production to Durango also must have been an incentive. Given the secondary nature of the roles played by the actors from Rosebud, the certification of historical accuracy through indigenous labor is largely figured through these manufactured artifacts. Once again, the presence/absence dialectic comes into play through the materiality of these props and the absence of the people who made them. Just as in the case of \textit{How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman}’s archival audio recording, this dichotomy’s irresolvability reaches its apogee in the film’s closing moments.

Both of these films problematize the notion of the Platonic Western, whose analyzability relies on its resolution of ideological contradictions. Their endings do not and cannot contain the multitude of conflicting discourses that they imbibe through their echoes of previous texts and

\textsuperscript{102} Alexander, “The Sad Lot of the Sioux.” Alexander reports that male adults received $12/day, versus the domestic rate of $50. Children were paid $2.50. According to Silverstein, Mexican laborers received $1/day and had to bring their own lunch (Unsalted, 21).

their material circumstances. Russell Reising has argued that texts whose “failed endings” resist clear-cut structural exposition “can’t close, precisely because their embeddedness within the sociohistorical worlds of their genesis is so complex and conflicted.” Instead of closing themselves off in an imaginary plenitude, “[t]hey force us to return to the beginnings of the work we’ve just completed…” In the same way that the dissonance between audio and video in Frenchman’s ending recalls the opening sequence’s visually falsified narration, Horse’s closing credit sequence gestures toward the juxtaposition of situated point of view and linear perspective that I have identified at its beginning.

While the spectacle of the Sun Vow renders the remainder of the film fairly anticlimactic, it nonetheless dutifully follows the outline of Johnson’s story: the deaths of Morgan’s wife and brother-in-law leave only him to care for his mother-in-law until she too dies, allowing him to finally leave the village and return to civilization. Morgan watches from atop a ridge as the semi-nomadic Sioux decamp in the valley below, in a wide-angle, over-the-shoulder shot. He waves to Black Eagle, now chief since Yellow Hand’s death, creating an eyeline that traverses an immense depth, highlighting the perspectival composition [fig. 4.18]. This shot seems finally to resolve the pictorial problems that began with Morgan’s landscape/portrait, which simultaneously suggests depth of field and stereoscopic planarity. After being repeatedly and uncomfortably placed in the position of the object of vision, Morgan seems to have definitively regained his status as subject. The fact that he is looking at Black Eagle, the one who spied on the naked Morgan from the riverbank, reinforces this notion of the restitution of point of view. Morgan’s reverse shot features a rather enigmatic facial expression that suggests his ambivalence at leaving his adoptive home. But then something strange happens: a cut to a shot of Black

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Eagle, still from Morgan’s POV but taken with an extremely long telephoto lens, recalling the moment when Morgan spied the horses that were to become his bride-price. Returning to the reverse shot, Morgan’s quizzical countenance might now be read as a response to this failure to contain the proliferation of points of view that mark the film’s visual discourse.

Morgan passes through the village graveyard, pausing to place a flower on Running Deer’s raised funerary bier. As he and his party of a dozen Sioux finally ride off through a break in the tree-line in the background, this platform, crowned by the flower and her moccasins, remains in the foreground, anchoring the shot’s deep-focus composition. The shot holds throughout the end credits, leading to the film’s final unsettling juxtaposition when the names of the Rosebud Sioux extras appear on the screen [fig. 4.19]. This “carcass hanger,” fashioned on the Rosebud Reservation and shipped to Durango, supports the corpse of Running Deer, sacrificed to the Western’s anti-miscegenation imperative. Of course, there is no body under the bearskin blanket, and Richard Harris and the “real Indians” who accompanied him are gone. It would seem that only when there are no bodies present can the universal subject regain the full stability of linear perspective. Yet the artifacts created by human hands remain, and the names of the people who were enlisted to become ideas disallow the complete evacuation of the material embeddedness of the scene.
Fig. 4.18: The Restitution of Perspective?

