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History of Film

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The Western: Landscape and Law

For the longest time western man operated in sun-filled landscapes as varied topographically as they were beautiful. He was able to travel freely across mountains, dunes, deserts, prairies, arroyos, canyons, valleys, grasslands, and forests, and act as he saw fit and do as he well pleased. Cities and towns functioned as rest stops, supply stops, and places from which to derive pleasure and play cards, and as places to make other men fall down to the ground. Constraints to freedom and constraints to his liberties were limited in the Wild West. Man had never been more free nor more in his element. With ever-present landscape and ever-present autonomy, man was most alive and in full existence. But life did not remain that way permanently as the frontier present turned into the metropolises of tomorrow until the frontier as the cowboy had known it was no more. Landscape succumbed to bureaucracy and technology and became fractured. Law and rules invaded him until he could no longer ignore them. As civilization advanced and population increased and economies industrialized, the western landscape became increasingly corrupted by outside forces, depreciating the western homelands' sanctuary freedom and aesthetic values, forcing the western man to abdicate his liberties and assimilate into new society and become part of the law, or become ostracized into confinement and await extinction.

Set in 1885 Nevada in the town of Bridger Wells, *The Ox-Bow Incident* follows a group of townspeople as they seek justice for the murder of townsman Larry Kinkaid. In the end it turns out that Larry Kinkaid was not indeed murdered, and that the three people hung by the town posse were innocent men. The main character Gil Carter and his buddy Art Croft ride into town on the fateful day and find themselves in the midst of the event. Carter and Croft have been away from town for the winter and are the strangers that ride into town even though they are not strangers in the town. Their lack of presence has them being somewhat suspected as the killers. More than anything they succumb to the "frontier tradition growing corrupt as a western enclave is engulfed by a complex, mature, and nearly alien civilization", as noted by Bates in "Man For All Seasons" (37). This is expressed in the town through faux Confederate Major Tetley's plantation house, which belongs in Louisiana and not in Nevada. It is completely inappropriate western iconography that looms large in its establishing shot. The house looms over the audience at an angle perpendicular to the camera angle with Tetley in the middle gap of the cracked gate in the mid-ground with his son leaning against a pillar in the background. The shot then cuts in after Carter exits the frame with Tetley now being in the foreground. During the whole scene Tetley maintains a stoic posture with an unfixed, dead gaze. It is as if he is expressing, 'I will civilize this land'. He is an out of place alien, the kind that violated and defiled the West by taming it.

For a western film there is a conspicuous lack of landscape and a preeminence of edifices and people. The opening shot of the film is a single shot of nearly no landscape. We do not receive a presence of nature and the frontier. Carter and Croft ride into the frame and come down the road between the buildings against a grey and barren sky. From this beginning it is

made apparent that this is not the typical western. The landscape is mute. The grey sky is like a wall itself—the denizens are barricaded from the environment of the frontier, from what lies beyond the top of the dirt road. Proceeding from this shot we remain in the town for some time and during this time there is no exterior landscape in the background of the street other than the ever-grey sky. It is a close-knit environment of assembled wood, people, and horses. Through deep space staging and dirty frames we receive a feeling of vast confinement. There are continuously multiple individuals in different planes of the camera. In the bar the bartender is in the front left with Carter and Croft on the right while Farnley and another are in the back at the end of the counter. As Carter and Croft tie up their horses there is a horse tied up in the background. In the streets people occupy various planes. While Davies addresses Carter there is another guy to the left of Carter in the foreground while Carter and Davies are more mid-foreground, Croft is center mid-ground, and the bartender is left, background. As the posse forms the planes become even more spread. Furthermore, frames are not constructed to have clean edges. Heads of horses, hats, arms, hands, a slice of a person, wood posts, and of course the buildings all cut and extend into the frames. Constant occupation of the edges enforces the entrapment the townspeople have found themselves in. The camera zooms out occasionally, and this reveals more, putting more in the frame and enlarging the confinement instead of opening up space.

