

THE USES OF THE PASTORAL IN CONTEMPORARY TRANSNATIONAL POST-WESTERN

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Abstract

The article discusses three contemporary films produced by different national cinematographies: *The Shepherd* (dir. Jonathan Cenxual Burley, 2016, Spain), *Ardor* (dir. Pablo Fendrik, 2014, US-Argentina-Mexico-Brazil), and *A Man of Integrity* (dir. Mohammad Rasoulof, 2017, Iran) with respect to their ways of combining elements of the Western and the pastoral for the purpose of problematizing some of the major social challenges of today in their respective contexts. Given the Western genre's focus on man's relationship toward land, the pastoral constitutes an important element of its imaginary. The films under discussion attest to this by featuring pastoral characters who get involved in conflicts enacted in accordance with narrative patterns of the Western. *The Shepherd* portrays a shepherd who refuses to sell his land for development and becomes the target of hostile actions instigated by the people whose interests are endangered. *Ardor*, set in Amazonia, also addresses the problem of the exploitative use of land and natural resources, featuring the conflict between a tobacco farmer and a gang of deforesters. It primarily comments on destructive economic processes. *A Man of Integrity* foregrounds a somewhat different conflict, but similarly combines the Western and the pastoral. The protagonist, a farmer who breeds goldfish, is confronted with a mysterious company that wants to take over his land. The key problem addressed in the film is the corruption of the system, which remains blind to stark injustice.

Keywords: the Western, film genre, transnational cinema, land, farming, corporatization.

This article discusses three contemporary films, portraying different national realities—*The Shepherd* (dir. Jonathan Cenxual Burley, 2016, Spain), *The Ardor* (dir. Pablo Fendrik, 2014, Argentina), and *A Man of Integrity* (dir. Mohammad Rasoulof, 2017, Iran)—with respect to their ways of combining elements of the Western and the pastoral for the purpose of problematizing some of the major social challenges of today in their respective contexts. Their plots directly echo the Western by focusing on individuals who live according to a clearly defined ethos and who—because of their firm convictions—do not yield in the face of powerful forces that threaten their very way of life and the values on which it has been founded. As Lee Clark Mitchell observes, “the Western's hold on our imagination has less to do with spurs and six-guns than with its embrace of family conflicts, its devotion to questions of law and justice, its focus on the possibly redeeming uses of violence [...]. If the initial form the genre took now seems understandably old-fashioned, the issues it embraced endure, as alive as ever.”¹ The critic

¹ Lee Clark Mitchell, *Hidden in Plain View: Family, the Western and the Syntax of Genre in A History of Violence, Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 54, no. 1, Winter 2018, p. 88.

adds that, “so strong are [...] [the] generic markers of character and plot that we increasingly have come to read some films *as* Westerns despite the absence of cowboys and horses, period costumes, and familiar historical crises between ranchers and farmers—in short, despite nothing else about the film suggesting it *is* a Western.”² Mitchell writes elsewhere that, “while the imperatives of the Western have altered over a century, they are still recognizably the same, or at least more or less similar in various configurations.” *The Shepherd, The Ardor, and A Man of Integrity* feature protagonists who are farmers confronted with a threat embodied by an expansive business organization, a contemporary counterpart of cattle barons in classical Westerns. The conflict in all three films concerns the land—belonging to the farmer and targeted by the organization because of its plan of expansion. The farmer’s attachment to his land prevents the realization of such plans. As Will Wright points out in his seminal structural analysis of the Western genre, “In the classical Western, the villains represent unbridled market self-interest. [...] On the other hand, the people of society represent social values—family, love, morality—and their code of honesty and fair play, even against evil, is derived from a basic respect and concern for others.”³ This fundamental opposition is reflected in all three films under discussion, of course reinterpreted through the lens of contemporary regional specificity.

The Western film has a long and complex history, and various labels have been used to talk about its formal and historical variants. Uses of the Western in different national cinematographies on a global scale, apart from attesting to the continuing appeal of the genre, expand the spectrum of its meanings. If *The Shepherd, The Ardor, and A Man of Integrity* were to be placed on the map of historical and geographical uses of the Western, perhaps the most relevant shared label would be that of transnational post-Westerns⁴, a term that requires some elucidation. Film scholars have been talking about post-Westerns for several decades, often in reference to phenomena that illustrate very different mutations of the genre. One of the first critics to use this term was Philip French, who saw post-Westerns as an emanation of a specific cultural climate. According to Susan Kollin’s summary of French, “Influenced by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the new crop of movies tended to locate in the genre’s ‘all-American’ figures ‘some less attractive traits: patriotism masking xenophobia, ignorance masquerading as intuitive commonsense, mindless aggression concealed beneath virility, arrogance disguised as style.’”⁵ It seems that French’s understanding of the post-Western corresponds with the category of the revisionist Western, which is a staple in Western scholarship. In his discussion of the eclipse of the film Western in the United States in the 1970s, Richard Slotkin identifies a number of post-Western genres, which relocated Westerns tropes with their inherent meanings into new settings; his examples include science fiction, urban crime dramas, and horror films.⁶ In his book *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West*, Neil Campbell describes the films he analyzes as “texts that participate in the formal, thematic, and tropic discourses of the classic, established Western, while not belonging entirely within its borders. Post-Westerns are generically impure, transgressive, perhaps ‘abject’ in the sense defined by Julia Kristeva.”⁷ Campbell’s definition of the post-Western, even if it sounds

² *Ibidem*, p. 85, original italics.

³ Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1977, p. 140-141.

