

# OPENING CHOICES

## *Rio Bravo*: Dude walks into a saloon

In the first shot of *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959) – the first, that is, after the opening credits sequence – Dude (Dean Martin) enters a saloon by a side door. This is not an obviously distinctive opening shot, nor is it among the most immediately memorable moments in the movie. Nonetheless, close attention to the shot reveals considerable complexity and economy of expression. Robin Wood, who describes *Rio Bravo* as the film he would choose to ‘justify the existence of Hollywood’, observes that ‘Hawks is at his most completely personal and individual when his work is most firmly traditional’ (1968: 35). All artworks have to negotiate their own relationship between the generic and the particular, the familiar and the idiosyncratic, but, as Wood suggests, the balance achieved between these dimensions in *Rio Bravo* is particularly rich and productive. A complex relationship between convention and specificity emerges across the movie as a whole, but it is striking how much of that relationship, and the basis for its subsequent development, can already be discerned in its opening shot.

The shot is not ostentatious. The action it depicts is slow and tentative, and its style of presentation does not draw attention to itself. Dude is shown in a medium shot, the camera reframing gently to keep him central as he enters and

moves into the saloon. In these respects, the shot offers us a functional, unremarkable depiction of a character entering through a door and fits Richard Schickel’s description of Hawks’ characteristic approach: ‘He will not sue for attention or favour’ (1977: 97).

At the same time, what we see is still presented to us as an entrance. One of the main characters, played by a recognisable star, is introduced. The opening of the door and Dude’s movement out of the shadows in the doorway promote a momentary sense of anticipation. The effect is fleeting, but enough to add a subtle emphasis to the entrance, beyond that which it already carries simply by being the first shot of the movie and the introduction of the first identifiable character.

The music also emphasises Dude’s entrance. As Dude opens and moves through the door, we hear a succession of slow three-note phrases on a Spanish guitar. After Dude shuts the door and stands by the wall, this slow melody is followed by a strummed chord and a contrasting fast, descending, flamenco-like figure. The music brackets Dude’s entrance, presenting it as a self-contained action, of interest in its own right. The emphasis provided by the music is identifiable but, again, light. The guitar is quiet – it can be heard over the background noise of the saloon but not fully separated from it.

The opening shot is brief (lasting only 12 seconds) and understated, but also dense in terms of the detail that it starts to make available to us. The particularities of the shot begin to suggest and refine some of what will be important in the film to come, in the specific dimensions of its story and world and in the ways in which our attention will be directed.

Among the most pertinent details in the shot are those relating to character and performance. Dude pushes the door open very gently, but this is not a controlled, deliberate movement, as we might expect from a character who was, say, peeking through an opening in a door and trying to avoid detection. Rather, Dude opens the door in a series of small, fitful movements. His entrance seems nervous, perhaps uncertain or embarrassed. The specific circumstances that produce such an entrance – Dude’s alcoholism, the humiliation he experiences frequenting saloons and begging for drinks – will be clarified as the film proceeds. It is already apparent, though, that this is not an assertive or confident



entrance. Rather than opening the door fully, Dude makes a relatively narrow gap in the doorway and edges through it. Neither does he move far forward once he is inside, instead staying close to the wall and starting to sidle along it. Dude's movements in the opening shot start to draw our attention to the importance within the movie of the degree of assurance or conviction with which characters act in particular situations. The central theme of the film has been repeatedly characterised in terms of 'self-respect' (Wood 1968: 48; Pye 1975: 41) and the sureness or otherwise of physical action and bearing is established as a key measure of this more abstract quality.

We are introduced to Dude in the opening shot through his movements and his appearance. He is noticeably dishevelled: he is unshaven, his jacket has a large tear on the breast, his collar is half turned-out and his hat is worn and starting to lose its shape. There is a suggestion of an undershirt underneath Dude's jacket, but it is unbuttoned, exposing his upper chest. Dude appears partially or carelessly dressed in a western, a genre in which the costuming of heroes, although not necessarily pristine, often emphasises elements of precision and control. We do not yet know Dude's name (or preferred nickname) but we will learn it shortly after the opening series of scenes. Among its other associations, the word 'dude' can refer to a dandy, and the extent of Dude's degradation at the start of the movie is retrospectively emphasised as he gets cleaned up and his costume acquires a more ordered and deliberate (if still casual) quality.

