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The Night-Time Town as an Alternative Space in the Western Genre

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Violence is an integral part of most Westerns. A challenge often faced by the genre is making its violence coherent, representing violent acts so that they can be experienced as satisfying and purposeful, rather than disturbing and chaotic. Jane Tompkins goes as far as to state that “the genre exists in order to provide a justification for violence” (227). Whether we agree with this or not, Westerns certainly offer us a range of conventions and standards for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable forms of violence.

The extent to which violence in Westerns is situated within particular conventions can be seen as a response to the volatile characteristics of violence itself. The use of damaging or destructive force may have a clear origin – it may even have a justification – but it will also have consequences extending beyond this. Hannah Arendt refers to the “all-pervading unpredictability, which we encounter the moment we approach the realm of violence” (5). Arendt argues that violence frequently exceeds its purpose, and can have results that cannot be foreseen or controlled:

The very substance of violent action is marked by the means-end category, whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it. Since the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more

often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals. (4)

This unpredictable dimension to violence needs to be carefully contained, but it also makes any attempt at containment problematic. No matter how successfully violence is framed within conventions that portray it as justified or meaningful, our awareness of it *as violence* remains, and its meaning as such is never limited to its particular function.

In this essay, I will argue that the conventions of the Western do not simply contain representations of violence and make them palatable. Portrayals of violence in Westerns have also been able to accommodate some of its more troubling and contradictory aspects. There are tropes and conventions within the genre that permit the expression of alternative perspectives on violence without departing from the familiar vocabulary of the Western. Many of the conventions associated with the depiction of illegitimate violence in Westerns do not simply highlight by contrast the “right” way to kill, they can also engage with, and in some instances question, more affirmative representations of violence within the genre. Furthermore, this engagement can be seen not only in “revisionist” Westerns, but also in the proliferation of mainstream Westerns between the end of the Second World War and the early 1960s.

My discussion will focus on a recurring location associated with conventionally illegitimate forms of violence: the night-time town. What Michael Walker refers to as “the traditional one-street Western town” (160) has its own particular nocturnal images – dark buildings, bright doorways, resting horses and traffic in and out of saloons. The night-time town is frequently used as a location where rules are broken, where dishonourable acts of violence are possible, and even appropriate. In Western towns at night, the more problematic aspects of violence can be especially obvious and unmitigated.

The night-time town is an alternative space within the Western, in which different values and assumptions obtain, where the conventions of the daytime world are corrupted or reflected more pessimistically. I will examine three scenes where a character is killed in a Western town at night. These scenes come from quite disparate Westerns from distinctive directors, made during the period associated with the so-called “classical” Western: *Pursued* (Raoul Walsh, 1947), *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962). Despite the differences between the three movies, the night-time town scenes in each

contain strikingly similar elements.

In each sequence, a character is shot dead on the dark streets of a Western town. None of the characters have a clear view of the person who shoots them; only in *Pursued* is the victim aware of his killer's presence at all. The three films use alternative tropes for the presentation of violence, particularly the trope of back-shooting, to engage with the generic conventions of the gunfight. It is useful to summarise what we might expect from gunfights in Westerns. Typically, two characters in plain sight of each other (and often in public view) face off, quickness to the draw and accuracy thereafter determining who lives and who dies. David Lusted suggests that:

In Westerns, back-shooting – shooting an adversary from behind – transgresses the ritual of the gunfight, which demands that an opponent is faced. Back-shooters thereby offend not just against the code of justice but against the social codes of a democratic masculinity by rejecting the public display of fair play. (72)

This “public display” exemplifies some of the key values that inform attitudes to violence in Westerns. Its open, visible dimension addresses the ethic of honour, which we might think of less as virtue itself than its assertion or display – “a style, concerned with harmonious appearances as much as with desirable consequences” (Warshow 111). An ethic that insists on external coherence and explicit standards of behaviour can function as a means of imposing order. As the historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown remarks, “the concept of honour was designed to give structure to life and meaning to valour, hierarchy, and family protection” (60). Honour in Westerns is frequently used to contain the excesses of violence.

