

## **Fractured places and subjective spaces – Historical objectivity and individual agency in Robert Altman’s *McCabe and Mrs. Miller***

Jake Walters, Cornell University

Scholarly analysis of director Robert Altman’s *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) often centralises the film’s disruptive contrast between a passive male figure and a more assertive female. This dialectic jeopardises both the individual male dominance in the American Western historical mythos and the narrative of individual agency so central to popular cinematic conceptions of history. Yet fewer scholars have moved beyond narrative and dissected the formal cinematic mechanics of the film. Through its cluttered *mise-en-scène*, discontinuous editing and prowling, ever-moving camera that favours contradictory viewpoints over any one perspective, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* moves far beyond simply trading in one objective historical hero, John McCabe, for two, or replacing a male hero for a masculinised female hero (according to hegemonic notions of virile agency) who is thereby merely assimilated into the project of preserving traditional masculine historical narratives. Instead, *McCabe*’s filmic mechanics suggest a world devoid of not only individual heroic narratives but a history resistant to unqualified, complete and arguably objective narrative characterisation. In this sense, the film ultimately *does* dismantle McCabe’s agency as a narrative-ordering agent who wraps the past around his fingers, serving as history’s *de facto* locus of change and transition in the world. But the film attends to this process through a complicated technical and imaginative arsenal that does not merely render McCabe incompetent but deconstructs the very visual bedrock from which Hollywood cinema presumes easy access to the past and erects a coherent visual history that can be ordered by a character in the first place. In other words, rather than simply critiquing masculine protagonist characterisations, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* challenges masculine viewing practices of period-piece cinema that are rooted in filtering narrative histories through a series of clearly understood, easily visible set-up to pay-off progressions complicit in the ideological project of America’s national, capitalist and masculine Western mythology.

While Robert Self argues that *McCabe*’s chief innovation – narratively – is understanding Golden Age Hollywood Westerns not as history but as ‘historiography’, or as biased, partially fictive attempts to navigate history, I argue that *McCabe* is also aware of its own position within this historiography. In utilising cinematic mechanics that not only preclude McCabe from exercising agency in the narrative but preclude the audience from fully understanding the film environment, the film replaces an awareness of historical objectivity with an audi-

ence's engagement with how film, including *McCabe* itself, constructs subjective images that exist to be interrogated rather than assumed as masterful and complete, objective reclamations of a forgotten past. However, rather than a nihilistic descent into historical nothingness and endless reflexivity precluding any possibility of imaginative connection to the past, the film suggests in its very alterity the importance of depictions of the past that are incomplete and uncertain in meaning and thus still alive today for discussion and reinterpretation. As opposed to a historical counter-narrative – an alternative set of crystallised facts – *McCabe* encourages a contrary method of narrativising. It is a discourse with rather than a depiction of history.

### An Imperfect Vision, or Beyond Objectivity

On analysing the sequence where nominal protagonist John McCabe enters the saloon in the snow-covered Pacific-Northwest town of Presbyterian Church for the first time – right after arriving in town – we see how the film jeopardises traditional notions of dominant individual protagonists and cinematic visual clarity. McCabe nominally enters the town as a cowboy who initially seems to embody the Great Man Western archetype by individualistically materialising out of nowhere as a corporeal answer to the problems of the Western community. He seems primed to fulfill America's infatuation with the virility of the Liberal individual agent at the expense of a more fragmented vision of historical conflict and collectivised vision of historical solution. Yet instead of focusing on McCabe as he walks around the saloon, proposing what Kolker refers to as a 'positive sense of space transgressed' (Kolker 1988, 319), the camera produces disarray by rejecting a clear-eyed understanding of the saloon's geometric interior or McCabe's place in it.

Soon after McCabe enters the bar, a roughly twenty-second sequence begins with McCabe striding to the left and a person immediately passing in front of him, intruding on McCabe in the frame. The camera moves around McCabe so that he is now walking away from the camera toward the back of the frame, stopping to talk to another man while the camera frames them in a two-shot. While the conventional two-shot (both characters next to one another in the same frame) suggests togetherness and ease of view, Altman's two-shot here implies disharmony and confusion. McCabe's rear is on the right, while the man to the left of McCabe is facing forward towards the camera (they are facing in opposite directions so that we can only see the other man's face, while McCabe remains an enigma). Disregarding continuity editing, the camera then flips over 180 degrees to the opposite perspective: now, it depicts McCabe from the front at the left side of the screen while the other man, his back now to us, stands on the right, both shrouded in darkness. The dusky cinematography depicts the space as though through a fog – human faces are almost invisible – and the 180-

degree flip disrupts spatial continuity for the characters. McCabe, within seconds, has already been visually surpassed by another man, suffused in a darkness that infringes on his corporeal presence and flipped around within the space in a gesture of visual chaos and confusion. Kolker argues that McCabe's agency in the narrative is 'tenuous at best, fraudulent at worst' (Kolker 1988, 342), but his agency in controlling the film screen and thus the audience's perception is even more circumspect.

