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Anthony Mann's Film Westerns: Mise-en-scène and the Total Image in *Bend of the River*

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Introduction

The film Westerns of Anthony Mann are now acknowledged as a turning point in the development of the Hollywood Western genre. [1] Unlike the Westerns of directors such as Ford and Hawks where the hero moves through a world opening into unlimited horizons, Mann's Westerns present a world with a "closed, frozen quality" (Kitses 145). The Mannian westerner circles within this closed world, fleeing his past and facing his own mortality. He is "beaten by a struggle against profound forces that operate as a kind of immutable law" (145). In this closed world, the westerner's struggle is as much a struggle with the "profound forces" of nature as it is with the villains who oppose him. [2]

In this paper we will undertake a reading of one of Mann's films – *Bend of the River* – as presenting a closed frontier. Our study will examine how this closure of the frontier is inscribed in the mise-en-scène as a foreshortening of the landscape, so that human actions appear to intermingle with it. We define mise-en-scène as the interrelation of objects within the space of the film frame, presented to the viewer as an "event" of the film. [3] The viewer is drawn into the film by what is offered in the mise-en-scène. Objects arrayed within the foreshortened landscape appear larger or smaller than what they would otherwise be. This deep focus style of imagery releases objects from the background and integrates them into the foregrounded meaning of the action. [4] Things such as spurs, coffee pots, mountains, boulders, river beds, and even the twigs of branches, become charged with

an affective force that links the actions of the characters directly into the natural world.

This foreshortened imagery equates with a modernist style of art that flattens the content of the artwork onto the frame of the painting (Fried 120). Cezanne's apples for instance appear in foreshortened form in the paintings, perched in an impossible position on a sloping table. They seem to be defying gravity, their presence as stilled objects guaranteed only by their placement in the frame itself. Their "meaning" is drawn not from the physical universe, but from the way the painting frames them and as it presents this frame to the viewer. Mann's Western landscapes present objects in a similar way to Cezanne's painted apples. They foreshorten the landscape so that it appears to the viewer as an assemblage of things and humans arranged and interacting according to a "flattened" film universe. Realism gives way to a hyper-realism of sharply etched images joined through a continually adjusting frame. In this sense, we argue that Mann's Westerns break with the realism of the classical Western. [5]

In the classical Western, the landscape *yields* to the journey. For instance in John Ford's *Stagecoach*, an extreme long shot presents a stagecoach journeying forth from a township along a trail winding towards the foot of a mountain, with nothing but a vast flat plain in between them (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The journey takes place as if on the "stage" of the plain. The conversations

and actions of humans take place on this stage but not in interaction with it. A similar staging principle can be seen in Howard Hawks's *Red River*. In an early scene, the hero Tom Dunson, his wizened offsider Nadine Groot and the boy Matthew Garth travel across flat plains seeking suitable country to establish a cattle ranch, eventually stopping in what appears to be an arbitrary spot marked by a large boulder in centre frame (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Tom declares "this is it, this is where we start growing good beef." At the same time he stoops down to pick up a handful of grass, a gesture that also "claims" the boulder as a "natural" marker of *his* ownership of the land. Here we see the kind of staging that characterises the landscape of *Red River*. The boulder is positioned geometrically to define the centre of the proposed ranch, thus defining landscape in purely arbitrary terms. Landscape yields to Tom's will, as he moves through it. Jim Kitses has noted that

> in *Red River*, the relationships between the characters dominate the action, the community theme remaining abstract. Although the cattle drive is referred to as gruelling and is equated with the salvation of the territory, its epic potential is not realised in the images. (150)

Kitses' comments on the failure of *Red River* to realise its epic potential in

images is, we suggest, due to its theatrical staging of events. Landscape is pushed to the background so that the main focus of the film is staged on the actions and dialogue of the men who journey forth in it.

In Anthony Mann's Westerns we see something quite different. In Mann's films, the landscape *resists* the journey. The staging of events takes place not on the landscape, but in struggling with it. The landscape does not yield to the actions of men, but becomes the site of a struggle at *this* place, for instance where a wagon breaks its wheel on a protruding boulder (Figure 3), or at "the bend of the river," where the climactic struggle of the film takes place.

Figure 3

Unlike the boulder conveniently placed to mark the human's claim over the land in *Red River*, boulders and other natural features become obstacles to humans as they journey through the land in *Bend of the River* (Figure 4).

Figure 4

A sense of "this place" is presented not only in terms of landscape, but also as a New World utopia. As Robert Pippin has argued, "[in film Westerns] it seems almost as if America needs its own America, its own New World, if it is to continue to be America" (10). In Mann's Westerns, this utopia cannot simply be claimed and then defended (as is the case in Tom's claim over the land in *Red River*), but must be brought into being through violent struggle. This struggle is with the resistive landscape as much as it is between men. In what follows, we will engage in an analysis of a number of scenes and images from *Bend of the River*. Our aim is to draw out the way mise-en-scène produces the meaning of the film through a dynamic interrelation of human and non-human things. This production is mythic in the sense that the quest for a New World is actively realised in the film's images through the landscape as an "event" of the film itself.

