

THE FORMAL STRUCTURE OF RED RIVER
AND THE "HAWKSIAN WOMAN"

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Among the Westerns directed by Howard Hawks, critics have tended to concentrate on the "trilogy" of Rio Bravo, El Dorado and Rio Lobo, while passing over his first--and perhaps greatest--Western, Red River. As Robert Sklar notes of Red River in a recent article, "Nearly everyone pays homage to it; almost no one pays attention to it."¹

Sklar sees this critical inattention (including elitist dismissals of the film as being simply a good Western with no deeper messages) as having an ideological foundation: a (perhaps unconscious) desire by critics to obscure the social significance of the film. For Red River, Sklar makes clear, is "about the issue of empire," "the social compact that binds people together for a common purpose," and "the even more fundamental issues of economic survival, of commodity production, above all of the need to find a market for one's goods."²

Yet, we may perhaps excuse the critics for having failed to notice these seemingly obvious issues which lie at the heart of the movie, for the product of the ideological system of an historical time and place, one which reinforces that ideology, tends to hide its political and economic underpinnings, to make them appear as part of a natural and eternal order outside of history. Even though political and economic concerns motivate the story of Red River, its plot--its formal structure--obscures these social relationships. Superimposed over them are sets of binary relationships--father-son, boss-hired hands, country-town, and above all man-woman--which are removed from social and political life to an idealistic, mythic realm. The contracts and compacts which Sklar sees governing human relationships in the film are hidden by a system which projects itself as eternal, ahistorical, non-dialectical. Central to this system is the role of woman.

Women occupy a privileged position in much of Hawks's work; his strong and seemingly independent female characters are exceptional for a Hollywood director. Naomi Wise notes that in Hawks's films, "the heroines are, if anything, superior to the heroes," that the stereotypical "good girl and bad girl are fused into a single, heroic heroine, who is both sexual and valuable."³ This observation is confirmed by female science fiction author and screenwriter Leigh Brackett, who worked on a number of Hawks's movies, including his later Westerns.⁴ The "Hawksian woman" is exemplified by Rosalind Russell's portrayal of Hildy Johnson in His Girl Friday, Hawks's reworking of The Front Page. Of this movie, Tom Powers observes that it "offers the alluring mirage of a sexual relationship based on equality rather than exploitation, with a woman achieving political-sexual parity through her intelligence, creative energy and economic independence."⁵

However, Powers goes on, this relationship is precisely a mirage because "the film mythologizes the roles of men and women. It establishes as 'natural' some modes of conduct that are in fact economically and socially determined and that actually predetermine the possibilities of

meaningful change."⁶

Similarly, in Red River, while the female characters may seem to be equal to the men, they actually serve a complementary function--neither man nor woman can be whole without the other, and neither can ever be complete within her or himself. This symbiosis--this binary pairing of seeming opposites for mutual benefit--is typical of all the social relationships in Red River. Mythic, artificial and static, these pairings are made to seem natural and dynamic when set against natural oppositions of color (black and white), setting (Indoors and outdoors), and time (day and night).

The story of Red River concerns Tom Dunson (John Wayne) who, with his sidekick Groot (Walter Brennan), leaves a wagon train to make his own way to Texas. After they have left, the wagon train is attacked by Indians and the settlers are killed, including Dunson's fiancée, Fen (Colleen Gray). The one survivor, who escapes with his cow, is a young teenager, Matthew Garth (played as an adult by Montgomery Clift), whom Dunson takes with him and later adopts. Together, the three men appropriate land from a Mexican noble and found a cattle ranch. Years later, they begin a drive north to sell the herd, but Dunson becomes increasingly tyrannical and Matt finally takes control of the drive from him. In return, Dunson vows to kill Matt. On the way to the new railhead at Abilene, Matt and the cowboys rescue a wagon train under attack by Indians. Here Matt meets and falls in love with Tess Millay, but heads on to Abilene. Dunson also meets Tess and takes her to Abilene with him. The next day Matt and Dunson have a showdown, but Matt refuses to draw his gun; instead, there is a fistfight which is finally stopped by Tess, and the two men are reconciled.

