Lords of Nothing: How *Hell or High Water* Redefines the Western

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For over a hundred years, the Western film genre has captured the spirit of the wild frontier while exploring themes that are deeply embedded in the history and culture of America. These tales of vengeance, justice, and the struggle for freedom and have all resonated across generations while helping define the mythology of America and popular culture. In more recent years, some filmmakers have used the genre with a postmodern perspective, to reexamine America's violent history and fascination with the Wild West. A standout example is Scottish filmmaker David Mackenzie's *Hell or High Water* (2016) which was released to critical acclaim, earning the project several Oscar nominations including Best Picture. Drawing from his own experiences living in the South, the screenplay was written by Taylor Sheridan. Sheridan, who is now known for his work on the hit television show *Yellowstone* (2018-present), brings a sense of depth and authenticity to the film's content and narrative. In contemporary rural West Texas, two troubled brothers Tanner (Ben Foster) and Toby (Chris Pine), embark on a string of bank robberies to save their family ranch from being possessed by the bank. A simple enough plot, but what helps *Hell or High Water* (2016) redefine the Western, is the film's use of mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound and how these elements combine to create meaning. One sequence in particular perfectly uses these elements to serve the film: when the boys visit the Comanche Red River Casino to launder their ill-gotten goods. This scene is significant, because it uses storytelling and filmmaking techniques to draw a connection between the modern struggle of the protagonists and the mythology of America and the Wild West, while deepening our understanding of the characters and establishing a broader meaning for the rest of the film.

Rather than spend the money they have stolen, after three successful heists, the brothers travel to the casino to divest themselves of any potential evidence and exchange the cash for a stack of gambling chips. By doing this, they ensure the stolen cash cannot be traced back to them, and when they exchange the chips later for cash, they can legally use the funds to pay of their debts. Casinos are a staple of the Western genre, but instead of a dimly lit saloon or glamorous parlor house, these outlaws are confronted with a sprawling, ugly maze of commercialization and technology. Besides being an avenue for the brothers to meet their goal, the casino also serves as

a way for American Indigenous to gain wealth and influence in a post-colonial America. It is a symbol of resistance for both the modern outlaws and American Indigenous people and is used to retaliate against the oppressive systems that persecute them. The mise-en-scene of the casino contributes to the character of the brothers (34:40). How they interact with their environment reveals information about them. Tanner for example immediately downs a shot of whiskey, while Toby nurses a beer, highlighting the difference in their personalities. The use of the non-diegetic blues country song "Blood, Sweat, Murder" by Scott H. Biram is an appropriate choice, as its dark lyrics and fast tempo reflect the journey of the brothers while characterising the casino as a place of debauchery. Tanner is excited and Toby is nervous; both are dirty and unkempt, looking the part of cowboys on the dusty trail. The conventions borrowed from Westerns are clear here, characterizing the boys as outsiders and outlaws.

The film cuts to a medium shot of Toby exchanging the money at the cash station (35:40). The camera is behind his shoulder, and we can see the teller through the glass. The camera cuts to a close up of Toby, with Tanner behind his shoulder and pulls focus between them as the exchange occurs. This technique signifies Toby's nervousness but also their dynamic. Toby is the brains of the operation while Tanner watches his back. The camera cuts to a medium close up of the brothers as they make their way further into the casino with a sizable stack of chips. The same technique as when they entered is applied here, a dolly tracking shot in front of the duo as they walk towards the audience. Tanner takes some chips and playfully runs offscreen, presumably to gamble and get into mischief, while Toby heads for bar to drink alone. This juxtaposition highlights the differences in their character.

The next scene starts while "Sleeping on the Blacktop" by Colter Wall plays during a montage (36:30) featuring poker hands being dealt and chips changing players, while Tanner accrues a respectable stack of winnings. Every time the film cuts to Tanner, his stack has continued to grow. The country blues song is another fitting choice of non-diegetic music, as its lyrics and tone paint an ominous picture of a lonely life on the road, moving from one town to the next hoping to outrun the consequences of one's actions. This montage serves to convey a passage of time, while also illustrating that Tanner is a skilled gambler. During the montage we are introduced to an Indigenous American man, who is playing poker at the same table. Tanner continues to win and gleefully rakes up the chips, but the camera's alternating focus between Tanner and the man suggests something between the two is about to occur. The camera cuts to Toby, sitting alone at

the bar while the song plays. Contemplative and alone, this shot establishes Toby's state of mind until he is approached by a mysterious woman. She is immediately seductive and interested in Toby, although it remains unclear if she is more interested in him or his stack of chips. Prostitutes and sex workers are a character archetype of the Western, and how the film characters interact with them reveals their personalities. Toby is kind, reserved and does not look down on her. The song has been playing the whole time in the background, behind the noise of the casino and dialogue of our characters and the camera has been switching between close-ups of Toby and the lady, creating a sense of intimacy.