I

In her seminal book on the films of Anthony Mann, Jeanine Basinger argues that the meaning of Mann's films can be understood in terms of what she calls the "total image":

    All understanding of Anthony Mann grows out of this basic fact –

in his films, meaning is contained primarily within the frame through composition, and this meaning is in a state of emotional as well as visual flux. He evolved the concept of the total image, one which contained story (content) and presentation of story with the tools of the cinema (form) as a unified event. (4)

The story world is "contained" within a dynamic cinematic presentation to produce a "unified event," or "total image" constantly in flux. In the total image, characters are not isolated elements separated from the background that frames them; rather, they interact with the frame as an unfolding filmic event. The meaning of their actions cannot be understood without knowledge of these interactions as part of the total image of the film. For Basinger, image composition holds the key to understanding the meaning of Anthony Mann's films:

> [Mann's] basic unit of expression became composition. Mann forced a viewer to contemplate characters in the space of the frame, and to take from their position and background an understanding of their situation in the narrative. Because the compositions were done with such extreme care, the understanding was not just about the surface level of the story, but also about the internal, psychological state of the character. (6)

In her analysis of the image composition of Mann's films, Basinger is able to show how a character's psychological state is expressed through the "space of the frame." The meaning of this psychological state resides in interactions within the film frame, in its containment of the story world as a "unified event."

Basinger's argument suggests a way of reading an Anthony Mann Western other than in terms of character type and narrative action. Rather than an isolated function of "narrative thrust" (Kolker 22), character is understood to be part of the total image of the film as an expression of the psychological state of the hero. However, in our terms, character becomes a *figure* within the film image – a set of traits inhabiting the character but linked to the broader figurations of the film as a whole in its dynamic unfolding on the screen, as well as to an archive of figurations drawn from the film Westerns of Mann and other directors, and playing themselves out in the film itself. [6] In terms of figuration, psychological states are not reducible to individual characters, but emerge out of the interrelation of the characters and other elements in the film frame (both human and non-human), as part of the total image that the film is constantly becoming. In this paper we propose to examine one of Mann's Westerns, *Bend of the*

River, in terms of its figuration of character in relation to the total image of the film. Through a detailed description of this figuration, our aim is to demonstrate how mise-en-scène (the "space of the frame") contains and enables the story world to come into being as a dynamic filmic event. We will also cross-refer our analysis of *Bend of the River* to other Westerns directed by Mann, and to a select number of films by other directors. Our aim here is to show how the figurations found in a specific film directed by Mann are shared by other films in his oeuvre and within the Western genre more generally.

Basinger's account of Anthony Mann's Westerns is focused on the hero and his "internal, psychological state" (6), especially as expressed through "physical ordeal" (92). In *Bend of the River*, the hero "explores landscape to resolve danger. In the rest of the film, he will explore landscape to resolve psychological tension" (Basinger 89). Basinger's perceptive descriptions of Mann's Westerns follow the fate of the hero as he endures trials and ordeals and confronts villains in order to be "reintegrated into society" (88), thus resolving psychological tension. Our concern is somewhat different. In our reading of Mann's films, the physical ordeal undergone by the hero is not an expression of an inner psychological state, but part of a higher mythic meaning figured through his actions. This higher meaning does not stop at the fate of the hero nor with his psychological state, but concerns the establishment of a New World, in which the hero plays a vital but non-determining role. Our analysis will draw out the political dimensions of this New World through the competing claims of different types of political community expressed in the particular grouping of characters and their changing allegiances, and show how the hero's function is to enable one of these communities to emerge at the expense of the others. The hero's actions are not reducible to personalised psychological states, but find meaning in the film as a total image of the coming into being of this New World.

II

We begin with the opening scene of Mann's film Western *The Naked Spur* (1953). As the credits flash up on the screen we see snow-capped mountains in long shot. Suddenly, a swish pan takes us from the distant mountains to the foreground image of a horse-rider's spur. In a single gesture, the swish pan links the distant mountains to the spur, setting the image in motion. The camera itself enacts the meaning of the action, signified by the naked spur, through its sudden movement. *The Naked Spur* thus begins by linking human action directly to the landscape, stitching them together into a

dynamic image of the whole film as it begins to unfold on the screen. As the horse-rider moves away into what at first appears to be an inviting green valley, the camera follows, but we soon discover that the valley is in fact a series of eroded gullies and marshy grassland, laid waste by gold prospecting. The distant snow-capped mountains with their aesthetic beauty is not matched by the scrubby terrain over which the horse-rider travels. At this point, the film enacts a disjuncture between the aesthetic ideal represented by the distant mountains and the reality of the difficult, rocky terrain over which the horse-rider travels and in which the action will eventually take place.

