

A Western Sense of Place: The Case of George Stevens' *Shane*

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... it is hard to be pessimistic about the West. This is the native home of hope. When it fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the pattern that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery (Stegner, 1980, 38).

Although there is debate as to what defines the 'West' as it figures in the 'Western' – and so debate over what exactly counts as a Western and what does not (whether, for instance, a movie such as *Last of the Mohicans*, can properly be counted as part of the Western genre) – the Western is nevertheless a genre of film, unlike almost every other, that is defined first and foremost *by its place* – that is indeed *named* by its place.¹ The Western is thus, we might say, a *topographic* genre ('topographic' being the term that I have used for some years now to refer to that which pertains to place and its analysis – see eg. Malpas, 1999, 2012b).² This is not diminished by the fact that the place of the Western is, in many respects, a *mythical* place. All myth belongs, in fact, to place, and every place engenders its own myths.³

For those who take place as a central theme (especially for those, like me, who are drawn to the project of what I have elsewhere termed 'philosophical topography' – see eg. Malpas, 1999),⁴ this ought to make the Western of particular interest. The investigation of topographic and spatial themes within the cultural form of the cinematic has developed considerably in recent years – the so-called 'spatial turn' (however, exactly, that is

understood⁵) has thus been a feature of film studies just as other disciplines have also looked to explore the topographic and the spatial in film (see, eg.: Aitken and Zonn 1994; Cresswell and Dixon, 2002; Everett and Goodbody, 2005; Lukinbeal and Zimmermann, 2008; Naficy, 2013).⁶ Film is a social and cultural artefact within which topographic elements play out, but it can itself be seen as a medium for the exploration of the topographic, and as an expression of certain topographic and spatial concerns, forms, and sensibilities. In the Western, however, issues of place arise in a way that is directly related to the very character of the genre, and that actually serve in part to define it; moreover, the way place appears in the Western is not only relevant to the discussion of place as it appears cinematically, but also provides an exemplary frame within which place appears as itself a central issue and in close connection with questions of self and identity, action and movement, landscape and community. Explorations of these themes can, of course, be found in many theoretical works from Relph (e.g. 1976) through to Massey (e.g. 2005), as well as in my own writing (see e.g. Malpas, 1999, 2012a), but in the Western they are presented and explored in an especially concrete and evocative fashion, even if in a way that also requires some explication. Part of the aim of this brief essay is to make explicit something of the presentation and exploration of these themes within one classic film of the genre, George Steven's *Shane* (1953), while also drawing on two other closely related films (one a remake and the other a kind of inverted reflection) that serve to reinforce the explication and analysis.

To say that the Western belongs to and evokes a place is not to say that the Western is only to be understood as belonging to a certain part of geographical space. The place of the Western encompasses a certain time no less than a space. This is an inevitable consequence, quite apart from any other consideration, of the fact that the spatial and

temporal are not independent modes of dimensionality, but rather belong together within the compass of the topographic – as part of the already given structure of place rather than apart from it (see eg. Malpas, 2012b, 2015a). To talk of the place of the Western or of a Western 'sense of place' is thus not to talk only of the space to which the Western belongs, nor just of a certain time, but of both taken together – something especially evident in the way Frederick Turner's work is so often invoked in discussions of the nature of the Western, its origins, and its characteristic preoccupations (see Turner, 1999). Moreover, although tied to place, the place of the Western is nevertheless essentially indeterminate. The geographical space of the Western thus spreads out from what might be viewed as its exemplary location 'west of the Mississippi, south of the 49th parallel, and north of the Rio Grande' (French, 2005, 13), and although the time of the Western seems to belong primarily to the period of American history following the Civil War up until the official end of the frontier in 1890, it also seems to spill over these bounds both before and after.

If we turn from questions of geographical or historical locatedness to the issues of thematic characterisation, still the theme of place remains. Consider the passage from Don DeLillo that appears as the epigram to an essay by Scott Simmon on *My Darling Clementine*:

People talk about classic Westerns. The classic thing has always been the space, the emptiness. The lines are drawn for us. All we have to do is insert the figures, men in dusty boots, certain faces. Figures in open space have always been what film is all about.

American film. This is the situation. People in a wilderness, a wild and barren space. The space is the desert, the movie screen, the strip of film, however you see it. What are the people doing here? This is their existence. They're here to work out their existence. This space, this emptiness is what they have to confront (DeLillo, 1983, 198; Simmon, 1996, 114).

Here Delillo provides us with a characterisation of the Western – and not only the Western, but American film – that not only presents it as essentially existential, but takes that existentiality to be worked out and portrayed through the actions of figures in an essentially empty space. The emptiness of the space, its character as wilderness, is directly tied to the existentiality of the situation: human existence, as Delillo sees it, is just a working out of existence in the midst of emptiness, in the face of nullity. The place of the Western for Delillo becomes, if not a non-place (the very idea of which is problematic⁷), still a place from which meaning has apparently been erased; in which the possibility of meaning is brought into question. One might take this understanding of place in the Western to be present in its starkest form in the films of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah – films in which the landscape stands as the empty and inhospitable counterpart to the existential situation the characters confront. Elsewhere, notably in the films of John Ford, the existential character of place may be less obvious, but the expressive character of place is to the fore. In Ford's films (even those films in which place does not figure as an element in the narrative itself), the grandeur of Monument Valley reinforces the epic quality of the action, while also resonating with larger themes belonging to the American sense of national identity as defined in its relation to the landscape.⁸

