

# The Ranown Style: Mapping Textual Echoes

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*Lucy Fife Donaldson*

A film begins with long shot of a distinctive rocky landscape, made up of huge, rounded boulders sticking up out of the parched earth. Distant snowy peaks appear faintly in the background, under a clear blue sky. Music provides an accompaniment, a minor refrain dominated by brass and backed by a persistent hollow-sounding kettledrumbeat. Credits appear, a crudely shaped yellow typeface made to look as though it is fashioned from rock or wood. After a minute or so, a small figure on a horse emerges from among the rocks and the camera pans steadily to trace his movement through the terrain. The figure proceeds to ride across this precarious environment, picking his way through winding paths among the rocks and eventually towards the camera.

This description fits the opening moments of not one but two films directed by Budd Boetticher: *Ride Lonesome* (1959), and *Comanche Station* (1960). Indeed, the similarities of place, style and mood are so close in these first few minutes that they could almost be the same film. Watching the beginning of either film may evoke recognition of the other. Moreover, to watch one with knowledge of the other creates an enriched experience, beyond expectation or the pleasures of familiarity. The openings are formally and narratively spare but acquire density when considered in concert. The contiguity in ways of situating character, signaling relationship to genre, and opening the narrative constitutes not just a parallel but also an overlap. Between them, these films acquire layers that underline or thicken certain qualities, illuminating the shared sensibilities of the films.

This chapter will seek to explore how the films' layering and accumulation, through repetitions and echoes, contribute to the dense texture of the world created in what Jim Kitses termed Budd Boetticher's "Ranown cycle."<sup>1</sup> The cycle—all collaborations with writer Burt Kennedy, star Randolph Scott and

producer Harry Brown—consists of four six Westerns directed by Boetticher between 1956 and 1960, four of which were shot in Lone Pine, California: *Seven Men from Now* (1956), *The Tall T*, *Ride Lonesome*, and *Comanche Station*.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, the Ranown cycle offers a straightforward path into evaluating Boetticher's work, demonstrating a high thematic and stylistic consistency. While Kitses suggests they are so similar that they are “essentially the same film,”<sup>3</sup> Mike Dibb writes about the films as a “unique quartet” distinguished by “a unity that sets it apart from Boetticher's other work [. . .].”<sup>4</sup> Kitses outlines the significance of the cycle to Boetticher's authorship:

The Ranown cycle gave Boetticher a stable base and creative relationships which allowed him to refine his form, the films growing deeper and more personal until with *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station* the controlled objectification of tensions, the appropriateness of form and style, approach perfection. But above all, Boetticher's Westerns are a series, this director demonstrating more dramatically than most artists how understanding and appreciation of the single work can grow through a knowledge of earlier and later works.<sup>5</sup>

This is entirely in keeping with the claims one might want to make about a director's style, that the distinctiveness of their work can not only be traced but valued through recognition of repeated patterns and themes (after all, even a bad director might have formal and thematic patterns). Narratives feature key parallels with one another while each film's visual style prominently draws on movements and spaces that can be found in the others, the qualities of similarity and difference becoming tightly woven together through the closely formulated network of concerns. When we know all four films, the contribution of the cycle to the feeling and density of each film's world becomes an important part of its texture. Building on the observations of Kitses and Dibb, this chapter will focus on the central role played by the location of Lone Pine in anchoring and developing the accumulative layering of meaning, the sense of one film building on another, paying particular attention to *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station* which are the films that push the echoes within Boetticher's work to the furthest degree.

## LONE PINE

A distinguishing feature of the Ranown films, and central linchpin in the connections between the films, is the landscape around Lone Pine.<sup>6</sup> Lone Pine is located north of Los Angeles in the backdrop of snow-covered Sierra Nevada Mountains, with the Alabama foothills below them. The most distinctive aspect

of the area's topography is the undulating Alabama Rocks: large rounded formations created out of huge boulders standing on end. Since movies were first shot there in the 1920s, Lone Pine, and the contours of the Alabama Hills, in particular, have stood in for a variety of times and places: "They remind you of the Khyber Pass in India. And Texas and Arizona and Utah and Nevada. Even Old Mexico and Peru and Argentina. That's because they've played all those parts and more during their 70-year Hollywood career."<sup>7</sup> Though Lone Pine has hosted historical adventures such as *Gunga Din* (George Stevens, 1939) and science fiction such as *Star Trek Generations* (David Carson, 1994), the location has primarily been used for Westerns.