The disjuncture between the distant ideal and the reality of life in *The Naked Spur* is enacted in two other Westerns directed by Mann: *Bend of the River* (1952) and *The Far Country* (1954). These three films, together with *The Man from Laramie* (1955), constitute what Basinger calls "the core of Mann's work in the western genre" (84), and in them Mann takes the Western mise-en-scène in an entirely new direction. Each of these three films involves a difficult journey through rugged terrain, where the journeyers must overcome an imposing landscape in order to achieve their goal. The landscape becomes part of the quest itself – it provides tests of endurance as well as possibilities of new life. By linking human action directly to the landscape with the tools of cinema, Mann's Westerns create a total image that carries the entire film in its dynamic unfolding.

Bend of the River begins in a similar way to *The Naked Spur*. In the distance we see a towering snow-capped mountain, while in the foreground a wagon train slowly moves along a rocky river bed. The river bed is dry, dusty and strewn with huge boulders. Boulders figure prominently in Mann's Westerns, as obstacles and threats (deadly rock-falls in *The Far Country* and *The Naked Spur*, and to a lesser extent *The Furies*), suggestive of Cyclopean mythology. [7] The wagon train encamps for the night by circling in the river bed, raising huge dust clouds. In the following scene, the mountain range re-appears in the background, but this time we see a lone scout from the wagon train riding on a reconnaissance of the hilly country denuded of trees. Weathered tree stumps stand as evidence of past logging. Like the foregrounded landscape in *The Naked Spur*, the countryside here has already been degraded by the human exploitation of nature. [8] This frontier is not open, but closed by the already travelled and worked land. What will challenge the pioneer wagoners in the rest of the film is the greed and exploitation already laying waste to the land through which they are now travelling.

The aim of the pioneers is to establish a settlement in Oregon, free from the

corruption of the east, and to farm the land in harmony with nature. [9] They are guided in their quest by the ever-present mountain. At one point, Jeremy (Jay C. Flippen), the leader of the community, says: "the mountains will protect us from the north winds." The mountain will shelter them from the severities of nature, keeping their crops safe from the blasting arctic winds. However, the mountain also acts as a threshold to their journey – that which cannot be crossed. The mountain figures as a sentinel, standing guard over them and keeping them safe, while defining the limits of their journey.

There are two quests governing *Bend of the River*: the quest by the pioneers to establish a new community working with nature free from human exploitation, and the quest of the hero (Glyn McLyntock, played by James Stewart) to free himself from the stain of the past – his involvement with the notorious Missouri raiders, outlaw guerrilla fighters – just after the Civil War. Glyn has allied himself with the pioneers, offering his services as a scout. He wants to become part of their new community, thereby ridding himself of the guilt of past associations with outlawry and gun play. The film thus falls in line with the traditional Western quest: a journey away from the civilized but corrupt east towards the uncivilized frontier of the west. This is where the fundamental problem of the film can be found.

As the hero of the film, Glyn is also the bearer of heroic virtue. He is honourable and steadfast despite a dubious past, and has innate gun-fighting skills used for the common good. His actions carry weight beyond the plot, and reach into the transcendent meaning of the film. To expiate his guilt and start a new life with the settlers, Glyn must repeat the crime of his past: the killing of men. However, as the bearer of heroic virtue, he must kill men not for personal reasons but for the common good. In this way, his acts of killing become heroic deeds that bring the pioneering community into being under the authority of its own law. For this to happen, Glyn must be *seen* by the audience to be rid of his violent past, so that his acts of killing can be taken to be for the good of the community in its desire for a peaceful life in harmony with nature. [10] How does the film do this?

To show how Glyn is freed from his "fallen" past, his character is split in two. In the opening scenes already discussed, Glyn heads out on his own immediately after the wagon train encamps for the night, and comes across a lynching party about to hang a man in a deeply eroded river gully strewn with uprooted tree stumps. Apparently, rough justice coincides with environmental degradation. The man about to be hanged is Emerson Cole (Arthur Kennedy), another Missouri raider fleeing the past. Glyn

intervenes, rescuing Cole from the lynching party, and they strike up a friendship while riding back through the logged hillsides to the encamped wagon train. Cole is the double of Glyn. [11] Together they form a character pair so that their respective fates become tied together in seeking a new life in the west. The hero's redemption will now be played out as a struggle between these two fallen men, first when Glyn realises that Cole is not the man he seems to be, and then at the "bend of the river" – the place where they are destined to meet and fight to the death. In the final scene of the film, Glyn overcomes Cole – his evil self – through violent struggle, and emerges from the river cleansed of his sins, while Cole's lifeless body is carried away by the fast-moving current. Glyn is hauled into the river bank by a rope thrown to him, which forms a sort of noose around his neck. Glyn untangles the rope from his neck, revealing a prominent scar – the burn marks of a real noose from some previous attempt to hang him. It is now revealed that Glyn had almost suffered the same fate as was to befall Cole when they first met, and that by lifting the noose from his neck, he redeems himself from his past and is now free to take up a new life as part of the pioneer farming community.