This does not mean, however, that any and every Western presents an active and evident engagement with place (a point that will also be evident in the discussion below). In many Westerns, in spite of their character *as Westerns*, the place and sense of place on which they depend and which they evoke is often highly generalised – little more than a standardised and unremarkable backdrop, a bland background of generic desert or brush. This undoubtedly reflects the fact that so many Westerns, especially given their character as

B-grade productions, were shot on Hollywood back-lots and in the hills of Southern California. Nevertheless, the fact that not all Westerns engage with place in a significant way does not take away from the centrality of place in the Western as a specific genre. Moreover, in some Westerns, there is indeed a thematisation of issues of place that goes beyond its existential or expressive roles alone, and that provides a point of entry into an investigation of place and its functioning in relation to notions of identity, self, action, and community. George Stevens' *Shane* is an example of just such a film.

Although an immediate box-office and critical success, *Shane* has not garnered the same level of close attention in the period since its release as have other films from the same era – especially when compared with a movie such as Ford's *The Searchers* (a movie that is often seen as standing in stark contrast to Stevens' film). One reason for this is undoubtedly that *Shane* was Stevens' only genuine Western, and so, unlike *The Searchers*, *Shane* does not figure within a larger body of work within the same genre. Moreover, while often cited as a 'classic', and so frequently invoked in discussions of the Western (even when not accorded detailed analysis), *Shane* also exhibits some anomalous elements. Alan Ladd is a strange, withdrawn, and as is often pointed out, an almost 'feminised' figure in conventional terms (something that reflects the portrayal of the character in Jack Schaefer's book on which the movie was based – See Schaefer, 1984⁹) – his relative slightness in physical terms seemingly at odds with the usual image of the Western hero as portrayed by such as John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. The film is also shot in a somewhat stylised fashion, with a strong sense of artistic direction, and with a complex set of ideas worked out in relatively explicit form in the film's dialogue. In addition, although the film deploys many classic Western motifs – the reluctant gunfighter forced to return to his trade to defend a community from which he is inevitably alienated, the cattle rancher exercising his power

through violence directed at a group of homesteaders who threaten the openness of the range – it does so in a way that also complicates the ways in which those motifs appear.

The ambiguous manner in which Shane himself is portrayed is one such complication. Even more significant, however, is the portrayal of Rufe Ryker (Bert Freed), the landowner who is the immediate instigator of the conflict on which the film centres. Rather than presenting Ryker as a figure of unmitigated malice, the film offers a picture of Ryker as only reluctantly forced to killing as the means to resolve matters, and in a long speech near the heart of the movie, Ryker presents the rationale behind his actions, in somewhat Lockean terms, arguing for his own right to the land as taking precedence over the claims of the families who threaten that right. These and other factors give the film a somewhat old-fashioned look (almost akin to classical drama) – especially to a modern audience used to rather less dialogue than *Shane* offers, to more spectacular action, and to a more straightforwardly realistic mode of filmic presentation.

Nevertheless, *Shane* remains a film worthy of critical attention precisely because of the way the simplicity of its story belies the complexity of its structure and underlying ideas, because it does indeed offer a singular representation of classic Western themes, and because, from the perspective of a Western 'sense of place', it is notable for the way in which place is directly thematized and deployed.¹⁰ Moreover, *Shane* also has an important role in Western movie history. It was the first big-screen colour western ever produced, winning an Academy Award for Best Cinematography, Colour (Loyal Griggs), as well as five other nominations including Best Picture and Best Director. *Shane* has influenced, and been invoked by, a number of subsequent films, beyond the Western genre alone, from *Bonnie and Clyde* to *The Deer Hunter*, as well as taking an iconic place in popular culture. The film also stands in an intriguing relation, not only to the Clint Eastwood remake, *Pale Rider*

(1985), but also to the 'post-Western', or even 'anti-Western', Martin Rit's *Hud* (1963), starring Paul Newman, a film that refers directly back to Stevens' classic. These latter films, which already connect with *Shane* in virtue of their narrative continuity, and in the case of *Hud*, through casting and other references, provide a useful comparative lens through which Stevens' film can also be viewed.

The basic story of *Shane* is simple to tell. A passing buck-skin clad, gun-toting stranger, Shane, is drawn into the life of a homesteading family made up of Joe Starret (Van Heflin), his wife Marian (Jean Arthur), and their young son Joey (Brandon Wilde – In Schaefer's novel, the character is named Bob). The family, and the community of which they are part, are threatened by the local cattle rancher, Ryker, who brings in a gunfighter from Cheyenne, Wilson (a young Jack Palance), to help him force the homesteaders off the land. After Wilson brutally kills one of the homesteaders, Torrey (Elisha Cook Jr.), the other homesteaders are set to abandon their claims, but are persuaded against it by Starrett and Shane. Starrett decides to resolve matters by taking on Ryker himself. Knowing Starrett would be walking into a trap, Shane fights Starrett, incapacitating him, then riding into town himself, where he fights and kills Wilson, Ryker, and his brother Morgan (John Dierkes), but is himself wounded. Watched by the young boy Joey, who tries to persuade Shane to stay ('Shane! Shane! Come back!'), Shane rides off into the hills from which he came, his future as enigmatic as his past. Based on Jack 's novel of the same name, loosely inspired by the Johnson County Range War of 1892 (the subject of Michael Cimino's ill-fated 1980 picture *Heaven's Gate*), *Shane* was shot in Wyoming, in 1951 (Stevens spent some time on the movie in post-production), near a place called Jackson Hole, in the Grand Tetons National Park. The action takes place in what is presented as a well-watered valley (actually a high

mountain plain that is much less hospitable than it may appear in the film) with the snow-covered peaks of the Grand Teton range looming behind.

