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Interpretation and Judgment: A Reading of *Lonesome Dove*

DAVID THORBURN

□—*Defending the importance for media study of a descriptive and evaluative scholarship grounded in old-humanist perspectives, this essay argues for distinguishing between “cultural” and “aesthetic” interpretation. In the latter, the text is valued not as a mere carrier of cultural meanings but intrinsically, as an intellectually coherent exploration of its subject matter. The current widespread suspicion of evaluation as a form of ideological mystification impoverishes scholarship, especially that devoted to non-canonical materials, by refusing to recognize and to value excellence. Using the TV miniseries Lonesome Dove as a case study, the essay argues that media texts, like literary works, can and should be evaluated according to the criteria of “formal mastery” and “intellectual coherence.”*

ASSUMPTIONS, OLD-STYLE

I want to begin by elaborating a distinction I proposed in a previous issue of this journal between a cultural artifact and a work of art, between *cultural* as against *aesthetic* interpretation. Some such distinction was, I think, the ground assumption of literary study before the advent of deconstruction, post-structuralism, and the ideologically centered scholarship that is today broadly labeled

“cultural studies.” In this old-humanist perspective a central task of criticism involves evaluation and judgment. A successful work of art differs from a failed or merely partially successful text by virtue of its formal excellence and its intellectual or thematic coherence.

By *formal excellence* I mean the text's mastery of its medium. A good or great poem cannot be such if its language is imprecise, if the poet does not demonstrate mastery of her verbal medium, if her diction is careless or muddled, her command of rhythm (and meter, if the poem uses a recognizable metrical pattern) imperfect. A good or great film cannot

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be such if it is oblivious to or careless about its nature as a visual experience, if it fails to exploit, for instance, the size of the image, the camera's mobility, the possibilities of montage, the potentially complex relation between the audio track and the visual image. Of course, these and many other formal dimensions of the text—including such factors as the length of the whole, the place of the spectator in relation to the text, the potential meanings embedded in generic and performance traditions—are conditioned by the subject matter: A large, encompassing subject requires some sort of answering formal largeness; an intimate, domestic subject demands (to stick with the example of film) an appropriately intimate behavior from the camera and the sound track.

It is important to understand flexibly the principle of formal coherence and the corollary principle that form must embody or articulate content. For apparent disjunctions between these central features of a text may in fact be a subtle and complicating aspect of what is ultimately a coherent sense of experience. One decisive example of this artistic circumstance, as recent feminist scholarship has powerfully demonstrated, is the seeming disparity in many Hollywood melodramas between intimate, relatively ordinary, unflamboyant domestic and middle-class settings and a heightened, emotionally extravagant visual style—a disjunction or disparity that powerfully dramatizes the intellectual and moral contradictions the conventional plot seeks to evade or to deny.¹ Especially in the case of Douglas Sirk's films, this apparent gap or inconsistency between

style and substance, form and content, *is* the content.

By *intellectual* or *thematic coherence* I mean the idea that the text's exploration of its content, of the materials it designates as its subject-matter, be thorough and serious, "complete" in some reasonable sense, not muddled or evasive or partial. This ideal of intellectual coherence—of "wholeness," we might also call it—is not a demand for a narrowly unified, univocal meaning. A text may be intellectually coherent in the sense I intend—it is the sense assumed, I believe, by the now maligned New Critics and other old-humanist literary scholars—and still contain multiple ambiguities, complexities, even contradictions (so long as those contradictions are "conscious" ones, contradictions the text understands and acknowledges).

An example will help to clarify this point. We are all aware of the way in which certain narratives "solve" or resolve the problems raised by the characters and events of the story by essentially arbitrary means, by killing off a primary character, say, who had served as an obstacle to the happiness or success of the protagonists. Even more common in certain narrative forms in Christian cultures is the similar mechanism of an abrupt change of heart, an unprepared-for spiritual transformation, in a villain who suddenly repents his evil and so enables a happy or psychologically satisfying ending. In both cases, we may say that the thematic oppositions and problems dramatized by the behavior of the villain or blocking agent has been exorcised arbitrarily, and that the contradictions inherent in the situation have been

evaded rather than confronted or resolved.