Comic drunkenness was, of course, a conventional feature of Dean Martin's persona as an actor and singer, but the state in which we first see Dude is not presented in comic terms. This is apparent in Martin's performance in the opening shot. There is a quality of intentness in Dude's eyes, which seem to be drawn to something in the saloon. However, he does not seem to be happy or excited – this seems to be a case more of compulsion than of any more positive motivation. There is a tension between the yearning in his facial expression, particularly in his eyes, and the tentative character of his movements. Martin's performance in the shot suggests that, while Dude may be in the grip of some sort of compulsion, he also feels conflicted or ambivalent about it, perhaps not as far as being able to resist, but far enough that his movements do not

match the intensity and desire in his eyes. While we anticipate that the tension we see in the opening shot will be developed and clarified for us in what will follow, a complex portrayal is already emerging.

As well as opening the door in a tentative, even embarrassed fashion, Dude also closes it gently, keeping his hand on it as if to stop it from making a noise. While he is clearly not hiding, it is obvious that he is not trying to draw attention to himself either. It is also significant that when he closes the door, he is looking elsewhere – his eyes are focused on the interior of the saloon, which we have yet to see. This not only accentuates a sense of distraction, an impression that Dude's attention is pulled in a certain direction at the expense of other concerns, but also suggests his familiarity with the place he is entering. He knows exactly where the door is and how to close it quietly without devoting any more than the slightest of conscious attention to it. Later in the movie, Dude will describe himself as 'an expert on saloons'. This is already hinted at in the opening shot, where the environment suggests a potential context for the qualities emerging in Martin's performance. Although it is not definitively confirmed that Dude is in a saloon until the second shot, which follows his eyeline and shows us the bar area, this is a reasonable inference to draw even before the film cuts away from Dude. The cowboy-hatted shadows on the door and wall and the background chatter we can hear suggest that this is a space of social gathering, and in a western this often means a saloon.

As my last point suggests, the details made available to us in the opening shot of *Rio Bravo* also help to shape our initial impressions of the environment that Dude is entering. We see the door before we see Dude come in, and have a brief opportunity to register its texture and that of the surrounding walls. The door is worn and marked, especially along the near edge. The rough walls, made from an adobe-like material, combine with the style of the guitar music to suggest a Mexican or Southwestern milieu (already implicit in the film's title). This tentative impression is supported by another prominent feature of Dude's appearance: the sweat visible on his face and chest. The film seems to be playing on conventional, even stereotypical associations of Mexican cantina-type locations as places of heat and excess, of illicit and destructive pleasures.





It is also significant for our impressions of both the milieu and the manner of Dude's introduction that he enters through a standard panel door rather than a pair of batwing doors. The door we see is a mundane, everyday fixture, its colour a drab brown. It is not the type of door conventionally associated with the main entrances of western saloons, and Dude does not enter in a way associated with that type of door. His entrance is not emphatic or frontal – he seems instead to be creeping in through a side door. Again, this distinction gets addressed more explicitly later in the movie, when Dude and Chance (John Wayne) chase a murderer into another of the film's multiple saloons. Dude requests that he should enter this saloon by the front door, because during the worst of his drunken destitution he was only allowed in via rear or side doors. Although it is much less explicit in the opening shot, an initial basis for the distinction is already in place, with the type of door combining with Martin's performance to suggest a furtive, even shameful dimension to Dude's entrance.

