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He Looks Mighty Pretty When He Gets Mad: Relationships of Face versus Body in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

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Abstract
Roach proposes an inventive reconsideration of the film's two stars, John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart that is premised fervently on post-structural deconstructions of masculinity and the politics of the body. Through gestural analyses and close attention to the ways in which both men occupy the filmic space, the article establishes a rigorous interpretation of Richard Dyer’s theories of stardom that is premised upon relational aesthetics: of not only its leads' interactions with each other, but also an ethic of genre-based intertextuality.

Keywords
John Wayne, James Stewart, stardom, western, masculinity

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John Ford’s 1962 western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* brought together two screen giants for the first time: James Stewart and John Wayne, who portray Ransom ‘Ranse’ Stoddard and Tom Doniphon respectively as two characters on opposite sides of a spectrum. Tom stoically obeys the law of the gun while Ranse fervently believes in the law of the books he studies. The relationship between face and body of the two characters played out on the screen as supported by each actor’s respective intertextual star image as well as shot length and composition creates two different ideas of heroism and masculinity: the confident gunslinger in Doniphon and the passionate underdog in Stoddard. Both of these images crumble with the civilization of the west, which leads to the film’s depressing, unresolved ending. Arguably the dead characters from the beginning of the film include not only Tom Doniphon and Liberty Valence, as a part of Ransom Stoddard appears to have died as well, and this is illustrated by changes in the relationship between his face and body which help add the layers of ambiguity to the film’s close. The relationship between face and body of each character is vital to understanding the ambiguity of the narrative, as these relationships change over the course of the film as each character ‘dies.’

Ransom Stoddard’s impassioned yell of “Nobody fights my battles!” following the confrontation between Liberty and Tom in the restaurant encapsulates his younger self as a character as one with a passion for justice who fights against the lawlessness surrounding him, shown in the conflicted relationship between his own face and body in which the emotion in his face overpowers his weaker frame. J.A. Place notes that Ranse “seems to possess a collapsible body without real strength comparable to that of Liberty or Tom” (218) and many of the shots throughout the film’s extended flashback which feature Ranse’s body in longer shots show him as somehow prone or awkward in his posture. Prominent examples include the shot of him
struggling on the ground after being beaten down by Liberty Valence, and again when Liberty trips him in the restaurant, both shots looking down on Ranse from a higher angle. Another shot used often with Ranse is the medium close-up, highlighting his facial expressions which display great levels of emotion, whether it is anger at Liberty Valance or excitement at the prospect of teaching Hallie to read. The shot lengths used with Ransom Stoddard bring us close to view the expressiveness in his face indicating his passion for justice, then take us farther from him to show what Ranse is struggling against, not only the lawlessness of his surroundings but his own lack of physical power.