Dibb makes reference to the way in which the space is invested with the iconography of the genre: "it is alive with the sounds and memories of drifting cowboys, laconic dialogue, galloping posses, gunshots, campfires, stagecoaches and hold-ups."<sup>8</sup> The qualities of its space, much like other locations used prominently by directors of the genre, such as Monument Valley, contribute vividly to the iconography of the Western, not just in terms of a visual setting that corresponds with what "the West" should look like but also as descriptive of the kind of world these films take place in. The Western's concerns with hardened masculinity, struggles for community, pioneering efforts to survive a harsh environment, are all shaped through such landscapes. At the same time, that's not to say that Lone Pine is the same as Monument Valley or other locations in Nevada and Utah. Boetticher's use of its particular qualities, and thus his individual contribution to articulations of the Western, was a deliberate decision, an explicit alternative to the more famous location of Monument Valley: "That was Jack Ford's, you know, and nobody could have done it better."<sup>9</sup>

It is clear that the films Boetticher made there were precisely informed by their location so that a significant collaboration the director was involved in was with the environment itself:

The great thing about Lone Pine is that you don't need to go anywhere else . . . we had sand, desert, a river, mountains, all the volcanic structures, it's amazing—it looks like it was built there for movies . . . Burt Kennedy and I just went from one place to another rewriting scenes to fit the rocks which is what you should do.<sup>10</sup>

Boetticher's response to the location is that of recognizing it as a complete world, indicating more specifically the kind of world he and Kennedy were interested in. The lack of a space to support a functional community is a notable absence in this respect. Furthermore, this comment speaks to the relative freedoms provided by Lone Pine, an ideal place to try things out and therefore encourage artistic development and flexibility.<sup>11</sup> Dibb locates this

location as central to Boetticher's contribution to the Western genre, defining the films' relationship to their antecedents: "Because Lone Pine is a place where so many of the stereotypical images of the Western have been located, it became [. . .] the perfect place in which to rework the conventions of the genre in a playful and imaginative way."<sup>12</sup>

## WORLDMAKING

We can start by thinking about the ways in which Boetticher uses certain spaces in Lone Pine. In his writing on film worlds Daniel Yacavone observes that, for philosopher Nelson Goodman, worldmaking is an aspect of authorial imprint: "considering the nature of artistic style he makes a passing reference to a recognizable (Alain) Resnais' style or 'signature' and, by implication, a way of worldmaking."<sup>13</sup> As the quote from Boetticher above points out, there are contrasting spaces, from the inhospitable (desert, rocks) to the safer green of woods and watering holes. As might be expected, the qualities of space determine the kind of action that takes place. Where there are more domestic spaces, they are located in the greener foothills of the mountains: *The Tall T* starts with Pat Brennen (Randolph Scott) riding to the stagecoach way station where Hank Parker (Fred Sherman), the station manager, and his young son Jeff (Christopher Olsen) live;<sup>14</sup> *Comanche Station* ends with Cody delivering Mrs Lowe to her husband and son. Prominent attacks by Native Americans are made in the desert areas, open plains with dunes to the side that form a ridge around the edge (in *Seven Men from Now* and *Ride Lonesome*). Complex rocky outcrops offer a stage for shootouts or a number of variations on this typically masculine confrontation: it is where Ben Stride (Randolph Scott) and Bill Masters (Lee Marvin) dispatch the robbers of the Wells Fargo and Masters's partner Clete (Donald Barry), before Stride kills Masters at the end of *Seven Men from Now*; and the scene of the final clash between Cody and Lane in *Comanche Station*.

Looking across the films suggests that Boetticher's use of Lone Pine goes beyond a categorization of space. As these examples indicate, decisions about what happens where are shaped by the particular qualities of that space and how the human body is situated in it. The open, dry and bleached desert is the most exposed and thus most suited to dramatizing one group attacking another, the use of long shots enabling this to play out graphically, with the darker bodies against paler background, while the sand slows down movement which thus works to extend the conflict. The rocky tangle of spaces in the Alabama hills heightens the vulnerability of the body, the softness of flesh and skin against hard stone, while the crevices and passageways formed by the boulders offer places to hide and be trapped, inviting a close relationship

between body and camera. While Boetticher's repeated use of these environments is certainly economical, it further demonstrates sensitivity to space and a desire to shape narrative to the possibilities provided by the terrain, rather than the other way around.

## BEGINNINGS: OVERLAPPING FILMIC WORLDS

Coming back to the beginnings of both *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station*, what they achieve is immediately to anchor the films' worlds in an experience of space and place. The world of a film is established by its opening moments, our first point of contact with the world and its concerns. As argued elegantly by Deborah Thomas<sup>15</sup> and Douglas Pye,<sup>16</sup> the beginning of a film sets up a range of narrative expectations, genre and our relationship to character through aspects of mood and tone.