⁴ Cf. Jesús Ángel González, *Transnational Post-Westerns in Irish Cinema*, *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, n.p., <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4112x2v4>, accessed 6 July 2024.

⁵ Susan Kollin, *Postwestern Studies, Dead or Alive*, in *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space* (ed. Susan Kollin), Lincoln and London, 2007, p. xii.

⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, New York, 1993, p. 633–643.

⁷ Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West*, Lincoln and London, 2013, p. 24.

somewhat vague, is the most relevant for the present discussion because it encourages a search for Westerns beyond the genre's traditional contexts and opens a space for global conversations about its circulation and significance.

The term “transnational” also calls for a word of comment. The increasing amount of scholarship on transnational cinemas in recent years attests to the relevance of this concept in the era of globalization, which does not mean that its definition—and especially its application—should be taken for granted. Nataša Đurovičová writes that “the intermediate and open term ‘transnational’ acknowledges the persistent agency of the state,” and concomitantly “implies relations of unevenness and mobility”; “It is this relative openness to modalities and geopolitical forms, social relations and especially the variant *scale* on which relations in film history have occurred that gives this key term its dynamic force and its utility as a frame for hypotheses about emergent forms.”⁸ Mette Hjort notices one fundamental problem when it comes to “the discourse of cinematic transnationalism”: “a tendency to use the term ‘transnational’ as a largely self-evident qualifier requiring only minimal conceptual clarification”⁹. She therefore proposes that the term “transnational” be used as “a scalar concept allowing for a recognition of strong and weak forms of transnationality”: “On this model a given cinematic case would qualify as strongly transnational, rather than only weakly so, if it could be shown to involve a number of specific transnational elements related to levels of production, distribution, reception, and the cinematic works themselves.”¹⁰ Using Hjort’s terminology, it can be said that *The Shepherd*, *The Ardor*, and *A Man of Integrity* are all examples of “weak transnationality,” in contradistinction to contemporary film Westerns that contain defining transnational features, to mention *The Claim* (dir. Michael Winterbottom, 2000), an adaptation of Thomas Hardy’s novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* set in mid-nineteenth-century California, or *Dust* (dir. Milcho Manchevski, 2001), portraying two brothers from the American West who settle their conflict in early-twentieth-century Macedonia and get involved in the Macedonian fight for independence. The three films under discussion actually reveal their transnational aspects when seen as a common configuration, because using similar generic tropes they shed light on context-specific challenges, which prove surprisingly similar and jointly concern, for example, the crisis of social justice in the contemporary reality.

The central conflicts presented in *The Shepherd*, *The Ardor*, and *A Man of Integrity*, while echoing familiar Western scenarios, are additionally framed through references to the pastoral. Terry Gifford identifies three main uses of the pastoral: a literary tradition “deriving from certain early Greek and Roman poems about life in the country, and about the life of the shepherd in particular,” a thematic category referring to “any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban,” and a pejorative term “implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country.”¹¹ The films discussed here essentially exemplify the second use of the pastoral, but their portrayals of the protagonists also draw from traditional pastoral imaginings. Central to those imaginings is the presence of the shepherd, according to Leo Marx’s description, a “liminal figure,” who stands for “a complex, hierarchical urban society,” when seen “against the background of the wilderness,” and embodies “the virtues of a simple, un-worldly life, disengaged from civilization and lived [...] “close to nature,” when seen “against the

⁸ Nataša Đurovičová, Preface, in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (ed. Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman), New York and London, 2010, p. x, original italics.

⁹ Mette Hjort, *On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism*, in *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Loc. cit.

¹¹ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral, London and New York*, p. 1–2.

background of the settled community with its ordered, sophisticated ways and its power”¹². The shepherd thus fulfills a mediating function that consists in “resolving the root tension between civilization and nature by living in the borderland between them.”¹³ Symptomatically, while evoking this traditional opposition, *The Shepherd*, *The Ardor*, and *A Man of Integrity* deny the shepherd’s role as a mediator because there is no equilibrium: society or civilization represents an invasive force that knows no limits. The life of present-day shepherds, in diverse cultural settings, is characterized by withdrawal, not mediation. The choice of a pastoral way of life signifies an anarchic mindset and readiness to face the consequences that such personal anarchy entails. Therefore the symbolic shepherds portrayed in the three films become fighters, even if only because they have been forced to. The combination of the pastoral and the Western enhances such a redefinition of the shepherd’s role and establishes a perspective on some of the greatest perils of the contemporary world.

The Shepherd: The Last Stand

The Shepherd introduces Anselmo Garcia (Miguel Martín), the eponymous shepherd who owns a herd of sheep, an old house, and a piece of land in the countryside near the Spanish city of Salamanca. One day, he receives a visit from two men representing a development company, which is planning to build a huge housing estate in the area and has been negotiating the purchase of land with Anselmo’s neighbors. The finalization of these transactions depends on Anselmo’s agreement to sell his land because it is located in the middle of the area selected for development. Anselmo rejects the offer and what follows is an escalation of the conflict between the shepherd and those of his neighbors who are most determined to complete the deal with the investors. Two men in particular try their hardest to convince Anselmo that he should sell his land: Paco (Juan Luis Sara) and Julián (Alfonso Mendiguchía). They are both very frustrated, but for different reasons: the former wants to improve the material status of his family, and the latter, an owner of a slaughterhouse, wants to save his business, which is threatened by his huge debts. Julián invites Anselmo to the slaughterhouse, walks him around, and offers him a well-paid job, a promise of a comfortable retirement. This is to no avail, therefore Julián completely loses his patience and resorts to violence: at night he and Paco approach Anselmo’s place in a car, and Paco fatally stabs the shepherd’s dog. The following night—the deadline named by Julián’s creditors by which he must settle the matter with Anselmo—Julián and Paco visit the farm again, although they do not quite know what they are going to do. Anselmo comes out holding his old rifle, and a bloody finale follows.