Fig. 4.19: Presence and Absence in the Credit Sequence
CHAPTER FIVE

THE UNFINALIZABLE FRONTIER: DECENTERING MONUMENT VALLEY

The view is familiar, so familiar as to be almost unremarkable despite its spectacular strangeness. Seen from a high vantage point, the burnt-orange desert expanse stretching before the viewer is punctuated by two giant stone monoliths uncannily resembling mitten hands reaching skyward. A third rock formation abuts the right edge of the frame, pleasantly balancing the composition according to the precepts of Romantic landscape painting. The setting sun, splashing the horizon with Technicolor purples, beckons the lone rider in the foreground, who peers Westward in a brief moment of hesitation before again answering the call of an insatiable wanderlust. Like the vista, the situation is a familiar one, found at the conclusion of innumerable Western films. Yet the rider is not John Wayne nor Randolph Scott but a chimpanzee, and his mount is not a trusty steed but a goat [fig. 5.1].

This cartoon by frequent New Yorker contributor Bruce McCall, bearing the rather literal title “Chimp Riding Goat,” appears in Werner Herzog’s 2007 Antarctic documentary, Encounters at the End of the World. By placing the eponymous primate in the desert space of Monument Valley, famously featured in several canonical John Ford Westerns, McCall and Herzog activate a strong generic association that at first seems out of place in a film about an environment largely composed of frozen water. Monument Valley, as it appears in Stagecoach (1939), My Darling Clementine (1946), and The Searchers (1956), is often seen as the ultimate metonymic staging ground for the American national myth of the conflict between wilderness and civilization. However, this view tends to confine the landscape to a purely instrumental role in expressing this structural binary rather than seriously considering how the variations in its use open out onto a multitude of potential meanings.
The suggestion that Monument Valley encapsulates the Western’s inherently hegemonic narrative structure—what I have been calling the Platonic Western—ignores the multiplicity of the genre’s potential uses. Steve Neale’s has identified “a tendency among those who use frontier mythology as a basic framework for discussing the western to view the latter solely as a vehicle for an unambiguous version of the former, to stress the former’s overarching characteristics and centrifugal pull rather than the latter’s local features and centripetal tendencies.”\(^1\) While any image of Monument Valley undeniably exerts a certain amount of centrifugal force toward Ford and the Western, there is also a countervailing centripetal force that invokes family resemblances to television commercials, \textit{2001: A Space Odyssey} (1968), and Krazy Kat comics. This is not to say, as Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues do, that the once-stable meaning of the landscape in Ford’s films was undermined by the post-1968 proliferation of images in subsequent films and particularly advertising that turned the Valley into “a cliché, a stereotype, \\

an empty signifier which can accommodate any number of signifieds.”2 Rather than finding a postmodern, simulacral vacuity in contemporary images of the Valley, I see them as encapsulating a palimpsestic richness of allusion to and rearticulation of prior images.

Following Bakhtin’s theory of the utterance being comprised of prior, historically situated utterances, each new use of a generic convention carries with it the echo of past uses. This phenomenon produces a transtemporal exchange of potential meanings between existing uses of a convention and each new use, through which the latter is able to alter and expand the potential readings of all prior uses. In this sense, Western films are neither exclusively about the past nor simply a reflection of contemporary contexts and concerns. Because of the repetitive nature of generic filmmaking, new instances necessarily engage with their semiotic genealogies, belying the notion of genre as a static, ahistorical structure or as a series of symptomatic historical reflections subject to a linear process of evolution.

Attending to Bakhtinian transtemporality and the interplay between Neale’s centrifugal and centripetal forces can illuminate how “Chimp Riding Goat,” and Herzog’s film as a whole, express ambivalent relationships to the Western and to genericity more generally. The hermeneutic polyvalence of McCall’s illustration provides a model of the connotative extensivity of generic conventions, recalibrating our presumptions about the fixity of generically coded signification. Of particular interest is the manner in which the spatial particularity of Monument Valley relates to the fluidity of its temporal connotations. Often considered to be emblematic of the Western’s nostalgic ideology of Manifest Destiny and its teleological theory of historical progress, here it is posed in a dialectical relationship not only to the Western but also to the art

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film, nature documentary, and science fiction. In the process, it becomes a multivalent node through which to imagine alternative histories.