The opening sequence of the film, one of the most famous of any Western, shows Shane riding down out of the mountains into the valley below ('almost floats down' is how Philip French describes it – French, 2005, 65). The film thus begins, as indeed so many Westerns do, with a figure in a landscape, and in this case the landscape is powerfully present. The valley is set against the massive mountains behind (deliberately filmed so as to make them appear closer than they really are), and we see a deer drinking from the river that runs near a log-cabin homestead, a young boy with a rifle (unloaded as we later discover) plays at stalking the animal, and through a window in the cabin a woman sings while she attends to household chores. *Shane* is a film that takes as one of its main themes the relation between a *place* and the people who live in that place. Some of those relations are already prefigured in the film's opening sequence, but that sequence also indicates the *human* relationships (between Shane, Joey, and Marian) that will contribute to a large part of the film's central narrative. The intersecting relationships at issue here are presented through the intersecting shots of the landscape from which these opening scenes are composed. *Shane* is also a film about belonging and the establishing of home (and, in Shane's own case, about the impossibility of such a home), and about the founding of a community in the place that is depicted in this opening sequence – about the transition from wilderness to cultivation, about the transition from a relationship of individual appropriation of land to one in which the land becomes a place of communal engagement (in this latter respect, the story of Shane fits neatly into Turner's account of American society and history).

It is often said, and Stevens' himself invoked the image, that the figure Shane represents is indeed Arthurian – and this most often seems intended to draw attention to Shane's character as a Westernized version of the 'knight errant' (although the way the triangle of Shane, Marian Starrett, and Joe Starrett echoes that of Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur, even if with a rather different denouement, is suggestive of another point of connection with the Arthurian). Yet Shane's role also echoes, perhaps even more directly, that of the city-founding hero of classical mythology¹¹ (Schaefer was himself trained as a classicist) – the hero who slays the monster that has taken possession of a place, and by this act of almost ritual violence enables the growth of a genuine human community.¹² In classical mythology what is destroyed in this act is not just a threatening creature, but a vestige of an earlier time, a representative of an almost pre-human order.¹³ Certainly, with his strong character, his bearded face, and the power he exercises over his men, Ryker has something of the appearance of such a pre-human figure, 'an outmoded pagan god' (Countryman and von Heussen-Countryman, 1999, 53, see also 15). The justification he gives of his right to the land, while sometimes likened to a Lockean defence of property, is perhaps closer to that of the ruler who takes possession through conquest. Ryker argues that it was he who first opened up the land, who wrested it from control of the Cheyenne Indians (and has an arrowhead in his shoulder to prove it).

Significantly, Starrett's rebuttal of Ryker's claim depends implicitly on a refusal of conquest as a legitimization of title on the grounds, partly, that there were others who were there before Ryker, but more importantly that genuine title depends on community recognition ("the government"), rather than one man's assertion of possession. This is a crucial point in the film, since part of its underlying argument can be seen to rest in the value of community over any individual benefit and especially in the absolute value of

community and family over considerations of profit or mere use-value (a point that also emerges in Eastwood's 1985 remake). The land itself appears as that which sustains community and through which community is enabled – not as that which is simply to be exploited for purposes of individual enrichment. Shane's act of killing Ryker, which also means killing those who most directly exercise his will, namely Wilson and Morgan, is not simply another instance of violence analogous to the violence by which Ryker disposed of the Cheyenne, but is instead a rejection of the idea of the land as subject to individual will and the exercise of that will and the establishing in its place of the principle according to which the land is the basis for community. Moreover, Shane's own buckskin-clad appearance is also suggestive of his identification with the land itself – unlike Wilson, whose more conventional getup connects him to the city from which he comes (in this respect, Stevens significantly deviates from the depiction in Schaefer's novel in which Shane's clothing, although marked by use, is described as uniformly dark, and he wears a black belt, a black hat, and a black silk handkerchief round his neck – Schaefer, 1984, 62-63). In this manner, Shane may even appear as embodying the spirit of the land itself, passing final judgment on Ryker whether for his wilful usurpation of title or simply for having outlived his proper time.

The intimate relation of community and land – of community *and place* – is one of the strongest, although perhaps most readily taken-for-granted, elements in Stevens' film. The valley that opens up in the film's initial sequence encompasses all of the action that subsequently develops. In this respect, the film is the story, not only of the Starretts and of Ryker, but of the valley itself. Significantly, although Ryker claims the valley as his own – as the range on which he raises his cattle – it is in the small cluster of buildings that make up the town (the blacksmith's, the hotel, and the combined bar and general store that is

Grafton's¹⁴), and especially in Grafton's bar, that is where we most often see him and his men. Like the mythical monster that terrorizes a whole countryside, but nevertheless remains for the most part in a single lair, Ryker too, for all that he claims the valley as his range, seems primarily to belong to just one place, and an interior place at that. By contrast, the homesteaders, the Starretts among them, move between one another's claims, and between those claims and the town. In a scene set on the town's cemetery hill with the homesteaders gathered for 'Stonewall' Torrey's burial, we see, from the one standpoint, both the town (where Ryker's men themselves watch the gathering on the hill) and the setting alight of the Wright's cabin. The valley itself appears as an interlinked series of places that is constituted through the cabins and claims belonging to the homesteaders, the town, and the cemetery, all enclosed and watched over by the mountains around. It is significant that as the actions of Rykers' men are directed at the destruction of the homesteaders farms, so they are also engaged in the destruction of the interlinked places in which the homesteaders' community is instantiated.

