

# *Gun Crazy*: Cinematic Amour Fou

Arturo Silva

“The world moves on a woman’s hips.”  
– “The Great Curve,” The Talking Heads

Muero porque no muero. (I die because I do not die.)  
– St. Teresa of Avila

## Overture

A boy appears onscreen; he moves forward – straight towards us, as it were – and as he does the camera pulls back only to reveal that what we have assumed to be the neutral space of the screen-frame is in fact the *other side* of a glass storefront, before which the boy stops and looks in; cut to a medium shot of the boy, and now the camera pulls forward, closer, to record his gazing; cut to a subjective shot of that gaze, and the camera again moves forward, closer, on to a pistol. Now the boy moves back, but only to hurl a stone forward at the glass, *the screen*, which shatters.

With these early shots taken from *the other side of the screen*, followed by no less than three flashbacks (the other side of the story, let us say), *Gun Crazy* “begins.” But *Gun Crazy* is a film that desperately struggles against beginning. For once it does – once the lovers’ long-delayed meeting occurs, the film knows – as surely they must, and we along with them – that the only possible end – the film’s, theirs – is death. Bart and Laurie traverse a path – kiss > kill > die – that they are unable to escape from; and so, to stave off death the only real recourse they have to their forward movement is a continual circling round.

The film too seeks to stave off the forward momentum to its end (“The End”) by its own circling round, not only on the level of the narrative but on that of the image as well, in the camera’s sinuous long takes, its haunted – craning, zooming – gazing at the characters’ haunted gazes. The film describes a straight line – the characters meet, fall in love, go on a crime spree, get trapped and die – and a circle, the ever-recurring circles of a fatal *amour fou*.<sup>1</sup>

*Gun Crazy* is a “B” film become cult favorite become canonical text. Besides a 1996 BFI monograph, only look at Paul Schrader writing in 1971 – “one of the best American films ever made” – to his 2006 *Film Comment* article in which he includes it in his 60-film canon. Almost all *Gun Crazy* commentators regard the film as an example of *amour fou*, but no one really shows how that works cinematically, as I hope to do here. Gun crazy, love crazy – the glory that is *Gun Crazy* is cinematically crazy: its dizzying narrative style (forward, back, round again) matched by camerawork that obsessively and lovingly examines its subjects, performances that don’t stop combusting, and an end that not only takes place in what seems to be another world, but takes the film itself to a whole other level of wonder. This is the frenzy that is *Gun Crazy*, what we shall see throughout – from the film’s very beginning as described above, and especially once the film “takes off” – once the couple is on the road and on the run – we will be pulled “forward-round” about the explosive force that is the couple in “gun crazy love.” Bart is the “straight-shooter,” trying to plan ahead (a home, a family), but forever blinded by his utter thrall to Laurie, who only wants “Action!,” and thus the couple is in constant movement (sexual, criminal, cinematic). And in its intensity, this call to action can only drive them back upon themselves, in gesture, look, and even dialog. Action will occur “all over the place” while also returning to its origins on both the micro and macro levels. Some of the dialog will discuss the most basic existential questions (dream and reality; community and isolation) while also hinging upon the subtle placement of a comma; some looks will construct a *mise-en-abyme* of self-loss, while others will go unregarded. A young couple on the run seems to create its own aesthetic, and in this case, the story of Bart and Laurie is no ordinary narrative, more rather a succession of insistent images, pure intensities – performances, looks, dialogs, and clinches. Bart and Laurie create their world, and they explode it in a death coda fittingly set in a savage and poetic landscape.

This essay acts as a complement to Jim Kitses masterful BFI monograph. Surely Kitses is correct in much of his analysis – the film’s political “anti-Americanness,” Laurie definitely not being a *femme fatale*, the success of the film being dependent on the work of all the personnel involved, and many other points (though he does not single out the camerawork as I do). As a complement, my work seeks to shift the focus from the dispassionate-analytic to the passionate-analytic. The detailed analysis will follow certain tropes and images – circles, lines, looks; mouths, ears, frames – with some necessary overlap. And perhaps too in my own forward momentum – as I look at the film as it unfolds as well as circling round and round certain features (Laurie’s looks, dialogs), I hope to match the film in literary style.

But back to death and its look(ing). How to avoid the inevitable end? Ignore it, deny it – that is, look away. Bart, and especially Laurie look out, off, away, as if *somewhere out there* were release. But what is more striking than their own looking is that of the camera – Russell Harlan’s camera, that is – ever inquiring, itself caught up in the delirium that is the lovers’ passion; it too wants to experience everything it can as intensely as possible in the little time allowed it, and thus the viewer becomes strongly aware of the insistent presence of this camera, its push-pull/fuck me-fuck you rhythm, its continual moving in, on, and circling round these two characters. It is an almost “forensic” camera: does it think that by looking closer it will look deeper? What truth does it hope to reveal? Or does it simply point to the truth of the surface and human unknowability? (We may “understand” Bart’s dilemma, but can we or anyone ever truly understand Laurie?)