Apart from foregrounding a conflict that brings to mind fights between small-scale farmers and powerful landowners in classic Westerns, *The Shepherd* more specifically alludes to the genre by employing—and inverting—the motif of the last stand. Richard Slotkin considers this motif to be an essential element of the myth of the frontier and points to the defeat of General George Armstrong Custer’s forces in the battle of Little Big Horn as a pivotal moment in the process of its mythologization. Politicians and journalists immediately began to use the last stand as a metaphor to talk about a range of problems that the United States faced at the time, and “[t]he metaphor has persisted down to our own time” (14)¹⁴. A defining narrative

¹² Leo Marx, *Pastoralism in America*, in *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen), Cambridge, p. 43.

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*, Norman, 1998, p. 14.

of the myth of the last stand is that of a savage war: “heroic representatives of American civilization sacrifice themselves to delay the advance of a savage enemy.”¹⁵ In such a scenario, the heroes often undergo “a regression to the primitive” to ultimately reassert “American cultural values”¹⁶ which they defend. The opposition between savagery and civilization around which last stand narratives revolve is also central to the handling of the Western in *The Shepherd*. In essence, the film inverts this fundamental dichotomy by portraying a corporate organization, with its obsession with gain, as an emanation of a present-day moral wilderness. Big-scale business is tantamount to exploitation, enforcement, and corruption, and the social reality based on such foundations shapes human expectations that defy an elementary sense of proportion. Corporate organizations embody an invasive force that aims to root out all existential alternatives that do not conform to its rules.

The values defended by Anselmo are precisely those associated with pastoral life, hence a very direct evocation of pastoral tropes in *The Shepherd*. Several times in the course of the film Anselmo is meaningfully shown amidst the landscape by means of long shots, which brings to mind the ways of depicting natural scenery in Westerns. The film opens with a ten minute’s long sequence registering the hero’s ordinary day from dawn till dusk. Having performed his morning routines at home, he lets his sheep out of the pen, chases them around the pasture, enjoying the sunlight. The outdoor scenes are accompanied by serene music, which helps create their atmosphere. The very length of this sequence emphasizes Anselmo’s self-sufficiency. Apart from the opening scene, there are two shorter scenes later in the film that portray Anselmo with his sheep, symbolically illustrating the crisis that he has to face. The second such scene takes place after Anselmo’s conversation with Paco and Julián in a local bar when it becomes clear that they will continue to pressure him to sell his land, and this time in most of the shots we see city buildings in the background, and in one Anselmo is chasing his sheep along a road. The composition of these shots lacks the symmetry that characterizes the method of framing in the opening sequence, the montage is dynamic and yields an effect opposite to the contemplative aura at the beginning, the effect augmented by the use of a different kind of music, somber and disquieting. What this scene highlights is the shrinking of Anselmo’s existential space. The closeness of the urban environment signifies an inevitable encroachment of the world that the hero has so far resisted or simply ignored. The third scene showing Anselmo and his sheep follows his meeting with Julián during which he rejects his job offer and gives him to understand that he will defend his land at all costs despite the latter man’s threats that “[the] constructions guys [...] will come and kick [him] out.” We see again the shepherd and his animals amidst a boundless field, the sun shining brightly, and serene music returns. The scene encapsulates the only way of life that the hero knows and accepts and also his determination to defend it.

The threat that the outside world poses for Anselmo’s way of life is perhaps best captured in a series of short still shots that show the interior of Julián’s slaughterhouse, emphasizing the frightening sterility of various elements of the equipment for processing dead animals. Before inviting Anselmo to his office, Julián walks him around the facility, including the cold room filled with sides of pork, and he says with pride, “We slaughter two thousand pigs every day.” The slaughterhouse functions within the system of mass production and mass consumption of goods, and of large-scale financial operations, the system that simply must expand and destroy everything that hinders its progress. The development company operates according to the same logic: when its representatives visit Anselmo, they talk about an

¹⁵ Id., *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 318.

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

investment plan that will transform a huge area into a completely different place. Business activities, which are based on brutal rules and often entail forms of corruption, are presented to the general public as beneficial from a communal perspective, mainly because they create jobs—the men from the development company and Julián use this argument in their respective conversations with Anselmo, which is a way of implying that he will be to blame if his neighbors are unable to improve their conditions of living as a consequence of the failure of the investment plan. They equate social responsibility with acquiescence to the expansion of corporate structures. What facilitates this process of expansion is that average people easily embrace norms and values which it promotes, especially that these norms and values are associated with comfortable life. This is verbalized by a librarian who has befriended Anselmo: “People want things, luxuries, things to fill their lives with.” She seems to understand such people better than she does the shepherd who lives alone amidst the fields, even if she sympathizes with him. The impact of corporate business on social consciousness and perception on a local level is reflected in a somewhat exaggerated, one-dimensional portrayal of Paco, a deeply frustrated man, overwhelmed by the challenges of family life and longing for a modicum of peace that only money can guarantee.

