

Wyatt Earp Joins The Community

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Introduction

In a 1976 essay on the visual imagery in John Ford's Westerns, Michael Budd analyzes the importance of the church dance sequence in *My Darling Clementine* for visually establishing the film's major theme of a community being created. A series of shots juxtaposes the dancers whirling around the floor of the unfinished church with Wyatt and Clementine uncomfortably looking on, until finally Wyatt summons the courage to ask her to dance and the two sets of images, in effect, merge. "Separate spaces, sounds, and forces are joined," writes Budd ; "the community finds a center."¹

I propose to continue Budd's analysis along the same general lines but extend it much further by applying to the church dance sequence theories of visual imagery put forward by Rudolf Arnheim in his book *The Power of the Center* (1982) and in a public lecture, "Composition in the Visual Arts," delivered by Professor Arnheim at the University of Idaho on September 18, 1985. Briefly put, Arnheim reduces all visual imagery to two "systems" : the centric system and the linear or grid system. The centric system corresponds in nature to the force of gravity, pulling everything toward the center. The linear system represents resistance to gravity and to the pull of outside forces generally. Centric systems are typically manifested by circularity, linear systems by verticality.

By explaining in somewhat greater detail Arnheim's theories, and then analyzing closely the visual composition of the individual shots that comprise

the scene in which Wyatt and Clementine watch and finally join the dance, I hope to establish that Ford succeeds in depicting not merely Wyatt Earp joining the frontier community of Tombstone, but an archetypal paradigm of the founding of *all* communities.

"Downward Pull and Upward Striving"

Arnheim's theory is, to say the least, ambitious. It claims to account not only for the formal characteristics of works of art but for their symbolic content as well. "The interaction between the two spatial systems (centric and linear)," he writes in the Introduction to *The Power of the Center*, "generates formally the complexity of shape, color, and movement that our visual sense cherishes; and it represents symbolically the relation between the cosmic perfection of which any thing or creature possesses a little and the struggle between downward pull and upward striving that marks the drama of our earthly behavior."² Furthermore, while up until now Arnheim has applied his theory only to painting, sculpture and architecture, he believes it would also be useful in the analysis of works in other media, particularly film³ and even in non-visual fields, such as music. He admits that this virtue of all-inclusiveness can also be a weakness: in response to a question following his public lecture at the University of Idaho he acknowledged that a theory which seems to explain everything runs the danger of explaining nothing. Nonetheless, his ideas are compelling not merely for their boldness but also for their success in deepening our understanding of the power certain kinds of images exert over us.

At the core of his theory, in more ways than one, resides the force of gravity.

The dominant pull of gravity makes the space we live in asymmetrical. Geometrically, there is no difference between up and down; dynamically, the difference is fundamental. In a field of forces pervading our living space, any upward movement requires the investment of special energy, whereas downward movement can be accomplished by mere drooping, or by merely removing the support that had kept the object from being pulled downward.⁴

Allow me, at great risk of oversimplification, to severely condense the symbolic consequences in visual art of the asymmetry of perceptual space owing to gravity. Gravity draws us and all objects in our experience toward an unseen center without requiring any cooperation on our part and indeed even

against our will. Circular and spherical images thus represent the centric system which overcomes our "upward striving" — our struggle to resist gravity's "downward pull" — which is represented by vertical or grid images. Therefore verticality is for Arnheim the crucial dimension with regard to the force of gravity. But when death ends our striving we effortlessly "droop," because, while our striving is short-lived, gravity is eternal: hence the "cosmic perfection" of the centric system. Yet as long as life continues we each feel the urge to assert ourselves in our individuality against the outside forces that ultimately claim us, and this in essence constitutes "the drama of our earthly behavior."

In effect, Arnheim claims to identify a psychological phenomenon that underlies all human experience and is expressed in its purest and most abstract form through the visual arts. "It is the interaction between the two (systems)," he said at his University of Idaho lecture, "that is, psychologically speaking, the interaction between the demands of the self and the demands of outer forces which is then manifest in the corresponding visual patterns." Moreover, the most profound manifestations of that interaction in visual patterns would seem to occur in works of art with decidedly religious themes, inasmuch as there is, not surprisingly, great religious significance accruing to both centric and linear systems. For example, Arnheim discusses Dieric Bouts' *Last Supper* (1468) as a painting that, when viewed as a flat composition, emphasizes the linear system but favors the centric system when perceived in three-dimensional perspective (see Figure 1). The painting allows both views because, while there are several obvious devices that suggest depth, the overall "symmetry of the projective pattern tends to flatten the scene." Viewed the latter way, the picture has an "upright format," which brings out the "hierarchic dimension of verticality," dominated by the "figure of Christ, framed and enthroned by the fireplace behind him." However, when perceived three-dimensionally the painting "becomes more down-to-earth, less hierarchic." Rather than being hierarchically subordinated to Christ along the vertical, the "group is now centered around the circular plate with the lamb roast," which of course is a Christ symbol.⁵ * Appropriately, two aspects of divinity are expressed: that of rising above the mundane, and that of absorption into the eternal:

