MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

James Stewart:
The Trouble with Urban Modernity in *Vertigo* and *Liberty Valance*

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Introduction

Legendary 20th Century Hollywood film star and American everyman James Maitland Stewart saw merit and enduring intrinsic reward more in his extensive career as a decorated military serviceman, which began a year before Pearl Harbor, well before his nation joined the fighting in the European theatre of the Second World War, and ended long after his controversial peace-time promotion to Brigadier General decades later—than in his lifelong career as a cherished and profoundly successful screen actor. For him, as for his father and grandfather before him, who, between the two of them, saw action in three major American wars, serving the nation militarily was as good as it got. When asked by an interviewer some 50 years after the end of his wartime military service about his WWII memories, writes biographer Jonathan Coe in his book, <u>Jimmy Stewart: A Wonderful Life</u>, Stewart remarks that his military experience was "something that I think about almost everyday: one of the greatest experiences of my life." "Greater than being in the movies?" countered the reporter. "Much greater" (Stewart qtd. in Coe 97). So when sometime in the last year of the 1950s Stewart arrived at the front desk of Madrid's luxurious Ritz Hotel with a reservation for one of their many plush suites only to be turned away because, as the nervous hotel clerk hesitantly pointed out, "We, ah, do not, ah, cater to actors, you see" (Smith 196), Stewart, a typically mild-mannered public and military figure lost his patience and let the clerk have it. By journalist and fellow WWII vet Starr Smith's account, the response was "completely correct" but "somewhat out of character" (196). At any rate, in town not as an actor but as a high-ranking Air Force Reservist for the sole purpose of completing his month-long active duty requirement at Torrejon Air Base, Stewart quipped back, "Zat so? Waal, lemme tell ya. For the next four

weeks, I'm Brigadier General James Stewart, United States Air Force." According to Charlton Heston, from whom this account was taken, he then "picked up the keys and turned to the elevator" (Smith 196).

Much of Stewart's star attraction stems from the atmosphere of "normalcy" that clings to his distinctive screen image. Whether it is his incessant stuttering and stammering, folksy charm, or lanky, stooped frame projected to the delight of millions of cinemagoers in movie theatres across the country over and over again in the years leading up to the Second World War, mid-century fans of the already established star identified with Stewart's many pre-war screen characterizations. They include, among many notable others, Reporter Mike Connor in The Philadelphia Story (1940), Tom Destry in Destry Rides Again (1939) and Jefferson Smith in Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939). Like the majority of the contemporary moviegoing public, he was ordinary (or so let on the big screen): gentile, not exceptionally intelligent nor handsome, yet certainly a proud patriot always hungry for romance and life's better offerings; and at times he could be quite vulnerable, too, sometimes stubbornly naïve and withdrawn; flawed, sure, yet morally yielding: never. Paradoxically, the longevity of Stewart's star status is in large part a credit to the actor's knack once the camera started rolling for detaching from the very fact of his stardom and even his presence on set altogether. Stewart's unique brand of performativity, in other words, could not call attention to itself if the act of deception—that is, the act of *non*acting—was to work. His appeal—Stewart's status as your Everyday Joe—depended upon it. For Rod Hume, "This is a considerable tribute to the artful artlessness of his acting" (4). Yet, somehow, as he himself has confessed, the task always came easily to the actor. Cinemagoers across the nation gravitated towards

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James Stewart's motion pictures because what they reliably encountered on screen was less a star than a happy-go-lucky, quintessential American man. Thus, when Stewart energetically berated the hapless hotel clerk that day in Madrid, he was acting not uncharacteristically, as Smith suspects, but as one might anticipate any ordinary American might act under similar circumstances. Ultimately, if Stewart was perceived by viewers as exceptionally ordinary, Stewart gladly reciprocated the gesture by self-identifying similarly. Stewart—like his fans—saw himself first and foremost as an everyday American, not a movie star, and an American who had honorably served his country at that.

Now if Stewart's time in the war was a significant source of pride and meaning for the movie star, the accumulated psychological strain of battling it out across enemy skies in his B-24 bomber on some twenty, ultra-dangerous day-time bombing missions over the years was enough to rattle his relatively rosy-eyed prewar vision of the state of humanity. He even lost his faith and questioned his return to Hollywood, if only temporarily. Of this and Stewart's attraction to the role of George Bailey, a regular, down-to-earth and down-on-his-luck kind-of-a-small-town-guy who would have turned to suicide had it not been for a timely celestial intervention in the veteran's first postwar picture, Frank Capra's It's A Wonderful Life (1946), Coe writes: because Stewart was "profoundly shaken by his wartime experiences," "a story about a hero who feels "despondent" might have exerted a strong personal appeal to him." His life on an airbase and in the skies of war-torn Europe even "caused him to doubt both his faith and the fundamental worth of his career"; and it was not until Stewart's concerned and resourceful father arrived on the movie set with four men in tow—each of them "elders

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of the Presbyterian Church" located just three blocks away—did Stewart "resume[] his attendance at services" ("Leading man" 81). More: it took long-time character actor Lionel Barrymore, according to Capra, to ask of Stewart indignantly if "he thought it was more "decent" to drop bombs on people than to bring rays of sunshine into their lives with his acting talent" (81), in order to convince the troubled Hollywood star to stick it out in movie land. Yet the dark strain in the graying heavyweight actor's increasingly complex characterizations —first pictured in Wonderful Life—was here to stay –albeit with one or two exceptions (see below).

Stewart was not alone. Following the war, ex-servicemen, their families, and people all over the nation were confronted with the unsavory sides of modern life on an unprecedented scale. The astonishing loss of human life at the hands of people and machines left in the wake of the World War had ordinary American men and women critically confronting the promises of modern progress more than ever—this, despite, according to Keith Booker, American capitalism expanding at a never before seen speed at the time, accelerating the material prosperity of the country and its political might on the world stage several fold in a matter of only a few years (1). Paradoxically, feelings of insecurity grew rampant in the postwar years. Continues Booker:

> America's new place as a global power helped to create a siege mentality in which Americans felt threatened not merely by the communist ghouls of the Soviet bloc but by the savage hordes of the Third World. For another, the new prosperity of the 1950s occurred within the context of a consumerist ethic that derived its energies from the creation of a never-ending and unquenchable desire that, by its very nature, made true satisfaction impossible. However wealthy it might have appeared to be, America at the time was beset with a panoply of anxieties. (2)

And so, even though Stewart's brooding post-war temperament as pictured in myriad postwar productions starring the screen legend (some are discussed below) may

truly reflect a darkness or uneasiness burdening his mind, it was not, I take it, entirely

under Stewart's own volition (at least, at first) to have that same darkness projected into

his screen characterizations. He needed some prodding. Stewart ended up infusing most

of his subsequent roles with nuance, psychological complexity, and melancholic or, in

rare but memorable cases, darkly explosive undertones not just in response to his own

changing world view but to those of Hollywood audiences. If prior to the war fans of

Stewart saw themselves reflected in the actor's leading men, Stewart's happy-go-lucky

leading men of the late 30s and early 40s had by now lost their identificatory magnetism.

