McCabe & Mrs. Miller: Genre, Voice and Virtual History

Thomas Boyer

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino

Part of the American Film Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, and the Metaphysics Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol5/iss1/6
McCabe & Mrs. Miller: Genre, Voice and Virtual History

Abstract
Boyer utilizes Deleuzian frameworks to present Altman's film as a "virtual history" of Nixonian America: discussing not only the time image's emphasis on tragic inevitability, but also how the film's visual investment in stasis and death is philosophically balanced by its warm, empathetic sound design.

Keywords
western, Deleuze, virtual history, Altman, relationality
In his discussion of the evolution of genres, Steve Neale quotes the method theorized by Russian Formalist thinkers of how thematic canonization is engendered: "When the 'canonized' art forms reach an impasse, the way is paved for the infiltration of the elements of non-canonized art, which by this time have managed to evolve new artistic devices." (qtd. in 192) He approves of this theory because it introduces the evolution of culture into the reading of genre; as culture changes the mindsets of the masses, the masses change the forms of the culture. It is important to understand films of the New Hollywood as being the result of swift cultural change, and not just because of the ways it appeals to a newer, younger mindset than classical Hollywood; additionally, these films are about change and transition. The framework of the revisionist Western is one such genre, whether the generic symbols find themselves unable to adapt to modernity (The Wild Bunch, 1969) or whether modernity intrudes on the stasis of genericity, such as in Robert Altman's McCabe & Mrs. Miller (1971). The latter film portrays a theme common to Altman's New Hollywood era: The disappointment over the failure of the sixties, cast with a tragically ironic and parodic viewpoint of its own main characters. Within this framework, it deals with the inevitability of time and history not only thematically, but also with a form that, bolstered especially by sound, evokes transience and the tragic fact of impermanence.

In his analysis of Brewster McCloud (1970), Marcos Soares elaborates the social conditions Altman utilized and mediated within his films: "The forced 'pacification' and the systematic erasure of so many of the conquests of the 1960s were part of a larger and more varied frame of changes with a view to the 're-establishment of order' ..." (90) Operating under this cultural mindset, Altman chooses to view the sanguine modernism of the sixties with a critical gaze; while critical of the institutions that repressed the
possibilities of the milieu, he pities his heroes, sympathetically aware of the futility of revolution while foregrounding the flaws that prevented his characters from possessing any sort of social agency. This sort of critical eye is one of the basic tenets of revisionism; but rather identifying these traits as part of the revisionist western, it's more important to think of them as being a part of the independent 'revisionist' genre. Robin Wood defines the political genre of classical Hollywood using a set of basic concepts and components including: Capitalism; the work ethic; marriage; nature as dually 'pure' and 'wild'; progress; wealth as paradoxically constructive and corruptible; and the American Dream. (594) Positing these as the capitalist metagenre about work, progress, and success, revisionism thus undermines capitalist ideology by undermining the tenets of the genre it revises.

The revisionist western provides for an interesting analysis under this framework because of the western's relative lack of capitalist ideology compared to other classical genres. Whereas a form like the classical musical is more inherently capitalist because of its emphasis on spectacle, the classical western tends towards apoliticization. Using the clichés of the form as examples, the town remains isolated from the nation; the bandit, motivated by money (but not greed) or sexual desire, doesn't represent an institutional concept but rather a vague sense of danger; the small, upstart town forgoes capital spectacle in favour of the spectacle of the frontier. Of course, these clichés are all mediated and subverted in Altman's film: The town of Presbyterian Church comes into contact with the corporation Harrison Shaughnessy; the villains are the representative of said corporation, and thus of American capitalism; and the town, filmed from high angles and mainly surrounded by forest, provides the spectacle usually residing in the frontier within the warm, vintage confines of Miller and McCabe's boarding house. By
revising the genre, capitalism is overtly inscribed into the form, even if the film doesn't completely indict its ideology. (After all, McCabe is a symbol of capitalism as well, improving the conditions of Presbyterian Church only for self-interest; and the atmosphere of the completed boarding house, ascribed with symbols of wealth like the automated music box, proves to be the most comfortable space of the film.) Rather, the mere introduction of capitalism into the apolitical space of the western creates meaning, as it contextualizes a milieu that traditionally exists on a separate plane from context.

