

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Deconstructing Dude: Masculinity in *Rio Bravo*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Howard Hawks's career as a filmmaker spanned over more than forty years. It started with the silent film *Road to Glory* in 1926, was developed in the classical Hollywood period, and ended with his last film, the western *Rio Lobo*, in 1970. William Faulkner once said that Howard Hawks used to make the same film all over again but in a different way each time: "and he knows how to make it" (Wollen, 1996: 2). Critics usually agree that the bulk of Hawks's forty-five films can be structured in two wide categories: adventure dramas and comedies. Critics also point out that these two categories tend to merge in some way or another, till the point that "his dramatic films are often even funnier than his actual comedies" (McBride, 2012: 3). In both categories one can find Hawks's favourite themes of professionalism and male group dynamics and also Hawks's favourite plot pattern in which a woman (whom critics usually refer to as the Hawksian woman) threatens a closed world of male camaraderie, fighting her way into the group while she teaches the hero how to become more sensitive and admit his feelings towards her. These themes and this pattern can be seen, for instance, in adventure dramas like *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) or in comedies like *Ball of Fire* (1941).

Hawks used all kind of genres as a framework to develop his recurrent themes, plots, characters and even dialogue lines. His filmography includes examples from the gangster film (*Scarface*, 1932), the film noir (*The Big Sleep*, 1946), the war film (*Air Force*, 1943), the romantic comedy (*Bringing Up Baby*, 1938), the musical (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, 1953), the historical film (*Land of the Pharaohs*, 1955)... and, of course, the quintessential U.S. American genre: the western. Howard Hawks directed five westerns: *Red River* (1949) *The Big Sky* (1952), *Rio Bravo* (1959), *El Dorado* (1967) and *Rio Lobo* (1970).

In an interview with Joseph McBride, Hawks claimed: “The western is the simplest form of drama—a gun, death—and they all fall, really, into two kinds. One is the history of the beginning of the West, the story of the pioneers, which was the story of *Red River*. Then there’s the phase when law and order comes. You’ve got a sheriff—sometimes you had a bad sheriff; sometimes you had a good one”. This second type of western clearly applies to *Rio Bravo*. In the same interview, Hawks explains how *Rio Bravo* was made as a response to two films he disliked: “we made *Rio Bravo* the exact opposite from *High Noon* and this other picture, I think it was called *3:10 to Yuma*” (McBride 2012: 163). In *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) the sheriff goes running around town asking for help but getting none, and finally he manages to do the job with no help (he only receives a little help from his wife). In *Rio Bravo* the sheriff rejects the help he is offered, although he ends up saving risky situations with the help of others. In *3:10 to Yuma* (Delmer Daves, 1957) the town marshal hires a small rancher (an amateur) to escort an outlaw, while in *Rio Bravo* the sheriff himself (a professional) is the one who guards the outlaw in jail.

Apart from being a western, *Rio Bravo* is also a quintessential Hawks’s film. Hawks’s favourite themes of professionalism and male group dynamics are articulated through Hawks’s favourite plot line: a beautiful woman is made to disrupt a male world and ends up bringing about a positive change in the hero’s masculinity. Some elements of *Rio Bravo* can be traced back not only to previous Hawks’s films such as *To Have and Have Not* (1943) and *Only Angels Have Wings*, but even further back to Joseph von Sternberg’s *Underworld* (1927) in whose script Hawks participated uncredited and whose influence Hawks himself recognised: “I stole two things, [from Sternberg’s *Underworld*] the dollar in the spittoon and the girl’s name, Feathers” (McBride, 2012: 142).

The main plotline of *Rio Bravo* focuses on a male group composed of distinct stock types working as a team. Simply put, the plot follows the tribulations of the sheriff of a Texas border town, John T. Chance (John Wayne), and his deputies Stumpy (Walter Brennan), Dude (Dean Martin), and Colorado (Ricky Nelson). They have to overcome the siege of Nathan Burdette (John Russell) and his gang, who are trying to free Joe Burdette (Claude Akins) from jail. The character of John T. Chance is supposed to be the center of the story and the mirror against which the “variously compromised fragments of men who surround and purport to assist him” have to measure their own masculinity (Meeuf, 2013: 156). Yet, as I will argue in this essay, the film’s core story is not Chance’s but Dude’s as Hawks himself recognised: “The crux of *Rio Bravo* is not Wayne; it is Dean Martin’s story- everything happens because of the drunk” (Bogdanovich, 1997: 345). The truth is that because of the drunk (Dude) all the events unfold. Because of the drunk there is a fight and Joe Burdette kills a man; then Joe is arrested and the troubles begin. However, this is not the only reason why I think Dude is the center of the story. It is my contention in this essay that Dude is a composite of the other three main male characters. Chance, Stumpy and Colorado represent different versions of masculinity that the character of Dude has to integrate in order to come up with a more complex representation of the male subject which had started to populate the genre of the western in the 1950’s.

