HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Rancho Notorious 1952

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Marlene Dietrich. Marlene Dietrich made a sensation in 1930's *The Blue Angel* with her dangerously seductive Lola-Lola and elevated herself to international stardom. At the time, Fritz Lang had yet to direct his last two films in Germany, *M* and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*. Jump forward twenty-two years to 1952, when Dietrich and Lang joined forces in Hollywood for *Rancho Notorious.*

The story revolves around a rancher's quest to avenge his fiancée's murder. It leads him to the mysterious Chuck-a-Luck ranch and its legendary proprietor played by Dietrich. An original poster's tagline described her character as "the mistress of the West's strangest hideout... a ranch where anything goes! This woman lives... and rules... in a daring way all her own!"

Cinematography and Set Design. Dietrich had played a similar character in George Marshall's 1939 Western *Destry Rides Again.* The two films also share the same cinematographer Hal Mohr who creates a dazzling color palette in *Rancho Notorious*—Lang's fourth color film. As the protagonist's investigation takes him south towards the border, the colors of the Mexican flag dominate the composition (Wild). The scenes with Dietrich performing are particularly charming and resemble the paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec. In his prolific career cinematographer Mohr had worked epics like *Noah's Ark* (1928) which is reflected in the somewhat generic décor of the outdoor scenes—which Florianne Wild wittily suggests may be "leftovers perhaps from some Pharaonic epic" (Wild, 29). Their lack of realism helps to create a more interesting viewing experience for the spectator—who may at times forget when and where exactly the story is taking place.

Music. In cabaret-like settings, Dietrich sings two songs in the film, "Gypsy Davey" and "Get Away, Young Man". The satirical comedy *Blazing Saddles* (1974) spoofed her character with the song "I am Tired"—also with lines such as "shut up, you Teutonic twat" and "please, you are making a German spectacle of yourself". In *Rancho Notorious*, the ballad "The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck" sang by William Lee accompanies the adventure right from the beginning when it introduces "the old, old story of hate, murder and revenge":

> *Oh, listen!*
> *Listen well…*
> *Listen to the legend of Chuck-A-Luck*
> *Listen to the song of the gambler's wheel*
> *A souvenir from a bygone year, spinning a tale of the old frontier.*

Legends of the Frontier. The film nods to other legends of the Old West. The two leading men's camaraderie—despite some suspicion and jealousy—recalls legendary frontiersman Wyatt Earp's friendship with Doc Holliday. Also, the Chuck-a-Luck Ranch functions in a similar way to the historic outlaw hideout in the Hole-in-the-Wall Pass which was the base of the gang with the same name.

An Unusual Western. The screenplay is based on the Silvia Richards story "Gunsight Whitman". Richards was the scriptwriter of Lang's *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947) which had the leading woman's voice-over shaping the viewers' perception of events. *Rancho Notorious* doesn't make use of voice-over but has a strong central female character. According to Robin Wood, the film is "a radical critique of patriarchal capitalism" (Wood, 85). Lang's film is also considered to be a sur-western (or superwestern) (Hillier, 91)—a term coined by Andre Bazin to refer to those films that would address issues not conventional to the genre. With its morally ambiguous characters as well as themes of revenge and

uneasy bonding, the influence of *Rancho Notorious* can be observed in the Spaghetti Westerns of the 60s.

Lang's previous Western *Western Union* (1941) was an adventure taking place in the backdrop of the extension of the communications infrastructure across America. A year before, he had directed *The Return of Frank James* (1940) in which his brother tracked down Jesse James' killers. James Brothers had made their first successful train robbery in 1873—a year that was marked by an international financial crisis. It also happened to be the year the legend of Chuck-a-Luck came to be.