McCall’s illustration appears very near the beginning of *Encounters*, during a sequence in which Herzog’s voiceover explains his motivations for making the film. As I will refer to this sequence repeatedly below, it will be useful to quote it in full, including indications of the images that accompany it in brackets:

The National Science Foundation had invited me to Antarctica, even though I left no doubt that I would not come up with another film about penguins. My questions about nature, I let them know, were different. [Cut from interior of cargo plane to a montage of black-and-white footage from *The Lone Ranger* television series (1949-57), whose action closely matches Herzog’s words.] I told them I kept wondering, why is it that human beings put on masks or feathers to hide their identity? And why do they saddle horses and feel the urge to chase the bad guy? [Cut from *Lone Ranger* to color stock footage from a National Geographic documentary: an extreme close-up of an ant.] And why is it that certain species of ants keep flocks of plant lice as slaves, to milk them for droplets of sugar? [Cut to “Chimp Riding Goat.”] I asked them, why is it that a sophisticated animal like a chimpanzee does not utilize inferior creatures? He could straddle a goat and ride off into the sunset.

In the juxtaposition of the three visual reference points that accompany his voiceover, Herzog expresses an antigeneric attitude, one that is not only antagonistic toward the Western or the nature film but to the entire genre system.

Yet an explicitly oppositional approach to a particular genre necessarily engages in generic discourse. His insistence that he is not making a typical nature documentary activates
certain associations and prompts the audience to test this film against their generic experience in that area. Certainly the footage of an ant milking aphids falls within generic expectations, but the ironically metaphysical tone of the voiceover is in sharp contrast to the conventionally self-assured, non-accented, impersonal voiceovers exemplified in Morgan Freeman’s narration of Herzog’s implicit foil, *March of the Penguins* (2005). Moreover, sandwiching this footage between *The Lone Ranger* and “Chimp Riding Goat” untethers its generic mooring, as do associations of the gigantism of the ant with the science fiction film *Them!* (1954) that are made explicit later in the film. Paradoxically, the Western is being used here to promote a view of the film as outside of genre. This rhetorical position is also supported by Herzog’s reference to the NSF as the source of his funding, in a quasi-Brechtian move that is reminiscent of the famous check-signing sequence that opens Godard’s *Tout va bien!* (1972). At the same time, the irreverent biting of the hand that feeds him invokes Herzog’s status as auteur, as a rebelliously independent filmmaker. These qualities of genrelessness, reflexivity, and personal expression all point toward the art film, which can itself be defined as a genre based on these very conventions.3

The juxtaposition of *The Lone Ranger* with the ant footage seems initially to point toward the incommensurability of popular fiction film and nature documentary, but the absurd mash-up of the two genres in McCall’s illustration brings their mutual exclusivity into question. While the Western is framed in terms of dissimulation and inauthenticity through Herzog’s remark about masks and feathers, it is also used as a conduit for posing philosophical quandaries. Similarly, despite his stated promise to “not come up with another film about penguins,” Herzog does exactly that in a memorable sequence midway through the film. “Everyone spoke about

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penguins,” the voiceover states. “However,” in another echo of the sequence described above, “the questions I had were not so easily answered.” One such query is whether penguins ever suffer from “derangement.” Marine ecologist David Ainsley responds, “They do get disoriented. They end up in places they shouldn’t be, a long way from the ocean.” At this point, the film cuts to a shot, framed similarly to McCall’s illustration, of a lone “deranged” penguin “heading into the vast interior of the continent” [fig. 5.2]. This “empty interior” has previously been described in the voiceover, in a rather conventional manner for a nature documentary, as being “larger in size than continental North America.” This analogy evokes parallels between the penguin’s inexplicable rambling and the pioneer spirit on the American frontier. The satirical tone of this juxtaposition is emphasized in yet another echo of the opening sequence, in which Herzog frames the penguin’s behavior in terms of ineluctable and inscrutable impulses: “Dr. Ainsley explained that even if we caught him and brought him back to the colony, he would immediately head right back for the mountains. But why?”
Herzog’s failure not to make a film about penguins suggests the difficulty of referring to a genre without becoming imbricated in its existing discourse, but it also shows the potential for decentering generic conventions from within that discourse. The voiceover’s tendency toward flights of fancy and exaggerated moral pronouncements suggests that the measured narration of conventional nature documentaries is not as objective as advertised and may involve speculations as unfounded as Herzog’s avian pseudopsychology. At the same time, this subversion of the omniscient narrator also undermines any claims that the film might have to representing reality, of having some relationship to the truth beyond the system of generic discourse in which fulfillment of expectations becomes the guarantor of veracity or verisimilitude. This epistemological uncertainty has to be recouped in terms of the film’s internal logic, which involves the invocation of various other generic reference points.