There is another American ethic at work in the conventions of the gunfight – the ethic of success. The American ideal of success depends on the assumption (however erroneous) of equal opportunity – without it, success cannot be felt to be deserved. For the result of a gunfight to mean anything, it has to begin with the participants on the same supposed level, with no unfair advantages or head starts. Raymond Durnat and Scott Simmon connect the ethics of honour and success in the Western to the legacy of American Puritanism, which equated success with “election” and demanded “public demonstrations of ... worth through successful work” (71). The public display of the Western gunfight, with its literary roots in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, has often functioned in these terms

as an assertion of individual value (and, in the case of *The Virginian*, quasi-aristocratic distinction).

The ethics of the gunfight are explicitly verbalised in *Pursued*, in a scene prior to the nocturnal shooting. At the inquest into the death of Adam Callum (John Rodney) in a rifle battle with his step-brother, the film's protagonist Jeb Rand (Robert Mitchum), the local coroner (Ian Wolfe) outlines the social and legal conventions that govern killing a man. Telling his jury that Jeb is "no ambusher," he asserts that:

It don't stand to reason that a man that shot down a dozen fellers in battle would shoot down his own brother without giving him a chance. If he had to drill him, he'd do it right. And if he done it right, then it ain't no killing, but a lawful fight. And hereabouts we ain't so danged uncivilised that a man can't win a lawful fight without getting his neck in a noose for it.

As well as emphasising that the "right" way to kill is enshrined in common law, the coroner enlists Jeb's war record in his defence. This portrays the conventions of the gunfight as analogous to military rules of engagement. The reference to giving one's opponent "a chance" also underlines the competitive nature of the trope, the necessity of fairness to prove merit and skill. The scene makes explicit the terms in which gunfights are judged to be legitimate, establishing this standard for later in the movie.

In contrast to the gunfight, back-shooting is both dishonourable and unfair. It lacks the transparency and equality that the conventions of the face-off provide. Its refusal of direct confrontation, of the convention of the fair fight, makes it a source of public shame for both perpetrator and victim. In this respect, Yvonne Tasker likens it to a sexual violation (169n). In its explicit transgression of the values of the gunfight, back-shooting is the quintessential form of illegitimate violence in Westerns and a complementary convention. As a darker counterpart to an iconic aspect of the genre, back-shooting seems particularly well-suited to the setting of the night-time town.

The night-time shootings in *Pursued* and *Liberty Valance* evoke the conventions of the gunfight, but introduce alternative conventions in their use of hidden gunmen. The equivalent scene in *Rio Bravo* forms part of the film's rejection of the one-on-one face-off as simplistic and irrelevant. The sequence in *Pursued* is closest to a traditional gunfight. Jeb Rand is

challenged to a duel by young Prentice (Harry Carey Jr.), which takes place in a dark alley alongside the Honest Wheel casino in the town of Lone Horse. Previously, at a social gathering, Jeb had danced with his former step-sister Thorley Callum (Teresa Wright) against her will (she danced with him only to avoid causing a public scene). Prentice, Thorley's escort for the evening, is coerced by her uncle Grant Callum (Dean Jagger) into avenging this insult.

As this summary suggests, the context the film establishes for the gunfight is one of manners and social graces. This is a public world, governed by the standards of honour, but we are encouraged to recognise the concealment and deception involved. Andrew Britton emphasises the importance of this dimension throughout the film – not only is Thorley's bitter "compliance" on the dancefloor motivated by "etiquette," but in the later courtship scenes, "bourgeois good manners become ... masks for murder" (14). The gunfight between Jeb and Prentice is placed not in the arena of transparency and self-assertion, but of pretence and affectation. This is accentuated by Jeb's dandyish costume (waistcoat, cravat and pale-coloured Stetson) and by Prentice's awkwardly formal mode of speech (he repeatedly calls Jeb "Mr. Rand"). Founded on obvious deceit, the violence that will follow seems to have little chance to appear meaningful or positive.

