HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Western Union 1941

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Background. After his arrival in the USA in 1934, Fritz Lang immersed himself in the "American atmosphere" (Bogdanovich, 15) before directing his first Hollywood film *Fury* (1936). In order to learn about his new audience, he read as many newspapers as he could and was particularly keen on popular comics. In his German films, Lang liked to incorporate actual events to the plot and in his first year in the USA he continued his habit of collecting newspaper clippings (16). He also took a road trip and interacted with a variety of people. He was intrigued by the West and visited historic sites such as the Boothill Graveyard in Tombstone, Arizona (Wagner, 228). The director was interested in the culture of Native Americans and during his travels he lived with the Navajo tribe for several weeks (Bogdanovich, 15).

Transcontinental Telegraph Line. A few years later, Lang would have an opportunity to put to use his first-hand observations of the West. Following the success of his first Western, 1940's *The Return of Frank James*, he directed *Western Union* which was released the following year. This film is about the first transcontinental telegraph line built by the communications company of the same name.

Significance of Telegraph. Parallel to the transformation of transportation by railways, communications were modernized by telegraph technology. By establishing communication between the East and the West, the line contributed to the nation building process. The optimism about technological progress and belief in Manifest Destiny are echoed in *Western Union.* Its imagery of westward expansion recalls John Gast's painting *American Progress*—depicting "Progress" as a female figure stringing a telegraph line and leading settlers westwards, while indigenous people and buffalos scatter at the sight. *Western Union*'s spotlight on modern communications parallels other Westerns, notably *Wells Fargo* (1937) dealing with the eponymous express company and the westward expansion of the railroad across the wilderness in *Union Pacific* (1939).

Story and Characters. *Western Union* is based on a novel of Zane Grey. The story revolves around individuals who endured hardship constructing the telegraph line. The setting is the Great Plains and the expedition is jeopardized by the presence of Confederate renegades and Native American bands. The plot involves a number of interesting dichotomies—North vs. South, East vs. West, and civilized vs. primitive. The three major characters of *Western Union* are the visionary engineer directing the operation, a reformed outlaw who seeks redemption and a privileged young man hailing from the Eastern seaboard. The engineer represents the businessman Edward Creighton who led the historic expedition and undertook the completion of the line from Omaha to Salt Lake City.

Historical Context. *Western Union* was released in January 1941 when the USA had not yet entered the WW2. The transcontinental telegraph line was completed eighty years ago in 1861—which also marked the beginning of another conflict, the American Civil War. This war constitutes the backdrop of the story. The bandits that threaten Western Union's line construction claim to be irregular soldiers of the Confederate Army. Their leader mentions that they are part of "General Mosby's guerillas"—alluding to an actual officer of the Confederacy**,** Colonel Mosby.

Cinematography. Majestic outdoor scenes with canyons and prairie are beautifully shot with Technicolor in Lang's second color film. Vast space and sightly topography often alternates between deeply shadowed scenes to create a fascinating contrast. Edward J. Cronjager would work with Lang to shoot 1950's *House by the River* and its eponymous turn of the century mansion.

Costume Design. Costumes were designed by Travis Banton who would collaborate with Lang in his *Man Hunt* (1941), *Scarlet Street* (1945), and *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947)—all three films starring Joan Bennett. The only female part of any significance in *Western Union* is that of Creighton's sister who is an ardent telegraph operator. She has a secondary role that adds an element of romance to the story.

A Western Star. The tragic hero of the film is the reformed outlaw played by Western star Randolph Scott. Among Scott's many Western roles were a marshal in *Jesse James* and Wyatt Earp in *Frontier Marshall*. His later films in this genre included *7 Man from Now* (1956), *The Tall T* (1957), and *Ride the High Country* (1965).

The Auteur under Contract. *Western Union* is one of several Lang films that he directed as he was under contract with a major film studio. Scholars have different opinions about whether this factor limited Fritz Lang's creative freedom. According to Nick Smedley, the director's impact on the early stages of the production—finalization of the script—was negligible (Smedley). On the other hand, Phil Wagner points out that his lack of control over the script would hardly hinder Lang's ability to assert his artistic signature (Wagner, 239).

The Western Genre. Lang's third and final Western that came out in the following decade. *Rancho Notorious* (1952) is an unusual Western and a uniquely Langian one. In her analysis of this film, Florianne Wild observes that the Western genre "invites spectators to lose themselves in the vast expanses of unlimited terrain, to range free and to conquer space and control it with identifying with a hero" (Wild). While *Rancho Notorious* may be a counterexample to such a description of the genre, it is a fitting framework for the less quirky *Western Union*—a more conventional genre film that has a touch of light comedy and plenty of Lang motifs all the same.