In this sense, the connection drawn between the deranged penguin and the opening sequence provides its own internal analytical tools. The sequence of questions as to why humans/ants/chimpanzees/penguins do or do not do certain things thus creates a chain of family resemblances that provides a text-specific hermeneutic structure in place of genericity. The references to the Western in the opening sequence therefore take on a larger interpretive force beyond their function as parodic foils for the art film and the nature documentary. The deranged penguin’s quixotic quest for new horizons consequently becomes emblematic of the film’s twin themes—both typical of the Western—of valorizing exploration and lamenting the consequent disappearance of new frontiers.

The penguin’s movement away from the camera contains a visual echo of the mounted chimpanzee riding into the sunset, but in the Antarctic summer, described by Herzog as “five months of no nighttime,” the sun never sets. And while Antarctica is measured in relation to the
American interior, there is effectively no West at polar latitudes: as Herzog tells us, there a
compass needle will point only north or south. One of the film’s many eccentric interviewees,
Stefan Pashov, described in a caption as a “philosopher and forklift driver,” posits that “this
place works almost as a natural selection for people that have this intention to jump off the
margin of the map, and we all meet here, where all the lines of the map converge.” It is in this
sense that Antarctica is geographically the end of the world, as the title proclaims. The
appellation is also applicable in a temporal sense, most literally in the framing of the continent’s
melting icebergs as harbingers of climactic cataclysms to come. On a more abstract level, the
geographical and temporal meanings converge in what we might call Herzog’s Antarctic
chronotope. This term comes from Bakhtin, who defined it as “the intrinsic connectedness of
temporal and spatial relationships as they are artistically expressed in literature,” or, in this case,
cinema. The mutual imbrication of space and time in Antarctica is vividly exemplified in the
lack of a sunset being conceptually inseparable from the lack of a westerly direction. In concrete
historical terms, this absolute geographic extremity also figures the temporal limits of European
imperialism: Herzog argues that “from the South Pole onwards, no further expansion was
possible, and the [British] Empire started to fade into the abyss of history.”

This spatiotemporal conception of the Pole as dead end works in a contrapuntal relation
to the frontier chronotope, where wide-open desert spaces like Monument Valley come to be
seen as the inherently appropriate arena for staging the teleological process of instituting
civilization in the wilderness. In this chronotopic construct, the physical westward movement of
European settlers is aligned with the historical progress toward modernization. However, the
frontier is as much a temporal borderland as a geographical one. The teleology of Manifest
Destiny is complicated by the supposition that traveling away from civilization also involves a

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4 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” 84.
temporal regression into the primitive. This dual nature of time on the frontier has been
exhaustively examined by Richard Slotkin, who argues that “the processes of American
development in the colonies were linked from the beginning to a historical narrative in which
repeated cycles of separation and regression were necessary preludes to an improvement in life
and fortune.”⁵ Paradoxically, in this view of the ideology of progress, the way forward is to
move backward.