The film returns to Tanner playing poker where he issues a challenge to the big man. "Don't chase me, chief," he says while raising his bet (37:40). This dialogue has multiple meanings. "Don't chase me," is both a challenge and a threat from Tanner. Later in the film we will see what happens to those that do chase Tanner. He reacts with extreme violence. It also implies that Tanner is on the run. By calling him chief, he insults the man. A title of respect and authority for an Indigenous American man sitting at a casino, a reminder of Indigenous subjugation would most likely be considered offensive. The big man is annoyed and takes off his sunglasses to stare at Tanner. This scene is reminiscent of a Western when a stranger confronts the protagonist over his unruly behaviour. Tanner asks if he is Comanche and the man nods. "Lords of the Plains?" he asks. "Lords of nothing now," the man replies. This exchange of dialogue is fundamental to an overarching theme of *Hell or High Water* (2016). The film directly compares the struggle of American Indigenous with the struggle of many of the people encountered throughout the film, especially the brothers. Like the Comanche, they are being forced out of their homes and their way of life is being destroyed. The white settlers who claimed the land from the Comanche, now face the same fate as those they kicked out. Throughout the film, Tanner repeatedly refers to himself as Comanche, signifying his respect for them but also how he sees himself, a mighty warrior on the high plains. The big man's reply is a deconstruction of that image. Tanner is the last of a dying breed, a man outside of civilization, and for all of his trials he is ultimately a lord of nothing. This dialogue redefines what it means to be an outlaw in the modern world.

The big man answers his challenge by calling the bet and they show their cards. Tanner gracefully accepts defeat and attempts to leave but the big man stops him. The camera keeps switching to closeups of each man's face, alternating between the two as they wait or hope to react to each other. The big man explains that Comanche means enemies forever with everyone. When

Tanner asks what that makes him, the big man answers an enemy. But Tanner rejects that and says, "it makes me Comanche." The two stare at each other and the threat of violence is palpable. Tanner is a man who sees himself as beset on all sides by enemies including the government and he resonates with the Comanche, who are historically known for warring with other tribes just as much as they did colonial powers. These two men begrudgingly respect each other, recognizing that they are cut from the same cloth, and after a tense moment Tanner leaves. This scene is fundamental to the rest of the film, as it contributes to a broader meaning. The Comanche people are used as a symbol of resistance against an oppressive system and are compared multiple times to the brothers, especially Tanner. This foreshadows Tanner's fate, who would rather be killed than be subject to the laws of society.

The camera returns to Toby at the bar, who is tempted by the prostitute's offer to visit a room after confiding in her and showing her pictures of his children. Toby does not look down on her and longs for the affection of a woman. The fact that he is so ready to open up to people, signifies his easygoing and good nature. Tanner interrupts them, and immediately assumes that she is trying to take advantage of his little brother for his gambling chips. Tanner is cynical and always on guard from his time in jail. Still reeling from the encounter at the poker table, he assaults her. How the brothers interact with her, showcases the differences in their personality. Even if she was trying to steal his chips, Toby admonishes Tanner and tried to pull him away. She leaves, and Toby asks how his brother has managed to stay out of jail. "It has been difficult," Tanner admits with a smile. This scene illustrates Tanner's recklessness and propensity for violence, while showing Toby's restraint. The two exchange their chips for some cash and a ten-thousand-dollar cheque made out to the same bank they have been robbing and the same bank they owe. This irony helps from the core of the story: the brothers are ripping off the institution that ripped them off in the first place. Retribution is a classic Western trope, and the boys fighting back against injustice makes them righteous rather than greedy.

The casino sequence from *Hell or High Water* (2016) encapsulates how the film uses mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound to serve the larger film and create meaning. The revelry of the casino reveals the character of the brothers while representing a symbol of resistance for both the protagonists and the American Indigenous people. The camera focuses on the characters and their reaction to the world, and the editing is sparse. How they interact, reveals just as much about their personalities and motivations than any dialogue or exposition. Tanner's

encounter with the big man, and Toby's encounter with the prostitute highlight the differences between the brothers and how they see themselves in the world. Toby is the leader, and yet he is reserved and kind. He is not charismatic or confident, or driven out of desire and greed. He is an unlikely outlaw compared to the protagonists of older Westerns or to Tanner, who's arrogance and brash behaviour is more familiar to the genre. The deliberate choice of music is used to emphasis their journey and characterise the setting, and dialogue is used to craft connections to America's past while establishing character and a larger thematic meaning and tone. *Hell or High Water* (2016) uses these formal film elements to redefine the Western for a postmodern audience, while creating a narrative that is rich in symbolism and meaning.