CHARACTERS

Vance Shaw. Shaw is an outlaw from the South who is hired by the Western Union as a scout.

Richard Blake. Harvard educated Blake's father is one of the financiers of the telegraph line. Blake's physical prowess initially causes skepticism but he soon proves himself.

Edward Creighton. The chief engineer of Western Union oversees the installation of the telegraph line.

Sue Creighton. Edward's sister is skilled in the Morse code and enjoys her work at the main office.

Jack Slade. The outlaw is the brother of Vance Shaw. Slade leads a gang and purports to be a guerilla fighting for the Confederacy.

Doc Murdoch. *Western Union*'s doctor is a bit of an oddball with dubious scientific ethics—he bets about the survival of a wounded man and checks the teeth and hamstrings of prospective workers in the recruitment process.

Herman. Slim Summerville's character plays the cook of the convoy. He provides comic relief and many scenes show him finding himself in taxing situations posed by frontier life.

Chief Spotted Horse. The leader of the Oglala Sioux is played by Native American actor Chief John Big Tree. The chief threatens the expedition only after his son is shot and wounded by Blake. When he is provided with a demonstration of electricity, Spotted Horse acknowledges the power of telegraphy and pledges not to interfere with the line's progress.

SYNOPSIS

Surveyor Edward Creighton is an engineer working for the Western Union Company, which has plans to install telegraph lines across the American continent. He has an accident and is saved by outlaw Vance Shaw, who is running from a posse. Later, they meet in Omaha and Creighton hires Shaw as the scout of the forthcoming expedition. Creighton isn't bothered by Shaw's criminal past. Among the members of the expedition are a Harvard-educated man named Richard Blake from the East and Edward Creighton's sister Sue, an enthusiastic telegraph operator proficient in the Morse code. Shaw and Blake enter into some good-humored romantic rivalry to charm her.

The expedition party departs. One night, a band of Indians raid the camp and swiftly get away under the cover of darkness. Shaw investigates and finds out that the Indians are actually Caucasian men—his former cohorts and ex-guerilla soldiers of the Confederacy. Shaw turns down their invitation to rejoin the gang and does not share his findings. An advance group of land surveyors supervised by Shaw are approached by a band of belligerent and drunk Indians. The inexperienced Blake gets edgy and shoots the chief's son. A brief clash ensues and the Indians flee as a large group of reinforcements from the main camp come to their rescue. Just when the main camp becomes vulnerable with most of the men scurrying to aid the surveyors, it is attacked by another band of Indians who steal the horses. Several workers including the foreman are killed trying to fight them off. A closer look at the body of a dead attacker reveals him to be one of the Confederate soldiers belonging to Jack Slade's gang. Creighton, Shaw, and Blake head out to the plains to resolve the issue with the Indians. The two parties agree to leave each other alone.

Much progress has been made and the transcontinental telegraph project is nearing completion—just when Slade's men lure Shaw into captivity before torching the expedition's camp. Shaw sets himself free but gets fired by a now suspicious Creighton. He confronts Slade; he gets shot by one of the henchman and is fatally wounded; Blake comes to his help and kills Slade. Sometime later, the connection to Salt Lake City gets completed and the project ends succesfully.

SCENES

The Outlaw and the Surveyor. A lone rider is galloping his horse around a canyon in Nebraska. Vance Shaw is an outlaw who participated in a botched bank holdup in North Platte and he is now running away from a posse.



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In her analysis of Fritz Lang's third Western, *Rancho Notorio*us, Florianne Wild observes that the Western genre "invites spectators to lose themselves in the vast expanses of unlimited terrain, to range free and to conquer space and control it with identifying with a hero" (Wild). This is a fitting framework for the *Western Union*—a more conventional genre film that has a touch of light comedy and plenty of Lang motifs all the same. In the opening scenes, the lone rider is featured in the vast open space.



Shaw has to stop after his horse gets injured and gently releases the animal into the wild. Just then, he notices a badly injured man among some sage bushes. This is surveyor Edward Creighton who has had

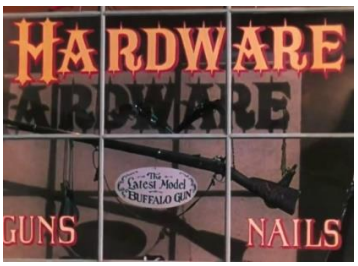
an accident. Although Shaw needs the man's horse to continue his flight, he chooses to help him. He takes Creighton to a mail relay station where he can be taken care of and quickly clears off with his horse.