This formulation is reminiscent of another of Bakhtin’s theoretical concepts, that of
“historical inversion”:

mythological and artistic thinking locates such categories as purpose, ideal, justice,
perfection, the harmonious condition of man and society and the like in the past. […] To
put it in somewhat simplified terms, we might say that a thing that could and in fact must
only be realized in the future is here portrayed as something out of the past, a thing that is
in no sense part of the past’s reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an
obligation.⁶

While Bakhtin explicitly critiques the displacement of utopia from a prospective, if indefinitely
deferred, future state onto a distorted vision of an imaginary past, there is a converse implication
that fictional narratives about the past may also act as imaginative staging grounds for possible
futures. This would also suggest that the teleological frontier chronotope as described above
properly belongs only to the Platonic Western, and that the relationships between space and time
in actually existing texts are often far more complex.

Rather than a dead end, Herzog’s Antarctica is a frontier with no determinate beyond. It
is a place where backward- and forward-looking temporal strains unite and intertwine in absurd

⁵ Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 11. Emphasis in original.
yet generative ways. As Herzog makes his statement about the end of empire, the camera pans over the preserved remnants of explorer Ernest Shackleton’s cabin, its shelves piled high with century-old cans of corned beef and mutton chops. Herzog’s comment that the scene resembles “an extinct supermarket” exemplifies the kind of anachronistic thinking in which the past, present, and future coexist and interact. The idea of future human extinction as a result of climate change is broached elsewhere in the film as analogous to the demise of the dinosaurs, extending the temporal frame of reference to the geologic scale. This deep-time perspective is manifestly visible in Monument Valley’s rock formations, products of the erosion of a primeval inland sea. The supermarket thus becomes a future archaeological artifact of a contemporary consumer culture in which time is collapsed into fifteen-second ads that are often set in the very same, apparently eternal Monument Valley. The concept of Shackleton’s cabin as supermarket reaches into the past to see the end of empire as contemporaneous with the emergence of neoliberal globalization and the subsequent reach of transnational commerce into the seemingly remotest areas of the earth.

This bewildering concatenation of temporal reference points is further developed in the transgeneric connections drawn between the Western and science fiction in Encounters at the End of the World. The film’s title conjures connotations with encounters between Europeans and indigenous peoples during the early period of colonization as well as those of the “third kind” between humans and extraterrestrial entities. Returning to the Lone Ranger/Ant/Chimp montage sequence, we can retrospectively reconfigure the middle term in the series away from the nature documentary and toward science fiction, in light of another sequence in which Herzog meets microbiologist Samuel Bowser. A sci-fi buff from an early age, Bowser describes the

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microscopic aquatic organisms that he studies as “like science fiction creatures … but creepier.” He speculates that “if you were to shrink down, miniaturize into that world, it’d be a horrible place to be,” associatively alluding to the B-movie classic *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957).

Bowser and his colleagues huddle around a computer screen to watch a trailer for *Them!*, a 1954 creature feature in which gigantic ants, mutated by radiation from nuclear weapons tests, pose a dire threat to the human population of the American Southwest. In another instance of the eschatological thinking that pervades Herzog’s film, an onscreen scientist proclaims, “We may be witnesses to a biblical prophecy come true: and there shall be destruction and darkness come upon creation, and the beasts shall reign over the earth.” This prophecy invokes a speculative causal relationship between the three elements that make up the montage, which begins with human conflict, gives way to the ant as new master, then ends with the reign of the beasts, as the chimpanzee usurps humans’ position as tamers of nature on the wild frontier. Recontextualized in light of this later sequence, the apparent non-sequitur of the opening montage’s ant now takes on a quite different connotation, activating a new set of family resemblances between science fiction and the Western.

As Joanna Hearne notes, uranium mining was a major source of employment among Monument Valley’s inhabitants at precisely the same time that Ford was making Westerns there. The menace of radiation that featured prominently in monster movies of the 1950s was then and continues to be a very real factor in the everyday lives of the Navajo. This contiguity complicates some of the claims made by historical reflection theories for genre cinema in the immediate postwar era. The contention that both John Ford’s Westerns and doomsday science-

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8 John Shelton Lawrence includes this film in his alternative genealogy of cinematic depictions of the American West in “The Western Ecological Film: The Subgenre with No Name,” in Deborah A. Carmichael, ed., *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2006), 19-50.

fiction films like *Them!* were imaginative responses to the Cold War is made uncannily palpable in the realization that the nuclear weapons that largely caused the era’s characteristic paranoia could have been carrying Monument Valley uranium in their payloads. The conceptual association of digging into the earth with going back in time is counterpoised with the prospect of the spoils of that digging causing a future, world-ending catastrophe. In this light, “Chimp Riding Goat” also echoes *Planet of the Apes* (1968), in which gorillas mounted on horses terrorize a human population that has devolved as a result of a nuclear apocalypse. McCall’s illustration similarly conflates a fanciful version of protohuman evolution and a potential scene from the other side of our impending extinction.