The life of the homesteaders also exhibits, in contrast to that of Ryker and his men, a much more intimate engagement with the land. The homesteaders raise chickens (selling them at Grafton's store) and pigs, as well as dairy cattle, and they plant crops. In what is perhaps the most famous scene from the film, Shane and Joe Starrett work together to remove a huge blackened stump from the ground near the Starrett's cabin. In doing so, they not only establish the bond that holds between them as men, but also a bond between themselves and the place – a bond that is achieved through the symbolic transformation of the place from a place of resistance to habitation and cultivation into one suitable for it. It is Shane who initiates the struggle with the stump, and it is shortly afterwards that Shane exchanges his buckskin for ordinary blue work-clothes. In Marian's case, her inscribing of her

own self onto the landscape occurs in an equally significant, but very different fashion, through the small and fragile garden that she has planted alongside the cabin. Not only is it vulnerable to nature (notably the deer that wakes Joey the morning after Shane's arrival), but the initial confrontation that occurs as one of the film's very first scenes has Ryker's men riding through the small garden, tangling in their horses' legs the strings that mark it off, and trampling the seedlings that have been planted. It is significant that when Shane rides up to the Starrett homestead, he does not ride through the garden, but carefully avoids it. In contrast to the conventionally feminised elements in Shane's character (something even more strongly present in Schafer's book, in which Shane even offers Marian news and advice about women's fashions), Ryker himself presents a resolutely 'masculine' figure, and the group that surrounds him is exclusively male in character. As a world dominated by the single male individual, Ryker's world involves only the most minimal of families – himself and his brother Morgan. As such, it is a world from which family and domesticity, and that which it is stereotypically associated, femininity, has been excluded; as such, it is also a world dominated by its past and present, and that offers little in the way of any real future.

The contrasting modes of life represented by Ryker and the homesteaders are presented in terms of very different modes of spatial and topographic form. Significantly, this is also true of the way in which Stevens presents the relations between different characters and their roles as worked out within the film. The most obvious example of this is in the division of spaces within Grafton's bar and store. The bar is a conventionally 'masculine' space, while the store is seen, at least by Ryker's men, as 'feminine'. The division of these spaces is played out in one particularly significant scene in which the homesteaders visit the store together. One of Ernie Wright's daughters seen trying on a hat in a mirror – Chris Calloway (Ben Johnson) then appears leering behind her. In some ways the scene is an

odd one given the gendered nature of the space, and the fact that on no other occasion do Ryker's men ever approach that part of the building, even telling Shane, at one point, to get out of the bar, and back with the women. The scene provides one small and important pointer towards Chris' own defection from Ryker's cause – and in scenes that were edited out of the final cut of the film, Chris's leer is transformed into a genuine romance with Wright's daughter that suggests he will become part of the homesteading community itself (in Schaefer's version of the story, Chris comes to work for Starrett after Shane's departure – in the final version of the film, he simply tells Shane he is "quittin' Ryker").

The connection of spatial differentiation to gender and role differentiation is also evident in many of the scenes at the Starrett homestead. Shane sleeps outside in the separate building that serves as the Starrett's stable and barn. The cabin's main room, combining kitchen, eating area, and living room, is essentially Marian's domain, but not when it becomes a meeting space for the male homesteaders, at which point she withdraws into Joey's bedroom. When Shane himself withdraws from the meeting, we see a conversation between him and Marian that takes place through a window, Marian in the dry, well-lit interior, and Shane outside, in the dark of a drenching downpour. The scene is mirrored later in the film when Chris tells Shane of Ryker's duplicity: the scene takes place in the stable, with Chris standing outside and framed in a doorway, while Shane remains in the interior space of the stable. The dialogue between spaces that is evident in these scenes is also present, though in a different way, in the suturing that occurs in the film's opening sequence – the interlinking of views – in which Marian observes Shane, and we observe Marian, through the window of the cabin, while Joey watches the deer, as well as Shane's initial arrival, from behind a bush.¹⁵ Later in the film, Wilson's shooting of Torrey uses a contrast between two spaces established, not through any opening in a physical barrier

(whether window, door, or the gaps between leaves), but through a difference in height as Torrey stands below Wilson in the muddy track outside the bar and Wilson stands above him on the raised timber floor of the porch.

The way in which human relations are articulated through spatial differentiation, through spatial connection and disconnection (a theme that should be familiar to cultural geographers schooled in the thought of Foucault and Lefebvre), is matched by the movie's portrayal of the formation of community through engagement with shared objects and in common activities (a key theme in contemporary material cultures studies). In *Shane*, this is most obviously evident in the joining of effort between Shane and Starrett in their uprooting of the tree-stump, but it is also present in the commitment, made when the Wright's cabin is set ablaze, to share in the task of rebuilding. While some audiences may find Wright's reversal of his decision to leave abrupt and without adequate motivation, it is a reversal based in Wright's recognition of the way his own identity is bound to the cabin he has built for his family, and that is also entirely in keeping with an ideal of identity as formed only in community – as Wright's cabin will be rebuilt with help from Starrett and the others – and according to which identity and community are both formed only by means of collective endeavour and mutual support. As such, identity and community are inseparable from the material forms in which they are given shape and reality.