His characters would have to evolve and "toughen up" to compensate for the ribbon of

gloom that had by the 1950s swept through the socio-political mood of the times,

radically shifting ordinary Americans' orientations towards the modern world. That

Stewart's second picture after the end of the fighting, Magic Town (1947), which revels

in pre-war "fantasy Americana" a la Capra, as biographer Tony Thomas calls it (107),

met a disastrous reception upon its release (even the director, William Wellman, thought

one suspect if he claimed to like the picture), should come as no surprise with the aid of

hindsight. Stewart's once endearing folksy allure was growing tired, and his nonstop

affability and small-town, straight-laced vibe was beginning to appear anachronistic, even

childish, provoking one reporter to ask how much longer would we have to put up with

"this long beanstalk, hemming and hawing all over the place" (Thomas 107). Simply put,

if moviegoers felt that they were facing a tougher world after the war, they wanted to see

that same tumultuous reality reflected in the pictures and in the evolution of Hollywood's

leading screen personalities with whom they identified. Yet, like I said, it is only due to

the power of our capacity to gaze at this historical period retrospectively that it appears

for us intuitive that spectators boasted such gloomy cinematic appetites. In fact, fellow war veteran and Hollywood director Frank Capra got it all backwards. Capra predicted, says another of James Stewart's biographers, Marc Eliot, that escapist films would fill movie theatres during those initial postwar peace-time days (210). Hence, because Capra's first picture after the war, It's A Wonderful Life, was still, as captured by the words of New York Times reporter Bosley Crowther, "a little too sticky for our taste" due to its overt sentimentality despite Stewart's markedly melancholic screen presence (qtd. in Eliot 206), the film ended up bankrupting the director who had bankrolled the project largely on his own. Capra learned the hard way that what the majority of American cinema spectators wanted from Hollywood was not an escape from but an acknowledgement of the challenges of post-war life. Accordingly, film studios in the United States began to turn out motion pictures that pivoted thematically on Cold War tensions. Examples include Elia Kazan's Gentleman's Agreement (1947), Edward Dmytryk's Crossfire (1947), and Robert Rossen's Body and Soul (1947) and All The King's Men (1949), among others. As each of these films were box-office hits and, better still, nominated for Best Film Oscar's in their respective years, many studio director's were prepared to capitalize on the post-war cultural shift that was responsible for the new tone and thematic turn evidenced in these films.

The Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford pictures featured in the chapters that follow are no exception. In fact, what drives this project is the very fact of a link binding the films' shared fixation on modern anxieties and the dominant cultural orientation of the times. To be sure, Hollywood and society after the Second World War were inextricably linked, and, in some cases—as in the films above, which in great part derived their appeal

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from their close attention to an urgent preoccupation in the American imagination with pressing social issues such as wide-spread corruption and anti-Semitism—the link between film content and social reality is quite direct. Likewise, the dramatization of modern themes in the films examined hereafter equally reflect an attempt on the part of Hollywood to better tap into contemporary viewers' modern day-authored pleasures and sensitivities in order to heighten their involvement in the unfolding action. Thus, my rationale for this project is quite simple: as the dark themes about modern life taken up by contemporary films such as those belonging to a recent string of popular revisionist westerns perhaps suggest [see Ethan and Joel Coen's No Country for Old Men (2007), Paul Anderson's There Will Be Blood (2007) and James Mangold's 3:10 To Yuma (2007)], today's American moviegoers continue to face a similar set of insecurities witnessed for the first time on screen after the end of WWII in genres other than Film Noir. Not only will these readings elucidate the kinds of modern day threats American audiences met with following the war, then; they will confront us with our own anxieties about life in urban modernity, demonstrating that contemporary America's encounter on screen with the problem of urban life in the global age began well before the Twin Towers collapsed in 2001.

That said, post-war Stewart, "sensitive" as he was "to the culture of [his] age," heeded the call for "tougher" screen performances (Pomerance "James Stewart and James Dean" 92). So, too, did prominent postwar Hollywood directors who time and again demonstrated an acute awareness of the harsher socio-political realities of life in the modern age. Master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, and heavyweight western directors John Ford and Anthony Mann are notable examples. Their talents for capturing on

celluloid the modern pulse was the first common thread connecting these legendary directors. The second: their shared interest in America's archetypal modern man, James Stewart. It was in their films that the star routinely brought his tormented, alter ego to the screen, prompting Peter Bogdanovich to declare, "No other male film star was ever better at showing the real pain and fear caused by violence. Or, indeed, the crushing anguish of lost love" (244).

Collaborations with Mann in which Dark Stewart's presence is certainly palpable include <u>Winchester '73</u> (1950), <u>Bend of River</u> (1952), <u>The Naked Spur</u> (1953), <u>Thunder Bay</u> (1953), and <u>Strategic Air Command</u> (1956), among others. Stewart's newfound intense emotionality on screen especially shocked Gary Fishgall, the star's biographer, in the actor/director duos very first project. Set in Dodge City circa 1873, Lyn McAdam (James Stewart), thirsty for revenge, is on the hunt for his brother, Dutch Henry Brown (Stephen McNally), who stole his gun, a rare, Winchester '73, and murdered their Father. In a saloon near the end of the film, after already having proven himself to be for the first time in a motion picture an actor capable of displaying "anger" and "neurosis" (Thomas 126), McAdam "turns ferocious" and grabs an adversary's "right arm, twists it behind his back and slams his head down on a counter" after the man goes for his gun (128); and "The look on his face as he does so, his eyes wide, his mouth turned down in a grimace" says Fishgall, "is chilling" (214). Of New York Times reviewer Bosley Crowther's comment that in <u>Winchester</u>, Stewart "drawls and fumbles comically, recalling his previous appearance as a diffident cowpoke in <u>Destry Rides Again</u>," Fishgall simply responds, Crowther "must have been watching another movie entirely" (214).

A mildly haunted Stewart also appears in Hitchcock's The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956), a film that Coe describes as a "commentary on tensions within the American nuclear family" ("Leading Man" 142). The story follows Dr. Ben McKenna (James Stewart) and his charming wife (Doris Day) as they frantically search for their kidnapped son, who went missing after the couple inadvertently stumbled while vacationing in Morocco into the thick of an elaborate assassination plot targeting a high-ranking world leader. In typical Hitchcockian fashion and a testament to the director's keen eye for the human condition in the modern age, social strain in this film radiates on a low frequency when it is not altogether concealed; and so when McKenna breaks the news to his wife after tranquilizing her that their son has been abducted, it is through nuance and acting agility that Hitchcock's camera glimpses Stewart's stalwart and controlled personality melt away, replaced by an expression of muted rage and agony as he watches his wife's heart break. It is mostly in Hitchcock's films that Stewart comes across as the American Common Man on the outside and a man whose inner world is characterized by isolation and gloom all at once. Stewart's ability to gracefully dance between these internal and external worlds in his postwar screen characterizations is, I take it, the actor's secret to his enduring career.

Ultimately, even though Dark Stewart was born in the skies over war-torn Europe, as stressed above, the actor did not automatically inflect his postwar screen personality with gloomy undertones. It took a radical perceptual shift in the postwar national consciousness, a shift that saw everyday American people questioning their faith in some of the fundamental truths about the American way of life and their security in a rapidly changing world, to press Stewart into bringing to life on screen a more mature yet

psychologically bruised self. At any rate, the more nefarious aspects of urban modernity fuelled the visions of a handful of prominent Hollywood directors mid century, and it is the concern of the following two essays to confront how in two of those director's pictures —one made by Hitchcock, the other by Ford and each starring James Stewart— some of the unique anxieties associated with this socio-historical period are animated.

Hitchcock's Vertigo (1958) is the focus of the first chapter. Released during the height of Cold War Hysteria, the film has been the object of much critical scholarship for its grim attention to modernity's more unsavory offerings. Robin Wood, for example, discusses the film in terms of its inherent preoccupation with the infeasibility of the sustainability of romantic love in the modern West, for "Scottie" Ferguson's (James Stewart) desperate quest to rescue his love interest, the elegant yet traumatized Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak), from certain death ends in tragedy. The "reading" of the film I offer in the following pages contemplates instead the role Hitchcock's visual architecture might play in drawing the attention of viewers to the limitations of rational logic as a principle guiding force in modern day urban and institutional settings. Building on Georg Simmel's criticisms of the new social realities ushered in by rampant urbanization in the 20th Century and Georg Lukács critique of techniques of rationalization and mechanization in the industrialized world, I will show that Vertigo's camera leads the discerning cinemagoer to ally with Scottie's dizzying view of and movements through the diegesis, making San Francisco's rational order and its institutional bodies appear callous and strange once the camera and its accompanying visual cues support a more detached encounter with the narrative action and the subjective world of our leading man. Indeed, in this film, the rational order rewards Gavin Elster—a talented con artist and murderer—

with entrance into the ranks of high society, while punishing Scottie—the man we are cued to identify with from the get go—for failing to behave according to the dictates of rational thought and action. As far as the institutional authorities are concerned, his spells of vertigo signal his weakness and ineptitude, and he pays dearly for the transgression.