The Pony Express Outpost. Creighton is an engineer surveying for an ambitious project of the Western Union Company—the installation of telegraph infrastructure on the east-west axis. The station is manned by employees of the mail courier service Pony Express. The rowdy frontier men are baffled by the concept of wired messages. Thanks to the good care of his hosts, Creighton soon recuperates.





Omaha, 1861. Spring comes, and a Pony Express stagecoach stops by the station. Creighton boards it to make it to Omaha. The company has a maintenance division here which is the hub of the forthcoming transcontinental telegraph project. Creighton is the manager of the outfit that would install poles and string wire all the way to Utah. The presentation of this town features interesting Fritz Lang touches and motifs: A woman gets her shoes polished by a Black boy while two older men gawk at the scene. The bank's window displaying rate of exchange for precious metals recalls Lang's comparable visualization of market economy in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* and *M*) The brief sequence presents brief glimpses of town life and examples of Lang's interest in shop windows: "modiste shop" with "latest Paris fashions" next to a hardware store displaying "the latest model buffalo gun".





Outlaw Becomes Scout. Omaha is bustling with activity and the wiring party is soon to take off westwards. Vance Shaw is one of many who apply for a job with the expedition. He is hired and Edward Creighton soon finds out that his rescuer is among the workers. The former outlaw feels uneasy because of his boss' first-hand knowledge about his run-ins with the law. Creighton isn't bothered by Shaw's criminal past; he is grateful and decides to utilize the man's background by employing him as a scout. Vance Shaw decides to quit the outlaw life, but will remain ambiguous about his loyalties



A Fresh Recruit. Among those joining the expedition is a young man named Richard Blake from the East. The Harvard educated Blake's father is one of Creighton's a financiers. Toughened frontier men regard this fresh recruit as a tenderfoot and test his skills. In an amusing scene, he shows off his embroidered costume custom-tailored for him in New York (The film's costumes were designed by Travis Banton.) Richard Blake soon proves his proficiency in horse riding and gradually earns their respect. He is also skilled with using the surveyor's sextant, his formal education will make him an asset to the expetion.





A Female Telegraphist. Edward Creighton's sister Sue is an enthusiastic telegraph operator proficient in the Morse code. Shaw and Blake enter into some good-humored romantic rivalry to charm her. When her brother informs Sue that she will have to stay behind and continue



working at the office she is a little upset about being left out of the exciting expedition.
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Sue Creighton as the telegraph machine operator anticipates the phone company switchboard operators of Lang's *The Blue Gardenia*.



A Langian motif: decoding and encoding verbal communication with the brass telegraph machine.



Setting out. Finally, the expedition party is ready to depart. During the official ceremony, speakers emphasize the importance of the mission for the nation and an endorsement message from President Lincoln is read out loud. Edward Creighton also makes the speech at the ceremony for the launch of the expedition.The party sets out and it all goes well the first few days until the feared Indian threat materializes. The convoy moves westward installing telegraph poles and scenes such as this one recall John Gast's painting *American Progress*.





Rustlers raid the Camp. One night, a band of Indians raid the camp and swiftly get away under the cover of darkness. They rustle the expedition's livestock and kill two of its cowboys. Shaw's knowledge of the region makes him skeptical about the existence of a hostile Indian tribe. Creighton dispatches him to find out more about the attackers and the stolen cattle. The sequence in the vastness is an example of Crojager's cinematography and use of chiaroscuro lighting.



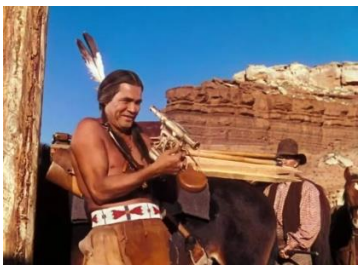
Shaw's Former Cohorts. Shaw leaves and soon spots a small group of Indians holding a pow-wow. As he approaches them, the bare-chested warriors turn out to be Caucasian men. These are Shaw's former cohorts posing as Indians. Their leader Jack Slade is a Confederate soldier and he claims that his gang is serving "General Mosby" as part of his guerillas. Shaw turns down his invitation to rejoin the gang and returns to camp empty handed.



The Convoy Moves Along. Shaw chooses not to share his findings with Creighton and instead reports that some tribe was responsible for the rustle. Creighton heeds the scout's advice to forget about the incident and move along. Meanwhile, Sue visits the camp and rekindles her romance with Shaw. The former bandit is regretful of his past and pessimistic about a fresh beginning. Her stay is cut short as her brother believes that the convoy is not suitable for women and sends her back to the city office. Shaw contemplates, apparently unsure about his next action—his introspective mood provides a stunning context for Cronjager's cinematography.



