ESSAY ON DUST

by Nick Yeck-Stauffer

On the surface, genre films (particularly the western, gangster, or musical) are nearly parallel to a religious service. No matter what your faith, when you go to a service you know what to expect. The characters, setting, message; all are familiar, if not predictable. You basically know what is expected of you as well: act reverent, stand up to sing, clasp your hands together, listen to the sermon, and end up stuck waddling behind some ancient blue haired lady for an hour trying to leave the place (wait, strike that last part). They are common in their ritualized experience through iconography (cross, gun, John Wayne, Jesus Christ) and structured behaviors, in their expected final re-affirmation of community values, and in their identifications of often (though not always) superficial problems in said community that elicit introspection, but do not stretch the limits of the comfort zone, not at least in their classical form. Now, if we were to attend a subversive political art showing, we would be prepared to be shocked, incensed, and to (ideally) have the deepest values of our society questioned. We would not necessarily have any expectations however, as there are no obvious codified generic traits of political art. The same is often true with political art film. When watching Godard's *One Plus One,* I was *prepared* for his signature absurdist political subversion in the style of *Weekend*, but in no way was I *expecting* to see a junkyard full of black militants having machine guns passed out amongst them, or expecting anything else in the film for that matter (with the exception of seeing the Rolling Stones) in the manner that I expect to see frontier, horses and gunfights while watching a western. When watching a genre film, the viewer does not make the same mental preparations, rather instead is filled with expectations. And these expectations can be used to turn the genre

film from a rather benign film to a volatile piece of art. To return to the religion metaphor: if during the course of a Christian service (just for example), while the "audience" was going through the comfortable established routine (stand up, sing, sit down, pray, etc.) the pastor were to announce "Immaculate conception is just a nice way of saying she slept around (how's that for the legend becoming truth)", the overall effect on the audience would be much stronger than seeing the same idea incorporated into a piece in an underground art exhibit. "While avant-garde and original works congratulate the audience by implying it has the capacity to understand them, genre films can exploit the automatic conventions of response for the purposes of pulling the rug out under their viewers"(Braudy 667).

Another way of looking at genre is through its comparability to various forms of music. Punk rock comes to mind, also blues and folk "involve a variations-on-a-theme approach" (Schatz). They are all based on a simple recurring pattern which somehow manages to maintain its power due to its profound resonance within the human spirit. It is interesting to note that Milcho Manchevski, the extremely literate director of the manic genre/culture/period/narrative collision *Dust*, chooses to cite the Sex Pistols as his strongest formative influence (Gibbons, Guardian, April 13, 2001). Among his other influences are James Joyce and the cubist movement, but he places the three chord sneering subversion of Johnny Rotten as what inspired him most directly. Another director who has experimented with genre quite articulately in the past (*Mean Streets, New York New York, Goodfellas,* etc.) is Martin Scorsese: [Speaking of genre pictures] "They remind me of jazz, they allow for endless, increasingly complex, sometimes perverse variations, and when these variations were played by the masters, they reflected the changing times."

One of the consummate masters of the genre film was John Ford. I mean this guy <u>was</u> the

cinematic western, plain and simple. Of course there were westerns before John Ford, in fact the first real attempt at a narrative was Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903. But from 1917 on, Ford refined the western and most certainly evolved the art form of the genre film. John Wayne, Henry Fonda, Harey Carey, and John Carradine, all icons of the genre, were all members of Ford's stock company. His influence is incalculable; from Bertolucci to Welles, Godard to Spielberg, the list covers an immense range of talent comparable perhaps only to the influence of Orson Welles, who himself named Ford as his favorite director (although, as a side note, Welles stated that if he could pick one film to watch in a "desert island" scenario, it would be *The Grand Illusion* by Jean Renoir; who concisely said "The Western is always the same, which gives the director tremendous freedom"). Although the films of his most ardent disciples (Kurosawa, Leone) are some of my all time favorites, I personally have an ambivalent reverence toward Ford's work which I think is shared by much of my generation. On one hand, his conservative overtones and tendency towards moderate sexism and racism (although definitely products of the times-both in the society of the wild west and during the blacklist era in which Ford worked) are bothersome. However, it cannot be denied that he evolved his craft subtly with the changing times like a true artist (although he would certainly balk at the statement: "I am not a poet, and I don't know what a Western saga is. I would say that is horseshit."). And, as I implied before (in chorus with many others) his films gave us the cinematic context of the western. He also articulated some of the western's most profound themes perfectly, not so often with words but with images, a powerful example being Ethan Edwards silhouette in the doorway, or Tom Doniphon's cactus Flower growing in his long dead attempted garden.

Milcho Manchevski's experiment in storytelling *Dust* is so brilliantly complex, so informed not only by the history of the western as a genre (and theory pertaining to it), but also the history

of art, colonialism and the history of the twentieth century in general, so layered in meaning that its interpretive possibilities and historical context could constitute countless essays. It seems that Milcho has so much to say to us seven years after *Before the Rain* (following what must have been a very creatively frustrating Hollywood experience) that he has taken several story and thematic possibilities and combined them into one. Thankfully he has the creativity and intelligence to weave them all together so that they are inextricable of one another.