2. MASCULINITY IN THE WESTERN GENRE

The genre of the western is usually regarded as a historical document of U.S history, and it has played an important role in the construction of U.S identity. However, Jane Tompkins has suggested “that western as a genre arose as a response against nineteenth century reform movements led by women and the kind of sentimental, domestically-oriented fiction many women were then producing” (Arnold, 2006: 278). In that

context, men felt drawn to a genre in which a man could feel free again just by riding a horse in the open air, gambling and drinking whiskey in the saloon, or testing his virility in a physical combat or a gunfight, all of that without the necessity of talking too much.

In the 20th century, radio shows, TV shows, comics, paintings and also Hollywood films surrendered to the western myth: a quarter of the films Hollywood produced till the end of the 1950's were westerns (Hoberman, 1998: 90). Westerns forged some of the most recognizable masculine archetypes: "There is no place in American culture where the lineaments of the masculine ideal are ratified more definitely than in the western film" (Freedman, 2013: 145). It does not matter whether this man was a cowboy, a gunslinger, a sheriff, an outlaw or a cavalry officer, all of them were intrinsically attached to one of the phallic symbols by excellence: the pistol. As Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) explains to W.W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek), the gunfighter so-called Two-Gun Corcoran "never carried two guns...a lot of folks did call him "Two-Gun"...because he had a dick so big it was longer than the barrel of that Walker Colt that he carried" (quoted from *Unforgiven*, 1992).

During the World War II years (1941-1945), westerns were temporarily replaced by war films as the favourite genre of Hollywood. After the war, the western came back but the traditional model started to be revised. Westerns in the 1950's were influenced by and reflecting the social changes of their historical moment. There were pro-Indian films like *Broken Arrow* (Delmer Daves, 1950) or *Run of the Arrow* (Samuel Fuller, 1957) (Kitses, 1998: 17), or political westerns such as *High Noon* (1952), a "western but different" (Combs, 1998: 168), which was read as a political denunciation of senator McCarthy's Red Scare. Western films also began to hesitate about the traditional representation of masculinity. In one of the most celebrated westerns of the decade, *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), the hero "not only looks slight and vaguely effeminate"

but he seems to prefer the company of “the ruggedly good-looking Joe Starrett (Van Heflin) to ... Marian (Jean Arthur), who clearly desires Shane” (Freedman, 2013: 145).

Socio-culturally speaking, if the 1960's was the period of the second wave of feminism in which women rebelled against their gender roles, the 1950's had witnessed a similar process in the case of men. In her study of masculinity in the 1950's, *The Hearts of Men* (1983), Barbara Ehrenreich argues that everything started when white collar family men began to show discontent about their role as good husbands and providers (breadwinners). At that time, that role was “the only normal state for the adult male” (15). The problem was that the conformity with this role “meant a kind of emasculation”, but its refusal inevitably carried “the taint of homosexuality”. Ehrenreich points out that “the grey flannel rebellion was never more than a lament” and men still “escaped into Mickey Spillane mysteries...or into Westerns”, a womanless realm (40, 41). Looking at westerns, “throughout the 1950's (and beyond) [John] Wayne's on-screen relationship with heterosexual coupling and the nuclear family is fraught with tension” (Meeuf, 2013: 29). He did not present many actively sexual relationships in his westerns, perhaps enough “to glory in his unalloyed masculinity without being suspected of the least abnormality” (Freedman, 2013: 147).

