

THE TRAIL(S) OF THE WEST: THE ITINERARY OF THE TRAGIC HERO THROUGH *SHANE*

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SUMMARY

The article considers the circumstances of the presence of the tragic hero in the Western from *Shane*, 1952, directed by George Stevens. The film, and in particular the last images, act as a limit text to return to the appearance of tragic marks on the hero of the genre, which emerged as a consequence of the painful revelations of the Second World War. The rise to the surface of the films of the tragic wound that determines the hero marks a new stage in the evolution of the Western, from which we can chart its development as far as its most extreme poetics.

KEY WORDS

History, Film, Aesthetics, Genre, Western, Tragic, Hero, Limit, Second World War, Image.

ARTICLE

1. The logic of nostalgia

The images date from 1952. It is the end of *Shane*, directed by George Stevens. Shane, the protagonist, the tragic hero, who has just emerged victorious from his duel with another gunfighter, Jake Wilson, rides off towards the horizon. He is leaving because, as he has already said, “*A man has to be what he is, Joey. He can’t break the mould*”. The hero, wounded in the duel, gradually dwindles into the distance whilst a boy, a viewer, watches him go and shouts desperately: “*Shane, come back!*”. But Shane does not come back, cannot come back. More than that, in the last shot the hero, now transformed into a ghost,

rides through the small town graveyard in the middle of night until he almost vanishes, sinking into that funereal land.

What these images do is endorse a discourse which has opened in a similar way. In large general shots, a horseman has crossed the space heading towards a family farm, the Starretts'. The space he has entered is the field of vision of a boy crouching in the brush who, from that moment, will take the newcomer from nowhere, whom we know nothing about, as the object of his desire and admiration, as a hero to imitate and to identify with. In short, the relation established between a viewer and the hero of a Western. But, and this is the important part, we immediately discover that there is some trauma hidden in Shane's past, an inner wound which undoubtedly has to do with his being a gunfighter, with violence.

The whole film has a simple architecture in its narrative framework. The hero, who is trying to flee from that original violence, tries to become a farmer, to join the Starretts' home and, by doing so, to become a member of a flourishing community based on the new social values and farming practices. A community also up against the old law that the rancher Ryker tries to impose, based on coercion, blackmail and violence. The new community facing the old law of the West. And it must be said that Ryker, like Shane, belongs to another time, the time of the struggle for the land against the Indians, the time of the first settlers, the optimistic time of discovery and foundation of the space. Now the time is clearly another: the time of the consolidation of civilisation.

Shane's attempts to keep his distance from violence will fail because what the story, and the viewer most of all, requires of him is his skill as a gunfighter. And that amounts to returning to the limbo of a time that no longer exists. That is the action staged in the final duel between the two gunfighters, with its perfect symmetry. Shane facing the gunfighter Wilson, or facing his image of violence unleashed. One dressed in light-coloured buckskin, the other determined by the colour black. Both characters timeless, enigmatic, ghostlike. The days of both of them, like old Ryker's, are over, although as Shane tells him, "*The difference is I know it*". An awareness, therefore, of a destiny determined by death, disappearance, oblivion.

Shane resorts to violence and kills the gunfighter and Ryker. In that act his true dimension appears. The community's chance to progress and found a fertile land has been provided by violent action, but what now rises to the surface in Shane is, of course, the wound that determined him, the one we had sense from his attitude to guns and which is now quite visible to the viewer, to the boy who confirms it: "*It's bloody. You're hurt*". And that wounded hero is the one who rides off for ever, far from the boy-viewer who, also aware, calls desperately to him to come back, since with Shane the hero of the Western, the gunfighter, disappears.

There is nothing new in this plot, although something significant appears in its whole construction and is endorsed by the ending: the presence of a device on the surface. That is what Slavoj Žižek (1) is referring to when he states that in this film what he calls the logic of nostalgia operates. According to him: “*Shane* is a pure Western at a time when pure Westerns are no longer possible, when the Western is seen from a nostalgic distance, like something lost”. (2) And the key, he says, is that the story is told from the point of view of a child: “The innocent, ingenuous gaze of the other who fascinates us in nostalgia is, in the end, the gaze of a child”. (3) Although, needless to say, it is not the narrative that is structured through the child’s eyes, but the viewer’s gaze, subject to identical processes of fascination with the legendary hero displaced from his context and already extemporaneous in the story.

The presence of a device, the “meta” dimension, is the reason why a film like *Shane* can become a centre of gravity for the history and evolution of a genre. Žižek explains that too: “And the way *Shane* works can only be grasped against the background of the metawestern: *Shane* is the paradox of the Western, the ‘metadimension’ of what the Western is in itself. In other words, it is a Western which implies a kind of nostalgic distance from the universe of Westerns: a Western which, as one might say, functions like its own myth”. (4) The role of the gaze, therefore, is fundamental.

