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# 'He had a Horse Called Bill' (*Yellow Sky*): The Appropriation of Shakespeare in the Western.

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Studying film from the perspective of genre theory requires analysis of cinematic techniques and contextual culture (filmic and social). Christine Gledhill claims that genre provides 'a framework of structuring rules […] which act as a form of 'supervision' over the work of film-makers and the work of reading by an audience'.[1] This definition indicates that each genre adheres to a fixed hierarchal form. Alternatively, Anthony Easthope argues that genre should be understood as an abstract, theoretical structure, which is transformed by each new production so 'any instance of a genre will be necessarily different'.[2] Easthope implies that the 'structuring rules' are not fixed but allow filmmakers ideological concerns and social and cultural environments to influence their individual films and aid in developing the genre framework itself. My essay shall adhere to this latter argument.

In agreement with Easthope, Mary Bandy and Kevin Stoehr have argued that, post-World War Two, the Western experienced a 'gradual transformation of genre'[3] towards more 'psychologically expressive Westerns'[4] which was due to the public's desire for darker subject matter. Alan Lovell specifies that these new Westerns did not alter the genre but simply imposed 'a new sensibility on the old forms',[5] retaining the classic wild west scenery of the 19th Century American frontier. Andre Bazin has called these new Westerns 'superwesterns'[6] and Lovell refers to them as 'adult westerns'.[7] However, for the purposes of this essay, I shall be adopting Bandy's term 'psychological western' because of its explicit allusions to the increased interest in exploring characters' inner struggles.

I shall be analysing three Westerns, *Broken Lance* (1954), *Yellow Sky* (1948) and *Jubal* (1956),[8] each produced in this Post-War period, in order to examine this theory of generic development from classic to psychological western. The classic western dealt with mythological stories of morality, heroism and the establishment of American civilisation.[9] These films are appropriations, according to Julie Sanders' definition of appropriation as 'a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product'.[10] Her term 'cultural product' is extremely useful as it implies that the film's current cultural environment (like audience and filmmakers ideological concerns) has a significant influence on the outcome. Studying how these films interpret their source material should indicate

[1] Christine Gledhill, 'Genre', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. Pam Cook (London: British Film Institute, 1987), p. 59.
[2] Anthony Easthope, 'Notes on Genre', *Screen Education*, 32:33 (1979): 39-44 (p. 40).
[3] Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* (California: University of California Press, 2012), p.157.
[4] Ibid., p. 156.
[5] Alan Lovell, 'The western', *Screen Education*, 41 (1967): 92-103 (p. 101).
[6] Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema?,* Vol. 2, trans. by Hugh Gray (London: University of California Press, 1971), p. 66.
[7] Lovell, p. 95.
[8] *Broken Lance*, dir. by Edward Dmytryk (Twentieth Century Fox, 1954) [on DVD]; *Yellow Sky*, dir. by William A. Wellman (Twentieth Century Fox, 1948) [on DVD]; *Jubal,* dir. by Delmer Daves (Columbia Pictures, 1956) [on DVD].
[9] Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, p. 149.
[10] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 26.

which themes and issues they believed the Western genre should be exploring. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen claim that Shakespeare helps 'us to understand the human condition',[11] an issue at the heart of the psychological western, suggesting that these films are using Shakespeare in order to 'deepen'[12] the Western genre.

*Broken Lance* appropriates the story of *Lear*. Karin Brown claims that 'in post-Second World War England, *King Lear* [was] performed more times than in its entire prior performance history' because the play spoke 'to the contemporary psyche',[13] suggesting that it should lend itself nicely to the new psychological western. *Broken Lance* primarily fits Lovell's requirements for the classic western.[14] Lear's kingdom is reimagined as a cattle ranch, built up by Max Devereaux (Spencer Tracy) and his sons. It contains the revenge theme, drawn predominantly from the Edgar-Edmund strand of the play. Like Edgar, Joe (Robert Wagner) wishes to revenge his brother (Richard Widmark) for his treatment of their father and Ben, similar to Edmund, wants to revenge himself on his father for his past treatment. The conflict of Lear's crumbling authority becomes the historic theme of civilising the West, utilising the play's themes of change and tradition. Devereaux insists on his old west ways of dealing with business: 'you have to run a ranch from the back of a horse not from the chair of a cattle-man's club'[15] and resists his sons' pressure to pursue business in town. Indeed, aided by the new cinemascope process, Deveraux's wild plans are shot in panoramic, wide-lens and long takes, whereas the town is filmed in mid-shots and relatively shorter takes making it seem claustrophobic. The film conveys a nostalgia for the old west and a necessity to develop, reflecting the central narrative of the classic western.