After he finishes speaking with the other man, McCabe walks off the screen to the left, while we track slightly right with the other man, following very briefly to the left as another man, the saloon keeper, moves left in the frame. Another cut shows McCabe similarly walking left out a door (to the outside world), followed by a separate shot of the saloon keeper following him to the left. The film then follows this with yet a third separate shot of a third man walking left in the frame. The camera thus tracks left through each of their movements without including any two of the men in one single shot to clarify their spatial relationships. Altman's tracking here establishes little legibility, coherence, or connection. Rather, it is an expression of disorder, cutting between characters with little sense of how they occupy space relative to one another. (The third man, neither McCabe nor the saloon keeper, is introduced spontaneously and without connection to the other two). Because the initial leftward track emerges from the remnants of an aborted rightward track, the camera is seemingly confused about which direction to explore rather than assertively stringing audiences along a pre-assumed cause-to-effect narrative to teleological completion. Because it moves around them disjointedly, the camera movement in *McCabe* abrogates rather than furnishes the individualistic drive to follow a virile character across space or to understand the links between the characters' causal agencies and their effects on the world.

The disharmony and confusion inherent to this shot structure stands in stark refutation of conventional Hollywood principle. Tracking motions traditionally serve to define contiguous space, to entrench continuity between characters by moving between them. They erect a comprehensible world necessary for the illusory reality that classical Hollywood cinema, particularly period-piece cinema, strives for. Within this contiguous space, Yvonne Tasker writes, many American action narratives employ long takes designed to display 'decisive action on the part of the (protagonists)' (Tasker 2016, 308) who inspect, intercept and overcome conflicts with dominance, diffusing chaos and reestablishing order in the space through physical action and movement. Coupling these displays of contiguous space with cause-effect editing that emphasises characters' actions and their consequences in that space, the result would be 'a unified plot ... in which characters' actions are clearly motivated and the causal chain of scenes made legible' (Grundmann et al 2016, 8), visually and stylistically preserving

‘the individualist logic of (Liberal) law (that) stipulates that individuals are practical actors, who effectively act on the world as producers of causes and consequences’ (Norrie 2014, 140).

Compared to that display of directorial virility to create a cohesive view of the past, *McCabe*’s ‘camera’, as Keyssar writes, ‘works from inside ... the saloon, (but) seems as unable as we are to find a focus for attention’ (Keyssar 1991, 179). Yet Keyssar, although noticing this formal reality, does not discern its implications. The refusal of the camera to stick with one character reflects not only McCabe’s submission to the chaos of the saloon. It also visualises the camera’s inability to reveal any complete ‘truths’ about the saloon as a space or to cohere around any narrative vision of this quasi-historical location. The chaos destabilises the supposed safety of McCabe’s entrance into the interior realm – the safety ostensibly defined by people’s development of domestic spaces. But, as I will explore, the disarray of the imagery similarly jeopardises the development of period-piece cinema to reclaim the past from the recesses of time. The motile, uncertain positioning of the camera disturbs McCabe’s physical movement across the screen and the movement of his identity from passive to active, narrative-binding figure, and dismantles the audience’s ideological movement into this space and the film’s movement into a definite, settled and inarguable past. In turn, it asks us to consider the past as an active, mutable reality rather than one sedimented, totalisable one.

In turn, Altman corroborates both the character’s tentative control of the frame and the audience’s tentative understanding of this historical narrative through the visible foregrounding of visual elements that block McCabe and other characters from view, sequestering people into the background of images. The aforementioned sequence of leftward tracking shots is disruptive in its edits, but the film compounds the disarray through the sheer anonymity of the characters behind an opaque rush of barely-recognisable objects that pass along the front of the screen. Beyond that, because the foregrounded objects are not on screen long enough to register as tangible constructions, they float by as enigmas rather than creations to focus on and diagnose. This disarray mirrors McCabe’s outsider status, but it is also reflective of an experiential chaos found in viewing a film that is a mediated representation of history. Right from the beginning, *McCabe* positions itself not as an indexical representation of the past that the camera easily accesses but as a fragmented, circumspect vision, an assumption to interrogate rather than an objective guarantee. McCabe’s own lack of actualisation, his failure to control the narrative and command the film space, can function as a mimetic response for both the film’s and the audience’s inability to entirely master or order history as well, to move from disorganised fragments of space and time to one linear fabric.

Furthermore, Altman marries his visual chaos to an aurally muddled, disjunctive sound mix that seems to overcome McCabe's voice in the frame, establishing a dense, overpowering morass of noises and voices that defy the singularity of McCabe's voice and the audience's ability to divine conversations within the frame. As McCabe walks toward the back of the saloon upon entering it, he runs into another person (this is when the camera flips 180 degrees) and mumbles 'Say, that's the backdoor ain't it' in a raspy tone almost indecipherable amidst the rampant clanking of glass and the hiss of lowly humming human voices dotting the aural landscape as well. The sheer dissonance of McCabe's near-silent muttering aurally diminishes his value in the film, depicting him as only tenuously capable of even communicating with another person. His individuality, rather than a symbol of power to assert dominance, alienates him, as though he is only speaking to himself.