The apparition of the magazine *Playboy* in 1953 was the next step of male revolt. The playboys were the first dissidents from the traditional role of the breadwinner that were able to avoid the taint of homosexuality: “every month, there was a Playmate to prove that a playboy didn't have to be a husband to be a man” (Ehrenreich, 1983: 51). Going further in the midst of the gender battle, the magazine accused women of oppression over men at home. The only escape for men until then had been outdoors spaces, no matter if that meant “the golf course...or the fantasy world of Westerns”. The magazine subversively reclaimed the indoors for men

(Ehrenreich 1983: 44). Traditionally, in the western genre, “if men must search their whole lives through, women must wait at home for them to return” (Lehman, 1998: 259). Coincidence or not, in the 1950’s some westerns started to look at indoor spaces. A good example is *Rio Bravo*. The film abandons the wide open exteriors for claustrophobic interiors of a bar, a hotel and a jail (Buscombe, 1996: 294). In addition, the jail, a space marked by masculine professionalism, “is constantly constructed as a domestic space” (Meeuf, 2013: 165), despite the fact that there is not a single woman in it.

According to Ehrenreich the next combatant in the “men’s liberation” war that took place in the 1950’s, the Beat, walked “away from responsibility in any form” (1983: 55). The Beat pioneers were strongly (if intermittently) prone to male camaraderie: “women and their demands for responsibility were ... uninteresting compared to the ecstatic possibilities of male adventure” (Ehrenreich 1983: 54). Focusing on the western film genre in general (and on *Rio Bravo* in particular), the genre (and the film) reinforced the notion it had always dealt with: the dichotomy between male desires for heterosexual coupling and homosocial desire for male bonding. Since the genre arose as an alternative to female domesticity, it is logical that the masculine rites remained womanless since “to act on heterosexual desire necessarily removes a man from the sphere of pure masculinity, shackling him to the feminine” (Freedman, 2013: 146).

In that context, at the end of the 1950’s, Hawks intended to make a western which “was supposed to provide a more heroic vision of the Old West” (Meeuf, 2013: 154). In Hawks’s own words the film has “very little in the way of plot — more characterization and the fun of just telling a story” (Bogdanovich, 1996: 341). Jean Luc Goddard wrote in *Cahiers du Cinema* that *Rio Bravo* “is a work of extraordinary

psychological insight... but Hawks has made his film so that the insight can pass unnoticed without disturbing the audience that has come to see a Western like all others” (Bogdanovich, 1996: 245). In the pages that follow I am going to analyse how the film conveys a modulation of masculinities and homosocial bonds, or as Meeuf has pointed out: “a complex exploration of masculine identity” (2013: 156).

3. RIO BRAVO (1959)

3.1 Hawksian Men

In his monograph on Hawks, film scholar Robin Wood writes of the stereotypes of the western and how almost all of them are present in *Rio Bravo*: the hero (Chance), the hero’s comic assistant (Stumpy), the singing cowboy (Colorado), the comic Mexican (Carlos), the villain (Nathan Burdette), and of course the hero’s fallible friend (Dude) (1968: 36). For Wood, of all of them, the hero’s fallible friend, in general, is the least stereotyped of western ingredients, and Dude, in particular, is “the most fully worked on and transformed in *Rio Bravo*” (1968: 43). The character of Dude can be traced back not only to the characters in the western tradition but also to other characters in Hawks’s filmography. Thus, Eddie (Walter Brennan) the drunk buddy of Bogart’s character in *To Have and Have Not* or Bat (Richard Barthelmess) the pilot who needs a second opportunity in *Only Angels Have Wings* “are both partly subsumed in Dude” (Wood, 1968: 45), which suggests Dude’s complexity as a character. During great part of the movie, Dude is just a heartbroken man who tries to overcome his alcoholism. In one of the scenes of the film, Chance is warning Stumpy about Dude’s problems with alcohol: “... be nice to him and he’ll fall apart in small pieces”. For Deborah Thomas, that is “a remark suggesting anxieties around male fragmentation” (1996: 86). In this section, I am going to explore the thin Hawksian lines between Dude and the other three main

male characters in *Rio Bravo*, and how Dude is deconstructed or fragmented into Colorado, the young gunslinger (what Dude used to be), Stumpy, the buffoon (what Dude is at the moment), and Chance, the patriarch/sheriff (what Dude could or should be in the future).