The narratives of both films are alike not only in terms of action and character but also in their mood. *Ride Lonesome* concerns bounty hunter Ben Brigade's (Randolph Scott) pursuit of revenge for the death of his wife. He captures Billy John (James Best) who is wanted for murder in Santa Cruz and is the brother of Frank (Lee van Cleef), the man who killed his wife. In the course of delivering Billy John, he is accompanied by Mrs Lane (Karen Steele) whose husband was killed by Mescaleros, and a couple of former criminals, Boone (Pernell Roberts) and Whit (James Coburn) who want to take Billy John and exchange him for amnesty from their own criminal activities. In *Comanche Station* Scott plays Jefferson Cody, a man searching for his wife, lost to the Comanche years earlier. At the beginning of the film, he makes a trade with a Comanche tribe for Mrs Lowe (Nancy Gates), and promises to take her back to her husband. At an abandoned swing station they meet, and are then joined by, Ben Lane (Claude Akins)—a man whom Cody knows from their shared military past—Frank (Skip Homeier) and Dobie (Richard Rust), a group of criminals who plan to kill Cody in order to claim for themselves the reward offered by Mrs Lowe's husband.<sup>17</sup>

Immediately these overlapping narratives, concerning journeys, isolated heroes, uncomfortable pairings of bad and good and missions of revenge and retribution inspired by grief and greed offer the possibility of multiple decisions that shape our sense of what kind of film it is: where to put the camera; what and whom to include on-screen (buildings, landscape, a crowd, the film's star); whether the soundtrack is diegetic (noises that might fill in details of where we are: birdsong, traffic, and so on) or a non-diegetic score. The type of space we see and how we see it are crucial determining factors in answering questions about what kind of world the films take place in.

The opening shots of both films emphasize a rocky and precarious landscape,

an inhospitable environment, with no indication that there might be a community nearby or the possibility of building one. In this way, both films use the rock formations of the Alabama hills to communicate hardened qualities of space and world and, in so doing, the openings situate the character in an isolated and uncompromisingly wild space. This is a location to be moved through, not one to settle into, thereby embedding movement through space as a defining component of the character's experience.

These are also both archetypal Western openings, the lone man on a horse in the tangibly hardened landscape of the American West and therefore constitute an economical announcement of a relationship to genre; these are films that are well aware of their place within the Western genre and are being emphatic about what kind of Western they are. In *Comanche Station* Scott is first seen in silhouette, a decision that draws out this emphasis further, so that he becomes an iconic image beyond the features of his character (which itself echoes a similarly conventional Western image in *Seven Men from Now* as the Greers' wagon and accompanying group of Stride, Masters and Clete ride along a ridge, shortly before they come to the desert and encounter a man being attacked by groups of Chiricahua). The CinemaScope framing offers a very particular way of seeing landscape, one that emphasizes the horizontal expanse of land, a quality which Boetticher certainly exploits to achieve this archetypal look, and to emphasize the relentlessness of the films' Western hero. Scott's small scale in the landscape is dramatized through the 'Scope frame, the format underlining the dominating power of the setting, and his characters' perseverance in it.

Despite the precariousness of the setting and the character's isolation in it, both films begin with a long take, the view of the landscape held during the credits and then readjusted in accordance with Scott's movement. The camera is content to wait for him to appear, a decision that focuses attention on the environment because it is offered up as such a dramatic expanse of land. Consequently, we are able to consider its place more broadly as part of the spectacle offered by the Western, and more precisely in terms of an attention to the particular implications of such terrain, which are placed in tension with the characters' progression through it. The sense that the films are holding back from action—that we are waiting for Scott's character—is a dramatic counterpoint to the inherent risk such a stark location poses. Yes, he is a lone figure in dangerous and difficult country, and his relative miniaturization against the rocks does present him as vulnerable; however, the pacing of the sequence understands his movement not as fraught but, rather, he is at ease in this terrain (though in both cases the character is knowingly riding into a potentially dangerous situation). In both films the pacing conveys a sense of calm: Scott's character is part of, and at home in, the landscape.

These sequences draw on the qualities of setting, making strategic decisions

about how we see that space that shape the atmosphere of the films and the parameters of their worlds. Furthermore, the experience of watching one after the other reveals parallels in their treatment of the same action that address a proximity between the structural textures of the films (to do with narrative, pacing, rhythm, and so on). This seems to be at least partly what Kitses has in mind when he suggests, “Landscape in a Boetticher always has a conceptual weight.”<sup>18</sup> Lone Pine is not just there to set the scene, or signify genre but it communicates more precisely ways of being and ways of seeing. Kitses goes on to observe:

[A]lways in Boetticher there is a formal interest in landscape, an observation and delight that give the images a *decorative* value. Often what we have is very like a painting, the characters moving over brutal terrain in the foreground, the middle distance a wall of jagged spires, the great peaks of the sierras in the misty background beyond.<sup>19</sup>

Dwelling on the landscape as Boetticher does in the openings of *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station* reveals this formal interest and an exacting sense of what these decorative values bring to the image. Not only that but the way these two films, in particular, layer attention to landscape and its singular properties (the brutal terrain, jagged spires, great peaks) constitutes a depth of experience, a familiarity, and a richness that enable such economy elsewhere.