Psychologically, two additional, related themes emerge. The linear system, directed toward the individual figure of Christ, suggests individuality, "the demands of the self," while the centric system, centered around the general symbol of Christ (the lamb), evokes "the demands of outer forces,"

which can here be seen, in this image of communion, as the demands of a community over and even against the individual. Arnheim observes that in the perspective viewing the fireplace "no longer enshrines the figure of Christ, who sits as one man among others" and is actually 'of equal height' to Judas.⁶ One might also point out, although Arnheim does not go so far, that the linear Christ and centric lamb also correspond, respectively, to masculine and feminine aspects of the two systems, with obvious affinities to the universal symbolism associated with the phallus and the womb.

The center of a composition acts as a hub, a function especially noticeable within a circular frame, as in the image on a cup from c. 480 B.C., representing Hercules and Athena which Arnheim discusses both in his book and in the public lecture (see Figure 2). In addition to serving as hub, this "balancing center" is often the site of what Arnheim calls a "microtheme", which is a "symbolic representation," usually a 'simplifying abstraction,' 'that reflects and symbolizes in the small the subject of the whole work' and is thus "capable of conveying the theme with concentrated immediacy." In Figure 2 the microtheme is "the two small containers, the jug and the cup, acting out a condensed and abstracted replication of the larger subject, namely the relation between hostess and guest, dispenser and recipient."⁷ Once again, it might also be said that the subject of the work, as well as the microtheme around which the whole image is centered, is a kind of communion symbol.

Arnheim also applies his theory to architecture, and his comments in the University of Idaho lecture on Bernini's plan for St. Peter's Square in Rome are worth summarizing because of their direct relevance to the visual composition of the church dance sequence in *My Darling Clementine*. (See Figure 3.) The plaza before the cathedral is comprised of "two half-circular colonnades.....in a centric way embracing the crowd which collected in the square around this center." But to incorporate just one system in the plan would be "static", and so "at the same time of course these people move towards the church and come out of the church and you have a linear movement from and to and out and over, "expressing" again the interactive of our two systems.....the tension between the compression, the concentration of the crowd in the embrace of the two colonnades and the traffic of the people coming and going from the sanctuary." Once more I would also add that the centric system represents the community ("the crowd") and perhaps femininity as well—twice Arnheim describes the colonnades as "embracing" the crowd. Similarly, the "sanctuary" toward which the linear system is directed

symbolizes the dwelling place of the one traditionally masculine Judaeo-Christian God.

Linear and Circular Interaction at the Church Dance

Even before Michael Budd's article the church dance sequence in *My Darling Clementine* had provoked much comment and admiration for its purely visual impact, aside from its dramatic (and comedic) effectiveness, its mythic flavor and so on. In 1973 Stefan Fleischer, attempting to develop a methodology for studying film based on the theories of Erwin Panofsky, used the sequence as a starting point for the investigation of "film iconography," a term which Fleischer tentatively defined by means of the proposition that "if a film means anything, it means not what it says but what it looks like." "Ford's West," determined Fleischer, "is a memorialization" that is achieved "by means of icons." For example, the American flags flying beside the church framework (Figure 4) "assume an iconographic resonance by the very fact of their doubling. Their elaboration in space suggests that they are emblematic of a dream about America, not the representation of an historical moment."

It should be readily apparent that Fleischer's observations concerning the flags can be greatly expanded by the application of Arnheim's concept of the symbolic import of verticality. Taken together with the church tower, the flags represent a spiritual striving toward the sky, which takes up most of the screen in the extreme long shots Fleischer is referring to. Indeed, the sky is visible through the unenclosed church framework, enhancing the sense of spiritual aspiration. Non-visually, the hymn on the soundtrack during the establishing shots before the dance begins increases this effect further. The church is in every respect at the center of the composition of these scenes: we see people approaching it from all directions until a crowd has gathered around it, not unlike the crowd in the "embrace" of the colonnades in Bernini's plaza. True, the space the crowd occupies is not perfectly circular; however, it is irregularly rounded, and that roundness is echoed by the hills in the distance and the curve of the horizon line and even by the white covered wagon visible just below the crossbar between the two flagpoles. The roundness of the crowd and of the landscape contrasts strikingly with the verticality and gridlike features of the church and the flags.