As mentioned, the camera belongs to Russell Harlan, and certainly one of the major reasons for the film’s success must be attributed to him. Previous to shooting *Gun Crazy* he had shot André de Toth’s *Ramrod* (1947) and Howard Hawks’ *Red River* (1948), after a decade of filming dozens of oaters. In the 1950s he would become an A-list cinematographer, shooting among many other films, at least five more for Hawks including *Rio Bravo* (1959) and *Hatari!* (1962), as well as Vincente Minnelli’s *Lust for Life* (1955). Commentators are in agreement that Lewis favored lots of camera movement, and Charles Tesson speaks in specific reference to *Gun Crazy* of the fever that “seizes a camera resonating to the madness of the characters” (in Routt, in the 1997 “Tributes” section); Lewis himself called Harlan’s work “masterful” (Ruhmann, Schwartz and Conway, 20). He is said

to have favored cinematographers with dramatic, concrete styles (Thompson, second paragraph); he also worked with Burnett Guffey and John Alton. Finally, Hawks biographer Todd McCarthy writes of Harlan being a “no-nonsense former stuntman with a rarefied artistic side” (419) – just the stuff for an ambitious B-film director like Lewis. But the question of to whom we can most properly attribute the film’s exquisite camerawork must remain an open one as it is difficult to distinguish precisely who is responsible for what. For example, the haunting shot of Laurie at a window (described anon) is echoed in a similar shot in Lewis’s much weaker 1955 Western *Lawless Street*. In the Harlan films just mentioned, I cannot discern any of the baroque flourishes that so distinguish his work in *Gun Crazy*, which is, of course, *sui generis* in Lewis’s own oeuvre. As Kitses remarks, quoting Lewis, we will just have to take it on trust that *Gun Crazy* was “the accomplishment of many, many minds.”

### **When Does *Gun Crazy* Begin?**

The opening scene as described above continues as the boy is caught by a policeman, then dissolves into his trial and its three flashbacks, all of which take us farther from the diegetic present-day narrative beginning.<sup>2</sup> The three are these: 1) In a straight line back in time, we see the boy – even younger now – and his grief over killing a baby chick; 2) the slightly older boy – that is, about the time of the opening theft – refuses to kill a mountain lion; and 3) also around the same time, the boy refuses to give up his pistol to his teacher (he’s brought it to school!). The trial sequence ends with the camera moving forward on to an extreme close-up of Bart’s ear as the judge passes sentence – his voice echoing in the boy’s ear; there is a brief fade to black and a loud ringing of a telephone. This belongs to the boy’s sister Ruby, and we learn he has come back home and the film has thus been thrust forward about eight years in time, finally, to the present – this arrival coming wholly twelve minutes into the film. In other words, the seeming present of the film, of the young pistol thief, was no present at all, more perhaps of a prelude or even a “back-story.” All these temporal changes, then, have been nothing more than a long drawn-out delay, an avoidance of our main character’s destiny; as with a cinematic “appointment in Samarra,” we believe death (the narrative) to be in one place only to discover that it is in another.

The first sequence then consists of Bart’s theft and trial, while the second opens with his coming back to Cashville, or, we might say,

his coming forward in time. Although this sequence establishes, finally, the film in the present, it is still not yet the real story's beginning: after all, *Gun Crazy* is the story of Bart and Laurie (John Dahl and Peggy Cummins), and she has not yet appeared. Of course, it might be said that the story is really Bart's and concerns his overcoming his reluctance to kill – hence justifying the “backstory” of his childhood and denying the full force of Laurie's character, turning her into a mere *deus ex machina* for Bart's neurosis. Yes, Bart has to overcome his aversion to murder, but more importantly, he must overcome his thralldom to Laurie – which, in the end, he, happily, cannot. While redeeming the little boy who killed the chick and stole the pistol, by killing her, some might say, he also (happily?) performs his own castration. Applying Oedipus here, however, would explain everything – and nothing. That way leads toward sanity, reason, normal life, exemplified best by the judge who sentences Bart to reform school, cousin surely to the judge in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1957).

