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Noir Westerns after World War II

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Noir Westerns after World War II

Kenneth E. Hall & Christian Krug

1. Heads or Tails in *No Country for Old Men* (2007)

Towards the end of Ethan and Joel Coen's Academy-Award winning *No Country for Old Men* (2007), Carla Jean Moss's life depends on the toss of a coin. Heads or tails will decide whether she lives or dies. Her husband Llewelyn (Josh Brolin) has already been killed, and now one of the most memorable villains of contemporary cinema, Anton Chigurh, pays a visit to his wife to determine her fate. After he flips the coin, Chigurh presses her repeatedly to "Call it". Carla Jean Moss first refuses: "The coin don't have no say. It's just you"; meaning, if you do kill me, *you* will have to take responsibility, not the coin – but the sentence can be taken in a literal sense. In this movie, Chigurh is the coin, in an ontological sense; he functions as inscrutable fate. Chigurh hints at this meaning himself when he replies, "I got here the same way the coin did."

In the figure of Anton Chigurh, the Coens' neo-noir post-Western (or is it a post-noir neo-Western?) revisits and condenses several of the main questions that were also at the centre of 1940s and 1950s noir-Westerns. What is the function of destiny and fate, but also of free choice, in the noir Westerns after World War II? How do characters deal with the various social, familial, psychological *Zwänge* they encounter? In this essay we will analyse the filmic representations of choice, destiny and fate in Noir Westerns after WWII. The motif of the coin toss itself occurs in one of the central movies, Raoul Walsh's *Pursued* (1947), analysed below.

The Coen movie is a good introduction to such questions since its characters are composites of stripped-down archetypes first of Western fiction and, second, of film noir. On one level, the main characters of the film are recognizable formula types, "the local lawman who maintains order and dispenses justice; the opportunistic, but basically solid citizen who succumbs to temptation; and the outlaw who lives by the gun"⁴³ – formula characters who have been stripped of their aplomb (Sheriff Ed Bell

⁴³ Tyrer and Nickell, 86.

[Tommy Lee Jones], who talks about justice but is very careful about pursuing it too closely), appeal (the slightly ridiculous bounty hunter Carson Wells [Woody Harrelson]), and apparel (Anton Chigurh [Javier Bardem], who wears no recognizable Western clothing in a movie that uses such intertextual references very carefully). *No Country for Old Men*, both the novel and the movie, are an exercise in postmodern *bricolage*: a clever, self-conscious exercise in generic and stylistic deconstruction and reconstruction.

On another level, what the characters signify is much harder to analyse – first (and this is true to noir style), because they do not say much, and second, because much of what they signify seems to depend on the characters' limited self-representation, especially on what they do say. The local Sheriff, Ed Bell, for example, serves as a focalizer of the movie, albeit a somewhat unreliable one. He is part of the myth-making process; from his first voice-over narration he inscribes himself into a tradition of the Old West. If one considers his actions rather than his words, however, a more nuanced picture emerges. Bell is precisely not a *High Noon* Marshal who confronts head-on the Frank Millers of his world. In fact, as Jim Welsh has argued, this Sheriff almost seems to avoid any confrontation with the people he is meant to pursue.⁴⁴

Anton Chigurh also casts himself in a particular narrative mould and encourages specific interpretations of himself. As a film character (if 'character' is the *mot juste* to describe Javier Bardem's Academy-Award-winning role), Chigurh lovingly evokes such psychotic Western villains as Jack Wilson (Jack Palance, *Shane*, 1953), or noir villains such as Tommy Udo (Richard Widmark, *Kiss of Death*, 1947). In his words and his actions within the movie's diegesis, however, he fashions himself as a type drawn from a much older tradition: the role of Fate in mediaeval morality plays. Such a self-fashioning is consistent with Cormac McCarthy's novel (2005). Here, Chigurh is even more clearly developed as a self-professed instrument of unrelenting fate. He claims that for him, the coin toss does not 'determine' someone's fate – it is rather an indicator (or, in semiotic terms, an 'index') of choices already made:

I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to

⁴⁴ Welsh, 75.

this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased. I had no belief in your ability to move a coin to your bidding. How could you? A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning. (Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, 259)

Soon after he gives this explanation, Chigurh's fate does change abruptly when, seemingly out of nowhere, he is hit by a car – a scene that also features prominently in the movie. That incident is perhaps an ironic reminder that Chigurh's self-representations are to be treated with caution: they are the projections of a single character and do not necessarily represent the symbolic and ideological meaning-structure of novel or movie as a whole. What Chigurh's character consistently tries to construct around him is nothing less than a coherent world view, a symbolic form that is radically different from more modern (and postmodern) epistemologies. This world view, Chigurh intimates again and again, is governed by a logic that is still based on analogy rather than difference. Chigurh claims that everything is interconnected through analogy and sameness; a coin toss in this sense can indubitably *reveal* all former choices of a person's life. Consequently, in McCarthy's novel Clara Jean's ending is rendered completely unambiguous:

She looked at him a final time. You dont have to, she said. You dont. You dont.

He shook his head. You're asking that I make myself vulnerable and that I can never do. I have only one way to live. It doesn't allow for special cases. A coin toss perhaps. In this case to small purpose. Most people dont believe that there can be such a person. You see what a problem that must be for them. How to prevail over that which you refuse to acknowledge the existence of. Do you understand? When I came into your life your life was over. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That there could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world. Do you see?

Yes, she said sobbing. I do. I truly do.

Good, he said. That's good. Then he shot her. (259–60)

There is a cruel inevitability to this ending which, nevertheless, must not be mistaken for determinism. Choice and free will operate in

Chigurh's world, but they are located mostly in the past. His focus is on the choices people had, rather than on the ones they still have. The present is simply the sum total of choices already made, and a road taken for him has always already been travelled for a long time. No *Country for Old Men* as a whole is concerned with making the past meaningful for the present, and Chigurh simply pushes this strategy to an extreme with his peculiar understanding of the coin toss. As we will see now in our discussion of Raoul Walsh's stark psychological Western *Pursued*, the concept of a (in this case a traumatic) past bearing relentlessly on the present is a key feature of noir Westerns after WWII.

