

GANGSTERS AND THE DEATH OF THE AMERICAN COWBOY

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"Some people call me the space cowboy. Some call me the gangster of love."

— Steve Miller

The scourge of many an outlaw in the American West was the Pinkerton detective. With their iconic symbol—the all-seeing eye—the Pinkertons struck fear into lawbreakers, investigating “robberies, murders, and other major crimes” (Repetto 11). But in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, the Pinkertons became known as the brutal arm of the establishment, and enemies of the working man—“they beat up strikers, burned headquarters, and safeguarded strikebreakers” (Marling 96). It was during this period that one of the agency’s young detectives in Butte, Montana, a young man from the East Coast who had seen a Pinkerton ad in a newspaper, became disillusioned with his work and moved to California to write crime stories. That young man was Dashiell Hammett, and he would go on to father the hard-boiled detective novel. Hammett’s story—he would later become a member of the Communist party and a Hollywood blacklister—can be seen as an allegory for the end of the Western mythos. The gangsters of 20th century Hollywood represent the dark culmination of Manifest Destiny and the death of the cowboy legend. Gangster stories and cowboy stories share a common iconography and common themes—in fact, the gangster story can be seen as a continuation of the cowboy story—but the ending is not a happy one.

According to Ron Goulart, the “hardboiled detective . . . supplanted the dime novels and fiction weeklies, taking over for heroes

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like Buffalo Bill" (xi). In his book, *Bullets over Hollywood*, John McCarty is clear about the connection: "Th[e] link . . . between the Western and the gangster film [is] not just superficial, for the gangster film is not simply an offshoot of the Western. It is the heir to it in our popular culture. It is the modern continuation of America's story reflected on film—a story the Western had grown too old to tell" (2).

In the film *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), Gladys George's character, Panama Smith, is a casually veiled version of famous New York nightclub hostess "Texas" Guinan. Guinan, a Texas native, emerged during the prohibition era "as a blond, mascaraed Calamity Jane . . . in cowgirl chaps with six-shooter in hand" (James 100). Just as Bat Masterson was able to find his niche after the bloodbath at the O.K. Corral as a sportswriter in New York, so, it seems, did gangsters feel at home with the idea of the cowboy. With the barbed fencing of the prairie, the expansion of the railroad, the invention of the automobile and the airplane, and the intrusion of the skyscraper, the smooth and rounded symbols of the West became sharper, starker, more blocked and jagged. Where a cowboy saw rolling hills and plains, the gangster saw smokestacks and darkened windows; where the cowboy saw distant riders approaching, the gangster saw the knifelike headlights of a passing car. The sloped shoulder and round hat of the town sheriff became the fine pinstripes and sharpened fedora of the city detective. But, despite this new acuteness and change of milieu, it was a fairly smooth transition as far as iconography goes— both the western and the gangster film feature a man with a cigarette and a strong jaw, hat down over his eyes, standing in a saloon (or speakeasy) with a gun in his hand.

As similar as their visuals can sometimes be, the thematic kinship of the two genres is even more striking. A good example of the classic western stereotype is the John Wayne character in the John Ford classic, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962). In the film, Wayne is neither a lawman nor a criminal. Although he has a deep sense of right and wrong, he is a man who lives outside the realms of law and order. He makes his own rules and his world is run by a bloody social Darwinism: the man with the fastest gun and the hardest resolve is right. When Jimmy Stewart's lawyer character arrives in town with his law books, he is portrayed as a starchy-eyed idealist. It is only with his (supposed) gunning down of the villainous Liberty Valance that Stewart's orderly ideas gain their necessary gravitas.

The prototype gangster character could be defined as James Cagney's character in *The Roaring Twenties*, and he has much in common with the John Wayne character from *Liberty Valance*. He has an innate

moral compass—he doesn't think twice about turning down an adoring high-schooler because of her age, and though involved in a vast bootlegging empire, he proudly drinks milk (at least in the beginning). Cagney's Eddie Bartlett is a man just returned from World War I, back in the new world and ready to make a fresh start. But there are no fresh starts for Eddie and his kind, so he is forced to create for himself a world where he can play by his own rules—where the idealistic laws of man don't apply.

In both the Western and gangster myths, there is a fierce respect for independence. The cowboy and the gangster worlds rely on their own utilitarian codes—think of Judge Roy Bean, "The Law West of the Pecos," who famously disregarded the written law in favor of his own instincts. In John Huston's film *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972), Bean claims, "I am the new law in this area . . . I know the law since I have spent my entire life in its flagrant disregard." As one critic claims, "Huston's hero never really comes to terms with the notion that there is an external authority" (Greenfield, Osborn and Robson 157). By way of correlation, look at Robert Duvall's Character Tom Hagen in *The Godfather* (1972). Hagen has a law degree and is Consigliere to the Corleone family. He is a crackerjack attorney, but his loyalties do not lie within the American justice system, but within the complex moral sphere of the New York (and Las Vegas) *demimonde*. Both Bean and Hagen are familiar with the law, but only so that they can operate independently of it.

The Corleone family of *The Godfather* had come west, to America, hoping to find a fresh start, and the American West was settled by men looking for a new chance at life. But here is the crucial difference: in the West of the 19th century, there was still a vast horizon full of optimism, a "geography of hope" as the Western novelist Wallace Stegner put it (Meine 113). So, what happens when there is no more "West" toward which the young man can go? What if that young man in search of an unsullied utopia comes bang up against a metaphorical ocean, or—more troubling—the crime-ridden, blood-soaked streets of Los Angeles.

It is no coincidence that many of the great hard-boiled novels and film-noir movies take place in California—*The Big Sleep* (1948), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *In a Lonely Place* (1950) and on and on . . . For while Hollywood may be the city where dreams come true for a few, it is also, for many, the city where dreams go to die. It is the city of The Black Dahlia and the George Reeves suicide/murder.

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There is one vital component that I want to mention that is present in many *noir* films but absent from Western films: the presence of the *Femme Fatale*. In the myth of the West (and indeed, in the true West), there are very few women. Those that do appear are motherly, nurturing, and often complacent—look at the kindly (and illiterate) Vera Miles in *Liberty Valance*, for example. But in gangster/ *noir* films, there is a much darker view of women. In the early gangster pictures, *Public Enemy* (1931) or *Scarface* (1932), for example, one sees the standard gun moll—greedy, ditzy, and prone to betrayal. We also see another gangster film trope, the gangster's mother. While she can be nurturing, this is not the kindly, worldly-wise mother of the Old West, but rather a simpering, obtuse old woman who takes abuse from her hoodlum son without questions. With the advent of World War II and true *film noir*, we see the addition of the truly iconic *femme fatale*. According to James F. Maxfield, "Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) established the basic plot motifs of film noir—the evil seductress, the tempted hero, an atmosphere of pervasive evil" (26). A few years later, *White Heat* (1949) would explode the simpering gangster mother archetype, replacing "simpering" with "malevolent." After viewing a *noir* film, one is tempted to try and send word to the past, to some of those lonesome cowboys on the frontier building a life for their future wives: "Yes, gentlemen, the women are coming. But they are *evil!*"

The famous closing scene of American Western films is of the cowboy riding off into the sunset. But what happens on the other side of that Western horizon? Perhaps there is a city there, and perhaps our hero finds himself in another famous closing shot: that of the gangster gunned down in the street, face down in a pool of blood.

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