Let us return to that. The gaze as a distancing device makes it impossible to perceive the story as a “pure” Western according to the Manichaean classical canons. Here the discourse moves into the foreground, superimposing itself on the narration. From the first shots, Shane, whose name is also the title of the film, is constructed as gaze-object. And so we can say that the centre of the film is precisely that gaze-object. His profile as a figure and his presentation in the story are lived through the eyes of Joey Starrett, the boy who triggers the imaginary processes that immediately turn Shane into a hero to be admired, to the extent of making him equal to a father and almost replacing the “real” father, Joe Starrett, in the imaginary construction. The same thing happens in a way with the mother, Marian Starrett, fascinated to a similar extent by the newcomer, which brings supplementary erotic overtones that round off the innocent boyish admiration.

The boy is not interested in Shane the farmer. For him the only thing that matters is the hero’s dimension as gunfighter, enforcer of the law and perpetrator of “just” violence. He insists on imitating him and learning to shoot with him, ignoring his father’s promise to teach him. He is not present at Shane’s humiliation by the heavy, Chris Calloway, and indeed refuses to believe the account of the event. From then on the film shows Shane’s gradual and inevitable return to violence, marked by a fist fight in which he takes revenge on Calloway (side by side with Joe Starrett), another with Starrett himself, and the final duel with the gunfighter Wilson. In all cases the presence of the boy Joey Starrett as a passive viewer is insistently indicated.

It should be pointed out that for the final duel Shane puts his gunfighter's outfit back on, the light-coloured buckskin suit he had renounced in favour of a farmhand's clothes, significantly identical to the ones the boy wears in the final scene. A limit is marked for the cinema here. The boy, the viewer's delegate, can only assert the nostalgic gaze that leads him to take an interest in the old heroes, with all their equipment, quite different from the everyday routine. However, the wounded hero who disappears opens an awareness of a cinema that will eventually disappear with him. It will not be long until the future when the boy-viewer will have to be interested, no longer in this radically mythical other, but in the similar-other the modern cinema will offer him. That very person who lives with him and wears the same clothes.

The final duel between the two gunfighters is, of course, the scene everyone has been waiting for throughout the film. That is why the boy runs desperately in search of the scene that can only be seen through his eyes. In the end, the triangulations are quite clear. On the one hand, Shane, old Ryker and Jack Wilson, highlighted by frames composed in diagonals of conflict, foreshortening shots and lines of tension. On the other, both axes of conflict rest on the attentive gaze of the boy-viewer, crouching down again and framed frontally with his eye movements directing our attention. The chain of mirrors is constructed like this: Shane recognises himself in Wilson, the characteristic interplay of shot-countershot and the short exchange of words that goes with it are highly significant. In the background, Ryker completes the spectral trio. As Shane says, his days, the days of violent law, of the Old West, are over. But, as Ryker replies, Shane's too. The difference, let us repeat, lies in Shane's awareness: "*The difference is I know it*". The outburst of violence occurs. By wiping out Ryker and Wilson, Shane endorses his own death as a character. Meanwhile, the boy constructs his gaze on the observation of the scene. In all cases, the process converges towards a discourse on the genre.

The genre taken towards the limit marked by the wound that opens to determine its hero, of which the watching viewer becomes fully aware. The traditional hero of the Western, now the wounded hero, has lost his function in the context. He must return to his limit condition, he must go to live where the dead dwell, in the graveyard. His marks are the marks of death. And the viewer, observer at that crucial moment, reaches a new state of awareness, where he must see the hero riding away inexorably, definitively displaced from a story which can no longer function according to the classical moulds of the genre.

2. Histoire(s) du Cinéma

From 1988 to 1998 Jean-Luc Godard constructed the four and a half hours, distributed over eight chapters, of his monumental *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*. What Godard is proposing in his new history of the cinema is to think about our relation with images and think about it from images. Among many other

things, this is making history with the films themselves, letting the images and sounds speak for themselves and engage in a dialogue, using montage as an instrument of thought. The image, therefore, makes us think.