III

Throughout the film, Glyn's redemption is shown to the audience in visual gestures and tableau arrangements of the mise-en-scène. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs describe the tableau as "the literal embodiment of the idea that situations should take the form of pictures" (29). A situation is a "deadlock" (24) in the narrative, a blockage of forces, for instance where good and evil characters confront each other, or where characters have to deal with seemingly impassable objects. In nineteenth century stage plays, actors formed tableau arrangements at the end of an act, pointing to a higher meaning related to the play as a whole. Films adopted the tableau in the early silent era, thus forming the building blocks for the cinema we know today. In terms of the tableau, films can be seen as a continuum of images unfolding and adjusting to the "situation" presented. [12]

In *Bend of the River*, the transformation from "fallen" to "upright," from "evil" to "good," is enacted through situations presented as part of the total image that *is* the film in its dynamic unfolding of tableau images. *Bend of the River* prefigures its own end through these images, gradually revealing Glynn's redemption as a continual movement of filmic gestures opening into character actions. In this unfolding of the total image, there are some constant indicators – a snow-capped mountain peak, a rocky river bed, a trail through the valley or boulder strewn hills – that guide not only the

pioneers but also the audience in its sympathies with them and with the quest more generally. These indicators are drawn from nature, acting as both guides and barriers to the quest. We have already mentioned one of these: the snow-capped mountain acting as a sentinel, marking their destination and protecting them from harm. The mountain constantly points to the place where they will eventually settle in the new land. But it also inscribes the limit of their quest and presents a barrier to their progress.

The wagon train eventually arrives at the township of Portland (at this stage, a peaceful and hospitable place), and, after purchasing supplies left on the wharf to be picked up later, the pioneers continue their journey up river on a paddle steamer until they are blocked by impassable rapids. Jeremy and Glyn are seen in conversation on the deck of the steamer. As Jeremy stares into the rapids, he imagines what the farming community he hopes to establish will look like: "a new country where we can make things grow." The film then dissolves into imagined scenes of men building log cabins, ploughing fields, and planting crops, while Jeremy's voice-over continues in prophetic tones. [13] At this point, the film switches back to its realist register, and we see the approaching figure of Glyn working a plough. Here the film is prefiguring itself, effectively bringing the settlement into being as a filmic event.

As the film re-enters realist mode, we see in the background the ever-present sentinel mountain acting as a point of reference for the community and keeping it from harm. We also see Jeremy and Glyn once again in conversation, as Jeremy warns of the severe winter ahead and the threat to the community when the fields become snowed under and their food supply runs short. At this point, Jeremy and Glyn walk to the veranda of Jeremy's cabin, where we see a wooden table beside a fire just out of camera view. Suspended over the fire are two objects: a large pot of stew and a coffee pot with a protruding spout. A woman emerges from the cabin, takes the pot of stew off the fire and places it on the table, leaving the coffee pot prominently displayed in the foreground. At the same time, Jeremy and Glyn move nearer the table, with the mountain remaining in the background. The scene "freezes" into a tableau where the elements in the frame form a straight line from the coffee pot in the foreground to the pot of stew on the table, on to the two men and then on to the mountain in the background (Figure 5). The tableau arranges all of its elements so that they point to the mountain, signifying a "higher" meaning.

Figure 5

The arrangement of this tableau image confirms Basinger's important point that, in Mann's films, "meaning is contained primarily within the frame through composition" (4). Meaning is produced through the fusion of form and content into a "total image." But it also confirms something else: at the "higher" level of meaning, the film is "saying" that human actions are linked directly to nature; that what humans do is both enabled and limited by their place in the natural world. By linking the coffee pot, cooking utensils and characters in a line running through to the mountain, the film "says" that everything is part of the same nature, and that human actions have consequences beyond society and man-made law. In the final moment of the scene, the woman rings a bell, summoning the community to supper. At the level of higher meaning, the ringing of the bell gathers the community safely together at the foot of the sentinel mountain, in preparedness for the threatening time to come.

IV

Basinger's analysis of the framing of mise-en-scène in Anthony Mann's films focuses on the organisation of elements within the film frame. For instance in her analysis of *The Naked Spur*, she describes a scene in which all of the characters in the film shelter from a storm inside a cave:

> All five of the characters are shown together in the frame in the cave's space, confronting each other with complete mutual hatred and distrust. For the first time, they are all totally alienated from each other and every one of the others. A scene of impending violence is slowly played out. (93)

The scene enacts the struggle between the characters as a series of choreographed moves that exhaust all of the possibilities of the plot. The cave acts as a kind of sarcophagus in which the deadly game of captor and captive is played out. This is a good example of what Basinger calls the "total image" of Mann's films. The image contains the entire meaning of the film: all of its permutations are expressed in the arrangement of attitudes and moods of the characters presented together in the single image. Here Mann's film comes closest to a static image: a tableau of the higher meaning to which the film is pointing. This higher meaning is then released by having the permutations play themselves out in the action that unfolds.