It began, they say, one summer day
When the sun was blazing down
'Twas back in the early '70s
In a little Wyoming town
So listen to the legend of Chuck-A-Luck
Listen to the wheel of fate
As round and round with a whispering sound it spins
The old, old story of hate, murder and revenge

CHARACTERS

Vern Haskell. Vern is a rancher whose fiancée is murdered eight days before their marriage. He embarks on a revenge mission by himself. Vern is a top notch horse rider and he becomes a skillful gunfighter along the way.
Altar Keane. "Glory girl" and singer of boom town saloons. The day she is fired from the casino seven years ago she wins a lot of money from a few games of Chuck-a-Luck. Evidently this is the capital with which she finances the Chuck-a-Luck Ranch, a safe haven for notorious criminals.
Frenchy Fairmont. Frenchy is a gunslinger infamous for his speed. He is a pleasant and easy-going outlaw who is dedicated to his long-time, on-and-off love Altar. They first met the day she was fired from Baldy's casino when Frenchy made sure that she leaves the town unharmed with her winnings from the chuck-a-luck game.

Baldy Gunder. The owner of the casino in Texas where Altar Keane used to work. Apparently Baldy had gone bankrupt soon after losing his most valuable employee.
Beth Forbes. Vern's fiancée is sexually assaulted and murdered by the bandit Kinch. She was the assayer's daughter and was alone in the store on the day of the attack.

The Outlaws at Chuck-a-Luck Ranch:

Kinch. The culprit Vern is looking for. Kinch had seen Vern just before assaulting Beth but it will take a while for him to recognize his pursuer. He used to be a gold miner. The actor Lloyd Gough was blacklisted so his name doesn't appear in the credits.
Wilson. Amiable and cheerful Wilson is a womanizer and has a prominent scar on his cheek. Vern suspects this to be a woman's scratch marks and for a while mistakenly suspects him to be Beth's murderer. Wilson is played by actor George Reeves, best known as the Superman of the 50s TV series.
Preacher. A former clergyman turned outlaw.
Star. A former sheriff turned outlaw.
Harbin. The oldest man among the outlaws has a limping leg. He appears to be in retirement—the others prefer not to take him along for heists.
Comanche Paul. Altar mentions that Paul is "half Indian—the honest half".
Red. A ginger man who doesn't drink any liqueur.

SYNOPSIS

Beth Gordon is sexually assaulted and murdered by two outlaws at her father's general store. Her fiancé Vern Haskell rushes to the scene and leads a posse to hunt down the killers—eventually he ends up

continuing the pursuit on his own. Meanwhile, one of the bandits kills his crony, who is soon found by Vern and in his final moments blurts that the man he is after would be heading to “Chuck-a-Luck.”

Inquiries introduce a new name, Altar Keane, a woman who used to be infamous in East Coast boomtowns. Further investigation points to Keane’s trail in Nevada, Texas—where she had won a prize at a shady casino in a game of chuck-a-luck and more importantly, was able to keep the money thanks to the protection of French Fairmont, a well known gunslinger. Reportedly, he stood guard by her motel room until morning, when she left for New Mexico to settle for a new life. Vern is told that Frenchy had very recently been apprehended in the town of Gunsight where he had come to buy a bottle of perfume for Altar. Vern goes to the town and gets himself jailed to contact Frenchy; together, they seize an opportunity to escape and Frenchy takes him to Chuck-a-Luck where they are greeted by Altar and an assorted bunch of hardened criminals—among whom are Kinch, the murderer of Vern’s fiancée. Altar happens to wear Beth’s emerald brooch and Vern flirts with Altar in order to learn how she came to possess it.

Frenchy leads the group for a bank heist, when Kinch attempts to get rid of Vern but fails. Following the botched robbery, Kinch and his cohorts ambush Frenchy and Altar at the ranch. Vern comes to the couple’s rescue but Altar gets fatally wounded during the shootout. Vern and Frenchy leave the ranch together—presumably tracked by lawmen.

SCENES

10 August 1873, Wyoming. The small town is quite that day because most people are away visiting a neighbor’s newborns. Beth Gordon is in charge of her father’s general store which doubles as an assayer. Her fiancée Vern Haskell is there to visit her and present her his gift of an emerald brooch. Vern is a cattleman and they talk a little about their future plans—eight days to wedding and eight years to owning the ranch.