Soon Laurie does appear – at minute fourteen – in a dramatic shot-reverse-shot of their meeting as she ascends up and forward from below the frame and Bart leans forward in his seat (FIGURES 2 AND 3), followed by Laurie's hip-swiveling shooting exhibition(ism) (upside-down, between her legs), in which the viewer is certainly as torn as Bart as to where to focus his (sic) attention, to those hips or to her markswomanship (FIGURE 4). Let me say rather that the film *almost* begins now, is *preparing* to begin, but Packie and the circus are in the way. It is not until the film gets rid of them, not until Bart and Laurie get on the road alone together – that is, when they achieve the goal of the Hollywood feature, the formation of the couple – that we can really say the film has begun. With this further twist in time – the usual Hollywood end is achieved early in a film that has, as it were, begun late – *Gun Crazy* really begins; that is, twenty-seven minutes into this eighty-seven minute movie. Let us call the lovers then – like their movie – “late beginners.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Lovers**

But who are Laurie and Bart? Who are these lovers whom life has dealt a losing hand, thrown a sucker punch, and given a raw deal? Like Bowie and Keechie of Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948), they were “never properly introduced to the world.” Bart Tare grew up fatherless, stole a gun because guns make him “feel good,” spent four years in reform school, followed by time in the army. Annie Laurie

Starr spent some years in Brighton – her father took her there – has been “kicked around” all her life, and killed a man in St. Louis. Never properly introduced indeed. But in fact Laurie is twice introduced to us (and to Bart as a fellow audience member) by Packie as “the famous, the dangerous, the beautiful,” and “so appealing, so dangerous, so lovely to look at”; equally apt might be the famous triplet concerning Byron, “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” She tells Bart she wants “to be good” (a remark that slides right past him), but neither she nor we much believe her.

What a magnificent creature Laurie is! Think only of her reaction to Bart when, in a pique of angst, he describes the possibility of their being alone forever, eternal outcasts from the normal world, to which she coolly replies, “What’s the matter, Bart?” She has no ethical conception whatsoever regarding what he is saying! Everyday reality, dream, goodness, evil – these terms mean nothing to her, are in fact beneath her reality. Bart, of course, is a good guy whose hormones respond to a woman who is as good a shot as he is. The only thing is, she happens to be dangerous; after all, as she says of herself, “I can only kill.” We might further say that Bart and Laurie are devoid of identities or interior selves other than those “I can only kill” and “Guns make me feel good”; or, let us say that whatever selves or pasts they may possess are consumed by their passion for each other. Hence, appropriately, the many costumes and disguises we see them in – as mock royals in crowns of wax, as cowboys, goodie-goodies, a soldier (Bart), Armour employees (FIGS. 4-9) – seem as natural to them as does the role of a pair of thieves, and one of them a killer. Are the costumes mere tools of their trade, or rather do they connote for us the variously possible permutations of personality? Can we really offer any sure answer to the question, “Who are Bart and Laurie?” other than to say that they are their images, these surfaces of costume and makeup? Likewise, while Bart is afraid of being called a coward (in the mountain lion scene), Laurie is afraid of appearing to be one (“I get so scared I can’t even think. I can just kill.”). Like two naturally attracted forces – on a star-crossed moral map theirs is a case of elective affinity – they meet – and move on to their natural destiny. Further, while his name seems to double back upon itself – (B)art Tare – hers – Starr – contains his. Bart’s conflicts, doubts, moral misgivings, will never make Laurie stop her shooting spree, nor, given her verbal and physical declarations of love, could he ever leave her. We understand this – and

not only because of narrative conventions; indeed, we understand it even better than they at the very moment they meet – “Uh-oh, that couple’s never gonna make it.” Kin to Bowie and Keechie, but also to Joan and Eddie (from Fritz Lang’s *You Only Live Once*, 1937), Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1966), even – Kitses’s suggestion – Lady Macbeth and Hamlet, and, more deliriously and appropriately – crime, sex, cinema – let us not forget Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow from Michael McClure’s controversial 1965 play *The Beard*, the last stage directions and lines of which read:

(Kneeling, THE KID ... grasps her thighs and presses his face between them, kissing her. HARLOW stiffens and arches her body ...)

HARLOW (Ecstatically): STAR! STAR! STAR! OH MY GOD! ... STAR! STAR! STAR!

Like Harlan’s camera, let us look even closer at the lovers. Despite his verbosity (John Dahl’s characteristic nervous delivery), the switch in time from the flashbacks to the present establishes the centrality of Bart’s ear (FIG. 11) to his role as passive listener to Laurie’s voice and the mouth that she so delights in. In the scene on the night before their first holdup, she (standing) speaks to him (sitting) from above and behind his head (Fig. 12). At one point in this scene we have separate close-ups of their faces in profile as she speaks again to the back of his head; finally, when they do face each other, she turns away from him. The scene ends with her suggesting that they end their relationship as they began it, “on the level” – this “level” being sexual, in the bed on which she lies, as Kitses sees it. And when, following the Hampton job, he worries over shooting at a man, she tells him reassuringly that she loves him by speaking to his ear (as he is driving). (FIG. 13). The calm she creates for him immediately explodes into the Rangers & Growers job with its famous shot of them as “daylight vampires” (FIG. 14). Though they do occasionally glance at or speak eye-to-eye to each other, this avoidance of exchanged looks is generally maintained throughout the film – until the end, of course – which also manages to keep the number of conventional shot/reverse-shots low. It is only when they are in an absolute panic, in their hotel in Los Angeles, following her “I can just kill” declaration (to Bart’s back), that they break down and look closely into each other’s eyes as Laurie, for once, succumbs to Bart, “I’ll do anything you say” (FIGS. 15 AND 16).