Clash with Indians. An advance group of land surveyors supervised by Shaw are approached by a band of belligerent and drunk Indians. Blake manages to wire an S.O.S. message to the main camp while a couple of Indians scavenge a wagon for whiskey. They help themselves to some garments and mess with a surveyor's sextant. Shaw tries to defuse the situation but the inexperienced Blake gets edgy and shoots the chief's son. A brief clash ensues and the Indians flee as a large group of reinforcements from the main camp come to their rescue.

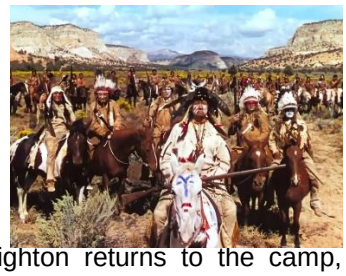


Fake Indians raid once Again. Just when the main camp becomes vulnerable with most of the men scurrying to aid the surveyors, it is attacked by another band of Indians who steal the horses. Several workers including the foreman are killed trying to fight them off. A closer look at the body of a dead attacker reveals him to be one of the Confederate soldiers belonging to Jack Slade's gang. Creighton concludes that the previous encounter must have been a diversion staged by the imposters.

Meeting Jack Slade. While Blake pushes for an all-out attack on the Indian tribe, Shaw advises prudence and replacing the stolen horses. Creighton chooses the latter option and the trio (Blake [Robert Young], Creighton [Dean Jagger] and Shaw [Randolph Scott]) goes downtown to buy new ones. Here they come across Jack Slade selling their string of horses. An annoyed Creighton consents to buy them back—but doesn't fail to observe that Slade and Shaw are well acquainted.



Wonders of Electricity. On their way to the camp, the engineer and his associates are approached by a contingent of Union Army's cavalry. The officer warns Creighton about the Indians who have declared that they will no longer tolerate the expedition's work in their territory. The army cannot be involved, so Creighton's party heads out to the plains to resolve the issue. Soon, their wagon is surrounded by Chief Spotted Tree and his warriors. Creighton bewilders and subdues the chief by a demonstration of electricity that leaves a bunch of warriors mildly electrocuted. The two parties agree to leave each other alone and Creighton returns to the camp, contented for having eliminated the threat from the Indians.



Jack Slade Strikes Again. Much progress has been made and the transcontinental telegraph project is nearing completion. One night, Jack Slade's emissary infiltrates the camp and sneaks into Shaw's wagon. He invites the scout to a meeting with his former partners. Shaw obliges and quietly leaves the camp, but pretty soon finds out that this was merely a ruse to get him out of camp. Slade tells him that he wanted to spare him from his crew's arson attack on the camp. The scout refuses another offer to join the bandits and Slade has him tied up. The bandits leave him there and ride to the Western Union camp to torch the surrounding forest. Engulfing flames soon destroy most of the wagons. Injured workers wait in line for medical attention following the devastating fire. The scene resembles the aftermath of a battle—this is a rare moment in the film that alludes to war.



Shaw goes after the Renegades. Shaw uses the bandits' smoldering campfire to loosen the ropes tied around his wrists. He sets himself free but also severely burns his hands. By the time he reaches the camp, Slade's men have vanished and many workers were injured fighting the flames. Creighton fires him for his suspicious absence and Shaw reveals that Jack Slade is in fact his brother. He departs to settle scores with Slade. The scenes that culminate in the showdown provide great examples of Cronjager's cinematography.



Confrontation. Shaw finds Slade and his associates in Elkville and confronts them at a barbershop. In the ensuing shootout, Shaw kills Slade's men before he himself is shot by his brother. As Shaw succumbs to his wounds, Blake arrives to the scene and after a brief gunfire exchange, Slade gets killed.

A Langian motif: Vance dies holding Sue's gift, the cameo charm. Another Langian motif: hands are featured prominently in many Lang films and *Western Union* is no exception—After getting shot, Vance tries to hang onto the barbershop's windowsill with his severely burnt hand.





Celebration. Some time later, the connection to Salt Lake City gets completed. Creighton, his sister and Blake celebrate the successful establishment of transcontinental telegraph. Sue laments about Shaw's death and Creighton consoles her that the scout would be watching over them.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Vance Shaw – Conscientious (Merciful, Regretful, Realist)
Richard Blake – Unconscientious (Tenderfoot, Warmonger)

VANCE SHAW (Conscientious)

Missouri born Shaw is a reformed outlaw who attempts to begin a new life with the Western Union project. Unlike his brother, Shaw is not affiliated with the Confederate Army.