The audio of the film also 'arouse(s) our distrust of the stability or possibility of relationships that we might otherwise assume to be natural or easily fabricated' (Keyssar 1991, 189), creating a collective world where the characters nonetheless defy genuine connection. In this case, however, while Keyssar writes on dubious relationships *between characters*, the audio and imagery also arouse distrust of the relationship between the film space and the camera, as well as between the camera and the audience. The camera seems not to be ordering a sensory experience toward finality but stumbling to cement any relationship to this sound-space. It suggests many conversations vying for attention rather than one conversation that controls the frame and confines it to a narrative focused on one individual. The audio thus reminds us that any singular focus on one accomplishing, frame-ordering character requires the elision of many other perspectives that constitute the polyphonic reality of history.

One can contrast *McCabe's* treatment of history and individualism, then, with a more classical treatment found, for instance, in John Ford's prototypical Western *Stagecoach* (1939): the camera vibrantly introduces protagonist John Wayne in a shock-cut that zooms directly in on his face backed by, and overtaking, an imposing Monument Valley monolith, a giant plateau as a totem to nature's might. However, because Wayne's body centers the frame and eventually blocks nature from view, the zoom erects Wayne and the individualist Western hero as the true imposing monolith. The film relegates nature, even nature as voluminous as Monument Valley, to subservient background status behind Wayne's titanic individualism. Furthermore, the zoom suggests clarity of historical vision, a temporal process from wide-shot to close-up that foregrounds the process of focusing in on a directed focal point. The sense is that the camera knows which version of history it is telling, that the film is closing in on what it knows to be important with unwavering assurance that leaves no room for digression on the camera's part.

Contrarily, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* actively retorts by zooming in on objects outside of McCabe's presence during moments of ostensible action on his part. Later in the film, during a sexual tryst between McCabe and Mrs. Miller, the camera denies McCabe's sexual potency; the film zooms not on him but on a close-up of money that McCabe had left on a bedpost. Not only does this relegate the idea of 'character' to secondary status, in diametric opposition to *Stagecoach*, but it rejects the individualist moorings of those norms. (The money is a harbinger of McCabe's bullish capitalistic individualism and disconnect from larger society that will ultimately fell him). Even this close-up is a relative exception though. Typically, the film rejects close-ups altogether, preferring wide shots where the camera scours the landscape without clear focus, refusing to direct our attention toward 'important'/'central' images. (In contrast, when the film does rely on close-ups on people, it often jumps to them without any establishing shots to situate the characters within the film's geographical (dis)continuity). The film does not merely invert its gender dynamics by denouncing McCabe's sexual conquest. Rather, it engages in a much more radical upending of the perceptual mechanisms by which cinema foregrounds the individual agency of the classical hero and the certainty of this individualist perspective as valid. But Altman's film, stylistically, is not exclusively a critique of the valiant individual Great Man historical narrative. It is a critique of the film and film director that proposes to resurrect history for audiences to see in all its objective glory, films which propose themselves and their directors, like their protagonists, as great narrative organisers, dominators of narrative. Historiography, here, is not an all-access pass to the past but an active process of discovery and provisional assumption, an attempt to construct a narrative out of fragments that do not inherently cohere into a homogenous solution. In contrast to many period-piece films which propose almost omniscient access to their narrative world, *McCabe's* venture into the past is an imperfect journey.

### An Uncertain Aesthetic, An Aesthetic of Uncertainty

However, Altman's film does not simply dissociate from traditional notions of visual and aural clarity to reject McCabe's supremacy and tackle individualistic historical storytelling with it. Indeed, the film's most subversive moments find Altman nominally conforming to more traditional Western individualist iconography and stabilising his world in a simulacrum of objectivity, such as when the film's opening saloon scene eventually finds balance and harmony around McCabe as he indulges in a poker game. However, while the film does coalesce around McCabe, it also self-consciously constructs his virile identity as a dubious construct. After the parade of leftward tracking shots and discontinuous editing arrangements that open the saloon sequence, we finally settle on the saloon keeper watching McCabe through a door (McCabe has walked outside the saloon temporarily), after which we cut to three men discussing McCabe. Following this, we see another shot of McCabe outside of the saloon from the saloon

keeper's perspective, with McCabe glimpsed through a frame-like window (in the door) and thus self-consciously rendered as an 'image' – much like an artificial filmic character glimpsed on a film screen – rather than a person. McCabe is treated as an object of other characters' gazes/discussions, pronouncing them as the subjects rather than McCabe himself, who is partially abstracted through the flesh-warping texture of the translucent door. As Self notes, the film 'displays a variety of contradictory subject positions', which allows the film to problematise clarity of historical vision (Self 2007, 140). But beyond what Self notes, the film's framing of subjective perspectives allows the film to explore McCabe as others hazard guesses about him. He becomes an archetype the film reflexively investigates, a subjective construct defined not by his own actions but by others' perceptions, a constructed figure whose objectivity is dubious.