Such evasions, Lévi-Strauss and others have taught us, may lie at the very center of cultural myths, whose function (so it is argued) is to display or dramatize contradictions in a form that offers an apparent symbolic resolution of conflicts and oppositions that have not been or cannot be resolved in the actualities of social life. Many materialist or culturalist accounts of film and other forms of modern popular culture see genres as contemporary instances of this process of mythic articulation and evasion. And it is surely important to recognize that genres such as the detective story, the western, the romantic comedy, the domestic melodrama are structured by ambivalence and division, by contradictory or conflicting yearnings and assumptions about human values. In what I want to call *cultural* as against *aesthetic* interpretation, uncovering and analyzing these structural contradictions—deconstructing them, as many would prefer to say—and linking them to the social and political order that shapes and legitimates them are crucial tasks.

But if the task of the scholar of genre, or of cultural studies more broadly construed, is contained wholly within this hermeneutic of suspicion, if narrative and dramatic forms are presumed always to be evasive in these ways, then I believe the study of contemporary popular culture, of our literary or cultural life in general, will be gravely impoverished. We need not subscribe to the notion of an unconstrained aesthetic realm free of politics or ideology in order to claim that certain texts achieve a greater or truer intellec-

tual coherence or wholeness than other texts. In fact, I would argue, *not* to recognize that some texts are superior to others, that some texts explore their mediums and articulate their subject matter more richly and decisively than others, is to deny to dramatic and narrative works qualities of competence and excellence that we routinely and necessarily grant in the rest of our experience. Is it foolish or intellectually naive to believe that excellence in bricklaying, or home-construction, or historical argument can and should be recognized? An ill-constructed fireplace, a poorly written or insufficiently researched historical study can be recognized and judged as inadequate. Should we not insist on the same right to evaluate the story forms of a culture? Are intelligence and technical skill relevant categories for most human activities but not for narrative texts?

The currently fashionable notion that aesthetic judgments are merely disguised forms of ideology working to enforce social or racial or patriarchal privilege radically simplifies complex cultural processes. Even if—as is surely the case—established canons and traditions are often blind to worthy materials the dominant culture conceives as marginal, it does not follow that the *included* categories and texts have been chosen only, or even primarily, for their ideological correctness. Moreover, the attack on evaluation as a rationale for elitist privilege carries especially damaging implications for exactly those marginalized or excluded categories in whose defense the anti-aesthetic argument has been deployed. This is so because a refusal to recognize degrees of excellence in artistic work by

previously excluded groups will ignore qualities of imagination, intelligence and technical skill that must surely distinguish some of this work. The cause of literature by women, say, or of Chicano poetry, will be ill-served if we assume that every author and every text in these categories have an equal claim on our attention.²

Of course the task of aesthetic judgment is immensely more complex than most other evaluative projects. Such evaluations always must be flexible, subject to revision, tentative. But still, they seem essential if we are to remain open to the rare, perhaps unique ways in which great narratives illuminate human experience. Thomas Kyd—author of *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) and other popular revenge plays, including, the scholars believe, a lost play called *Hamlet*—is not the equal of Shakespeare. Mickey Spillane is not Dashiell Hammett. Ogden Nash is not Emily Dickinson. *Dragnet* is artistically (that is, technically and intellectually) inferior to *Hill Street Blues*. To insist on the importance of such judgments is to insist on our right to value skill and intelligence in artistic matters, just as we do—and must do—in other dimensions of human experience.

SUPERIOR TELEVISION, FLAWED ART

To illustrate something of how such principles might operate in practice, I propose to discuss the television miniseries *Lonesome Dove*. This eight-hour epic, first broadcast in 1989, earned the strongest ratings of any miniseries in the previous five years. According to the Nielsen Company, more than one-quarter of all TV homes tuned in to the program,

which was seen each night by nearly 50 million viewers. The program also was highly praised by newspaper and magazine critics and received 18 Emmy nominations, more than any other program from the 1988–89 season.