## THE FINE ADJUSTMENTS

Looking at the beginnings of *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station* dramatizes the precision of the differences between the films, just as it registers their closeness. Their formal patterns (including mise-en-scène, rhythm and pacing, music, performance) render them extremely close in their unfolding of the drama but these echoes also draw out the fine grain of their differences. For example, the opening shots are distinguished by the variations in camera angle: in *Ride Lonesome*, the high angle of the opening shot means that Scott’s character must move up towards us while, in *Comanche Station*, the camera’s low angle entails that he rides above and in profile. The subtle difference between the two ways of seeing him in the space draws out incremental changes in register. In the first, Scott emerges from within the space, slowly riding his horse up a small path that winds its way through the rocky outcrops into the shadow of a large boulder in the foreground. Decisions about costuming blend his own weather-beaten and leathery surface with the browned and hardened exterior of the rocks. In the second, he is more emphatically moving across the space, navigating his path through the rocks with ease but becomes visually separated

from them as he initially rides over the top. Kitses addresses the sense that Boetticher is focused on the particularity and force of such a re-articulation by degrees: “Boetticher’s achievement, though it is not inaccessible to all but the connoisseur, does require for its full impact an awareness of the fine adjustments he makes within the form.”<sup>20</sup> Recognition of the nuances within the films’ parallels is not just a way to make an argument about Boetticher’s precision, but also a way to experience immersion in his way of seeing the world. Scott’s characters are closely aligned with the landscape in both, and there is a suggestion, through his unhurried pace, that they occupy a certain degree of mastery in relation to this terrain. In *Ride Lonesome* he emerges from within, he visually blends into the rocks, immersed to a degree so that he shares their characteristics of hardness and fixity. In contrast, the initial view of him in *Comanche Station* visually separates him from the landscape—he moves across/on top rather than within—which lays the ground for a comparison with the indigenous people he is about to meet and indicates a fractional division between him and the qualities of the landscape; he is a detached figure.

A further example of parallels revealing the varying intonations of a formal perspective can be found in a particular way of framing space which is repeated across the cycle, whereby the foreground of a dwelling is placed in shadow while movement occurs in the background, usually moving away from or towards the stationary camera. One particular instance of this kind of framing in *Ride Lonesome* is drawn attention to by Kitses, who suggests that this example “with great economy and resonance seems to express the heart of Boetticher’s world.”<sup>21</sup> The shot he refers to is a view of Brigade et al. departing on their journey to Santa Cruz from the swing-station porch. The action of them leaving is placed in the sunlit background of the frame while the porch, which is in shadow, frames the image at the sides and on top. A crudely constructed set of posts with a horizontal bar at the edge of the porch creates a further frame within this, the frame bisected not quite half way up by the bar and any action beyond it obscured on the top left by a large ceramic jug hanging from the porch. For Kitses, this framing and the rhythms of the action beyond balance narrative function (the framing is repeated when Frank and his gang arrive at the station) and visual pleasure. “The tension between static black border and bright rhythmic play within is so fine that ultimately the image has the quality, the essence of Boetticher, of an animated still life.”<sup>22</sup> Appreciating the fine adjustments to the pattern is, therefore, partly recognition of Boetticher’s artistry—the elegance of this particular composition in depth—and playfulness with cinematic form. The director’s stripped-down approach to narrative/character development is perhaps balanced with a style that tinkers with, and subtly tweaks, ways of seeing and doing things. Attention to such refinements is in tension with the B-picture status of the Ranown cycle, and certainly indicates why writers such as Charles Barr and



André Bazin were so keen to celebrate Boetticher's artistry in the 1950s and 1960s, and how radical a position this was in that moment.

Moving out to the cycle as a whole, this artful approach to framing space emerges as a fairly consistent pattern with examples in each film. Near the beginning of *Seven Men from Now*, after Stride has joined the Greers, there is a view of their journey through the trees which places them in the background, with foliage and branches in the foreground framing this more distant action; in *The Tall T* the approach of the stagecoach carrying Brennan and the Mims is observed through the darkened doorway of the way station and its front porch; later, in *Ride Lonesome*, the group's journey is again viewed through a darkened frame, this time of foliage and branches, as they move from light background to shadowy foreground; and a similar view in *Comanche Station* at the end of Cody and Mrs Lowe's first day of travel with Lane and the others, when they arrive somewhere to rest. On one level, Kitses's point about this kind of detail being available only to the "connoisseur" is true, as watching all the films while consciously attending to potential patterns or repetitions enable recognition when they do occur but these particular framings of space do not call attention to themselves as overtly significant. Rather, the pattern they constitute offers worldmaking connections across the films. Yet, more significantly, as with noticing any pattern in an artist's work, this prompts questions about what this framing is doing and what it might reveal about the filmmaker's concerns and ways of looking. It may be a personal preference of Boetticher's, a facet of his own tastes in shooting landscape, though we could speculate equally, given his approach to Lone Pine, that it is a view inspired by interaction with that particular location.