The evident presence of the device of the viewer on the surface of *Shane* enables us to think about the film, not so much as one more in the genre, more or less well-made, with a rather sketchy, old-fashioned plot, but as a historical text, an essay that recapitulates what happened to the genre after the events of the Second World War. It also looks ahead to trace some of the possible roads it might follow in its evolution. This may well be the importance of *Shane* beyond its values as a film. It seems like a reading instrument that tells us that in 1952, seven years after the end of the war and 13 years after *Stagecoach* (1939), the high point of the classical Western, the hero has lost his classical marks and how and why he has become a tragic hero. We also know with *Shane* that the tragic hero tends to become a spectre, stripped of his attributes as a human being and anointed, in his violent quality, as a gunfighter at the outer limits, on the boundaries of meaning, on the margin of any social construct or structure of progress. In other words, from *Shane* we retrospectively understand the effect of the appearance of the tragic hero in the Western, at least since *My Darling Clementine* (1946), and we sense, for example, the consequences of a character like The Stranger, (5) who bursts onto the scene in *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), the first episode in Sergio Leone's spaghetti Western trilogy, the outermost limit of the poetics and configuration of the genre.

It is therefore a matter of observing the image as a text superimposed with other images of history that enter into a dialectical relationship. At the interstices we find the revelation of the meaning of the story or stories. Of the cinema too. That is where we must situate the whole final part of *Shane*, in particular the last shot, of the hero riding through the graveyard, with those two other images, also filmed by George Stevens, which Jean-Luc Godard brings to light in *Toute les Histoire(s)*, the first chapter of his colossal work.

Two images: the first of the corpses on the Buchenwald-Dachau convoy filmed by George Stevens in late April 1945, using a 16 mm Kodak colour film for the first time. The second, a still from *A Place in the Sun*, directed by him in 1951, in which Montgomery Clift appears clasped in the arms of an Elizabeth Taylor in a swimsuit. George Didi-Huberman has dealt most pertinently with the appearance of those two images in Godard's film. (6)

Didi-Huberman explains how Godard establishes the dialectical vector, of extreme tension, between the two images. On the one hand, the face of the murdered Jew, fallen to the left in a kind of cry of infinite suffering, and on the other Montgomery Clift's face with an expression of ecstatic happiness. The question is posed around the relation between the real victim and the fictitious man in love. The French author writes: "We cannot fail to understand or, at least, to feel that in the succession of those stills

private happiness often grows against a background of historical misfortunes; that beauty (of affectionate bodies, of instants) is often exhibited against a background of horror (of wounded bodies, of history); that the tenderness of one being in particular for another being in particular often stands out against a background of hate, often administered by some beings in general against other beings in general". (7) Similarly, he continues, the relation established between those images is as simple as Godard explains in the voiceover. Both were filmed by the same man within a period of five or six years. If George Stevens had not used the first colour film at Auschwitz, Elizabeth Taylor would not have found her place in the sun. And he states: "What that montage makes us think, then, is that the differences used belong to the same history of the war and the cinema: it was simply necessary for the Allies to win the war for George Stevens to return to Hollywood and his fictional tales". (8)

And so it is between those two images, and following the dialectical teaching of Godard's history, that we would like to situate that last shot from *Shane*, the dark, ghostly image of the hero riding between the tombstones in the graveyard. Because the historical discourse of the Western, once the time of optimism had gone by and after the destruction of the war and the concentration camps, is that the happiness of a community is built on a base of horror, of violence, that the new community is founded on a graveyard that keeps the memory of an original violence. It is founded, in short, on a laceration, the one the figure we call the tragic hero bears ontologically. Progressive drama uncovers a tragic modulation of the story. And that will have decisive consequences for the genre, heading in its gradually growing awareness for the outer limit beyond which meaning declines.

3.- Staging tragedy

The interstice, the limit, seems to change the neighbouring notion of frontier, the main configuring element of the Western as a genre. In his archaeological work on the genre, Jean-Louis Leutrat (9) places the decisive moment around 1893, at the confluence of Frederick Jackson Turner's lecture on the Importance of the Frontier in American History, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the birth of the cinema. (10) From that moment universal history, American history and the history of the cinema seem to be closely linked. Jackson Turner decreed the closing of the American Frontier, a historical epic, the conquest of the West, which bore fruit in the creation of a thriving industrial region which was presented to the world at the Exposition in Chicago. Oddly enough, the closing of the frontier coincided with the opening of the story of its process, the adventure of the Western.

In that whole process, which bore its loveliest epic fruits in the years of the apogee of silent films, the frontier was the mark of a land to be conquered, to be civilised, and therefore it is not the limit itself that is at stake but the possibility of extending it towards a perfect close. However, as we have seen, stories

intersect and determine one another. At the time it had to be supposed that the Second World War, the historical hinge of the twentieth century, with the decisive event of the Shoah, would have its repercussions on the history of the cinema and, most of all, on the story of the making of the American nation: the Western. That, moreover, is one of the driving forces behind Godard's work: rereading the history of the cinema in the light of the central historical event that decides everything.