The psychological western, as described by Bandy, involved a 'deepening and complicating the characters and dramatic situations framed by […] familiar patterns'.[16] *Broken Lance* clearly contains these classic patterns; however, I agree with Yvonne Griggs' claim that Devereaux's character is not explored in any psychological depth. Griggs says that he is 'psychologically static'.[17] Indeed, his emotions are conveyed through outward actions. His anger at his sons for not signing to save Joe is manifested in a display of violence; the camera focuses on the whip pinning Ben to the ground, rather than Devereaux's facial expression. This illustrates what Warshow sees as the central problem of the Western: that masculine identity is expressed through violence.[18] To counter his declining Patriarchal power, Devereaux chooses to assert his masculinity through violence. Devereaux is characterised by outward actions and not by any deeper psychological discomfort. Using a psychologically complex source text is not enough to make a film into a psychological western.

However, the characterisation of Joe, who acts as Cordelia, allows them to begin grappling with more complex issues of self-identity and race. The issue of parentage is explored in *Lear* through Edmund: 'why brand they us / With base? With baseness?'[19] *Broken Lance* develops this issue to incorporate an exploration of racial identity through Joe, who describes himself as 'a half-breed'[20] to Barbra (Jean Peters). Howard calls the Joe-Barbara romance 'an anti-racist Romeo and Juliet subplot';[21] however, it would be more accurate to describe it as the 'Othello subplot' as Joe's racial identity is the barrier between

[11] Jonathan Bate, 'Introduction', in *King Lear*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 2009), p. 12.
[12] Bandy and Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride,* p. 157.
[13] Bate, p. 165.
[14] Lovell, p. 97.
[15] *Broken Lance*.
[16] Bandy and Stoehr, p. 157.
[17] Yvonne Griggs, 'King Lear as Western Elegy', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 35:2 (2007): 92-100 (p. 96).
[18] Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1970), p. 66.
[19] William Shakespeare, *King Lear,* ed. by Bate and Rasmussen, I.2.9-10.
[20] *Broken Lance*.
[21] Howard, 'Shakespeare's Cinematic Offshoots', p. 307.

them. Just as Edmund questions the effect of his bastardy on his personality, Joe struggles between his love for Barbara and his fear of 'what people will say', exposing the issue of how parentage effects identity. In the romantic scene by the spring, Joe delivers the line 'four days ago I wasn't in love with you'[22] before immediately standing up and exiting the frame, suggesting his wish to escape the judgemental gaze of the camera. The inclusion of this more 'adult' theme has caused Griggs to call *Broken Lance* a 'message film'.[23] However, Joe's crisis of identity is a subplot and does not influence heavily on the main narrative, yet its inclusion — which gained Dmytryk Golden Globe for Promoting International Understanding[24] — shows that Dmytryk is testing the western's potential to deal with more complex issues. To some extent, the clash of old and new within *Lear* is exhibited in *Broken Lance* both through its narrative and its employment of 'classical and revisionist modes of the western' characterisations of Devereaux and Joe, making it possible to call *Broken Lance* a 'bridge' film on the brink of development.[25]

The following films, *Yellow Sky* (influenced by *The Tempest)* and *Jubal* ('a cowboy Othello'[26]), more explicitly use their source material to develop the western towards more psychological concerns. It becomes apparent that in order to develop the western to explore the darker themes within their source texts the films take influence from the increasingly popular film noir, which, as Schatz words it, captured 'Hollywood's profound post-war affection for morbid drama' with its darkly complex themes and bleak narratives.[27]