The illustration of Dude's typical way of entering a saloon in the opening shot and the subsequent clarification of its significance exemplify a central aspect of the approach to storytelling in *Rio Bravo*. Details are introduced subtly and unobtrusively, with their significance often emerging several scenes later. Other examples of this include the flowerpot used by Feathers (Angie Dickinson) and Colorado (Ricky Nelson) when they intervene to save Chance from the villain's henchmen, and the handbill containing information about Feathers and her late husband. The flowerpot is visible by the front door of the Hotel Alamo in a number of scenes as we see characters entering and leaving. By the time it plays a significant role in the action, we have had the chance to become accustomed to its ambient presence. Similarly, we see Chance open and read a letter, later revealed to contain Feathers' handbill, during an early scene with Dude and Stumpy (Walter Brennan) at the jail. Chance puts the handbill in his jacket pocket and takes Dude out on night patrol to distract him from his alcohol withdrawal. At this point, the handbill is little more than an incidental detail – the emphasis is on Dude's suffering and Chance's concern. A couple of scenes later, Chance brings the handbill out when he is mistakenly accusing Feathers of cheating at cards. Only then does it become a more prominent



element. The variety of emphasis within these examples also highlights the richness and range possible within the film's characteristic style of narration: the flowerpot and the handbill are introduced so gently that they are easy to miss, while the details of the opening shot are quietly suggestive from the outset.

Returning briefly to the matter of doors, a pair of batwing doors would also show us more of the space outside the saloon than we see when Dude enters. We get a glimpse of a blurred strip of wall through the door that Dude opens, but nothing more. At this stage in the movie, we are not given any clear sense of the environment beyond the saloon. We have, however, already seen something of the outside world in the opening credits sequence. In this sequence, we see an unidentified party of riders and wagons, later revealed to be Pat Wheeler (Ward Bond) and his employees, coming down a track towards the camera. One effect of this sequence is to



establish a milieu that is generically western but otherwise largely non-specific. We see western iconography – horses, wagons, western clothes, a mountain and a dirt track – but we are given little indication of who the characters are, where they are going or what might be important or distinctive about what we are seeing. Indeed, there would be little point in doing so, since we only see Wheeler and his party under and between the opening credits and are not in the position to give them our full attention.

Later, it becomes apparent that Wheeler and his wagons arrive in the film's town (which may be called Rio Bravo, although this is not explicitly confirmed) the day after the night depicted in the opening scene. Assuming that the credits sequence does show Wheeler's party about to arrive in town (rather than simply making their way down a slope at some earlier stage in their journey) the sequence is temporally

un-anchored, detached from the circumstances of the beginning of the story. Just as the credits sequence provides a general indication of the western genre, it also creates a general sense of arrival or beginning, rather than establishing a more specific relation to the events that will unfold.

The music in the credits sequence contributes to a related effect. The credits are accompanied by an instrumental arrangement of the song 'Rio Bravo' (of which we hear two lines sung by Dean Martin at the end of the movie) with the melody played on harmonica, accompanied by guitar and percussion. The instrumentation and folksy ballad style again form part of the film's general introduction of itself as a western. The acoustic character of the music, however, is more distinctive. The harmonica reverberates, as if it were playing in a large, resonant space. This gives the music a hazy, distant quality, reinforcing the impression that our initial access to the world of the film remains vague and unformed. We are waiting, at this point, for something more concrete to emerge.

This is an important context for the opening shot. Dude's entrance starts to extend and refine the general impressions made in the credits sequence. It has been established as pertinent that *Rio Bravo* is a western, that its story will take place in a conventional western milieu, with western-type characters and so on, and the opening shot continues to draw on generic associations. Dude's costume and behaviour evoke a number of possible western types: he may be a bandit or some other type of itinerant character, one forced to live in difficult material circumstances. Or perhaps Dude is a different type of bedraggled westerner: the town drunk, which of course he is quickly revealed to be. The generic associations of saloons are immediately in play and, as I have mentioned, the shot also hints at some of the stereotypical connotations of a Mexican or border town milieu.