When McCabe reenters the saloon, the camera zooms out from him (and the door) to the opposite end of the main room behind a table while McCabe walks to this opposite end, traversing the frame toward the camera. In doing so, he transgresses the visual discontinuity as he arrives all the way at the table and thus asserts a certain dominance over the space. For the first time, someone has capably overcome the chaotic saloon, revealing McCabe as a figure of jurisdiction over the space. McCabe sits at a table to initiate a poker game, the camera lingering as the other humans in the saloon flock to observe him, surrounding him. Ostensibly, this is a gesture of power on McCabe's part as he literally coalesces the wandering chaos of the saloon into a loosely organised circle. Yet when the others arrive at McCabe's location, they jeopardise his supremacy, engulfing him, with one man taking McCabe's presumed spot in the centre of the frame as McCabe disappears amidst the commotion. The lone Great Man wanderer who breathes order into a chaotic world and magnetises people to his presence is dwarfed by the sudden awareness of the masses around him.

Visually, the film follows up on this strain of denying McCabe the satisfaction of his supposed hero-dom by refusing to expose the poker game. Although the game continues for several minutes, the camera quickly returns to its prior activity of prowling around the saloon, following other characters as they discuss McCabe's image without ever visually showcasing McCabe's gambling prowess. In fact, the one shot of McCabe handling cards on the card table we are given is almost entirely blocked by McCabe's coated arm in the frame, a tacit suggestion that McCabe's oafish reality obstructs us from viewing his possibly fraudulent skill as a card player, that his skill may be a fictional construct that the film cannot truly visualise. The film will continue to otherwise demonstrate McCabe's inability to practice business: he cannot even count money, and the real mastermind of the business he develops will be Mrs Miller. Yet this early scene already jeopardises the Liberal individual merit ideal of the American success story that heroes achieve space-ordering, narrative-controlling status by their own skill.

Altman here feints toward the classical Hollywood style of narrative order only to question it, visualising the film's themes of the slippery fragility of easily-accessible historical narrative and individual agency stylistically. Indeed, that we can only understand the film through its visual style is a reflection of the importance of looking at historical images and artefacts to understand them before one layers a narrative above them. Reducing the poker scene summary description to 'McCabe leads the saloon in poker' favours conforming to assumptions of individual agency over actually reading the image-to-image flow we are given, a flow that does not corroborate the assumption that the saloon is finally coherent or even limited to McCabe's actions. If the film's style floats uneasily around the loose threads of narrative rather than tightly stitching the film together, this digression is itself cotangent to the film's atmosphere of history that cannot be handed over to us by one individualised protagonist.

Expressing the saloon less as a 'real' space and more as a dreamlike haze, the reddened/amber hues of the lighting during the game also speak to cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond's contribution to the mythic nature of the scene and the film's interrogation of its own objectivity. When the bartender eventually lights the lantern above the gambling table, the men, huddled together, are cast in an ochre glow that will, as the film continues, permeate the inside regions of Presbyterian Church. Although the warm hues are more pronounced later on, the warmth suggested by the lighting from the beginning 'proves to be false, fooling the viewer as it has the characters of the fiction' (Kolker 1991, 327). Kolker's argument is narrative-based, namely that the warmth never helps the characters but instead only fools them into believing they have truly escaped the difficulties of the outside world. (The red lighting is almost exclusively connected to the rampant opium use in the saloon, and thus the opiated American Dreams of success that the characters imagine but cannot achieve). But the lighting's fragility is visually inscribed for the audience as well. Constantly undercut by harsh cuts to cold blue exteriors threatening to disrupt the warmth, the warm hue exists as a frail counterpoint to an outside world it cannot visually defeat. Altman undermines the colour as a specious, fictional sense of warmth designed to paint an image of technologically-produced safety, an image that nonetheless cannot overcome the bitter reality of the outside world or the chaos of the saloon that seems no less difficult to settle into. In this sense, Altman's *mise-en-scène* dismantles traditional binaries between nature and civilisation and, more importantly, American accomplishment and bitter failure.

Furthermore, the soft, diffuse lighting that cushions the characters' faces, casting them in a glow that renders the borders of their faces difficult to discern, partially threatens the characters' tactility as people. The detail on their faces partially evaporates specifically because the supposedly comforting lighting almost diffuses their facial features, giving them a translucent, ghostly quality of impermanence, as though the film's grasp on them might fade into non-existence. Reading their emotions from their often non-discernible facial features,

deducing the internal psychologies of characters from scraps of external information, becomes an arduous project. Many historically-set films from Hollywood use a pristine visual stock and high-key lighting (which artificially overlights the set) to enforce the tactile presence of historical reality before us, and to allow us to easily treat characters as fully available objective presences. In this sense, if the warmth of the saloon reflects any characters' mental fictions or dreams of opportunity, the lighting also plays into an audience's dream of illuminating the past to reclaim history, and typically individual-centric history, for the present.