In *Howard Hawks: The Grey Fox Of Hollywood*, Todd McCarthy explains that in an earlier version of the script, the hero's fallible friend was conveyed through the character of a hired gunslinger called Jim Ryan, who "resembles a combination of the eventual Dude and Colorado characters" (McCarthy, 1997: 550). As Arnold has pointed out, the fact that Hawks finally chose "to fragment this figure suggests a desire to more carefully dissect and examine certain ambiguities of masculinity" (2006: 274). Their originally common roots also reflect how deep both characters are intertwined so that Colorado is a mirror image of what Dude was in the past. In the scene in which Wheeler arrives in town, there is a shot-reverse shot outside the jail. First, we see Wheeler and John T. Chance leading the conversation — both are the patriarchal figures. The reverse shots show Dude and Colorado side by side, waiting orders from Wheeler and Chance — since they are their respective hired guns. Dude's gaze towards Colorado shows both his admiration towards the young gunslinger and how he can recognize himself in Colorado, recalling the freshness he had once (Fig. 1). The similarities between both characters are brought to the foreground in a more direct manner later on, when Colorado, who has helped the sheriff in a difficult situation, is hired as a new deputy just at the same time that Dude is about to quit from the same post. Dude asks Chance about Colorado: "Is he as good as I used to be?" Chance's answer is revealing: "It'd be pretty close".



Fig. 1

As mentioned above, the character of Dude (because of his alcoholism and his role as the hero's best friend) can be traced back to the character of Eddie from *To Have or Have Not*, who was also played by Walter Brennan. In fact, Eddie has been also regarded as predecessor of Stumpy: "the fact that both are played by Walter Brennan makes the similarity very conspicuous" (Wood, 1968: 45). This establishes a thin Hawksian line between Dude and Stumpy through a common predecessor in Hawks's filmography. In addition to that, Dude is presented as a maimed human being that can not control his shaking hands, which is not good for a gunslinger, while Stumpy has to deal with his physical limitations as an old cripple. Stumpy's bodily limitations play an essential part in the action. When Dude comes back to jail shaved, bathed and with new clothes, Stumpy, who can not see well, shoots him and makes a hole in Dude's hat contributing to Dude's breakdown (Wood, 1968: 43). It seems as if this part of the deconstructed Dude that Stumpy represents (a negative part which is transforming him into an unworthy man) was revolting against his improvements and provoking a relapse on Dude, preventing him from overcoming his problem.

The connections between Dude and Stumpy do not end here. Robin Wood has argued that in *Rio Bravo* there are variants of individuality which come from broad

humor (Stumpy) to near tragedy (Dude). Stumpy embodies the traditional comic relief stock type, a buffoon “pushed to an extreme that verges on parody” (Wood, 1968: 42). At the same time, Dude is called “borrachón” by the Mexicans, which connects him with another variant on the Western’s traditional comic relief stock type: the comic Mexican. In this light, Dude can be seen as a “tragic” counterpart of Stumpy, the sad clown (Fig. 2). Actually, Dean Martin’s screen persona had been associated to a similar role in his film career since he had appeared in some films as the “serious” counterpart of the very physical and gestural U.S comedian Jerry Lewis. As Wood has pointed out, in *Rio Bravo*, “the continual interaction of the various levels of seriousness and humor produces a great complexity of tone” (1968: 49).



Fig. 2

John T. Chance is the hero of the film, and Dude embodies the hero’s fallible friend, as Kid Dabb (Thomas Mitchell) is the fallible friend of the hero Geoff Carter (Cary Grant) in Hawks’s *Only Angels Have Wings*. In one of the crucial scenes in *Only Angels Have Wings*, Geoff and Kid try to help Joe (Noah Beery) to land in the middle of the fog using their ears and voice “as if they were two aspects of the same human being” (Wood, 1968: 50). When Joe finally crashes, Geoff takes a cigarette that Kid has

rolled. The cigarette motif is used again in *Rio Bravo* but in the opposite direction, since it is the hero, Chance, who keeps rolling cigarettes for his fallible friend, Dude, whose shaking hands are unable to do it: “All of a sudden you realize that they are awfully good friends or he wouldn’t be doing it” (Bogdanovich, 1996: 345) (Fig. 3). The fallible friends are placed in westerns to act as counterpart or contrast to the hero’s infallibility. But, in *Rio Bravo* the interaction between Chance and Dude is so complex and “Dude takes on such importance in the film that it becomes a question at times who is a foil for whom” (Wood, 1968: 44). As Robin Wood has pointed out in relation to the Western as a whole, the usual progress of the hero’s fallible friend is a decline which drives to betrayal. In *Rio Bravo*, Hawks reverses that progress by making Dude betray Chance from the very beginning. In the wordless opening scene, as a response to Chance’s sanctioning gaze when Dude is about to get the coin from the spittoon, Dude strikes Chance down, leaving him unconscious in the crucial moment in which Chance was going to confront Joe Burdette for the first time in the film. That simple action will unchain all the plot events of the film, and in the case of Dude “a movement (despite setbacks) towards salvation”, that is, towards Chance (1968: 44).