In *Bend of the River*, a film with a much larger cast of characters and wider scope of action than *The Naked Spur*, the frame is often crowded with human and non-human objects, so that the viewer has to pick her way through it in order to make sense of the action. The larger scale of these images often means that the permutations of plot can be played out within the unfolding-framing of the image itself. Shot/reverse shot editing is kept to a minimum, and the dialogue is presented mainly within the same frame. The film unfolds as a series of tableau images interacting with one another in a continuing filmic event. The movement of characters is governed as much by the adjusting and balancing of the frame as it is by the requirements of plot. Characters move in concert with the movement of the camera as it leads the viewer through the scene. Take for instance a scene in which Cole, having seized control of the wagon train from Glyn (more on this later), speaks to his men seated around a campfire. Prior to this scene, we have already seen Glyn, disarmed and abandoned, vow to pursue and defeat Cole. As the wagon train is driven on under Cole's command, two of the men, Red and his unnamed offsider, fall behind. Catching a glimpse of Glyn in the undergrowth, Red decides to go after him with a rifle against Cole's orders. This will have deadly consequences for Cole and his men; with his superior bushcraft, Glyn defeats Red and arms himself with Red's gun. Now armed, he is in a much better position to seize back control of the wagon train.

In turning to the scene under analysis, we first see a wide shot of the men gathered around the campfire eating out of tins and drinking coffee in

silence, all facing the camera. We then see Cole emerge from the bottom of the screen, reach over to pour himself a cup of coffee from the pot suspended over the fire and sit in front of the men, his back to the camera (Figure 6). Spooked by the thought of Glyn in hot pursuit, Cole quizzes the men about the whereabouts of one of their number. "Where's Red?" he asks in a commanding voice. At this point the camera makes a slow pan from left to right across the men, as each man looks in turn to the next man on his left, eventually coming to a halt with Red's offsider at the end of the line. The offsider then stands to face Cole to reason with him about Red's whereabouts, but Cole, angered by Red's disobedience, punches the offsider down and he falls out of view in front of the camera. Now stirred with anger, Cole spins around to the other men demanding their obedience, and they rise in response to his threats. At this point, with the camera still retaining the wide angle shot of the men, we see emerging in extreme close up the barely discernable head of the offsider who again challenges Cole. Cole promptly turns and shoots him dead. This scene provides another example of Basinger's idea of the "total image" of Mann's films, where permutations of plot are acted out within the framing of the image itself. Foreground and background are linked by the camera in the way it moves around the scene, rendering the actions immanent to the scene itself. They appear to emerge out of it.

Figure 6

By retaining their place in the mise-en-scène, things appear more prominent than they might otherwise be. The coffee pot becomes more than

something to hold coffee; it provides hospitality to the men including Cole, linking them together around the campfire. But at the same time its positioning in the frame separates Cole from the men. By drinking the coffee, Cole is shown to be both with the men and against them. Every gesture of the camera takes on a special significance: the panning of the camera across the men links them together as part of a potential conspiracy against Cole. By showing each man turning to the other, their actions become chained together: they are "passing on" responsibility to the next man. This weakens them as a group and makes them obedient to Cole's commands. Cole's sudden act of killing Red's offsider is equivalent to the Roman centurion's practice of decimating his cohort of men, keeping the rest in fear of their lives under his tyrannical command. [14]

Bend of the River is composed of a series of such tableau images, working in concert and unfolding as the event of the film. The psychological state of the characters emerges out of the dynamic interactions occurring in the images themselves. These states are not simply indicators of character motivation, but part of the total meaning of the film – the meaning towards which the film is constantly pointing and which is prefigured in the permutation of possibilities played out in the tableau.

V

The event of founding a new community in *Bend of the River* repeats a conceit common to the film Western: the founding of an American New World to replace the corrupted Old World of the east and Europe (Pippin 10). This New World emerges in *Bend of the River* through violent struggle between competing claims over its sovereignty. [15] The struggle takes place primarily within the natural landscape of the film: in the hills, valleys and rivers; in the rocky outcrops and winding trails of the mountainous country through which the wagons must pass. In terms of the story world, what is this struggle about?

The struggle concerns the hijacking of supplies to the fledgling settler community guaranteeing its survival through the winter months. Without these supplies already paid for and waiting for them on the wharf at Portland, the settlers will starve and the settlement fail. The supplies are hijacked three times before Glyn takes them back. The first time is by the trader in Portland who charges the settlers exorbitant prices over and above the price already paid. The second time is by the wharf labourers hired by Glyn, who try to take control of the supply wagons on their way to the new settlement. [16] The third time is by Cole who seizes control of the supplies

from the wharf labourers and asserts a tyrannical authority over them. These three attempts to take control of the supplies represent three different types of sovereign authority: entrepreneurial capitalist, worker-collective and tyranny, none of which prevail in the film. [17] When Glyn eventually defeats Cole at the bend of the river, he also defeats these hostile claims of sovereignty over the new community. The community is now able to establish itself in terms of what it wants to be – a democracy of free yeoman landholders. [18]

To watch *Bend of the River* is to watch the enactment of America reborn in mythic violence. In Walter Benjamin's terms, mythic violence establishes the conditions under which law can be made. In recalling the legend of Niobe who challenged the gods, Benjamin writes:

> Mythic violence in its archetypal form is a mere manifestation of the gods. Not a means to their ends, scarcely a manifestation of their will, but primarily a manifestation of their existence.... [T]heir violence establishes a law far more than punishes the infringement of a law that already exists. Niobe's arrogance calls down fate upon her not because her arrogance offends against a law but because it challenges fate – to a fight in which fate must triumph and can bring to light a law only in its triumph. (248)

In their arrogance, human beings challenge fate, thereby bringing the wrath of the gods down upon them. In rising to the challenge of the gods, humans are inevitably defeated, but in a way that allows for a new law to begin. Mythic violence is the way humans subject themselves to their own laws as if these laws were divinely decreed. Mythic violence is not individual action, but an archetypal event. The individual hero acts not through his own will but through the will of the event itself – the necessity that something should come into being under a new law.