When the process is made theme, when the device emerges, as *Shane* shows, the field for metamorphosis is prepared. One of the directors who saw that most clearly was John Ford. Another of the men who forged the cinematic epic of the Western, the protagonist of the relations between the war and the cinema throughout the Second World War, master of the genre and director in 1946 of *My Darling Clementine*, a Western that followed immediately on the end of the war, (11) which literally and starkly stages the tragedy at its heart.

Ford made the limit one of the main notions of his films, as we can observe from the persistent recourse to the threshold as a transcendent manifestation, from the attention to the space determined by demarcation structures between closing and opening, and in the encounter with the grave, the definitive threshold between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In *My Darling Clementine* he also had to make use of a theatrical device, a scenic reframing, also typical of him, to raise the crucial question: what happens when tragedy bursts into the Western?

It happens about half way through the film, when what elsewhere we have called "the tragic scene" (12) appears. "The tragic scene" is what we understand as the setting up of an evident scenic space in which the division of the tragic hero occurs. The utterance of the tragic word in a public setting makes the hero, Doc Holliday in this case, assume his tragic condition and his funereal destiny. That tragic condition reveals itself in the wound which turns the hero into a subject at the edge, divided between two spheres of imaginary influence: one, the diurnal, luminous and diaretic, appropriate to the patriarchal, epic hero, characteristic of the Western of the 1910s and 1920s; the other, the dark sphere, lacerated, inexpressible and given over to the shades of death, of destructive time. That divided, and therefore tragic, condition is structured in the relation between the hero and the tragic word that determines him and which he assumes as his own: the word of the famous soliloquy from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Between to be and not to be, between life as a sea of troubles and death as a consummation devoutly to be wished, the contradiction of the tragic figure is structured: between the conscience that makes cowards of us all and the irrational emergence of death, what falls on the unconscious side. The tragic hero is sunk in radical doubt, at the limit.

And although the tragic hero is marked by laceration, division, his destiny also seems irreversible, since it is the marks of death that cluster above him. Such will be the goal of the character in the story: to structure his tragic paradox in a terminal drama, to give meaning to his death, to combine death as a

destiny with a Promethean confrontation with calamities. From bearing the “tragic wound” to becoming mediator, artificer of a new stage of the story.

4.- Superwestern

The tragic condition of the Western hero, heightened, as we see, after the end of the War, seems to be closely linked to the emergence of the staging or spectatorial device, to a reflexivity. That takes us back to André Bazin (13) who, as everyone knows, was the first person to observe this phenomenon with precision in his article ‘Evolution of the Western’. As he says, since the war was virtually won, the Western, a genre which had practically disappeared in the years of the conflict to be replaced by war movies, has reappeared, though dressed in new clothing. From the perfect classicism of *Stagecoach* (1939) to *My Darling Clementine* (1946) we observe a complex evolution, what Bazin calls a Baroque renewal.

And, true, we know that Hamlet’s soliloquy, invoked in Ford’s work, is a prelude to the performance by the actors in Elsinore Castle which contains and duplicates the keys of Shakespeare’s drama. Gilbert Durand (14) reminds us of this Shakespearean custom, so much to the Baroque taste, of the play within a play. That is, to bring the device to the surface.

As Bazin says, the Second World War forced Hollywood to think. He calls this new kind of film ‘Superwestern’, and defines it, somewhat dismissively, as “a Western which is ashamed of being no more than itself, and tries to justify its existence with a supplementary interest: aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, erotic... in short, with some value alien to the genre and which is supposed to be capable of enriching it”. (15)

Bazin dates the appearance of the Superwestern to the war years and places its peak and limit in two films, *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953). The latter, not highly rated by Bazin, is the full stop of Superwesternisation because “George Stevens sets out, in effect, to justify the Western... with the Western. Others manage to bring quite explicit theses out of implicit myths, but the thesis of *Shane*... is the myth”. (16) Words that take us back to Žižek’s text: “A Western which, as one might say, functions like its own myth.” Naturally, then, “the Western is seen from a nostalgic distance, like something lost”. (17)

That quality of something lost is what should interest us. Where *Shane* shows itself as the limit of the genre and offers itself, rather than as a film, as a theoretical text from which to return to the evolution of the genre, its relations with history and the history of the cinema, and as a turning point that marks the definitive passage to the graveyard, the one in the last shot, of the Western hero.