*Jubal* converts the military base of Cyprus into a ranch, where Othello becomes the ranch owner, Shep (Ernest Borgnine), and Iago his cowhand, Pinky (Rod Steiger), who convinces Shep that Jubal (Glenn Ford), a favourite of Shep's, is sleeping with his wife, Mae (Valerie French). *Jubal* avoids the racial issues of *Othello* by casting Shep as a typical white westerner, making his marriage simply mismatched rather than socially subversive. Yet this omission does not simplify the plot but focuses the narrative on issues of sexual desire, jealousy and psychological manipulation. The film hints that Pinky's actions are motivated by a lustful jealousy for Mae, whom, Pinky claims, had a previous affair with him; Steiger breaths heavily, his eyes hungry, whenever he talks to Mae. There are also suggestions that he is driven by a professional jealousy, as Shep makes Jubal foreman after a couple of weeks, or simply because he was born with 'a big fat burr in his britches'.[28] Leaving Pinky's motivation ambiguously open, coupled with the decision to make Mae truly unfaithful, contributes to the 'more critical, demythologizing manner'[29] of the psychological western, which avoids simplification and unsettles the audience. This leads me to argue, in accordance with Scott Simmon, that the plot of *Jubal* concerns 'everything associated with noir'.[30] Indeed, the second half of *Jubal*, in which Jubal must find evidence to clear his name, has distinct parallels with *The Wrong Man* and *The Maltese Falcon*, both exemplary of the noir thriller.[31] *Jubal*'s narrative closeness to noir indicates its attempts to express a bleakness unexplored in the previous classic westerns.

[22] *Broken Lance*.
[23] Griggs, p. 94.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Bandy and Stoehr, p. 160.
[26] Howard, p. 305.
[27] Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 111.
[28] *Jubal*.
[29] Bandy and Stoehr, p. 175.
[30] Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 271.
[31] *The Wrong Man*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Warner Bros., 1956) [on DVD]; *The Maltese Falcon*, dir. by John Huston (Warner Bros., 1941) [on DVD].
Prior to *Jubal,* Glenn Ford starred in several film noirs, including *The Big Heat*, dir. by Fritz Lang (Columbia Pictures, 1953) and *Human Desire*, dir. by Fritz Lang (Columbia Pictures, 1954), thus his casting would draw in an audience who enjoyed the darker themes of noir.

In contrast, the narrative of *Yellow Sky* is much more classical. Simmon describes *The Tempest* as 'Shakespeare's western',[32] primarily because the events happen in an exotic location where human identity and morality can be tested. *Yellow Sky* draws out these themes through the western's historical distance which provides areas which are 'morally open',[33] with no universal laws. Prospero's island becomes a ghost town, Yellow Sky, discovered by a band of robbers, in which live an old man (James Barton) and his granddaughter (Anne Baxter). Unlike Prospero, Grandpa has no power to control his visitors and he is soon forced to admit he has a stash of gold, buried in the mountainside. Like the greedy Antonio and Sebastian, the men take advantage of the lawlessness of the town and dig for Grandpa's gold; gold, Grandpa warns, 'I've seen it ruin many a man'.[34] The narrative uses the classic issue of the untamed west to explore how far men are driven by an innate sense of morality or untamed desires.

How far these films adhere to the psychological western can be gained through an examination of their protagonists and whether they 'put emphasis on the principle of individuality'.[35] *Yellow Sky* makes a definite 'journey away'[36] from *The Tempest* in terms of narrative, but it still upholds a 'sustained engagement'[37] with its darkest themes of human identity and desire. James 'Stretch' Dawson's (Gregory Peck) characterisation adheres to Charles Moseley's argument that 'characters [in *The Tempest*] are patterned'[38] against each other. Dawson contains both animalistic elements of Caliban and the princely civility of Ferdinand, allowing the film to explore man's 'inner battle between his ego and id'.[39] At first Dawson cannot contain his lust for Mike and, on three occasions, physically assaults her and kisses her (a visual interpretation of Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda). Her disgust of him stimulates him to change. The morning after being rejected, the camera cuts-in to a close-up of Dawson's face, as he wakes, and holds on him for about 30 seconds as he looks down at himself, smells his shirt, and takes out his razor. In the next scene Dawson walks into the frame with slicked back hair, clean-shaven, wearing a smart, military-like jacket: the image of heroism. The film adheres to Moseley's argument that 'Renaissance art theory' indicates 'outward shape [to be] an index of inner nature';[40] indeed, this new Dawson becomes morally reformed, defending the gold from his comrades, embodying *The Tempest*'s plot arc towards forgiveness. Yet, his characteristic reformation seems too easy; the bad turning to good is a simplistic theme of the classic western.[41] Although his characterisation does consider the darker aspects of human desire, Dawson is not as psychologically developed as Jubal.