On a basic level, the repeated framing reveals a concern with staging in depth, of dramatizing foreground and background. The encounter with landscape is placed in reference to certain details (whatever is in the foreground) while, at the same time, placing the foreground in darkness draws the eye to the action happening in the distance. The result is a complex arrangement which resonates with the qualities of reticence and patience in allowing action and landscape to unfold seen in the opening shots of *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station*. Movement and landscape are formally layered in such shots, appearing in planes of action emerging from the camera's central point. The composition itself is thickened through attention to depth as the multiple planes occurring in a single perspective are layered like the notes in a musical chord. The thickened configuration of these shots is thus in tension with the temptation to describe Boetticher's style as spare or pared down.

Space and action are compositionally juxtaposed at these different moments to draw out varying degrees of disquiet. The view from the building—however lacking in domesticity or community it might be—places retreat from it (in *Ride Lonesome*) as movement away from the possible securities of civilization

out into the open and, therefore, danger. In a similar shot, arrival at the site of civilization (in *The Tall T*) is entirely fraught with possible danger. Being positioned within the way station, to witness the stagecoach arrive immediately communicates something is not right, especially considering that the space was previously presented only from outside, and implies the presence of Usher and his gang before they are actually introduced. The repeated framing is used in different contexts, a repetition altered through adjustments of detail to shape differences in tone and mood through a relationship to space: the increasing detachment from civilization (however slight a marker) and its influences on the group in the first; and the precariousness of civilized spaces, how open to attack and perversion they are, in the second.

While the Western's preoccupation with a tension between interior (civilization) and "out there" (wilderness) might be frequently dramatized from within a single frame; think of the final shot of *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1958) as John Wayne's character is seen through a doorway leaving the homestead and walking into the landscape beyond. The specificities of Boetticher's framing pattern invests the artificial structure with a complete absence of welcoming textures: it is simply a black outline. In both examples, it is an assertion of safety rather than a substantial presence, the comparable visual flatness of the foreground standing in contrast to the full depth of the background. These particular compositions use the flatness of silhouette to call attention to the thickness of the space beyond, and this is where Boetticher's concerns lie. He is simply not interested in the interior (whatever good *or* bad it represents). It is a mere framing device, a piece of setting which literally frames his real concern: the wilderness beyond. The contrast between "here" and "out there" is such that civilization is never a possibility or a comfort, however slight, the treatment of landscape thus elaborating on the hero's own confinement to the wilderness which is marked by his ease and enjoyment of the terrain, its possibilities as much as his isolation.

#### THICKENING EXPERIENCE: REPETITION AND ACCUMULATION

Similarities and subtle differences illuminate the work of a director who is interested in creating a very detailed register of meaning within a compressed gamut of concerns. We might say that Boetticher's Ranown cycle is constituted from a dense network of decision-making whereby choices of how to place camera in space or performer in front of camera are made in reference to previous decisions, reiterated and fractionally adjusted for a complementary exchange of familiarity and difference. In making such interrelated decisions across the films, a web of meaning is created between them. The echoes form

connections between texts, adding additional layers to their texture. Though texture might immediately indicate a concern with materiality, it also has structural implications. Drawn from its use in music and roots in weaving and textiles, texture “concerns the interrelation of style, narrative, genre in creating the shape and the feel of the film as a whole.”<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere I have written about the fictional world created in *Ride Lonesome*, looking specifically at texture as a structure through consideration of atmosphere, genre and narrative.<sup>24</sup> This chapter expands consideration of filmic texture by contemplating how it might be built through more than one film. Parallels between the Ranown films form a layered construction: there is an accumulation of meaning through stylistic, narrative, and thematic echoes.

This connectedness, or intertextuality, acquires a force of meaning that contributes most palpably to a communication between the films. Watching a scene in one film reminds the viewer of another moment in a different film so that experience of space (as well as dialogue, character, and narrative) is multiplied or even stretched across, and connected through, the films. Roland Barthes suggests that meaning is formed of citations, references and so on; it is a web, permeable and fluid, added to by those who interact with it.<sup>25</sup> From this perspective, the film becomes a layered object and we might reflect on how extratextual elements contribute to the textuality or texture of a film, the complex network that informs response to a particular film. While acknowledging Barthes’s argument for the reader (and emphatically *not* the author) bringing meaning as a call for agency and active reading, attention to layering and references between texts seems an approach ideally suited to consideration of authorship and genre, as both concepts involve thinking about the accumulation of patterns, relating to an authorial signature on the one hand and generic iconography on the other. More than this, value, and not just identification of recurrent features, is crucial to critical authorship approaches.

Within the cycle, parallels are placed more or less visibly; some more striking as actual repetitions than others. Kitses goes through the shared thematic concerns in detail, suggesting from the beginning that the films “can be difficult to distinguish from each other given the recurrence of plots, locations, performers, even names.”<sup>26</sup> To supplement his consideration of these connections, I would suggest that the more precise repetitions and references between the cycle figure in the following groupings:

1. Relationships. Scott’s characters are pitted against the films’ villains, usually a trio (or a more prominent trio within a larger grouping, such as *Ride Lonesome*): one irrevocably bad man he has to kill, the other two slightly younger or more stupid, and more or less villainous. There is always one woman with whom Scott is more or less romantically involved. In *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station* he is only interested in securing her safety.