The nastier side of the modern impulse is at the centre of Ford's, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), the focus of chapter two. This chapter is similarly attached to the theme of urbanization. But instead of "reading" the cues in multiple aspects of the film's visual architecture, my meditation on Liberty Valance engages predominantly with the embodied features—that is, the movements, sensorial aptitude and gun-slinging prowess—of Stewart's performance in the film's leading role as Ransom Stoddard. Ransom is a man shaped extensively by his eastern upbringing; and so, when he relocates out West determined to plant the seeds of stateshood there, he meets with a level of resistance that he has little chance of overcoming without the assistance of Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), the self-declared toughest man in town. In the absence of the conveniences and safeguards of the city out West, Ransom betrays in his movements, voice and gestures a striking naivety and impoverished masculinity, albeit a masculinity, for Ford, that will one day belong to the men that lead the nation into the modern era. Modern Men, for Ford, are, relative to their western counterparts, disproportionately and dangerously dependent on their urban environments for their own safekeeping. The cynical edge in Liberty Valance surely speaks to the atmosphere of insecurity that went hand-in-hand with Cold War fever. The 1950s and 60s may have been tumultuous times politically and socially for the United States, but at least the country could count on Hollywood to produce a few good movies.

Chapter 1

Vertigo: **An Architecture for Double Vision**

As signaled as far back as the late 1920s with Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927),

Modern anxiety goes hand-in-hand with city life. Hitchcock's directorial talents, like

Lang's, rest in part in his capacity to lift those anxieties out of social reality and knit them

into the fabric of his films. Vertigo is a testament to his skill at doing just that. If

America's Red Scare and McCarthy's systematic efforts to wipe out the country's

communist influences left ordinary American's by the end of the 1950s feeling not just

paranoid but also skeptical of the ongoing celebration of rational progress in the

commanding discourses of modern society at the time, they certainly left their mark on

Vertigo. Despite the dictates of official rhetoric, what Hitchcock's film about the hapless

exploits of Scottie Ferguson (James Stewart) suggests is that for the ordinary city-

dwelling individual, the urban environment is less a rationally-driven system home to

organized movement, democratic exchange and meaningful social bonds than it is a

hostile, unknowable and unpredictable terrain animated by frenzied movement,

impoverished relationships and a rational order that rewards deceit and masquerade. The

combination surely makes for a "strange" new world for the city's increasingly alienated

populations. What's more, little has fundamentally changed. Cold War hysteria has since

been replaced by a host of other causes of uncertainty for Americans such as the Vietnam

War, globalization, the neoliberal turn in national politics, the wars in Iraq, terrorism

plots, and North Korea and Iran's nuclear ambitions, not to mention the ongoing

domestic challenges to heteronormative family values. Everyday city life remains as

"strange" and uncertain today as it did in 1958, hence the unremitting power of the film's leading man to draw the spectator into the turbulence of his subjective world.

Indeed, cinema has the power to reveal what the bourgeois economy conceals: the new social configurations of life in the rational age are fundamentally "strange." I mean "strange" in the same way that Georg Simmel means it –a hallmark of urban modernity (54). "Strangeness" becomes a characteristic of the city because the principle forms of public interaction there increasingly follow depersonalized market and bureaucratic logics; and also because a tangled web of disparate heritages, specialized fields of knowledge, and moral visions covers the city as nowhere before. In light of this "strangeness," says Sigmund Freud, the modern individual's susceptibility to social alienation swells (135). Occasions for the formation of meaningful community bonds are thereby put in jeopardy—ironic at first glance, given the archetypal industrial metropolis's thick and mobile population. At any rate, a host of longstanding socio-historical bonds patterned after once stable religious and community attachments were all but eradicated by modern systems of governance and commercial capitalism. The modern city is instead built after the values of calculability, specialization, rational justice, linearity, and a reason-based hierarchy of human thought and action. So the rational order that builds cities also makes them strange. Then again, rational *logic* provides that with enough individual talent for unearthing pattern and motive in what is seemingly inexplicable, even the most ambiguous social phenomena can be demystified. That everyday sleuthing helps the modern individual manage, classify and contain the turbulent crowding of day-to-day urban life is surely good news for the mental health of modern man and woman. Says Vertigo's retired San Francisco detective/ quintessential

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modern man, "Scottie" Ferguson to his newfound object of romantic adoration, the blonde and ethereal Madeleine Elster on the Big Sur coastline: "if I could just find the key, the beginning, and put it together." Prompting his assertion is Madeleine's vision of impending death, a vision made all the more foreboding given that our heroine claims to be possessed by Carlotta Valdes, the spirit of her great grandmother who says she must die. But Scottie would like to find a rational explanation for Madeleine's affliction and thereby cure her. For him, the impulse to assemble clues and cues out of life's most enigmatic offerings in an effort to excavate root meaning is invested with much faith and resolve. For him, to explain is to literally explain *away* —explain away the demon, or madness, that has hijacked Madeleine's mental health and rescue a neat-and-tidy rational view of humanity at the same time. The exercise of reason is a means of establishing a sense of control over one's slice of modern life, of stabilizing one's relationship with knowledge in an otherwise chaotic city. After all, "If ghosts are real," as William Rothman puts it, "human beings are not free and he [Scottie] is condemned to his vertigo" (223). Yet reason is not without blind spots. Contexted in Scottie's wandering search for meaning and pattern in the circuitous motions of modern day San Francisco, Vertigo's visual architecture signals the pitfalls of scientific rationalism as a dominant force of social organization in urban life. More: it reveals that the ritualistic disavowal in institutional settings of affective states that transcend ordinary shared experience is part and parcel of the Rational Order's role as a potent engine of everyday mystification. Gavin Elster knows all about the cracks and gaps in the machinery of rational society. His ascendancy through the ranks of the upper classes depends on his ability to navigate them; but more on that dimension of Vertigo later.

Hitchcock's formula for making the city look strange rests on his talent for effecting a set of key identificatory practices that binds the moviegoer to the film's leading man. Indeed, the viewer is cast into Scottie's subjective world most notably because Hitchcock's camera approximates Scottie's gaze at precise narrative intervals. In doing so, our capacity to identify with the acrophobic detective's orientation towards reality is magnified several fold –to strike up similar optical, navigational and visceral attachments to the city, that is. An even better way of arousing the cinemagoer's sympathies, writes Robin Wood, is achieved by adding a lethal twist to the point-of-view shot (221). Note Vertigo's gripping opening sequence. Seconds into the film we find Scottie in close up dangerously dangling from the rain gutter of a seven-story apartment building. He slipped on its precariously angled rooftop after having leaped there from the top of the adjacent structure to pursue a suspect. A fall from this height will certainly kill him as it does his colleague, a uniformed officer who tumbles to his death seconds later in a failed bid to rescue Scottie. The prospect of certain death prompts Scottie and the viewer's first encounter with vertigo. Now allied with our desperate hero's panicked gaze fixed on the alleyway far below, the camera reveals a space in suspended and receding motion at once, simulating visually the dizzying waves of vertigo. But a vertiginous spectacle is surely not the only consequence of Scottie's dance with death. In him is likely triggered a host of other bodily sensations and intensities --fear, constricting chest muscles, shock, panic, cold sweat, shallow breath, and heart palpitations are some starters; and the spectator is driven by the shot design to share vicariously in the experience. Scottie's San Francisco is to be the viewer's San Francisco, we are cued from the start, and it is a strange and hostile place.

Yet the same city pictured in the next scene through Midge's studio windows appears comparatively quiet, still, and tranquil. Consider the elevated view they offer. The buildings dotting the San Francisco cityscape look miniature when observed from Midge's bright and cozy place set high above the city. Absent is a view monopolized by the towering proportions of modern skyscrapers –skyscrapers that, when pictured from ground level, reveal their power to blot out the sun, dwarf pedestrians, and delimit their range of vision. The conventional relationship of scales between people and high-rises in the modern age is inverted at this height. Equally misleading about the view from Midge's studio is the colour scheme of the visible structures—washed-out yellows, light browns, lots of white—shades evocative of Midge's clean and innocent bourgeois world-view. In addition, the buildings lie along a flat if vaguely sloping hillside like the aggregate parts of a suspended wave; the creases and bulges that typify San Francisco's topography have been seemingly ironed out. Likewise, the same buildings are arranged evenly into distinct parallel columns separated by streets and boulevards and ornamented with pockets of uniformly green foliage –a vision of nature and the rational city in harmony. Removed from the peculiarities and pulse of bustling street life, the viewer at this height is afforded a degree of spatial mastery over the rationally ordered urban milieu. Or, if Scottie's San Francisco is disorienting and mysterious, Midge's San Francisco is deceptively easy to see, navigate, and know. So expansive city views and the rational order are both in the business of mystifying reality.