Tom Doniphon’s character is perhaps best encapsulated by his claim that “Liberty Valance is the toughest man south of the picket wire, next to me,” and his confidence and machismo is conveyed in part by a harmony in the relationship between his face and body. Rarely does the camera come as close to Tom as it does to Ranse, with shots of Tom more often featuring his confident posture either from the waist up or with his holster in sight. The few times the audience is brought significantly closer to Tom is when he talks to Hallie, telling her that “she’s awful pretty when she gets mad” but such flirting is then followed by more macho criticism of Ranse’s ways. Another significant medium close-up of Tom occurs during the confrontation between Tom and Liberty when Tom dares Liberty to “just try it” as Liberty turns as if to draw his gun while leaving the restaurant. These two shots bring us close to indicate what Tom cares about, not only Hallie but also the preservation of justice delivered by gunfire, not legislation. Still, Tom’s confidence is rooted heavily in the way he holds his body, and Tom’s downfall is illustrated by not only the destruction of the house but the collapse of his confident form into a drunken stumble, representing a form of spiritual death.
The way these two images of men, that of the passionate underdog and that of the confident gunslinger meet in the frame are important to take note of. Place notes that vertical and horizontal lines in the frame are important for expressing the relationship of Tom and Ranse in the film (218). Throughout the flashback that comprises most of the film, Tom takes dominance over Ranse in the arrangement of various important scenes. When Ranse is first brought to Nora and Peter’s restaurant, he is laid on the bed with Tom in one moment standing over him and then taking over from Hallie in cleaning Ranse’s face. Another example of this is found in the aforementioned confrontation with Liberty and the saloon, in which Tom towers over Ranse who sits sprawled on the ground. In these shots Tom’s strong vertical line of a body towers over Ranse’s fallen horizontal frame. There are only a couple of instances in which Ranse towers over Tom and the difference in the emotional distance between Ranse and the audience is important to note. The first example is when Ranse punches Tom for the trickery Doniphon pulls in teaching Ranse how to shoot, splattering Ranse with paint. Immediately following the shot of Tom flabbergasted on the ground, a medium close-up of Ranse follows, showing the extent of his emotions as he yells at Tom. The punch is an important moment in the film as this follows Tom’s last attempt to lay claim on Hallie, a claim he has already begun to lose and the sequence shows Ranse gradually taking the power from Tom by knocking him down. This moment is in contrast with what we see of Ranse at the end of the film as he stands vertically over Tom’s horizontal coffin. In this instance, we are kept at a distance from Ranse’s face, the emotion and passion that once characterized Ranse having been dulled despite standing at the foot of the man who saved his life. Even when both characters are upright they are established as having different images of masculinity. One of the most interesting scenes to examine in the aspect is the composition of the scene when Tom enters the restaurant. On the right side of the screen is
Tom dressed in his finest, full body visible while on the left is Ranse, only visible from the waist up due to his being behind a counter washing dishes in an apron. Hallie stands between them, placing her in the middle of a choice between the classical, physical masculinity that Tom Doniphon represents and the more expressive, emotional masculinity of Ransom Stoddard.

Performance signs and star image can be argued to also play into the relationship between face and body of the two characters in Ford’s film as well as shot length, angle and composition. Richard Dyer defines performance signs as including facial expression, voice, gestures, and the posture and movement of the body (480) and while shot length is an important establisher of the relationship between face and body and the resulting masculinity that is conveyed, performance signs should be considered as well. The anger with which Ranse yells at Liberty and Tom for their lawlessness and the tenderness and joy with which he interacts with Hallie in educating her come from not only the audience being brought closer through framing but by Stewart’s own emotional performance. Likewise, Tom Doniphon’s dominant position is highlighted by long shots of his body as well as the American shots but the way John Wayne holds his body is important as well, his sturdy posture and grace of movement putting him in contrast with Stewart’s often more slumped or hunched posture and ambling walk, present even as Ranse marches forward to punch Tom in the face. Dyer notes that “part of the business of studying stars is to establish what [the] recurrent features of performance are and what they signify in terms of the star’s image” (481), and both James Stewart and John Wayne have cultivated intertextual star images that can be seen as feeding the characters of Ranse Stoddard and Tom Doniphon. One only needs to look at Stewart’s past with Frank Capra to see characters of the weaker man fighting for justice in films such as Mr. Smith Goes to Washington and It’s a Wonderful Life in which part of the character’s appeal to the audience is a combination of the
characters’ physical vulnerability (consider the deteriorating physical condition and climactic faint of Jeff in *Mr. Smith*) combined with a great depth of emotion and passion (prime examples being the haunting close-up of George Bailey’s face upon being shunned by his mother in *It’s A Wonderful Life* or the close-up of Jeff Smith’s exhausted face upon receiving a reassuring smile from the President in *Mr. Smith*). John Wayne meanwhile has been known for his “easy and confident masculinity” (Dyer 480) in his characters as they emerge from the desert they take dominance over, whether it be the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (1939) or Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956). Dyer explains an example of how “performance also signifies” (482) using John Wayne specifically, pointing to another film in which John Wayne’s easy, confident movement is contrasted with another actor, in his example Henry Fonda in *Fort Apache* (1948) whose character is rigid in his movements. Dyer argues that in this example John Wayne’s performative style of movement enhanced the thematic and narrative opposition between himself and Henry Fonda (482), and this can be seen at work again in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* as Wayne’s confident movements are in contrast with the more awkward movements of Stewart’s body. The intertextual image of both stars also plays into the depression of the film’s conclusion. John Wayne’s traditional laid-back machismo that has come to define him in previous films fails to get him the girl and leaves him in misery with Link Appleyard telling Ranse that before his death Doniphon hadn’t carried a gun for years, essentially giving up on what he had so firmly believed in. Meanwhile James Stewart’s passion and fight for justice is dulled by years of living a lie built on a murdered man’s body, a grave and haunting realization that would be unthinkable in one of his Capra heroes.