The characterisation of Jubal presents human identity as truly complex and not easily altered. Howard calls Jubal 'the innocent bystander; however, Jubal's role is not merely to provide 'the moral viewpoint'.[42] Jubal's characterisation explores the issue of Cassio's identity crisis which his loss of reputation installs in him: 'O, I have lost my / reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial'.[43] John Bayley calls Cassio's reputation 'a kind of self-love';[44] indeed, in *Jubal* 'reputation' becomes synonymous with self-understanding and self-appreciation. Initially, Jubal says he's 'running from bad

[32] Simmon, p. 271.
[33] Warshow, p. 140.
[34] *Yellow Sky*
[35] Bandy and Stoehr, p. 184.
[36] Sanders, p. 26.
[37] Ibid., p. 4.
[38] Charles Moseley, 'The literary and dramatic context of the last plays', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Last Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 59.
[39] Bandy and Stoehr, p. 166.
[40] Moseley, p. 59.
[41] Bandy and Stoehr, p. 182.
[42] Howard, p. 312.
[43] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2nd edn., ed. by Jane Coles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), II.3.242-43.
[44] John Bayley, 'Tragedy and Consciousness: *Othello*', in *Shakespeare: Othello; A Casebook*, 2nd edn., ed. John Wain, (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1994), p. 157.

luck',[45] yet he later reveals that he is running from a traumatic past which has threatened his sense of self-worth. He tells Naomi (Felicia Farr), a virtuous girl from a travelling Christian group, that his mother hated him and his father died to save him from drowning. Othello's rejection of Cassio is reimagined as a parental rejection, first enacted by Jubal's mother and later by Shep, who becomes a father-figure to Jubal, highlighting that family and the past have a significant influence on self- identity. Jubal never overcomes his inner sense of insignificance and rejection. Even though he wins Naomi in the end, the final image is of him on horseback, still 'running' from the past, unable to find a stable sense of self. *Othello* allows Daves to explore the issue of self-identity to the tune of 'post-war gloom',[46] leaving the audience with questions rather than false optimism.

*Yellow Sky* and *Jubal*, unlike *Broken Lance*, use the visual landscape of the classic western to explore issues of human identity. In *Yellow Sky*, the landscape of the abandoned ghost town comes to reflect the character's inner animalistic tendencies, foregrounding *The Tempest*'s consideration of 'the border between the human and non-human'.[47] A scene which best illustrates this is when Mike collects water from the spring: a wild space, with croaked trees and tufts of dead grass. A mid-shot captures the men spread out besides the water, likening them to wild animals guarding their drinking ground (Appendix). Lengthy (John Russell) trips Mike up and physically assaults her, but is pulled away by Jed (Robert Adler). The two wrestle together in the water, each attempting to drown the other. The men begin to embody the wildness of Yellow Sky, supporting Simmon's argument that *Yellow Sky* is 'particularly dark […] morally' and has clear links to film noir.[48] For these Westerns to enter into a discussion on darker themes they necessarily draw on elements of noir, exemplifying Schrader's argument that noir touched almost 'most every dramatic Hollywood film in the 40s and 50s'.[49]

Similarly, Jubal's inner crisis of self is presented through his association with wild landscape. The first shot of the film shows Jubal struggling down the side of a mountain; it is a wide-angle shot and the composition of the frame positions Jubal in the middle of the final third. Jubal's brown jacket makes him barely distinguishable. His smallness mirrors his feelings of insignificance and the rugged landscape illustrates the lack of stability and direction in his life. In the following tracking-shot he rolls, uncontrollably, down the mountain, unable to master himself. Arguably, this image is an illustrative reading of Iago's metaphor for self-control, 'our / bodies are our gardens';[50] Jubal is associated with natural wildness due to his lack of self-control. Visually, both *Jubal* and *Yellow Sky* do not fit the style of noir — defined by 'shadow and darkness'[51] — as they deal with wide, western landscapes. Both are using the visual tools of the classic western to explore darker themes, associated with film noir, to produce psychologically concerned westerns.