Both being gunslingers, it is natural that their hands are also central to their characters, but with a difference. Three times we see Bart's hand, his grip, but in these instances we read his agony: first as a child after he has shot the chick; and a moment later after refusing to shoot the mountain lion and Clyde fires away; finally, in the "on the level" scene when he has to decide between his idea of a decent life ("What's your idea of living?" "It's not forty bucks a week. ... When are you going to begin to live?") or one with Laurie (FIG. 17). More tellingly, we have only one significant – and endearing – shot of Laurie's hand, and that is during the shooting challenge at the circus when Laurie offers her ring to cover for the \$500 Packie offers, and we see her/Peggy Cummins' unexpectedly short fat fingers (FIG. 18; no "hand doubles" on B productions, presumably). Further, Bart is rigid (again, characteristically Dahl), a straight line; we rarely see him relax. Laurie, on the other hand, is – again, true to our first swiveling sight of her – all curves, nervous movement, and ever true to her declaration, "I want action!", a line that also places her in such good cinematic company as Lana Turner in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959) when she declares to her boyfriend, "I'm going up and up and up!"

Despite these oppositions – ear and mouth, rigidity and movement – they are united in the whorls of their passion, and so their element is air – speed, flight – and in the end they are undone by fire and water – gunfire and sunrise, the exhausting humidity of the marsh – and so, appropriately, when they die, they are left breathless.

### Circles and Lines

The two strategies I have mentioned pertaining to *Gun Crazy* are also strategies of passion – the straight line of a desire wholly and solely intent on its object; the circle of that obsessive desire coming round and round to its object – and in this case, one that is doomed. What is all this but, as I have said, a real bad case of *amour fou*? Mad love is not a dinner party, it is not pretty or romantic (in the common, dull sense of the term); it is, rather, obsessive, delirious, against all bourgeois morality – though it is highly moral in the best sense: it insists on human liberty, and it is an absolute that is freely chosen; it is – or should be – revolutionary. Indeed, Paul Kerr remarks that "Peggy Cummins turns in a staggering performance that threatens, singlehanded, to overthrow the cultural and sexual certainties of middle American life." *Amour fou* is intensely felt in both body and soul, "pure



and licentious in the Absolute," as Surrealist poet Robert Desnos says. Moral and erotic then. The erotics of *Gun Crazy* are driven by Laurie: in her self-admiring in mirrors, and at her mouth especially; in the camera's obsessive gazing at her; when she tells Bart, "I love you" and that declaration is immediately followed by a burglar alarm (B film production shorthand for orgasm); in her insistence to him that she is "real"; in her emerging from her bath in a white bathrobe and then donning black nylons *for their night in*. Although seeming so, Bart is not wholly passive to her insistence on "action!" – his life-affirming hard-on is the only appropriate response to her "I can only kill." Given the restrictions of the Hollywood Production Code at the time, their crime spree is obviously to be read as a metaphor of their sex life.<sup>4</sup>

Mad love takes many forms, in cinema anything from the eponymous film by Buñuel to the Surrealists' much loved (however silly we may regard it now) *Peter Ibbetson* (Henry Hathaway, 1935). Others would include *Ossessione* (Luchino Visconti, 1943) and *Ai no Corrida/Relam of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976). In literature we need only mention *Wuthering Heights*, which Georges Bataille called the most passionate book ever written, or André Breton's eponymous memoir and meditation. One of the most famous examples of a mad – and doomed – love occurs in the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*. The second circle of Hell, the realm of the lustful, is dark and filled with screams and relentless winds; it relates the tale of Francesca da Rimini and her fatal passion for her brother-in-law. However one interprets the episode,<sup>5</sup> according to Dante's system, the lovers are punished for an excess of physical passion, for *submitting their reason to desire* ("che la ragion sommettono al talento", *Inferno*, V, 39), and their punishment ("contrapasso," or poetic justice) is to be eternally buffeted round and round by tempestuous winds just as their desire had propelled them forward against all measure. Accordingly, in *Gun Crazy* we see this selfsame figure of unceasing movement, of going everywhere and nowhere in circles: all over America.<sup>6</sup> They live by night, indeed: and in their darkness they hear the modern equivalents of Dantean screams and howls – gunshots and sirens.

