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## THE SMALL WORLD OF A BIG WESTERN

*How a Limited Environment Can Serve a Significant Theme in the Western Film*

David Bennett Carren

### ABSTRACT

Whether a film is produced under a low or high budget, a small world coupled with a big idea can serve strong themes and powerful stories. To define this concept, "small" represents a confined or focused environment in a story with a limited cast that takes place in a foreshortened or restricted time frame. "Big" refers to the nature of the theme or at least the point of view of the story. Defined by isolation on a rough frontier restrained in space, population, the Western is a genre that can advance the notion of a big idea in a small world better than almost any other. A Western film that focuses on a substantial theme yet takes place in a narrow realm can offer its audience thrills, tension and suspense as well as an effective comment on the human condition.

Whatever the size or scope of a feature film, the physical world of the project as delineated by its locations, cast, and time frame can define the intent of its story, theme, and characters. Using a restricted cast and locations can augment the narrative power of a film's story while still exploring significant themes. At the same time, developing a project with a "small world" may offer a filmmaker with limited means the opportunity to produce a project that is still "big" in its themes or audience experience. To this point, thrillers like *Blood Simple*, horrors like *Insidious*, and even comedies like *Ruby Sparks* all prove that a small world supported by solid writing, directing, and casting can produce a feature far superior to one produced with far superior means.

9However, by its very nature, the Western is a genre that can advance the notion of a big idea in a small world better than almost any other. An environment defined by isolation on a rough frontier restrained in space, population and time serves the Western well. Even when the stagecoach in *Stagecoach* travels through the breathless vistas of Monument Valley, the focus is on the tight confines of a small, rolling vehicle packed with human beings, their problems, and conflicts. This approach of isolation and limited civilization also enhances the basic theme of chaos and evil battling against justice and decency that is at the heart of most Westerns. In these films, the world is in disorder or threatened with disorder, and only the hero can bring peace to a society in such disarray.



"Virtually all Westerns end with a climatic act of violence. This violence is necessary, inevitable, because the Western takes place on the frontier, where the rule of law would protect the weak and innocent does not yet exist. Right can only be established through might. Because the conventions have been so long established a [Western] film hardly needs to explain the nature of the threat or the need to confront it. What it must do is establish beyond doubt the moral right of the hero to commit the act of violence which will ensure that good prevails over evil." (Buscombe 28)

Lawless, uncivilized situations like the ones depicted in so many Westerns can be difficult to create believably in a story set in the modern world. Very few current societies are so remote that its inhabitants are allowed or forced to create their own system of justice separate from the rest of civilization. To isolate a community in the information age, contrivances often abound, especially in Horror films, as with the "abandoned" but intact town in the latest version of *House of Wax* or the renegade police officer in the most recent remake of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. In many Science Fiction projects, the filmmakers have literally gone off planet and into the future – as in *Alien*, *Super Nova*, or *Outland* (a futuristic version of a classic small world, large idea Western, *High Noon*) – to sequester their characters.

In the period Western, however, godforsaken and self-dependant societies are believable and acceptable. In these films, the hero fights overwhelming odds to bring law and order to a secluded and limited environment where an established culture is weak or non-existent. He usually has few or no allies, the enemy is often well armed or numerous, and the support of the local populace lukewarm or ineffective. In *High Noon*, the hero fights alone to maintain order against hostile invaders. In *Hondo*, the title character strives to rescue a young woman and her son from a cruel and deranged environment by taking them to a safe and sane one. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, the titular hero struggles to find order as he travels through a chaotic universe filled with a ruthless opposition.

Whether disorder takes the form of Indians, gunslingers, outlaws, or the very elements themselves, the Western hero battles to reassert or create balance. These characters "are bound only by their own sense of duty. Within that code, however, they are deputized to do whatever is necessary to stop the antagonist from destroying a threatened society." (Hicks 43)



A close examination of *Rio Bravo*, one of the best Westerns, will illustrate this concept. The film's plot is deceptively simple. In the small Texas town of Rio Bravo, Joe Burdette has committed murder, and Sheriff John T. Chance has locked him up. However, Nathan Burdette, Joe's brother, is the wealthiest and most powerful man in the county, and his men have sealed up the town. Chance is trapped in his own jail with only Stumpy, an old man with a game leg, and Dude, a seemingly hopeless alcoholic, as his deputies. Arrayed against him is a small army of cold-blooded gunslingers and hired killers determined to free Joe.