2. Remembering Is Sometimes Present Tense: *Pursued* (1947)

Pursued often appears in criticism as an exemplar of a limited species: the noir Western. The classification is correct not only in terms of the film itself but also because of the film's horizontal connections to non-Western noir films of the period.⁴⁵ Walsh's film presents familial conflict and trauma in a manner that parallels such works in the noir orbit as Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) or John Brahm's *The Locket* (1946). *Pursued* also features a conflicted, potentially violent antihero, played by Robert Mitchum – an actor whose mere presence during that period of his career conjures up noir connections – including such iconic examples of noir as *On Dangerous Ground* (Nicholas Ray, 1952), *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (Otto Preminger, 1950). (The presence of Teresa Wright, Judith Evans, and Dean Jagger, all actors associated with noir and Gothic suspense, adds to the intertextual web.) As in Wise's *Blood on the Moon*, the Mitchum character is concerned with his past – but unlike Jim in the Wise film, Jeb Rand is not conflicted about the choice of paths to take based on his knowledge of his own past. Rather like Peck in *Spellbound*, Jeb suffers from memory loss due to trauma and needs to recapture his past in order to understand his role in the present. *Pursued* also features an evil fatherfigure – a “père fatal” (Covey) –, a type of character not uncommon both in Westerns and in film noir, as well as

⁴⁵ Coyne observes that “*Pursued* owed as much to the concurrently popular genre of film noir as to the Western, and similar hybrids followed in its wake – André de Toth's *Ramrod* (1947), Robert Wise's *Blood on the Moon* (1948), Raoul Walsh's *Colorado Territory* (1949) and, again from Niven Busch, Anthony Mann's *The Furies* (1950)” (Coyne 48).

an important narrative thread concerning murky or clandestine sexual motivation.⁴⁶ The film also ties in neatly with film noir since its protagonist Jeb becomes a war veteran who suffers in various ways after his return, including loss of economic standing effected through a coin toss, an element of choice introduced within a wider context of betting in the narrative of the film. Implied here is the element of chance present in any capitalist enterprise, an element which Jeb seems to relish; perhaps the concomitant rise of gambling empires in the West after World War II, particularly in Las Vegas, serves here as contemporary backdrop to the narrative. Further motifs include the feud which lies at the root of the original homicides shown in fragmented flashbacks until the end of the film.⁴⁷ The feuds in the narrative converge in the personage of Jeb, who embodies them (due to his mixed parentage): the interfamilial feud between the Rands and the Callums is perpetuated in the lethal prodigal-son motif played out within the Callum family, between Adam and Jeb, and as well in the Cain-like treatment meted out, at least for a time, to Jeb from the grief-stricken and hate-filled Thorley and her mother.

Pursued opens with an extreme long shot of an unidentified rider against a bleak horizon. Voiceover narration by Mitchum soon informs us that his character's perspective will control its flashback scenes. These flourishes identify the film from its opening as cousin to the more characteristic detective or crime examples of noir. Soon the flashback narrates the early youth of its three sibling characters, Jeb, Thorley, and Adam, after the fashion of the early noir *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (Lewis Milestone, 1946), which similarly depicts more recent conflict between family members as instigated by an incident from childhood. One year later in *Pursued*, two seminal incidents are depicted: one, a fragmentary memory, shows Jeb hiding in the house where his father has just been killed; the other, much sharper in detail, shows the killing of Jeb's favorite colt by an unidentified man firing a rifle from hiding. (We will soon learn that

⁴⁶ Niven Busch, the screenwriter on the film, noted that “the story [...] has kind of Greek overtones – incest feeling, and all that – which the West was like” (Busch 106).

⁴⁷ Busch explained that the idea for the film was based in fact: “In El Paso I read a newspaper story about a feud and how a boy, who was the only survivor of the feud, had been brought up by the feuding family that had eliminated the other. His life had been saved because he had been put in a steel bathtub by the people defending the house. The bathtub was pitted with bullets. I thought, ‘Jesus, what was the fate of that little boy? He's going into a family that has killed all his parents and his relatives.’ Seemed like a wonderful classic springboard.” (Busch 106)

this man is Grant Callum [Dean Jagger], the vicious enemy of all the Rands.) The grief-stricken Jeb promptly blames Adam for killing the colt, starting a fight with him which will be duplicated in much more serious form later in their lives. The scene also reveals the deep tension that exists between the two male siblings, adumbrating the explicit Prodigal Son trope which will surface between them as adults. As in another psychoanalytically oriented film, Hitchcock's *Spellbound*, childhood trauma will be reproduced in adulthood; but as in *Martha Ivers*, such trauma will be augmented by intra-familial conflict beginning early in the subject's biography.

The element of choice in *Pursued*, embodied in the repeated recourse to coin tosses to decide important life paths, is also traceable to the traumatic childhood and youth of Jeb Rand. As a youth who felt that his life was out of his control and mysterious in its origins, Jeb would turn predictably to a 50/50-chance mechanism as a natural method of resolving choices which might be difficult to decide by other means. As Roslyn Jolly has argued, this motif in *Pursued* may have been based on, and certainly parallels, a similar feature in Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae*.

The familial conflict in *Pursued* is not resolved by Jeb's agreement after the first coin toss to enlist in the military. Films about the Civil War sometimes contain or center on sibling or parent-child division resulting from the war (see Chadwick 55-7). Such divisions were based loosely on historical fact, as numerous families were indeed split due to conflicting loyalties (one brother, for example, would join the Confederacy, another would join the Union – particularly in families living in border areas such as Virginia or Kentucky). Jeb becomes an authentic hero – though perhaps in a dubious cause – as he is wounded in combat and comes home to a hero's welcome from his hometown. But on the ranch he encounters resentment from Adam, who views him as a prodigal son with little right to his inheritance. Here the characteristic form of the prodigal son parable is subverted because the parent who lavishes favors on the returning Jeb is not a father but a mother or stepmother. Notably the female member of the sibling trio does not appear to resent Jeb's status; she tries rather to serve as peacemaker in an attempt to smooth over irreconcilable differences. Significantly, this family rift leads to the second important coin toss, this time to determine Jeb and Adam's

respective positions as inheritors of the ranch property. The coin toss does not resolve the violence of the rift, however. Adam becomes as vicious towards his stepbrother as did Luther Adler against Richard Conte in *House of Strangers* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1949; remade in Western generic format as *Broken Lance*). The fistfight that ensues eventually leads to even greater violence as Grant Callum helps to provoke a murderous outcome.



Before the killing starts, Jeb graduates from coin-tossing amateur to gambling professional as he buys into "Honest Jake" Dingle's saloon after the latter tilts the roulette wheel to allow him to win money for the buy-in. ("Honest Jake" Dingle [Alan Hale, Sr.] may have slippery principles about gambling, but he is actually one of the very few morally straight characters in the film.)⁴⁸ In other words, Jeb embraces to the fullest his avoidance of decision-making, becoming a partner in the saloon and giving up his interest in his family enterprise. It is precisely at this point that his real troubles begin – his somnambulist exercise in self-forgetting yields to homicidal nightmare. Both resultant killings are in self-defense, with Jeb fighting attackers incited to violence by the whisperings of Iago-like

⁴⁸ The gambling house becomes a place of refuge for Jeb for a time, and its avuncular owner serves as a positive surrogate father for him. The fact that the activity of gambling, usually seen in Westerns as morally suspect, is shown here in such a positive light is indicative of the dangerously skewed ethical universe inhabited by the characters.

Grant Callum.⁴⁹ (A Freudian might classify the attackers as projections of Jeb's own guilt about his father's abandonment of him.)⁵⁰

The first attack on Jeb is mounted by Adam and overtly concerns his resentment of Jeb's attentions from the mother (and from Thorley)⁵¹ and his alleged threat to Adam's property ownership. Unable to identify his attacker because of long distance, Jeb reacts by firing at and killing him. The second assailant, Prentice (Harry Carey, Jr.) is tagged as an innocent by the very fact that Harry Carey is cast in that role.⁵² The challenge issued by him concerns his jealousy of Jeb, whom he sees dancing with Thorley but without understanding in the least the true status of Jeb and Thor's relationship. Like Adam, Prentice is provoked or encouraged by Grant to attack Jeb.

