HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Return of Frank James 1940

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Lang's First Western. Fritz Lang's first films in the US—his social trilogy—were followed by *The Return of Frank James* (1940). His first Western was received with enthusiasm—the reception for the upcoming *Western Union* and *Rancho Notorious* (more than a decade later) would echo this sentiment. Lang was proud of his work (Bogdanovich, 44) and evidently felt at home working with this uniquely American genre. Indeed, the German émigré was no stranger to the themes of the American West. As a teenager in Austria, he had watched *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show in 1905. Decades later, he conceived of a film that would revolve around this show's tour in Europe—*Scandal in Vienna* (1951)—which was never realized (Gunning, 207). The director held a high regard for the Western genre and thought "it is not only the history of this country—it is what the saga of the Nibelungs is for the European" (Bogdanovich, 40). Like *Die Nibelungen* he directed sixteen years ago, *The Return of Frank James* is a tale of revenge—sought by Jesse James' brother.

A Sequel. Lang once said that he thought "the James boys were the greatest heroes since Robin Hood" (McGilligan, 17-18) and he "used to cry over Jesse's death". His 1940 film was a sequel to the previous year's *Jesse James* directed by Henry King. Henry Fonda was recast in the part of the brother of the eponymous hero—played by Tyrone Powell—who was killed at the end of the original film.

The Real James Brothers. James Brothers' first bank robbery took place in 1969, four years after the end of the American Civil War. A series of sensational heists came to an end with the botched bank robbery in 1876, after which the gang struggled to survive. **Frank James** surrendered a few months after his brother was murdered by Robert Ford in 1882.

The Legend and the Legacy. Henry King's *Jesse James* and Lang's *The Return of Frank James* were not the first appearance of the famous outlaw on the big screen. In 1921, he was portrayed by his own son, Jesse James Jr. in *Jesse James as the Outlaw*. Since then, the story of James Brothers has continued to fascinate popular imagination with films such as, *I shot Jesse James* by Samuel Fuller (1949); Nicholas Ray's *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957); the Bob Hope comedy *Alias Jesse James* (1959); a science-fiction—*Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter* (1966); two films starring war hero-turned-actor Audie Murphy, *Kansas Raiders* (1950) and *A Time for Dying* (1969); and Walter Hill's *The Long Riders* (1980). Contemporary takes on the subject—*Frank and Jesse* (1994), *American Outlaws (2001)* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) starred A-list actors Rob Lowe, Colin Farrell and Brad Pitt.

James Brothers and related figures were also featured in popular television shows such as *Bronco* featuring James Coburn ("Shadow of Jesse James, 1960); *The Twilight Zone* ("Showdown with Rance McGrew", 1962); *Bonanza* ("The Younger Brothers' Younger Brother", 1972); *Brady Bunch* ("Bobby's Hero", 1973); *Little House on the Prairie* ("The Aftermath", 1977); *Around the World in 80 Days* (1989).

Style and Themes. *The Return of Frank James* is Lang's first color film and is shot in Technicolor. Vibrant color palette is accompanied by the director's signature shots of deep shadows and light contrasts. His care for ethnographic detail and interest in Americana is obvious (e.g. repeated use of the stoneware shoulder jug and Frank James' tobacco chewing). The film is rich with thought-provoking observations about representations of race and gender—particularly relevant for today are an African-American character unjustly accused of a crime and a female reporter striving for professional recognition. It tackles interesting questions about American history, popular culture and national identity. In the lengthy and hilarious courtroom scene, American Civil War is brought up in connection to the

James Brothers' past as guerillas fighting for the Confederacy. The brothers emerge as rebels pitched against a privatized police force controlled by the rapacious railroad corporation. With its interesting view of popular culture, *The Return of Frank James* sheds light on how a historic event gets to be regenerated as a legend.

CHARACTERS

Frank James. Following the death of Jesse James, his brother has been keeping a low profile and managing a farm with help from Pinky and the young Clem.
Eleanor Stone. The young reporter gets acquainted with Frank James as she writes a story about the James Brothers. She is the daughter of the owner of the newspaper and successfully resists her father's attempts to keep her away from journalism.
Clem. Clem is Frank James' young sidekick. Frank struggles to keep the teen out of trouble but Clem is too eager to become a gunslinger—ultimately he dies following a shootout with Bob Ford.
"Major" Rufus Cobb. The major—one of several Confederate army veterans in the story—is an old friend of Frank James. He is the editor and publisher of Liberty Weekly Gazette. The character is very loosely based on John Newman **Edwards**.
Bob Ford. Bob Ford is the assassin of Frank's brother Jesse James. Ford is played by John Carradine, who would contribute to two Fritz Lang films in 1941, *Man Hunt* and *Western Union*.
George Runyan. Runyan is an agent of the Pinkerton Detective Agency and is in effect a private investigator working for McCoy's St. Louis Midland Railroad.
McCoy. Railroad baron was behind the assassination of Jesse James and he is the driving force of plots to capture Frank James.
Pinky. Pinky is Frank James' trusted farmhand. Actor Ernest Whitman has more screen time compared to other African-American characters in Lang's other films.
Mose. The page at the hotel carries messages between Frank and Eleanor Stone. Like Jackie Cooper who played Clem, the young African American actor Matthew "Stymie" Beard was another child star of 1930s.