A key paradox of *The Shepherd*, in the light of its employment of the motif of the last stand, is that Anselmo does not defend anybody else’s values but his own. He is an odd man out, and the first scene that shows him in a social interaction clearly suggests this. The scene in question is his visit to a bar after a day’s work, and his conversation with the bar owner concerns the fact that Anselmo does not own a TV set. The bar owner says that he should buy himself one for entertainment, to which the shepherd replies that he is “entertained enough.” The bar owner ends the conversation by saying jokingly: “Shit, man, you live in the stone age.” Several other scenes that immediately follow portray Anselmo in other social situations—in a library and a veterinary clinic—and they establish his status as a member of the community. However, his relations with the people who treat him in a friendly way are superficial, and they have to do with good manners rather than with actual care. It appears that most people around him view him as something of a curiosity, and this means that perhaps they would never call him names, like Paco and Julián do, but they do not consider him to be one of their own kind. The librarian, who travels with him on the bus on one occasion, asks him if he does not feel lonely, living by himself far from his neighbors. She is the one who tries harder than anybody else to understand him, but she does not receive a convincing answer. Anselmo is a relic of the past that she has no sentiments about, just like others. All in all, the people from Anselmo’s community assume the role of observers of his conflict with Paco and Julián. Quique, the bar owner, explains to the shepherd why these two men need money so badly: “Paco’s greed is a bottomless pit ... and Julián ... is up to his neck in debt.” Quique’s critical remark about these two men does not mean that he is going to support Anselmo, or even that he sincerely sides with him. Briefly speaking, Anselmo’s fight is not his fight, and this is the case with every other member of the community who has good relations with the shepherd.

The film’s ending, by mirroring and inverting a Western-like shootout, emphasizes Anselmo’s tragic plight. In Westerns, violent endings often signify some form of renewal, individual or communal, after the removal of a serious threat. In *The Shepherd*, by contrast, the hero’s final confrontation with his oppressors marks the definitive end of his world. Paco and Julián come to Anselmo’s place and begin to shout, calling him names, which is actually a sign of their helplessness. Anselmo walks out of his house and shoots, wounding them both badly. A police officer, alarmed by Paco’s wife, shows up immediately after Anselmo fired his shots, slowly approaches the shooter and tells him to put down his weapon. Before obeying the order, Anselmo turns his head to look at the house, perhaps realizing that he has just lost it and

everything that it stands for. The film closes with this scene, leaving the viewer pondering the consequences that Anselmo will have to face. Paco and Julián will not complete their plan, but what this plan assumed—somebody taking over Anselmo’s land under the legal pretext of his “incompetence”—is now very likely to happen. His herd of sheep will probably disappear. Whatever eventually happens to his land and animals, Anselmo’s shots trigger the beginning of the end of the world as he knew it.

The Ardor: A Barefoot Avenger

The Ardor is set in the region of the Parana river in Amazonia, and it focuses on the conflict between a family of farmers and a gang of deforesters, who want to take over their land. The leaders of the gang are three brothers named Tarquinho (Claudio Tolcachir), Tulio (Jorge Sesán) and Vando (Julián Tello), and they do not hesitate to kill if people resist them. João, the owner of the farm, lives there with his daughter Vania (Alice Braga) and farmhand Jara (Lautaro Vilo), who used to work for the deforesters. A mysterious man named Kaí (Gael García Bernal) arrives at the farm—as it turns out—in response to João’s call for help. The same day the three brothers attack the farm, wound Jara, and force João to sign a bill of sale for his land by threatening to hurt his daughter. They brutally kill the farmer nevertheless and take Vania with them. Kaí, who is watching all this from a hiding place, refrains from intervening, and it is only after he has taken care of Jara that he goes on a search for Vania. He finds her and her captors right in time to save her when the youngest brother is trying to rape her. Kaí and Vania head back for the farm, and on the way Kaí encounters the bandits several times, intercepting João’s document on one such occasion. On the whole, however, Kaí is reluctant to kill. Back on the farm, Vania, Kaí and Jara, who has already recovered enough to walk, ready themselves for the fight with the bandits. Vania gives Kaí to understand that this time they cannot do without killing. After a successful defense of the house and the elimination of the most dangerous bandits, Kaí walks away into the woods, promising Vania that he will be near.

From among the three films discussed here, *The Ardor* adheres to the plot development of the Westerns most closely. To begin with, it features a protagonist resembling, at least remotely, a Shane-like type of the Western hero: he emanates an uncanny aura and, just like the protagonist of *Shane* (dir. George Stevens, 1953), appears at a place where his help is needed, as if he were driven by a magnetic force. At the same time, the film does a lot to undermine such associations, starting with Kaí’s appearance—he walks barefoot and bare-chested all the time—through his reluctance to use violence, to his social attachments, something that the classic Western hero avoids even though he performs socially desired actions. In comparison with the farmers whom he helps, the eponymous hero of *Shane* embodies “the attributes of a ‘higher race,’” as Slotkin puts it.¹⁷ Kaí, by contrast, is of the people whom he defends. A major part of the plot of *The Ardor* revolves around the motifs of captivity, search and escape, which in the U.S. context most directly connect the Western to its roots in Puritan writing. Andrea Tinnemeyer describes Mary Rowlandson’s famous captivity narrative as “less her own story than a moral lesson, less a personal narrative than a paradigmatic genre for articulating an Anglo-European, and Anglo-American, identity in the ‘New World.’”¹⁸ The critic further notices that, “Central to the captivity narrative [...] are the circumscribed gender positions of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

¹⁸ Andrea Tinnemeyer, *Identity Politics of the Captivity Narrative after 1848*, Lincoln and London, p. xii.