Adam's death turns Jeb into an outcast from his adopted family. Both Thor and her mother blame him for the killing of Adam, in a twisted reprise of the Cain-and-Abel story. Jeb's place of refuge with Honest Jake protects him for a time from the psychic threat of the Callum-Rand feud, but in a mutually self-destructive manner, Jeb actually begins to court Thor, who goes along with the apparent charade despite her mother's absolute prohibition against Jeb's visiting the ranch. In an amazing narrative twist (but very true to noir style), Thor reveals to her mother that she only plans to marry Jeb in order to punish him all the more – she wants to carry out her revenge on Jeb by appearing to give in and then killing him precisely when he thinks his long-sought goal is attained. Once again in this unusual film, the noir perspective intrudes upon and clashes with the normal elements of civilizing society in the Western. The wedding ceremony,

⁴⁹ Dean Jagger inhabits the role of Grant Callum in a way that other actors might not have. He specialized in playing underhanded or morally cowardly characters (though not exclusively so). One of his other memorable roles was the drunken sheriff in *Bad Day at Black Rock* (John Sturges, 1955), a modern-day Western dealing with anti-Japanese racism from World War II.

⁵⁰ Niven Busch disclaimed an intentional Freudian subtext but did not dispute its applicability: "Well, I never tried to inject a Freudian context into any of those films. My objective was to make the people real and to give them three dimensions in terms of modern culture. People in westerns weren't often like that. And maybe some of my characters are more modern in psychological terms than people of that period really were. Certainly their actions were self-revealing. But the Freudian element is one we impose, like a surface coating. It was not my intention. It came from the eyes of the viewers." (Busch, 108)

⁵¹ Britton observes that "The incest theme in *Pursued* comes nearest to explicitness in Adam's attachment to Thorley" (201).

⁵² Carey became rather a specialist at playing not too intelligent, impulsive young men, as he did memorably in *Red River* and *The Searchers*.

so central to many Westerns, becomes a threatening mockery of itself as the viewer awaits the ironic conclusion to the supposedly unifying ritual.⁵³

The wedding indeed leads to the (apparent) attempted homicide of Jeb by the vengeful Thor, thus fulfilling the expectation aroused in the viewer of an ironic outcome. But the outcome is doubly ironic, as Jeb shows himself to have been quite well aware of Thor's intentions. He brings her a glass of champagne to celebrate the wedding; on the tray is hidden a Colt revolver. She takes the gun and fires at him but clearly is not emotionally able to aim at him properly. This incident neatly parallels, and reverses, Grant's handing of a revolver to Prentice after inciting him to kill Jeb. The reunited Jeb and Thor are soon attacked by Grant and his men, causing Jeb to try to draw them away from the ranch to the ruins of the old Rand house, site of the original traumatic event and now the locus of its resolution. Although not totally convincing, the resolution provided in the film does eliminate the dark threat of the old trauma represented by Grant. The seemingly random coin tosses and other gambling motifs have by now merged into a conscious choice by Jeb and Thor to leave their past behind.

This resolution does not have the mythic overtones cast by another, more modern film about family threat and conflict with gambling as backdrop, the 1994 *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan, with Kevin Costner and Joanna Going). During this treatment of the Earp legend, the conflict within the extended Earp family is a central element, revolving around Wyatt's convincing his three brothers to come to Tombstone in order to pursue business interests including mining and gambling. Wyatt is presented as a man embittered and haunted by his past, particularly by the loss of his wife Urilla (Annabeth Gish) to typhoid. Although he does not suffer from childhood trauma like Jeb Rand, he is a good example of a conflicted patriarchal leader who shies away from commitment to anyone but his brothers. His violence is not, like Grant's, irrational or compulsive, but calculated and methodical, with a veneer of legality

⁵³ The film even corrodes the presumably positive subtext of a religiously suffused work like *The Bravados* (Henry King, 1958), in which the grieving widower played by Gregory Peck pursues (in error) the supposed murderers of his wife. Instead of an outside force disrupting the happy unity of a couple, in *Pursued* one of the marriage partners appears to subvert the institution by killing the other partner – that is, corrosion from within.

when possible and openly outside the law in other cases. Like the protagonists of *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *On Dangerous Ground*, Wyatt Earp displays potentially explosive rage which is here shown to be contained and controlled – the performance by Costner, an actor often criticized as wooden or robotic, is on the mark here – and, unlike the violent cops in the Preminger and Ray films, his violence does not exceed “acceptable” bounds because of the special circumstances of his family. Gallafent’s comparison of the film to *The Godfather* is especially apropos here, as both films excuse, or appear to excuse, the vengefulness of their protagonists (chiefly Michael Corleone and Wyatt Earp) as justifiable or at least comprehensible given the need to protect their families. The Preminger and Ray films, on the other hand, censure their protagonists precisely because of their lone wolf status, which leads them to “dangerous ground” – significantly, each is integrated into a new family unit at the denouement.

Such reintegration is a feature of *Pursued* as well as of the Kasdan, Preminger, and Ray films. *Pursued* shares with *Broken Lance* (Edward Dmytryk, 1954) a less than convincing resolution of the familial divisions presented in each film, as the hero leaves with his bride, or future bride, for a presumably open future. The Kasdan film neatly mythifies the married future of Earp and Josie Marcus by showing them years after the Tombstone events on a boat, headed yet further west for the gold fields in Alaska. Approached by a young man who tells them a personal story about Earp’s life as a lawman, Earp and Josie are less than definite about the truth of the story, as their final lines in the film demonstrate.⁵⁴ The Preminger film has the most conventional resolution, as the violent, unstable Detective Mark Dixon (Dana Andrews) must be placed on probation and perhaps do time in prison despite the promise of union with his beloved Morgan (Gene Tierney). Ray’s film features the most emotionally and spiritually fulfilling resolution, as the troubled, unstable cop Jim Wilson (Robert Ryan) decides to stay with the blind woman Mary Malden (Ida Lupino) whom he encountered in the course of his “exile” to a rural area to assist with a murder case and who can “see” the better part of his nature. Like the traumatized psychiatrist John

⁵⁴ Wyatt: “Some say it didn’t happen that way.” / Josie: “It happened that way” [said reassuringly as if either trying to allay his doubts about his own lack of veracity or trying to convince herself that even if the story isn’t true, it should be because it fits her own conception of Wyatt].

Ballantyne (Gregory Peck) in *Spellbound* (Hitchcock, 1945), Jim Wilson is “cured” by a sympathetic woman who can “see” more deeply into his wounded psyche.

3. The Film of Choice: *Blood on the Moon* (1948)

The very first spoken sentence of *Blood on the Moon* (Robert Wise, 1948) is “Who’s that?”, and it is addressed to Robert Mitchum’s character Jim Garry. That is what we are wondering about. Robert Wise’s first major feature film is usually considered a character-driven, psychological film noir, and Jim Garry seems to fit the bill completely. He has a past that is revealed piecemeal and partially; many of his thoughts remain hidden throughout the film, as does his moral and ethical alignment. Filmed in expressive imagery in harsh light and with stark contrast, *Blood on the Moon* is a good example of the noir style in Western movies, and Jim Garry is its poster boy.