In this connection, the cartoon also echoes another cinematic appearance of Monument Valley from outside of Ford’s oeuvre. Near the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, astronaut Dave Bowman experiences an interstellar journey “beyond the infinite” that includes some heavily color-filtered aerial footage of Monument Valley. The use of such a recognizable landscape seems to threaten the spectacular novelty of this mostly abstract sequence, yet it also fulfills a particular semiotic purpose in that the Valley spatializes the disruption of temporal directionality that marks the remainder of the film. The appearance of panoramic landscapes here, placed in counterpoint to the claustrophobic spaceship interiors in which the bulk of the film takes place, hearkens back to the open spaces of the prehistoric opening sequence. Of course, an equivalence between these two time periods is suggested by the famous graphic match between a bone, the first tool/weapon, heaved by a protohuman primate into the air, and a cylindrical space station floating through the ether. Monument Valley, often viewed in the context of the Western as a wilderness on its inevitable way to civilization, here becomes a space capable of signifying past and future simultaneously. Herzog thus extends Bakhtin’s concept of historical inversion to an
extreme, making Monument Valley a space of temporal involution where each element (i.e. past or future) is imaginatively analogous to its opposite.

The capacity of this particular landscape to express such a temporal involution is again illustrated through the science fiction genre, though in a strikingly different context, in Navajo (Diné) filmmaker Nanobah Becker’s contribution to the 2012 PBS sci-fi anthology series *Futurestates*. Her episode is entitled “The 6th World,” a reference to Navajo mythology, in which a series of cosmological migrations led the ancestors into the current, fifth world. The plot concerns a Navajo woman spaceship commander whose mission is to establish a new settlement on Mars. In the final shot, the colony is underway on the red planet, played by Monument Valley [fig. 5.3]. As Salma Monani argues, Becker’s narrative “subverts colonial motifs that tie [the Western and science fiction] genres together,” leading us instead to “re-encounter the frontier as Indigenous home.”¹⁰ Thus, rather than the typical encounter narrative of colonial settlement, Becker fashions a re-encounter narrative in which the journey forward is framed as a return. She also reminds us of the material reality of a place where many generations of people have lived and continue to live, as opposed to its perceived role in canonical Westerns as an empty space that is more symbolic than actual.

In his recent monograph on the widespread adoption of location shooting in postwar American cinema, R. Barton Palmer argues that the Valley in John Ford’s oeuvre is “always already unnamed, never identified as it ‘is,’ extratextually speaking,” and that “it is emptied of its ability to signify itself insofar as it always signifies a someplace else that is always fictional.”¹¹ While it is true that none of Ford’s films is specifically set in the tribal reservation straddling the

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Arizona-Utah border known as Navajoland, to suggest that it cannot “signify itself” involves a fallacious conflation of the signifier with the signified. It is analogous to claiming that in *The Searchers*, John Wayne literally becomes Ethan Edwards and is no longer readable as star-text nor the actually existing person who stood before the camera just as Monument Valley did. In fact, the materiality of the location is strongly emphasized in the several biographies of Ford as well as in his onscreen interviews in the documentaries *Directed by John Ford* (1969) and *The American West of John Ford* (1971). Palmer’s argument also falls into a tradition of reading this particular landscape as hermeneutic playground that Hearne brings into question, observing that “in treating representations of … Western landscapes as abstractions—ciphers that can allegorize any current social problem—critics instantiate and extend the discourses of Indian absence that characterize the genre itself.”