The posse rides out of town and we receive the most open landscape in the entire movie. In a few wide shots they ride across the country of rocks and grass and rocky mountains, but then they ride into the pass and are swallowed by the mountains and we are back in the close confinements like that of the town. The three strangers are holed up in a valley and these three

are the presumed murderers. Deep space and dirty frames continue with guns without arms poking into the frame. We do not receive a feeling of awe from the landscape or a tie to a nature. The valley is town, just without the physical constructs. The darkness of the night ensures this. They might as well be in town; what landscape is to be had in the black of night? Man's kinship with nature has been broken through whole displacement of the town and by subservience to Tetley.

Before riding down to the suspects' camp the posse stops under the tree on the hill with a wide branch arching left. The posse is framed under it in the back of the frame as in a painting; Tetley resides under the center bump of the limb on a white horse (no other horses are this light in color) and the shot cuts in to him positioned between Farnley and the backup deputy. Sitting there on the horses under the branch it is like they have condemned themselves to see justice carried out. Out in the mountains the townspeople are like sheep around Tetley. He is positioned in the foreground and the others encircle him. The camera zooms out from him to further display this. Essentially the whole town except for the judge and and the sheriff are there—the town is now the sheriff and the judge and Carter and Croft are part and parcel and caught in its wake. Croft remarks, "We didn't have to come." Carter responds, "It woulda looked funny if we hadn't." As Bates explains in "Man For All Seasons", "Man cannot buck the pack because he fears that it will turn on him" (38). Carter and Croft cannot escape the pack. Ever since Art was shot in the arm by the stagecoach driver and subsequently passed on the opportunity to travel back to town, they damned themselves to the undertakings of the pack, abdicating individual will. The majority has become so powerful that they become persistently tentative and must

give in to the conscience of society. Through recession from the force of nature man becomes unhealthy and is left unsupported in his morality, turning to abstract justice.

Fast-forward seventy-five years to 1960's New Mexico. Jack Burns rides into town on his horse Whiskey to meet up with Jerry, the wife of his friend Paul, because he heard Paul was in jail. He decides to get himself voluntarily locked up in order to get Paul out of jail. Jack gets in a bar fight (now deemed unacceptable by society) but that is not enough to get him thrown in since the jail is at near full capacity, so he decks the police officer that brought him in to the station. His pal Paul is in jail for assisting illegals across the border. Paul refuses to break jail with Jack and the story follows Jack in his pursuit to escape the police that are now on his tail. 1962, the film's release year, as Skerry points out in "The Western Film: A Sense of an Ending", was "the final year of American innocence" with violent crime in public life increasing dramatically as well as "the disappearance of the American Western film" (13). *Lonely Are the Brave* is the key film which Skerry refers to as it embodies the new cynicism towards our history and our national character, showing the difficulty "it was for us to believe in the conventions, formula, and icons of the western genre" (14). Jack looks more cowboy than anybody else in the bar with his hat, boots, jeans, and shirt, and moreso to the viewer who has just seen him riding a horse and wearing an ascot. The first shot in the bar is of a music playing device, not of a piano, but an electronic, spaceship-looking jukebox. A one-armed man picks a fight with Jack and Jack fights him one-armed. Jack gets roughed up and it is clear the cowboy is no longer a force in society. To technologically-advanced society the cowboy is a weak individual, no more a hero, but a non-conforming threat of freedom. The bar patrons insist he fight one-armed with his non-

dominant left and cheer when the police take him away. To Jack, the fight is ridiculous and the need to carry ID is ridiculous, as to society him riding a horse and his wardrobe is ridiculous.