As well as developing these broad, generic meanings, however, the first shot also constitutes a decisive shift in specificity and focus. We move from a general sense of western-ness in a vaguely defined exterior setting to a depiction of a particular character, looking and behaving in a particular way, entering a particular interior space and relating to that space in a particular and complex fashion. The change in register is reflected in the style, in the closeness and controlled scope of



the shot and the opportunities it gives us to register the details of mise-en-scène. We have been taken, as it were, from 'Rio Bravo is a western' to 'Rio Bravo is this western' and the movie starts to offer us ways to refine our understanding of what this particular western will be like.

The details that emerge in the opening shot are presented to us quickly, but, as I have argued, subtly. Their significance is not emphatically declared, and no single detail is isolated or amplified. The discernible shift in register after the credits sequence draws our attention to the details that we are starting to encounter, but the subtlety of presentation suggests that our attention itself is also important. David Thomson notes that a 'principle' in Hawks' movies is 'that men are more expressive rolling a cigarette than saving the world' (2003: 380). Although referring to Hawks more generally, Thomson is alluding specifically to *Rio Bravo*, in which the repeated action of Chance rolling a cigarette for Dude acquires considerable significance. The rich but unassuming character of the opening shot suggests that attention to small, specific details of this kind will continue to be rewarded in the movie to come.

The emphasis on the accumulation of significant details is maintained over the next few shots as Dude moves further into the saloon and we see more of it. It becomes apparent that Dude is our conduit into the specific world of the film and our connection to him continues to develop. However, we soon encounter another substantial shift in register when we move into the more extensively-discussed portion of the first scene, described by Douglas Pye as the film's 'famous "silent" opening' (1975: 39). In this part of the scene, the absence of dialogue becomes more noticeable and the performances become more stylised and gestural, often emphasised by overt musical flourishes and 'stingers'. The shift occurs when Joe Burdette (Claude Akins) throws a silver dollar into a spittoon for Dude to retrieve and the music suddenly becomes louder, more fully orchestrated and more obviously matched to the shot-by-shot action. At this point, the background sounds of the saloon also recede. An obvious explanation for this would seem to be that everyone in the saloon stops what they are doing to watch the ensuing confrontation in tense silence. However, the chatter fades away before it is apparent that

there is a confrontation, or that it has attracted much attention from those nearby. The barber behind Dude, for example, continues shaving his customer after Joe throws the coin, and it is only apparent that the saloon's patrons are watching after Chance gets involved. The change occurs in the soundtrack before it can be discerned in the action. The throwing of the dollar is significant in itself as a bullying gesture intended to humiliate Dude, but it also functions as a way of heralding the temporary shift in style and tone.

In the 'silent' sequence, several key aspects of the narrative, including Dude's alcoholism, Chance's role as sheriff and the central conflict involving Joe are introduced or confirmed in stark, readily-understandable terms. It is significant that Chance himself is introduced in this way, looming over the abject Dude in an exaggeratedly low-angled shot. As well as setting up the contrast between Dude and Chance, not just in their characterisation but in the very mode of their introduction, this also establishes the film's self-conscious play with the sense of stature associated with John Wayne, which we will see both reaffirmed and undercut in a range of ways throughout.

The 'silent' sequence acknowledges the strongly generic dimension to the film and its narrative, its reliance on conventional types (like Chance's upright sheriff) and actions (like Joe demonstrating his dishonourable villainy by shooting the unarmed man who intervenes when he is punching Dude). The generic elements are presented with an overtness that borders on parody – for example, the abrupt cut to a close shot of Joe's holster as he draws his gun and shoots the unarmed man – and stands in strong contrast to the gentler, less emphatic style of the first few shots. One effect of this is that we are alerted to the presence of very different types and levels of expression in the movie. Alongside its emphasis on subtle and specific details, the film also relies on broader and more explicit elements. For example, while Stumpy is a central character and the complexities of his relationships with other characters (particularly Chance) are developed across the movie, his presentation remains firmly within the conventional terms of the comic old-timer. In the climactic shoot-out, he greets the news that he has been standing next to a wagon full of dynamite by exclaiming 'Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!'