The pronounced linear qualities of the church and flags associate them visually with the town of Tombstone as a whole, which, as McBride and Wilmington observe "seems to be divided into squares and planes," while the

"framing continually emphasizes horizontal planes stretching into the distance (the boardwalk and the long bar)." The symbolic connection between church and town in terms of verticality is by no means obvious, although McBride and Wilmington seem to hint at it unintentionally when they describe our first view of the town (after the doomed James is left to guard the cattle) as follows: "Tombstone, which the three surviving Earps enter beneath a turbulent El Greco sky, is like the painter's *View of Toledo*—an isolate, throbbing citadel of light nestled in a pall of chaos and darkness."⁹ The town, including its church, of course implies civilization, the summation of all human efforts to transcend the limits set by nature · mortality, animality, gravity. Like El Greco's holy city Ford's Tombstone does indeed strive upward out of the darkness. Ford's city, however, like its church, is unfinished.

As is also the case with its marshal. It has often been remarked that the Henry Fonda character is civilized in the course of the film in several respects, most immediately, though, with respect to his instant dandification in the barbershop. "This moment," comments Peter Wollen, "marks the turning-point in Wyatt Earp's transition from wandering cowboy, nomadic, savage, bent on personal revenge, unmarried, to married man, settled, civilized, the sheriff who administers the law."¹⁰ At the beginning of the film Wyatt, like the town, needs to be cleaned up, though both man and town have a strong potential for good in them, even latent spiritual aspirations. In Wyatt's case we see this clearly from his speech at his brother's grave. With regard to the town we gradually draw a similar inference from the Mayor's efforts to hire a decent and effective law enforcer, from the people's willingness to invite and attend a performance of Shakespeare, and of course from the deacon's industry in founding a church ("Bless my scul, he did it" says the Mayor. "John Simpson said he'd have a church and he has.")¹¹

The symbolic kinship, then, between Wyatt and Tombstone is evident through a correspondence in "appearance," so to speak: both move from looking unkempt and unfinished to being well on the way to maturity and refinement. But the similarity in appearance is also brought out through visual correspondences that are best understood through Arnheim's theory. Just as the town and church are defined visually in terms of lines and grids, so Wyatt is typically photographed in such a way as to accentuate his height, slenderness and upright carriage. Usually, and especially after his second visit to the Bon Ton Tonsorial Parlor he wears black, which makes his upright figure stand out even more against the dusty town and desert backdrop. In particular his tall cowboy hat, of which I will have more to say later, sums

up—literally caps—the impression of verticality. Furthermore, he is often framed in such a manner that his body complements and all but becomes incorporated into the line and grid character of the town, as when he sits on the porch keeping an eye on things (Figure 5) or as he seeks cover at the OK Corral (Figure 6).

Wyatt and the town also resemble each other in what it is they are lacking. The church tower, the town's spiritual center, is only a framework, a bare skeleton, open to the sky but unprotected against the elements. It needs to be filled in, but more to the point it needs to be filled up with people. Wyatt, too, needs to fill his life with people other than those he identifies as his own family. Until he does so, his life will remain rootless, insubstantial. His brothers are little more than subordinate manifestations of his own personality, and together they constitute a collective version of the classic Western loner. Yet for the first part of the film that seems to be the way he wants it. His only reason for restoring the peace on his first visit to Tombstone is in order that the barber can finish shaving him, which is to say that his aspirations toward cleanliness and purity are entirely inward directed. His decision to change his mind and stay on as marshal with Morgan and Virgil as deputies is mainly motivated by desire for revenge, although his explanation at his brother's grave establishes a basis for eventually opening up his spiritual resources to others: "We're 'goin' to be around here for awhile, Can't tell—maybe when we leave this country, young kids like you will be able to grow up and live safe" (p 40).

Making Tombstone safe for young kids to grow up in is unquestionably good work—it might well be regarded as part of the Lord's work, as the following bit of dialogue between Wyatt and the deacon's family corroborates early in the church dance sequence, after the Earps are invited to the "social gatherin'.....to raise enough money to finish the church: "

WYATT: Well, thank ya, ma'am, but my brothers got sort of a job of work to do and I oughta stay around the place.