Fig. 3

But if there is a point in the film in which Dude and Chance converge, it is in relation to Feathers (Angie Dickinson). At the beginning, we have been told that the reason for Dude's alcoholism was a girl who arrived on the stagecoach and to whom "he was hooked". Even though the girl "was not good", Dude left town and everything else for her, only to come back without her six months later. Thus, when Feathers appears in town, Chance hates her from the very beginning because she reminds him of Dude's girl, and tries to send her away on the next stagecoach. We have no references about Chance's past to fully understand this initial rejection of Feathers except maybe that "she is explicitly comparable to the woman responsible for Dude's down fall" (Arnold, 2006: 277). Thus, "Chance rationalization for misogyny is that his best friend, Dude, was driven to drink by a woman's duplicity" (Wise, 1971: 115). On the other hand, from the point of view of Dude, Feathers represents a second opportunity with romantic love, and an attempt to redeem himself and women as a whole. However, Dude is going to live this new opportunity not through himself but through Chance, in such a way that the two plot lines, that of Dude overcoming alcoholism and that of Chance accepting Feathers and his feelings towards her, are going to be in a sense encompassed.

We can conclude that Dude is a character fragmented and mirrored in the other three. Dude will have to prove his masculine worth by overcoming his alcoholism, just as Colorado will have to prove his value by overcoming his arrogance and inexperience, or just as Stumpy will have to prove he is still worthy by overcoming his age and limp, or just as Chance will have to prove his authority by overcoming his fear towards women: "Chance must address the tension posed by Feathers" (Meeuf, 2013: 156). Dude is, as I will argue in the paper that follows, a composite of the three Hawksian men represented by Chance, Stumpy and Colorado.

3.2 The Sheriff, the Buffoon, and the Gunslinger

As many others Hawks's films *Rio Bravo* unfolds in long and medium shots, usually straight-on angle eye-level shots, with a camera that moves just the strictly necessary. Hawks's definition of director was: "someone who doesn't annoy you" (Wood, 1968: 11). In a film like *Rio Bravo* scenes flow like a "river" and are intricately interwoven at least within each one of the four or five "acts" that each day of the plot represent in the film. In their interview, Bogdanovich and Hawks more or less agree that dramatically the scene in which Dude pours the whiskey back into the bottle without spilling a drop is the climax, but Hawks also adds: "I think the best moment is when he [Dude] faces down the heavies in the bar" (1996: 345). In this section I am going to analyse this scene because it shows Dude complex personality and how, as I argued in the previous section, he can act as a sheriff, a buffoon and a gunslinger in a short space of time.

The scene Hawks refers to in the interview is the resolution of the chase for the assassin of Pat Wheeler. In a medium-long shot, we see Chance and Dude side by side. Dude is sure that the man who has killed Wheeler has run into the saloon where Burdette's gang is and that he has stepped in mud in his way in so he could be recognized by his dirty boots. Then, the film moves to a medium shot of both to emphasise that they have to decide the crucial next move. Despite the fact that there could be eight or ten of Burdette's men in there, "maybe more", they decide to step into. At this crucial moment, the film changes again to a shot reverse shot of Dude and Chance, as if they were both sides of the coin, because this time Dude is going to take the front door (Chance's task) while Chance will take the back door (Dude's one). This is a test for Dude. He wants to know if he is "good enough" to be the sheriff, to be Chance.

The camera shows Dude and Chance approaching the saloon. When they split ways the camera focuses on Dude, leaving Chance off-screen for a while: Dude is the crux of this scene. We can see Dude, in medium shots (no close-ups), hesitating at the saloon front door with a similar expression to that in the opening scene when he was entering the same place through the back door desperately looking for a drink. There is a mix of feelings for him since he is “an expert on saloons” but in a different way. When Dude enters the saloon, Hawks gives us a long shot of the place, an establishing shot, so we can clearly understand the situation, the solitude of Dude surrounded by Nathan Burdette’s men. Then the film cuts to a medium-long shot of Burdette’s men staring at Dude, while at their backs, in the background, Chance is silently crossing the back door. When Chance stamps the door they all suddenly turn their heads back towards Chance who, with a gaze, gives Dude the permission to start.