Within this story, the social relationships are clear. Tom Dunson and Matthew Garth are father and (adopted) son, but they are also partners. Matt needs Dunson for care and protection, but Dunson also needs Matt, both for his lone cow with which to start a herd and for his help (the boy, it turns out, is fast with a gun). Full partnership between the two men is delayed, though--Matt's initial will not appear on the brand, he is told, until he earns it. The need for mutual support obviously also exists between Dunson and his hired hands: he needs them to get his cattle to market; they need him for the money.

These relationships among Dunson, Matt and the cowboys are subsumed into a larger pattern, that of the relationship between country and town and, on a larger scale, between the individual and the nation. While Dunson's cattle need a buyer and Mr. Melville, the cattle agent (Harry Carey, Sr.) needs a seller, this simple commercial binary opposition is representative of a more important relationship. Matt, having taken over from Dunson, is not selling only his cattle, but also those of neighboring ranchers which were rounded up by Dunson, and this first drive up the Chisholm Trail has opened up a market for all the ranchers of Texas. Mr. Melville represents the Greenwood Trading Company of Illinois which in turn will supply its beef to the cities and the nation. Tom Dunson's dream of feeding a hungry, growing nation, in Sklar's words "the link between his personal empire and the nation's imperial future,"⁷ has come to pass.

In all of these relationships, the economic factors are present but downplayed, naturalized. Exchanges of services, cash and goods take place communally, almost through barter (even in the bargaining over the

price per head); in Sklar's terms, the relationships are primarily those of mutually agreed upon compacts rather than legal contracts. But even these economic relations are obscured by the setting of the binary social groups against natural dichotomies of color and setting.

Black and white hats play their traditional roles. When Dunson leaves the wagon train to strike off on his own, he is wearing a white hat. The Mexican who tried to keep Dunson, Groot and Matt from settling on the spot they have chosen wears a black sombrero. And, given the fact that the Mexican draws first, there is no question of who is in the right when he is shot.

But Hawks and his collaborators add an unexpected edge to this oldest of Western film cliches. For after the transitional montage which depicts the passage of years and the growth of Dunson's ranch, we see an aged Dunson now wearing a black hat. Soon we hear Groot inform Matt that Dunson has changed. Given the black hat and the new crosses marking the graves of those who tried to usurp Dunson's land, we can be certain that the change is not for the better. Already we have the indication that the father-son relationship is headed for trouble. And, despite the threats of rivalry between Matt and the hired hand Cherry Valance (John Ireland), the more neutral shading of their clothes is a clue that our real concerns for conflict should lie elsewhere. Thus, the traditional symbolism of color is used not just to tag a character, but to indicate that character's development and to forecast the direction of the story.

Contractual relationships, when they occur, are naturalized through setting. In the world of Red River, the outdoors is a place of work and action while the indoors is where people gather to make the agreements that allow them to work and act together. The cowboys are signed on for the drive in the bunkhouse. Melville rides out from town to greet the cattle drive, but he and Matt settle the terms of sale in his office. Matt and Tess seal their vows of love for each other (and perhaps sleep together) inside the hotel the night before the showdown with Dunson. Of course, these are natural settings for such events, but the settings serve to underscore the separation and mutual dependence of town and country, action and agreement. Hard work outdoors and civil agreements indoors, the film suggest, are necessary to one another in the fulfillment of a task.

This naturalization of human interaction is further elaborated by the opposition of day and night. The proper place to be at night is indoors; the contract with the hired hands is made and the check for the cattle is signed at night as well as indoors. Outdoors, though, the night is a time of danger and disruption, while the day is a time of cooperative effort and the resolution of conflicts. During the night, Dunson and Groot are attacked by Indians on the banks of the Red River, and Dunson learns of Fen's death when he sees the bracelet he gave her on the arm of one of the attackers.

By day, during the cattle drive, the men work together, united by the general, diffuse sunlight and bound together in common effort. By night, though, when the drive has halted, they are highlighted and separated by the campfire light: they drift off into small groups or complete isolation. Reasons for conflict arise; at night the men hear of the new

railhead at Abilene which Dunson vetoes as a destination; at night they complain about the quality of the food; three of the hands attempt to mutiny and two other, Teeler and Laredo, desert at night. Most spectacularly, night is the time of the cattle stampede, a result of human weakness and selfishness. Bunk Kenneally, a cowboy with a sweet tooth, attempts to steal some sugar from the chuck wagon and upsets the pots and pans, spooking the cattle and starting the stampede which ultimately claims another hand's life.