Illustrative moments

Merciful. At the beginning of the film, Shaw tenderly releases his horse after it gets injured. A moment later, he sees that the injured Creighton is helpless in the wild and goes out of his way to take care of him.

Regretful. Shaw decides to quit banditry but realizes that his past won't let go. When Sues suggests that "mistakes can be corrected", he responds "not always". Western Union's telegraph line ushers in a new era but it doesn't look like Vance truly believes he has a place in it. His confrontation with his brother is motivated by his need for redemption.

Realist. It is not clear what exactly makes Shaw give up banditry and whether he really supports Western Union's westward expansion. He tries to persuade his brother not to target the telegraph line but doesn't provide a moral rationale. He simply keeps saying "you can't fight something so big and important as Western Union" which hardly convinces Slade.

RICHARD BLAKE (Unconscientious)

Creighton employs Blake because of his wealthy father. Blake is privileged but he is also competent and soon earns the respect of others. He is charmed by Sue Creighton and competes with Shaw to get her attention. Actor Robert Young is first billed in the credits.

Illustrative moments

Tenderfoot. Blake arrives at the outfit in custom made garments embellished by fancy embroidery. The pioneers regard him to be too soft for challenges of the prairie but he soon proves them wrong.

Warmonger. Blake is the member of the expedition with the best education but he is also the one who readily advocates war. In contrast to Shaw's advice of restraint in relations with indigenous people, Blake

is aggressive and encourages Creighton to clash with the local tribe. He is the one who shoots the chief's son in spite of Shaw's instructions and his action almost endangers the safety of the expedition.

THEMES

Society (Indigenous People vs. Settlers, Modern vs. Rural)
Politics (North vs. South, East vs. West)

SOCIETY

Indigenous People vs. Settlers. Shaw is fluent in the Lakota language and is the only member of the team who claims to be knowledgeable about indigenous people. "Indians can't stay interested in one thing very long", he explains. Native Americans are initially regarded as the major threat to the expedition but turn out to be harmless and peaceful—they are simply different. The Oglala Sioux are portrayed as naïve and impressionable. The band of Sioux is easily tempted by whiskey and their curiosity can make them intrusive. In one such instance, Creighton's team shocks them—literally—with a demonstration of their technological superiority, by mildly electrocuting a bunch of warriors.

Western Union does not villainize Native Americans —it suggests that the inclination to scapegoat them is misguided and unproductive. The real enemy is the group of outlaws from the South who impersonate them.

Modern vs. Rural. A young Indian marvels at the surveyor's sextant and tries to play with the brass instrument like a child. Such products of modernization baffle the indigenous people and highlight the superiority of the settlers. Then again, there exists a similar contrast within the latter. The pioneers at the Pony Express relay station are an example. When Creighton presents a watch as a token of his gratitude, his host is not sure what to do with it—"what does a fellow who goes to bed at sundown and gets up at sunup want with a watch" he wonders. Another one is given some cash for his troubles and is surprised to see "folding money". The same man amuses Creighton by asking if he can use the telegraph to send his pelts, "All you can send is writing" the engineer explains. Not all settlers are at home with the abstractions of Modernity.

POLITICS

North vs. South. Jack Slade and his cohorts are soldiers of the Confederacy. They claim to be guerillas and don't wear uniforms—most of the time they are only partially clad as they impersonate Sioux warriors. Shaw insinuates that Slade is using the war as a cover for his criminal activities.

The brothers are from Missouri and Shaw's own approach to the Civil War is ambivalent. When Slade tells him to stand by his people, he tersely replies that "when they turn against their own country, they aren't my people anymore". On the other hand, when Slade invites him to rejoin the gang; Shaw says he would do that only on they would go south to enlist in the Confederate Army as real guerillas.

East vs. West. Well educated and urbane Blake personifies the East and hardy pioneers initially find his ways annoying. He gets to be ridiculed for being a tenderfoot. On the other hand, those that mock him aren't always cast in a positive light—e.g. couple of semi-serious jokes about eating dogs and donkeys as well as constant spitting and disregard for baths. The culture of the West is caricatured and hardly idealized. The film's approach is ambiguous—as is the case with the other dichotomies.

Discussion question

Lang said that he liked making Westerns and they were among his most popular films. In his interview with Peter Bogdanovich, he remarked that he was proud of a letter he received from a "club of old timers" (Bogdanovich, 43) which commended him for his film being an accurate description of the West. Lang remarked that he was happy about the compliment but didn't share the sentiment—he thought that these people simply enjoyed to view the West as they imagined or remembered it.

What makes him say this? Any particular scenes or dialogue? Is historical accuracy important in period films? Any examples / counterexamples?

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