the three quintessential figures: captive, captor, and rescuer,” therefore “the genre readily molds itself to the nation-building project at hand.”¹⁹ Captivity narratives helped reinforce racial hierarchies in colonial North America and then the United States, and it comes as no surprise that contemporary American cinema has used the trope of captivity to critically interrogate entrenched cultural imaginings. *The Ardor* undoes the unequivocal binary notions of civilization and savagery inherent in the motif of captivity. In this film, it is civilization, embodied by the deforesters, that is equated with extreme cruelty, disrespect for other people’s ways of life, and solving problems through the use of force. Last but not least, the film’s closing sequence follows a familiar Western scenario, with a carefully choreographed duel between Kaí and Tarquinho, characteristically shown through a combination of long shots of the shooters against a larger background and close-ups of their faces and weapons.

The Ardor employs the pastoral as a vehicle for the narrative rendition of the settler experience and ethos. One problematic aspect of the film is that there is no indigenous presence and, as a result, it is the settlers who are portrayed as the people of the land. João articulates the settler ethos when he says to Kaí: “I came here with my father in 1970. We busted our asses working. We managed to buy this after ten harvests.” His family’s history is now inseparable from the land: the farm is where his daughter was born and where his wife died. Kaí confirms him in his belief that his right to the land cannot be questioned by saying: “You belong here”. The use of the pastoral helps showcase the settler approach to land and its resources as rational and balanced, adjusted to the conditioned of nature. João, Vania and Jara live a simple and meager life, and the glimpses of their farm—the old, rusted machines and the simple wooden buildings with holes in the walls—leave one wondering whether, in the material sense, the farm gives them anything more than mere subsistence. On the other hand, they refuse to envisage a different way of life, and it seems as if they renounced all material comforts for the sake of the values which they identify with a settler’s life. Jara, who initially worked for the deforesters and left the gang to live with João and Vania, thus explains his decision to Kaí: “I saw this place. I saw her. I realized that all this shouldn’t disappear. That I wanted to stay and help.” Jara’s words imply that farming is an existential choice, resulting from a deeply felt need. Such a choice has a spiritual dimension, and Jara’s transformation, which can be described as a conversion, accentuates this.

The farmers’ meager but balanced life contrasts sharply with the rapacity and relentlessness of the modern world as embodied by the deforesters. The film’s establishing shot shows the threat that these men pose: the camera is located amidst the jungle, and a wave of fire suddenly breaks through it, filling up the entire frame. The symbolic meaning of this image of violent, destructive penetration soon becomes apparent as the film strongly suggests the parallelism between the destruction of the wilderness and the violation of female bodies. The three brothers who lead the gang kidnap women from the farms they have taken over to enslave and abuse them. In one of the scenes at the beginning, they are standing over the dead body of their last victim: the woman hanged herself and her body was pulled down by a tiger, hence bloody wounds all over it. It is precisely the blood that makes her look as if she were merging with the ground. In the light of this scene, it is clear what fate awaits Vania at the hands of the brothers, if she is not rescued in time. The attributes that define the deforesters are various kinds of tools of destruction: rifles, axes, machetes, mechanical saws. It is never stated who exactly they work for; the force that sanctions their brutality emanates from an expansive corporate environment, and the people who engineer it are akin to phantoms. João thus

¹⁹ *Loc. cit.*

talks about the destruction of forests and farms: “They burn it all. They bring pines and soy. And all of this is wiped out. Besides they want to set up a processing plant here.” The word “they” seems to refer to a disembodied entity, and this intriguing discursive aspect provides a measure of the dehumanization of the deforesters and their mysterious employers.

In the face of the deforesters’ violence, Kaí’s actions aimed at preventing some of their movements seem barely sufficient, but this is in keeping with his portrayal as a pastoral figure, a protector rather than an aggressor. After he has saved Vania from their hands and regained João’s bill of sale for his farm, his efforts concentrate on slowing down the bandits’ pursuit. In one scene he is confronted with Tulio, the most brutal of the three brothers and João’s killer; Kaí is armed with a gun and Tulio with a machete, but when the latter man steps into a snare, the former simply puts down the gun and walks away quickly. He evidently considers killing to be the last resort. The film puts stress on his connection to nature, and not his fighting skills. In the scene that introduces him, Kaí emerges from among the trees, walks onto a stretch of burnt land, and kneels down, and this is a way of implying that similarly to the classic Western hero he is an emanation of the land, but at the same time he belongs to it in a more literal, physical sense. He walks barefoot and bare-chested most of the time, directly connecting with the natural surroundings through his body. In one scene, he attacks the bandits with spears, but since he mostly remains invisible in this scene, it seems as if nature were fighting back. The most symbolic expression of his closeness to nature are two scenes with the tiger that roams the area because its living space has been shrinking. On the first such occasion, the animal approaches Kaí while he is sleeping and rests briefly just a few steps away from him. In the film’s conclusion, the hero follows the tiger into the jungle, as if there existed a form of mutual understanding between them. It is also worth mentioning that earlier in the film the tiger saves Kaí and Vania when Vando tracks them down—the animal attacks the pursuer, and not his would-be victims, a possible sign that it senses human intentions.