By night, and with the help of others, Dunson manages to win his conflicts, but the problems remain because he is the source of the conflict, growing increasingly isolated and tyrannical. It is only during the day, when Dunson prepares to hang Teeler and Laredo, that Matt rebels, assumes control and brings order to the drive again. Dunson has failed to give his men the necessary support, so Matt must return the pairing to its previous balance. The harmony of cooperation between boss and hired hands is restored, but the night remains a time of danger because it now conceals the vengeful Dunson.

Through these colors and settings--traditional, natural, seemingly eternal in their symbolic value--the human relationships in Red River are abstracted from history. Despite the emphasis the movie gives to the historical significance of this cattle drive, its message is the fulfillment of the manifest destiny of the nation through an unchanging human nature which operates in predetermined social roles. These roles, though, are by themselves insufficient to fulfill the mythic structure of the world of Red River; they need an extra element to complete the story, to fulfill the historical imperative of the film, and to reconcile the elements of color and setting on all levels. That element is to be found in the role of woman.

The appearances by women in Red River are relatively brief, but they are still significant. For while the binary opposition of man and woman is similar to the others (father-son, boss-hands, country-town), these other relationships are all between men. Women, therefore, affect all other sets of relationships within the film.

Woman is the necessary counterpart to man, essential in reconciling him to the world and to himself. Dunson's great mistake, we are given to understand, was leaving Fen behind with the wagon train. Guilt at being partially responsible for her death and the lack of her moderating influence have made him a driven, hardened and lonely man. What good is left in Dunson comes from his relationship with Matt, and Robert Sklar points out that the androgynous personality of Montgomery Clift makes Matt "The bearer of the feminine principle in a society of men without women."⁸

Androgyny, however, cannot be a permanent state in the world of Red River. Oppositions cannot coexist forever in only one member of the set. The sexual taunting of Matt by Cherry Valance is a challenge to Matt's masculinity exemplified by the shooting contest they hold when they first meet. Once Matt has asserted his manhood by deposing Dunson and, soon after, finding his own female opposite in Tess Millay, Valance's taunting ceases. He not only abets the courtships of the couple, but finally gives up his life for Matt by challenging Dunson. Dunson, too, is in the end willing to forgo the father-son dualism, with all its sexual over-

tones and to put Matt's initial on the brand and accept him as a full partner--man-to-man.

This final reconciliation, though, occurs only when the fight between the two men is stopped by Tess Millay, brandishing a pistol. Despite the complaints of some viewers at this ending, it is a necessary one, because woman is the great reconciling force of Red River. As the opposite member of the set man-woman, she not only fulfills men's individual lives, but adjusts men to their natural settings--reverses the polarities, as it were, in the values of black-white, indoors-outdoors and day-night.

For Tess, black is actually a positive color. When Matt first meets her fighting off the Indians attacking the wagon train, she is wearing a light-colored dress. Matt rejects her, apparently thinking that as a woman travelling west alone, she must be a prostitute (many of the travellers seem to be gamblers and other low types). When they next meet, though, he accepts her because she is dressed in widow's black. Tess continues to wear black until the day of the showdown in Abilene when she appears in a domestic gingham household dress.

"Naturally," as a woman, Tess is an agent of domesticity. Thus, her place is in the town, as the men's is in the country, and indoors, as theirs is outdoors. Inside her tent at the wagon train camp, it is Tess who dominates or holds her own with the men. She even shows herself to be Dunson's equal in determination. Compared to the wounded man sitting at her table, it is she who seems to be the stronger as she stands over him, lighting a match with a sweeping gesture. Indeed, Dunson admires her enough to ask her to bear him a son to take Matt's place. Being in her element, Tess can refuse this request and even get Dunson to take her to Abilene to see Matt one more time. Of course, in the town she is also in her element and can command the fight to stop.

