Textual Analysis

IB Film Standard Level

M2020

XXXXXX

Gun Crazy: 00:16:14 - 00:21:14
The extract I have chosen is from the 1950 film *Gun Crazy* directed by Joseph H. Lewis. In this sequence, the gun obsessed protagonist, Bart Tare, is encouraged to accept a shooting challenge at a carnival sideshow, ultimately defeating sharpshooter Annie Laurie Starr. I am going to analyze this extract in terms of its social and historical context along with its use of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and symbols.

*Gun Crazy* premiered five years after the end of World War II. American soldiers were returning home and the United States had “the world’s strongest, richest economy” (Uschan 69). However, Cold War tensions continued to grow. This uncertainty enforced traditional American gender roles and advertisements displayed “women...in the home and men...going out to work” (Hunter 9). Although this time period glorified domesticity, historian Dr. Michelle Getchell described it as “not as conformist as is sometimes portrayed” (Getchell). A prime example is the sexual and dominating personality of *Gun Crazy*’s female protagonist, Laurie. During WWII, females comprised 35 percent of the workforce (Uschan 72). American women’s newfound independence encouraged them to enter careers they had previously been excluded from. Laurie reflects this through her “masculine” career of a professional gunman. The redistribution of wealth after WWII and America’s abhorrence to communism also allowed for middle-class growth and promoted a stronger consumer culture. Stylish cars “became essential symbols of the new consumer culture” and mass automobile production supplied young couples
with privacy that ultimately led to a rise in premarital sex (Hunter 37; Getchell). However, “the traditional ideal continued to insist upon marriage before sex” (Getchell). This ideal is likely the cause of an emphasis on Laurie's diamond ring, a symbol of marriage.

In 1949, the United States discovered the Soviet Union had developed an atomic bomb (Uschan 121). The fear of a Soviet attack created a theme of “good versus evil” in American media. In this extract, Bart, a war veteran, is representative of good while the conning carnival manager dressed in all black signifies evil. Film noir gained popularity because the genre’s focus on low lighting and double-dealing “reflected the worries of the time about...the Cold War” (Hunter 14). *Gun Crazy* belongs to this genre as it includes an anti-hero (Bart), femme fatale (Laurie), and dramatic use of light and shadow. In the years surrounding *Gun Crazy*’s release, The House Un-American Activities Committee jailed 10 film industry workers for refusing to answer the committee’s questions and blacklisted other suspected communists including original *Gun Crazy* screenwriter Dalton Trumbo (Bowen). This necessity for capitalist values is likely the cause of the film’s emphasis on cash, jewelry, and cars: symbols of consumer culture. The Hays Code was also fully intact in the 1940s and 1950s. Bans on “nudity, suggestive dancing, and lustful kissing” forced filmmakers to creatively express sexuality through symbolism and clever screenwriting (Mondello). However, after WWII, the American film industry faced competition from television and foreign films that permitted nudity (Mondello). Hollywood studios eased their restraints and American
filmmakers were able to produce “racy” films like *Gun Crazy* that utilized more blatant sexual symbols such as Laurie’s tight-fitting clothing and seductive glances.

The sequence I chose to analyze is the first interaction between Bart and Laurie. With smoke, shadows, and suggestive outfits, the mise-en-scène of this extract introduces a sexual tension that remains for the rest of the film. Due to a budget of only $400,000 and 1947’s “financial decline for the motion picture industry,” the costume department consisted of one worker: Norma Koch (Keating 60). According to author John Gibbs, costume color can have “a direct association with a particular character” (Gibbs 8). Koch associated Bart, a confused and newly unemployed war veteran, with a muted colored suit and Laurie, an experienced high-stakes robber, with a vibrant outfit. Bart’s unbuttoned long suit and oversized pants depict him as disheveled and less certain than Laurie in her well-fitted, prescribed cowgirl costume. The costumes of the carnival manager, Packett, and Bart are opposites. Bart wears a gray suit and black tie while Packett is dressed in a black suit and gray tie. This symbolizes the differences of the two men Laurie must choose between. Laurie wears black pants and a white shirt, representative of her “good” and “bad” personas. The contrasts of these costumes are highlighted in a wide-shot with all three actors (Figure 1). This gradient illustrates the completely different appearances and personalities of each character.
Laurie’s tight pants, heeled boots, and constricting shirt are not practical for her physically demanding job. This emphasizes the carnival’s focus on entertainment rather than reality and further sexualizes Laurie through the accentuation of her curves. Laurie is reduced to a sexual object for the audience rather than a respected gunwoman.