From that moment on, Dude takes over the situation and tells the men to drop their guns and even controls the bartender at his back without even looking at him, which is received with an approving gaze from Chance: Dude is doing it well, he is “good enough” to be a sheriff. The exchange of roles between Dude and Chance is reinforced by means of *misè-en-scène*, since for the only time in the whole film, Dude is carrying a shotgun, which makes him look like Chance (always with a rifle in his hand) (Fig. 4). Up to that point the scene unfolds in medium and long shots and the composition in depth clearly shows how Dude moves along the row of men in front of him checking out their boots. But then, the film cuts to what Bogdanovich defines as “an unusual kind of shot” for Hawks. There is a high-angle shot which shows a hidden man in the loft, watching from above. The frame includes the man, closer to the camera, and also Dude and Chance in the background (Fig. 4). Hawks commented on: “Unusual position for somebody to be in. But that was just to show where he was in relation to

them—to tie them all together” (Bogdanovich, 1996: 345). The shot also encompasses the change in the mood of the scene, reinforced by the change of the music.



Fig. 4

As nobody in the room seems to have mud in the boots Dude’s self-confidence falls apart. The bartender tells Dude—“you been seeing things again”—clearly an allusion to his alcoholism. With a shot/reverse-shot of Dude and Chance, Hawks shows the deception of both, at the same time that the laughs of Burdette’s men start to be heard. One of them even tosses “a coin in the spittoon for Dude to fish out, mirroring Joe Burdette’s humiliating gesture from the film’s opening scene” (Meeuf, 2013: 157). Dude is being again the buffoon he has been for the last two years. The idea is reinforced when he leaves the shotgun over the bar: he is not ready to be Chance yet. Spectators know it is unfair because Dude is right, since the film has shown us the man in the loft, which makes us be sorry for Dude. The medium close-up shot of Dude’s apparent defeat is the closer Hawks will be to a close-up. Then, Dude moves along the bar looking at a jar of beer as if he were about to suffer a relapse in his alcoholism. However, the camera rapidly closes-up on the jar to enable the audience to see what Dude is seeing: drops of blood falling in the jar from above (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5

Thanks to the previous shot of the hidden man in the loft, spectators can interpret the meaning of the blood-stained jar at the same time Dude does. For a moment, Dude hesitates while stepping back. Then, repeating the high-angle shot, we see the exact moment of Dude turning around and shooting up the man hidden in the loft (Fig. 6). Dude has overcome the situation as the best gunslinger would have done: just one shot. As Hawks explains, “then, as the man fell out, we cut and he landed on the floor”. From then on, the scene focuses on Chance’s violent rage in contrast to Dude’s peaceful way of forcing one of Burdette’s men to fish out the coin from the spittoon. The scene ends as it started, with Chance and Dude side by side in a medium close-up and a thankful gaze of Dude towards Chance due to his approval for a job well done.



Fig. 6

Russell Meeuf has pointed out that the scene can be seen as the epitome of professionalism, since the meticulous professionalism of Dude's labor, while handling and disarming Nathan Burdette's hired men, is a reflection of Hawks's meticulous professionalism "in his cinematic construction" of the scene (2013: 157). The scene also shows the unstable personality of Dude at once. In his attempt to be "the sheriff" he could be, his self-confidence has not been strong enough so he has suffered a relapse towards "the buffoon" he is becoming because of his alcoholism. Thus, he has had to look further back, towards the gunslinger he was, as a manner of recovering confidence and overcome the situation with a single shot.