Unlike U.S. Westerns, which stress the difference between the gunfighter and the community for whose sake he acts—as Slotkin puts it with regard to Shane, “[he] is never part of the community, and his superior values are not seen as belonging to the community”²⁰—*The Ardor* erases such a difference, which can be seen as an expression of a specific social consciousness. Accordingly, Kaí is fully attuned to life amidst nature, but at the same time he retains his bond with the community of farmers, and his depiction as a pastoral hero corresponds with this duality. In a conversation with Vania, he shares his own family story and it sounds familiar in the light of the film’s plot: his family lost their farm, which was forcefully taken over by deforesters, and his relatives went to live in the city where most of them “disappeared,” as Kaí phrases it, an ambivalent, unsettling word. Kaí says: “I returned to the jungle,” and adds referring to the deforesters: “Those people taught me how to belong here.” The most symbolic gesture confirming this sense of belonging is when Kaí puts on João’s worn straw hat, which was placed on his grave, before his final duel with Tarquinho. In this scene, the hero’s appearance suggests that his role has changed, even if briefly, from that of a protector to that of an avenger. Long shots used in this scene emphasize the farm setting: the final confrontation takes place on a plot of land ready for cultivation. Although Kaí leaves the farm in the end, this is not a definitive decision: in the scene of their parting, he gives João’s hat back to Vania, who says: “People who sent them will send more,” and he assures her that he “will be around.” The film’s conventional ending strikes a disturbing chord as a reminder that the forces of the contemporary corporate world do not relent, and every time they strike, they strike harder.

²⁰ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 400.

A Man of Integrity: The (Un)Corrupted

A Man of Integrity tells the story Reza (Reza Akhlaghirad), an educated man from Tehran, who now runs a farm in Northern Iran, where he lives with his wife (Soodabeh Beyzaee) and son. His specialization is the breeding of goldfish. His farm comprises several ponds and water is supplied by a system of canals. Reza's farm is cut off from this system by a company that controls a nearby dam and wants to take over Reza's land. When attempting to restore the water supply, the protagonist is confronted with a gangster named Abbas, who works for the company. Reza goes to prison for several days for beating Abbas and breaking his arm, the latter being a false accusation, but impossible to disprove. Reza has to pay a compensation to Abbas, which he cannot afford to do because he is already in debt. Meanwhile, somebody poisons the water in his ponds and all the fish die. The subsequent part of the plot registers Reza's conversations with various officials about how to avoid paying a compensation to Abbas and how to receive a compensation for the dead fish. His desperation grows and he even decides to sell his farm to the company, but its representative rejects his offer because such a transaction could undermine its reputation, leading to suspicions that the company has taken advantage of Reza's hopeless situation. Unexpectedly Abbas goes to prison on drug charges—the suggestion is that Reza has planted drugs in his car. Pretending to be the prisoner's associate, Reza bribes a prison guard who agrees to smuggle a drugged candy for Abbas. The gangster dies in prison. A man who works for the company offers Reza a job as its local representative.

In Godfrey Cheshire's words, "[a] political film seething with white-hot anger, *A Man of Integrity* has a premise that might work dramatically in numerous other contexts. You can imagine it in a classic Western, with a young soil tiller [...] facing off against ruthless cattle barons and their bought-and-paid-for constabulary."²¹ Indeed, the film's affinity with the Western primarily concerns the initial conflict and the portrayal of the main hero. Reza is confronted with a powerful business organization, which—as it appears—largely operates through secrecy, that is in a mafia-like fashion. It is never stated what the company does and why it needs Reza's land, and this vagueness actually provides a measure of its influence. Such a presentation of the company emphasizes the challenge that Reza undertakes in his symbolic role as the last just man. He understand the nature of law and the rules of social coexistence in simple and fundamental terms. In a scene at the beginning of the film, he talks to a bank clerk who suggests that he should bribe some of the directors of the bank to get an extension of the payment of his loan. The following day Reza sells his car and hands the entire amount to the clerk, who feels offended by this. The hero's integrity makes him appear to be an odd man out. His attachment to his convictions and principles is something that others can hardly comprehend, this is why more often than not they speak to him without concealing their disdain. The schoolmaster, whom Reza meets to talk about the problems his son has caused in school and who happens to be his acquaintance from Tehran, says to him at one point: "You have not changed since you were a student. You consider yourself a hero," and he means it as an expression of disrespect.

The film's use of the pastoral is most evident in some of the scenes at the beginning, depicting Reza's routines on the farm: feeding the fish, monitoring the water supply, segregating the fish for sale. These scenes alternate with scenes of family life, implying that the hero has achieved a form of existential balance. At the same time, it is clear from the outset that this balance is under threat: in the very first scene of the film, two men visit Reza's place and

²¹ Godfrey Cheshire, *Review of A Man of Integrity*, RogerEbert.com, 17 June 2022, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/a-man-of-integrity-movie-review-2022>, accessed 6 July 2024.

search it for alcohol—as we learn, they are “from the mosque.” In fact, Reza makes watermelon moonshine for his own use, an early hint of his anarchic mindset. The pastoral acquires an important political meaning because, as we subsequently find out, Reza left Tehran and settled in the rural North to avoid possible persecutions and, more generally, the necessity to make difficult choices in the face of Iran’s social and political reality in which, as one of the characters puts it, “You either become the oppressor or the oppressed.” The hero has found not so much a pastoral middle ground, but an area beyond this stark division. However, his relative isolation does not guarantee freedom, and Reza lives a life which is as insecure as the lives of those who openly refuse to side with the oppressors. The delicateness of the goldfish symbolically reflects the instability of the foundations on which he has based his existence. His pastoral plan for life falls through abruptly, and this is emphasized by two dramatic scenes bespeaking the definitive end of his world: the poisoning of his fish and the burning of his house. The latter event takes place toward the end of the film: Abbas’s men set Reza’s house on fire as a punishment for his involvement in their boss’s arrest. There is a crucial difference between the meanings of these two scenes: the former stresses Reza’s helplessness, as he enters the pond with the dead fish facing the camera, which registers his terror and despair, and the latter possibly suggests his acceptance of the inevitable, as he is standing with his back to the camera, watching the burning house from a distance. The fact that this scene does show his emotional reaction can be seen as a way of implying that he has by now accepted the brutal rules of the game.