The world of this conflict is as merciless as its participants. "The town appears to be surrounded on all sides by empty and intractable desert," comments Robin Wood in his book, *Rio Bravo*. (Wood 56) He notes that this is a world so desolate there is never even a hint or sign of the Rio Bravo, or River Brave, the town and the film are named after. (Wood 80) But this makes perfect sense to Wood, who writes that Hawks' "adventure films are set outside America, on or beyond the outskirts of civilization and celebrate an escape from it." (Wood 16)

As Chance and his allies defend themselves against a series of attacks and stratagems, *Rio Bravo* takes on the structure of a War film. Nathan Burdette employs brute force, treachery, persuasion, and even psychological terror in his campaign to release Joe. His people assassinate Wheeler, a friend of Chance's, serenade the jail with Mexican death songs, attack Chance in broad daylight in front of the entire town, and eventually kidnap Dude. The story climaxes with a gun battle at the Burdette warehouse, and, in an ending not unlike one available in a War film, the enemy is defeated when a massive explosion tears the building apart.

What could have been a simplistic melodrama is more substantial thanks to the approach the film's writers, Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett, took to developing their key characters. While John Chance is a standard Western hero in many ways, his relationships are not. His closest allies are the drunken Dude, the old man Stumpy, the young gun hand Colorado, and Carlos and Consuelo, the Mexican couple that run the local Hotel Alamo. In the course of the story, Chance develops a deep and complex connection with Feathers, an itinerant gambling lady that stumbles into Rio Bravo at the most inopportune moment.

For any time, but especially 1959 when the film was produced, these are very unusual characters to be associated with a Western's lead hero, especially a man like John T.



Chance. The fact that he depends on, and clearly loves, such a rich variety of damaged, alienated, or socially unacceptable people layers an appeal on the man beyond that provided by John Wayne's persona. In addition, the character's courage and sense of code are defined beyond the usual two-dimensional Western heroics. Chance is a professional determined to do his job under almost impossible circumstances, yet he refuses the help of the local townspeople, and in a conversation with Wheeler he explains why.

CHANCE:

Look, Pat – anybody who takes sides with me is liable to find himself up to his ears in trouble.

WHEELER

Is that why you haven't asked for deputies? You could get some.

CHANCE

A few.

WHEELER

And what about me and my drivers?

CHANCE

Suppose I got 'em. What would I have? Some well-meaning amateurs, most of 'em worrying about wives and kids. Burdett's got thirty to forty men, all professionals and only worried about earning their pay. No, Pat – all I'd give 'em would be a lot more marks to shoot at, and a lot of people would get hurt. Joe Burdette's not worth it. He ain't worth one of those that'd get killed. (Furthman, Brackett 24)

John Wayne, who played John Chance, often said that *Rio Bravo* was the antithesis of *High Noon*, a film he considered un-American. He hated that its townspeople refused to help Gary Cooper's Sheriff confront invading outlaws, and that its story ended with Cooper dropping his badge in the dust. For Wayne, the universe of *Rio Bravo* was more appropriately American. Law and order may be under assault, but the forces of civilization, as represented by Chance and his allies, will stand firm with the support of the public. In the town of Rio Bravo, the people are willing to help Chance, but he refuses them. The man is the ultimate hero, taking total responsibility for an entire



community at the risk of his life. He is working under the code of the professional lawman; no amateurs need apply.

While the realities or politics of such a determined and autocratic law officer in a modern society would be questionable or even dangerous, in the tiny, primitive world of *Rio Bravo* they are proper and appealing. The audience's innate desire for justice and order is satisfied as Chance wins his little war in a small Texas town. What theme could be larger than that one moral, brave and determined individual can triumph over overwhelming odds to maintain an entire civilization, even one as confined as *Rio Bravo's*?

This examination can be applied to any Western, both classic and contemporary, and beyond the basic conceit of the law maintaining order that is dramatized in *Rio Bravo*. There are also Western films that flip the central concept, transforming the protagonist from an individual that brings order to an insular society to one that creates disorder instead. While Western protagonists are usually braving stiff opposition to their establishing a tiny piece of normalcy in their chaotic and limited world, a hero that creates chaos in a world defined by a twisted normalcy can also be quite satisfying. Since the order or society being presented is usually a deformed, evil, or unappealing one, the protagonist's actions can be appreciated on a level beyond those of the usual Western hero. He becomes a renegade bent on upsetting the status quo, a character more active than reactive, which almost always makes for better drama. The stronger the hero's opposition and the less support he gathers from the community he is assaulting, the more the audience identifies with and desires his power, courage, and sense of mission. This is still another approach that takes advantage of a small world to service a large theme.