If woman's domesticity rules indoors and the town, then her sexuality rules the night, both indoors and out. When Dunson says goodbye to Fen, she reminds him that the sun shines only half the day and that he will need her for the other half. To his future sorrow, he does not heed her plea (itself made in the weakest possible place for her, outdoors during the day while wearing a light colored dress). Tess, on the other hand, restores the night to Matthew Garth, going out from the wagon train to be with him as he anxiously watches the herd and awaits Dunson's attack, and meeting him in his hotel room in town. Her own meeting with Dunson is from her strongest possible position--not only is she inside her tent and wearing black, but the meeting takes place at night.

Certainly, Tess Millay has the appealing strength of other Hawksian women. She is not scared of guns, she suffers an arrow wound without complaint, and she has the spunk to stand up to Dunson (the fact that both of them have been wounded and have their arms in slings at their meeting makes them seem all the more equal). Dunson's comment to Matt, "You'd better marry that girl," indicates the approval we should have for her. And certainly, the kind of woman represented by Tess and (presumably) Fen is more appealing than the heroines of other Westerns. In John Ford's films, for example, the women may be feisty on occasion, but are much more simply passive tenders of the hearth.

It is the active qualities of women in Red River that give the movie much of its dynamism and drive. Women are not simply passive beings, but interact with men, bringing them qualities which men lack and giving positive values to settings which for men alone are negative. This interaction keeps all the social relationships in the film in process and prevents them from resolving into stale dichotomies or reactionary clichés.

Altogether, the role of women in the film is crucial in giving the world of the movie--one which is stable, orderly and logical--its appeal. The danger of such appeal is that the world of Red River is not our world. The real conditions of history that created the first drive up the Chisholm Trail and the drives which followed are obscured by such order. Relationships between buyer and seller, employee and boss are divested of the conflicts of interest which underlie them; instead, they become cooperative ventures between men of good will. Such relationships are made to seem as natural as the sexual pairing of men and women--an unchanging part of nature and human nature.

Yet, that sexual pairing itself is a false opposition. Though presented in the movie as if they were members of an equation, each term equal in value, the positions of man and woman in fact cannot be reversed--neither can replace the other.⁹ This is not true (to the same degree at least) of the strictly male relationships within the film. The son can replace the father, the individual employee can conceivably replace the boss. (even though father cannot become son nor the employer become a worker), and the cowboy and the townsman can conceivably trade places. Social factors might inhibit such exchanges, but the men in Red River share a field of action (daytime, outdoors) that would make such exchanges of place at least thinkable.

Men and women, though, inhabit separate fields of action that might as well be separate worlds. Neither can replace the other nor attempt to join both female and male qualities within her or himself without risking disaster. Man, master of the day and the outdoors, cattle raiser and contract maker, remains the controlling and determining force of society. Woman must be content merely to support, to be the little woman behind the great man, the hand that rocks the cradle and rules the world vicariously.

Red River, then, is not only about the destined role of post-war America, but (like so many other films of the late 1940s and 1950s) also about the proper place of men and women within that society; both messages, through the story and structure which present them, are made to seem natural and inevitable. If it is good that Tom Dunson cannot live by masculine imperatives alone, it is dangerous for Matt Garth to conjoin the two sexes in an androgynous whole. And, by extension, Tess Millay can never hope to exchange her domain of household and of night for something else. In the world of Red River, both Hawksian woman and Hawksian man are still trapped within their roles.

NOTES

¹ Robert Sklar, "RED RIVER"--Empire to the West," Cineaste, 9, No. 1 (1978), 15.

² Sklar, p. 15.

³ Naomi Wise, "The Hawksian Woman," Take One, 3 (Jan.-Feb. 1971), 17.

⁴ Leigh Brackett, "A Comment on The Hawksian Woman," Take One, 3 (July-Aug. 1971), 19-20.

⁵ Tom Powers, "Screwball Liberation: HIS GIRL FRIDAY," Jump Cut, No. 17 (April 1978), p. 25.

⁶ Powers, p. 25.

⁷ Sklar, p. 19.

⁸ Sklar, p. 17.

⁹ I am indebted for this mathematical analogy to Gayatri Spivak in a polyseminar titled "Women and Discourse," Department of Comparative Literature, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Feb. 19-23, 1979.