For Deleuze, capitalism engenders and represents a fluid, representative understanding of history that makes for an interesting reading of *McCabe*. In summarizing the theorist's statements, Holland makes the distinction between Deleuzian history and more conventional schemata. He states that "the conventional, linear depiction of time ... presents it as a straight line in which each passing moment recedes behind the present, just as each approaching moment arrives from a future stretched out in front of us along the line we are travelling." (22) But this is not how humans perceive the past; instead of "rewinding" the chain of the past to a remembered point, we "jump" to the point we need to remember. Humanity's past is not a series of consequences, but rather one omnipresent whole, "the past". Combining this idea with the Nietzschean account of becoming over being, Deleuze states that any event is its own history and, even moreso, the history of the universe. (23) This sutures time within materiality by identifying the importance of history in engendering the object's being. Moreover, the physical object that represents all of space and time serves as a reminder of the complexity of life, and this is how Deleuze theorizes the concept of virtual history. This history is the history of contingencies: "A thing's present being is understood as a more or less temporary and unstable, contingent contraction of its becomings." (24)
Virtual history is the dialectic of scientism and physicality, which narrows possibility to understand and create laws of nature. Capitalism, then, relates to virtual history because of its predetermining nature. Instead of making choices for the present, capitalism, in its cautious search for capital perfection, makes choices for the future. As such, it "changes the proportion of non-linear becoming and linear causality in universal history" in favour of non-linearities. (26) The function of state history is to create its own history; to decide the chain of events that lead to a becoming, forgoing the possibilities present in each event. Capitalism, on the other hand, looks at how events in the past could have been different as a way of forcing determination away from the present, introducing complications in order to better understand the future for the purposes of making a profit. Thus, under capitalism, all decisions, both economic and social, are made in virtual reality: "So every historical event anymore ... has both a singular linear history and multiple non-linear becomings co-existing within it; all historical events participate simultaneously in a causal series deriving from and contributing to capital accumulation and state power, and in becomings that may escape capitalist axiomatization and state codification altogether." (28)

The layers of difference and revisionism in Altman's movie reveal how this theory can be applied. As mentioned before, the film contextualizes the Western town within history by indicating the transition Presbyterian Church makes from a tight-knit community to one controlled by the external force of the corporation. Although the town is destined to be controlled by Harrison Shaughnessy when its two representatives arrive, McCabe gets the chance to keep a stake in his holdings by creating a partnership with Sheehan, the town's other landowner, in order to dictate how land is distributed within the town. His refusal of this proposal represents his impulsivity and his
overreliance on the past to shape his decisions. His reason for saying no is that he left his previous town precisely to get away from partnership, a circumstance that evolved presumably against his favour as evidenced by his incoherent grumblings upon arrival in town. His inability to critically think about his possibilities reappears when the agents from Harrison Shaughnessy arrive: He drunkenly overvalues his holdings as a way of bargaining, unaware of the power the corporation may yield if the negotiations fail. Altman reveals the possibilities that conventional history hides in favour of merely presenting time’s causalities, such as the possibility of a non-corporate America and the possibility of the prevention of senseless violence; possibilities which are signified by the introduction of capitalism into the western genre.

To add to the notion of virtual history, the analysis of the Deleuzian time-image is also important within the context of the film. The time-image is defined somewhat dialectically as being 'not the movement-image'; this latter image depicts transition as physical movement, of atoms or pixels moving through space as opposed to time. (Rushton 27) This means that time is compressed within the image and removed from its context; time may pass throughout the film, but that which changes with time does not change as it does in 'real life'. Thus, that which is affected by the laws of entropy in 'real life' is not affected in the movement-image. This definition can be manifested in film in different ways, including: the transplantation of modern culture or sensibilities onto actions in the historical film; the reaffirmation of stasis at a film's conclusion, and thus presumably onto the post-diegesis; and the binding of work with progress or construction, without a contextualization of this construction. These elements of the movement-image, with emphasis on the latter two, are present in the classical narrative: As the former tries to interpret and understand the past by placing it in a modern
framework, the latter two are the archetypical happy ending and the archetypical plot progression that is free from externalities like the deus ex machina. Thus, when defining the time-image, its presence in the revisionist genre is apparent. The time-image is about transition expressed within time and not movement; the presence of the past, present, and future is expressed in the film. To create dialectic examples from the aforementioned instances of the movement-image, the time-image foregrounds the alien nature of the past; it introduces the difficulty of enacting change and, implicitly, preventing change; and it presents its characters as being passive to the actions of time. As such, while characters of the movement-image are simply and clearly defined, the time-image introduces complexities like confusion, disappointment, and alienation within its characters. (Rushton 59) McCabe is ultimately a film predominantly comprised by the time-image, as it is about the impotence and inaction of its lead character, is set in a past that foregrounds its difference, and portrays the rise of the corporation that led to society's modern economic world. McCabe's failure reminds the audience of possibility, of the chance of success; similarly, the corporation's metaphorical win is a reminder of an alternative history where the corporation does not come into power. As such, the film's use of the time-image reinforces its foregrounding of virtual history.