3.3 With My Three Good Companions

As it was mentioned above, the climax of *Rio Bravo* probably comes in the scene when Dude pours the whiskey back into the bottle: "Didn't spill a drop" he says. That happens when he hears the tune "El Degüello" coming from the Burdette's saloon. The song is a threatening message from Nathan Burdette himself. As Colorado explains, it is the same tune the Mexicans played in the siege of The Alamo and it means "no mercy for the losers". The song, instead of getting Dude down, removes the shaking of his hands and encourages him to continue as deputy until the end. Just after that climatic moment, we find one of the most memorable (but also controversial) scenes, the song sequence in jail. For some critics the scene was terribly commercial, it can be regarded "as a way to foreground the singing talents" of Dean Martin and Ricky Nelson (Arnold, 2006: 272). For others, "it seemed quite natural" for Hawks since he used to include song scenes in his movies (Bogdanovich, 1996: 348). For Hawks it is simpler: "when you've got some talent, your job is to use it" (McBride, 2013: 159). Whatever the reason, the scene encapsulates the complex relationship between Dude himself and the different parts of him represented by Colorado, Stumpy and Chance.



Fig. 7

The scene opens with a medium shot of Dude lying down and singing alone. He is, for the first time in the film, totally relaxed while smoking a cigarette. Then the film cuts to a shot of Chance pouring himself some coffee, and when he hears the tune he moves towards the music. The camera pans to give us an establishing long shot (Fig. 7) which shows Dude in the middle with Stumpy and Colorado at both sides, and Chance a little bit apart in the only occasion in which he is included “by himself in the frame, looking on indulgently” (Arnold, 2006: 272) . The song, through a shot/reverse-shot editing, “develops into a ‘love duet’ for Martin and Ricky Nelson” performing “My Rifle, My Pony, and Me” (Wood, 1968: 187). In this part of the scene, in a metafictional interplay, the connection between Dude and Colorado (as a young version of Dude) resonates with the connection of the star personas of both Dean Martin as an old crooner and Ricky Nelson as the young rock star. Since Dude leads the duet, the film seems to be telling us that Dude has reconciled with his former self, with his past as gunslinger that Colorado embodies.



Fig. 8

By means of editing and framing the duet transforms into a trio with Stumpy accompanying with the harmonica (Fig. 8). After the first song by Colorado and Dude, Stumpy asks: “Why don’t you play something I can sing with you?”. The three together sing “Cindy Cindy”, and this time Dude leaves the leading voice to Colorado: “I imagine it added about a million and a half to the picture’s gross”, Hawks commented about Ricky Nelson (Bogdanovich, 1996: 348). In a sequence of shot reverse-shot, Colorado is framed singing alone in medium close-ups against the reverse-shots of Dude and Stumpy doing the chorus. The fact that Stumpy “...for once, is out front and involved...” (Arnold, 2006: 272) in addition to the friendly gaze of Dude over him indicates that Dude is not only in control of his past as gunslinger which Colorado reflects, but also that he is in control of that part of himself that Stumpy represents. Dude is not a cripple anymore, he “has recovered from his two-year drinking binge” (Arnold, 2006: 272). These friendly gazes between Dude and Stumpy contrast with the tension between them in the scene previously mentioned in which Stumpy had precipitated Dude’s breakdown.

The third part of the deconstructed Dude, that is Chance, never gets entirely involved in the scene. In part, “his separateness from the scene” (Arnold, 2006: 272)

responds to the fact that for Hawks “a sheriff shouldn’t sing” (McBride, 2013: 159). But it also responds to the fact that although Dude has overcome his alcoholism, his issue with the “bad woman” is not completely healed, at least until Chance fixes it later on by definitely getting involved with Feathers. The lyrics of the songs seem to reinforce that idea. “My Rifle, My Pony, and Me” begins pleading for the typical male freedom of the western until it moves towards the possibility of hanging the sombrero on the limb of a tree and “coming home, sweetheart darling”, becoming “in a sense, an elegy to drifting and a yearning for a stable home” (Arnold, 2006: 272). In “Cindy Cindy” a cowboy sings about the possibility of marrying Cindy “some time”. In addition, the song line, “she’d take a bite of me”, has to do with the male wishing of being “the object of the woman’s active desire” (Thomas, 1996: 86). Thus, Cindy is not a submissive woman, but one who, rather like Feathers, takes the initiative to have a bite at the apple. In any case, the songs reflect the core western topic of the dichotomy between male desires for heterosexual coupling and homosocial desire for male bonding. That is expressed in the framing of the scene, since the three “single” characters (romantically speaking), Dude, Stumpy and Colorado, who are singing together and establishing male bonds, are framed together several times, while the only character who is in his way to a relationship with a woman, with Feathers, remains “excluded from the common experience” (Wood, 1968: 52). Chance looks at them as hesitating between his masculine world of cowboys and the eventually domestic life Feathers offers him.