In *Gun Crazy* repetition and recurrence are expressly used, like links in a chain of love, as figures of the very condition of Bart and Laurie's world. Again and again throughout the film we return to the same or similar scene. The bottles lined up on a tree branch in the mountain lion scene are later echoed by the candles of the "crown" in

the circus shooting contest. Bart's death occurs in the same mountains, and, of course, he returns to his hometown twice, following his stint in the army and following his and Laurie's failure to get out of the United States. Likewise, while their story begins in a carnival, its dénouement begins in something like another, the circus and nightclub in Los Angeles. Scenes of the police pursuit are seen many times. We repeatedly return to the couple in disguise. Bart has five ruptures of angst that he expresses in dialogs with Laurie that seem to go in circles, something like, "I'm worried/I love you/Bang bang."<sup>7</sup> The nine-shot honeymoon montage is an excellent episode of circularity bound by their wedding rings: the first shot is of a jewelry shop and the last a pawnshop, this cycle also being a line of decline. And of course, fatally, Laurie's "shooting" Bart with blanks when they meet is turned upon itself when he shoots her for real at the end of the film.

Circles are simple matters; straight lines are more complex. They are like the labyrinth Borges speaks of that is a straight line. Examples of straight-ahead movement are equally if not more striking as many of them also involve some degree of circular (or, better, curving) camera movement; this too is where I believe the film's real poetry lies. I have already highlighted the forward movement of the opening scene – young Bart's theft of the pistol – and its criss-crossing/shot/reverse-shot intensity of back and forth movement of both the camera and the character. As I mentioned, the camera pulls back to reveal that it has been placed inside the hardware store's display window, which has a reeling effect upon us as if we have moved from the surface of the screen to *behind* it (FIG. 19). Likewise, when Bart enters Laurie's trailer in order to defend her against Packie, the rapid shot/reverse-shot ends from *behind* the mirror that Bart's bullet has shattered, effectively leaving the movie screen torn (FIG. 20).

Examples of forward camera movement abound, many of them not as telling as those just mentioned, but cumulatively creating a certain dynamism in the film. These include the move-in on young Bart as he aims at the chick – aiming at aiming, as it were; moving in on the teacher as she introduces the third flashback, a shot that is complemented by a backward movement as the flashback opens with a view of her; tracking in on the *Cashville News* window (framing Dave, a type of image we shall see again); closing in on Bart and Laurie as she seduces him into the first robbery in the hotel bedroom scene ("What's it got you being so particular?"), and again as she

speaks to him from behind his head. The camera also closes in on Laurie's bag and the gun she takes out of it during the ride with the man whose car she steals for the Hampton job. One last example of a zig-zag line: during the Armour job sequence, the camera follows Laurie's gaze as she watches "the old biddie" enter her office, then pans back to Laurie, and then back and up and close to Laurie's point-of-view of the clock.

A couple more significant examples of forward movement will soon be described when I look at "the looks of *Gun Crazy*." The sequence shot of the Hampton job is justly famous, but in particular I want to point to the moment when, after Bart has gone into the bank, Laurie gets out of the car to speak with a policeman. The camera moves forward, following her until it stops and frames her in the car window, a movement that is repeated later when in Los Angeles Bart gets out of a taxi to buy a newspaper and the camera follows and frames him in the car window. The camera closes in on her again later as she turns to look back to see if the police are in pursuit (once more, forward movement and back). A variation of this last bit comes a few moments later following the Rangers & Growers job. Here, she drives, looking forward, as he looks back at the police in forward pursuit. And, as Bart climbs into the back seat of the automobile he moves forward, again approaching the camera as much as the screen. Again, Lewis cuts between the two faces (Laurie urging Bart to "Shoot!"), showing their cross-purposes: Laurie being (sexually) excited at the possibility of killing; Bart confused and anxious over that possibility, and again his enthralment to her voice and its urgings (FIG. 21).