First and foremost, however, *Blood on the Moon* is a film about choices – in a systematic and structural sense, rather than in an individualized one. It is so first, because prior to that opening sentence, the very first scene of the movie is of a lone rider pausing and having to choose between two paths – the valley, or the ridge. It is raining heavily, and the rider, who can only now be identified as Robert Mitchum’s character, is completely wet – and yet he chooses not to go down to the valley, with its inviting lights, but to continue riding on the ridge, in the wind and rain. (*Pursued*, as we have seen, also opens with a tracking shot of a lone rider, in this case a woman, Thorley, who, it is slowly revealed, has chosen to throw in her lot with her husband Jeb.) *Blood on the Moon* thus begins with a choice – as deliberately, perhaps, as Luke Short’s novel *Gunman’s Chance* (1941), on which the film is based, does not: “He couldn’t help it because he and his two horses were too tired to make it down to real timber.”⁵⁵ At this point of the movie, this choice is not that of an individualized character (yet) – the very choice is a literary and pictorial trope, identifiable in the Gospels, Dante, Robert Frost, or Led Zeppelin – to name just a few. Faced with the choice of two roads, Mitchum’s character takes “the one less traveled by,” to quote Frost (1916), and it *does* make all the difference for him. (Later on, he will heed Jimmy

⁵⁵ First serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post* between 15 March and 26 April 1941.

Page and Robert Plant's advice and switch paths, for "[t]here are two paths you can go by. But in the long run, there's always time to change the road you're on."⁵⁶ The film is thus *foremost* about choices because it is structured as a series of decisions between binary opposites: the left or the right path, work for Lufton or drift on, align yourself with Riling or the homesteaders, etc. (This binary logic of the film is further underlined by the fact that the film is structured around doubles: Lufton and Riling, Riling and Garry function as doubles as do Riling's two daughters, etc.)

What, then, is the main choice around which the film revolves? Ostensibly and superficially, it is the protagonist's decision whether to align himself with an entrepreneurial, honest cattle driver, John Lufton, or with an old friend and criminal accomplice, Tate Riling (Robert Preston). Summaries of the movie usually point out that Garry switches allegiances once he fully realizes the moral and ethical disposition of the two opponents. However, the film follows a very intricate dramaturgy in which such a 'choice', or any clear transition from Riling to Lufton, never quite appears outright in the movie. It only occurs as the combined effect of various smaller choices Garry makes: first, he decides against Riling and for returning home; he is already on his way back to Texas when he explains to Riling why he cannot work for him anymore. Next, he decides against Lufton and, again, for returning to Texas; he is once more on his way home when Lufton's daughter Amy (Barbara Bel Geddes) talks him into aligning himself fully with Lufton's cause. The sum total of these plot manoeuvres is the switching of allegiances, but, as we will find out, the little steps in between are crucial.

The film itself marks Garry's transition from Riling to Lufton (Tom Tully) as an important, indeed crucial, development. The only scene in the movie in which Garry voices the reasons for any of his actions occurs in this context. Just before the fistfight in the cantina, Garry explains himself to his former partner, and the reasons he gives for rejecting Riling all revolve around morals and honorable conduct on an interpersonal level:

Garry: "It starts with your double cross and a bunch of poor, jug-headed homesteaders; and the hiring of gun hands. It goes on to your making love to a man's daughter to get her to turn against her own

⁵⁶ "Stairway to Heaven", *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971).

father. And your try for Lufton today. It goes past that to the death of Chris Barden's son, and it winds up right here, with Reardon waiting outside to see if I go with you or if he shoots me in the back. - I've seen dogs wouldn't claim you for a son, Tate." (Wise, *Blood on the Moon*)

This very outspoken statement is both revealing and misleading. It is revealing in that it constitutes virtually the only moment in the movie where the hero explains himself at all - Garry otherwise remains appropriately noir and a foil onto which reason and psychological motivation has to be projected, rather than a character that they can be read from. In that it reduces the choice between Lufton and Riling to one solely of personal honor and conduct, Garry's explanation is also misleading. What it does not clearly address, in fact what it hides from view, is the question of Garry's commitment to, or distancing from, either of the *causes* Riling and Lufton stand for.⁵⁷ The film clearly sets Garry's choice between Lufton and Riling into a larger, socio-political context involving new homesteaders (the film is set right after the 1862 Homestead Act), cattle grazing rights, common land, and Indian Affairs. A condensed socio-economic plot of the film would read like this: Lufton has been supplying beef to an Indian reservation on a regular basis, but this year, the US agent in charge of the reservation, Pendalest, refuses to buy his cattle. Instead, he funds Riling to buy the herd from Lufton for a price of \$4 per head, far below the market price. To achieve this, Lufton is given a deadline to move his herd off the reservation. If he does not, or cannot, comply, the US government will forfeit the cattle and Lufton loses out altogether. Riling, who is in cahoots with the Indian agent, tries to keep him from moving the herd off the reservation, by closing the river crossings and by falsely convincing the new homesteaders that Lufton is after their land. Jim Garry's role in this elaborate scheme is to serve as Riling's proxy: once Lufton realizes that he will not be able to move his herd off the reservation in time, Garry is supposed to make an offer far below market value that Lufton would have to accept.

⁵⁷ If read against this socio-economic background, Garry's choices are actually very difficult to evaluate. He does not clearly align himself with the small, 160-acre-farmers; the cause of the homesteaders remains by and large unimportant to him. He does not break with Riling primarily because of the latter's business model either, nor does he align himself with Lufton's side because he believes in any right of big cattle drivers. Garry seems apolitical, but the movie is on one level very political indeed.

This socio-economic dimension appears throughout the film, though sometimes as a subtle undercurrent. The movie, for example, problematizes the corruption of a government agency and highlights the plights of the new homesteaders, but it does so mostly in an individualized form: it blames the greed of one government official, not the Office of Indian Affairs as an institution. Similarly, the homesteaders pay dearly for fighting for their newly acquired farms, never realizing that they are proxies of a very different business endeavour that has nothing to do with their land. Metaphorically, the price they pay is in blood: the son of a homesteader is shot when Riling's men induce a stampede of the herd of cattle.



Jim Garry does not position himself in relation to such socio-political questions – but again, this is perfectly in keeping with noir style. Conceptualized in socio-economic terms, however, Garry's choice(s) between Lufton and Riling would have been one between (a very contemporary) form of futures contracts and venture capitalism, and an older form of market economy. As a cattle driver who buys livestock in one market and sells it in another, Lufton represents the older, more traditional form of a market economy in which need and

demand determine value and profit. Venture capitalism and futures trading, as represented by Pendalest and Riling, however, change the game. The herd of cattle is now an object of speculation in a very different economic sense. It has been stripped of any use value (as food for the Native American population) and now only carries exchange value. It has become a commodity in a very symbolic sense – its presence in a specific market at a specific time in the future determines its value. Lufton/Pendalest are a new breed of futures traders and venture capitalists who play the fluctuations of the market, metaphorically represented by the fluctuations of the herd, and Lufton tries to stack the odds in their favour by manipulating the market. As Lufton's proxy, Garry is his designated (live)stock broker.