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**Fig. 5.3: Monument Valley as Mars**

Herzog’s abiding interest in indigeneity in his fiction films—historical narratives about colonial encounters like *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) as well as the contemporary-set *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984)—is also reflected in *Encounters* through one interviewee’s expression of pride in his Mayan ancestry and another’s discussion of the ongoing extinction of indigenous languages. This ambivalence between the continuing presence of indigenous people and the constant threat of their erasure is endemic to the Western genre. It is also at play in the opening montage’s juxtaposition of McCall’s version of the Valley, bereft of human life, and the footage of Tonto, overlaid with Herzog’s editorializing about masks and feathers.

Hearne restores indigenous presence to Monument Valley through an analysis of *The Return of Navajo Boy* (2000), a documentary that emphasizes not only the material impact of film shoots and tourism on a particular Navajo family but also the environmental and health consequences of uranium mining in the Valley. The titular return is that of a Navajo man astoundingly named (at the suggestion of the actor himself) John Wayne Cly, who was adopted by white missionaries as a young boy after his mother died of lung cancer, likely caused by exposure to radioactivity resulting from uranium extraction. The real exploitation of mineral resources is thus framed as an ecological disruption that also cuts off a personal, generational lineage rooted in a particular place. This is yet another model of conceiving the interrelationship of time and space, and one which accords with the ecological themes of Herzog’s film. Cly’s decades-long separation from his family ends in his geographical return to Monument Valley, which is also figured as a temporal reunification with Navajo history and tradition.

*Navajo Boy*’s intervention in generic discourse raises further associations with a silent-era hybrid of the Western and the social problem picture, the “Indian film.” The very first film
shot in Monument Valley, *The Vanishing American* (1925) falls squarely into this category.\(^{14}\) The plot of the Zane Grey novel on which the film is based is initially reminiscent of John Wayne Cly’s story: the protagonist, Nophaie, is taken away from his family to attend a government-sponsored boarding school and then an Eastern university. On his return, Nophaie is caught between two cultures, but later, as he lies dying of the influenza epidemic that is ravaging the reservation, he comes to see that the inevitable triumph of European over Native civilization is merely a part of the natural order.\(^{15}\) In the film, a lengthy prologue expands this Social Darwinist viewpoint to encompass the entire human history of the region. Monument Valley becomes the setting for a succession of invasions and conquests, even before the arrival of Europeans. “Since the dim dawn of human life,” a caption informs us,

> it has been the mighty corridor through which race after race has trod its way from darkness into dark. A little while—as Nature reckons time—its rocks resounded to the march of feet and clash of battle, or echoed softly the contented babble of a people at peace. Then—stillness again—the hush of the ages. For men come and live their hour and go, but the mighty stage remains. Through the ages, since the Great Beginning of It All, how many races have crept within the shadow of the monuments?

Again the Valley is figured as an evolutionary environment, with the apparently cyclical alternation of peace and war actually at the service of the linear development whose motor is the survival of the fittest. The racial ideology of colonialism, which survives in subtler and modified

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\(^{15}\) The plot was significantly altered in the screenplay, in which Nophaie’s departure from the reservation is occasioned by a tour of duty on the Western front in the First World War. Another early film shot in Navajoland, *Redskin* (1929), has an identical setup to Grey’s novel. Here, the protagonist Wing Foot (also Richard Dix) is redeemed to the tribe when he discovers oil and successfully outmaneuvers the white profiteers who seek to steal his claim, which in the end he shares with the whole Navajo nation. The fantasy of tribal ownership of mineral resources and Wing Foot’s seamless reintegration are conclusively belied through the corrective narrative of *The Return of Navajo Boy*. 

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forms in later Westerns but which is so blatantly stated here, is challenged and made absurd in McCall’s illustration. The nonlinear and speculative versions of time that this image encapsulates have the potential to reconfigure the chronotope of Monument Valley, not only in terms of its own semiotic genealogy, but in how we view the relationship between space and time in the Western more broadly.