Scottie's San Francisco pictured through his apartment window at night looks mildly inhospitable. Visited for the first time after Madeleine drops into San Francisco Bay, his residence is located deep within the bowels of the city. It sits midway down an

angled street that, viewed through his window, continues rolling downwards and out of sight. The darkness is tempered by a hazy luminosity produced by the street lights, evoking both the phantasmic design of the plot and Scottie's restricted field of vision. Likewise, Coit Tower, along with the formidable hillside it stands on, obscures Scottie's view of the bay. Encircling the base of the hill is a disorderly outcropping of houses; and the geography of the city pictured here follows a topographical pattern that is more wild than orderly. The urban landscape therefore appears secretive and unstable –not the flat and orderly San Francisco we were introduced to in Midge's apartment; and unlike Midge's open embrace of the city, the blinds on Scottie's windows, pulled and angled as they are, look like horizontal bars that at once separate and connect Scottie to the dizzying maze and proportions of his neighbourhood –a testament to his ambivalent relationship with the city. What we are confronted with in Scottie's apartment is not a portrait of a knowable city like in Midge's studio, but a portrait of a world that is restless and unpredictable. Scottie's San Francisco, unlike Midge's, is labyrinthine and elusive, its rolling topography, Murray Pomerance points out, disproportionately pitched downwards ("An Eye For Hitchcock" 229).

In fact, the city looks determined to draw Scottie down into its din and deny him the bourgeois comforts of expansive views. Earlier in Midge's studio, our hero climbs a small yellow stepstool by the high windows. He is set on demonstrating to Midge and himself his plan to overcome vertigo; but instead, he catches another dizzying sight. A shot approximates Scottie's downward gaze. Our eyes instantly gravitate towards a strip of alleyway (surprisingly) far below –an effect owed to the shot design; and an instant later, we notice the horizontal lines following angular trajectories across the screen –

another vertiginous quality of the shot. We are peering through Midge's window. In the split second it takes us to consciously register the details of this shot, we are already unnerved and our commitment to Scottie's perspective already reinforced.

But the sequence that has the spectator clinging most closely to Scottie's swirling experience of the unfolding drama is set inside the bell tower of an old Spanish mission. Madeleine will throw herself from its highest reaches. Hopes of solving her riddling affliction are quashed after Scottie, midway up the tower shaft, is arrested by two more spells of vertigo. Allied again with Scottie's point-of-view, the camera shows its stairwell still and receding at once. This is the same illusion used in the opening sequence to bind us to the hero's subjective world. By now, we should thoroughly identify with Scottie's position. Yet at scene's close, the moviegoer is transported somewhere radically different but not altogether unfamiliar. From outside and high above, a matte shot shows Scottie exiting the tower and slipping silently away. The view, still and elevated like Midge's, casts judgment on Scottie, as if simulating from way up there the gaze of a higher power/ supreme rational being. To align now with the camera's detached, cold stare is disjointing for the keen-eyed spectator. All along it has been through *Scottie's* eyes that he was cued to confront the action. However in this shot, that same world, distanced now, loses some of its familiarity –but only some. Still fresh in Scottie *and* the spectator's minds are the sights of the swelling tower staircase and Madeleine's broken body sprawled across the rooftop. A curious doubling of perceptual vantage points has thus taken place for the cinemagoer. Indeed, Scottie is made for the first time in this picture something akin to a friend *and* stranger all at once. Our relationship towards Scottie—like his relationship

towards the city—is now marked by ambivalence. Hitchcock is preparing us for the coroner's scene.

The coroner's scene is similarly disjointing for the spectator for similar reasons. For one, in sharp contrast to preceding scenes, the coroner's inquiry is mostly shot dispassionately, privileging not Scottie's gaze but the rational gaze as allegorized by the city pictured from Midge's apartment. Also disjointing about this sequence is that *Vertigo*'s newfound clinical eye urges the spectator to cruelly judge Scottie's failure to rescue Madeleine; and, depending on his level of sensitivity to Vertigo's fantasy world, the viewer may very well during this sequence have the feeling that he is judging himself. After all, the spectator has grown accustomed to projecting himself into Scottie's inner world. It is in the tension that mounts as a result of our being and seeing Scottie in this new light at the same time that the rational order begins to look uncannily callous and transparently so for us; and Vertigo's shot design is responsible for our perceptual shift.

The scene begins with an eye-level shot steps from the location of Madeleine's death. It pans rightwards revealing one of the mission's pristine pastoral buildings alive with activity. Cut to behind a handful of onlookers. Cut again. Now the spectator is an onlooker himself –a stranger in the crowd who takes on their optics of detachment. The camera now confronts a pair of second-floor balcony doors, propped open, cuing the spectator to the camera's next destination. Cut to the far end of the room's spacious and gloomy interior –a most appropriate setting for an institutionally-sanctioned condemnation. It is not until four shots and more than thirty seconds into the sequence that the camera finally cuts to the locus of action, hanging, as it does, high above the proceedings. It can be argued here that the objective gaze of rational society is mustered

by this shot. The spectators, the coroner, a stenographer, the jurors, Scottie, his former superior, a guard, the nuns –all of the relevant agents involved in the coroner's inquiry are on display in plain view all at once. In fact, as I have shown, it is "objectively" that the entire sequence unfolds. Starting with a long shot, the camera slowly narrows in on the action. It does so patiently and systematically, shot-by-shot, building a world befitting a rational stranger/ detached observer. More than this, the rational organization of successive shots makes the spectator complicit with the institutional gaze and thus, also, with the coroner's (Henry Jones) chain of logic. The coroner, in a cold and matter-of-fact voice, acknowledges that the retired detective's acrophobia certainly played a role in his inaction. Yet he nevertheless questions Scottie's "strange" behaviour, wondering aloud if his flight immediately following Madeleine's death evinces his inability to "face the tragic result of his own weakness." To this he adds that on a previous occasion under similar circumstances, Scottie "allowed a police colleague to fall to his death," thus establishing a legacy of ineptitude and weakness on the part of our hapless hero. Officially, Scottie failed miserably. But, like Midge's innocent vision of San Francisco, it is not that simple. If the spectator's bond to Scottie was strong to begin with, it is, in fact, through the interplay of conflicting gazes that the cinemagoer now confronts Scottie –one rooted in the institutional world, the other in his subjective world; and, it is through this double vision that the ideological design of the rational order can be glimpsed. For one, the camera illuminates in this scene the unfeeling disposition of institutional life. For another, the film confronts us during this sequence with the possibility that social democracy may not be the central feature of the rational city after all. In this film, the rational city condemns the individual who, like Scottie, just cannot seem to "keep up"

(recall the downward impulse of Scottie's San Francisco and Scottie's inability to make it to the top of the tower in time to save Madeleine). In fact, "keep up"—that is, climb high *and* move fast—seems to be the guiding maxim for public and private life in Vertigo's San Francisco –not freedom for all.

Gavin Elster "keeps up" just fine, as Pomerance shows in his book on Hitchcock (226). Yet what advantages Elster is not devotion, like Scottie and the coroner's, to the pursuit of explaining life's riddles. Elster's talent for deceit and masquerade and his willingness to kill are his tools for rising out of the maelstrom of modern metropolitan life and into the ranks of high society. He earns the plush office overlooking the shipyard through an elaborate ruse, in other words; and the cranes pictured through his office window—surely of menacing proportions when viewed from below—are his phallic trophies. Scottie, we later learn, is the victim of Elster's plot to murder his wife, take all of her money, and get away with it. The "Madeleine" Scottie meets and falls in love with is a hired con –an expert at social performance herself. It is the body of Elster's actual wife –a woman neither the detective nor the moviegoer ever meet– that Scottie, stuck in the tower shaft, witnesses drop to the rooftop below. The "Madeleine" we thought we knew and loved lives on (for a little while, anyways). At any rate, by film's end, one thing is certain: in Vertigo, to the modern individuals most adept at climbing and staying "up" in the rational age go the spoils. After all, Scottie's "fall" is Elster's gain.

