Many terms were thrown at the new westerns of the sixties and seventies: the anti-western, the revisionist western, the comic western, and *Little Big Man* contains elements of all three. Where Andre Bazin could write in the fifties that the western offered “a morality of a world in which social good and evil, in their simplicity and necessity, exist like two primary and basic elements,” it was the modern western’s task to work against such basics. From Sergio Leone’s comically violent spaghetti westerns like *A Fistful of Dollars* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, to Sam Peckinpah’s elegiac rethinkings of the genre, *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, the western was a sacred cow frequently taken out and slaughtered. *Little Big Man* is as revisionist as any, but the tone it adopts aligns it to a hipster style, an absurdist account of the West where the morality of the western gives way to the pragmatism of the individual and the chaos of the situation. The 121 year old Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman), who reminisces about his adventures as a boy and as a young man, might be an unreliable narrator, but Arthur Penn’s film half-proposes that his recollections are probably no more unreliable than many a western that passes itself off as very reliable indeed. Now of course as Bazin notes, “many current westerns of honourable standing...have only a tenuous relation to historical fact. They are primarily works of imagination”. But what Penn wants to do is foreground the unreliability, as these are the recollections of a man who is going back a hundred years in time, and where hazy memory collides with absurd events. In one scene halfway into the film he is working as a scout for General Custer as he searches for his missing wife, who’s been kidnapped by a tribe of Indians, when he finds himself against his will involved in an ambush fighting with the Cheyennes who brought him up as a boy. A Cheyenne Indian friend doesn’t recognize Crabb and tries to kill him, and Crabb, trying not to fight back, insists the friend must know who is. At that moment a white soldier kills his friend. Crabb says, “there’s no describing how I felt, a man I hated had saved my life by the violent murder of one of my best friends. The world was too ridiculous to even bother to live in it.”

Often critics talk about the binary nature of the western, and perhaps more than other genre it lent itself well to structural opposites practised by cine-structuralists like Peter Wollen and Jim Kitses. This is evident in comments like Wollen’s on Ford’s film:
“[the central character] in *My Darling Clementine*...is structurally the most simple of the three protagonists I have mentioned: his progress is an uncomplicated passage from nature to culture, from the wilderness left in the past to the garden anticipated in the future.” Wollen goes on to mention the added complexity of Ford’s *The Searchers*, but the emphasis is on applying the notion of binary structuralism to film. Bazin was hardly a structuralist, and basically predated its application to cinema, but his comment about morality was consistent with structuralist thinking. *Little Big Man*, though, is one of numerous westerns of the seventies interested less in oppositional structures than their paradoxical collapse.

Some might insist however this isn’t especially true, and that though Crabb lives a chaotic existence, we’re left in a coherent universe. The whites are generally dishonest, hypocritical and in denial, while the Cheyennes are the good Indians and the Pawnee the bad ones. This is basically paradoxical revisionism, where the film works with the absurdity of life, but at the same time for the purposes of revising our perspective. At one moment after the whites have taken out numerous Indians, Crabb observes “rifles against bow and arrow. I never could understand how the white world could be so proud of winning with those kinds of odds.”

This line comes moments before he once again enters the white world, a world he came from as a child but that we’ve not been privy to: the film opens on Jack and his sister being taken in by the Cheyennes after being the sole remaining survivors of a Pawnee attack. But the comment of white world pride begins to make sense when he gets taken in by a bible-basher and his wife (Faye Dunaway), and while the wife might preach the word of the lord, she practises extra-curricular humping in the back of the local store. There is a sense that the white man doesn’t see the world as it is but as he wishes it to be, and perhaps central to the reliability or otherwise of the narrator is whether he is finally more Indian or more white. If the white man practises denial and deceit, and the Cheyenne honesty, and that Crabb is a complex mix of both, how much truth and how many lies can we expect from him? At one moment, after Crabb becomes assistant to a white con-artist, the man says, “You’re improving Jack, you just can’t seem to get rid of that streak of honesty in you”. He blames it on the Cheyenne.

Here we have a man of variable qualities, as Jack is more honest and lucid than most whites, but finally self-preserving and cowardly. He proves brilliant with a gun as he manages to hit three bottles thrown in the air at the same time, but can’t stand with authority in a bar when he decides to become a gunfighter. He promptly retires before killing anyone after he witnesses Wild Bill Hickok (Jeff Corey) taking out an enemy. As blood gathers around the body, Bill explains exactly how he got his man, while Jack looks on like a medical student witnessing his first autopsy.

Later, and more significantly, after he returns once again to the Cheyenne community that leaves him feeling finally more like an Indian than a white man, he witnesses yet another massacre of the Indians by the Caucasians. As his pragmatism finally gives way to a sense of the tragic, we watch as the Cheyenne woman he has grown to love gets mowed down along with the baby that he’s adopted as his own. As Penn cross-cuts between Jack running through the woods and Sunshine running through the camp away from the soldiers, she and the baby get brutally killed as Penn offers a cross-cutting series of match cuts on the dying bodies: as Sunshine and the baby fall...
so Jack does likewise, and Penn shows the two bodies as if one, though in different places. At the same time Penn kills the sound, and this is the moment where Crabb moves from pragmatic to reflective, from taking his chances where he can, to wondering who it is that happens to be taking these chances.

If before Jack was a shallow individual making his way in life; now he is a man who doesn’t know who he happens to be at all. He moves from existential survival to ontological insecurity; a point emphasised further on when he tries to kill Custer (Richard Mulligan) and lacks the courage. As Custer says he could have Crabb hanged; so the general decides against it. It would mean Custer going against a decision that he’d made (that Jack was a trusted scout) and that Jack’s miserable life isn’t worth Custer reversing a decision he’d committed to.