In *Bend of the River*, the gods' wrath descends on Portland when gold is struck in the hills. Portland suddenly changes from peaceful and hospitable to violent and exploitative, and greed sets man against man. The coming of this wrath sets in train the event of mythic violence, and challenges Jeremy and Glyn to live up to what it requires – the defeat of the corrupting forces in order to begin again. What comes into being in this new beginning is an American New World embodied in the community of free yeoman landholders represented by Jeremy and his pioneer settlers. The film's transcendent sense of meaning is concerned with the coming into being of this New World under its own divinely decreed law – the law of nature. Through violent struggle this New World frees itself from the corrupt forces

of the Old World – forces that have brought down the wrath of the gods in the form of self-devouring greed and violence.

Mythic violence comes through direct interaction between humans and the natural landscape, so that the struggle between men is *also* a struggle with nature in its resistance to human conquest and exploitation. The sentinel mountain stands as testament to the resistivity of nature: the barrier that dare not be crossed. Rather than conquer the mountain by crossing it, the settlers must live in the shelter of its presence. The resistance of nature to human conquest is shown in a number of scenes in which the supply wagons, driven on mercilessly – first by Glyn in flight from the pursuing trader and his gang and then by Cole pursued by Glyn – attempt to cross the mountainous terrain. At one point the wagons undertake a difficult traversal of a rocky escarpment; wagons slide across the slippery rocks while horses struggle to keep upright. The humans driving them look worried and beaten, and at any moment it would appear that, like Cezanne's precariously placed apples, the entire wagon train might slide down the rocky hillside into oblivion (Figure 7). At this point the fate of the fledgling community hangs in the balance. The audience is made to feel this struggle with the landscape through lingering shots of the wagons that seem to be animated by invisible forces pulling them in different directions.

Figure 7

The entire film becomes an event of mythic violence as the struggle for the

supplies becomes a struggle with the rocky terrain that threatens their passage to the settlement on the other side of the mountain. At one point, Glyn, defeated and banished from the wagon train by Cole and his men, is seen struggling to rise from a rocky outcrop (Figure 8, Figure 9).

Figure 8

Figure 9

This image of autochthonic man rising from the earth, suggests the rebirth of Glyn as he then sets out in a super-human pursuit of the seized wagon train in order to get it back. As Cole stands gloating over his erstwhile friend, Glyn answers back through gritted teeth: "You'll be seeing me, you'll be seeing me. Every time you bed down for the night, you'll look back into the darkness and wonder if I'm there. And some night I will be. You'll be seeing me." This scene repeats the scene in *Red River* where the leader of the cattle drive, Tom Dunson, is overthrown by his adopted son Matthew Garth. Elements of *Red River* appear time and again in Anthony Mann's Westerns but in different arrangements of plot and imagery, and with a different politics in mind. [19] The betrayal of Glyn by Cole is not only a betrayal of their friendship but also a breach of the code of honour that binds the westerner into a sense of moral duty. Glyn's pursuit and eventual overthrow of Cole is not a simple act of revenge, but the restoration of heroic virtue, enabling the community of free settlers to come into being. On the other hand, the betrayal of Tom by Matthew in *Red River* is part of an Oedipalised conflict between father and son. The reason for this conflict is not in order to establish a new community under a democratic rule of law (although this may have been what it was shaping up to be in its initial stages when Matthew challenges Tom in the name of the rights of the men treated unjustly under Tom's ruthless command), but to retain the existing cattle empire founded by Tom with a law modified for primogeniture. Tom's pursuit of Matthew does not end in his overthrow but in a reconciliation that enables the handing down of authority from father to son. *Bend of the River* is thus a more politically progressive film than *Red River* in that it explores the possibility of a free democracy through contending versions of political authority, rather than displacing this problem in a struggle between father and son.

At the level of transcendent meaning, *Bend of the River* resolves the gap between human being and nature through violent struggle. By killing Cole at the bend of the river, Glyn also kills his evil self (the self prone to tyranny and monomaniac will), which is not simply an act of revenge or retribution, but part of the archetypal event of the founding of the New World community. However, because Glyn is the bearer of heroic virtue, the act of killing Cole also frees the community from the moral stain of the past. It is free to be itself under the law of nature.