The revisioning of the story of *Shane* that occurs in Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*¹⁶ also takes up the issue of the defence of community, but it does so in a very different way that is no longer so clearly tied to the spatial and the topographic. Eastwood's narrative concerns a community of prospectors panning for gold in a wooded valley in the mountains of California. The prospectors are threatened by Coy LaHood (Richard Dysart), who has given his name to the nearby town, and who is using large scale hydraulic mining techniques to

search for gold further along the same valley. The opening scene shows LaHood's men riding through and destroying the prospectors' camp. Once again, a stranger (Eastwood) arrives, taking the side of the leader of the prospectors, Hull Barrett (Michael Moriarty), in a fight with LaHood's men outside the general store in the town. Barrett has taken up with one of the women living in the prospectors' camp, Sarah Wheeler (Carrie Snodgrass), and together with the woman's daughter, Megan (Sydney Penny), the three form a less conventional version of the family group that appears in *Shane*. The stranger, who becomes known as the Preacher, attaches himself to this family group, while also encouraging the prospectors' to resist LaHood. The film reworks many of the key scenes from *Shane*, and in the climactic ending to the film, the stranger kills the corrupt marshal and his men who have been brought in by LaHood to clear out the prospectors, while LaHood is shot by Barrett as he tries to gun down the stranger. Having accomplished his task, the stranger rides off into the mountains. Megan, who has run from the camp to the town, but arrives too late, calls out her love and gratitude as he disappears into the distance.

As in the portrayal of the homesteaders in *Shane*, the prospectors in *Pale Rider* are presented as making up a diverse community committed to one another, to their families, and to building a future for themselves that encompasses more than just immediate financial gain. LaHood, on the other hand, is at the centre of another male-only society, preoccupied with the exercise of his own power, and, much more blatantly than Ryker, with the exploitation of the land for the increase of his wealth. The prospectors, like the homesteaders, are identified as living in a way more directly engaged with the land. This is made especially clear through the contrast between their own small-time prospecting methods, and LaHood's industrial assault on the landscape that uses high pressure water to tear into the hillside so that the resulting debris can be processed for the gold it may

contain. Thus, unlike *Shane*, but in keeping with its own time, *Pale Rider* constructs its narrative within an explicitly environmentalist frame, although this is also allied with a similarly critical attitude towards capitalism and the desire for profit that appears in the earlier film.

Although Eastwood's film is a satisfying and well-made film in its own right, and is particularly significant given the time at which it was made (Westerns having then fallen out of fashion), the spatial and topographical elements that are such a strong feature of Stevens' production are much less clearly presented in Eastwood's, and the later film thus provides a useful counterpoint to the earlier. Unlike *Shane*, *Pale Rider* lacks the strong sense of a landscape that is spatially differentiated and integrated by the activities of those who appear within it – indeed, it is not clearly a single landscape that appears in Eastwood's movie at all, but rather quite distinct locations: the town, the prospectors' camp (which means that the prospectors' community is constituted within a single place rather than being formed through the connecting of different places within the one valley); the site of LaHood's mining operation; the plain across which the railroad runs. Significantly, for all that it adopts an environmental stance, *Pale Rider* also fails to convey the same sense of conflict over the land – over place – as is present in *Shane*, and this is so largely because of the spatial separation between LaHood's activities and those of the prospectors. In *Shane*, it is Ryker's desire to retain the freedom of the range that is directly opposed to the desire of the homesteaders to fence and to build, and these represent overlapping and spatially incompatible possibilities. Certainly LaHood desires control over the prospectors' claims, but it is LaHood's employment of a different technology, coupled with the encompassing nature of his desire and an associated difference in attitudes, that marks off his mining activities from those of the prospectors he opposes, and is not primarily based in competing modes of

spatial or topographic configuration (although the differences in technology, desire, and attitude will certainly bring spatial and topographic differences in their wake).

Similarly, and partly because Eastwood's film is much less stylised in character, relying on a much weaker sense of artistic direction, *Pale Rider* makes no real use of the contrast between interior and exterior spaces and places, nor of the differentiation of interior spaces that occur in *Shane*. Moreover, in Eastwood's film, the land never appears in the same powerful fashion as it does in Stevens'. This is partly a function of a difference in cinematography as much as in the physical setting of the film. Although Eastwood shot the film against the snow-capped backdrop of the Sawtooth Range in Idaho, the landscape never seems to have the same presence as in *Shane*, and the Sawtooth Range certainly does not loom in key scenes in the way the Grand Tetons do in Stevens' film. As a result, *Pale Rider* lacks the atmosphere of concrete locatedness, and of the landscape as an active component in the story as well as a witness to it, that is present in *Shane*. One might thus say that, for all that it more directly invokes an environmental sensibility that might itself be construed as a direct thematization of place and the sense of place, *Pale Rider* lacks the same sense of its action and its characters as being embedded in the landscape, of the spatial and topographic formation of community, or of relationships as formed in and through the concrete engagement with things and in places.