Whereas Vertigo problematizes aspects of the darker side of the modern condition by staging via Hitchcock's visual architecture a conflict between the Stewart persona and the rational order, Ford's Liberty Valance, the topic of the next chapter, relies more on Stewart's bodily cues to flesh out a similar critique. However, while both directors

portray the urban setting unflatteringly for the most part, Ford's picture, I will show, appears much more sensitive to the impact urbanization has had on normative masculinity specifically.

Chapter 2

***Liberty Valance*: Masculine Anxiety in the Cinematic "Wild West"**

In response to, as William Luhr puts it, the "pervasive image of doomed, impotent, and demoralized men in many *films noir*" and "a highly publicized masculine fear" in the post-war climate about "becoming simply a "number," an "organization man," a corporate "man in a gray-flannel suit""– many1950s men felt that they were losing control over their public and family lives (75). Luhr sees this kind of anxiety operating in the screen personality John Wayne brought to his role in The Searchers (1956) (77). Like Stewart, prior to the war, Wayne's screen characterizations were devoid of the darkness that, in his post-war collaborations with Ford, would shadow every one of his characters, including Wayne's Tom Doniphon in Liberty Valance. Still, despite their penchant for psychotic outbursts, Wayne's heroes are typically valorized on screen because, I would argue, the iconic cowboy whose shoes the Hollywood actor routinely steps in to on screen carries with him such mythic weight that the hard masculinity he boasts has grown to have a special claim to the "natural" order of things. Wayne's cowboys are "authentic" men, exemplar prototypes of normative masculinity. They are pre-urban, in other words, born from the Earth itself. Yet the Wayne persona is an idea more than anything, albeit an idea that most men fantasize about replicating (which, of course, they still do). The Stewart persona, however, is somehow more sincere, vulnerable, less mythic. In Mann's The Naked Spur (1953), says Dennis Bingham, Stewart "plays a character who shows desperation beneath the mask while masquerading as a tough Western man" (59). He thus betrays the performative dimensions of masculinity, and in his desperation to repair the "cracks" in his act, invites

viewers to identify with the familiar struggle –another testament to Stewart's identificatory magnetism. In fact, because of Stewart's history prior to partnering with Mann of playing in films regular guys from the growing cities of the east, it is hard to shake the feeling when confronted with Stewart as, say, Will Lockhart in Mann's <u>The Man From Laramie</u> (1955), that the Old Stewart—that everyday American man—is engaged in mimicry. Deep inside the hard exterior of Stewart's dark cowboys, one gets the impression that what cowers within is a soft, city boy who wound up getting in way over his head. Likewise, the eastern man played by Stewart in <u>Liberty Valance</u>, is, in many respects, I will show, treated like a fraud by Ford. If his integrity is called into question, so, too, is the integrity of the common, "civilized" man—modern man, that is— who, confined to the industrialized city, has lost touch with his roots and surrendered his individual power to the machinery of the city. But <u>Liberty Valance</u> is as much about masculine anxiety as symptomatic of an uneasy orientation towards urban modernity as it is about the collapse of moral certitude in that same post-war era; and, as is the case for the brand of anxieties staged in <u>Vertigo</u>, the moral and gender insecurities reflected in <u>Liberty Valance</u> remain contentious issues to this day.

Indeed, when William "Bill" Munny (Clint Eastwood) muttered in his raspy, tired voice, "deserve's got nothing to do with it," before dispatching the film's villainous law-man, Little Bill Dagget (Gene Hackman), from the face of the Earth, Eastwood's <u>Unforgiven</u> (1992) announced unequivocally that prominent Hollywood filmmakers near the turn of the century were still deeply attached to the Revisionist Western pioneered almost four decades earlier by George Steven's <u>Shane</u> (1953). In fact, the moral ambiguity and cynical tone that typify the sub-genre (Cawelti 255), evidenced in <u>Little</u>

Big Man (1970), Ride With The Devil (1999) and Dead Man (1995), to name a few, permeate more recent Hollywood Westerns with renewed vigour [see The Assassination of Jesse James (2007), There Will Be Blood (2007), and 3:10 To Yuma (2007)]. Again, the rise of the socially critical Western parallels the genesis of "widespread anxieties about the erosion of individuality and masculine vitality in the postwar era" for the generation that fought World War II (Luhr 75). The Democratic response: "We stand today on the edge of a new frontier—the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and paths…we stand on this frontier at a turning point in history" (qtd. in Kent Anderson 10). These words, spoken by John F. Kennedy in his democratic leadership acceptance speech on July 16, 1960, link the as-of-yet unrealized liberal turn in U.S. federal politics to the vision of nationhood spelled out in the mythical "Old West." But Ford is distrustful of the rhetoric, indicated by the atmosphere of dejection and regret that permeates his film, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) (Anderson 13). As exemplified by this film, it can be argued that the more recent pictures introduced above do not fundamentally depart from normative Western genre conventions at all. They instead build upon a deeply entrenched legacy of films set in the "Old West" critically attuned to the nation's shifting political atmosphere and ongoing modern developments.

Ford's post-WWII Westerns project a fractured moral economy once firmly anchored, for this conservative visionary, in the mythic "Wild West." Symptoms of Ford's age of moral uncertainty and national vulnerability take shape in his films in disparate ways. For one, the film stages a confrontation between eastern and western masculinities, wherein the latter is venerated for pioneering the American way of life,

while the former is admonished for steering the nation in the wrong direction. While this aspect of Ford's picture will certainly be addressed, albeit peripherally, greater attention will be given to what has received little scholarly attention, namely, as each shot skillfully accentuates the embodied aspects of Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) and Tom Doniphon's (John Wayne) failed and triumphant masculinities respectively, the distinct anxieties haunting the ordinary urban-dwelling bourgeois masculine subject are rendered intelligible. While contemporary urban metropolitanism is celebrated routinely by dominant national narratives as a force of economic rationality and modern progress, Liberty Valance betrays echoes of a pattern of social conditions rooted in the modern experience that restricts the modern subject's level of mastery over his environment to the point where his environment ineluctably masters him. This theme guides the following analysis.

But first, a summary of the plot is necessary. The story is set in the late 19th century American West, the film follows Senator Ransom Stoddard, a well-educated and aspiring law man from the East imbued with an altogether ordinary bourgeoisie sensibility. For him, rapid industrialization, sprawling urban development and elaborate bureaucratization are the building blocks of modern civilization (Anderson 14). Told in flashback, Ransom makes his first trek westwards. Deep into wild country, a fact signaled by the absence of train and tracks (Schivelbusch 21), his Stagecoach is held-up. Ransom resists. He pays for his ignorance of the West's "wild" ways at the hands and whip of the gang's leader, Liberty Valance, who emerges as the film's leading antagonist. Our eastern hero arrives in town broken and near death. Tom, the self-proclaimed toughest man-in-town, helps restore Ransom's health and tacitly takes him under his wing. The

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gesture is surely life-saving. Ransom's eastern socialization and arrant naivety leave him dangerously ill-equipped to navigate this new and unfamiliar habitat alone. Smarting from his early lesson on the lawless character of the West, Ransom opens a school in Shinbone in an effort to cultivate the town with the ideals of Statehood, rational organization and universal democratic law—the ideals on which the standard contemporary American urban metropolis are ostensibly founded. Yet Ransom encounters resistance from our now familiar nemesis, Liberty. The tension between these two foes culminates in a showdown. Ultimately, the notorious outlaw is gunned down, but not by Ransom. From somewhere off the street and off screen, Tom shoots Liberty dead. The intervention occurs unbeknownst to filmgoers and screen characters alike. More: he does so in a manner calculated to appear as though the budding law-man is responsible for the kill. With the credit all his, Ransom remorselessly "swoops in" on Tom's girl and falls into a life-long career in federal politics replete with esteem and privilege. Tom, abandoned and heartbroken, embarks on a new life replete with despondency and self-destruction.

