



MAN OF THE WEST (1958)

Directed by Anthony Mann. Screenplay by Reginald Rose.

Starring: Garry Cooper, Lee J. Cobb, Julie London, Arthur O'Connell, Jack Lord, Royal Dano.

Eden Court Cinema, 12 June, Time 7:45pm Film notes by Tony Janssens from Inverness Film Fans.

Anthony Mann is one of the major figures of postwar American film who started his career in the theatre, but slowly worked his way up the Hollywood ladder by, at first, directing low-budget films with actors who couldn't act and on sets that didn't exist. Then, from the late forties onward, making highly stylized crime pictures that blend technical brilliance with raw storytelling and penetrating psychological insights. During the latter part of his career he made epics like *El Cid* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, but Mann's considerable talents are most vividly displayed in his westerns, starting with a James Stewart gem, *Winchester '73* in 1950, made when Mann was already forty-four. *Bend of the River* (1952), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *The Man from Laramie* (1955), and *The Far Country* (1955), all starring Stewart, are among the genre's most innovative and distinguished contributions. The heroes and villains in them reveal close connections via familial or past association, yet their worlds contrast in sometimes staggering, sometimes subtle ways. Mann's films were overshadowed in the fifties, the decade when the Western genre reached its peak, by more prestigious productions such as *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), and *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959). A strong sense of disintegration appears in two of these more famous films, affecting the hero (*The Searchers*) and the community (*High Noon*), but it is Mann, working on a smaller scale, who most efficiently captures the sense of despair entering this conservative genre, one that pretended to turn the conquest of America into a utopian narrative. Mann made insightful use of Freud, the Bible, the German Expressionist cinema and Shakespeare in all of his films. Particularly *King Lear*, a play he first directed on stage while in his twenties, haunts his westerns time and time again, above all *Man of the West* (1958). Of all his twelve westerns this is Mann's masterpiece, his *Lear*, with its sense of emotional whirlwind, and an older order crumbling. *Man of the West* is not an easy watch; it is a confrontational, unsettling film that contains plenty of sexually-charged scenes, two of which suggest both rape and castration, so overpowering, that it is a surprise they escaped the Hollywood censors.



The film is challenging principally because of its profound subversion, its assault on expectations, its attack on the American civilising process and all of the conventions of the American Western that sustained popular assumptions about the “settling” of the West. On its surface *Man of the West*, like several Mann films, is a tale of redemption, as a man confronts his outlaw past. However, it allows few consolations. It demands of the viewer to consider the essential monstrousness of the hero, and whether redemption is a justifiable concept. The hero appears noble at first, but gradually it seems he is one not very deserving of our sympathy, a savage whose past barbarity seems unforgivable. As the film historian Robin Wood noted, *Man of the West* looks down the road to the horror film of the later age: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977) spring to mind, with their savage clans and desiccated American wasteland.



By 1958, James Stewart had a falling-out with Mann that was most fortuitous for *Man of the West*. Mann did not consider Stewart suitable for the main part, and allegedly they never spoke to one another again. Gary Cooper, the screen’s original incarnation of the strong, silent type, was cast as the film’s lead. Cooper was by then truly an iconic figure, famous for not talking a lot, ostensibly doing very little in front of the camera, yet his image possessed the screen, in this potent mix of quiescence, doubt, shyness, reticence and integrity. In *Man of the West* this icon, embodying American strength, fair play and essential naïveté, is torn to ribbons, made into one of cinema's most opaque characters. This, to me, is his best performance, where Cooper is simultaneously the quiet hero, a kind of awkward bumpkin, and a savage outlaw. So difficult to place, and we viewers are made unsure to whom our allegiance should be. People complained about the casting, since Lee J. Cobb, playing Cooper’s perverse “uncle,” was ten years his junior. And Cooper had been already quite ill for some time. His physical infirmity, a continuous sense of confrontation with pain and mortality, especially in scenes where he endures humiliation, serves the film extraordinarily.

Link Jones (Cooper) rides on horseback to a junction called Crosscut, where he takes a train to Fort Worth, carrying the savings of his adopted town of Good Hope. The citizens have entrusted him with finding a schoolteacher – thus bringing them civilization. Link ends up accompanied by Crosscut’s prostitute, Billie (Julie London, her character rendered, typically, as a “saloon singer”), and a smarmy but affable cardsharp, Sam Beasley (Arthur O’Connell). When Link’s train is robbed, he finds himself alone in the wilderness with his two companions. He takes them to a remote valley with a tumbledown shack at its base, a dead tree and an animal carcass in its yard. Link obviously didn’t just stumble upon the dwelling. He tells Billie “I used to live here once”. Billie asks: “When you were a boy?”, to which Link answers with a most evocative line: “Oh, I don’t know what I was”. After hiding Billie and Beasley in a barn, Link enters the dark abode, straight out of an expressionist German film, where he is confronted by several outlaws, the loutish Ponch (Robert Wilke), the mute hysteric Trout (Royal Dano), and the sadistic Coaley (Jack Lord). A curtain is suddenly pulled aside, revealing a grizzled old man wrapped in a scarf. He is taken aback by Link’s presence. Link, it seems, is the long-lost prodigal son. The old man extends his hand: “Shake hands with your Uncle Dock Tobin.” Tobin (Cobb) is a notorious outlaw of the past, mentioned earlier in the film when an unprepossessing but alert old sheriff (Frank Ferguson) confronts Link in Crosscut, asking him if he “ever heard the name Dock Tobin,” to which Link shakes his head “no” unconvincingly.