If the herd of cattle represents a new form of capital, a commodity in a purely symbolic sense, the various stampedes shown in the movie also gain additional meaning. As soon as Garry comes to Sun Dust in the beginning of the film, a stampeding herd literally takes away his livelihood – Garry is visually engulfed by a power he does not even try to control. On the other hand, the stampede also shows forcefully that while the herd may represent pure exchange value, this virtual commodity does retain and reaffirm its material presence throughout the movie by remaining fundamentally uncontrollable – an uncanny return of the material presence of the commodity in the 'stock' market.⁵⁸

Even if the film emphasizes the 'moral', ethical and personal dimension of Garry's choice(s) between Lufton and Riling, it does also subtly acknowledge, at least metaphorically and symbolically, the socio-economic dimension of the conflict between the two. The movie portrays a new market economy where neither possession (the 'yeomen' of the homesteaders, a new class of 'landed gentry') nor traditional labour (Lufton's annual cattle drives), but *market timing* determines value and profit. With its agricultural roots in cattle and corn, futures trading has existed in the US in an institutionalized form since the mid-19th century;⁵⁹ the movie now tests what would

⁵⁸ Also, the new futures trading/venture capitalism threatens to engulf every aspect of the movie's diegesis, and Garry himself is, in a manner of speaking, not too dissimilar to the herd of cattle as capital. Until his crucial choice(s), Garry is likewise a commodity, drifting like the cattle, being pulled in different directions by Lufton and Riling.

⁵⁹ Cassis, Youssef, *Capitals of Capital: A History of International Financial Centres, 1780–2005*, transl. by Jacqueline Collie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 250–1.

happen if the commodities speculated on are divested of any use value and become purely speculative. (And without allegorizing too much, in the US, the earliest forms of venture capitalism and private equity companies [since 1946] coincide neatly with the release of the movie in 1948).

Garry's affiliation either with Riling/Pendalest or with the Lufton family is set up as a significant, if not the central, element in the meaning structure of the movie. It is conceptualized by the character as a personal decision based on questions of honour. The movie also gives it an additional socio-economic dimension, which, while never really acknowledged by Garry himself, is very prominent in terms of the movie's symbolism and plot structure. However, if the movie is indeed about choices in a structural sense, there is yet another choice that plays below the surface of the movie and which we, and the protagonist, return to again and again. As we have already seen, the transition from Riling to Lufton is actually represented as a series of choices Garry makes, each involving his potential return to Texas. Texas is not just the place where Garry used to engage in criminal activities with Riling. It is represented as a place of stasis – in a deliberate change from the novel, Garry would return to the 'Lazy J' ranch (in *Gunman's Chance*, it was called "Flying W"). If going back to Texas is thus set up as a kind of regression, an alternative seems not readily apparent to Garry – and this is where the character of Amy, Lufton's daughter, comes in. In the campfire scene, after she has followed him for a day on his way back to Texas, she offers him a new life by providing him with a narrative about himself:

Jim, I know you better than you think. You've been in hard luck, and you've made mistakes. You hated those mistakes, but you never admitted them except to yourself. Like this mess with Riling, you never liked it, that's why you walked out on him. Today, you tried to do something to make up for it. And Dad threw it back in your face. He thought you meant to kill Pendalest. I didn't think so. I know why you did it. You thought it would help wipe out the past. You're a proud man, Jim. But this is the wrong kind of pride. If you ride on back to Texas, you're lost. (*Blood on the Moon*, 55:45ff)

It is very important that Garry does not respond to this characterisation of himself; he does not acknowledge the truth or falsehood of her narrative, and again, Luke Short's novel differs markedly in this respect. In *Gunman's Chance*, Short inserts free

indirect discourse and his narrator's comments into the dialogue and makes her reading far less ambiguous:

"You're a proud man, aren't you, Jim?" She spoke in a low voice, and Jim could hear no trace of irony in it. "I think I understand you better than you know."

Jim stared doggedly at the fire, but his heart was oddly hammering.

"You've been in hard luck and you've made mistakes. Your pride has made you hate those mistakes, but it's kept you from admitting them, except to yourself. That day at the river when we met, when you shot at me. I had no right to do it, and you had no right to shoot back. Both of us were wrong, weren't we?"

Jim nodded.

Amy went on. "This mess with Riling. I don't know what went before, Jim, and I don't care. But you didn't like it. You've never liked your part in it. That afternoon in Sun Dust with those two killers, you made your choice, and it wasn't Riling's way. I saw it on your face when Dad was talking to you. I saw the decision forced and I saw what you chose, and you acted on it."

She picked up a handful of leaves and idly felt them, and Jim was quiet, almost holding his breath.

"This afternoon you did the thing you had to do, the thing that would wipe out all the past that's been hurting you. And Dad threw it back in your face. He thought you were proposing to kill Pindalest."

Still Jim didn't speak.

"I didn't think so, Jim," Amy said. "I knew, you see. I knew you did it because you felt it would wipe out all the rest – the part that's gone before and that you don't like. Is – am I right, Jim?"

Jim nodded mutely, staring somberly into the fire. (Short, *Gunman's Chance*, ch. 8)

Again and again, the novel establishes through its narrator that (personal) 'pride' is Garry's main problem and the obstacle he needs to overcome; "a stubborn pride in him would not allow him to speak first"; "[a] kind of stiff pride kept Jim silent a moment. He didn't like it but, after all, he had no choice" (ch. 1). Short explores the individual and psychological dimension of his protagonist in elaborate detail, and Garry is 'analysed' by characters like Amy just as if the scene quoted above were not around a campfire but in a room with a couch in early 20th-century Vienna. It is precisely such passages as the following, oscillating between free indirect discourse and omniscient, soul-searching narrator, that are missing in the film:

Jim felt the gray depression settle on him, and he hunkered down in his chair, a long, restless man with defeat in his gray eyes. It was the old pattern again this long waiting for trouble out of which he would profit. For what? A few hours at the tables and the old driving restlessness that pushed him into trouble again. He watched Riordan across the street, back to the wall, hot eyes raking every passer-by, every interplay of movement, interpreting them only as they affected his ultimate survival. That was himself in a few years, when the edge of his conscience had blunted even more. A hired gun hand, who balked at nothing that would pay for his whiskey and his taste in horses or women and his pride. A man with no roots, who could know the lifetime of a town and its people in a few hours and reject its ways and theirs. A man with no stomach for anything except trouble. (Short, *Gunman's Chance*, ch. 4)

None of this survives in *Blood on the Moon*. Here, Jim Garry's character very much remains a foil for other people's projections – Amy's, Lufton's, Riling's, and that of the audience. Is Amy's campfire reading of Garry really correct? If one evaluates the film solely from the ending and keeps the novel in mind, events do prove her right. But if we take seriously the ambivalence of this noir character and the intricate dynamic of how the film actually unfolds, another reading presents itself – and with it, perhaps, the crucial choice addressed by the movie. The decision Garry makes is between going back to Texas and accepting a new identity – by claiming Amy's narrative as his own.