A Ghastly Crime. Vern has to leave to take care of the herd and he waves Beth goodbye. He rides away without noticing the two strangers passing through the town. One of the men enters the assayer with the intention of robbing it and forces Beth to hand him all the valuables. His focus—indicated by his lustful gaze—quickly shifts from contents of the safe to her. From outside the store her scream is heard. Moments later the man runs out and hastily rides away with his crony.

The Lone Rider Investigates. Townsfolk soon gather at the store and Vern comes galloping his horse. He is told that Beth was raped before she was murdered. The brooch was snatched from her hand which is now convulsed—the bloody fingertips reflecting her agony and fierce resistance. A posse lead by Vern goes after the killer. Once the group reaches a stream—“the other side is Sioux country”—all the members of the posse come up with excuses to return. Vern continues the pursuit alone.

“Where and What is Chuck-a-Luck?” In the meantime, the two bandits quarrel and Kinch—that is the name of Beth’s killer—shoots his partner and resumes his flight. Vern soon finds the dying man who tells him that Kinch’s destination would be “Chuck-a-Luck”. After fruitless inquiries about this clue at the army headquarters and Wells Fargo offices, Vern finally stops by a barber shop. There, a patron admonishes him for asking about Chuck-a-Lot.

Who is Altar Keane? The man also blurts a name—Altar Keane—before drawing his gun. In the vicious brawl that ensues, Vern kills him. He turns out to be a wanted criminal and the local sheriff commends Vern. The new clue evokes memories in a sheriff’s deputy. He tells an anecdote about Altar Keane from many years ago, when he used to work as an ore miner—the legend of Altar Keane becomes one with the film’s star.



Flashback #1: A Boomtown Saloon, Altar Keane Introduced. The narrator fondly reminisces about an evening of rowdy fun and wild partying at an east coast saloon. The flashback shows a game with b-girls riding the patrons. “It was a horse race, only I was one of the horses and Altar was my jockey” he recounts with joy. He directs Vern to a friend of Altar with whom she had moved to the West to work as a singer.



Flashback #2: Altar Rides High in Virginia City. Vern comes to Nevada and finds Altar’s friend working as a pianist at a saloon. She tells him that the exuberant Altar was at the peak of her popularity in Virginia City—her carriage pulled by two white horses was a spectacular sight in the town. The woman adds that Altar had eventually left Nevada and moved to Texas. His next trip takes Vern to Tascosa. Long after her glory days, Altar is working here as a hostess.



Flashback #3: A Tascosa Casino, Seven Years Ago. A group of older men relaxing on a porch narrate a story about Altar. Seven years ago she was working at Baldy Gunder’s casino—a far cry from the high-end venues she used to perform in Nevada. The story goes that Baldy had been annoyed with her temper for some time. One day when Altar showed her contempt for groping drunks, he finally fired her. On her way out, Altar played a final game of chuck-a-luck (a dice game which is played with a vertically placed roulette wheel in *Rancho Notorious*). The wheel spun and Altar won twice—not thanks to her luck but because the wheel was rigged. The croupier decided who won by controlling a pedal. He was not yet aware that Altar was fired and assumed she was shilling for the casino.

How Altar Met Frenchy Fairmont. Once Baldy spotted what was going on, he intervened and challenged Altar to a last game. She accepted it even though her loss was now a certainty. At this moment one of the patrons pushed aside the croupier and positioned himself to control the pedal. This was French Fairmont, a well known gunslinger who had a reputation to be “faster on the draw than a Mexican jackrabbit”.

Altar and her Protector. Frenchy saw to it that Altar won once again and Baldy couldn’t do anything about it. Altar exited with her winnings, escorted by Frenchy. He guarded her room until morning when she left for New Mexico to settle for a new life. The narrator concludes that the two later got together near the border.