In Greek myth the hero's deeds reconcile the world of the gods with the world of humans (Auerbach 15ff.). The gap between the divine and the

mortal is dissolved through the enactment of the heroic deed, thus creating the conditions of law as divinely ordered. All societies base themselves in one way or another on myth to justify their existence to the gods. In modern myth, the reconciliation takes place through nature. As Roland Barthes has argued, myth reconciles human being and nature; it naturalises what are in fact human actions and desires, as if they were part of the natural order. In the Western, the heroic deed is often played out in terms of the duel and the fight to the death between good and evil embodied in opposed characters, and in some cases within the same character split in two. In *Bend of the River*, we see this embodiment of good and evil in the characters of Glyn and Cole, which are in fact an expression of the moral ambiguity of the westerner himself as a flawed human being who must decide for the good against his evil self. By killing Cole, Glyn not only frees himself of his own evil self, but also enacts the heroic deed that resolves the gap between nature and the human, enabling the New World to come into being under divine law ordered by nature.

Conclusion

In this article we have engaged with one of the film Westerns of Anthony Mann as a post-classical Western that elevates the film image to new heights as the bearer of meaning. In *Bend of the River*, the meaning of the film is contained in what Jeanine Basinger has called the "total image" (4): a fusion of "form" and "content" that characterises the style of Anthony Mann's films in general. We develop this position in order to shift focus away from the psychological state of the individualised hero, to the mythical and political dimensions of the world that the film brings into being. The hero's actions present a higher meaning in the same way that the tableau formation of images points to the idea expressed in the dramaturgical situation of the nineteenth century stage play and early silent film (Brewster & Jacobs 22ff.). In other words, the total image makes meaning immanent to the event of the film itself. The film *is* the meaning it produces.

Mann's Westerns are modernist in their style: they flatten the action into a series of gestures inscribed directly into the imagistic material of the film, fusing form and content into a unified event. We argue that, with this modernist style of imagery, Mann's Westerns transform the classical Westerns of directors such as Ford and Hawks. They offer a "new style" (Bazin 156) in the clarity of its vision and in the simplicity of its presentation. With Mann's films, the Western genre makes a new beginning.

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Endnotes

1. Jeanine Basinger was one of the first to analyse the breakthrough style of Anthony Mann's Westerns in detail. Her book *Anthony Mann*, first published in 1979, has been recently republished in an expanded version, testament to the renewed interest in Mann's films. See Bazin for an account of Mann's Westerns as a "new style" (156). See Kitses for the critical reception of Mann's Westerns (165-167).

2. We propose the distinction between an open and closed frontier strictly as a heuristic device in the analysis of film Westerns. For further discussion of this distinction and its relation to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis in American history, see Smith (250-262).

3. Our definition differs from the cognitive-formalism proposed by Bordwell and Thompson who reduce mise-en-scène to a system of elements cognitively known by an idealised viewing subject. For Bordwell and Thompson's theory of mise-en-scène as cognitive-formalist, see Bordwell (427-428).

4. Deep focus imagery gives clarity to distant things so that they appear sharply focused as are things near at hand. The effect of this is to equalise the clarity of foreground and background while retaining the spatial extension that keeps them apart. Space is thus twisted back on

itself creating an illusion of proximate depth on a flattened plane.

5. Definitions of the classical or traditional Western vary, but tend to be concerned with themes and character types. For instance, Kitses defines the traditional Western as "a totalizing system with its iconic representation of America in the cowboy, its nostalgic celebration of a heroic masculinist individualism and racist Manifest Destiny" (Kitses, "Introduction: Post-modernism and the Western" 16). By way of contrast, we define the classical Western in terms of a theatrical mise-en-scène: the presentation of the action as if it were taking place on a stage. The mise-en-scène retreats into the background as landscape on which the action takes place, while realism is achieved through the psychologising of the hero's quest through speech and gesture, acted out on the landscape-as-stage. The modernist Western, by way of contrast, integrates the action into the film presentation itself. The mise-en-scène *becomes* the landscape in and through which the action takes place. In these terms, a film such as John Ford's *The Searchers* remains classical, despite revisionist elements of characterisation (the hero is presented as a psychotic racist) because its action takes place on a vast landscape acting as a theatrical stage.

6. Warwick Mules has proposed a figural reading of mise-en-scène in "Mise-en-scène and the Figural: a Reading of Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*."

7. The Cyclopean landscape also features in Budd Boetticher's *The Tall T* (1957). Much of the action occurs in amongst rocky outcrops and cave-like recesses of boulder-strewn hills. His films are clearly influenced by Mann's style of mise-en-scène.

8. This deforestation of nature can also be seen in an earlier Mann Western. In *The Devil's Doorway* (1950), the hillsides of a much sought after valley rich with vegetation and a good water supply are seen to be cleared, presumably by extensive logging.

9. In his commentary on *Bend of the River* in *Horizons West*, Kitses argues that "the agrarian ideal, so central to Ford, has little relevance for Mann's work: the fecund valley, the frontier homestead – these are largely absent" (Kitses 159). This statement seems a little strange to us, given the fact that the quest in this film is precisely one of founding a new community based on the agrarian ideal. For Kitses, the film presents "the sense of a community on the move and blending with the terrain" (159). Here Kitses locates the community in the landscape

itself. However, we will argue that in *Bend of the River*, the community has yet to be founded. The movement of the wagons through the landscape is part of the struggle to bring the community into being. Against Kitses, we argue that *Bend of the River* is all about the agrarian ideal – how it is realised through struggle with the landscape.