The depiction of women in these films is a useful indicator of their generic decisions. Laura Mulvey claims that women in the western have 'two functions':[52] to represent either the domestic values of civilisation or the wild, primitive ways of the untamed West. In *Broken Lance* Barbra is an example of the former role. She returns from an Eastern education with perfect clothes and manners, like a female Edgar, the perfect child. In *Yellow Sky*, Mike is initially representative of the wild, untamed nature woman. Her isolation from society

[45] *Jubal*.
[46] Jane Root, 'Film Noir', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. Cook, p. 96.
[47] Martin Butler, 'Introduction', in William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Martin Butler (London: Penguin, 2007), p. xxiv.
[48] Simmon, p. 208.
[49] Paul Schrader, 'Notes of film noir', *Film Comment*, 8.1. (1972): 1-8 (p. 9).
[50] Shakespeare, *Othello*, I.3.313-14.
[51] Root, p. 94.
[52] Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Framework*, 15 (1981), p. 14; quoted in Christine Gledhill, 'Western', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Cook, p. 70.

meant she was 'brought up by Indians'[53] and dresses in jeans and shirt, a rifle in her hands, a kind of alter-ego to Shakespeare's obedient, feminine Miranda. To some extent Mike's characterisation challenges feminine identity, within the westerns' historical period and the film's social context. However, her reluctance to adhere to a feminine role becomes a further reflection on the classical theme of civilisation. Dawson is consistently telling her to act like a lady and his continued sexual assaults on her seem to soften her. Finally, he achieves in making her into the ideal female and buys her a flowered bonnet which symbolises patriarchal authority and her submission as a civilised female. This reflects Butler's argument that Miranda's situation is 'constrained'[54] and, I might add, equally submissive to patriarchal control as Mike. To some extent both Mike and Barbra are simply functional, symbolising civilised correctness.

On the other hand, *Jubal*'s leading female role is much more complex and suits the psychological western. Mae fulfils the role of an unvirtuous Desdemona. Her characterisation does not fit either of the roles the western supplies for women. She represents domesticity to the extent that she is Shep's wife, but threatens domestic stability by trying to seduce Jubal. She has no affiliations with the untamed nature of the west having come from Canada and tells Jubal that, for a woman, the ranch is '10,000 acres of loneliness'.[55] Contrary to Howard's belief that Mae is simply Bianca,[56] Mae is the combination of the sexuality of Bianca, the hatred of Iago's re-imagined Desdemona and, predominantly, Emilia's resentfulness. Indeed, Emilia's belief that wives have 'desires for sport and frailty, as men have' underlines Mae's motivations and actions: she claims that her husband sees her as 'livestock' and pursues Jubal with confidence, kissing him boldly when Shep leaves the room.[57] Thus, Mae is exemplary of the 'stock film noir femme fatale', a woman 'defined by [her] sexuality'.[58] Mae's appearance, dark red lips and dark hair, likens her to Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon*,[59] the pinnacle femme fatale. For Daves to borrow so directly from the noir genre indicates that the female roles in the western genre were not complex enough to help him explore themes like female sexuality. To some extent, *Jubal* can be called a 'noir-western',[60] but its choice to retain the classical elements of the western, particularly in terms of setting, suggests that the term psychological western is still most appropriate.

In conclusion, all these films, to varying degrees, reveal the development of the classic western towards the psychological western, illustrating that genre is not fixed but evolves depending on the current concerns of audiences and filmmakers. *Broken Lance* tests the western's potential to explore the more complex theme of racial identity as a sub-plot, but *Yellow Sky* and *Jubal* are more overt in their exploration of human identity, desire and sexuality. *Jubal* most truly fits the category of psychological western due to its adoption of character, narrative and theme from the bleakness of film noir. Using Shakespearian source texts does not guarantee psychological complexity; however, it provides the material with the potential to explore darker themes which post-war audience's desired.

[53] *Yellow Sky*.
[54] Martin Butler, 'Introduction', p. xli.
[55] *Jubal*.
[56] Howard, p. 312.
[57] *Jubal*.
[58] Howard, p. 312; E. Ann Kaplan, 'Introduction', in *Women in Film Noir,* ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1998), p. 2.
[59] *The Maltese Falcon*.
[60] Simmon, p. 208.

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## Appendix

The Lion's Lair

*Yellow Sky*, dir. by William A. Wellman (Twentieth Century Fox, 1948) [on DVD].