From the campfire scene onward, Garry will act out Amy's narrative and fashion his character according to it. He has done this before in the movie: when Riling called on him as a gunhand, he came; when he is questioned by Lufton in the beginning, he does not dispute that he is a drifter. Now that Amy offers him a respectable master narrative, and with it, a future, he accepts it. The very first spoken sentence of the movie, "Who's that?", thus acquires an additional significance. The question is not rhetorical at all but a genuine one that Garry has to answer. Short's novel was written and published in 1941, shortly before the US entered WWII; *Blood on the Moon* was shot and released shortly after the war ended. Again, it is tempting to allegorize this Jim Garry of the movie, and claim that he stands, in a larger sense, for American men, or former American WWII soldiers, or America herself, in the process of having to fashion

a future. The film bears such a reading, but it does not demand it; much the same could be said of psychoanalytic readings of *Pursued*. True to their noir style, both films remain open.

4. Convergence and Revisionism in *Run for Cover* (1955)

Run for Cover (Nicholas Ray, 1955) is a movie about chance, convergence, and rehabilitation. Many of the principal characters converge in the film's little town of Madison only because of chance: Matt Dow (James Cagney) is on his way to somewhere else when he happens to cross the path of young Davey Bishop (John Derek), and their paths and the railroad tracks have just converged when a train goes by. The convergence of railroad tracks and the riders' trail, of a hawk passing by overhead, and of a previous robbery which had been committed just in that spot before, all govern the outcome of this first scene.

As the riders shoot at the hawk, the guards on the train mistakenly believe they are again the victims of robbery and obediently throw out a bag of money, leaving the riders nonplussed and the ostensible perpetrators of a crime they never thought of committing. This ingenious scene seems designed to elicit from the audience the question "what are the odds of THAT?" – thus establishing from the beginning a theme of convergence, chance, and repetition. Such spatial and temporal convergences play an important part in this first scene, but they also structure, in a less spectacular sense, the film as a whole. (The Swedish Swenson family, for example, was on their way to California when their money ran out just outside Madison, forcing them to set up their farm temporarily before they can continue their westward trek.) In that first scene, however, convergence and chance are very pronounced – it is not often in Westerns that a train is robbed 'mistakenly' in quite this fashion. This almost impossible – yet not implausible – convergence is structurally important because it sets the narrative of the film in motion: Bishop's injury, Dow's standing with the townspeople and his eventual enlisting as a Sheriff, Dow and Bishop's recuperation period spent at the Swenson farm, all directly result from this first convergence, as does Davey Bishop's later betrayal.

However, this scene is more than just a narrative 'germ' from which the story blossoms. It is symbolically important, like the opening scenes of *No Name on the Bullet* and *It Came from Outer Space*, in that it provides a lens through which the rest of the film (and that which took place before it) can be evaluated. For Davey Bishop, for example, the scene prefigures later events when he does actually become a robber (in retrospect, he proves the townspeople who shoot at him right). For Matt Dow, the scene replays his past (he was also mistakenly identified as a criminal and sentenced to six years in prison just because he looked like somebody else) and prefigures the future – he will be guilty in mistaking Davey Bishop's actions later on and shoot him once more.

History does not just repeat itself in *Run for Cover* – it seems to offer the chance of revision and correction. 'The second chance' is a recurring motif in the movie – Davey Bishop receives several of them as Dow's incompetent and even treacherous deputy. Also, in psychological terms, the film intimates that the orphaned Bishop serves as a substitute for Dow's actual son whom he could not raise himself. By giving Bishop the benefit of the doubt more than once, Dow also tries to right the wrongs others did to him. When Dow kills Bishop at the end, he replays a crucial symbolic element of the first scene: Dow kills the hawk (a predator) after Bishop had drawn, fired, and missed it. In the scene of Bishop's death, Bishop draws and fires at his new partner (played by Ernest Borgnine), thus saving Dow from a treacherous ambush. Bishop only appeared to be a dangerous predator to Dow, but he turns out not to be predatory, but harmless (at least in this instance).

The motif of second chances also occurs on an intertextual level. In his spare time as Sheriff, Matt Dow is seen carving a gun out of wood. When he finishes it, he briefly points it at the townspeople – before handing it over to a kid as a gift. Playing with a wooden gun is a kind of performance 'revisionism'. According to a persistent legend, John Dillinger – America's first "Public Enemy No. 1" in the early 1930s – escaped from prison in 1934 with a gun carved out of wood. James Cagney, the actor playing Matt Dow in this movie, had risen to fame in 1931 with his portrayal of fictional gangster Tom Powers in William A. Wellman's *The Public Enemy*, and in 1949 had revisited the classic

gangster genre with *White Heat*. Now, in 1955, Cagney symbolically adds to his former performances the missing, iconic, scene.

5. The Catalyst of Fate: *No Name on the Bullet* (1959)

If *Run for Cover* was a movie about chance and rehabilitation, Jack Arnold's *No Name on the Bullet*, released four years later, now deals with fate and retribution. And while the former movie was firmly rooted in the present, foregrounding the moments of convergence, in the latter movie, myth takes center stage, serving as a catalyst that makes the present spin out of control.

Catalysts trigger chemical reactions. Like chemical reactions, human interaction – ethical, emotional, or spiritual – often relies on catalytic energy. The central character in *No Name on the Bullet* (1959) is such a catalyst: John Gant (Audie Murphy) is a reputed killer for hire who comes to the small town of Lordsburg. His mere presence sets the pot boiling in a stew of guilt, fear, and hatred which will result in the death of several townsfolk. Gant says very little and offers almost nothing about his mission, or lack of mission, in the town. He normally answers questions with silence or with questions of his own. The enigmatic Gant acquires one near-friend in the town, the veterinarian and town doctor Luke Canfield, M.D. (Charles Drake), whose acquaintance with his new 'friend' provides Gant with a point of entry to one section of the town's social structure, as Luke is in love with Anne (Joan Evans), daughter of retired Judge Benson (Edgar Stehli). Eventually Gant will depart after having killed no one directly, although the target against whom he was contracted (the judge) and several others are dead, and the lives of many are put on new trajectories.

No Name on the Bullet was one of the few Westerns directed by Jack Arnold (1916–92), who achieved cult status, and deservedly so, as the director of several science-fiction films whose low budgets belie their sophistication and whose structure and themes are mirrored in *No Name on the Bullet*.⁶⁰ *It Came from Outer Space* (1953) is one of the earliest of Arnold's little masterworks,⁶¹ and a comparison of the narrative

⁶⁰ Reemes (105–9) discusses *No Name on the Bullet* with insight without, however, comparing it specifically to Arnold's science-fiction films.

⁶¹ *It Came from Outer Space* has the added distinction of having been the first film to use the 3D process effectively, as Reemes notes (22–33).

structure of this and other Arnold films (*Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Revenge of the Creature*, and *Tarantula*) will help to illuminate further the mechanism of *No Name on the Bullet*.