10. Throughout the film, Glyn's character is placed in question: he is seen at one point to regress to the ways of the past when he has to be stopped by Laura (Jeremy's daughter) from stabbing a rebellious worker to death. This regression into extreme violence by Glyn contradicts an earlier scene in which Glyn stops his offsider Trey from continuing to shoot down a gang of horse riders pursuing them and caught in their ambush. In reply to Trey who asks why they should stop shooting the men down, Glyn says with full moral authority: "if you don't know I can't tell you." Here Glyn's moral authority to command men to abide by the westerner's code of honour (in this case: don't shoot men in the back) is counteracted by his later act of raging violence against the rebellious worker. The shift from barbarism to a civilized code of honour can be traced back to *The Virginian* (1914, 1923, 1927), the seminal film Western. These films enact a psychological movement within the westerner from uncivilized to civilized with backsliding tendencies, stopped by the civilizing influences of a good woman. The moral task of these films is to show to their audiences a transformation from bad to good through specific episodes in which the hero is tested for his worthiness as the bearer of heroic virtue.

11. In his study of classical myth in Hollywood Westerns, Martin Winkler notes that "the dual nature of the westerner usually shows itself in his being paired with a badman who is in many ways the hero's alter ego; their antagonism, sometimes postponed by an uneasy alliance, finally erupts in a violent showdown at the film's climax" (123). Winkler goes on to identify this split personality in the context of revenge and Oedipal struggle between fathers and sons, including some of Mann's films.

12. For an analysis of silent film as tableau see Warwick Mules, "The Tableau, Film and the "Ground' of Technological Struggle: the Case of D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* and Silent Film."

13. This prophesying by Jeremy echoes Tom Dunson's hopes for the future of the cattle empire he plans to build in *Red River*. However there are significant differences between them. For Jeremy, his hopes are based

on the growing of crops in harmony with nature, whereas for Tom his ambition is to expand his cattle empire to feed the nation. Where Jeremy expresses pride in community effort, Tom boastfully declares an intention to single-handedly conquer the world.

14. Mann's epic film *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964) contains a scene in which a Roman military *centuria* is subject to a decimation as punishment for weakness in battle by having a random selection of its soldiers executed by pushing them over a cliff, one by one.

15. See Martel for a discussion of sovereignty, violence and political authority in western culture.

16. These labourers are clearly designated as having socialist tendencies by virtue of the fact that their leader wears a red cap and is called Red. These "longshoremen," to give them their proper American name, are first seen huddled together on the wharf at Portland, where they bargain with Glyn for the best rate of pay to load supplies into the paddle steamer. They are not however socialists in the true sense of the word, but more a collection of workers recognising their common subordination to capital; they do what they can to maximise their position by cutting the best deal with the boss. The workers quickly turn to self-interest when tempted by the inflated prices that the supplies will fetch in the gold fields, and succumb to greed and violence as a means of acquiring money.

17. There is a further type of authority – indigenous custodianship of the land – that does not figure here. Indeed the possibility of this type of authority has been dismissed in the early part of the film when Glyn and Cole foil an ambush by Indians on the wagon train. With superior bushcraft and hunting skills, they mercilessly kill the ambushing Indians, thereby settling the issue once and for all. Glyn and Cole are men who know Indians more than the Indians know themselves. Their authority displaces the Indian's right of law over the land because they cannot defend it.

18. See Smith for the myth of the free yeoman farmer in nineteenth century America. Based on the Jeffersonian ideal of "a society of small landholders tilling their own soil … the figure of the yeoman had become the focus of a developed agrarian philosophy" (Smith 134). Smith notes that "the career of this symbol [the free yeoman farmer] deserves careful attention because it is one of the most tangible things we mean when we speak of development of democratic ideals in the

United States" (135). The film enacts the struggle between different theories of political association, with the ideal of agrarian communitarianism as the ultimate goal of American democracy winning through in the end.

19. The screenplays for *Red River* and *Bend of the River* were written by the same person: Borden Chase. In *The Far Country*, another Mann Western whose screenplay was written by Chase, the film begins with the hero, Jeff Webster, entering a town driving a small herd of cattle. This scene picks up where *Red River* leaves off, but with a much diminished herd. As the scene unfolds we learn that Jeff has shot two of his men who had deserted the drive, thus repeating the same tyrannical power that Tom Dunson wields over his own men in *Red River*. These acts of killing will have different consequences in the two films: in *Red River*, they result in a reconciliation of Tom with the men and consolidation of power in the cattle empire, whereas in *The Far Country*, they signal a crisis of conscience in Jeff, his rejection of the ways of the past on the open range, and, like Glyn in *Bend of the River*, his redemption in a new life as part of an agrarian settler community.

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