Perhaps the most exquisite example of circular movement is one that does not actually occur in the film, that remains virtual, and is, most likely, another example of B-film budget limitations. Following the Armour job, the couple make it to their getaway cars – they plan to spend a couple of months apart till the heat cools down. They say goodbye and begin to speed off in differing directions, but their passion prevents their separation and they turn back with Bart getting into Laurie's car, where they embrace, desire triumphing here over reason and a deadly end they must surely acknowledge. Only think what this little scene might have looked like had the production had more money to rent a helicopter: a single shot from the air would have shown the cars taking off and then turning back to form more than a figure eight but the sign describing their eternal union! (FIGS. 22 & 23)

## Looks and Frames

Although *Gun Crazy* indulges in some subjective shots – young Bart’s looking at the gun in the shop window in the opening; Bart and Laurie’s “blind” looks into the fog at the end – and conventional shot-reverse-shots, it is the looks of the camera and the characters, especially those of Laurie that stand out. Conventionally, we think of the camera’s look and the viewer’s as working alongside each other, but here we might say that *we look at the camera’s act of looking* as it snakes forward, closer to its object, and we sit back astonished while also taking in the narrative. The camera’s look then has more to do with movement and looking; it is an excessive case of scopophilia, a baroque self-indulgence and of metacinematic self-consciousness. Here I would like to examine those many haunting looks – character looks – especially those that are doubly-framed, that is by both the screen and, usually, a window frame. Again, the scene when Bart shoots at Packie begins with Laurie in an erotic exchange of looks with herself in the mirror (that pouting mouth) as she fixes her makeup for what she thinks will be a date with Bart. When Packie enters her frame he invades her self-reverie, and so accordingly he must be (narratively) eliminated (FIG. 24). Moments later, their honeymoon funds exhausted (“What a fool I was to think we could buck Las Vegas”), they are sitting at the end of a diner in a deep focus shot with the cook foregrounded; he turns and looks directly into the camera and scowls. And seconds later, as they leave the diner and enter their car, the camera moves in on Laurie in the passenger’s seat, framed in the car door window, as she again fixes her lipstick while – self-framed – gazing into a pocket mirror. In this condition – and not offering Bart a single glance – she brings up her idea of committing a robbery, to which he naturally succumbs (FIG. 25). The intensity here lies in this combination of Laurie being multiply-framed – screen, window, mirror – this triple distance serving to draw Bart further in. This might be compared to the “on the level” scene where the effect – Bart’s compliance – is the same, though without this complexity of framing, although we should certainly consider the bed a frame of sorts.

## Looks and Talk

It is here too, between the Hampton and Armour jobs, that Bart suffers his great doubts. In the first, dressed in a soldier’s uniform, he confesses to Laurie, “Everything’s going so fast ... I wake up

sometimes. It's as if none of it really happened, as if nothing were real anymore." And her splendid answer, "Next time you wake up, Bart, look over at me lying there beside you. I'm yours, and I'm real." To which he replies, only half comprehending her (and himself), "Yes, but you're the only thing that is, Laurie. The rest is a nightmare." This short dialog is a marvelous expression of their free and absolute union: together they constitute their only reality. The shot fades out and then fades in to one of the most haunting images in the entire film. It begins as a long shot of a snowy field in Montana, a train traveling in the background, and the side of a building with a window of nine panels, and then moves closer and closer until the frame is dominated by the mist and snow-encircled frame of one of the window panes, in which we see Laurie, her face outlined in bright white light like some medieval frescoed angel (FIG. 26); her eyes survey the scene and she moves away in seeming disgust at (only?) being snowed in. But it expresses so much more: her frustration with the weather – nature itself – with her and Bart's lack of progress, and perhaps with her life itself, her very aloneness. A conventional film would have cut between the long establishing shot to the close-up; instead, the long sinuous dolly-in is inquiring and evocative. Laurie comes in and sits by Bart and he commences: "Didn't you ever think of this? Didn't it ever occur to you that once we started we could never ask anybody for help, no matter if we were dying, for the rest of our lives. [Note how, despite Dahl's insertion of two quick commas, the phrase yet possesses a certain ambiguity.] We're all alone, always will be. Didn't you ever give it a thought?" And then, magnificently, as described earlier, she responds to him – following her equally but silent existential gaze out the window – "What's the matter, Bart?" To interpret further, we can say that something has happened to her since the Hampton job and her telling Bart that she is "real." Laurie has entered another realm of her delirium; she is on another moral plane, well beyond good and evil. In fact, we might say that she is so far gone that her "solution" to Bart's crisis is nothing less (and nothing more unexpected) than to agree with him, to declare that she too has had enough of their way of life. But in order to turn straight she proposes "one more job" (that's our girl!), and after once more successfully seducing him, she concludes – in a line certainly the most removed from reality – "Oh, Bart, we'll grow old together."

## **Innocence, Death, Freedom**

Following the Armour job, they come to California, and Bart accedes to Laurie's wish to stop for a while by the ocean, which she has missed since her childhood with her father. Settled in, we see her framed once more in a window, and we see the seaside she is gazing on as if in a reverie of youthful innocence (FIG. 27). Bart has his final "agenbite of inwit" here when he reads about the two people killed in Albuquerque. His line, – "Two people dead, just so we can live without working!" – unfortunately always gets a laugh in the cinema, but it should be seen as an expression of the Surrealist demand for freedom from mundane constraints.