The shifts between registers in the opening sequence help to emphasise the importance of our attention across different levels of overtness and subtlety and prepare us for the various ways in which these levels will be combined in the movie. In the opening moments of the movie we are presented with contrasting levels of expression first sequentially, then in combination. After the 'silent' sequence, Dude helps Chance to arrest Joe and we return to a less obviously heightened style where individual details are no longer given the same emphasis through music and editing. However, some broader flourishes still remain, like Chance's 360-degree spin when he hits Joe with his rifle. Over the course of the first few minutes, then, it is demonstrated to us that a large range of types and levels of detail matter in this movie, from the subtleties of facial expressions and background design to much more overt and stylised elements.

By the time that Joe is arrested, our progress into the world of the movie is more or less complete. The shifts in register in the opening scenes make clear the extent to which this progress is gradual. Part of what is exemplified in the opening shot is the wider pattern of the crossing of thresholds. This is anticipated in broader terms in the credits sequence, with its general sense of arrival, but is made more concrete by Dude's entrance. One effect of the 'silent' sequence is to remind us that our entry into the film is not yet complete and that there are still thresholds to be crossed. As Pye observes, 'the emblematic compression of intense action' in the sequence 'borders on the unacceptably schematic' (1975: 40) and we might suspect that such a style would be difficult to sustain. Certainly, we would be unlikely to expect the absence of speech to continue indefinitely in a Hollywood western from the 1950s. The subsequent introduction of dialogue and shift away from the stylistic extremes of the 'silent' sequence make it evident, if it were not already, that we are being introduced to the film in stages. The early scenes of *Rio Bravo* work in a piecemeal fashion, developing the film's complex perspective through repetition, variation and accumulation of detail. This also functions as an introduction to the film's easy and deliberate pacing, which can accommodate both concentrated bursts of exposition (like the 'silent' sequence) and extended passages focused more on relationships and interactions than

on anything more directly related to the main plot (like the song sequence later in the movie).

Dude's entrance is significant in the context of the multiple thresholds that are crossed in the process of establishing the film's characteristic manner and approach, but also in relation to its treatment of convention. A character entering through a doorway is a common trope, widely used for beginnings and introductions (although not necessarily the first thing we see in a movie or a scene). The film noir *The Glass Key* (Stuart Heisler, 1942) opens with an establishing shot of the interior of a political campaign headquarters. The second shot, however, depicts corrupt political operator Paul Madvig (Brian Donlevy) entering through a revolving door with his entourage, and the story develops from there. The first thing we see in *C'era una volta il West / Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1968) is a rickety wooden door creaking open. Shortly afterwards, the looming figure of Stony (Woody Strode) appears in the doorway. Doorway entrances are also sometimes used to introduce major characters, and the stars who play them, further into a movie (I will return to the matter of star entrances below). Amanda Bonner (Katharine Hepburn) in *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949) is first seen opening her bedroom door to collect the breakfast tray and newspaper, while Tracy Lord (Grace Kelly) in *High Society* (Charles Walters, 1956) is introduced backing through a door with an armful of wedding presents. Hawks himself used the device repeatedly, including in the opening moments of a number of movies. Comparing some of these examples to the first shot in *Rio Bravo* brings us back to some of the distinctive qualities of Dude's entrance while also highlighting the deliberateness with which it is employed as a convention.

If we compare Dude's entrance into the saloon with the arrival of Phillip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) at the Sternwood mansion in *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) it is evident that the fleeting effect of anticipation created as Dude is revealed in *Rio Bravo* is given a more emphatic and extended treatment in the earlier movie. The anticipation created in *The Big Sleep* is more obviously that of the star entrance, which, as Valerie Orpen notes, is conventionally 'delayed and fragmented' (2003: 88). We see Marlowe's hand as he rings the doorbell and hear Bogart's distinctive voice as





Marlowe introduces himself to the butler before we finally see Marlowe as he enters through the door. In this instance, the doorway entrance is combined with the conventions for introducing a star performer in a way that suggests a character of greater and more immediate stature. The longer shot and the grander doorway also reinforce this contrasting sense of scale. Set against the opening of *The Big Sleep*, we are immediately aware of the humbler and more intimate qualities to Dude's entry in *Rio Bravo*.