An extremely faithful adaptation of Larry McMurtry's best-selling novel of the same title, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1986, *Lonesome Dove* mixes many elements of the traditional western with an ironizing humor and "realism" in ways that clarify its distinction but also its artistic limitations. The story centers on two retired Texas rangers, Woodrow Call (Tommy Lee Jones) and Augustus McCrae (Robert Duvall), who lead a cattle drive from south Texas to Montana, represented in the film as a kind of last frontier, one of the few remaining untamed territories. Both characters understand the drive as their last great adventure, one final valiant quest that will cap their lives as Indian fighters and heroes. "I wouldn't have missed coming up here [to Montana]," Gus says late in the story. "Ain't nothin' better than riding a fine horse into a new country. It's exactly what me and Woodrow was made for."³

Whatever its other limitations, *Lonesome Dove* exhibits a formal or technical excellence rare in large-scale or epic TV productions. A visually dazzling achievement, its scenes of heroic action are as vivid and as thoughtfully conceived as its passages of human intimacy. This technical superiority is especially notable because the epic scale of the western genre is so uncongenial to the limitations of the small television screen. It is no accident that the artistically

strongest early television western, *Maverick* (ABC, 1957–62) was a parody of the form, mocking its heroic pretensions and epic grandeur in stories largely restricted to interior spaces—the *Maverick* brothers were itinerant gamblers who spent lots of time at the poker table in various saloons—and celebrating the Odyssean virtues of cunning and survival as against the traditional western values of macho fighting and killing. James Garner's Bret *Maverick*, especially, was a great talker and con- niver, (often) a physical coward, a partly comic inversion of the taciturn man of action who stands at the center of the traditional western text.

Even the two most important television western series—*Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1955–75) and *Bonanza* (NBC, 1959–73)—though far more respectful toward the genre's interest in heroic individualism, consistently dramatized conversations, intimate interactions in enclosed, essentially domestic spaces. In *Gunsmoke*, in fact, the western conventions must be seen as a near facade, behind which we can perceive a recurring family melodrama, whose primary characters return in every episode, gathered for meals, conversation and comic badinage at their favorite table in the Long Branch Saloon: curmudgeonly Doc (Milburn Stone); generous but toughly independent Kitty (Amanda Blake), saloon-owner and implied mistress to the hero; whiny and gimp-y Chester (Dennis Weaver); and Marshall Matt Dillon himself (James Arness), towering but with surprising gentleness and tolerance over his surrogate family.

Bonanza contained more heroic action and favored outdoor settings somewhat more fully than *Gunsmoke*,

but it, too, deployed the conventions of family melodrama, masculinized to fit the demands of the imperial western, in ways that make it useful to see even this epic program as a cousin to the numerous situation comedies of those pre-feminist years in which a patriarchal father must contend (mostly comically) with the nurturing tasks created by the absence of the wife and mother. (*The Rifleman* [ABC, 1958–63], another culturally significant western series, fits this pattern even more closely than *Bonanza*.)

One of the chief accomplishments of *Lonesome Dove*, I believe, is its success in adapting to the constraints of the reduced visual scale of the TV screen without undermining the epic scope—the sense of vast landscapes, long horizons, grand physical adventure—essential to the story. The mini-series format, of course, is itself conducive to this expansiveness, but such serial duration alone is not enough to assure that epic size will be credibly dramatized. Many earlier mini-series with equivalent ambitions foundered, in my judgment, by ignoring the implications of the small-ened *mise en scène* enforced by television. Two factors in particular seem to me to explain how *Lonesome Dove* succeeds where other would-be TV epics have failed.

First, like the novel itself, *Lonesome Dove* is as interested in character as it is in action. And although I've not put a stop-watch to the film, my strong impression is that passages of intimacy and conversation occupy far more time in the text than scenes of expansive outdoor action. What is certainly true, in any event, is that most of the crucial turnings in the story involve human closeness, emo-

tional encounters. One thinks, for example, of the fine leisurely establishing scenes in Part I: the communal meals inside the ranch house where Call and McCrae's contrasting natures emerge so economically, where Jake Spoon's (Robert Urich) attractive but also suspect character is established [figure 1]; or the revealing, comic scenes in the shabby saloon-whorehouse where Gus loiters for company, poker and the favors of Lorena (Diane Lane), the town's lone prostitute. Even the scenes shot out of doors in the first part of the film often require relative close shots, framing two or at most three characters in typical poses and conversations. The lazy, pleasurable drinking and reminiscing between Gus and Jake Spoon outside the cellar where Gus keeps his liquor is a striking instance of this recurring strategy [figure 2]. And, of course, many of the central later scenes justify a similar visual intimacy. The extended, powerful scenes of Gus's long dying are the most dramatic of these [figures 3, 4, 5], but there are many others, including the brilliant action sequences leading up to Gus's mortal wound, and especially the passage in which Gus and his comrade hole up