Present time—Fresh News about Frenchy. It sounds like a happy ending to the story if it was not for a very recent piece of news—about Frenchy being arrested in New Mexico. He was reportedly apprehended as he came to the town of Gunsight to buy a bottle of perfume for Altar. Vern now follows Frenchy’s trail in order to get closer to Altar Keane.

Election Day in an Angry Town. When Vern arrives to the town, it happens to be the Election Day. The Law and Order Party is expected to put an end to the corruption of the Citizens Party. Votes are being counted and sheriff’s deputies are on alert for a last ditch attempt of the (apparently) much despised Citizens Party officials—including the incumbent sheriff.

Vern Meets Frenchy in the Jail. Vern creates a scene at the local bar and gets himself placed in custody. He is locked up in Frenchy’s cell and the two get along fine. In the next cell are three corrupt local politicians. These men are restless as the victory of the Law and Order Party would most likely entail their lynching.

Escape from Jail. In order to escape, the politicians conspire with the crooked sheriff to have a skeleton key delivered to their cell. The key mistakenly ends up in Vern’s hands who uses it to free Frenchy and himself. They break out and after a long ride in the open country, Frenchy invites Vern to a secluded ranch. They head to Chuck-a-Luck.

A Notorious Ranch. Altar is rejoiced at Frenchy's arrival and she welcomes Vern as her lover's trusted confederate. She is the boss and manager of a horse range which serves as a hideout for criminals. Robbers of all sorts can stay there as long as they pay a commission from their lootings to Altar. "She would shut the door on a cattle baron, if she had fancy for a cowpuncher" according to the legend of Altar Keane.)





Laughter bonds the outlaws together and Altar is one of the boys. A notable secondary character is Preacher—a bandit who has the appearance of a clergyman. "Preacher reads over anybody he kills" Altar remarks. He is supposedly a former priest who occasionally utters pseudo-religious lines for laughs—e.g. "be joyful for you shall find haven here" (referring to the hideout) and "praying for Mammon has always been my infirmity" (indicating his willingness to participate in the bank heist). Another secondary character who enjoys substantial screen time is one of the outlaws, Paul the half-breed Native American. Altar introduces him to be "half Indian—the honest half". This character is another token of the film's representation of race. He is as good or bad as the other outlaws at the ranch, essentially equal to them.

The Culprit. She introduces Vern to the current residents, an assorted bunch of hardened criminals. They enjoy merry times at the hideout—which sometimes looks like a boys' dormitory).

Merrry times—Rancho Notorious was released in 1952 and its story takes place in 1873. Some of the events and issues of 1870s were "The Panic of 1873", dropping of the silver standard, an international financial crisis. The decade also corresponded to the early part of the period of optimism and advancement known as the Belle Époque.



Kinch—the murderer of Beth—is among the group, but it would take a while for Vern to identify him. Likewise, Kinch can't yet recognize the rancher even though he had seen Vern mount his horse on the day of the gruesome crime.

A Happy Commune. Altar maintains security by sentinels placed at the approaches to the camp and keeps it orderly with a full-time staff of Mexicans. She is tough in business matters but takes care to entertain her guests by singing during communal meals. Vern is unmoved by the gaiety—his fiancée's emerald brooch pinned to Altar's dress grabs his attention.



Danger! While the gang is enjoying drinks and music, a lookout dashes in, alerting the outlaws of an approaching posse. Altar instructs the outlaws to go to the ridge camp to hide. The posse arrives, inquiring about some of the residents of the ranch. A sheriff's deputy spots the fresh tracks of the horses that just left the ranch. Altar finds herself in a difficult situation and it is at this moment that Vern comes to her rescue, providing the lawmen with a reasonable explanation about the missing horses.

A Love Triangle. With the posse riding away and danger averted, Vern flirts with Altar in order to learn how she came to posses the emerald brooch. She can't see through his masquerade and is enamored with the younger man's advances. They act discreetly in Frenchy's presence but the perceptive gunslinger gets jealous nonetheless. During her birthday dinner, Altar tells Frenchy—"don't ask how old I'll be tomorrow and I won't ask you." Age is a big deal at the hideout.