Not all Westerns, then, even those that tell the same story, need involve the same explicit thematization of place. In this respect, *Pale Rider* stands further from *Shane* than does a film with a very different story to tell, Martin Ritt's *Hud*. Ritt's film is no remake, at least not in any ordinary sense of the term, but it does connect quite directly with Stevens' original film in several respects: *Hud*, like *Shane*, was adapted from a novel (Larry McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By* – McMurtry, 1961); in both cases the story is told from the

perspective of the youngest character – in Shaefer's *Shane*, Bob Starrett (Joey in the film), and in McMurtry's *Horseman, Pass By*, Lon Bannon; and in each of the film versions of the story, this central character is played by the same actor, Brandon deWilde.¹⁷ Like *Shane*, *Hud* tells what might appear to be a simple story, and yet it is one that carries enormous complexities within it. Unlike *Shane*, there is no stylization in the film – starkly, but beautifully filmed in black and white, the story and its characters are realistically portrayed – and yet, unlike *Pale Rider*, the film deploys a strong set of spatial and topographic elements in the articulation of its narrative, and can also be seen as exploring a set of themes associated with ideas of place and community, and of the role of the individual, that are not entirely unconnected with those that appear in *Shane*.

A critically acclaimed picture, *Hud* won three out of the seven Academy Awards (Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Cinematography, Black and White) for which it was nominated in 1963. Filmed in and around Claude, Texas, *Hud* is not a Western in the strict sense, being set contemporaneously with the time in which it was filmed, and focussed on the breakdown of the already damaged relationships in the family of an aging cattleman Homer Bannon (Melvyn Douglas) who faces disaster when his herd is infected with foot and mouth disease. The first character we meet is Lon, Homer's grandson, who has been sent into town in search of his uncle Hud Bannon (Paul Newman). Hud is the central figure in the story. The younger of two sons – the elder, Norman, having died in a car crash as a result of his brother's driving – Hud is a brawling, drinking, womaniser, who shares none of his father's old-fashioned principles, and is impatient to get his hands on the family ranch. Keeping house for the Bannons (Homer is a widower), and living on the ranch with them, is Alma (Patricia Neal), of whom Lon is clearly protective, but who is also subject to Hud's frequent sexual advances and innuendo. With the destruction of his cattle, and the loss of

the way of life that has been the source of his values and his identity, Homer Bannon is left an angry and broken man. He confronts Hud over his dissolute way of life, laying bare his disgust and disillusionment. Hud responds in kind charging his father with hypocrisy and implying that the only love he had was from his mother, "but she died". The argument, which arises after Hud returns from a night on the town in which he takes Lon drinking, and in which the two get involved in a bar-room brawl over a woman, marks the penultimate point of breakdown in the Bannon household. Hud's own anger and frustration, fuelled by drink, leads him to seek out, assault, and try to rape Alma, but he is forced away by Lon. Alma leaves, Lon taking her to the bus station in town. On his way back to the ranch, with Hud chasing recklessly behind him, they narrowly miss Homer who has crawled to the road after a fall from his horse. Homer dies accusing Hud, Lon makes his own departure, and the ranch is left to Hud alone.

Ritt's film is not a traditional Western, and it can be viewed as a story about familial disintegration that could take place anywhere, yet it nevertheless stands in an important relationship to the Western in its traditional forms, and one can even view it as presenting a certain inversion of the story that is played out in Stevens' *Shane*. Indeed, Ritt incorporates into *Hud* a number of references, direct and indirect, to the earlier film. The most obvious is in a scene near the beginning of the movie, when Hud drives into the ranch in his Cadillac, running over the small fenced-off area of seedlings planted by Alma. Hud is clearly no *Shane*, and the act of spatial violation prefigures the bodily violation that will be attempted later. The bar-room brawl in which Hud involves Lon prior to the critical argument with Homer, and in which Hud and Lon seem to discover a bond, even if it is only temporary, also evokes the analogous episode in *Shane*. In Paul Newman's *Hud* we see another version of the lone cowboy who is also instantiated in Alan Ladd's *Shane*. Both are outsiders of a sort,

but whereas Shane is the outsider who desires to be part of the community from which he inevitably excluded, Hud is the outsider who refuses the community of which he is already a part.

Both Shane and Hud are presented with specific occasions, focussed around specific tasks, that allow them to show commitment to a wider collectivity: in Shane's case it is participation in the working of the land on which the homesteaders' livelihood must be based, and which is symbolised by the struggle with the stump by the Starrett's cabin; in Hud's it is the challenge of the disease that destroys the family's herd, and which is symbolised by the dead animal on which his father wants his opinion, and that he asks him to guard until the veterinarian arrives. Although the comparison is complicated by the existing frictions between Hud and Homer, and by Homer's own errors in judgment, still Hud can be seen to refuse the commitment that Shane accepts. Moreover, in that refusal, Hud also sets himself on the road that will lead to the final destruction of the Bannon family, dysfunctional though it already is, whilst Shane's acceptance leads in the opposite direction to the affirmation of familial connection and the genuine founding of community. In both films, we also see analogous familial structures, although very differently instantiated. The archetypal form of the family that appears in *Shane*, and which clearly echoed that most archetypal of families that is the holy family of Christian belief, is itself echoed, although in distorted fashion, in the form of the Bannon household. Both Shane and Hud represent a disruptive element in relation to that form – and more specifically in relation in to Marian/Alma, to Joey/Lon, and to Joe/Homer – but in Shane's case the disruptive potential is sublimated, whereas in Hud's its full destructive potential is unleashed.