FIGURE 2

in a shallow cave, fighting weather, fatigue and Indians [figures 6, 7]. The sense of physical danger is palpable here, but is played out in a confined space especially congenial to television.

Yet the film also creates a rich sense of the panoramic spaciousness of this western environment, and even (perhaps especially) when it is intent on creating such vistas it nonetheless adjusts to the peculiar demands of television's reduced visual scale. The key to its success in this panoramic mode lies, I think, in the way in which Simon Wincer, the director, and his collaborators—Douglas Milsome, the director of photog-



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 3

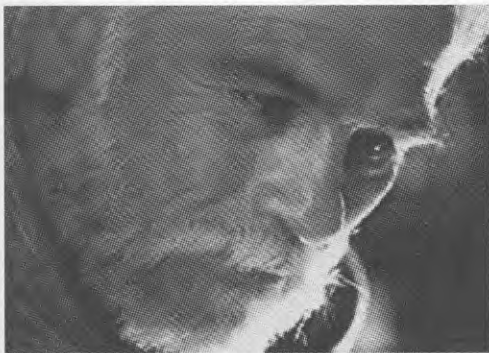


FIGURE 4



FIGURE 6

raphy; Corky Ehlers, the film editor; Cary White, the production designer—are able to suggest or imply spaciousness, while at the same time creating perspectives that confine or channel our sightlines, or that offer only brief glimpses of unrestricted vistas in quick cuts that are juxtaposed with tighter shots centering on people or objects.⁴

The first part of the title sequence itself is an exemplary instance of this visual subtlety. A map of the southwest appears on the screen, Texas occupying the central space, then the title *Lonesome Dove* is superimposed on the map as Basil Poledouris' nostalgic theme music rises on the soundtrack. Now follows a sequence of nine

still frames—images from the later action, though the viewer initially can only infer this—over which the credits appear. The faded, sepia-like coloring of these frozen images reinforces the sense of gentle melancholy or nostalgia suggested by the music. All nine stills show us outdoor settings, and taken together they suggest something of the diversity and immensity of the spaces and physical action in the story to come. But the *mise en scène* in each is cunningly contrived, suggesting vastness without actually attempting to embody it.

In the first frame, after the map, two horsemen are frozen at full gallop in the middleground, but a mesquite bush in the left foreground or-

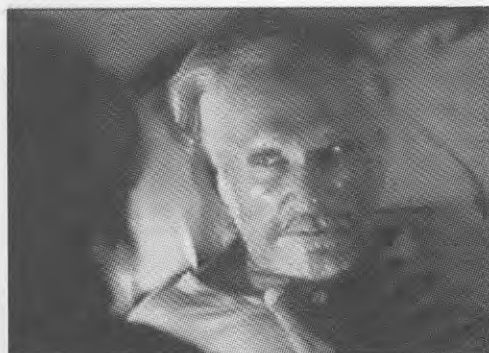


FIGURE 5



FIGURE 7

ganizes our sightline, sending it into the depths of the image, toward and past the horsemen to the looming late afternoon sun just above the horizon, which dominates the background and blurs the scene with its glare [figure 8]. The second frame [figure 9], less faded, offers a view of a cattle drive, the line of cattle receding back into the rear of the frame in a way that channels our vision into the depths of the image, creating simultaneously an awareness of the great size of the herd and of the flat, grand immensity of the landscape.