That the women echo Scott's dead wife (the exception is *The Tall T*) generates an absent doubling which intensifies the impact of the female characters (themselves invested and developed with the shadow of another's image).

2. Dialogue. As noted by Dibb, the writing of Boetticher's collaborator Burt Kennedy embeds repetition into the dialogue: "Kennedy obviously enjoys the use of conversational patterns, in which certain words and phrases are repeated almost like a rhyme."<sup>27</sup> Such structural repetition within the films is expanded across the cycle, as particular lines of dialogue echo between the films. For example: in *Seven Men from Now* Masters proclaims "a man needs a reason to ride south" and, in *Ride Lonesome*, Brigade addresses Boone "A man needs a reason to ride this country. You got a reason?" Similar duplications occur in complimenting the women on their cooking and coffee-making skills. Such repetitions increase the resonance of the relationships, fleshing out and enriching the links between the films' stock characters through the echoes of their conversation.

3. Actions. As a result of the similarities of relationships, the progression of the narratives in the films carries certain parallel beats, with characters repeating actions. The antagonists in *Seven Men from Now* and *Ride Lonesome* find themselves burying a man in the desert on behalf of a woman, an action that further cements the desert as a treacherous place across the cycle. Though these actions can be entirely serious, it is this set of echoes that carries one of the strongest indications of Boetticher's playfulness, referred to by both Kitses and Dibb. For example, in *The Tall T* Scott's Brennan jumps into a water trough to avoid being gored by the bull he has failed to stay on while, in *Comanche Station*, Cody throws Mrs Lowe into a water trough to keep her safe during a Comanche attack. The exchange of the woman and man in this repeated piece of business affords an expansion of the humor in both moments, as Mrs Lowe's predicament, though urgent in the context of the attack, is treated with some lightness, indicated by her frequent bobbing out of the water and immediate ducking in response to arrows and spears. The possibility for amusement in *Comanche Station* is increased in the context of the memory of the more straightforwardly comic moment in *The Tall T*. This echo also reflects on the adjustments of Scott's characters between films as, while Brennan becomes more outwardly serious through the film's kidnapping plot and Cody has a moment of comedy when he hops in response to Mrs. Lowe treating his injured leg, the two characters are distinguished through being at opposite ends of Scott's range of relative softness and hardness; it is difficult to imagine Cody jumping into a water trough to avoid a bull he has ridden for a bet in order to set up his own ranch.

4. Space. This category ties in with the sense I have mentioned already that particular spaces engender a certain atmosphere or are conducive to certain kinds of activity. While there are many spaces that seem obliquely or impre-

cisely to echo one another, there are those that are explicit repurposing of a location. One example of this is that the same stretch of water is used in *Seven Men From Now* and *Comanche Station*. In the first film it serves as a place to wash the Greers' horses after they have hauled their wagon out of the mud. The men wash the horses while Annie washes on the other side of some reeds. Stride is distracted by Annie's singing and looks over Mr Greer's shoulder as he talks, seemingly hoping to catch a glimpse of her. The scene is filmed with the camera facing the bank and then roughly on the same axis as Stride's line of sight toward the reed bed. In *Comanche Station*, the river becomes a point for the group to cross along their journey. First Cody tests the water, the camera placed on the bank. Then, when he gives his okay, the camera moves to film them crossing, facing towards the bank with the reed bank visible in the background as it pans with them crossing. In both scenes, the river is invested with a sense of security, a place to wash or cross in safety.

To draw out further the precision of such parallels, and the way they might carry a forceful intertextual layering, I want to look in detail at one of the more prominent repetitions of a space used in both *Ride Lonesome* and *Comanche Station*: a dead tree in the center of a clearing ringed by trees and the distant outline of Mount Whitney far off behind it.

In *Ride Lonesome*, this clearing and the tree itself are the stage for the final act, the meeting point of Brigade and his quarry Frank. Brigade's movements have been leading to this point, and it is here that he threatens to hang Billy John in order to exact his revenge against his older brother Frank. The tree is the place where Frank killed Brigade's wife, thus making it a suitably resonant site for his death, and revealing an emotional repetition within the film's own texture, the force of which is carried by the multiple encounters of Brigade with the hanging tree, both before and during the film. In contrast, the hanging tree's appearance in *Comanche Station* is much more brief. On their way across country, and shortly after their river crossing, the group of Cody, Mrs Lowe, Lane, Frank and Dobie pass through another waterlogged area—a swamp or perhaps a small lake—in the center of which is the tree. The juxtaposition of an object which accumulates such significance within one film and is of passing reference in the other, presents first an acknowledgement of the proximity of the films' worlds and, second, the possibility of a more substantial connectedness and resulting density of meaning between films.