Kinch recognizes Vern. Frenchy leads the group for a bank heist. Meanwhile, Kinch finally recognizes his pursuer. He figures out that Vern is after him for revenge and plans to use the robbery as an opportunity to get rid of him.

The Bank Robbery Turns Sour. During the heist, Kinch shoots at him from a concealed position but misses. Shooting alerts the townsfolk who take up arms and gather to defend the bank. Some of the bandits are shot and the lightly wounded Frenchy falls apart from the bunch. Following the botched robbery, the remaining robbers get together to recuperate. Vern volunteers to go to Chuck-a-Lot to deliver Altar's cut from the heist.

Vern Identifies Beth's Murderer. At the ranch, Vern pushes one more time to learn where the brooch came from. Altar finally reveals that it was part of the loot brought by Kinch. As soon as Vern gets the information he needs, he drops all pretense of courtship. He insults and accuses Altar for her role in the criminal activities. As he heads out to find Kinch, the dismayed and heartbroken Altar packs up to leave the ranch for good.

Kinch Evades Capture and Prepares to Strike Back. Vern challenges Kinch to a duel at the bar but he declines. The local sheriff comes to the scene and arrests him for the August 10th murder of Beth Forbes. A bit later, Kinch's associates from the ranch have their friend released at gunpoint. They decide to go after Altar for giving information to Vern.

Showdown at Chuck-a-Luck. Frenchy finally arrives at the ranch to find Altar ready to leave. As he tries to have her change her mind, Kinch and his four cohorts sneak upon them and corner Frenchy. They demand that he let them have Altar but he defies them. Just when things look hopeless for Altar and Frenchy, Vern comes to their aid and shifts the balance. In the abrupt exchange of fire, Kinch and a couple of his partners get shot. Altar is mortally wounded as she shields Frenchy from a bullet.



The Two Ride into the Sunset. Vern and Frenchy leave the ranch together—presumably tracked by lawmen. According to "The Ballad of Chuck-a-Luck" that can be overheard, "they died that day, so the legends say… with empty guns they fought and so ends the tale of hate, murder and revenge".

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Vern Haskell – Disagreeable (Vindictive, Hateful, Manipulative)

Altar Keane – Open (Legendary, Authoritative, Strong, Independent, Impulsive and Daring, Pragmatic, Aging)

Frenchy Fairmont – Emotional (Romantic)

VERN HASKELL

To get to his fiancée's killer only known to him by his association with "Chuck-a-Lot", Vern follows a trail that leads him to befriend the famous gunslinger Frenchy Fairmont. Vern woos Altar Keane and identifies one of the residents of her ranch as the man he was after.

Illustrative moments

Vindictive. The ballad "The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck" introduces the film as a "story of hate, murder and revenge". Revenge is the driving force of the protagonist. In fact, we barely see any other dimensions of his character. The film—almost—ends with him exacting his revenge and riding into the sunset with Frenchy. The very last moments of the film when the credits roll mention that Vern and Frenchy were both killed that very day. Revenge proves to be self-destructive.

Hateful. "He sure does gander—he looks straight through a man" observes one of the bandits when Vern arrives to Chuck-a-Luck. Vern suspects everyone (including Frenchy) and is full of contempt.

Manipulative. All of Vern's interactions with Altar are marked by his insincerity. He is playful when he talks with her and pretends to admire her—but all he cares is getting more information about the identity of the murderer. In three scenes he steers the conversation to the emerald brooch and asks her how she got it. Once he gets the answer, he blatantly scolds her for her indirect involvement in crime.

ALTAR KEANE

Following an eventful career as a showgirl in entertainment venues in Nevada and Texas, Altar settles down in a New Mexico ranch which she names "Chuck-a-Luck"—financed by her winnings from her last dice game. The ranch becomes a safe haven for criminals seeking respite from pursuing lawmen.