In the typical western opening of the film Jack is lying in the midday sun by a smoldering fire with his hat pulled down over his face when he is suddenly molested by three fighter jets that roar overhead. The world of the cowboy is interrupted by the future. Thereafter, there are nice wide shots of Jack riding his horse across the plain until he comes upon a sign that says "Closed Area: Duke City. N.M. Water and Power Company." He shifts his head and we assimilate a landscape shot of a fence going into the horizon and seemingly forever. When he arrives in town Jack remarks to Jerry "A westerner likes open country, that means he's got to hate fences. The more fences there are the more he hates them [. . .] Paul naturally just didn't see the use in the fence, so he acted like it wasn't there." Jack does the same here with this fence, cutting the wire with pliers. We receive more wide shots of him riding across the desert and into the river to get to town. These shots are in contrast to the following shots on the claustrophobic highway Jack must cross to get into town. A full shot of Whiskey rearing from a passing flatbed cuts to her legs shuffling, which cuts to a pan of a passing car, to a medium of Jack turning, to a side mirror shot of Jack in deep space in the rearview, to a full shot, and finally to a matching action wide shot, all while whiskey is prancing on the double yellow lines. These successive shots contribute an ominous feeling that Jack and his horse are figures out of the past.

At the end of the film, when Jack has escaped the police and is en-route to Mexico we have the same scenario. In order to get to Mexico he must cross a highway. Again whiskey is stuck in the middle on the double lines and again quicker varied shots depict the danger: medium shot, leg shot, medium of horse, long shot from the semi's windshield, medium shot, leg shot,

and then a dirty, over the shoulder full shot through the windshield as he gets hit. Although he was able to escape law enforcement, he was unable to escape the net that is modern society. Industry, technological advancements, the postwar economic boom giving way to the pervasive automobile, is what did him in. It is a world of perpetual motion. Even in the pouring rain people are flying down the highway in their autos. The film's frequent use of pans depicts this. Whenever there are cars there are pans, at police headquarters there are pans, in jail the camera pans, out in the landscape it pans, in the house it pans. Early on in the film the camera pans from the train to the new, better, faster, train—the automobile, and in the end the camera recedes and pans from the officer directing traffic to the rain-drenched cowboy hat lying in the street. The iconographic western hat is now without its wearer, an artifact for a museum.

Society has become the fallback for the law. Although the law can communicate better than ever with radios and telephone, and maneuver better than ever with off-road vehicles and helicopters (the helicopter's bird's eye view and overhead shots as well as the overhead shot with the camera placed right behind the pilot's cockpit—one of the most unique placements in film I have seen, treat the landscape as something which is easily conquered) Burns still, albeit narrowly, beat these tactics. Unfortunately for Burns, built society is so extensive and powerful and bordered that, as Jerry says to him when he arrives at the house, "Either you go by the rules or you lose." The new frontier presents "a vision of closing options, of men run out territory, of mass society, corporate America killing the individual" (Skerry, 17) with the modern cowboy "a type of living dead" says Megan Williams in "Nowhere Man" (6). Jack momentarily ponders leaving Whiskey on the mountain and this thought is seconded by the sheriff while looking

through the binoculars at Burns on the mountain, “If you’d turn loose that horse you’d make it.” The horse, the cowboy’s faithful partner, does him in; it is an outdated vehicle.

Many more decades into the future in the sun-baked outback of contemporary Australia the cowboy (Josh) has become the law. In *Goldstone* it is the indian detective (Jay) who is the stranger that rides into town (on a missing persons case), and the individual who can awaken the zombified western man. Josh is the only lawman in the town of Goldstone and remarks multiple times in the movie in conversations revolving around pressing matters that he ‘has other things that he needs to be doing’, but it does not seem like there is much to do in the middle of nowhere in the outback. The cowboy has lost the feeling of freedom and what it is like to be alive. At the end of the story Josh remarks, “Sometimes, I can’t help but get this feeling that. . . I coulda been, shoulda been, something more [. . .] this small piece inside crying out to be me.”