Braudy points out that “Genre in films can be the equivalent of conscious reference to tradition in the other arts”(Baudry 666). Now my interpretation of this is that as painters will refer to other painters, writers to other writers, so also do genre films reflexively refer to the history of other genre films, probably in the same genre. In Scorsese’s *Goodfellas*, a seminal gangster genre film, the last shot is of Joe Pesci’s character firing into the camera, a direct reference to the original western film *The Great Train Robbery*. This is somewhat of a crossing of genre lines, however the two films thematically are blood relatives- both feature criminals as main characters who get their ‘comeuppance’.

So, as *Goodfellas* demonstrates how thematic similarities can cross (an admittedly blurry) genre line, Manchevski’s *Dust* reinterprets Braudy’s statement and through the vehicle of genre crosses over the lines of medium as well. Here is the continuation of Baudry’s quote: “Picasso’s use of Delacroix [is an] effort to distinguish [his] view on the proper ends of painting… Pynchon’s of Joyce make[s] similar assertions of continuity and difference”(Baudry 666). Now as I have mentioned before Manchevski is influenced by both Picasso and Joyce. “I want the viewer to feel as people felt when they first saw a Cubist painting; I want them to put the puzzle together. Filmmaking is story-telling, but compared to the novel, movies are still stuck in the early 19th century. We haven't made it to James Joyce yet"(Manchevski).

The story of Luke and Elijah takes place right at the turn of the century, ending apparently around 1903-1904. This is assuming that the image of the Wright brothers' plane and the line "when you see an airplane you die!" signifies that Luke dies around the time of the first flight in mid-December of 1903. *The Great Train Robbery* was released in that same year, signaling the end of the cowboy except on the screen (it is interesting to note that toward the end of the film Edge rather subtly quotes the scene most directly threatening to the audience in *Goodfellas*- "Funny how? Like clown funny?"- perhaps this is a nod to Scorsese's using Pesci's character to recreate to Porter's original threatening of the audience…whew). In 1906 James Joyce was completing *Dubliners* and considered adding another story about a man named Leopold Bloom. Based on a retelling of the *Odyssey* in (then) modern day Dublin, much of the actual "odyssey" was to take place inside the characters minds on the day of June 16, 1904 (the day of Joyce's first date with his wife to be). *Ulysses* was completed in 1921 written in an often stream-of-consciousness style which was paradoxically bound by a complex formalized structure (sounds familiar…) and was one of the key works to give rise to modern literature. Around 1906 the fathers of cubism, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, made their first forays into the new art form. "One dimension that film has, and painting lacks is time. Playing with different times, times intersecting and overlapping in the story of this film was the most interesting equivalent of cubism"(Manchevski). It is as Angela says: "far, far from the wild west; to the wild east, where the centuries don't follow one another, they coexist".

Certainly *Dust* does play with time. The entire films premise is based on moving back and forth between the present day turn of the century and that of the past. And Manchevski is not gentle about it either; almost always we are ripped back to present day from one moment so tense it seems the screen will rip asunder (Luke with Elijah at gunpoint surrounded by 500

rifles…or was it 70…) gasping or screaming into the present day, out of the womb of the vibrant fantasy to a situation of real life and death concerning the maternal Angela (a scenario that hits the subconscious harder than at first I realized). “The methods of the [genre] film are also reminiscent of the way Shakespeare infuses old stories with new characters to express the tension between past and present”(Braudy, same page).

The Man who Shot Liberty Valance is certainly one of Ford’s greatest westerns, also his last. In 1962, the traditional western was coming to an end, and this movie in a sense is Ford’s farewell. He chooses to shoot the movie in black and white, even though he had made the change to Technicolor years ago, which has a nostalgic significance as well as “preserving some hint of the rigidity of archaic photography”(Warshow, 709), something that *Dust* does in parts as well. The film centers around a love triangle between Tom, Halie and Ransom, a device in common with *Dust,* if Ransom had in fact been born in the west and Liberty was his brother.

Luke certainly has more in common with Liberty than Tom, with the exception that he achieves some sort of redemption by the end of the film. He has many characteristics of the gangster that Warshow wrote about in 1954, unable to foresee the changes in the western after *The Wild Bunch* and the spaghetti western changed the hero to an antihero. As Warshow writes: “He is wide open and defenseless, incomplete because he is unable to accept any limits or come to terms with his own nature, fearful, loveless”(704).

The two films center around the creation and propagation of myth, the power of storytelling, something such great westerns as *The Left-Handed Gun* and *Unforgiven* tackle as well. Angela, and eventually Edge, create Luke and Elijah’s story, and the newspapers have created Ransom’s.

“The truth is that the Westerner only comes into the field of serious art when his moral code, without ceasing to be compelling [“He never killed nobody without a good reason”, Tom

Doniphan] is also seen to be imperfect. The Westerner at best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity; this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justifications, he is a killer of men"(Warshow, 708).

Works Cited

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