Modern individuals possess hazy optics –as will be shown below this includes Ransom. Indeed, the "bigger picture" in contemporary urban society is hard to come by both spatially and temporally. I mean this in a number of ways. First, with cities circumscribed by towering buildings and vast networks of labyrinthine streets, horizon-to-horizon panoramic views are preciously rare in urban centres, whereas Ford's cowboy can access optically sometimes a hundred or so miles of "wild country" at any given time [two notable Westerns that emphasize the expansive quality of their settings are The Searchers and Stagecoach (1939)]. Mostly it is top executives and affluent families that

have routine access to expansive views of the city. From an office or loft window forty-some-odd floors up, the bustle and hustle of street-level city life takes on new meaning. On this, Michel De Certeau writes: "The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins," where they are subjected to "endless labyrinths" and "an opaque and blind mobility" (93). There, they "follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read" (93). Sociologist Marshal Berman echoes this sentiment in his book, All That is Solid Melts Into Air. For him, the "archetypal modern man…is a pedestrian thrown into the maelstrom of modern city traffic a man alone contending against an agglomeration of mass and energy that is heavy, fast and lethal" (159). Yet when elevated to heights that parallel "the summit of the World Trade Centre," according to De Certeau, one's body is "lifted out of the city's grasp." At such heights one can finally read the urban "text" in its entirety, "be a solar Eye, looking down like a god," and relish in the voyeuristic powers and pleasures of "seeing the whole" from a distance (92). The elevated view De Certeau celebrates enables one to transform the dizzying "mass and energy" into the building blocks of a rationally ordered city arranged optically across a vast grid; to magically see around every corner all at once, thereby taking one's ability to anticipate movement and future events to the limits in an urban space; and to morph soaring skyscrapers that have the power to block out the sun into equals. One version of spatial mastery is thus achieved optically, and is rare for all except the most privileged in a burgeoning metropolis.

Another source of faulty modern optics is knowledge-based. Consider, for example, the implications of the accelerating shift towards a consumer-based American

society following the adoption and adaption of Taylor's production model across a host of workplace settings. What began with the advent of industrialization on the continent resulted in American citizens after Fordism being increasingly cut-off from the means of production (Grint 90). The rise of a specialized workforce was the next logical step (Ingelhart 10). A skilled heart transplant surgeon may be revered in his field, but by mid-century it was no longer surprising if the same doctor lacked the requisite knowledge to properly install a kitchen cabinet or tune-up his own car. No time. No skill. In any case, those jobs fall into someone else's specialized field. The tasks get done one way or the other. But what if they no longer did? The spectre of economic, natural, or war-related catastrophes once in a while entering the mind of even the most disciplined modern bourgeois consumer would be enough to send a sliver of panic bolting through his insides. Indeed, in what Vincent Mosco's names our age of "liminal uncertainty" (32), future events are increasingly difficult to calculate (see Beck and Ritter 1992). Paired with the ballooning scale of potential disasters ushered in by modern innovation, a host of apocalyptic future scenarios dramatized on the big screen by the Terminator films and its imitators now trouble and fascinate the popular imagination. Ultimately, the combination of workplace specialization and labour process alienation has tremendously reduced the breadth of modern man's knowledge of the inner workings of his immediate material environment.

If we are to believe the dominant cinematic conception of the "Old West," a man's eyes, ears and tongue must be alert and his movements calculated at all times and all costs if he aims to defend or enhance his social standing in the mid-19th century American West. In other words, to survive or thrive on the frontier, mental and physical

agility in Ford's vision of the "Wild West" is a prerequisite. The principles of urbanity and Victorian etiquette adopted by early American bourgeoisie do not belong in the wide-open terrain of the West (McCutcheon 1993). In fact, in the absence of effective systems of religion, governance and law enforcement (Ford's picture barely acknowledges the Church, boasts a cowardly Sheriff and treats the government as an alien entity), loyal adherents to these customs risk death just for practicing them on the open range. The fact is alluded to during the stagecoach robbery as Ransom expresses his disapproval after Liberty unceremoniously tears a necklace from the neck of a bourgeois lady held up at gun point alongside him. This violates the eastern brand of etiquette our quixotic, city-raised man invests in so deeply. For Ransom, it is, of course, "ungentlemanly" to behave in such a manner towards a "lady." That, and Ransom is just too naive to think to bite his tongue. He is harshly punished for the transgression. Sensorial and embodied aptitudes replace urban-crafted social etiquette as guiding values out West, and the cinematic cowboy displays this fact on and through his body in what follows.

Mental and physical laxity routinely betray Ransom's lack of masculine fortitude, a clue that the urban-crafted masculine subject is without the skills, vision and know-how necessary to control his immediate environment. Long after his traumatic initiation into America's West, Ransom takes board above the town's diner where he washes dishes to earn his keep. In this scene, Ransom offers to wait tables. With a steak-in-hand destined for Tom's table, Ransom spots the Liberty gang and its leader's infamous silver-knobbed whip proudly displayed in close-up atop their table. Our eastern boy is determined to demonstrate to himself and any witnesses at hand that his masculinity, while bruised, is nevertheless on the way to a full recovery—and so, too, is his civilizing mission; besides,

he answers to a "higher" code that ostensibly guarantees safety through law, enforcement and democratic cooperation. But resuming course is foolish. Ransom met Shinbone's Sheriff. He is inept and gutless as evidenced by his constantly cracking, high-pitched voice, which is more akin to an oft parodied pubescent boy's than that of an authoritative figure. His rotund frame also leaves him looking soft, slow and lethargic. In addition, he displays clear signs of relief each time he finds a way to evade responsibility. I am thinking of the sheriff's ear-to-ear grin and immediate return of his appetite following the good news that he will not have to get involved in a foreseeable conflict. But Ransom fails to notice any of this. Moreover, given his city upbringing, wherein residents are socialized with the knowledge that life-saving professionals are always stationed no more than a few blocks away, and coupled with his bourgeoisie faith in law, surveillance and enforcement as viable deterrent regimes–Ransom's cognition is configured according to a radically urban-centric concept of safety and space. That he behaves as though the logic still applies is utterly delusional. The sheriff is responsible for *single-handedly* maintaining order in town. Ransom's false sense of security is dangerously naive, and links to the general visionary opacity that shadows modern city-dwellers.

Liberty is equally determined, yet for reasons that prove deleterious for our abject hero. More to the point, our leading outlaw, once provoked into action, exposes Ransom's stubborn naivety, navigational incompetence (Ransom's movements through space are clumsy, irrational and wild), and unleashed corporeality. Collectively, they paint an unsympathetic portrait of Ransom's masculinity, one that is far too juvenile and splintered to induce envy in your typical, heteromasculine modern subject sensitive to the limited command he wields over his slice of modern existence. Indeed, our outlaw aims

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to publicly reinforce his superiority by publicly shaming his foe, and, as an added bonus, squeeze a few more drops of pleasure out of bullying Shinbone's new man-of-law. Hence, he trips Ransom as he passes. The gesture is fundamentally symbolic: Liberty's interests –lawlessness, the preservation of his exceptional masculinity and the stability of the open-range system— compete with the interests of law, order and civilization championed by Ransom. Our budding lawyer/waiter along with Tom's meat and potatoes spill gracelessly onto the floor in a spectacle that is as violent and messy as it is illuminating. The act figuratively "lowers" the status of Ransom's masculinity by literally lowering his body. Likewise, because, in Ford's "wild west," the dominant configuration of heteromasculinity is given priority over god and law, with his masculinity subjugated as such, Ransom's principles, too, are rendered suspect. The cowboy that never loses his footing or bearings lives. The cowboy that does dies (see Shane (1953), The Searchers (1956), or any number of conventional Hollywood Westerns). Like Tom, he displays a seamless masculinity, an unfaltering mastery over space and corporeality (see below). But, also, tripping is a deeply infantalizing act, no matter the setting or victim. Tumbling bodies trigger visions of toddlers awkwardly managing their nascent motor skills, pubescent girls and boys transfixed by their rapidly transforming, "out-of-control" bodies, and hapless school-aged victims desperately fending off playground bullies. Young children, according to normative western discourses, are tremendously naive and short-sighted. Otherwise, the ones that defy this expectation would not be routinely treated by Hollywood as uncanny, supernatural, dangerous, or all of the above at once (see The Sixth Sense (1999), The Shining (1980), Children of the Corn, (1984) or The Exorcist (1973), to name a few). Like Ransom, an ordinary child's orientation towards

reality is skewed by overt narcissism and a superficial account of her immediate and tightly bounded social world (Freud 67). Deeper meanings, nuance, and access to the "bigger picture" come much later –at least, so we are led to believe, in my view, by normative dichotomous categorizations including child/ adult, immature/ mature and ignorance/wisdom. Each binary maintains that with age, hard work and the passage of time—progress, that is—access to knowledge, requisite skills and a coherent understanding of the life world will one day materialize for deserving adults. These dominant dichotomies sustain bourgeois fantasies of personal "development" and total environmental control. More than this, they treat adulthood in the same way that they treat gender: as something more than just an elaborate masquerade. In any case, success vis-à-vis command over ones modern habitat and "growing up" go hand-in-hand under the dictates of American hegemony. Ransom's routine bouts of naivety, coupled with his inability to control his space and bodily movements during this sequence, betray an unexceptional masculinity. He is the man that never grows up.