The setting of the night-time town is a crucial part of this. Much of the social life of Western towns takes place at night. The characteristic sound of the setting is music spilling out from a saloon. As well as indicating the proximity of groups of people, this also blurs the distinctions between inside and outside. Given the significance attached in conventional accounts of the Western to the relationship between civilisation and wilderness, as introduced in Jim Kitses' influential table of antinomies (11), this ambiguity itself suggests the scope for alternative perspectives within the genre. In the first scene in *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones) is shown dancing outside a presidio, which has been converted into a huge bar and gambling house. Inside, the bustling, cavernous presidio resembles the site of an outdoor fiesta. Pearl subsequently hides in the darkened street and watches through the window of a house as her father shoots her mother and her mother's lover. Through Pearl's concealment and the murder's visibility, indoors mimics outdoors, and vice versa. In the shadows of a Western street, it is possible to be both obscured and exposed, hidden from sight but subject to social scrutiny.

This presentation of the night-time street as both secret and social gives the gunfight in *Pursued* its sense of pathos. We see Jeb hiding in, and eventually being forced to shoot from, the shadows. In contrast, we see Prentice, determined to do what he considers right and proper. Both characters are shown to value fairness – before they meet in the alley, both reject suggestions of ways to gain an advantage. Grant Callum suggests that Prentice should shoot Jeb through the window of the Honest Wheel. Jake Dingle (Alan Hale) advises Jeb to hurry out and “get the drop” on Prentice. Both men refuse, but take opposite courses of action. Prentice remains intent on fighting a formal duel, while Jeb’s plan is to slip away under cover of darkness. This decision may seem cowardly by the standards of public honour, but Jeb’s aim is to avoid being forced to kill Prentice, who has admitted that he is “not much good with a gun” (while Jeb is a decorated war veteran). The disjunction between Jeb’s unwillingness to fight and Prentice’s insistence makes the killing seem all the more like a tragic waste.

The fight also undermines our sense of Jeb’s individual authority and agency. He recognises that no good can come from it, whatever the result, so he tries to avoid it. However, he is unable to stop himself from getting dragged into the conflict. His control of the situation is shown to be limited – he is compelled to respond in a sudden and compromised way. When he has to fight back (after Prentice has fired and missed several times), it is from a concealed position. The events of the fight are significantly shaped by their setting – both the topography of the night-time town and its darkness help determine the outcome. Attempting to escape, Jeb manages to get around the back of Prentice, hiding behind a carriage in a stable as his opponent continues down the alleyway. Trying to open a door, Jeb makes a sound that alerts Prentice to his whereabouts. Prentice fires into the darkness and misses. Forced to defend himself, Jeb produces a gun from inside his jacket. This immediately evokes conventions of more clandestine and disreputable forms of violence. Jeb is not candid about his deadliness; he fails to project what Robert Warshaw calls the “image of a single man with a gun on his thigh” (123). However, he is not the only character with a hidden gun. We have already seen Grant Callum hand Prentice a gun which had been concealed in his jacket. Lone Horse by night is a place where guns are kept out of sight, by heroes and villains alike.

Jeb’s unfair advantage is further emphasised at the moment he shoots Prentice. We hear two gunshots and see Prentice fall, but we do not see

Jeb until we cut to the next shot, where his face is still partly in shadow. The emphasis on Jeb's concealment persists into the following shot, in which a group of men are approaching to investigate, while on the other side of the stable wall Jeb advances towards the fallen Prentice. Neither Jeb nor the men seem aware of each other. A key aspect of the scene is that the audience is able to see a fuller picture of what is happening than any of the characters are. We see that Jeb is unseen, and we are in a position to consider the significance of this. We might perhaps judge his actions to be dishonourable, for failing in terms of openness and visibility in his use of violence. However, we can also see that this is not entirely his fault, that the elements that make the shooting seem conventionally "wrong" are imposed upon him. Our privileged point of view makes us conscious of the complex and troubling implications of what we see.