As the film’s plot unfolds, the Western/pastoral narrative is suspended and a social drama takes over, and the event that marks this transition is the poisoning of Reza’s ponds. Cheshire has aptly compared *A Man of Integrity* to Andrey Zvyagintsev *Leviathan* (2014)²². Reza’s conflict with the company over land and water turns out to be a manifestation of a much larger phenomenon, namely ubiquitous corruption. The structural solution that accentuates this consists in punctuating the plot with the hero’s conversations with people who embody some form of authority, including policemen and lawyers, and who give him to understand that he is simply too weak not to obey the corrupt rules. This may sound like a far-fetched analogy, but *A Man of Integrity* resembles *High Noon* (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1952) insofar as both films portray protagonists who move around and talk to other people with the hope of ensuring their support only to discover in the end that they are completely on their own. The officials to whom Reza complains about Abbas’s false accusation tell him almost openly that there is nothing to be done because the judge has been bribed. An insurance agent advises him to collect false statements to prove that the death of his fish was caused by a failure of power supply. Reza’s wife, who is a head teacher in a school for girls, plays an important role as a mediator of sorts between Reza and the corrupt social environment. In the beginning, she seems to accept his categorical attitude; in an early scene, in which they talk about their debts, she says reassuringly: “Sometimes you have money, sometimes you don’t. Do what you think is right.” In the course of time, however, although she never denies her support to him, she gets increasingly irritated about his irrational behavior. She tells him at one point: “Why are you so stubborn? You have ruined our life, isn’t that enough?” She is a pragmatic woman, and this means that she accepts moral compromises. The scene that encapsulates her moral ambivalence is when she talks in school to Abbas’s ten-year-old daughter to make her persuade her father to drop his charges against Reza. “Nobody should use their position of power”, she says to the girl and this is precisely what she herself does.

²² *Loc. cit.*

The film's central paradox in the light of the tropes that it borrows from the Western is that the hero's integrity signifies very limited agency, and every time Reza forgets about his principles, his range of possibilities expands. There are even situations in which he takes over the initiative, although under the circumstances initiative means some form of abuse. The viewer follows his transformation into a more ambivalent character, the process first signaled by the scene of his meeting with an insurance agent about a compensation for the dead fish: Reza asks him how much he owes him for his advice, and the man just tells him to go. This is the first person whom the protagonist has offered a bribe, and he unexpectedly declines. The moral implications of this episode may not seem very dramatic, but the reversal of roles that we observe here anticipates the troubled motivation behind Reza's subsequent actions. A later scene in which we see the hero acting against his principles is when he negotiates the sale of his land with the lawyer representing the company; it has contradictory implications in suggesting that, on the one hand, Reza has given up his fight, but on the other, he finally wants to do something concrete to change his lot. He symbolically crosses the Rubicon when he plants drugs in Abbas's car. Unlike Western heroes, who confront their enemies openly, he acts clandestinely, and the film intriguingly conveys this by leaving out some of Reza's most crucial actions. Finally, when Reza bribes the prison guard, it is a one-on-one situation in which he manipulates his interlocutor to take the upper hand when it becomes necessary. He does not hesitate to blackmail the guard to make him do exactly what he expects him to.

The closure of *A Man of Integrity* is the opposite of the unequivocal endings of classical Westerns. After Abbas's death the reality remains as impenetrable as it has always been. Reza's pastoral longing only makes his final realization of the various, ineluctable entanglements more poignant. He has prevailed, but not on his own terms, and in a sense the new circumstances are even more overwhelming than before. An elderly man whom Reza has occasionally asked for advice now tells him that he will promote him for the mayoral office. A stranger thanks Reza for ridding the village of Abbas and tells him to take good care of himself, because the man who poisoned his fish is still around. Needless to say, up to that point Reza believed that Abbas was responsible for the poisoning, and it turns out that there is another enemy, perhaps more dangerous because of his secrecy. Lastly, a man from the company offers Reza a job. The hero's newly discovered agency enables him access to privileges, but this is still a far cry from the right to decide for himself. Unless he does something truly radical, which is not very likely in the light of the final part of the film, whatever decision Reza eventually makes, it will be one that somebody else has already made for him.

Conclusion

In their introduction to the collection of essays *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*, Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper write: "Adapting the Western film to settings, audiences, and cinematic traditions beyond the United States enriches the genre with new geographical realities [and] new histories [...]. It is a wellspring of new variations of Western stories that have been told elsewhere—and of wholly new stories that could be told nowhere else"²³. *The Shepherd*, *The Ardor*, and *A Man of Integrity* jointly attest to the appeal, adaptability, and relevance of the Western genre across very different cultures. The former two films share a lot in common, constructing Western-like stories about farmers-turned-fighters

²³ Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, *Introduction*, in *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier* (ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper), Lanham, 2014, p. xv.

whose very way of life is threatened by the expansion of corporate forces, the process governed by the ruthless logic of maximization. As these two films show, this process can have drastic manifestations with regard to how it impacts individual human fate. It also corrupts social relations in establishing violence as a vehicle for effective action. *A Man of Integrity* addresses different social issues, but it shares more with *The Shepherd* and *The Ardor* than just a plot construction based on Western and pastoral tropes. It portrays analogous mechanisms of power, in which capital is the decisive force, creating inevitable divisions and hierarchies among people. All three films focus on crises the solution of which requires some kind of interventionist action, and the Western provides a formula that helps envisage what such an action can be like. At the same time, the aspect of fantasy, often inherent in transnational uses of the Western genre, suggests unsettling questions about the viability of the social scenarios that the films convey.