The opening of *It Came from Outer Space* shows a desolate desert landscape upon which a house sits. We are introduced to John Putnam (Richard Carlson) and his fiancée Ellen Fields (Barbara Rush). Putnam is an amateur astronomer who is watching the stars. The two see an object fall from the sky with an enormous explosion, and when they go off to investigate, they discover a large, smoking crater, into which Putnam descends against the fretting advice of Ellen. He re-emerges claiming to have seen an odd spherical object. True to a motif common to horror and science-fiction films (and often to suspense films and even Westerns with captivity narratives), he is the lone witness who is not believed. Soon enough townspeople begin to act strangely as they are replaced by alien simulacra. The robotic simulacra seem harmful, and fear leads the townspeople, led by the sheriff (Charles Drake), to clamor for the destruction of the sphere. Putnam manages to hold off the mob, reminiscent of lynch mobs in Westerns and other genres, and eventually we learn that the aliens had only borrowed the townspeople held hostage so that they could repair their ship and leave. They had been afraid to show themselves because their appearance would seem too horrifying to humans; again, only Putnam is allowed to see them as they truly appear.

While on the surface, *No Name on the Bullet* and *It Came from Outer Space* may seem wildly disparate, they are in fact rather similar in structure: both feature unknown visitors coming to a small town in the midst of a desolate landscape; both highlight the mysterious and unexplained agenda of the outsiders; both emphasize the divisive effect the outsiders have on the town; both feature a romance as central to the plot; both feature an unbeliever or criticized observer who forms an interface with the visitors; and both probe the unexamined assumptions of the townspeople about themselves and the outsiders. Beyond the similar structural patterns, both films were made at the peak of the Cold War era, one at the beginning of the 1950s, the other at its end. Besides the Communist conspiracy motif often cited in such films, science-fiction and horror films often contained references both overt and covert to fear of the atomic bomb. Westerns are not normally cited in this context, for obvious

reasons, but the atomic motif in others of Arnold's films is nonetheless instructive for study of *No Name on the Bullet*.

Cyndy Hendershot has contributed impressively to the literature on 1950s science fiction with her studies on the specific nature of paranoid elements in the *fabulae* of these films. She connects paranoia about nuclear destruction and the Communist threat to sexual paranoia. The paranoid nexus in these films connects directly to invaders of different yet parallel types: inhuman seed-pods (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), giant ants mutated by radiation (*Them!*), prehistoric monsters (*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*), a gigantic tarantula resulting from experimentation (*Tarantula*), humanoid-animal hybrids from an earlier age (*Creature from the Black Lagoon*), or invading aliens (*It Came from Outer Space*). Her perspective can easily be applied to *No Name on the Bullet*, because the paranoid tendencies exhibited by multiple townspeople upon the arrival of the mysterious Gant are directly parallel to those displayed in the numerous science-fiction examples mentioned above. Although the mechanisms involved may differ – Hendershot discusses in one article the paranoid fears of actual alteration or replacement of the body by radiation or invasion – the irrational fear of the townspeople toward outsiders in the Western example and in the science-fiction films, many of them set in the Western desert, in small towns like latter-day frontier towns, is eerily familiar. Citing three 1950s science-fiction staples, Hendershot observes that they “all share the paranoiac view of the enemy Other penetrating into the very heart of American 1950s society – the small, suburban town” and that “the three films tell the postwar audience that there is no place to hide, especially when the small town is located in the American West” (Hendershot 30). Nor can the inhabitants of Lordsburg (an actual place, but perhaps an ironic name) hide from the enigmatic, reputedly dangerous Gant, who pulls aside the curtain of their respectability to reveal collusion, corruption, and cowardice. The film has been compared to Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, and it certainly contains conscious allusions such as chess playing, the number 7 on Gant's room, and so forth – but these are more playful nods than deeply structural parallels. Arnold's film is very much an American 1950s genre piece which expresses the fear and paranoia typical of the era, whether in science fiction, horror, Western, or melodrama.

Like some other melodramas of the period, this Western also impinges on film noir, most particularly in its revelation of hidden crimes and murky motivations under the surface of apparent normalcy. Small-town noir films, or suburban noir films, often highlight the threat posed by the importation of big-city corruption and crime into the artificially halcyon ambiance of the periphery. Such films include *The Brothers Rico* (Phil Karlson), *Fallen Angel* (Otto Preminger), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *On Dangerous Ground* (Nicholas Ray), *Nightfall*, and, after this period, the last film directed by Phil Karlson, *Walking Tall*. The invasion motif in films of this sort may be rather explicit and extrinsic as in *The Brothers Rico*, or the invasion may be located within the hero's memory, leading to negative consequences, as with Jeff (Robert Mitchum) in *Out of the Past*. Notice, though, that this type of film noir shares with other genres of the period the fear of invasive influences which may awaken, corrupt, or metamorphose a precarious peace into a destructive conflict. (Sometimes, as in Anthony Mann's Westerns, the hero actually brings to the small town the conflictive element, or awakens a conflict dormant in the town, with *The Man from Laramie* [1955] as the best example.)

No Name on the Bullet certainly fits this model. Once Gant arrives in town, the banker (Whit Bissell) is revealed as a thief and kills himself. Two of the prominent citizens in town, owners of a mine, are shown to have colluded to squeeze out a third man. He attacks and kills them, dying himself in the gunfight. An interesting case is that of Lou Fraden (Warren Stevens), who blusters his way into a confrontation with Gant, only to show himself as a coward. He leaves town as he has done in other towns, running from himself. Gant says that the only man he has met since coming to town whom he likes and respects is the veterinarian/town doctor Luke Canfield, who seems unafraid of him and unconcerned about his presence, at least until others begin to be injured or to die.⁶² In fact, Gant is brought into contact with – though not to full acceptance within – Luke Canfield's family, which includes his blacksmith father Asa (R. G. Armstrong) and his fiancée

⁶² Drake is an intriguing casting choice for this role, as he often played cowards (*Winchester '73*), corrupt blowhards (*Hondo*), or stubborn, shortsighted locals (*It Came from Outer Space*). The film also features other examples of typecasting: R. G. Armstrong as the strong, silent father figure; Willis Bouchey as the quiet authority figure; Whit Bissell as the nervously guilty 'little man.' This typecasting fits quite well with the emphasis on types perpetuated by Gant.

Anne, all of whom have no evil secrets to hide. Nevertheless, Anne does have a skeleton in her family closet, one which Gant uses her to extract: her father, a retired judge and presumably a model of rectitude (Edgar Stehli), who turns out to be the real target Gant has been sent to eliminate. The judge is a former power in a crime syndicate and as the man who knows too much cannot be allowed to live even in a backwater town. Like Eddie (Richard Conte) in *The Brothers Rico*, he represents a threat who must be removed. Although he determines not to fight against Gant, knowing that Gant always waits for his opponent to draw first, Gant provokes him by insinuating that something untoward has transpired between himself and the judge's daughter. The infirm judge dies trying to shoot Gant. The town doctor arrives and tries to stop Gant from leaving; as Gant tries to shoot him, he throws his hammer (a tool he dominates as an expert, having learned presumably from his father) and injures Gant's shooting arm. Presumably, Gant is now doomed at the hands of his next enemy.