Figure 1: *Pursued* - Jeb, still in the shadows after shooting young Prentice

As I have argued, part of what emerges is a sense of Jeb's passivity. In a genre that so often insists on the exceptional nature of its heroes, it is significant that his advantage comes more from his surroundings than from himself. We are aware that he is the more proficient of the two men with a gun, but we also see how little that counts in this context. Anyone can shoot or be shot from the darkness. This is emphasised just after the killing of Prentice, when Jeb emerges from the shadows. We see Grant

Callum point his gun at Jeb from back in the alley, while Jeb is looking down at Prentice (again, our perspective is privileged). Callum is interrupted by the sound of another pistol being cocked, this one belonging to Jake Dingle, who warns Callum off shooting at Jeb. This staggered succession of hidden guns gives the convention of back-shooting a perverse sense of equality. In the night-time town, it is an option available to all. The range of characters involved – the hero, the villain and a sympathetic but morally ambiguous supporting character – demonstrates the capacity for this sort of violence, and the environment that permits it, to overcome distinctions of identity and status. This is not the impersonal ritual of the fair fight, but rather a proliferation of opportunities for unfairness. In this context, the meaning of violence becomes more difficult to regulate. It can be used on anyone, by anyone. Skill and purpose are no longer reliable guarantors of survival, let alone qualities that might mitigate or justify violence.



Figure 2: *Pursued* - Dingle's gun, pointed at Callum

The presence of Callum and Dingle also reminds us of the social dimensions to the confrontation, that it was never simply a face-off between two men but the product of a larger, more complex situation embodied in the night-time town. The darkness of the town reflects the lack of clarity in this situation – the intricate background of grudges and allegiances, guilt and misunderstanding, cannot be condensed into a

single conflict. The indication that the issues that prompted the fight remain present and unresolved emphasises the futility of Prentice's death and the inability of violence to coherently address such a situation. The setting of the fight draws attention to the complexities and problems that are involved in it.

The nocturnal shooting of Pat Wheeler (Ward Bond) in *Rio Bravo* fulfils a similar function, demonstrating both the impossibility of isolating a particular conflict from its surroundings and the inadequacy of the individual, however skilled, in this context. The film's main protagonist, Sheriff John T. Chance (John Wayne), although strong and capable, is candid about his own limitations. Asked why he carries a rifle, he replies that, "I found some were faster than me with a short gun." The shooting of Wheeler is the first major indication that the situation Chance faces is larger and more serious than can be dealt with by his abilities alone.

This is already suggested in the film's second scene, in which only the intervention of Dude (Dean Martin) allows Chance to arrest Joe Burdette (Claude Akins) without being threatened by Burdette's henchmen. It is Wheeler's death, however, that reveals the scope of the threat to Chance and his comrades, partly by drawing on the suggestions of deception and malevolence associated with the night-time town.

Wheeler is shot in the back by a gunman hired by Nathan Burdette (John Russell), Joe's powerful brother. He is killed because of his "well-intentioned indiscretions" (Wood 43) – trying to recruit men to assist Chance without paying attention to who might be listening. As in *Pursued*, the social dynamic of the night-time town is portrayed as lethally oppressive. The value of virtuous social display is inverted – Prentice's show of decorum gets him killed and Wheeler's show of loyalty does the same. While Grant Callum is able to manipulate Prentice by citing social conventions, Nathan Burdette is able to dictate the conventions of public behaviour through the ubiquitous presence of his men.

As with *Pursued*, the wider implications of the shooting of Wheeler are suggested by the manipulation of point of view [1]. The sequence begins with Chance meeting Dude outside the hotel bar and asking if he has seen Wheeler. Dude indicates up the street, and we cut from a two-shot of the men to a long shot of Wheeler walking back towards them. Within these shots, there is a slight positional inflection that shapes our perspective. Both shots are more sideways-on than might usually be expected; both are viewed at a clear diagonal. This subtly differentiates our perspective from

that of the two men looking down the street. It also helps create a more three-dimensional sense of the scene, opening up the space in front of the hotel and next to Wheeler.