### Meeting *McCabe*, Meeting *McCabe*

An analysis of the 'saloon sequence' is even more meaningful in light of the previous sequence, in which McCabe rides into town on his horse before walking into the saloon. Nominally, the saloon is designed to provide respite from the cold. Yet many of the techniques used to construct the space within the saloon are similar to Altman's vision of the outside world. This connects the two spaces rather than fully contrasting them (which the aforementioned colours do), adding further credence to the argument that the saloon is not a space for the characters or the audience to settle into a mode of easy, unobstructed existence or viewership. Even before McCabe hastily stumbles into the heart of Presbyterian Church, then, Altman's confrontational film has already seeded both of the strains discussed in this essay: a sabotage of McCabe as a representation of the virile male archetype and an expression of the film's reflexivity as something related to but not one with history and which ripostes the assumption that completing or progressing through a narrative is the only or ideal way to confront history in cinema. *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* begins with a shadowy, fur-covered McCabe arriving in the town, his rightward trek in during the opening credits ostensibly invoking, as many Westerns have, his superiority over nature. A closer look however reveals the subversive way that the camera focuses not on him but on the trees in the foreground, blocking our view of the man as nature overtakes him in the image (as non-natural elements do in the saloon). More trenchantly, when the title of the film itself appears on the screen, it too arrives as a wind-carried weapon crawling left to pass through McCabe himself, drawing overt attention to itself by puncturing the main character. Even before the opening credits have ended, then, the film entangles its own reality in the non-diegetic or the openly fictive elements of the film such as the credits. By mixing the two or addressing the reliance of the world on these more openly fictive elements, the opening of Altman's film undercuts not only McCabe but the film's own reality. It remarks on the film's own existence within the very fictional Western cinematic imagination the film also critiques.

The sequence where McCabe rides into town before entering the saloon is shot through with similar subversive gestures that complicate ideas of objectivity and subjectivity as well as McCabe's control of the film frame. Yet in lieu of a full walk-through, an emphasis on one shot is most telling for how it problematises our ability to differentiate objective and subjective viewpoints and thus safely determine that any moment is meant as an objective, omniscient and thus completely truthful vision of the past. At one point, while McCabe is riding in town on his way to the saloon, the film cuts to a leftward track, the camera in front of and moving with a woman who is also walking to the left and foregrounded in the frame (the camera is moving as she moves, following her to the left). She then looks off to the left in the distance (where McCabe is) as the camera continues to track left past her (she is no longer in the frame) into a viewpoint of McCabe in town. The viewpoint is roughly approximate to her perspective (the camera looks where she was looking) but not fully complicit with it (the camera moves leftward beyond where she was physically positioned in the film). The film seems to bleed her subjective perspective into what is typically assumed to be the omniscient perspective of a film camera, wherein the camera has easy access to all information in the film and can suture scenes to give the audience information as it chooses. In other words, in many films where the camera hides information from the audience, it is only to generate suspense for the eventual reveal, preserving the assumption that the camera can access the entire world. However, the shot of the woman/camera looking at McCabe calls the camera's objectivity into question in a more fundamental way without allowing us to completely mitigate the subversive gesture by writing it off as emblematic of merely this one woman's perspective.

In many films, the moments of explicit camera subjectivity (often shaken camera movements as if made by a character) are meant to contrast with the objective viewpoint of the rest of the film. They express what certain characters in their limited or fractured subjectivity do not know, or what they distort in their minds. In turn, this allows the film to preserve the assumption that the rest of the film is omniscient, revealing the 'true' (in this case, 'historical') version of events through the stylistic contrast between the subjective and objective moments. (It also suggests that the film can safely invade the characters' minds, as though it has complete access to visualising the way they see and think). But because the camera moves away from the woman in *McCabe*, as well as how it moves around the space of the film elsewhere without any grounding in a character's field of view, the perspective distinctly suggests something intrinsically subjective about the *camera's* perspective, its *de facto* mode of viewing. It is not 'withholding' historical truth to surprise us, dealing in absence only to reaffirm a heroic ability of the film to return us to concrete knowledge and historical guarantees. Instead, *McCabe's* viewpoint is fundamentally debatable.

In addition, it is also important that *McCabe's* disruption of classical individualist narrative tropes and objective historical style are not merely present at

the micro intra-scene level but across the wider fabric of the narrative itself. McCabe ultimately actualises his fictive heroic image in an exclusively accidental and disinterested manner, leading to his death in the snow while the town, pointedly, is putting out a fire that his conflict has accidentally caused. A loose conflict with Big Business capitalism structures the story; McCabe wants to control his saloon for himself, while a larger mining company wants to purchase it from him. But the film largely digresses from that narrative, expending its energy depicting an exhausted, quotidian locale that is too complicated to be confined to a build-up of one narrative conflict. After the film rushes to a final shootout between McCabe and three mercenaries, one of McCabe's antagonists shoots a lantern in the (hollow) church that gives the town its name, setting it on fire. McCabe's 'gunfighter' status never actualises in a way he can benefit from. When he truly becomes a gunfighter, shots of him in action (wide-shots, nearly-silent in nature, doused in cold blues and white snow suggesting an engulfing white limbo devouring him) are cut against the townspeople, in harmony for the first time, putting out the fire, undercutting his importance and virility. As McCabe's actions happened to set off the fire, thus prompting the town's actions, McCabe fulfills an almost accidental heroic role tangentially related to his nonexistent desire to 'save the town'. (His shootout is a personal conflict for his business, and any desire on his part to help the town is tertiary). The cacophonous sound and motion for the shots of the town acting to put out the fire invoke agency in community and collectivity as opposed to individualism.