A short scene with Frank, his first appearance on-screen, sets up the significance of the tree in *Ride Lonesome*. Frank fills in the reasoning for Brigade's leisurely pace: "It ain't Billy he wants, it's me"; and the backstory for the revenge, "I did him a hurt once. Long ago. So long, I 'most forgot." He finishes the thought by situating the hurt in relation to a place: "He wants me to catch up, and I think I know where." The scene ends with a dissolve from

Frank leaning back against a wall, and tilting his hat back on his head in a gesture communicating his own lack of urgency, to the group moving through a less open landscape. Shortly afterwards they emerge from a wooded area to come a stop in front of a bleached log. The score, which had been providing a quiet background accompaniment to their journey, begins to shift to the foreground via a rumble of drums as the film cuts to a long shot of the tree. As they ride towards it, the group is presented in a high-angle shot from behind the tree, the crooked angle of the left branch jutting dramatically across the frame. Drawing closer, Boone comments “Hanging Tree” and they begin to pull up at its base where an exchange between Boone and Brigade further sets up the function of the tree within the film’s world and also Brigade’s relationship to it as Boone remarks, “Come to think of it, you strung a few there yourself.”

The next encounter with the tree is that night. Having made a camp in the old riverbed a little further along, Mrs Lane finds Brigade staring out at the tree in the gloom. This scene is when he fills her in on past events involving the murder of his wife by Frank. As he sparingly recounts the story, Scott stands to the right of the frame, with Steele on frame left, their backs to the camera and with the hanging tree visible as a silhouette between them in the background. On the line, “He hung her,” Scott turns towards the camera and exits the frame. There follows a shot reverse-shot as Mrs Lane turns first to watch him go and then back to glance at the tree, her look repeated by Boone as the film cuts to him watching out of a hiding place in the bushes. The scene ends with a further cut, back to the hanging tree, accompanied by a rumble of drums and strong brass note on the score as with its first appearance in the film.

With these two scenes occurring in short succession, the final confrontation between Brigade and Frank is then mapped entirely around the tree, with Brigade threatening to hang Billy John in order to lure Frank nearer before shooting him. Throughout these three scenes views of the tree cement its narrative prominence visually and aurally. The tree remains central, or at least situated between, characters and is presented as an object of their attention—we consistently see characters looking up at it—while the score further underlines its solemnity through variations in key and adds a material hardening of the soundtrack through the increased prominence of drums and brass. The starkness of the tree itself, its isolation and large scale heighten its dramatic significance, so that the repetition of it through these three moments efficiently increases the power of it as an icon of death, tied to Brigade’s wife, momentarily to Billy John and then finally to Frank.

In contrast, the brevity of the tree’s presence in *Comanche Station* could seem nothing more than a passing thought or a convenient reappropriation of a prior location. Details of how it is presented suggest otherwise, however. The burnt-out hanging tree is positioned near the center of the frame, and the

shot lasts for twenty-eight seconds, spanning the time it takes the group to move from the mid point of the water to the bank and out of the frame. While decisions about shot scale and editing do not call attention to it—there is no cut in for a closer view—the framing and length of shot support the sense that, despite the dramatic changes in terrain, this is the same place and the same tree. Moreover, the tree is visibly burnt even though it remains distant from the camera. *Ride Lonesome* ends with the tree being set alight so the particularities of its appearance here bear the traces of those characters' previous actions. These decisions about how the tree is seen share aspects of its visual prominence in *Ride Lonesome* so that, although the characters do not refer to it, it is a striking presence.

As with my previous examples, the repetition immediately draws attention to the measured adjustments between presentations of the tree, enabling reflection on the differences between the films, particularly in terms of how the space has changed around the tree. Whereas in *Ride Lonesome* the tree sits in a bare stretch of ground, in *Comanche Station* it is placed in the middle of water. The change in the quality of the space around rearticulates the visual presence of the tree: the water works against its visual prominence somewhat as it no longer provides such a graphic contrast against a pale and sandy ground. Yet, its reappearance, which acts as a visible marker of the passage of time between the films through its burnt surface, ultimately points more forcefully to the continuities between the films: the repetition of a journey through this environment, and the sympathetic/antagonistic connections between hero and villain, and the conversations at nightfall. Most forceful is the memory it evokes of Brigade and his hardened quest for revenge which has the potential to transfer on to Cody, a man whose grief for his dead wife is not as close to the surface. Could the tree be a visual marker of the passage of time, signifying a less urgent need for revenge?