Figure 3: *Rio Bravo* - Wheeler coming down the street

Both of these prepare us for the more pronounced shift in point of view in the next shot. We see a view of the street from inside the stable across the road. A gunman cocks his rifle, steps back and aims through the window. When Wheeler steps into the gunman's sights, he is shot down. The brief moment of anticipation, in which the rifle is cocked and Wheeler is allowed to approach, is facilitated by the shift in point of view. We are given information that Chance, Dude and Wheeler himself lack. Beyond providing a moment of suspense, our awareness that Wheeler is about to be shot emphasises the premeditated nature of the killing, and in turn, the scope of Nathan Burdette's influence. It also conveys a sense of powerlessness, for Chance and Dude as well as Wheeler. No one is able to prevent, or even anticipate the shooting.



Figure 4: *Rio Bravo* - Wheeler stepping into the sights of the hidden gunman

The killing of Wheeler demonstrates the level of knowledge and control possessed by Nathan Burdette and his henchmen. In order to kill Wheeler this way, someone involved had to know where he would be, which was a subject of enquiry and speculation for Dude and Chance immediately prior to Wheeler's death. The swiftness and precision of the murder assert Burdette's power over the town. Crouched over Wheeler's body, Chance summarises: "They got him in the back. He's dead. It didn't take 'em long, less than an hour after he offered to help. You don't get many friends like that." As well as emphasising the speed with which the villains are able to work, and the increased isolation of the sheriff and his remaining friends, Chance explicitly labels Wheeler's death as a back-shooting. Wayne delivers the first part of the line with a snarl of disgust, indicating Chance's contempt for conventionally dishonourable violence. Part of the shock of Wheeler's killing comes from its portrayal as an assault on the familiar – on the streets that Chance patrols and the conventions that he observes. The casting of Ward Bond (a prolific character actor recognisable from many Westerns) as Wheeler is another factor in this. When *Rio Bravo* was released, Bond would have been especially familiar from his central role in the television series *Wagon Train* (NBC, 1957-1962). To kill his character off so quickly, and after he has done so little, disrupts expectations and forces us to reassess what might be possible in the world that the film depicts.

Chance refers to Burdette and his gang as a nebulous, undefined "they."

The man who shoots Wheeler is presented in a consistently anonymous fashion. He is never seen front-on; when we see his face it is only in oblique profile from behind. In a film full of distinctive-looking characters, his features are bland and undistinguished. When he steps back to aim at Wheeler, he moves into shadow, only his head and hands remaining discernible. When pursued into the Burdette saloon, he hides up in the rafters, again rendered indistinct by the darkness. The extent to which this unnamed gunman blends into his surroundings makes him seem almost like part of the environment itself. This is given a particular inflection by the setting of the night-time town. The sense of pervasive and impersonal menace comes from the villains' control over, and willingness to exploit, the opportunities for physical and social concealment (Burdette's men also deny the presence of the gunman) that the town and its darkness provide.

Against this threat, Chance's adherence to the values and conventions of the gunfight is shown to be inadequate. When Wheeler's killer is still in the stable, Chance expresses his intention to go in "right through the door" to confront him. Even as he faces a different kind of violence, Chance's approach continues to stress open and direct engagement, the overtness and regularity of honour and the individual distinction it confers. In the subsequent confrontation, Chance ends up momentarily blinded by dust and the killer escapes. The dust in the sheriff's eyes not only demonstrates that the local environment continues to offer advantages to those less concerned with formal rules of engagement, it also provides a neat riposte to Chance's insistence on directness and visibility. The reassuring coherence that these could potentially bring to violence is denied.