And then everything changes, things fall apart, and we know death is nigh. Much of the system may remain in place, but telltale signs occur, including – worst cut of all – the camera gliding right past them. But poetry will remain at a high level, even in this short exchange that begins with Bart asking Laurie:

Why?  
Why did you do it?  
Why do you have to murder people?  
Why can't you let them live?

To which she gives five responses:

Because I had to.  
Because I was afraid.  
Because they would have killed you.  
Because you're the only thing I've got in the whole world.  
Because I love you.

She then finally succumbs to Bart with further repetition:

I'll do anything you want,  
anything, Bart,  
anything you say,  
anything.

It is with this unnaturally submissive Laurie that the death knell is sounded. We are back in the hotel with Laurie one last time gazing upon herself self-embraced in a fur. Actually, it is once again a triple embrace: she is encircled by the fur, by the mirror frame, and by the screen frame (FIG. 28). Bart agrees to her wish for an evening out after once more weirdly mentioning settling down and raising "those kids

we talked about once.” A quick cut brings them back to a circus and them – the vampires gone mad – racing wildly round a roller-coaster (FIG. 29) and a merry-go-round, curved and circular and straight up and down forms both. In a ballroom, they dance to a song called, not insignificantly, “Mad About You.” It is all like a perverted version of the honeymoon scene, a quick trip through the circus (rides, popcorn), romance, dancing, innocence regained for one last night.

But when Bart notices the G-men they begin their flight. Laurie drops her treasured fur, but unlike the Armour job she cannot return to fetch it – movement is now insistently forward, there is no circling back. Then we see an empty window on an alley wall, and the pair suddenly rush past it as we see their reflections in it (FIG. 30) What’s wrong with this picture?, we wonder. Shouldn’t the camera move forward, observe Laurie as she observes her reflection? Isn’t this the proper order of things? It was, but no more: like the cinema, they appear and disappear, leaving only a trace of their time and presence – in Cocteau’s phrase, what we are watching here is “death at work.” And just a moment later as they sit in a taxi, the heroic camera work of the Hampton job now goes awry: instead of acting as their accomplice and moving forward with them, it moves now from front to back – and *past them* to the rear window and the anonymous city lights beyond (FIG. 31).

They come to Ruby’s, and we see them window-framed once more, Laurie looking in on a family life that will never be hers – putting the lie to any thought of raising kids in Mexico (FIG. 32). (For that matter, what kind of parent could we possibly imagine her becoming? After all, a moment later, she comments to Ruby, in one of those clichés people use when they feel uncomfortable being around children, “Gee, what cute kids.” The following day she is ready to kidnap one of them to use as a hostage!) That day too Bart meets for the last time with Clyde and Dave, and departs the screen with a *descent* (complementing our first view of Laurie when she *ascended* into the frame FIG. 33)

Then the penultimate stage of their flight, in the car and on foot, reckless, wayward, curved, zig-zagged. Like the Los Angeles alley window shot just described, they appear for a moment framed by the car door window, but soon disappear from it too. As they rest against a tree the camera typically moves in on their faces. Better yet, in the evening, as they approach the site of their death – we see it in the

background – they stand with their backs to us, and the high-angled camera once more moves in on them as they turn their heads back, towards the camera, towards us and the screen, in a last lost look that might also be read as an acknowledgment of that camera that has so stuck with them (FIG. 34). Later yet again, the camera takes one more carressive look, moving from a distance to a close-up of Bart as he lies on the ground, breathing exhaustedly. Something beside him stirs, and we realize it is the back of Laurie's head. They share the tight frame as she admits her fear, and he reminisces about camping with Dave and Clyde, as her eyes, like the camera, finally explore his mouth and face in a close-up worthy of Sergio Leone (FIG. 35).

And then, as if they have passed on to another realm – finally, away from the rain-drenched street of Bart's arrest, from the cheap circus tents and intolerable nights with Packie ("You're a two-bit guy") – their eyes open on to a waking dream, reality and dream finally one (FIG. 36), a fog-filled Chinese-like landscape that is not unreminiscent of the marsh in Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) (FIG. 37). Laurie remarks, "Bart, we're in real trouble this time." (Where does her faith to go on fighting come from? Hadn't she recently admitted defeat?) Their physical end is all too simple, almost stately compared to what has preceded. Very tight singles and doubles, medium and close shots, plain cutting among sounds and looks at the reeds and fog – the sobriety of the editing, the sublimity of the setting, and the awfulness of the end, this is all that is left. Laurie, growing tense at her loss of control – she has no visible target – can only shout, four times, "I'll kill you!" – and is shot by Bart, finally, crazily, proving that he is "not a killer." If regarded conventionally as simply Bart's story (his long opening backstory, how late Laurie enters), then he kills her so as to save his friends' lives and thus come full circle in his resolution with straight, regulated society. But this is to miss the whole wild thrust of the film, their crazy desire and incompatibility with any society outside their own. Bart's final gunshots are their final kiss; it is an act of affirmation, of mercy and love, mutual sacrifice attesting once again to their independence of the world of "law and order." (Kitses sees the pair as a modern Romeo and Juliet, p. 67; Martin calls the film "a love story" and even speaks of its "joy," p. 85) The camera moves in on their fallen bodies a final time, and the rest is silence, normal, waking life, as the camera cranes away, respectful and at a distance, and we see the small clump of reeds where the false world of Clyde