Since John Gant's mission is deliberately left open until the very end of the film (he says that "everyone – anyone" might be his intended target, 57:40), many of the townspeople project their anxieties and guilt onto his person: It might just be one of them he is after – it *must* be one of them. In a psychological sense, Gant functions as



an externalization of individual guilt and of the tensions festering beneath the surface of the community. Put in another way, like any good psychoanalyst, Gant remains silent or answers questions with other questions, thereby forcing the townspeople to confront their own feelings, and address, rather than suppress them – in a parody of 1950s psychoanalysis, Gant becomes the catalyst who facilitates the

working-through of psychological tensions, their (violent) resolution, and ultimately, perhaps, brings a dark sense of relief.

Focussing on Gant's catalytic function is much more rewarding, and in fact does more justice to the movie, than treating him as a 'round figure' with a psychological make-up of his own. In fact, whenever characters in the film attempt to 'analyse' Gant, they inevitably reveal only their own projections again: the former judge offers a psychobiography of Gant by imaginatively constructing his past from troubled childhood to stone-cold killer (54:00), evoking a typical case of juvenile delinquent turned hardened criminal that might have appeared as a defendant before his bench (or, more likely, in front of the bench of a contemporary 1950s judge in movies or on TV). Anne Benson likewise attempts to read Gant, and she projects onto him a pathological desire to kill ("you like to kill", 1:06:00). Neither reading is actually borne out by the movie; Gant is a killer who never kills anybody in this movie. We get to know nothing about his youth. He remains a blank screen.

Gant's function is primarily that of a catalyst, and in this respect he is very similar to the figure of Anton Chigurh in Ethan and Joel Coen's *No Country for Old Men*. If Chigurh functions as inscrutable fate, the equivalent to flipping a coin (see above), Gant is likewise mythologized and comes to approximate the role of Death in mediaeval morality plays – or in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, the existentialist psychodrama released just two years before and extensively referenced in *No Name on the Bullet*. In fact, most characters are reduced to types, not least by Gant himself. Rather than referring to characters by their given names, he calls them "physician", "banker" or "friend" – they are turned into functional types in a play that he has starred in, or perhaps enacted, many times before—and literally, there is no name on the bullet. This is not to say that the movie only has cardboard characters – but even the multi-dimensional characters appear curiously one-dimensional, in that only one aspect of a character is actualized at any given time. Luke Canfield, for example, enacts the roles of metaphysical healer-figure, community doctor (and veterinarian), fiancé/future son-in-law and townspeople, and assistant blacksmith; and depending on his role at a given moment, he is addressed differently, sometimes by the same

characters: "physician" (Gant's customary salutation), "doctor", "Luke", etc.

The main characters also take on clearly delimited mythological roles. For example, very early in the movie, Gant remarks that "Luke the physician" was "well named" (11:37), reminding the audience of the biblical allusion to the apostle Luke, "the beloved physician" (*Colossians* 4:14). Luke Canfield M.D. tells the audience that he was predestined to become a healer in early childhood by his father Asa (whose name is also reminiscent of the Hebrew word for healer). Luke the healer and Gant, as the harbinger of death, become involved in a game of chess, with Luke commanding the white pieces, and Gant the red ones. This piece of Bergmanesque existentialism (which is anything but a staple feature in Westerns of the 1950s) develops into a philosophical meditation on physical and spiritual sickness. While Luke Canfield claims that as a physician, his "mission" is to postpone death as long as possible, Gant points out the futility of all medical endeavours ("they are going to die anyway – best you can do is drag out their miserable lives. Why bother?"). He deals instead with metaphysical sickness: "It's occurred to me that the real sickness is... the most important ones are seldom physical. I think I've had more experience with those than you have" – to which Luke replies: "Well, you sound more like a preacher than" (31:40). Gant consistently casts himself as Luke's double, handing out his own kind of 'medicine' against a spiritual sickness: "I like you, physician – you're like me. You and I might be the only two honest men in town". "You might say we're in related fields – I cure things, too", he claims, and the Sheriff refers to Gant's gun as his kind of medicine (17:20).

The chess game serves as the backdrop for the characters' existentialist meditation about physical and spiritual sickness – but what "game" is it exactly that Gant plays? (Luke remarks: "You play a very interesting game", 32:50). If Gant evokes an older, mythological universe – such as that of mediaeval morality plays – or at least if he fashions himself thus, he will play by different rules than the conventions of Western movies – perhaps even on an entirely different playing field. Such an opponent cannot be beaten by conventional means: "The most useless man in town right now is a man with a gun" (40:00), says Buck Hastings, the Sheriff who has been crippled by Gant. What one needs to combat a mythological

character like Gant is another myth, and the movie turns to old Norse mythology to supply one. Luke Canfield resolves the action by beating Gant on his own, mythological, playing field – he takes on the role of Thor, the god in Norse mythology who defends the realm of Asgard with his hammer.

By the time the final duel of the movie takes place (1:11:10), Luke Canfield has become the defender of his community, the town of Lordsburg, and of his family. In the final duel, John Gant is armed with his revolver; Luke Canfield brings his blacksmith's hammer to the duel. Early in the movie he had already demonstrated his skill in using the hammer, and he now uses it to incapacitate Gant by hitting him on the shoulder⁶⁵ (just like he is shot by Gant in the shoulder). Gant has not been killed – but he has been humanized. Luke has taken his mythological powers. Gant rode into Lordsburg as a myth; he will ride away as an ordinary man.

A final comparison to Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* will not just bring this essay full circle. It is instructive in another sense, too. The comparison helps to draw attention to Gant's self-fashioning – he carefully hides his mission and his past from other characters, offering them the chance to project onto him their anxieties, fears and paranoia so that he can emerge as a larger-than-life figure. He de-individualizes and typologizes other characters, and he then instrumentalizes the fears generated by his own, quasi-mythological name. And just as with Chigurh, his strategies need not necessarily be trusted. Take Gant's rationale for killing: in one of his conversations with Luke Canfield, he argues that since his price is high, the people he is hired to kill are rarely innocent (35:00). Gant proposes a nexus between money and morality, but it is impossible to determine whether he even believes that this justifies his own actions. In fact, the statement might not even be about Gant, but about the character he addresses – Luke Canfield, the town's hard-working doctor, veterinarian, and assistant blacksmith. Gant's rationale is a distorted version of a founding myth represented in Westerns, the Calvinist work ethic whereby wealth is an indicator of God's grace (rather than

⁶⁵ The thrown hammer as a weapon to end Gant's terrorizing is highly unconventional, and its symbolism has been remarked upon before – but the obvious mythological reference to Thor has not (to our knowledge) been discussed. According to Cirlot, for example, the hammer is analogous to the battle-axe, "[a] symbol of the power of light." Cirlot then notes that the twin-bladed axe is even more powerful and comments that "[t]he axe is also symbolic of death ordered by a deity" (21–2).

other peoples' money signifying one's own moral corruption). As in other sequences of the movie, Gant here simply fashions himself as Canfield's alter ego, or 'Other.' It is these uncomfortable 'Others' – the Gants, Chigurhs – that some Noir Westerns of the late 1940s and the '50s seem to need in order to function. They establish and utilize them, but just before the movies end, they also cut them down to size, or as with Chigurh, simply cut them down.

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