Fig. 1. Miguel Martín in the film *The Shepherd* (2016, dir. Jonathan Cenual Burley).

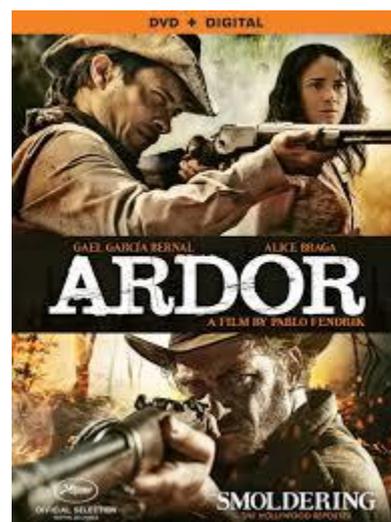


Fig. 2. Poster of the film *El Ardor* (2014, dir. Pablo Fendrik)

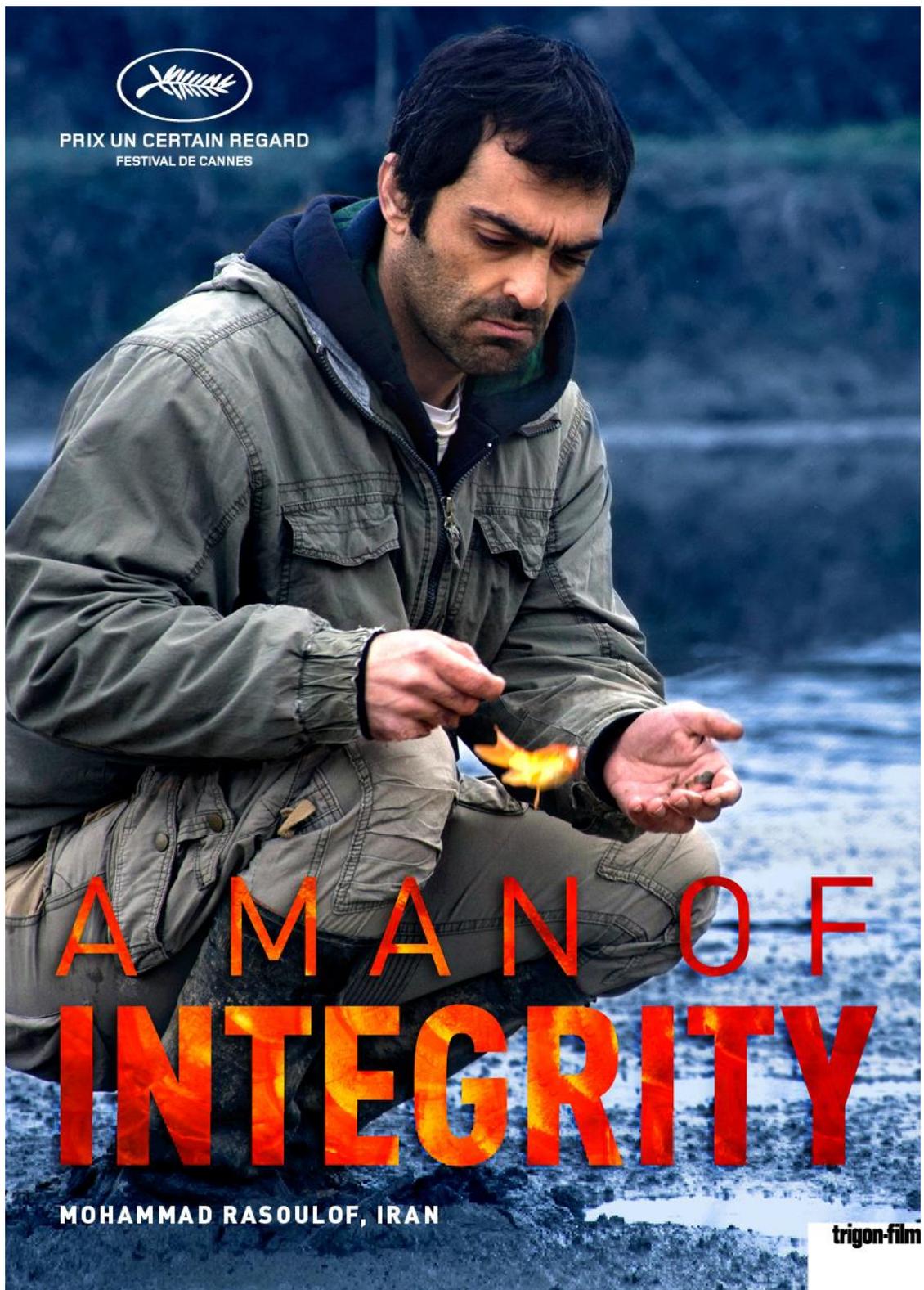


Fig. 3. Poster of the film *A Man of Integrity* (2017, dir. Mohammad Rasoulof).