So, Dude has taken over Colorado, what he was, and Stumpy, what he was about to become (but not anymore), but he can not take over Chance yet. What he could be, the sheriff, will have to wait. In fact, after the song sequence, Dude will be kidnapped again. A final reunion of all parts of the fragmented Dude will be necessary to save the real one in the famous scene of the dynamite near the end of the film. But although the

main plot of the film gets to an end after that scene (they finally defeat Nathan Burdette's gang), the definite redemption of Dude and women still remains uncompleted. Thus, in the final scene, Chance is going to obliquely tell Feathers that he loves her by saying "I'd arrest you". In that moment they both are finally together and Chance throws away Feathers's tights through the window (Fig. 9). The camera follows the tights down to the street where they are picked up by Stumpy (Fig. 10), which is taking a turn around the town with Dude: "In fact, by the end of the movie, Dude and Chance have more or less changed places" (Thomas, 1996: 86). Dude's second opportunity with love comes to an end, Chance gets the good girl, so Dude is redeemed and can be now the sheriff he deserves to be with his deputy Stumpy.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

4. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have argued that although the protagonist of the film is John T. Chance, it is Dude around whom the other three main male characters move. As stated in the first section of the analysis, the character of Dude can be related to the character of Colorado, who is a skilled gunslinger as good as Dude was. Dude also presents many connections with Stumpy, who is a buffoon as “borrachon” (Dude) is throughout most of the movie, being both, Dude and Stumpy, fully aware of his limitations. The connections between the characters of Chance and Dude are also strong. The intermingling between them makes Chance aware of his limitations and he ends up accepting his feelings towards Feathers. By doing that, the wound of Dude (caused by a “bad” girl) has been healed. What I hope the analysis of two particular scenes has proved is that Dude encapsulates different facets of masculinity. Thus the gunslinger, the buffoon and the sheriff, all of them parts of Dude, are living in a precarious balance at the beginning, as happens in the scene at the Burdette’s saloon. As the film unfolds, these different parts of Dude are reconciled as the song sequence shows. By the end of the film, it seems clear that Dude has managed to integrate all the parts and is ready to replace Chance as sheriff.

In *Howard Hawks*, Robin Wood points out that, unlike other western films and their nostalgic evocation of U.S past, in Hawks’s films “there is little sense for the past” and his “characters live in and for the present” (90). The characters of *Rio Bravo* represent the quintessential male professional group typical of Hawks’s films and at the same time they are related to archetypes of the western genre. But like in other westerns in the 1950’s, the characters of *Rio Bravo* also encapsulate the social changes of the historical moment. A film that started as a reaction against the deconstructive attack on the traditional male protagonist of the western which was present in two films such as

High Noon and *3:10 to Yuma*, ended up being a complex exploration of masculinity. It seems that the quintessential male genre needed a change to accept and merge the contradictions that result from the dichotomy between male desires for heterosexual coupling and homosocial desire for male bonding, typical of the western genre.

In that environment, it is the character of Dude that becomes the perfect place to negotiate the shifting masculinity of the 1950's that Ehrenreich theorizes. On the one hand, even though *Rio Bravo* nuances Wayne's authority, "suggesting the limits of his idealized masculinity" (Meeuf, 2014: 155), the star persona of John Wayne makes Chance unable to show the necessary weakness for the new model of masculinity that was being forged. On the other hand, Colorado's youth and inexperience and Stumpy's limitations as an old cripple make them non-appropriate to be presented as masculine role models. Dude seems to be in a mid point to embody the contradictions of the new masculinity of the 1950's. Though apparently the most flawed character of the four male protagonists, Dude's narrative evolution in the film ends up bringing together different features of the other three main characters. The three parts of the deconstructed Dude represent archetypical western roles on their own but when they collide within Dude, they result in a more complex personality and masculinity, which can be related to the socio-cultural changes taking place in the 1950's regarding to the roles and attitudes of men. When the alcohol transforms Dude into a buffoon, the gunslinger he was is still there, but seems to be more human, less monolithic. That humanity (the film seems to be arguing) is necessary for Dude in order to become a man who could be a good sheriff, or a citizen who has to belong to society in a deeper and more civilized way than a gunfighter does.

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