More importantly, *McCabe* dissents from the way that the classical Liberal hero's journey structures social conflict and physical space as a theatrical backdrop for individual 'personal growth ... (and) new phases in life that draw blueprints of identity and test them in the field of action' (Wulff 2016, 238). In *McCabe*'s conclusion, Altman does not treat space and other characters as spectators or props for a theatre of individual action. McCabe and the three men do not square off in the classical fashion in a duel linearised in the middle of a carefully symmetrical, ordered main street designed for the protagonist to bind the town's people through spectating McCabe's agency. The town does not 'watch' McCabe assert himself over these three enforcers as the center of the narrative. Contrarily, his shootout plays out on the outskirts of town with no audience while the town itself is set in motion to collectivise and put out the fire, among the only moments of decisive action on anyone's part in the film. While the typical Western hero narrative suggests throngs of onlookers for the hero's ultimate triumph, *McCabe* frustrates heroic readings by unfurling this narrative out on the sidelines.

### Counter-Narratives, or Counter-Narrativising?

Often, films which subvert expectations about protagonists do so exclusively by either narratively characterising the supposed protagonist as immoral, as in *The*

*Wild Bunch*, or incompetent, faltering against the weight of the world (the latter would be the common, but more superficial, reading of *McCabe*). Merely doing so challenges or disrupts the assumption that individuals are, respectively, moral people or physical agents. But it fails to dissect the Enlightenment-inflected notion that the individual is the de facto locus through which people ought to view the world or the past in the first place. The film world remains meaningful only insofar as it can hurt our presumed protagonist. The camera is still ‘focused’ on an individual, albeit an incompetent or immoral one. In the case of a passive individual, period piece cinema often still defines itself – defines value – in relation to a trajectory from passivity to agency; it simply happens to be a trajectory this particular protagonist has failed to actualise. This paints individuals as failures within a rhetoric of goal-oriented agency rather than problematising that rhetoric altogether. This may be a different narrative, but not a different mode of constructing narrative overall, not a shift away from cause-and-effect logic. However, as *McCabe*’s narrative progresses, it will remain resistant to the audience’s attempts to scour the bowels of history and limit the past to any individual. McCabe’s presence in the film not only challenges his diegetic agency but his ability to control the world, even passively, simply via his status as individual. Just as it is not complicit in the classical Western narrative of vertically following one character’s phallic trajectory from conflict to resolution, set-up to pay-off, *McCabe* does not merely invert this dynamic by watching the character fail. Instead, the film partially unsettles itself from the individualistic dynamic altogether, excavating other corners of the *mise-en-scène*.

The other films that only emasculate their protagonists are limited in that they fail to unshackle themselves from a historical form that Landy – advancing Nietzsche – refers to as ‘melodramatic’: ‘the melodramatic, indeed operatic, qualities of monumental history and its reliance on metalepsis, that is, the explanation of causes by their effects’ (Landy 1996, 18). Explaining ‘causes by their effects’ refers to the deep-dive historical impulse to resurrect the past melodramatically, building up a heightened and direct chain of emotions and events, tracing the present backward through a singular causal chain, erecting one vertical ‘monument’ of history to completion. That we can trace this chain feeds into its melodramatic quality, preying primarily on an emotional nostalgia that treats the past as ‘worthy of imitation, as imitable and possible for a second time’ (Nietzsche 1874, 70), or rather, as a reclaimable object we can relive by understanding it in total. The agency of the protagonist to create history and the agency of the film to relive it for us, to recreate it by depicting it with uncritical pseudo-objectivity, become fundamentally entangled. This ‘melodramatic’ history favours emotional ‘monumentalism’ – to cite Landy – and stylistic ‘monumentalism’, or a stylistic coherence that emphasises the past as a hyper-present monument in front of us, grandly restaged by the film. These films engorge the past with actions and reactions that coalesce into a singular, tendentious whole,

a piston of a film that both shoots its narrative forward and the audience backward into the past, and thus the past into the present. It treats cinema as a necromancer, summoning a past kicking and thrumming with the lifeblood of activity that shuttles us into the throngs of living and emotionally exciting history that we feel as an active, monumental presence.

In contrast, *McCabe* operates horizontally rather than vertically, spilling out into the periphery as the camera dawdles, looking at other people and seeming minutiae, sights and sounds that do not conform to the melodramatic impulse to constantly build up one linear, monumental trajectory either in the historical sense or in the narrative sense. This horizontality does not galvanise itself in the aesthetic certainty of cause-effect editing that ensures every corner of the film links to one another or builds up to anything. If many period piece films treat the past as one totalisable presence – a concrete slab of easily coherent, and thus more easily transgressable and masterable, history we can snatch up and use – *McCabe* understands the past as a sketchy, hazy hash-work that scurries away from us and demands polyvalent interpretation. What might be distractions from a protagonist in another film become, instead, ways of emancipating historical cinema from the limits of that very individualistic perspective.