The ninth still in this sequence [figure 10] exploits this same recognition of the way in which TV images can suggest physical expanses if we follow action in depth, vertically, toward or away from the camera's eye, as opposed to movement across the screen, horizontally, where the sense of confinement and limitation is unavoidable. Here, in sepia, we see wagons and horsemen entering a western town toward an eye-level camera; the wide muddy street dominates the foreground; one- and two-story wooden buildings, typical western-town structures, run along the right and left borders of the frame, creating a tunnel effect that directs our



FIGURE 9

gaze toward the oncoming wagons and riders in the middle distance and beyond them into the vista of mountains and big western sky that looms behind the town and recedes into the depths of the image.

The credits continue over a fluent montage of 10 additional shots, and the sequence is worth describing more fully as an emblem for the technical elegance and subtlety that is characteristic of the entire production. In the 10th image we make a silent and for the moment unacknowledged transition into the present-time of the narrative. This tenth shot [figure 11] is a tight view of a faded painting of a dove on a



FIGURE 8



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11

rounded, cupola-like wooden facade. The only hint that we've shifted from a proleptic montage of events to come into the beginning of the story proper is the brighter, more realistic light and color in the image. The next shot [figure 12] is high-angled, showing the distinctive rounded dove-cupola of the previous image, but situated now atop a building in the middleground too far from our vantage for the dove itself to be recognized, while slightly below the camera's eye, in the right foreground is the church belltower of Lonesome Dove. The Rio Grande snakes left to center in the background, and for the first time in the sequence the



FIGURE 12

image registers movement and we hear a snippet of diagetic sound: Smoke curls from the chimney of the dove-building, a single cock crows. Now a series of eight shots in fairly rapid montage establishes the physical spaces of the town, its relative emptiness and shabbiness. The smoke appears in several shots, wind is heard, though the theme music continues as well. A human figure, deep in the background, appears in the 18th shot, wearily leading a horse toward the camera. In the final image of the title sequence [figure 13], the screen is filled with Gus's wooden sign, naming the Hat Creek Cattle Company, and for the first time, the camera itself moves, slowly zooming close to read the names on the sign—"Capt. Augustus McCrae, Captain W. F. Call," and below in smaller print, "R. E. Parker: Wrangler"; then below again, as the camera pans gently right: "Deets Joshua." The camera continues its rightward pan to reveal Gus's Latin motto and the injunction "We don't rent pigs!" The grunting of pigs accompanies this final image, effecting the transition to the story itself, where the first shot [figure 14], in bright sunlight, shows two such noisy creatures rooting



FIGURE 13

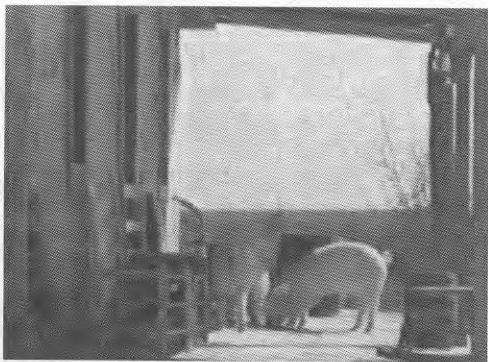


FIGURE 14



FIGURE 16

around at a snake on Gus's faded porch. Gus himself now appears [figures 15, 16], skinny, almost frail-looking, in an oversized cowboy hat, pants and suspenders and a shabby white undershirt, preparing to chase his pigs away from the house.

The entire sequence of 19 shots consumes slightly more than two minutes. Its elegance and subtlety are notable especially because most of it is obscured behind the lettered credits. And in addition to embodying the audio-visual complexity that will mark the whole film, the sequence also constitutes something of an emblem for the text's (and McMurtry's) tangled, partly contradic-

tory attitude toward the mythology of the western genre, progressing from still frames of large vistas and heroic action to live shots of a shabby, dusty near-ghost town, to the haphazardly improvised, eccentrically amateur hand-carved sign, thence to the comically unheroic introduction of the hero himself, who is first seen half-dressed and talking to his pigs.

This impulse toward a deflating, partly ironic realism—emphasizing the ordinary and antiheroic dimensions of western life and implicitly undermining the pretensions and romanticized myth-making of the conventional western—is of course a recurring feature of McMurtry's fiction and critical writings⁵ as well as a defining element in *Lonesome Dove* itself.