SIMPSON: Well, keepin' the peace is no whit less important. (pp. 6-77)

Although Wyatt's work is equally important, it is still not the same as actually participating in the social gathering and helping to finish the church. He is still too individualistic, too inner directed to seek admission to Tombstone's symbolic first communion. Significantly his brothers, the two remaining parts of Wyatt's collective alter ego, are going to visit the grave of the third part. However, both brothers express an eagerness to get back

quickly : Virgil wants to dance and Morgan says, "You know, there's probably a lot of nice people around here. We just ain't met 'em," This prepares us for Wyatt's definitive moment of transformation. However, our expectation has been building from the beginning of the sequence, when the Earps in three-shot, Wyatt in the center, all comment on how the procession of wagons into Tombstone reminds them of "back home on a Sunday morning," "with Ma scrubbin' our necks" (p. 75).

But the strongest, though subtlest anticipation of Wyatt's joining the community is conveyed in purely visual terms as Wyatt escorts Clementine to the gathering place. (See Figure 7.) Even more than previously, his tall, dark figure, accentuated by his high-crowned hat, reflects the vertical and linear qualities of the town. Even more significantly, in a relatively long take as they walk slowly down the street away from the camera, Wyatt verily nearly overlaps the church steeple in the exact center of the frame, so that the steeple almost becomes an extension of his spirituality, as with Christ and the fireplace in the Bouts *Last Supper*. Clementine's appearance, however, while harmonizing with his, presents a distinct contrast to it in several crucial respects. First, he is dark while she is light, both in color of clothing and in skin tone. Second, the angularity of his features point up the roundedness of hers. Literally this is the case from head to toe : even the softness of line in her eyes, mouth and chin underscores the sharpness of his eyebrows, moustache and jutting jaw. Of greatest interest, though, is the contrast in dress, particularly his tall hat compared to her low bonnet, and his stiffly cut jacket compared to her lacy shawl, with its curvy embroidered border. Undeniably much of the appeal in this scene comes from its evocation of conventional gender roles : they are, after all, dressed like bride and groom and their hymn-accompanied stroll is like a mock wedding march, or perhaps a wedding rehearsal. Yet her association with the centric system is not tangential to her association with traditional values ; on the contrary it is the most forceful, albeit also the most abstract expression of her mythic role. "The myth of the western illustrates, and both initiates and confirms woman in her role as vestal of the social virtues," writes Andre Bazin in a famous essay, which goes on to offer a metaphor that could almost be taken as a prophetic endorsement of this aspect of Arnheim's theory : "Within her is concealed the physical future, and, by way of the institution of the family to which she aspires as the root is drawn to the earth, its moral foundation."²

The moral foundation to which she and Wyatt are drawn is of course the literal foundation of the church. The dance begins after Simpson has "officially dedicated" the church and simultaneously pronounced a biblical

sanction for "havin' a dad-blasted good dance" (p. 82) This appropriately takes the form of a square dance, with couples taking turns spinning arm in arm about the center while the other people stand in straight rows to either side and cast long, straight shadows. The dance, then, in its essence combines the linear and centric systems. Closeups, though, tend to emphasize the centric system through slightly low-angle shots of buxom, round-faced women, while long shots from above bring out the linear prominence of church and flags. Overall, the two systems are held in a dynamic balance, as is evident even from the description in the continuity script:

Long shot of the dancers. There are facing lines of men and women ; individual dancers meet a partner between the lines, each in turn, according to the music, and then go back to their places. The camera looks down the line of dancers, slightly angled toward the women's line.

Long shot looking directly down the space between the two lines. The dancers move across the frame, circling and turning. At the far end of the space, the bottom of the steeple frame can be seen (p 83 ; italics omitted)

To reiterate Budd's phrase. the community indeed finds a center, and it pulls everyone toward it. In the original shooting script, in fact, even the Old Man Clanton is there, not to mention the town drunk, the local madam and her "ladies" (pp. 118-28, n 25)

At the heart of the sequence is the miniature drama concerning the last to join the dance, Wyatt and Clementine. Budd's description of the ordering of the images leading up to that moment is worth repeating :

Couple and community are in separate shots ; the dance continues to build, while Wyatt and Clementine, not yet participants, are more and more attracted to it. The parallel actions culminate in the final three shots of this part. The dancers begin a movement of both lines through the center, a climactic affirmation of communal unity. Only then, in the next shot, are the town and the far-off monuments added to the church scene, all elements in the film accumulating in one synoptic image in preparation for the couple's inclusion. And so when Wyatt subsequently asks Clementine to dance and they start to join the community, the action carries a tremendous charge of assimilation and consummation ¹³

Budd's recounting of the scene is already a virtual replica of the reading I would bring to bear upon it, minus the theoretical underpinnings and analytic equipment supplied by Arnheim. Rather than spell out those additions, let me instead focus even more narrowly on a minute but fascinating detail that Budd neglects.