Another possible comparison might be to the opening of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953), where Dorothy Shaw (Jane Russell) and Lorelei Lee (Marilyn Monroe) enter through a doorway on a stage and begin the song 'Two Little Girls from Little Rock'. The stage makes us immediately aware of their entrance as part of a performance, deliberately put on for an audience within the film. As with *The Big Sleep*, the use of a long shot rather than a medium shot adds a dimension of grandeur to the entrance. Combined with the set design, the scale of the shot also draws our attention to different possibilities of closeness and distance between performers and their audiences. Dude is not adopting a public persona in the same way – he is neither a performer like Dorothy and Lorelei (consider the contrastingly casual, relaxed position in which he sings later in *Rio Bravo*, reclined on the couch in Chance's office, his hat tilted forward over his eyes) nor a professional meeting with a client like Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*. The contrast here further highlights the more personal, unguarded qualities in Dude's entrance (and Martin's performance) and also the sense of Dude's isolation and estrangement – compared to either the detective or the two singers, he is not playing an obvious role or occupying an identifiable place within a defined relationship.

The self-consciousness with which Hawks treats this type of conventional entrance, though suggested in *The Big Sleep* and especially in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, is perhaps most evident in *Monkey Business* (1952). Here, the opening credits sequence makes an extended gag out of Cary Grant (initially called by the star's name rather than that of his character, Dr. Barnaby Fulton) repeatedly attempting to make his entrance through a doorway, only to be sent back by the director's off-screen voice. His anticipated entrance into the movie



is in fact an exit – we will shortly learn that Barnaby is trying to leave his house and go to a party with his wife, Edwina (Ginger Rogers). After the credits, the initial joke is extended as Barnaby, distracted by thoughts of his scientific research, never actually gets beyond his front door. The conventional entrance that we are primed to anticipate never materialises, and this provides us with a suitably perverse and back-handed introduction to both the character of Barnaby and the film's wider comic world.

In its self-conscious presentation, the doorway entrance in *Monkey Business* is acknowledged as a convention, involving particular expectations surrounding the introduction of



characters and performers, the thwarting or delaying of which forms the basis for the gag. In this way, it is also made explicit that such conventions can be subject to manipulation and inflection, that certain dimensions or details can be varied to create different (in this case, comic) effects. The overtness of the manipulation in this instance can, among its other effects, remind us of the deliberateness with which conventional elements are deployed in Hawks' movies. In this context, it is clear that Dude's entrance in *Rio Bravo*, though treated less emphatically, is an equally deliberate deployment of the convention. Unlike Barnaby, Dude is not impeded by escalating comic complications. What impediments there may be are internal and personal, and this difference is reflected in the more intimate and restrained style with which his entrance is depicted. Nonetheless, we are still being introduced to Dude through an obviously conventional device, highlighted by its placement at the beginning of the movie. Pye argues that 'The compression of *Rio Bravo* is the result of a self-discipline based on understanding the possibilities inherent in the generic material' (1975: 41). The treatment of Dude's entrance, acknowledged as a familiar trope but situated in its own precise and distinctive context, suggests that the controlled and expressive handling of conventions in the movie extends beyond those specifically associated with the western.

Different types of convention are centrally important in *Rio Bravo*, not just as sources of meaning, but as part of the way in which the movie makes its complex perspective available to us. Every stage in the articulation of this perspective is built on and situated within commonplace elements. Hawks' movies, which often work distinctive variations on established and familiar material, present a particular kind of critical challenge: to characterise the complex interactions between generic and idiosyncratic features without artificially separating the conventions from their treatment or assuming the greater value of more obvious deviations. This challenge is intensified when writing about moments like the opening shot of *Rio Bravo*, which could seem to be merely functional. The shot is functional, of course, but, as I hope I have shown, its precise and subtle realisation rewards further attention. At the same time, we must also avoid inflating the significance of such moments in isolation. The value of the shot is best

appreciated in the contexts of the film to which it contributes and of the conventions to which it relates.

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