Yet the film exceeds merely trading in this collective heroism for McCabe's individual heroism. It is important to remind how tentative even the town's final actions are. The fire comes and goes within minutes, only for the film to return to a lonely crawl of a zoom toward a now-dead McCabe in the snow, cut against a zoom inward to Mrs Miller inside, opiated, staring at a tiny vase as she lies in semi-cadaverous inactivity. Typically, films put a period on themselves, emphasising resolution, with their final shot, in this case a close-up from Mrs Miller's perspective of the vase itself. Yet the close-up abstracts the vase as she turns it in her hand and it mutates into a collage of color untraceable as a tangible object. The film concludes not with a feint toward solution but a gesture of openness. It marshals the temporal reconfiguration of editing not to clarify the narrative through cause-effect but to throw the audience into perceptual attentiveness by redrawing the meaning of images. Taking us back to Landy and Nietzsche, another form of 'monumental' history they signal is 'antiquarian history', which is monumental in that it establishes such an adoration of, even fetish for, the past that 'it knows only how to preserve life, not how to engender it' (Nietzsche 1874, 75). This static past is monumentally moored in immutable interpretations, a style of monolithic viewership – imposing one unalterable perspective onto the past – that *McCabe*'s final image ripostes.

As such, the final image is also a mimetic for the entire project of the film: rather than reflecting history, *McCabe* refracts it. Rather than producing a historical counter-narrative, it engages in a wholly different process of narrativisation. As opposed to judging the merit of a historical film by its ability to replace

historical absence with historical presence and certainty, *McCabe* presents history's impermanence, its semi-presence in the present. But *McCabe* uses this understanding not only to demarcate the boundaries of its relationship to the past but to see how viewers and films dialectically refresh the past by reinterpreting it. Rather than a negative statement about the failure of film to represent the past adequately, it questions what 'adequate' representation is, inviting a positive statement to the value of uncertainty, skepticism and productive confusion that allows for multiple interpretative discourses, a statement about what film can achieve when narrative is slackened, when the sanctity of the stable trajectory is erased. In this sense, re-entrenching communal action over individual agency *is* one such corrective action against the classical Liberal individualist historical narrative. But even concluding the film as a statement to communal over individual heroism would unduly force an arc of narrative agency (and a logic of 'heroism' still rooted in characters who order their narratives and master their film spaces) onto a filmic world that resists such definition. Altman's film defies not only the completion narrative of America but the agency-thrust of the scholar who would attempt to solve the film.

The value of irresolution is often overlooked, which might lead to reading *McCabe* not only as a narrative about McCabe's failure but as a failed narrative, a failure to narrativise the past cohesively. If the film simply noted that its grasp on its narrative had faltered – that it had failed to achieve an understanding of this past, just as McCabe had faltered in relating to his world – this would only suggest that the characters' and viewers' narrativising goals had not been achieved, not that value could potentially be defined in other terms. But *McCabe* asks the audience to explore other means of understanding a film or viewing the past beyond successfully 'completing' the narrative trajectory with their minds. The failure of the narrative to actualise can reconfigure the receptive viewer not to think of images exclusively in narrative terms, as a futures market where the audience speculates not on the visual in the present but on what it might be worth in the narrative future. Rather than thinking of *McCabe* as a failure to narrativise – as a film shot-through with aporia, as a requiem for historical ease-of-access – we might ask what we can reclaim from an indeterminate filmic view of the past rather than one which matches its own virility to enact the past with its characters' ability to initiate it. One might say that the death of a coherent lexicon for perceiving a narrative is constituent to reconsidering the relationship of the viewer to the past not as an attempt to construct one objective master-narrative ordered completely but to consider possibilities, potentialities and their own provisional relationship to the past. The final shot of the vase may not be nihilistically empty so much as unfinished, opening up the film to be read outside of the limited images it can show us.