The reunion between Link and Dock sets up the film’s central ideas, which effectively unravel the premises of the Western. Dock Tobin is at first awed that his old charge has returned, but his mood turns sour when he recalls when Link left him, his humour combining with his monstrousness. Dock then goes into a reverie as he recalls his favourite moments with his prize adopted son, like an archivist of a degraded civilisation. Not just Shakespearian, but shades of Charles Dickens’ Oliver

Twist too. Dock is a Fagin of the old West, who rounds up the abandoned children of a society too ambitious, too detached to care for them. And what is also made clear is that Link is not just a long-lost child of the old murderer; he is remembered as the most vicious, the most unstoppable and cruel.

Dock's world is spinning out of control (the Lear element is constant). He is contemptuous of his current, addled-brained gang members, except for Coaley, the brutal young pretender to Link's position. This is a key point: the Tobins are a family, constantly in-fighting, one of the all-male clans of myth, history, and folklore (like the Daltons, the Earps, the Youngers, and the Clantons). A vile male clan of women haters, all the more apparent when Billie is discovered hiding in the barn. Coaley makes her do a striptease, as if in preparation for a gang rape, while his knife at Link's throat. The whole scene is authorised by Dock to make Link know he's still boss, if a bit infirm. Paced with a torturously slow tempo the stripping scene is very difficult to watch; it does not have the titillating imagery found in later westerns, made by Sam Peckinpah or Italian directors like Leone and Corbucci. We feel the humiliation of the girl, and also Link's utter impotence to protect her. When Link eventually goes to bed with Billie, basically to prevent her from being raped by the others, pretending "she's mine", Dock enters the filthy barn that is the marital bedroom, poking, haranguing Link with a stick.

Lee J. Cobb is frightfully brilliant, lending his character a menace, an unhinged madness that is tied to the crazed and obsolete ideals of the old West. And at the same time he harbours an impossibly romantic hope that Link's return will herald a new dawn and will bring back the glory days of his old gang, a new Renaissance.

The sexual degradation surrounding the film's conception of family is most stunningly portrayed in Link's savage fight with Coaley, Link's eyes flashing madness, conveying his "old" self, culminating in Link tearing the clothes off of his younger rival, something only marginally resisted by the defeated Coaley in the most homoerotically-charged scene of the American Western until the Oscar-winning *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). In Tobin's gang everyone is a "cousin", a typical coding for an incestuous tribe in American popular narrative. This joins pathos with horror, adding to the idea of the American family as simultaneously horrific as well as a sanctum. Dock Tobin is both murderous demon and reassuring patriarch.

Man of the West is a genuinely expansive film, commenting on the central ambitions of the Western, from the nature of the frontiersman to the goals of imperial conquest. Dock is preoccupied with robbing the town of Lasso, the very mention of which sends the old man into ecstasy ("Like a bell ringin' in my head... Lasssssoooooo!").

The town is the old man's El Dorado, the symbol of empire achieved. Lasso, supposedly the home of the biggest bank in the territory, is nothing more than a ghost town, and a very surreal one, its sand-coloured buildings blending into the streets, with twisted, impractical fences made of twigs, and an odd little shack in its middle, propped up by stakes. The town's only occupants are an impoverished Mexican couple: a native population that stands witness to white civilisation's barbarism, threatened with annihilation.

Mann's approach to the Western differs radically from John Ford's; he was distrustful toward the romantic, sweeping views of the more idealistic Ford. The latter's use of landscape is monumental while in Mann's films, especially in this one, it becomes a visual metaphor for the hero's journey. *Man of the West* starts in the lush green surroundings of a town full of life and industry while Tobin's abode shows only limited evidence of surrounding farmland, the skeletal remains of a dead animal and sparse woodland. As Link descends deeper and deeper into the wasteland of his past life the whole scenery becomes more barren, rugged and harsh until the climax between the rocky cliffs. I do not want to give too much of the film away, but the hero's quest for closure is not sparked by the need to bring an era to its close, but by a far more primal need to avenge the hurt done to an innocent he failed to protect.

The entire film leaves pending the central question it poses: is the man of the west worthy of our sympathetic interest? The monstrosity of American civilisation continues, often under the reasonable hand of a Link Jones, an Obama, or an unbalanced one like Dock Tobin's, a Trump.

Man of the West, written by Reginald Rose (12 Angry Men), was the penultimate western in the career of Anthony Mann, and it signposted the direction the genre was later to take, when films like Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch, Abraham Polonsky's Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here, Ralph Nelson's Soldier Blue and Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven effectively turned the Western on its head and made it significant again. This influential, yet unsung masterpiece is not merely a great Western, it simply is one of the finest American films of all time.

Our next screening, Hombre, starring Paul Newman, 26th June at 7:15pm



As a vision of the American West and the wide country around it, "The Former blacklisted Martin Ritt ("Hud") directs this superior revisionist western, with a liberal slant, based on the novel by Elmore Leonard. It's a variant on John Ford's 1939 'Stagecoach', as the outcast hero (played by Paul Newman) instead of running away from civilization in his final desperate act he moves toward it. A hard-bitten tale about racism, injustice and corruption, that is beautifully shot in the Death Valley and Halvetia Mines locations by acclaimed cinematographer James Wong Howe. Released in 1967, it is widely considered a classic of the genre and was the sixth and final movie that paired director Ritt and Newman.