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* ends with Ranse and Hallie leaving Shinbone for Washington on a train, with the conductor telling Stoddard that “nothing’s too good for the man
who shot Liberty Valance” and with that statement the audience is brought closer to Senator Stoddard who blows out the match he was lighting and becomes lost in thought. Many questions are left by the ending, including Hallie’s own question of Ranse, “Aren’t you proud?” Is Ranse proud? Is he happy? Did he do the right thing? Did Tom? Why did Tom simply give Hallie up? Did Hallie love Tom all along? The ending of the film is indeed steeped in ambiguity and unanswered questions. It is not simply enough to assume that Hallie loved Tom all along, as clearly she loved Ranse enough to marry him. Rather, it might be that part of Ranse has dulled or perhaps died, and the changes in the relationship between Stewart’s face and body in the film may be some indication. Senator Stoddard seems more at ease with himself – the shots of him usually show more of his body as it stands tall and confident, “held up by a politician’s brand of pretensions and appearances” (Place 218) and for the most part the audience is kept at a distance from his face in the sequences taking place in present day Shinbone, his eyes. The passionate, conflicted man has quieted, and with the fight against his weaker body resolved he doesn’t need the nurturing from Hallie that brought the pair together. Indeed, the scenes in which Hallie and Ranse are seen to be most intimate are those where Ranse is collapsed on the bed, weakened, and these are the scenes that incense Tom’s jealousy the most. Perhaps when Hallie explains that her heart is in Shinbone she is not simply referring to Tom but to a younger, more expressive and idealistic Ranse, and Ranse himself has already picked up on this and suggests the move before Hallie even has to say anything. Perhaps he too misses the lawless west to an extent, if only because it gave him something to fight against. Tom gave up the bid for Hallie’s heart because it was a losing battle, in part because he assumed Hallie’s feelings, as shown in his confident swagger and laid-back composure for much of the film, while the more intensely emotional Ranse won with a different form of masculinity, one in touch with emotions that also becomes
lost in the civilization of the West. There is not a place for Tom’s form of law in the new civilization certainly, but in a way there is no place for Ranse either, at least the parts of him that were so passionate and idealistic that have taken a backseat to the stern, supposedly steadfast legislator Senator Stoddard has become, as his “expressiveness has become hollow” (Place 220), just like the pompous political opponents he was meant to stand against in the fight for statehood.

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* does not leave the audience with a sense of positive closure, but rather a feeling of depressed ambiguity, and part of that feeling is brought on by the relationships between face and body which help to establish as well as show the changes in the two main characters of Ranse Stoddard and Tom Doniphon, established not only through John Ford’s chosen shot length and composition, but also the performance signs and intertextual star images that both James Stewart and John Wayne bring to the film. Not only is there the narrative realization in the ending that Ranse Stoddard has built his political life on a lie, but that life seems to have dulled the emotional passion in him as he keeps the audience and the other characters in his life at a distance from his face which once held so much expression despite his physical hesitation and weakness. Tom Doniphon is also a troubled character because he lost Hallie in part due to his own closed-off machismo and assumption of her feelings, illustrated in the film by the distance at which the audience and Hallie are kept from his facial expressions, both in shot length and in the relaxed, confident facial expression he usually wears. The spiritual death of both Ranse and Tom through the civilization of the west leaves the audience to question whether progress is always the positive experience it is proclaimed to be, or whether there is something lost in the process of civilization and legislation, whether it’s the honest, easy
confidence of a John Wayne mythical hero or the earnest passion for justice of a Jimmy Stewart underdog.
Works Cited