Illustrative moments

Legendary. Anecdotes are abound about the legend of Altar Keane—Once she rode through a hotel on a white horse for her appointment with the mayor, all the way to the dining room; Kansas Pacific Railroad had a parlor car named after her; three men once dueled for her and they all died… and so the list goes on.

Authoritative. Considering that Altar's guests are typically a motley of wanted crooks, Altar maintains order at the ranch without carrying or using a gun unlike everyone else around her. She is strong-willed and tough when necessary. The criminals may not always like her ways but she is treated respectfully.

Strong. Altar may count on Frenchy Fairmont's support when he is around and she has a full time staff of four locals but she makes it clear that she is solely in charge. She keeps her own accounting books and has an interest in financial speculation.

Independent.

> *How could she leave her baby?*
> *How could she leave her bed and board*
> *And elope with Gypsy Davey?*
> *Last night she slept in a goose-feather bed*
> *At home with her lord and her baby*
> *Tonight she sleeps...*

At the Tascosa casino scene, Altar sings the song "Gypsy Davey". It underscores her independent nature. "She would shut the door on a cattle baron, if she had fancy for a cowpuncher" her friend from Altar's "glory-girl" days recounts. Altar is independent in her business affairs and the same goes for her personal life.

Impulsive and Daring. After Baldy fires Altar from the casino, she gambles and wins thanks to the rigged roulette wheel. Baldy is frustrated at the sight and steps forward to take away her money. He challenges Altar to a new game. This time it is clear that he would see to it that she loses. Altar is not one to back away and impulsively accepts the challenge—the rest is legend.

Pragmatic. Altar has fine crisis management skills and can show flexibility when necessary. As the residents of Chuck-a-Luck peacefully lounge, she plays cards with some of the bandits. It turns out that one of the men was cheating her. Someone spots this and calls him out. Frenchy moves to back up Altar and it looks likely that guns would come into play. Altar dilutes the crisis by saying that she had already stolen the man's watch as retribution. For a moment, a violent end to the evening appears unavoidable but thanks to her quick wits it continues with music and laughter.

Aging. "Don't ask how old I'll be tomorrow or I'll ask you" Altar says jokingly to Frenchy. She brings up the issue of aging a couple of times. Frenchy is a part of her past. He reminds her that "time holds us together; and time is stronger than a rope". Vern on the other hand represents youth—which can be a bit perplexing since the actor playing Vern (Arthur Kennedy) is actually older than Mel Ferrer who plays Frenchy. "Go away and come back ten years ago" Altar tells him. Being the free spirit she is, Altar flirts with him despite her attachment to Frenchy. The issue recalls—in reverse—the age-gap relationships between the middle aged men and younger women of Lang's *Scarlet Street* and *The Woman in the Window*.

FRENCHY FAIRMONT

"The fastest draw in the West" is quite the opposite of Vern, he is basically a nice guy, pleasant and courteous. French had become an outlaw after he was swindled out of his homestead. He was well aware of the legend of Altar Keane before they met.

Illustrative moment

Romantic. "I met only one man in my life who didn't want something behind this pretty talk" Altar tells Vern, referring to Frenchy. The night they met, Frenchy had offered her protection when it was certain that her casino winnings would make Altar a target. She had accepted and invited him into her cabin, assuming that Frenchy was after sexual favors. His refusal was a big surprise for Altar. Frenchy had waited outside until morning to see to it that she left the town safely with the first coach. "I am sentimental" is Frenchy's self-description. Altar would confirm that. Frenchy gets caught as he comes to Gunsight to buy a bottle of perfume for Altar. Not only does he risk his life once for the gift, he makes sure to stop and grab the bottle after he and Vern escape from jail.

THEMES

Society – (Gender and Femininity, Corruption, Race, Religion)
Justice – ([Raw] Justice)

SOCIETY

Gender and Femininity. Marlene Dietrich was known to play with codes of masculinity long before *Rancho Notorious*. She had appeared in *Morocco* (1930) wearing a tuxedo and top hat kissing another woman. Here, she alternates between fancy gowns and blue jeans. Altar is assertive in her interactions but her femininity is never compromised.