Capitalism is in full force and Josh exists and can exist because of capitalism which Johnny, the gold mining boss, reminds him later on in the film, “We keep this country in business. It’s all about standards of living. We can’t let the wheel stop turning.” Josh is part of the wheel and so disconnected from his ancestral past that he is unable “to ascribe a temporal significance to the events before him, [so] his inability to narrate his present in historical terms, his sense of having lost a past, create in him a “certain kind of chaos” ”(Williams, 6). Josh is without meaning to his existence and has become numb to it. Constantly throughout the film there are establishing and de-establishing shots of getting in the car to go somewhere, exiting the car to get out, and getting back in the car to leave. The point a to point b narration signifies the hollowness to Josh’s life. The camerawork is very steady and immobile in the film as the days pass by swelteringly for Josh. He does what he has to do and gets it done because he is supposed

to, unquestionably, until Jay arrives and while Jay is present. Meanwhile, all around him are these hues of purples, blues, and pinks, yellows, oranges, and whites in the sky. The sky is a massive canvas with the colors infusing themselves into the earth and into the human—car lights, plane lights, runway lights, the Digger's Motel sign, Pinky's van, The Ranch (the brothel), and into clothing. "They offer a constant warning", as Ward notes in "Landscape Doesn't Lie", but this warning is to Jay, not to Josh (40). To Josh the colors in the sky that engulf him each day reflect how dead to reality is. The sky could not be more vibrant and he could not be more passive. He exists in the perpetual present without a reference to the past to navigate the present.

When Jay or Tommy (indigenous head of the land council) walk or drive in the film the camera goes into steep overhead and birds-eye-view. These angles bring a new interpretation to the landscape. Greg Dolgopolov states in "Balancing Acts" that these birds-eye-views "could be read as a mere topographical map, or as an approximation of an aboriginal dot painting" (13). The landscape becomes more abstract, reflecting the native view of the land. Jay and the jeep become a dot and a matchbox in the bush. The land is owning them. When Jay canoes the sacred sights, the camera goes into a cinematic travel video mode which is in contrast to the usual static camera. This indigenous perspective is what helps Josh escape from his confinement and revolt against his reality; it is a remaining connection to the past. Jay has keen eyes that allow him to clean away dust. When the biker gang has Josh digging his own grave we see the world directly through Jay's eyes in a different perspective, the insert cross of a sniper rifle, but it is as if Jay is still viewing the situation in third-person as it cuts to a quick birds-eye-view shot. For Josh to awaken and find some sense of his origins Jay has to free him from a physical death.

This enables Josh to make decisions not dictated by society. It returns a past molecule that makes the sun less numbing and Josh more mobile.

Jay is the parable to Josh's myth. As Ken Derry explains in "Myth and Monstrosity", "Parable is the "dark night of story," undermining our faith in truths we have taken for granted, and in so doing opening us up to new possibilities" (4-5). Josh has been unable to see and navigate his environment from a non-level, straight-on angle. The landscape has lingered in this view for so long with the lengthy, slow-moving colors baked into his mind. His mind is awash and saturated by the intense colors of the sky. The one dwelling that does not have the sky colors infused is Jay's cabin. The cabin is mostly brown and more close-ups are utilized here. Outside the windows and door is out of focus. The cabin environment is separate from the rest of the environment. With each visit, Josh's mind is progressively opened to possibilities.

In order to preserve the Wild West man had to resist growing weak in the shelter of an increasingly comforting civilization full of conveniences. The more comforts and conveniences he acquiesced to the more freedom he abdicated. By putting his trust in the majority he abdicated his right to be an individual, thereby removing the right from his son and his son's son. To get that right back civilization will have to again collapse. The cyclical cycle from primitive to advanced contains a period of true freedom, but for that period to last civilization must restrain itself from growth, and the chances of that occurring are not foreseeable given man's preoccupation with power. The world will see another Carter, another Burns, another Jay, and another Josh, and it is likely that those men will lead similar lives. In stage one he will feel the pressure of the pack tugging on him, drawing him in to their thoughts. His ear will hear the workings of society and believe it better to consent to some of its desires in hopes to quench it.

In stage two he will find many men like himself each consented a little bit until the pack grew strong enough to override the individual and make him no match. Here he can either assimilate or face death. In stage three, generations down the line in the pack, he might become aware of his menial existence through a remnant and take a stand against the system, risking himself in his pursuit at reversion, but making the environment a little more alive through lightening the dust.

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