SCENES



Frank James' new life in the Ozarks. A quick flashback introduces a scene from *Jesse James*. Rustic opening credits, unusual for a director invested in the modern city. Just as Jesse is about to fix a crooked picture frame, he is shot from the back by Bob Ford. Newspaper headlines announce the assassination and kick start the story of Jesse's brother Frank—who has quit outlawry to become a farmer. The only two people who know his real identity are the young Clem, who is the son of a deceased cohort and the African-American farmhand Pinky. Despite Clem's calls for revenge, Frank decides to wait for justice to be served—breathtaking scenery of the outdoor scenes of *The Return of Frank James* must have charmed Western fans.





Interesting details underscore Fritz Lang's curiosity about American popular culture and social history: the stoneware shoulder jug appears multiple times, evidently as one of Lang's favorite Americana. Another item of interest: no space is wasted on the preacher's wagon.



Frank in Missouri. He is soon dismayed—Ford Brothers are caught, tried and declared guilty in Missouri but the governor has them released right away with a special pardon. A vengeful Frank urges Clem to stay at the farm and leaves to settle scores with the Fords. After a long horse ride, he arrives to the town of Liberty and secretly visits his old friend "Major" Rufus Cobb—the publisher of the small local newspaper. This former Confederate officer tells Frank that the Ford Brothers had left the town a few hours ago. Frank follows

their trail. Bright outdoor scenes contrast with the director's signature deep shadows in some of the interior scenes.

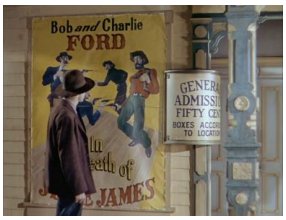


The Railroad. The Ford brothers are snug with a certain Pinkerton detective named George Runyan, who is employed by the St. Louis Midland Railroad. Jameses and the Runyan's boss McCoy have a history—it is revealed that the railroad baron was behind the assassination of Jesse. Consequently, when Frank needs cash to finance his pursuit of the Fords, he picks the railroad company's mail office for robbery. During the holdup, he is surprised when the young Clem shows up to offer his assistance. An accidental gunshot alerts the townsfolk who dash to the office. Frank and his sidekick manage to escape but the clerk is killed as a result Pinkerton detectives and sheriff's deputies firing blindly. Frank is framed as the culprit and McCoy offers a reward for his capture—the lines between public and private get blurred as McCoy meddles in law enforcement and justice.



The Reporter. In order to distract their pursuers, the runaways spread the rumor that Frank James was gunned down near the border and Clem energetically circulates a story about having witnessed his fall. The scheme works well, so much so that he is approached by Eleanor Stone, a young journalist who happens to be the daughter of a major newspaper. Clem is persuasive and the story makes it to the headline of the Denver Star. Meanwhile, Eleanor Stone and Frank are enamored by each other.





The Fords. Frank comes across a theatrical play about his brother's death, which not only stars the Ford Brothers themselves, but portrays them as heroes standing up against thugs. The moment they spot him Fords run away and a horseback chase ensues. Bob's brother falls off a cliff and dies but he manages to get away. An actor plays Frank James as the villain in a phony reenactment of Jesse James' death; in this rewriting of the legend, Jameses threaten a young woman who is luckily rescued by the Ford Brothers.



The Pinkerton Detective. The Pinkerton detective Runyan isn't convinced by the newspaper story about Frank's death and reckons that Eleanor Stone must have unknowingly met the man himself. A quick interview with her confirms his suspicion and he ambushes Frank and Clem. They overpower the detective and get away to continue their pursuit of Bob Ford.



Frank James at Crossroads. Frank learns that Pinky was arrested as his accomplice for the killing of the railroad clerk and would be executed soon. He hesitates between pushing forward with catching Bob Ford and trying to save Pinky. Despite Clem's urgings, he decides to give up the chase and go to Missouri—and turn himself in to be tried for the killing of the railroad clerk—Frank's trusted farmhand Pinky; Mose the page delivers messages between Eleanor Stone and Frank James.



Clay County. By changing horses on the way and commandeering an express train, Frank races to Clay County. He manages to make it there in time to get Pinky off the hook. Eleanor Stone is among the reporter contingent covering the sensational trial, which starts with fanfare—Mose the page delivers messages between Eleanor Stone and Frank James.