It is only through Dude that the gunman is apprehended. As a recovering alcoholic, Dude has knowledge and experience of the town's nocturnal underbelly. By his own regretful admission, he is "an expert on saloons." His understanding of the nocturnal milieu is explicitly linked to the suffering and humiliation he has experienced there. His sadness and shame give him an insight into the complexities of this environment. When Dude urges Chance to take the back door of the saloon, leaving him to take the front, it is not only for the sake of rebuilding his own self-respect. It is also a way of persuading Chance to compromise his direct approach and be flexible in the face of an opponent superior in numbers and position, and with a total disregard for fair play. The conditions of the town at night are shown to be alien to the upright Chance. In an earlier night-time patrol scene he is startled by a donkey,

and admits that he is “getting jumpy.” Through Dude’s experience of despair and degradation in the night-time town (in the film’s opening scene, he attempts to retrieve a silver dollar from a spittoon), he helps Chance adapt.

The other major function of the night-time town in *Rio Bravo* relates to the expression of containment and restricted space. The film’s narrative revolves around a siege – Chance’s attempts to keep Joe Burdette in jail until the federal marshal arrives to take him. This story is structured over a series of days and nights, marked by shots of sunrise and sunset. Solar time is often used in Westerns of this period to suggest an elemental dimension – consider such titles as *Red Sundown*, *Rage at Dawn* and, most famously, *High Noon*. The night-time scenes in *Rio Bravo*, however, work against this sort of emphasis. Rather than establishing a continuity with the cycles of the natural world, they stress the town’s separateness and isolation. The darkness of the night-time town shuts out the surrounding wilderness that is visible at the edges of town in the daytime. Without it, the world of the Western shrinks. The sense of freedom and grandeur that the landscape often expresses is circumscribed. Western towns at night frequently carry the suggestion of narrowed or diminished possibilities. In the night-time town, there seems to be less scope for action that might express or affirm something positive. The overall scale of the physical environment, and the stature of individuals within it, is reduced. This quality of containment and restriction creates the impression of the night-time town as its own distinct, self-contained world. The dawn and dusk shots in *Rio Bravo* make this overt. The scenery around the town disappears at sunset, only to reassert itself in the morning.

The use of landscape in *Liberty Valance* is similarly restricted – unusually so, as Douglas Pye points out, for a Ford Western (119). Most of the film is set within the town of Shinbone, with several important scenes taking place at night. I commented on the capacity of the night-time town to blur distinctions between inside and outside. In *Liberty Valance* the effect is slightly different – the basic distinction is maintained, but as in *Rio Bravo*, the exterior spaces appear more confined, combining aspects of inside and outside. Aspects of the nocturnal Shinbone can be seen as substituting for the wilderness, in terms of both its emptiness and lack of social control. Indoor scenes, brightly lit and dominated by medium shots, are juxtaposed with scenes emphasising the dark, empty streets that surround these social spaces, inhabited by solitary figures framed in long shot. In contrast to the iconic Western shot of the individual against the open landscape, the solitude of these figures does not convey independence or

distinction, but isolation and uncertainty.

An example of this occurs when Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) departs from Peter's Place, Shinbone's dining establishment, telling his intended bride Hallie (Vera Miles) that he will be "out of town for a while." Our view shifts from the kitchen to outside, and we see Hallie watching Tom walk out into the shadows. The depth of the shot dwarfs Hallie, and the doorway that frames her. She is visually overwhelmed by the darkness. While we have been told that Tom is going out into the countryside, we do not see this. Unlike in the famous doorway shots in Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), here, the wilderness is not an immediate and visible presence. The night-time town functions as shorthand for the wider, more dangerous world outside the safer spaces of social interaction.



Figure 5: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* - Hallie in the kitchen doorway, watching Tom depart

Through the sustained use of Shinbone by night, then, the West of *Liberty Valance* is able to be "wild" without appearing to be very large. This can be connected to the film's framing device: the main narrative is recounted by Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) some years after it takes place. While the movie does not restrict itself to Ransie's point of view (he is absent from several scenes and unconscious in one), our awareness of his narration emphasises that what we see is structured around one man's experience of the West. Again, this suggests a contained and restricted narrative world – Tag Gallagher argues that "in a sense, the world beyond does not exist" in the movie (391). This is particularly relevant to the shooting of Liberty Valance himself.