Many features of the miniseries reinforce its revisionist claim to be a self-conscious reflection on and criticism of the simplifications and moral confusions so prominent in earlier westerns. But a chief source of this tendency is its central character, Duvall's Gus McCrae. As Richard Campbell has remarked, in some respects Gus is more closely allied with the garrulous comic sidekick of the conventional western (as played by



FIGURE 15

such actors as Gabby Hayes or Andy Devine) than with the typical western hero.⁶ Loquacious and pleasure-loving, averse to physical labor, Gus is a memorable figure in the novel and is granted even more vitality and idiosyncratic plausibility in Duvall's rich performance. "I'm just tryin' to keep everything balanced, Woodrow," he tells his partner early in the story. "You do more work than you've got to, so it's my obligation to do less."

The contrast between the two central characters is less decisive than it appears at first to be, but it is a primary instrument of McMurtry's (and the film's) critique of the conventional western. The taciturn, dispassionate, unimaginative Call might serve in a conventional western as an unambiguous hero, but here, especially in contrast with his comic, cynical, philosophizing comrade, his misogyny and stolid, relentless single-mindedness are explicitly criticized. Like the damaged heroes played by John Wayne in such films as *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948) and *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), Call embodies a defensive and repressed self-sufficiency. Unable to acknowledge his son Newt (Ricky Schroder) as his own, unable to rest or take pleasure even in the company of his own men, Call survives in cheerless isolation at the end of the film, a powerful judgment on the western's conventional celebration of heroic individualism.

Yet despite its significant virtues, the film's antiheroic and critical stance is partial, incomplete, a source of muddlement and self-canceling contradiction as well as strength. Like the tribal myths Lévi-Strauss has described for us, like the mystified story-forms Roland Barthes identifies as

bourgeois mythology, *Lonesome Dove's* apparent realism, its insistent sense of itself as a revisionist western, hides or glosses over crucial contradictions.

Among these unacknowledged contradictions is its attitude toward women. It is clear from many details and scenes that *Lonesome Dove* believes itself to be more enlightened about the role of women than the traditional western, whose misogynist tendencies have been widely acknowledged. And it is true that in isolated passages, especially the scenes between Gus and Lorie on the trail drive, we are shown impulses toward gentleness and tenderness unusual in the genre. But Lorie suffers a violent fate in the story as sensational as any in a pulp western, and Gus's relation to her, for all its generosity and attentiveness after her rescue, always contains elements of condescension and male supremacy. Worse, the lone independent woman in the story, the only female to venture out into the wilderness on her own, the errant wife of a bumbling secondary character named July Johnson, is presented as a kind of monstrosity. Her desertion of her husband and young child is understood to be aberrant and morally reprehensible, and her pursuit of her former lover and her desertion of her newborn infant are clearly intended to signify pathological obsession. When she is brutally murdered off stage, it is as if the plot itself has punished her for her crimes against the family order.

Even the most powerful and morally attractive woman in the story, Gus's former sweetheart Clara (Anjelica Huston), comes to embody contradictory, self-canceling tendencies.

She is granted a strength and moral authority denied to most of the other characters, it is true; and she understands Gus's ambivalence toward heroic achievement, toward conventionally masculine pursuits, more clearly than Gus himself. She dislikes Call for his symbiotic hold over Gus, for his misogyny and utilitarian single-mindedness. Her explanation to Gus for her original rejection of him is a critique of the male-bonding principle that is nonetheless celebrated in *Lonesome Dove* as fully as in traditional westerns. I didn't want to spend my life contending with Captain Call for your attentions, she says. Yet she also is shown to have the traditional nurturant impulses of the saintly wives and mothers in traditional westerns: She gets dewy-eyed and possessive over July Johnson's newborn child [figure 17]; she is angelic and protective toward Lorie. And her refusal to marry Gus this second time around seems strangely unmotivated, given her joy at seeing him again, given the fact that her husband's imminent death will release her from her marriage honorably. When she refuses Gus with the explanation that she's decided she doesn't want to marry anyone again,