Another off-the-wall Western, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) has a tight—all male—crew bind closer together by their loud and hearty laughter. A comparable moment of bonding in *Rancho Notorious* has Altar Keane together with almost a dozen seasoned criminals. She is the center of attention but not just a spectacle for the gaze of men. They look at her with admiration and respect—unlike the lustful patrons of Yoshiwara Club in *Metropolis* or the clerks ogling their employer's mistress *Scarlet Street*. Above all, she is part of them.

Corruption. Frenchy explains that he originally became an outlaw because of an injustice. "A bullet I put in a rancher, another man who had his own sheriff and cheated me out of a homestead". Corrupt officials are not a rarity in Lang's films and *Rancho Notorious* is no exception. When Vern arrives in Gunsight to hook up with him, Frenchy is in jail and an election is in progress. Vern gets himself detained to befriend Frenchy and leads their escape. The politicians in custody attempt to do the same and they are aided by the town's incumbent sheriff. "You could bribe them with a rusty nail" Frenchy remarks about the politicians, and they themselves bribe the sheriff to let them escape.

Race. The posse which sets out to catch Beth's killer at the beginning halts at some demarcated zone referred to as the "Sioux Country". Vern continues by himself and the threat never materializes. There is one Native American character in Chuck-a-Luck, working alongside the three Mexicans as Altar's "hands"

at the ranch. While these may be minor parts, the characters are portrayed positively. Another secondary character who gets more screen time is one of the outlaws, Paul the half-breed Native American. Altar introduces him to be “half Indian—the honest half”. This character is another token of the film’s representation of race. He is as good or bad as the other outlaws at the ranch, essentially equal to them.

Religion. This Western does not have a character who represents religious authority but there is Preacher—a bandit who has the appearance of a clergyman. “Preacher reads over anybody he kills” Altar remarks. He is supposedly a former priest who occasionally utters pseudo-religious lines for laughs—e.g. "be joyful for you shall find haven here" (referring to the hideout) and “praying for Mammon has always been my infirmity” (indicating his willingness to participate in the bank heist).

JUSTICE

(Raw) Justice. The reason the politicians try so hard to flee is the election that is being wrapped up outside the jail. The votes are counted and the result is a massive victory for the Law and Order Party which beats Citizens’ Party by 1540 to 119. This would entail that the crooked sheriff would be replaced. Also, the triumphant party’s followers are likely to lynch the politicians in the jail. There seems to be hardly anything that can prevent them—“I’ll go and make a speech to them” says the prospective sheriff, not very assuringly. Lynching is a recurrent theme in Lang, most prominent in his *Fury* (1936) as well as *Hangmen Also Die, Metropolis* and *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* which have scenes with out-of-control mobs.

Discussion questions

Robin Wood states that *Rancho Notorious* is “one of the most Brechtian films ever made” (Wood, 88) (i.e. “a Brechtian parable about patriarchal capitalist culture”[Wood, 85]). In an interesting close reading of the film, Walter Metz offers an interesting analysis of the film as a Brechtian allegory—of the Holocaust (Metz). Would you agree with such that reading? What may be examples of other allegories that *Rancho Notorious* stands for?

Rancho Notorious was released in 1952 and its story takes place in 1873. What may be the significance of these years? Some of the events and issues of 1870s were “The Panic of 1873”, dropping of the silver standard, an international financial crisis. The decade also corresponded to the early part of the period of optimism and advancement known as the Belle Époque. How does the film represent this particular period of the 19th Century?

Can you point out to specific examples and ways in which *Rancho Notorious* could have inspired the so-called revisionist Westerns or the Spaghetti Westerns?

Is Altar Keane a typical female film character of the era? In what way is she different? How would you compare her with the heroines of 1950s films by Lang and other directors?

How would Rancho Notorious’ representation of race compare to other Westerns of the period?

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