The Trial of Frank James. The focus of the court is to settle questions about Frank's involvement in the death of the railroad employee. Not only is he innocent of the charge, little evidence is available about that night, so the spotlight turns to his past and character. The prosecutor highlights his career as an outlaw while "Major" Rufus Cobb—who doubles as his attorney—keeps bringing up his client's participation in the Civil War. Soon, these two aspects of his past—outlawry and soldiery—get conflated. Frank is pictured as a war veteran, a guerilla fighter who deserves to be left alone. Thanks to the presence of former Confederate soldiers among the jury members, witnesses and audience—even the judge turns out to be a senior cavalry officer of the South—Rufus' strategy works very well.



The Return of Frank James is one of Fritz Lang's few films that verges on light comedy. Particularly, the trial scene has hilarious moments and the courtroom audience has a blast—at the expense of the railroad baron McCoy and the prosecutor—who is identified as a "Yankee."

The Climax. Bob Ford walks into the courtroom just before the verdict is delivered. The moment the jury acquits Frank, he runs for his life. Outside the courthouse he exchanges gunfire with Clem—who is fatally wounded. Frank, now a free man, follows Bob Ford to a barn and a shootout leaves Jesse's assassin dead.

THEMES

Society – Culture as Spectacle, American History, Race, Working Women
Justice – Revenge, Justice and Corruption, Privatization and Policing

SOCIETY

Culture as Spectacle. The film is sprinkled with instances of performative story telling. Clem tells Eleanor Stone a totally fabricated (and wildly imaginative) account of his witnessing the heroic death of Frank James. He poses as the latter as well as his adversaries, acting out how the large gang had gunned down his friend. She is gripped and convinced by his narrative. Her report makes it to the front page of *Denver Star* which offers another version of story telling that contributes to the legend.

Mainstream media is not the only source of news; "Major" Rufus' local newspaper offers a perspective that is very favorable of Jameses. Its language is laden with exaggeration and reflects its eccentric editor's character.

Then, there is the representation of the death of Jesse James as a stage play. Ford Brothers themselves star as the heroes who save a young woman from two rowdy bandits (Jameses). The show is evidently the major entertainment offered in the town. The theater is packed and the audience is delighted by the performances.

Finally, the trial itself is played out as a form of entertainment. Particularly the defense attorney for Frank James is keen to keep the audience amused. There is coarse laughter and booing—he even fires Frank's revolver (which is on display as evidence) supposedly by mistake.

American History. Beyond lovingly used ethnographic details, the film does not shy away from bringing up issues about American history. The story takes place a few years after the American Civil War and the lengthy court scene becomes a stage where contested versions of history are pitched against each other. The prosecutor (from the North and on McCoy's payroll) and defense attorney (Confederate veteran) debate about the use of correct terminology—"rebellion", "unpleasantry", "War for the Southern Confederacy". With this strategy, the attorney not only entertains the jury and the audience, he manages to win the sympathy of the judge—who turns out to be one of the leading Confederate commanders of the First Battle of Bull Run (1861).

Race. The cast of *The Return of Frank James* includes more African-American actors compared to other Lang films. The most prominent one is Pinky, the cheerful and good-humored farmhand working at Frank's farm. He is unjustly accused to be Frank's accomplice in the killing of the express office's clerk (and faces the death penalty). Another African-American character is Mose, the page at the hotel (played by a child film star).

Working Women. Eleanor Stone is an ambitious young reporter who wants to have a career in journalism—she is not yet on the payroll in the newspaper published by her father. Several scenes show (and mock) men expressing surprise at her profession—i.e. "a lady newspaperman?" During the courtroom scene, she is the only woman among reporters following the sensational trial.

JUSTICE

Revenge. A recurrent theme is many Fritz Lang films is revenge—notable avengers are Kriemhild in *Die Nibelungen*, Vern in *Rancho Notorious* and Bannion in *The Big Heat*—and *The Return of Frank James* is no exception. The difference this time is that revenge does not prevail and Frank James chooses to abondon his pursuit of his brother's killer in favor of saving Pinky's life by appearing before the court.

Justice and Corruption. Frank is initially faithful in the justice system but he is soon dismayed as Ford Brothers are swiftly released with a special pardon from the governor. It becomes clear that Jesse's assassination was staged by McCoy, the boss of St. Louis Railroad. The corporation's tentacles also control the justice system. A sheriff who appears as a witness is revealed to be formerly employed by the railroad company—as is the trial's public prosecutor. By exposing officials to be on McCoy's payroll, Frank's attorney is able to gain sympathy for his client.

Privatization of Policing. *The Return of Frank James* doesn't romanticize Pinkerton detectives; it is quite the opposite, as "special police" or "railroad police" are presented as operatives of the railroad. Detective George Runyan is an odious character and he almost manages to frame Frank James for murder.

Discussion questions

According to Tom Gunning, *The Return of Frank James* is one of Fritz Lang's "conformist films" (Gunning, 204). How would you explain such a characterization of this film? Do you agree with it?

How would you describe the film's representation of African-American characters? According to Lang's biographer Patrick McGilligan, they are mostly "racist caricatures" (McGilligan, 267). Do you agree?

How would you compare the portrayal of Jesse James in this film with other representations, such as Brad Pitt in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik, 2007)?

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