Valance's death is shown twice – first as it appeared to Ranse and others at the time, and then how it really happened, as explained to Ranse by Tom. The first time it is presented as a conventional face-off, the second time as a concealed, premeditated killing, like that of Wheeler in *Rio Bravo*. The difference between the two versions, and the two sets of conventions they employ, is represented spatially. In the first version, where Ranse appears to kill Valance, a narrow corridor of action is established by staging the gunfight on the veranda of Shinbone's General Store, rather than in the street itself (an early indication that it might not be the honourable public act that it appears to be). The first part of the fight consists of alternating shots of the two men. Subsequently, the line between them is maintained by the wooden rail at the edge of the veranda. The pronounced sense of tunnel vision created here reinforces the limited and subjective nature of the first account. It can also be interpreted as a comment on the conventions of the gunfight. By keeping the action along one clear line on one side of the street, it appears almost two-dimensional. This makes it seem too simplistic and artificial to function as a moment where significance can be concentrated into an emblematic act of violence. The ritual of the climactic face-off is portrayed as reductive and false.

When the truth is revealed, another spatial dimension is added. In the second version of the shooting, we see the face-off from the other side of the street, which had previously been excluded from our view. From an alleyway, Tom catches a rifle thrown to him by his servant and companion Pompey (Woody Strode), aims it at Valance and shoots him dead. The authenticity of this version is asserted through its foregrounding of three-dimensional space. We see the two men on the veranda sideways-on, at the back of a deep focus shot across the street. The flat plane of the gunfight is situated in a fuller spatial context.



Figure 6: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* - Tom shoots Valance from across the street

There remain, however, elements of containment and restriction. This is partly created by the context – Tom’s account to Ranse is contained within Ranse’s own narration. The scene is a flashback within a flashback, giving it an intensified focus and specificity. While it extends the space of the previous account, it is still tightly enclosed. The shot of Tom shooting Valance is bounded on both sides by the edges of the alleyway, accentuated by the positions of Tom and Pompey on each side of the frame. This level of narrative and spatial encapsulation locates the shooting in the irretrievable past, accessible only through a series of frames. As an apparently distinct and separate space, the setting of the night-time town adds to this effect.

The presentation of the flashback also plays on the motifs of darkness and concealment associated with the night-time town. It is introduced by a dissolve, which blends with the smoke from Tom’s cigarette in the previous shot to form an obscuring cloud, out of which the scene emerges. At first, however, we see nothing. The street is only revealed when the black-clad Tom steps out of the extreme foreground. This is repeated after the shooting, when Tom and Pompey walk back into the alley, blocking the shot again. The empty middle plane of the street also emphasises that Tom, in the background, watches and shoots from an unobserved distance. A contradiction is expressed here. We understand that Tom is telling us the true story of the killing. This is translated, in cinematic terms, into showing us what happened. However, what is revealed is deception and concealment. Tom displays his hidden role in the death of

Liberty Valance. There is a perverse kind of honour to the overtness with which he does this, but that just emphasises the disparity between such public standards and what he has done. This contradiction brings together different conventions for framing violence as legitimate or illegitimate, honourable or dishonourable.

Although Valance's death becomes the basis of Ranse's political career, our view of Ranse is not significantly undermined by the revelation. Rather, it is Tom, and the authentic Western-ness that he seemed to represent, that suffers the most damage. Although Ranse benefits from the killing, even in its first version it is depicted as a lucky escape. Ranse shows considerable courage in confronting Valance, who can shoot with far greater speed and accuracy. Ranse is a man of virtue, but he has almost no power in the context of a gunfight. Valance, by contrast, is described by Gallagher as "pure unadulterated violence and chaos without hint of redeeming feature" (396). We initially experience Ranse's survival and Valance's death more in terms of relief than triumph, but we still admire Ranse's fortitude in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation.

