



by GARY HILL

Monte Walsh is a song being sung, not a film being accompanied — not even by Mama Cass:

"The good times are coming. They're coming real soon. And I ain't just pitchin' pennies at the moon."

The film itself is being sung.

Monte Walsh (Lee Marvin)

comes down from the mountains with Jack Palance, out of a winter hard enough to put them both out of work in a town called Harmony, where horseless cowboys blink and stare at eastern accountants. A giant consolidation firm in the east is cashing in what it can of the bankrupt land and livestock.

They take jobs from a range manager — anything they can do on a horse.

Scenes fade in and fade out like musical movements. They are not nailed to storytelling.

The film is not so much a story being told as it is short rhythms being hummed, and the people humming are whole people. There is more word and gesture information given about Marvin and Palance and Jean Moreau than the other characters, but not even the smallest parts slip into two-dimensionality or caricature out of convenience to a storyline.

The gestural language of the film is intimate.

Marvin and Palance, who have been cowboys together for a long time, sit on the porch with Palance about to tell Marvin he has decided to marry the Hardware Widow and stop being a cowboy. Marvin is dozing. Palance turns to nudge him but hesitates and scrapes instead the head of his match under the arm of Marvin's chair — enough to wake him gently to the bad news.

Action is not announced. Things simply happen, and there is no hurry to put these things into words. The weight of silence is felt, and the silence is respectful, nearly reverent.

Fighting Joe Hooker took the name of the general he rode under on Missionary Ridge in the war. He's old now, riding fence — a last man's job. When Marvin and Palance ride out with wire, the old man lights his pipe and stares out across the hills to the war. I had a good life, puff puff.

Can we do something?

No.

Later, Fighting Joe comes screaming down the ridge whipping his horse and kicking his way into death.

"He's coming down Missionary Ridge," says Marvin.

"He'll never make it," Palance answers.

"He don't want to."

The horse stumbles and the old man is thrown.

"I wonder if he felt anything."

"Yeah," says Marvin, "surprise."

The dialogue is human. Events aren't being talked about so much as people and their feelings are being opened up. The economy of the dialogue is matched by an economy of detail which approaches a spare form of iconography.

Jean Moreau cuts Marvin's hair and loves him, never charging him for either. At her death, he opens a hinged box in which she kept her scissors, his lock of hair and a clip of money she accepted from him when times were bad.

These details, like the gestures in the film, are simple reflections of the slow and unsurprising hard times. They are expressions of the quality of the lives being lived, weaving as they do inside of actions, words and movements.

This is important and hard for me to verbalize.

The film establishes its own sensory space, its own sensory terms. The objects of the film grow out from the action and feelings of the characters, and are rarified by the care with which they are rendered.

Marvin and Palance do more with cigarettes and matches and fingering each other's tobacco tins than most westerns do with charging armies and bloody Indians. And what is being done is the establishing of a sensory language belonging to the film itself.

There are no outside referents. The film establishes its own sensory terms from which the warm and meaty moments pull their strength, their warmth, their meat, their reality.

Shorty, the bronco buster, is first seen shooting a tobacco can off a split rail fence. Marvin knows Shorty from before, and shoots the can off just as Shorty draws — a joke. Shorty sets the can back up and draws again, this time firing at Marvin in the bunkhouse, flat on the floor. When Shorty comes to the window, his thumb and forefinger are a teasing gun, and he clicks his

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