A superb example of this can be found in Millard Kaufman's screenplay of *Bad Day at Black Rock*. From the moment the film's hero, Macreedy appears in the isolated desert town of Black Rock, dissension and fear arrives with him. The train never stops in this community of "wretched dust" and "mean, modest buildings," (Kaufman 5) yet it stops to deliver Macreedy. As the laconic stranger with a useless left arm roams through Black Rock's empty streets; it's immediately clear that some kind of dark secret hovers over the place like a thunderstorm. It's also clear that Macreedy's on some kind of mission, which doesn't please the ruffians that dominate the town. One of them, Hector, comments "He can only mean trouble." (Kaufman 21) Another, Sam, says "Walks light



for a big man.” (Kaufman 13) Tim, the town’s dipsomaniac Sheriff, observes to Macreeedy “You move fast for a crip... for a big man.” (Kaufman 24)

As Macreeedy spreads his quiet but intense influence across the community, its malignant peace begins to dissolve. This draws the lethal frustration of Reno Smith; Black Rock’s most powerful and dangerous citizen. “This guy’s like a carrier of small pox. Since he arrives, there’s been a fever in this town, an infection. And it’s spreading... Hastings has been in a sick sweat, running around, shooting off his face. Doc, for the first time in four years, gets snotty with me... And Tim – Tim, the rum-dum. Tim suddenly decides he’s gotta act like a Sheriff.” (Kaufman 32-33)

Smith tries to charm Macreeedy, then, in short order, bully, abuse, and kill him. As their battle escalates, we learn what’s at stake is past heroics rather than present ones. Macreeedy has journeyed to Black Rock to give a Japanese farmer a medal. The man’s son, Joe, earned it in Italy saving Macreeedy’s life at the cost of his own. But the farmer is dead; a drunken Smith shot him the day after Pearl Harbor. This senseless act has haunted the town for four years, but Smith has maintained his iron control every day since it occurred.

Only Macreeedy can upset the unholy order Smith has imposed on the town, and Smith can’t stand it. His rage drives him to murder and attempted murder, but Macreeedy thwarts him with courage, brutality, and cunning, then finally fire, burning Smith out like he was a pestilence. The film ends with Macreeedy giving Doc, one of the community’s few, sensible and decent citizens, the medal that was intended for the Japanese farmer, thereby offering Black Rock a second chance as well. Smith’s control has been smashed, and the town, such as it is, returned to a more civilized and just state. Macreeedy leaves on the train, its startled conductor commenting “First time a streamliner stopped here in four years.” “Second time,” is Macreeedy’s response. (Kaufman 88)

Kaufman has reversed the usual order of the Western paradigm. The intruder that destroys order is the hero, not the villain. At the time the film was made, this was a fresh and startling dynamic that has been much copied since. But few of *Bad Day at Black Rock*’s imitators have approached the original film’s impact. A one armed man working alone to savage the power pyramid of an entire community, even one as tiny and insignificant as Black Rock’s, offers hope to any one feeling less than powerful themselves.



Beyond the traditional issues of the Western, any genre, theme or story can take advantage of the big idea/small world concept. Since a tiny environment is servicing such sizeable drama, the antagonist and protagonist become even larger in the audience's eyes and their conflict even more involving. There are fewer distractions in the sense of population, peripheral characters, and unrelated events to draw attention from the main characters and their story. The more limited a film's time and space, the more confined its world, and the more obstacles and opponents its creators place in the protagonist's way, the more claustrophobic, and intense, the film becomes for both the protagonist and the audience. At the same time, complex issues can be dealt with in a direct yet sublime way. As Edward Buscombe notes of *Stagecoach* in his book on the film, it's construction can be appreciated "for its subtlety of rhythm, the relationship between the exterior shots of the stage on its journey and the interior shots of the drama inside... like two fugues which react together in a contrapuntal effect, increasingly tightened." (Buscombe 84) Although the circumstances and environment can vary widely, many big idea/small world films accomplish this parallel construction, their limited exteriors and interiors smoothly joined together to emphasize drama and character.

To sum up, we have seen how a filmmaker can effectively develop a Western project that offers a strong comment on the human condition. All that's required is the right story designed specifically for a small world.

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