### Adorno, Horkheimer and the Problem of Assimilation in Period Piece Cinema

Implications for further research are numerous, many of them comparative. Most obviously, *McCabe* begs further comparison to traditional revisionist history or progressive-minded 'social issue' films that do not challenge regulations of editing, framing and perspective like *McCabe* and thus may actually inscribe the very hegemonic order they purport to defy. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer are useful figures in this context. Although they do not refer explicitly to revisionist or progressively-minded 'history' films, their writing implicitly suggests the paradox of the critical social history film, or any progressively-minded social film: namely that it is often only understood by subsisting underneath the conservative formal rhetoric of mainstream cinema. A film like *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, for example, fights inequality through an individualistic protagonist framed in center-frame (and often in lionising low-angles) and, more importantly, edited so that his causal agency structures the film narratively and visually. Such gestures at the narrative and formal level paradoxically assert an inequality of their own variety, that of Mr Smith's virility to rise above the populist rhetoric he represents. The film foregrounds his agency to individually control a film where others cannot. My analysis, however, extends beyond merely applying a critical theory reading of individualism to film narrative. Instead, I explore the extent to which Hollywood cinema intrinsically reifies individualistic social ideologies through its very formal mechanisms. In many films that adopt the classical Hollywood style, entrepreneurial individualism through individual agency is not only the center of the story but the visual film world. Or, as Horkheimer and Adorno note, 'biographies and other fables stitch together the scraps of nonsense ('nonsense' defined as rebellious, anti-rationalist cinematic anarchy) into a feeble-minded plot' or a simulacrum of sense and complete understanding (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, 114). Although perhaps blunt in their phrasing, the emphasis on *stitch* implicitly emphasises the continuity editing designed to bind the world along a linear path. 'Biography', meanwhile, implies that the stitching is rooted around a vision of history as a theater of the individual.

Mr Smith is a non-elite Everyman incorporated into the rhetoric of individual success, possibly to the effect of keeping that individualistic rhetoric alive and only slightly mediated by the need to incorporate less dominant voices to preserve individualism as something which can, in hegemonically useful cases, apply rhetorically to people of all backgrounds. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the purpose of culture and popular art here is 'to open that industry to clever (individual) people (in an) otherwise regulated market' (ibid 104), pacifying rebellion in both the world and in cinema by channeling it toward relatively stable pathways for action against inequality. This is also the pathway of the Western film or the history film that *merely* provides a black hero (2012's *Django Unchained*) or a female hero (2016's *Jane Got a Gun*) or even a veritable Rainbow

Coalition (2016's *The Magnificent Seven*). These films assimilate new voices into the governing individualistic logic of historical cinema and Western society to paradoxically galvanise that logic in a rhetoric of pseudo-diversity. The skin colour or gender of the individual may have shifted, but this can be assimilatory more than artistically emancipatory. It does not reject the stylistic logic of cause-effect editing and other mechanisms which underscore the central logic of the valorised individual agent, a logic that has devalued men who are not white, and women, throughout history. Providing the contained diversity central to the Liberal market construction of democracy, the protagonists of these films fight against the classical Western archetypes only by becoming them, paradoxically engaging in mortal combat with themselves. Altman may be suggesting this very fact by dressing McCabe in suits, beacons of his desire for cultural capital, primarily worn by his Big Business opponents elsewhere in the film. If McCabe has any desire to position himself as a champion of the common man and opponent of Big Business, his attire suggests instead his desire to become his enemies.

Horkheimer and Adorno also write that 'the great artists were never those who adopted style in its least fractured, most perfect form' (ibid, 103) but those who splintered, punctured, even ruptured their style so that the perceived style of the art was never treated as natural or innate. If incorporating new voices into the same cause-effect, trajectory-and-goal-oriented style preserves the style as democratic and natural, then, contrarily, formal and stylistic breakage can be useful to reveal the style as a construct that can be falsified. In contrast to most progressive films, *McCabe* charts the latter path. If 'the culture industry has ... impos(ed) its own perfection' (ibid 1944, 108) according to rules of precise cause-effect filmmaking that underwrite rationalist narratives and trace a stylistically harmonious narrative visualising a perfectly-rendered history, *McCabe* is distinctly imperfect according to these standards. The film does not simply incorporate a female agent (Mrs Miller) into the same clean structures of individualist hero-dom. Because it deconstructs hegemonic and normative film styles, and thus acknowledges that they are constructed in the first place, *McCabe* partially defies the hegemonic absorption referred to by Todd Gitlin (advancing Horkheimer and Adorno). For Gitlin, 'consent is managed by absorption as well as by exclusion. The hegemonic ideology changes in order to remain hegemonic' (Gitlin 1979, 263).

But *McCabe* is less easily absorbable into the mainstream as a cinema with any kind of individual hero (of any race or gender) or as any objective vision of history at all. Whereas a film like *Django Unchained* absorbs a black cowboy and slavery into the dominant individual cowboy myth with relative ease, *McCabe*'s dissent is inextricably intertwined with the ability to parse its world at all. It dissents from the perceptual rules by which Hollywood cinema structures filmic individualist history narratives, and thus it boasts implications for

questions of dissent outside of cinema. If indeed Westerns are ‘national narratives (which) rehearse the major desires and traumas, anxieties and ideals of cultural identity’ (Self 2007, 6), then merely disabling the dominant individualist narratives of the American West is not enough for Altman. In this spirit, *McCabe* does not trumpet its own foreknowledge as a shepherd driving the audience toward a new historical counter-narrative. Rather, it explores the temporal process of constituting a historical whole in the first place. Not merely a critique of cinematic objective access, though, Altman’s film is also a statement to what cinema may achieve in lieu of objectivity. It replaces a fixed vision of history not with an alternative, equally fixed vision of history but an understanding that every popular work of history is part of an active discourse with the past rather than a portal to it.

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