The connections between the films of Stevens and Ritt do not consist only in the inverted parallels of narrative and character. Hud is spatially constructed around three main

locales: the ranch, the town, and the range. These are clearly separated from one another, and each is connected with different sets of values and commitments. The town is most closely associated with Hud, and with his dissolute lifestyle; it is not a space in which we ever see Homer, although it is a place from which Lon can pass back and forth; the ranch is the space of familial connection and disconnection; it is the place in which Homer, Lon and Hud all engage, and it is the only place we see Alma until her final departure; the range belongs with Homer, and the dying values that he espouses (he has refused to give it over to oil or mineral exploration); but it is also the space in which Hud seems least comfortable (in spite of his performance in the rodeo ring), and from which he is most eager to depart. These places and spaces are connected in different ways. The space between ranch and range is a space for the most part traversed on horseback, which is the mode of transport Homer most often employs (he dies in a fall from his horse while riding the range after the argument with Hud). The space between town and ranch, which is perhaps the most important of these connecting spaces in the film, is traversed in the pickup or in Hud's Cadillac. This space is also one that is usually acoustically filled with the country and western sounds on Hud's car radio.

The spatial and topographic differentiation that appears here give Hud a similar clarity of spatial and topographic form to that which is also present in *Shane*. Moreover, as in *Shane*, this is also evident, although to a lesser extent, in the use of interior and exterior spaces. The space between town and ranch is one such interior space – the interior of the Cadillac or pickup – even though it is also a connecting space. Alma has a private space of her own that is apart from the main house of the ranch – her attempted rape occurs in that space, the violation reinforced spatially, just as it was prefigured in Hud's intrusion onto the space of Alma's garden – and the differing spaces in the main house, notably, the porch,

kitchen and hallway are each associated with different interactions and types of interaction between Homer, Hud, Lon, and Alma.

Like *Shane*, *Hud* thus presents a picture of human lives as worked out in ways inextricably bound to the spaces and places in which those lives are lived. Moreover, that spatial and topographic emphasis also brings with it a sense of human life as shaped and given reality only through the relational interconnection that occurs through interaction within a common space, in relation to shared objects, and as given form through spatial and topographic integration and differentiation.¹⁸ Just as *Shane* is, in large part, a film about an individual who establishes community, and who may even be said to recognise the value and significance of his individuality as residing in the community that it enables, so *Hud* is a film about an individual who, in the very assertion of his individuality (an assertion that may be said to represent an extreme form of that 'individualism' often thought to be epitomised by the Western hero) loses any sense of himself. Whereas it is *Shane* who rides away, leaving the new community in the hope that it will grow, like *Joey* himself, 'straight and strong', *Hud* is the one who remains, deserted by those around him, alone on a ranch without cattle, without hope or compassion, with only a beer in hand and bitterness in his heart. Here, perhaps, is the contemporary counterpart to *Ryker's* wilful, male-oriented individualism, and its destructive refusal of any genuinely shared sense of community, of world, or of place.

At the heart of both *Shane* and *Hud* are fundamental issues concerning identity, community, and human relation, but these issues are articulated and worked out in direct relation to the spatial and the topographic. The sense of place that is at work in these films is thus not merely expressive, nor purely environmental or existential, but rather operates at what I would argue is a more concrete and, in some ways, more fundamental level. The

human connection to place cannot be viewed as just a contingent feature of the way human life is imagined or expressed, and the spatial and the topographic should not be construed as only a source of metaphorical or figurative articulation of what are actually more abstract modes of thought and concept.¹⁹ It is only in the concrete forms of landscape, and of place, that human lives become real, and that human community can take on genuine shape (see again, e.g., Malpas 1999).

If to be human is to engage with others as well as oneself, then such engagement must also, and at the same time, be an engagement with and in the landscape, with and in place. It may well be that it is precisely because of the way such issues are at stake in the Western, whether they are directly thematized or not, that makes the genre so significant and so attractive to audiences across cultures. The Western may have its origins in a uniquely American experience of the human relation to landscape and to place, and yet that relation is one that does not belong to the American experience alone. In George Stevens' *Shane*, not only do we find an instance of the classic Western, but we also find an instance of one of the clearest explorations of the spatial and topographic underpinnings of human life, identity, and community. Moreover, although *Shane* also portrays an idealised conception of community and landscape that is very much of its time, and is overlaid with elements particular to 1950s American culture, the picture it presents of the essential relationality of genuine human life, a relationality worked out only in and through the concreteness of our physical surroundings, is one that remains accurate, and that also provides, as Wallace Stegner suggests, the only real basis for responding ethically and practically to the world, and the landscape, in which we find ourselves.²⁰

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Notes

¹ There are other types of film that are also tied to specific places or regions, but no other major genre that has the same close identification with place as the Western. Even the samurai movie, with which the Western has close associations, is identified, not by its locale, but by the role and class of its leading characters. Perhaps only the road movie is as much defined by place as is the Western, and although it has its origins in works such as Homer's *Odyssey*, and in picaresque literature and the *Bildungsroman*, the road movie, like the Western, is also closely connected with American culture and experience. It is arguable, however, that the way place figures in the road movie is very different from the way it figures in the Western, while the road movie's very character as a genre is also an important point of difference.

² Geographers have, in recent years, tended to assume a distinction between 'topography' and 'topology', and to assume also that this specifically geographic usage has a much wider currency than is actually the case. My own talk of 'topography' is quite independent of the

geographic use of the term, arising out of a primarily philosophical context in which ‘topography’ and ‘topology’ are overlapping rather than distinct – see Malpas, 2012b.