This moment turns Jack to drink as he says that was the worst thing anybody could have done to him. A minor decision by one man is worth more than another’s entire life. Yet it also makes sense, for Jack’s been living in such a way that he hasn’t accumulated a life; he has lived by series of essentially passive decisions. He was a white boy picked up by Indians at the beginning of the film, an Indian who escapes by claiming he’s white during the first brutal attack, and vacillates between the two states for much of the film, playing not so much pragmatic as Plasticine, willing to be bent and shaped by those around him. Part of the film’s absurdity, and the picaresqueness of its narrative, lies in the weakness of character: Crabb is a man with no particular place to go – possessed of no fixed abode, no permanent profession, and no code to live by. The film is an exploration of paradoxical revisionism through the problem of Jack Crabb’s existential necessity giving way to an ontological unease: from a basic desire to live, to a yearning desire to belong to something much bigger than his own life. But how to do so: by living according to the white man’s sense of ambition, or the Indian’s capacity for well-being?

Now it is in this problematic where we can see the film is turning things upside down as we witness the contrast between the Cheyenne chief Old Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George), and General Custer. In Old Lodge Skins sits the weight of cyclical history as time gets marked by the seasons; while with General Custer time is Manifest Destiny, the process of history that can liberate black slaves yet also destroy a Native American population. The film’s sense of the absurd resides partly in the assumption that such destiny ought to seem inevitable, and partly in the film’s interest in the contingent.

It is in relation to such points that the film uses the picaresque form particularly well. Generally defined as a chronicle of a character getting through life more through wit than work, luck than purpose, the picaresque form usually focuses on shallow characters that don’t develop internally nor especially narratively, and frequently go round in circles, with other characters turning up in one part of the story and then showing up again by chance much later. A Handbook to Literature describes it thus: “Episodic in nature, the picaresque novel is, in the usual sense of the term, structureless. The picaro, or central figure, through the nature of his various pranks and predicaments and by virtue of his associations with people of varying degree, affords the author an opportunity for satire on the social classes.” It is then, above all else, episodic, and maybe is an especially useful form for proposing a change of perspective not through character motivation and purposeful action, but through
character shallowness and situational contingency as it consequently comments on the society rather than on the character. This can create the impression of a chaotic universe consistent with Crabb’s comment about the world’s ridiculousness, but equally it can offer up a form that allows values to be found not in goal-oriented behaviour, but an awareness of the fragile logic of existence. By making Old Lodge Skins someone who allows life to happen to him, yet insists on it doing so without tampering with the values he believes in, and Custer a character for whom every decision he makes is mightier than a man’s life, the picaresque can show up the latter and give credence to the former. There is far more chance in existence than proponents of Manifest Destiny would like to believe; while for those who see life as cyclical, the return of characters from other periods in one’s life, accidentally, adds to one’s belief in contingency over agency.

Penn adds to the picaresque though a shift in Crabb from the shallow to the profound, and while *A Handbook to Literature* proposes that “internal character development is a quality of the picaresque novel”, Penn works with a shift where the development is hardly developmental; more a sudden realisation on Crabb’s part of his non-being. Where he realises at various moments that the world is absurd, there is a sense that he is himself substantial. But the film successfully deepens when it shows that the world may be without meaning and purpose, but that the individual can create meaning and purpose through his own values in that world. These are the sort of codes the Cheyenne lives by, and that allow them to call themselves, unlike the white man, Human Beings.

This is the crux of the film, and so any absurdist and paradoxical elements get swallowed up by the underpinning value of being human. As Robert Phillip Kolker says, contrasting the film with an earlier Penn work, “the admirable figures here are not, as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, active and rebellious, but quiet and conservative. The opposition to them is not an established order but an establishing order.” (*A Cinema of Loneliness*) Yet the film develops out of the paradoxical as if to say that if the values have been turned upside down what does it take to put them back on their head, however briefly? The topsy-turvy reasoning proves vital of course to Jack’s central role in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. He might not have had the courage to kill Custer, but he gets to kill him indirectly as he knows that any suggestion he makes will be questionable because Custer doesn’t trust him: Custer uses him as a barometer of perfidiousness, and Jack plays on this. Penn finally manages to give his central character meaning and purpose, but does so from a place not of clear character agency, but contrariness.

There is the feeling that the classic, moral western gave way to the modern, amoral western, but *Little Big Man* proposes that it is less about showing an amoral universe, than a morally fundamental one turned upside down by believing in a developmental world. If Sam Peckinpah would so often wonder whether the wilderness wasn’t more civilized than the garden, Penn muses over what sort of un-thought through values were white Americans pursuing at the time: Custer it should be remembered was on Lincoln’s side and thus for the abolishment of slavery, and is still perceived heroically for his hounding of confederate general Robert E. Lee. Yet next to the calm, fundamental and elemental beliefs of Old Lodge Skins, the rabidly egotistical Custer (the hero of a number of classic westerns) becomes a paranoid narcissist, capable of
killing a hundred Indians including women and children in the battle of Washita, and
dying an idiotic rather than noble death.

The bumbling Crabb never quite grows up but what would he have grown up into -
Old Lodge Skins or General Custer? He’s an unreliable narrator no doubt, but the
reliable ones were hagiographically praising the white general, while old chiefs were
ignored. This is perhaps the final irony of the film; that an unreliable narrator can tell
greater truths than the most apparently direct of tellers. Central to seventies cinema
was not the amoralizing of the movies, but finding deeper historical, personal and
fundamental truths than classic Hollywood, no matter if so many of the films indicated
indeterminacy, irony and absurdity in the telling.

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