The extract is primarily well-lit with bright, high-key lighting. This design choice promotes the typical happy carnival atmosphere and expresses Bart’s excitement while watching Laurie. Noir films conventionally use low-key lighting and harsh shadows, however, in this scene, the gaffer, Lloyd Garnell, chose to use low contrast lighting. The only prominent shadows in this scene are produced by Laurie’s cowboy hat and Packett (Figure 2, 3).
These shadows represent Packett and Laurie's immorality and add “a more dramatic effect” (McIver 40). Bart only produces one shadow in this scene, signifying his purity. Once Laurie converses with Bart, she removes her hat, eliminating the shadow. This suggests Bart’s positive influence on Laurie and Bart’s decrease in suspicion towards Laurie. When Laurie wears “The Crown”, a spotlight is placed on her face (Figure 4). Laurie appears vulnerable and, as David Landau observes, “light coming down
from...above can render a feeling of isolation” (Landau). This white light also portrays Laurie as more angelic and advances the idea that Laurie is the focus of Bart's life.

![Laurie wearing “The Crown”](image)

**Figure 4. Laurie wearing “The Crown”**

Symmetrical framing is utilized by cinematographer Russell Harlan to emphasize the similarities between Bart and Laurie (Figure 5). The shooting target is located directly between them and they face each other at the same distance from the target. Because the characters are located on the same plane, they appear proportionate to each other and more equal, foreshadowing their partnership.
Camera angles have the ability to “suggest either vulnerability or power” (Prunes). Filming at a low-angle from behind Bart twists the perspective and presents Laurie as strikingly smaller than Bart (Figure 6). This conforms to the role of men and women in the 1950’s in which men were expected to be the commanding, dominating figure in the relationship.
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To emphasize the expressions the characters held when talking intimately, a deep focus is applied to their close-ups (Figure 7, 8). Once the camera returns to a shot of the audience, a shallower focus is implemented to recognize each member of the audience and acknowledge the publicity of Laurie and Bart’s flirtation.

![Figure 7. Close-up of Laurie](image)

![Figure 8. Close-up of Bart](image)

Leading lines are also utilized multiple times. For example, Bart’s extended arm when shooting acts as a leading line towards Laurie, directly pointing at her (Figure 6). This suggests Laurie’s importance to the plot and Bart. When Laurie and Bart walk across the stage, a tracking-out Dolly shot follows to maintain a skewed one-point perspective (Figure 9). The symmetry of the audience seats, the stage posts, and the walkway directly down the middle of the frame creates a focal point on Laurie’s face, again stressing her significance to the plot and to the protagonist.
The flames from the crown of matches symbolize Laurie and Bart’s fast-moving and unorthodox romance. As each match is lit, the tension between Bart and Laurie increases. It is not until the matches are blown out that Bart and Laurie have an ordinary conversation about Bart’s career. The guns in this scene represent the film’s overarching theme of America’s love of firearms. This film acts as a social commentary on America’s “gun crazy” phenomenon and centering the competition around guns further idolizes the weapon. “The Crown” trick is not a common technique used in gun shows which suggests its significance as a symbol. When Laurie dons the crown, she resembles the Statue of Liberty, an American monument embodying freedom. Laurie represents a release from the war Bart returned from and acts as an opportunity for Bart to be free from an average life and to join a world of excitement. The ring Bart returns to Laurie symbolizes marriage and the value of product consumption. Because premarital sex was viewed as wrong, a close-up of Laurie’s diamond ring is included before the
flirtatious competition, foreshadowing the pair’s marriage. Focusing on Laurie’s large, diamond ring also appeals to the value of expensive, tangible goods, subtly promoting a capitalist agenda.

*Gun Crazy*’s release during a period of distrust caused by the Cold War created an “unwholesome” film representative of Hollywood’s “darker, and more issue oriented” post-war films (Deming; Franklin 151). The filmmakers’ choices in costumes, high-key lighting, and shadows create a mise-en-scène that expresses female sexuality with tight clothing, highlights the traditional mid-20th-century theme of “good versus evil” through the male characters’ contrasting clothing, glorifies the idea of a pure woman using white light, and symbolizes the prominent Cold War themes of immorality and suspicion using carefully placed shadows. Cinematographer Russell Harlan’s application of close-ups, deep focus, and leading lines foreshadow the significance of Laurie in Bart’s life by creating a focal point on Laurie’s face. Harlan’s use of framing to depict Laurie as smaller than Bart is also representative of the belief that women hold less power than men. However, the film focuses less on this power dynamic and more on an expression of sexuality. In an interview, Joseph H. Lewis recalled his detailed instructions to Peggy Cummins (Laurie) for this scene: “You’re a female dog in heat, and you want him” (Peary). In the Hays Code era where lewd references could result in distribution difficulties, Lewis used flames to symbolize sexual tension along with “The Crown” and a diamond ring to represent freedom and marriage. The first draft of *Gun Crazy*’s screenplay was rejected by the Breen Office but through the film’s mise-en-scène, cinematography, and symbolism, Lewis clearly conveyed Bart and Laurie’s deep
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passion without breaking production code (American Film Institute). Along with its influence on the film noir genre, *Gun Crazy* paved the way for iconic crime films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* that explored similar themes of freedom and frank sexuality, ultimately shaping America’s sexual revolution. *Gun Crazy* offers a glimpse into a world of pure suggestion and serves as a significant reflection of America in a momentous time of suspicion and sexual evolution.

Word Count: 1748
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