Altman's use of voice is perhaps the most significant form of the time-image within the film. The voice in McCabe is explicated on the level of gender, the psychoanalytic symbolism of which Mary Ann Doane describes: "The mother's soothing voice, in a particular cultural context, is a major component of the 'sonorous envelope' which surrounds the child and is the first model of auditory pleasure." The male voice, on the other hand, is defined by difference; the father, whose intimacy with the mother
indicates the separation between mother and child, symbolizes within his voice interdiction. (326) Altman's trademark overlapping dialogue removes the semiotic content within the dialogue and provides a melange of voices that are differentiated by its obscurity through gender. The predominantly male townsfolk invoke a sense of community through their speech: Since the lack of clarity exempts the possibility of exposition, voice acts to establish only connection between the population. This quality is reinforced after Harrison Shaughnessy buys Sheehan's holdings; the resulting disruption of community is reflected in the general lack of overlapping dialogue between the men of the town throughout the rest of the film. At the same time, though, when the male voice is marked with clarity, it predominantly represents instability, as the actions of the male characters work to dismantle the stasis of the community. Whereas Miller's agency acts to keep the town together by creating a boarding house that attracts foreign wealth and advising McCabe to sell his holdings, the agency of McCabe as well as the men from Harrison Shaughnessy works to dismantle the town through impulsivity and greed, respectively. If the male voice represents instability, then the female voice represents stasis and utopia. The melange of female voice first appears when the prostitutes bathe upon arrival in town; their voices remain silent until they all use the same bath together, clearly enjoying themselves and sharing an immensely intimate moment. The melange next appears during the birthday party when the boarding house is finished, the setting being cast with a pleasurable red glow and a nostalgic Christmas tune playing on bells as opposed to the film's norm of Leonard Cohen. The prostitutes' near-perpetual sense of enjoyment only serves to reinforce the utopic space of the boarding house, but this utopia is implicitly destroyed not only by the disappearance of scenes within the boarding house in the film's last act, but also with McCabe's climactic
death and Miller's metaphoric suicide by her use of opium in the film's final scene. Thus, while the female voice establishes a utopia like that of the final scene in the classical film, the male voice destroys this utopia, acting to displace it towards the middle of the film and to thus highlight its impermanence.

*McCabe & Mrs. Miller* uses sound and genre to comment on the inevitability of history to enact change, a quality that is part of the revisionist dogma because of classicism's inability to suggest temporal flow after its diegesis. Despite the destruction of stasis within its third act, though, the film offers a sympathetic, tragic irony in its final scene to represent a futile sense of closure. In the final two shots, Miller is seen in an opium den, having implicitly given up and using drugs as a way of dealing with the pain from her unclear past. As the drugs take effect, the camera zooms in closer to her face, removing the context around her and thus the possibilities and uncertainties of history. Finally, the camera cuts to an extreme close up of the opium jar she cradles between her fingers, indicating to the viewer its brilliance. The haloed yellows and reds of the jar provide the film's second and final utopic space, allowing Miller closure by taking pleasure in such a miniscule object. As this scene illustrates, history's transience is tragic for those who get a taste of success; but this tragedy is inevitable, and closure is never complete until death, literal or metaphoric.
Works Cited


Soares, Marcos. "Brewster McCloud and the Limits of the Historical Imagination."