³ The Arthurian narrative that the Western often itself invokes, and that is articulated in both literature and in film may be regarded as even more the stuff of myth than is the Western, and yet it too is embedded in a place and a topography – its narratives marked out in placenames, stories, and sites across the British landscape of England, Wales, Scotland, and Brittany. There is only a relatively small body of films that deal explicitly with the Arthurian (including various cinematic versions of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin*, and *Tristan and Isolde*) and they are perhaps best regarded as falling within larger genres whether ‘fantasy’, ‘romance’, ‘action/adventure’ or ‘historical’, rather than as constituting a clearly identifiable cinematic genre of their own. Arthurian themes and elements can also be found in many films across a range of genres. The Western, in particular, is one genre that often draws heavily on Arthurian elements – and this is especially so in the case of Steven’s *Shane* (1953) (as is briefly noted in the discussion here). Coincidentally, Alan Ladd, who plays the title role in *Shane*, also took the title role in *The Black Knight* (1954), an Arthurian movie directed by Tay Garnett.

⁴ My aim in this essay is not to provide a definitive analysis of the ‘topography’ of either the particular Western that is *Shane* or of Westerns in general, but rather to use *Shane*, as it stands alongside *Pale Rider* and *Hud*, in order to explore something of the character of topographic analysis and the way that analysis shows place at work in relation to other key notions. I would hope that in the course of doing this, however, some light is indeed also shed on the ‘sense of place’ that belongs to *Shane* and to the Western.

⁵ To what extent is it indeed a turn towards the ‘spatial’ is itself questionable – see Malpas, 2012b, 2015a.

⁶ Although there has been a shift of interest towards broader issues of space and place in film that relate to the global economies of cinema, to the spatialities of cinematic production and distribution, and the role film plays in larger systems of identity formation both nationally and internationally, my approach here is focussed on issues relating more directly to filmic *content* – to the ideas and narratives that are presented in and through the films discussed.

⁷ Since any appearance whatsoever, even of nullity, appears somewhere - place is the very condition of appearance. To talk of a 'non-place' is thus to refer to a certain kind of place: a place that refuses its own character as a place.

⁸ From a different perspective, and with an eye to the essential connection between place and film, Ross Gibson has discussed Ford's *The Searchers* as an 'exemplary place-making artifact' (Gibson, 2012, 246). Gibson focuses on the making of place as this occurs primarily through filmic, and especially, cinematographic *technique*. This is also an important element in both *Shane* and *Hud* (less so, I would argue, in *Pale Rider*), but it is not the sole or even main focus of my discussion here.

⁹ First published in book form in 1949, the story originally appeared as a three part serialization in *Argosy* magazine, in 1946, under the title, *Rider from Nowhere*.

¹⁰ It is perhaps notable that *Shane* is one of the handful of movies discussed by Bonnie Honig in her exploration of the role of the foreign and the foreigner in a political community (Honig, 2003). Honig's is one of the very few extended critical engagements with *Shane* in the contemporary literature.

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that the Classical and the Arthurian are not incompatible here, since the Arthurian can be seen as itself incorporating or instantiating elements of the Classical. As a narrative and mythical form, the Arthurian, both in its medieval and modern

versions, is a rich amalgamation of a variety of earlier sources, themes, and motifs – as is the Western also.

¹² Bonnie Honig sets *Shane* together with *The Wizard of Oz* and *Strictly Ballroom* as all taking the form of what she terms ‘myths of foreign-(re)founding’ (see Honig, 2003, 9).

¹³ Originally, Stevens considered framing the film as a flashback (much as the novel is also told retrospectively) with Marian reading to Joey the story of Jack the Giant Killer – Ryker being the obvious figure for the giant. See the brief discussion in Countryman and von Heussen-Countryman, 1999, 17-18. The fairy-tale motif is also present in the novel – see Schaefer, 1984, chapt.. 16.

¹⁴ Grafton (Paul McVey) is a strangely neutral character in the film. As the owner of the store and bar, he supplies both the homesteaders and Ryker, and although he seems disinclined to take sides in the conflict that develops, Ryker is nevertheless concerned that things should look right to Grafton, and so it becomes important, for instance, that in the killing of Torrey, Wilson should be seen to draw second.

¹⁵ A different framing occurs in this opening scene with a view of Shane between the antlers of the deer as he approaches the cabin, and such framing recurs elsewhere: the shadow of a deer's antlers frames Joey in the early light of the morning following Shane's arrival; three trees frame the approach of the homesteaders Shipstead (Douglas Spencer) and Torrey as they come to town immediately prior to Torrey's killing by Wilson, and this framing is repeated when Shane approaches the town for the final confrontation with Wilson and Ryker.

¹⁶ Which should perhaps be seen more as a revisioning of Schaefer's book than Stevens' film – significantly, the poster for Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985) seems deliberately to imitate the cover design for *Shane: The Critical Edition* (Schaefer, 1984).

¹⁷ The two films, and the way they each relate to the novels that are their sources, are discussed together in Folson, 1984, 372-392.

¹⁸ On the key role of relationality here, and so on the close connection between relationality and the topographic, see e.g. Malpas 1999, and also Malpas, 2012b, 2015a, 2015b.

¹⁹ The tendency to metaphorize the language of space and place, and even to think of these concepts as significant only inasmuch as they figure in a spatial or topographic imaginary, is widespread even within geographic thinking. See Malpas, 2012b, 2015a, and also Malpas, in press.

²⁰ It is worth noting, however, that just as Stegner himself became more pessimistic, and less hopeful (in spite of his comment here), so too did Schaefer come increasingly to adopt a more negative view of the 'civilization' to whose advancement Shane can be seen as contributing. See Cleary, 1984, 319-337.