
Moving Pieces

By Matthias Stork

[Moving Pieces - Sergio Leone's Duel](#) from [Matthias Stork](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The above video essay was borne out of a lifelong affection for Sergio Leone's renowned *Dollars* trilogy (*A Fistful of Dollars* [1964], *For A Few Dollars More* [1965], and *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* [1966]). It is also my personal attempt to define, in audiovisual terms, one of the crucial components of its iconography: the duel.

As a fledgling video essayist, the piece constitutes a departure for me. My previous work was, by design, fairly *analytical*.^[1] The first two parts of "Chaos Cinema" were essentially conceptualized as the illustration of a thesis, employing a linear structure that addresses specific, interrelated points of an overarching argument. Part three, though a tad more *laissez-faire* in its structure, equally aims for coherence, by virtue of a point-by-point checklist formula. Consequently, the essays rely largely upon voice-over narration which served as a constant reference point, indeed the guiding principle, for the aesthetic form. In other words, the selected scenes were put in service of a written text.

With "Moving Pieces" I aspired to engage with another approach to the video essay. I thus deliberately opted against a voice over. The idea was to use only few textual inserts and primarily focus on the editing, to *get in touch* with the film object. Written and vocalized comments turned into purely audiovisual ones. This conceptual shift posed quite a challenge for me because it required a re-conceptualization of the video essay, not as a vehicle for a written argument, but an argument in itself.

The resulting *poetic* design of the video essay completely reconfigured the standard I had previously cultivated for myself. Instead of a linear structure, "Moving Pieces" is informed by an associative editing schema. Instead of explicit words and inter-titles, it uses match cuts and dissolves, music cues, and text fragments to construct - what I hope is - a more cinematic discourse. And it does not flaunt its core argument at the very beginning and subsequently provide examples to corroborate it, but gradually builds towards a distinctively personal vision of the duel aesthetic in Leone's seminal Western films. This personal element accounts for the choice of the Ennio Morricone soundtrack from *A Few Dollars More* (1965), the quintessence of Leone's vision of the (Spaghetti) Western, a - partially - deeply melancholic and tragic film that critically

explores the personal ramifications of violence, much more than *Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*. Morricone's nostalgic, wistful tune sets the overriding atmosphere for the video essay.

My intra- and intertextual commentary on Leone's films is complemented by a further link with Clint Eastwood's iconic 'Man with No Name' character and Eastwood's own meta-textual treatise on his career and the Western genre, *Unforgiven* (1992). The oft-quoted line, voiced by Eastwood's William Munny — "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he's got and all he's ever going to have" — puts Leone's approach to the duel in perspective. The *Dollars* films seem to not engage with Eastwood's sermon, as popular discourse frames their use of violence as glorifying. While this cliché is true, to a certain extent at least, the related claim that violence itself is glorified, to me, is problematic. I propose that the violence of the duel is just one of many elements in Leone's stylized action cinema. The structure of the duel, the manner in which it is ritualistically staged and executed, marks it as a deeply human action, one that goes beyond pure spectacle.

Eastwood's quote opens the essay, and instigates my own search for more meaning. The essay concludes with a further quotation, one from Sir Christopher Frayling's book *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*.^[2] Frayling characterizes Leone's duel as a ballet of death, ascribing it a poetic elegance and beauty that clash with the brutality of death. It is in between *Unforgiven's* foundational critique and Frayling's astute observation that I attempt to locate and crystallize my own assumptions about the duel, as a series of moving pieces, grandiose, exuberant, and invariably poignant.

Endnotes:

[1] I am referring to Christian Keathley's distinction between "analytical" and "poetic" video essays. See Keathley, Christian, "La Caméra-Stylo: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia." *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*. Eds. Clayton, Alex and Klevan, Andrew. London: Routledge, 2011.

[2] Frayling, Christopher. *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*. London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan, Paul, 1981.

Copyright:

Frames #1 [Film and Moving Image Studies Re-Born Digital?](#) 2012-07-02,