By way of contrast, Tom's seamless manipulation of the embodied aspects of his masculinity in this scene reveals the paradigmatic heteromasculine "grown up," no doubt highlighting the fractures in Ransom's masculinity at the same time. Enter our archetypal cowboy. In medium shot, Tom swaggers onto the screen from left to centre, his hands coolly hang from his hips, the fingertips of his right hand rest immediately above his holster. His movements are steady, composed and confident. His words are exact, patient and to-the-point. "That's my steak," he remarks calmly. His ensemble is illuminating. Tom wears fitted dress pants, a smart, unbuttoned dinner jacket and a limply-hanging western-style tie that resembles a rooster's wattle more than anything. Also significant is

his erect posture, bulging chest and slender legs. The combined effect is that of Tom resembling a rooster. He is the cock to be and the cock to beat. Liberty springs to his feet. He mirrors Tom's cool, stiff posture and strategic hand placement. For Ford, the villain of the "Old West," too, is acutely aware of the relationship between bodily mastery and survival in "wild country." Cut to close-up of Tom's face. If the man is afraid, his facial features betray nothing. His eyes, while locked onto his opponent and unblinking, appear relaxed. His eyebrows rest neutrally, neither furrowed in anger nor arched in alarm. His jaw hangs unclenched, indicated by the sliver of open space separating his upper and lower lip. A flinch, a twitch, a nervous spasm is all it takes to trigger a messy gun battle during a volatile confrontation such as this–hence Tom placidly instead of abruptly elevates his left arm and points over Liberty's shoulder to draw attention to his long-time companion, Pompey, and his shotgun trained on the surrounded outlaw's mid-section. Liberty instructs a member of his two-man entourage to pick up Tom's steak. After all, it is not a good idea to mess with a bigger man's meat. In a fluid motion, Tom pivots rightward, swiftly kicking Liberty's henchman in the face and pivots back. Neither his balance nor the casual placement of his hands on his upper belt is disturbed. Seamless. As well, Tom strolls up-screen to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Liberty –the former right of screen, the latter left. The shot emphasizes Tom's body mass. His stomach and chest in particular take up a disproportionate amount of screen space. Next to our archetypal cowboy hero Liberty's upper body looks comparatively deflated, while Ransom's, still hugging the floor, fails to even contend. Tom's bulk certainly helps him establish dominance in the confrontation. But his masculine prowess is magnified several times over by his linguistic, spatial and bodily command. Ransom is safe for now.

In a key scene replete with homoerotic innuendo and embodied masculine performativity, Ransom's anxieties reflect in his lack of western-style lexicon, linguistic cunning, and talent for gun-slinging. If one aims to survive "wild country" or succeed in a market-driven democracy that measures human worth based, to a significant degree, on linguistic prowess, one better learn to talk-the-talk. Consider the Nutty Professor (1963). Set in a bustling, mid-century Californian metropolis, the film features a socially inept chemistry professor (Jerry Lewis) who routinely stumbles through his sentences. He discredits his authority in the face of faculty and students all the time as a result. However, as soon as he transforms into his suave, alter-ego, Buddy, not a hint of his former linguistic incompetence remains. Buddy's command of language is total, which he utilizes along with other aspects of his newfound corporeality to rocket to the top of the diegetic social strata. Murray Pomerance takes this point further. On Morty's (Jerry Lewis) relationship to language and power in the Errand Boy (1961), he writes: "finding himself in a foreign situation without language, he is a child who cannot seem to be an adult, which is to say, one managerially and proactively competent to engage with others in the politics and chicanery of everyday competition" (241). Hence, we may trace Ransom's inability to "grow up" not only to his thick naivety, but also to his stunted linguistic abilities evidenced in the following exchange.

Tom speaks first: "I'm tellin' you that Hallie's my girl." As usual, his voice exudes a deep patience and coolness. His words are direct, too. By contrast, Ransom's response is vaguely defensive: "Well I guess everybody pretty much already takes that for granted." Like the Nutty Professor, Ransom's voice meanders melodically. He neglects concealing his emotional state in a smooth, monotone drawl the same way that

Tom does. In contrast, Ransom utters from his throat. Indeed, Ransom's voice sounds nasally and oddly contained as a result. Its pitch fluctuates wildly between shrill and serene aural hues. Tom's vocalizations, meanwhile, sound comparatively sonorous, stoic, and thus quintessentially heteromasculine. His entire chest cavity gets behind projecting his voice. The overarching outcome moreover is that Tom's words appear neither contrived nor self-monitored for content, much like Buddy's. Indeed, a "real" man's masculinity is not derived from dexterous masquerade and routine maintenance, but from the Earth itself –at least, so the dominant American gender ideologies of yesteryear dictate,and as will be sh own below, one of Judith Butler's key frustrations. Hence, the dirt covering Tom's exterior as he converses with the smartly-dressed Ransom only heightens his authenticity at the expense of his counterpart's. Tom's masculinity has been seemingly carved out of the very setting he now inhabits. He is the corporeal equivalent of a landscape that, unlike cityscapes endlessly undergoing spatial reconfigurations at the hands of modern progress, seemingly boasts a history that can be traced back to the Earth's very beginnings. The red dust that settles atop the vast expanse of Arizona tundra and its sharp, wind-swept peaks takes on an air of timelessness when captured so majestically and painterly by Ford's cinematographers. Tom's utterances seemingly channel his soul in a way that Ransom, like Morty and the Nutty Professor, can only mimic.

Ransom's failure to weave his thoughts into a coherent, straightforward speech act also reinforces what an odd pairing Ford's American West and our hero from the East make. Excess and ornamentation abound in the metropolis, markedly affecting dress, etiquette and language there. Indeed, it is interesting to note how the rules of etiquette

that infiltrated stagecoach travel, a deeply eastern mode of transport later adopted out West, appear to guide the potentially more infantile, "uncivilized," or western-raised passengers on how to shape their behaviours to accommodate a Victorian sensibility. Note for yourself:

> Don't swear, nor lop over onto your neighbor when sleeping. Don't ask how far it is to the next station until you get there. Take small change to pay expenses. Never attempt to fire a gun or pistol while on the road; it may frighten the team and the careless handling and cocking of the weapon makes nervous people nervous. Don't discuss politics or religion, nor point out places on the road where horrible murders have been committed, if delicate women are among the passengers. (McCutcheon 3)

The guidelines are discursively part and parcel of Eastern America's western civilizing project. They are a solution to the problem of social order in a densely populated environment. But before the diffusion of modern developments and practices across the frontier, ornamentation in language was rather alien. The socio-geographical setting of the late 19th century American West requires adroit sensorial sensitivity and embodied practices to survive. Indirect language, then, is a luxury the inhabitants of the cinematic "Old West" cannot afford. Ransom routinely fails to adhere to this tacit dictate. He "*guess(es)* everybody *pretty much already* takes that for granted." His words meander as much as his tone and pitch, fundamentally marking his "Otherness." More still, Ransom's response communicates vulnerability and acquiescence, but not just because his response is wordy: his diction is imprecise as well. The prototypical modern urbanized masculine subject customarily cloaks intention and meaning in language thick with social etiquette designed to save face and maintain order (recall the stagecoach etiquette). But his tortuous sentence structure is not just a matter of upbringing. Like the Nutty Professor, Ransom expresses insecurity through language, unwittingly splintering his masculinity in the process. But that is not all.