5.- Not to be

In Hamlet's meditation on to be or not to be, the two edges Eugenio Trías has defined in his philosophy of the limit (18) are involved. The limit is the sphere between the "to be" of phenomena, what can be apprehended, and the hermetic "not to be", the unknown country from whose bourn no traveller returns, as Shakespeare says. In the "and", in the "between" the tragic hero, the character at the limits in search of the configuration of the meaning of his actions, finds his place.

However, when the configuration of meaning does not occur or is flawed, the tragic element is heightened to the point of exasperation. When the limit is broken, the horizon of the meaningless opens up, the contours are blurred and the flaw is beyond repair. That can be seen in Ford's last Westerns, *Two Rode Together* (1961) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), in which the hero's tragic sacrifice brings no progress whatever. However, in Ford, despite everything, there is cause for optimism, even if it is the heroes' happy consignment to the margins or the flowering of the desert rose on the ashes of their deathly memory.

Still more, we should recall with Patxi Lanceros that the man confirmed in doubt, in the tragic wound, knows the incontrovertible fact of death as the only certainty: "Death is the only naked presence of the tragic radical –of the ontological wound or laceration- perpetually updated". (19) The definitive laceration of the frame produces a flood of not being, an apotheosis of violence, which no longer finds an act of progress to sustain it. That is the road it takes at least after *My Darling Clementine*, and through *Shane*, in different directions that lead to the most extreme configurations of the genre.

On the one hand there is an itinerary that leads to the character of stone and the landscape of revenge in Anthony Mann's films, the formal emptiness and disappearance of meaning in Budd Boetticher's cycle of films with Randolph Scott, and ends in the existential wasteland of Monte Hellman's Westerns, whose only horizon is emptiness and deflagration. The place where we will come close to the existential absurdity of Beckett.

On the other, a path, which turns heavily on the hinge of *Shane* and even of *High Noon*, which calls for a formal exasperation, an absolute over-exposition. The path which through Sam Peckinpah leads to all Sergio Leone's Westerns and many of Clint Eastwood's. Where the economy of violence and the economy of money go hand in hand, tending towards farce or parody. Where the hero is definitively one of the living dead who rides through graveyards where there is nothing to found. (20)

NOTES

(1) ZIZEK, S. *Mirando al sesgo: una introducción a Jacques Lacan a través de la cultura popular*. Buenos Aires: Paidós Ibérica, 2000 [English translation: ZIZEK, S. *Looking awry: an introduction to Jacques Lacan through popular culture*. MIT Press, 1991]

(2) ZIZEK, S. *Op. Cit.* p. 188

(3) ZIZEK, S. *Op. Cit.* p. 189

(4) ZIZEK, S. *Op. Cit.* p.188

(5) Also referred to significantly as “The Man with No Name”.

(6) DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. *Imágenes pese a todo: memoria visual del holocausto*. Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 2004. [French original: DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. *Images malgré tout*. Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 2003]

(7) DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. *Op. Cit.* p. 214-215

(8) DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. *Op. Cit.* p. 216

(9) LEUTRAT, J.L. *Le Western: archéologie d'un genre*. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1987.

(10) At least its first steps with the device invented by Edison. It is well known that Edison's invention had no luck but its role in the beginnings of the cinema is undeniable.

(11) This needs investigating in more depth. *My Darling Clementine* was presumably made by Ford under the impact of the images shot in the concentration camps by George Stevens. In 1945 the film services of the US army asked Ford to think about the use of the images shot by Stevens. Cf. DIDI-HUBERMAN, G. *Op. Cit.* p. 202

(12) BENAVENTE, F. X. *El Héroe trágico en el western de John Ford: aproximación mitocrítica a My Darling Clementine*. Research work. PhD in Audiovisual Communication (1997-1999). Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

(13) BAZIN, A. *¿Qué es el cine?*. Madrid: Rialp, 2000 [English translation: BAZIN, A. *What Is Cinema?* Essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray, University of California Press]

(14) DURAND, G. *Lo Imaginario*. Barcelona: Ediciones del Bronce, 2000. p. 40. [English translation: DURAND, G. *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*. Translated by Margaret SANKEY and Judith HATTEN, University of Sydney. Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999]

(15) BAZIN, A. *Op. Cit.* p. 257.

(16) BAZIN, A. *Op. Cit.* p. 258.

(17) ZIZEK, S. *Op. Cit.* p. 188.

(18) TRÍAS, E. *Ciudad sobre ciudad: arte, religión y ética en el cambio de milenio*. Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 2001.

(19) LANCEROS, P. *La Herida trágica: el pensamiento simbólico tras Hölderlin, Nietzsche, Goya y Rilke*. Barcelona: Anthropos Editorial, 1997.

(20) This article proposes a starting point to be developed in an ongoing investigation.

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