At the same time that “Chimp Riding Goat” participates in an ongoing lineage of Western generic conventions, it exhibits a more obvious visual relationship to animated cartoons and print comics. While the more well-known association might be to Warner Brothers’ series of Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner animated shorts (1949-66), is also reaches further back to George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* comic strip (1913-44). Like Zane Grey, Herriman visited Monument Valley repeatedly from the nineteen-teens forward and adopted it as a backdrop for his graphic narratives. But contrary to the novelist’s chronotopic vision of Monument Valley as an eternal stage on which the positivist version of linear human evolution unfolds, the cartoonist’s version is a phenomenological environment in which time and space are continually in flux.

Herriman’s strip endlessly repeats one simple plot: Ignatz Mouse throws a brick at Krazy Kat, who mistakes the projectile for a sign of love and affection. This eternal recurrence represents an extreme generic simplicity that confounds any attempt at a structural narratological interpretation. As Gilbert Seldes argued in his 1924 book on popular culture, *The Seven Lively Arts*, the meaning of *Krazy Kat* is to be sought instead in its absurd landscapes, the version of Monument Valley that Herriman named Coconino County:

In one of his most metaphysical pictures Herriman presents Krazy as saying to Ignatz: “I ain’t a Kat… and I ain’t Krazy” (I put dots to indicate the lunatic shifting of background which goes on while these remarks are made; although the action is continuous and the
characters motionless, it is in keeping with Herriman’s method to have the background in
a constant state of agitation; you never know when a shrub will become a redwood, or a
hut a church)… “it’s wot’s behind me that I am… it’s the idea behind me, ‘Ignatz’ and
that’s wot I am.” In an attitude of a contortionist Krazy points to the blank space behind
him, and it is there that we must look for the “Idea.”

Beyond its metaphysical profundity, Krazy Kat is also an expression of the cartoonist’s
embodied experience of Monument Valley. The editors of a collection of Herriman’s cartoons
suggest that, surreal as his backdrops may be, they are grounded in the phenomenological
appearance of the landscape: “The perpetual metamorphosis of Herriman’s settings can, in part,
be attributed to the changing light playing over the huge rock formations.” Herriman’s
Impressionistic rejection of realist pictorial representation, so central to John Ford’s mise-en-
scène, subverts the apparent objectivity of the latter’s panoramic landscapes, in which spatial
clarity and stability are inextricably linked with historical veracity and moral certitude.
Conversely, Coconino County is an environment that changes from moment to moment, relative
to any given, specific spatiotemporal vantage.

Yet Herriman’s invocation of the phenomenological immediacy of perception is
tempered by Krazy Kat’s pronouncement, “It’s wot’s behind me that I am.” This statement has
temporal connotations as well as spatial ones. In combining the immediately recognizable
Fordian vista with Herriman’s anthropomorphic, cartoonish style, McCall juxtaposes the
presumed linearity of the Platonic Western chronotope with the outlandish fluctuations of

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17 McDonnell, O’Connell, and de Havenon, Krazy Kat, 73.
18 Despite the apparent questioning of the accuracy of written historical accounts in Fort Apache (1948) and The
Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), the events on screen are presented as “what really happened,” providing the
spectator with an epistemological certainty that takes precedence over the falsification of those events in the
historical record.
Coconino County, a space that connotes “untime.” McCall and Herzog’s playful deconstruction of the standard version of colonial history in the Western is thus achieved precisely by employing the genre’s most apparently straightforward and sacrosanct visual environment to activate a myriad of potential alternative readings, many of which are reliant upon Bakhtinian echoes of prior uses. This strategy invokes a series of family resemblances among multifarious aesthetic appropriations of Monument Valley, retrospectively bringing into question the stability of meaning in Ford’s oeuvre and the Western genre. In so doing, it also challenges the presumed linearity of history and the relationship between genre and ideology.

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19 This is a coinage of E. E. Cummings, another Krazy Kat admirer: “then, mercifully, up (out of memory) lifts the immortal dictum of untime’s most ignorant how wisest daemon: It’s What’s Behind Me That I Am. Blessings upon thee, Krazy Kat; may thy poet prosper until eternity!” *EIMI: A Journey Through Soviet Russia* (New York: Liveright, 2007), 50. The unorthodox punctuation is, of course, Cummings’.
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