Tom, however, is portrayed as both virtuous and strong. We know him to be capable of violence, but also expect him to have some control over it and to be accountable to standards of fairness and honour in its use. His reasons for back-shooting Valance are noble enough, but he still violates the code of the gunfight; his intervention is, he admits, "cold-blooded murder." Although the murder is consistent with the pragmatism that Tom displays throughout the movie, enough is invested in his status as at least a potential hero for it to still constitute a fall from grace. A key factor in this is the star persona of John Wayne. While this does not necessarily guarantee a heroic character, it suggests overtness and transparency of action. Deborah Thomas describes Wayne as "a star whose meaning is profoundly corporeal" (75). He expresses himself in terms of tangible physical substance; he embodies the values of his characters. These need not be sympathetic, but we expect them to be evident in his action and bearing. We do not expect to find a John Wayne character hiding in the shadows.

Retrospectively, Ranse comes closer to embodying the values of the Western gunfight. His chivalrous behaviour, gently mocked by Tom, is not ostentatious but it is obvious enough to be clear. He also insists with some vehemence that "nobody fights my battles." Yet, as Pye observes, "iconographically and in other ways, he remains emphatically of the East" (122). His "Western" values do not match the West that he inhabits, which

is more accurately represented by the night-time town, with its hidden dangers and thin veneer of civilisation. This contrast can be seen in the different ways that Ranse and Tom inhabit the night-time streets. Just before the first version of the gunfight, Ranse wanders the darkened streets of Shinbone, looking through the window of the newspaper office where Peabody (Edmond O'Brien) has been badly beaten. Ranse's separateness and isolation are emphasised – a combination of his white apron and some backlighting ensures that his outline remains distinct. Tom, however, repeatedly blends into the shadows. In the night-time scenes discussed above, his black clothing makes it harder to work out where he ends and the surrounding darkness begins. Tom is aligned with the night-time town from the first time we see him, transporting the battered Ranse into Shinbone at half past five in the morning. Tom's Western-ness and the town's reflect and reinforce one another – they share each other's darkness.

Tom is *Liberty Valance's* emblematic Westerner, and the night-time town is its emblematic West. That this is possible illustrates the extent to which the night-time town is an established part of the iconography of the post-war Western. As the three scenes I have discussed demonstrate, the conventions for portraying back-shooting and other forms of illegitimate violence are equally established within the genre. The setting of the night-time town, however, allows the genre's portrayal of dishonourable violence to be further explored and developed. Its particular inflection of the social and spatial dimensions of the Western make it an environment where concealed gunmen and complicated circumstances seem more typical. Acts of conventionally illegitimate violence are less likely to be understood in isolation – they are overtly connected to the surrounding environment, and by extension to the wider world of the film. This can bring honourable and dishonourable forms of violence closer together, as some of the conventions of the gunfight can be reinflected in a context more conducive to back-shooting.

We can see this relationship in the different ways in which the three shootings evoke the gunfight. In *Pursued*, what is intended as a face-off becomes something less conventionally justifiable; in *Rio Bravo*, the directness of the gunfight is portrayed as an inadequate response to complex circumstances; and in *Liberty Valance*, a gunfight and a back-shooting are directly juxtaposed. In different ways, these three scenes bring the conventions of the gunfight into dialogue with more dishonourable forms of violence, and in the process, suggest some of the limitations to the ways in which Westerns have portrayed violence as

meaningful or justified. Honour, fairness, individual distinction – all of these are in different ways undermined by the transposition of the conventions of the gunfight to the setting of the night-time town. By complicating some of these justifications, the three shootings demonstrate the capacity of violence to exceed or resist control, and to depart from the values used to frame it. Robert Warshow describes the relationship between violence and the Western hero in similar terms: “The Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity; this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justifications, he is a killer of men” (112).

Writing in 1954 about Westerns made between the late 1920s and the early 1950s, Warshow identifies a complexity in the genre’s representation of violence that is all too often only attributed to its later, “revisionist” incarnations. The close examination of tropes such as the night-time town can help us to acknowledge that the Western has been able to accommodate alternative perspectives on violence for considerably longer.

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Endnotes

1. For a more extended analysis of point of view in another scene in *Rio Bravo*, see Pye, “Movies and Point of View.”

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