The extent to which the tree acts as a persistent and powerful motif in the earlier film renders its presence in *Comanche Station* as far from arbitrary. Its placement also repeats its qualities in *Ride Lonesome*. Building on Boetticher's interest in the depth of space and juxtaposition of foreground and background, it is worth considering the extent to which the doubling of this tree across the films can work as a further example of comparison between foreground and background, albeit of a more structural kind; to watch one film after the other encourages contemplation of the tree as both foreground (the film being watched) and background (the film that has been watched). The impact of a space in one film on that of another thus posits a further spatial expansion. The very fact of its recurrence creates a powerful and layered object across the films, a prominent point of connection that accumulates meaning. Consequently, the tree's qualities seem to permeate the boundaries between the films, the shadow of the hanging tree persists in *Comanche Station* as the

group's movement through its space comes at a transitional moment in their journey. Whereas the arrival at the water (the river crossing described above) is imbued with a sense of safety, moments after the group passes the tree, one of their number is killed by an unseen Comanche attack when they stop to wash. Rather than offering discrete occurrences of a tree, this specific echo between the films layers the tree's image and associations to create an intersecting tree space where the resonance of the tree's power in *Ride Lonesome* bleeds into its apparently much more innocuous appearance in *Comanche Station*. The density of the "multiple textual space" is at its thickest in such an intersection, informing perspectives on space, narrative and character.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued for an appreciation of the parallels, echoes and repetitions within Boetticher's Ranown cycle with the aim of furthering an argument about the density of the films' texture, not just individually but in concert. While Boetticher's films can be described as economical, sparing and succinct, the fictional world he creates through the layering of relationships, dialogue, action, and spaces across the films can be valued as dense and immersive. Attention to certain patterns reveals a concern with depth and complexity in conceptions of space that also supports a thickness to his style. Like the Randolph Scott characters who perpetually ride the country around Lone Pine, the experience of watching the films is to come repeatedly to aspects of the terrain with him again. Boetticher's films ask us to look at this landscape as a layered environment. On the one hand, it seems that such proximity between the films' worlds works to efface precision or artistry—"they all look the same"—yet the articulation of these spaces draws us into a more detailed knowledge and understanding of his work, beyond a possible appreciation of economy and sparse style.

## NOTES

1. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (London: Thames and Hudson and British Film Institute, 1969), p. 94.
2. Boetticher made a further two films starring Scott and produced by Brown but neither was shot at Lone Pine: *Buchanan Rides Alone* (1958) and *Decision at Sundown* (1957).
3. Kitses, p. 114.
4. Mike Dibb, "A Time and A Place: Budd Boetticher and the Western," in *The Movie Book of the Western*, ed. Ian Cameron et al. (New York: Continuum, 1996), p. 161.
5. Kitses, p. 94.



6. During Randolph Scott's career, he made several other films in Lone Pine: *The Doolins of Oklahoma*, 1949; *Frontier Marshall*, 1939; *Hangman's Knot*, 1952; *Man in the Saddle*, 1951; *The Nevadan*, 1950; *The Stranger Wore a Gun*, 1953; *The Thundering Herd*, 1933; *The Walking Hills*, 1949.
7. David Holland, *On location in Lone Pine: a Pictorial Guide to One of Hollywood's Favorite Movie Locations for 70 Years!* (Granada Hills, CA: Holland House, 1990), p. 4.
8. Dibb, p. 162.
9. Budd Boetticher quoted in Sean Axmaker, "Budd Boetticher and the Ranown Cycle: 'What a director is supposed to do,'" *Parallax View*, November 2, 2008, <http://parallax-view.org/2008/11/02/budd-boetticher-and-the-ranown-films/2008>.
10. Dibb, p. 162.
11. A point made by Warwick Frost in explaining the popularity of Lone Pine as a location: "Filming on location allowed directors to escape financial and artistic control." Warwick Frost, "Reshaping the Destination to Fit the Film Image: Western Films and Tourism at Lone Pine, California," *Department of Management Working Paper Series*, 61/04, Monash University (2004), 6.
12. Dibb, p. 162.
13. Daniel Yacavone, "Towards a Theory of Film Worlds," *Film-Philosophy* 12: 2 (2008): 87. This comment is made in relation to Goodman's book *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978), p. 34.
14. Though the safety implied by the opening scenes is quickly undercut by the presence of the villain and his gang when Brennan returns with the stagecoach.
15. Deborah Thomas, *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (Moffat: Cameron & Hollis, 2000).
16. Douglas Pye, "Movies and Tone," in *Close-Up 02: Movies and Tone/Reading Rohmer/ Voices in Film*, ed. John Gibbs et al. (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), pp. 1–80.
17. There are distinct overlaps with *The Tall T* and *Seven Men from Now*, though the latter is closer to these two, as Randolph Scott's character – Ben Stride – is again seeking revenge for his wife who was killed in the robbery of the Wells Fargo. In *The Tall T*, Pat Brennan (Randolph Scott) is kidnapped, along with Mr and Mrs Mims (John Hubbard and Maureen O'Sullivan), by Usher (Richard Boone) and his younger sidekicks, Chink (Henry Silva) and Billy Jack (Skip Homeier).
18. Kitses, p. 115.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 115. This observation provokes Kitses to compare Boetticher to Yasujiro Ozu.
23. Lucy Fife Donaldson, *Texture in Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 41.
24. Donaldson, pp. 49–80.
25. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Philip Rice et al. (London: Edward Arnold ([1971] 1989), pp. 166–71.
26. Kitses, p. 95.
27. Dibb, p. 162.