This scene does more than establish the disjointed nature of Ransom's masculinity in the cinematic "Old West"; it establishes, too, that the ordinary modern urban man played by Ransom possesses an inept masculinity no matter what landscape he encounters –rural or urban. Indeed, that Ford is critical of the archetypal modern man in his ordinary modern metropolis is evidenced throughout the director's not so subtle dramatization of Tom and Ransom's uneven talents for gun-slinging. The link between masculine prowess and the gun resonates deeply in today's shared cultural imagination. Look no further then The Waterfront (1951), The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956) or the Bond Franchise to grasp the extent to which the gun as principle force of effective urban masculinity has long been celebrated in American film. Male potency as reflected through gun-slinging dexterity is not a geography-specific social phenomenon, then. Thus, if Ransom's ability to handle a six-shooter is inchoate in the Old West, he would fair no better back east. Ford's eastern boy lacks no matter where he resides.

In the "Old West," a man's weapon—the quintessential phallic symbol—belongs as much to his embodied arsenal as do his posture, clothing, mannerisms, and lexicon. While each function is deeply mechanical—standing erect, putting on pants, swaggering, cocking a rifle, manipulating one's tongue, lips and larynx to produce intelligible sounds with manageable effects—a skilled artisan of normative masculinity choreographs each of his corporeal constituents to appear as genuine, or, as *un*mechanized, as possible. Ransom withdraws his six-shooter only to have it unceremoniously plucked from his fingertips. Our cowboy hero evaluates the weapon. He bounces it twice then fingers the barrel. His grip, lax and delicate, lets the gun droop. Tom's grasp and his overtly unenthused reaction morphs Ransom's six-shooter into a flaccid instrument. Indeed,

Tom's handling of Ransom's revolver, however brief, instantaneously transforms it from a fearsome weapon into a child's innocuous pop gun. Thus the gesture reinforces Ransom's juvenile rank. By highlighting the embryonic quality of Ransom's struggle to "pull off" the role of prototypical western hero, where he resembles more a boy at play with an over-active imagination than the man he so desperately mimics, the gesture facilitates Tom's primacy as well. Ransom *plays* the role more than he *lives* it. Tom, on the other hand, unequivocally *lives* the role. He is Earth made flesh. More accurately, Tom *appears* to live the role better than the rest –he naturalizes it, in other words, to the point where the distinction between performativity and authenticity fades ineluctably. Yet, like any myth, Tom's "essence" cannot, as Roland Barthes observes, evolve from nature itself (1). Still, that there in fact appears to be one for the nation is what sets the stage for what Judith Butler calls 20th century America's "compulsory heterosexuality" (20). Without the normative fantasy, Ransom and Tom's confrontation would lose all intelligibility. Indeed, if "heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmic idealization of itself," as Butler claims (21), this scene theatricalizes the attempt. And if Tom, the film's hero, doubles as the "phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity" (21), Ransom is his envious shadow, endlessly striving to "naturalize [himself] as the original" (21). All in all, what gets dramatized is the extent to which "the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself" (21). To take it further, it is in Ransom's inexhaustible chain of lack that symptoms of the nefarious aspects of the modern age are witnessed. Back to the scene: Ransom prepares to shoot an empty paint can tossed a ways into the field. First, he stands erect, but not in a display of confidence that mirror's the effect of Tom's posture; instead,

his body constricts to brace against the inevitable blast of the gun. His face gives it away, too. The camera shot lingers long enough to capture Ransom's squinty eyes, pursed lips, and tense facial muscles. In other words, the camera shows him sealing, as best he can, every orifice in his face to shield his most vulnerable parts. The gesture reveals his extreme unease and discomfort with the weapon and the power it wields. Indeed, what is striking is that even before Ransom shoots, his behaviour betrays that, to him, a gun is unequivocally alien—a dangerous prop; it is anything but his own appendage. Next, Ransom mechanically raises his right arm. It hangs rigidly and unbending as he prepares to shoot. His face constricts more still. He aims. He—"Don't forget to cock it." Tom interrupts, snatching Ransom's gun for a second time. He cocks it. "And balance it light in your hand…and don't *jerk* the trigger…*squ-ee-ze* the trigger." Here, Tom knows intuitively that an acute ability to wield a weapon with delicacy and adroitness are precursors to an organic masculinity on the frontier. And if Ford is tacitly pointing us to the theme of clumsy, adolescent sexual self-discovery in Tom's dialogue—*cock* the trigger but don't *jerk* it—the director reminds filmgoers that Ransom still boasts a fledgling masculinity. If he is still exploring how the equipment works, how will he ever manage to gun down a veteran gunslinger? His underdeveloped movements, naiveté, and now his sexual innocence all point to an ineffectual masculinity. But Tom is not convinced that the lesson is learned. He instructs Ransom to place three cans filled with white paint atop three consecutive fence posts. Before Ransom has a chance to retreat to a safe distance, Tom, shooting from his hip, expertly explodes them one after the other, the last can erupting immediately over Ransom's head. White paint spills all over our eastern boy's freshly pressed suit. If the gun in the West is the focus point of male virility, the

once innocuous character of the white paint takes on new meaning in this moment. An addition painted white is one thing. It signals domesticity, innocence and motherliness – an appropriate symbol of Tom's mythic dreams of bourgeoisie and family bliss. A man painted white *by Tom's gun* is another. Sure, it signals Tom's efforts to shape Ransom's undisciplined body according to masculine conventions befitting of the "Wild West" much in the same way that he labours to whip the "wildness" out of his own home using the same white paint. But the gesture also signals Tom's special claim to Ransom's masculinity. The white paint, an extension of Tom's gun and thus of his embodiment as well, coats Ransom, subordinating his masculinity, marking him as Tom's belonging to do with as he pleases, and disciplining him for trespassing on his turf and the turf of the "wild west" all at once. Ransom, offended, slugs Tom in the face, but by now the damage is done.

If the misguided masculine subject meanders aimlessly in his modern day environment, so, too, does his nation. Consider Roosevelt's credo from his essay, "The Manly Virtues and Practical Politics":

> If we wish to do good work for our country we must be unselfish, disinterested, sincerely desirous of the well-being of the commonwealth, and capable of devoted adherence to a lofty ideal; but in addition we must be vigorous in mind and body, able to hold our own in rough conflict with our fellows, able to suffer punishment without flinching, and, at need, to repay it in kind with full interest. A peaceful and commercial civilization is always in danger of suffering the loss of the virile fighting qualities without which no nation, however cultured, however refined, however thrifty and prosperous, can ever amount to anything. (qtd. in Anderson 15)

Ford and Roosevelt's visions of the relationship between national fortitude, moral certainty and hard masculinity are one in the same. Liberty Valance is therefore traditionally read as a critique of the nefarious impact the modern age has had on the security and trajectory of America (see Anderson 2006). Not only are the collisions of

opposing masculinities staged in the film designed to establish a lineage linking the men of the cinematic "wild west" to the comforts of modern day civilization in America; but also to demonstrate that the lineage along with its system of values have long since been severed following the mythical setting's "domestication" in the wake of rapid mechanization and urban development at the turn of the 20th century (Anderson 13). Yet deep within Ford's profoundly conservative portrait of the "Old West" are diffuse traces of deep-seated modern anxieties that manifest in the embodied features of James Stewart's Ransom. Time and again, we observe that the unique set of masculine inadequacies he encounters in the "Old West" correlates to a distinct pattern of conditions that define life in the modern, urban metropolis. In the city and in the West, Ransom's ineffectual linguistic, visionary and gun-wielding aptitudes are symptomatic of a severe complacency cultivated in the face of an urban environment that offers the bourgeoisie easy access to sustenance and security. Yet apprehension towards such a system is a tell tale sign that the seams of the modern age betray cracks. Convenience begets vulnerability. Yet Vincent Mosco reminds us that myths *reveal* as much as they conceal (19). While Modern progress narratives conceal their myriad drawbacks by displacing them, in this case, in the endless struggle to replicate the phantasmic heteronormative agent—another mythical creature, to be sure—they reveal a genuine desire for peace and equitable democratic communion at the same time. It is in the cracks where uneasiness roams that we must go to unsettle what myths conceal. It is there that an acute and affectionate awareness towards existence will start to unravel.

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