that she's beyond needing men, the line rings false; it doesn't seem consistent with the passionate and sentimental woman dramatized in the text; it sounds instead like a half-hearted gesture in the direction of feminist sentiments that are otherwise ignored in the story. At one key moment, when Gus takes his leave of Clara's ranch to continue north with the herd, the camera itself, the visual rhetoric, collaborates in undercutting or canceling out the text's well-intended but unpersuasive effort to valorize a strong woman. For in this scene of farewell [figures 18, 19], Gus sits on his horse, in the foreground of the frame, looking down upon both his women. Lorie stands in the background of these middle-distance shots, while Clara stands close to the horse's head, looking up affectionately and tenderly at her departing man. The *mise en scène* unambiguously subordinates both women, and in the very iconic poses reserved for females in the most reactionary conventional westerns.

The confusions or unacknowledged contradictions in the text's treatment of female characters are replicated in its muddled attitudes toward the Indians. That the conven-



FIGURE 17



FIGURE 18



FIGURE 19

tional western articulates an expansionist and colonial ideology which rationalizes the conquest of Indian lands by white men has long been recognized—and not only by scholars and intellectuals, but by the western genre itself. Compared to such films as *The Searchers* or a whole group of major westerns made during the 1970s when the counter-culture and anti-war sentiment encouraged filmmakers to subvert traditional forms, *Lonesome Dove's* efforts to acknowledge the humanity of its Indians or to question the imperial theme that defines the genre seem half-hearted and partial.

The events leading up to the death of the black scout Deets (Danny Glover) at the end of Part III constitute the film's most extended passage of self-conscious sympathy for Native Americans. Here Deets, Call and McCrae come upon a band of Indians, who turn out to be miserable and starving, huddling together for comfort, not the savage, blood-thirsty enemies they perhaps expect. Deets is killed by a young brave who misinterprets his compassion for a blind Indian child. The scene is perhaps too neat in its multiple ironies, and Deets's death deflects attention

away from the text's momentary recognition of the Indians as humans and victims, but there is no doubt its intention is to complicate or ironize what had been a ground-assumption of most older (pre 1950s?) westerns—the association of Indians with savagery, disorder, monstrosity.

The trouble with this morally admirable ambition in *Lonesome Dove* is that it is not coherently absorbed into the narrative. Not only had Call and McCrae made their reputations in the past by ridding Texas of Mexican bandits and comanches, there is no suggestion that either man hesitates in their heroic drive to Montana on the grounds that the dangerous Indians they expect to encounter there might have a legitimate right to their territory. This is so, we might note, despite McCrae's explicit moment of self-doubt early in Part II, when he and Call visit San Antonio to find a new cook. McCrae discovers he is unhappy that towns are springing up where there had once been wilderness. It's our fault, he tells Call. "We chased out the Indians . . . hung all the good bandits. Did it ever occur to you that everything we done was a mistake? . . . We killed off most of the people who made this country interesting. . . ." Yet like most of his other moments of philosophic moralizing, these sentiments have no impact on McCrae's behavior. They complicate his character for the audience, as they no doubt are intended to do, but they remain essentially irrelevant to the momentum of the action, and represent a characteristic gesture of self-indulgence wherein the story confesses to crimes or failings which it then proceeds to enact anyway.

The heroic stature of both Call

and McCrae is mystified in another and perhaps even more disturbing respect by the way in which McMurry's apparent realism—his purportedly anti-romantic sense of the "real west" as a locale of chaotic and unpredictable violence—leads him to create villains whose motiveless malignity belongs not to any credible historical past but to a surreal universe of nightmare and (racist) fantasy. The most blatant and morally disturbing instance of this is the figure of Blue Duck (Frederic Forrest), a renegade half-breed whose reputation for plunder, murder, and rape has made him as famous as Call and McCrae. During the course of the film Blue Duck murders two children and several men and abducts Lorie, giving her to his band of drunken comancheros who repeatedly assault her. A half-breed who dresses like an Indian and who leads a band of brutal, drunken Indians, Blue Duck is a racist caricature whose presence undermines the film's sympathetic treatment of the Indians in the scene of Deets's death. Neither the film nor the novel makes any effort to explain or motivate Blue Duck: he exists as a figure of pure evil, the inexplicable demon of (white) settlers' nightmares.