The shots of Wyatt of Clementine which are interspersed with those of the dance are static, almost frozen in comparison to the whirling dance. This is appropriate in terms of the linear resistance Wyatt is still exhibiting against the centric pull of the community. He stands tall and rigid beside the ever softer-looking Clementine, and his verticality is further enhanced by the background, which in the first three of those shots includes distant, spire-like mountains, while the last shot (just after Simpson stops the music for them) prominently features three giant cactuses. Yet these two-shots are not entirely static. As Henry Fonda's face registers more and more embarrassment and indecision, we see that Cathy Downs has begun to clap (in the second shot of the series), indicating that in a sense she is part of the dance already.

It is at this point that, in the words of the continuity script, Wyatt "takes off his hat, holds it in his hand for a moment, then tosses it away." That high-crowned hat, as I said before, is literally the apex of his verticality, the symbol of his upward striving and of resistance to the pull of outside forces. It is also an expression of his individuality: no one in the film wears a hat anything like it. Perhaps we might even think of it as his last link to the drifting cowboy life he is now figuratively discarding, as he literally "tosses away" the hat. (Actually he first gazes on it with an expression of yearning while she watches, unsure what he is about to do.) He asks her to dance and she accepts, and what happens next may again be described from the continuity script: "She takes off her shawl and gives it to Wyatt, who folds it on his arm" (p. 84; italics omitted.)

The business with the hat and shawl, I contend, is a microtheme: a "symbolic representation" or "simplifying abstraction" "that reflects and symbolizes in the small the subject of the whole work" and is thus "capable of conveying the theme with concentrated immediacy." In removing the hat, Wyatt's verticality makes a concession to centricity that makes it possible for him to participate in the dance of communion. He is no longer above or isolated from the people, and as he dances with Clementine (Figure 8), the couple is photographed in such a way that, with Wyatt bareheaded, they are nearly equal in height. At the same time, he is still marked out from the rest visually by maintaining his verticality through his dark suit and even by the

dance itself: he leads Clementine through a high-stepping, up and down waltz, in angular contrast to the whirling motions of the previous dancers. This is fitting, for as much as he needs to belong to a community, the community needs singular individuals like him in order that "young kids..... will be able to grow up and live safe." So the deacon calls on the crowd to "make room for our new Marshal" (p. 84), and it is also fitting that the hatless Wyatt should dance alone with his "lady fair" while upholding her frilly shawl, which flutters from his arm like one of the flags overhead from its flagpole.

Notes and References

1. Michael Budd, 'A Home in the Wilderness: Visual Imagery in John Ford's Westerns.' in Robert Lyons, ed., *My Darling Clementine, John Ford, director* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1984), p. 165. The essay was originally published in *Cinema Journal* 16 (1976): 62-75.
2. Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), p. x.
3. Arnheim, *Power of the Center*, pp. 211, 212.
4. Arnheim, *Power of the Center*, p. 10.
5. Arnheim, *Power of the Center*, pp. 187, 189.
6. Arnheim, *Power of the Center*, p. 189.
7. Arnheim, *Power of the Center* pp. 94, 120.
8. Stefan Fleischer, "A Study through Stills of *My Darling Clementine*," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 3 (1973): 241, 251.
9. Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, *John Ford* [New York: Da Capo, 1975], pp. 95, 93.
10. Peter Wollen, "Structural Patterns in John Ford's Films," in Lyons, ed., *My Darling Clementine*, p. 171; originally from Peter Wollen, "The Auteur Theory," in *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972]. Also see Fleischer, "A Study through Stills," pp. 245-47.
11. Lyons, ed., *My Darling Clementine*, Continuity Script, p. 80. Further references to the continuity script will be given in my text.

12. Andre Bazin, "The Western, or the American Film *par excellence*," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray [Berkeley : Univ. of California Press, 1971], 2 : 145. Originally published in 1953.
13. Budd, "A Home in the Wilderness," p. 166.

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