But Blue Duck is not the only example of this impulse to create antagonists for the heroes whose unmitigated evil places them in a realm of nonhuman monstrosity. The insanely murderous gang-leader with whom Jake Spoon becomes entangled perhaps exceeds even Blue Duck in his

gratuitous lust for death and torture. After killing some farmers, this cartoon villain proceeds to hang and set fire to their corpses. Such excesses serve the narrative function of justifying Call and McCrae as heroic avengers. "I can't let a horse thief off," Gus tells Lorie as he sets off to hunt Spoon's gang, "particularly one that's killed a boy." In a world so evil—peopled by such creatures as Blue Duck and Jake Spoon's mad gang-leader—the vigilante self-sufficiency of Call and McCrae is made to seem heroic and even comforting.

So a film that aims to complicate and even to expose the myths of heroic and violent self-assertion that have defined the western yields to devices of plot and character that muddle and undermine those ambitions.

These contradictions in the text's understanding of its characters and its central subject-matter are too decisive, too thorough-going to be dismissed as minor flaws in an otherwise satisfying story. The visual power of *Lonesome Dove*, the brilliant authority of its main performers, the partial complexity of its sense of character, perhaps most of all the text's touching and tender evocation of male friendship—these are genuine virtues and admirable achievements. But the story as a whole is radically flawed, its vision of human experience is reductive and self-canceling. Valuable in many ways, *Lonesome Dove* does not attain to the coherence of truly serious narrative art.

NOTES

¹See, for example, Doane (1987), and the essays—especially those by Gledhill, Elsaesser, Mulvey and Rodowick—collected in Gledhill (1987).

²In the case of television studies, the assumption that an interest in artistic value is mere ideology is especially ironic and intellectually debilitating. For from the moment of its first appearance in our society television has been understood as a form of ideology; such a notion of television might even be said to be the single "fact" about the medium upon which virtually everyone has agreed. The consensus has been remarkably inclusive. The "popular" understanding of the medium by journalists, interest groups, the general public, political conservatives who bemoan television's indifference to "traditional" values and political radicals who excoriate the medium for legitimating white, patriarchal, heterosexual values—this popular understanding makes the same ground-assumption as most television scholars. All are obsessed by television's "influence," by its power to represent and shape attitudes and beliefs; in short, by its force as ideology. In this sense, much of the emerging scholarship on television, asserting its theoretical sophistication in comparison with older forms of "mass-culture" social science, remains essentially committed to a view of television as propaganda that is only marginally different from the crude empiricism of older traditions of communications research. The new ideologically grounded approaches to cultural interpretation have had and will continue to have valuable consequences in literary and film study, where established canons and aesthetic hierarchies have reified and have been taken for granted, where skepticism toward long-sanctified authors and texts can open new perspectives. But in television study it is not news, it is the same old story, to be told that the medium carries ideological baggage. This is all we have ever known or assumed about television. My own strong sense, needless to say, is that our understanding of television is far more likely to be complicated and enlarged by a descriptive and evaluative scholarship willing to recognize and even, where appropriate, to celebrate the medium's highest achievements.

³I've quoted the miniseries here. But compare—as a measure of its the faithfulness to the original—the equivalent lines from the novel: "I can't think of nothing better than riding a fine horse into a new country. It's exactly what I was meant for, and Woodrow too" (McMurtry, 1986, p. 832).

⁴Wincer gained considerable experience with the problem of filming scenic vastness for television in the two-part, four-hour miniseries *The Last Frontier* (CBS, Oct. 5, 7, 1986), an action melodrama shot principally in the Australian outback. Linda Evans had star-billing, but the *TV Guide* summary plausibly suggested that the Australian landscape "is the scene-stealer" in the film.

⁵See, for example, McMurtry's novel *Leaving Cheyenne* (1963) and his discussions of real cowboys and western films in his collection of essays (1968).

⁶In a subtle essay-in-progress titled "*Lonesome Dove* and the Re-Invention of the Western Hero" to which my comments on McCrae and Call are much indebted.

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