and Dave has seemed to triumph (Fig. 38), but too where Bart and Laurie will no longer have to go on dying for the rest of their lives.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The film is thus a “circle-and-line” narrative, in the same way that Richard Roud describes Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* (1965) in his Introduction to the English translation of the script (Simon and Schuster, 1966). Many commentators (Naremore, Kerr, Meisel, Thompson, et al) regard *Gun Crazy* as a precursor of New Wave aesthetics and especially influential on Godard’s *Breathless* (1960); and, I would add as well, his *Pierrot le Fou* (1965).

<sup>2</sup> One might go even further and say that the film doesn’t even know its own name: originally titled *Deadly is the Female*, the credits make it look like *Hotel Gun Crazy* (FIGURE 1), with the dizzying implication that this story, this love and fate are not restricted to the couple in the movie – everyone is welcome, we are all potentially “gun crazy.”

<sup>3</sup> Allow a brief extravagance, and let us imagine a sort of “purified” *Gun Crazy*: over the next few minutes they get married, go on their honeymoon, become broke, Bart has his first fit of angst, and in a rapid montage they perform four robberies. The rest of the film – except for the end – is comprised of scenes that are basically repetitions, doublings and expansions of almost everything we see from the scene of their marriage to the four robberies and police pursuit. The major robberies (the Hampton and Armour jobs) may become more elaborate, more police may chase them, and, yes, two people are killed, but essentially, these forty or so minutes are variations on a theme, little more. Let me envision then a shorter *Gun Crazy*, one that excludes this long, exciting-but-unnecessary middle: it begins with the exchange of glances (her swiveling hips, his desiring eyes) of Laurie and Bart meeting in the circus, and cuts quickly to the two in their car, followed by the marriage-to-robberies scenes, and then concludes with the final cop chase, their exhausting tramp through the mountains, and their death in the marsh. Who cares about Packie, Clyde and Dave, Bart’s family, or even the glories of the Hampton job and the dead “biddie” of the Armour? What have they to do with a young couple alive, alone, and doomed? A twenty-minute *Gun Crazy* then, as pure as Bart and Laurie’s passion, love and death. All else is filler, an early testament to the truth of the 25-word pitch.

<sup>4</sup> Though the parallel is not exact, we might see them as akin to the couple of Arturo Ripstein's *Virgin of Lust* (2002): the opium-and-wine addicted whore Lola dominates her masochistic and fetishistic would-be lover Nacho, till in the end he becomes a political assassin – he murders Franco – and she finally succumbs to him. So, Bart is in thrall to Laurie till he can overcome not only his thralldom to her but also his aversion to killing only by killing her.

<sup>5</sup> The classic view was of a romantic couple undone by an excess of passion; twentieth century criticism would have Francesca a vain creature and her lover manipulated by her. Without drawing too fine a line between poem and film, it should be pointed out that the fifth canto also concerns the relation between love and death and between passion and art; as Teodolinda Barolini states, the canto is “a scene that is powerfully specular, a *mise en abyme* where our passions are engaged as we read of passionate readers reading about passion.” (This comes from her entry on “Francesca da Rimini” in *The Dante Encyclopaedia*, Garland, 2000.) Or, in a word, is *Gun Crazy* capable of making viewers love crazy too?

<sup>6</sup> By my reckoning, they visit Niagara Falls, Yellowstone, and Las Vegas on their honeymoon; in California the San Lorenzo Mountains and Pasadena (or Los Angeles or Bay City, it is never made clear which exactly); as well as Montana and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>7</sup> The five are these: 1. The “on the level” hotel scene. 2. Just after the Hampton job, dressed as goodie-goodies, he wonders about the bank clerk who had wondered if he was “on the level” about using his gun, and Laurie interrupts and quashes his doubts with an “I love you.” 3. When he is dressed as a soldier and remarks, “Nothing is real anymore,” and she asserts her reality. 4. In Montana, his anguish over being alone forever (and again her wondering what could possibly be wrong!). 5. In the Los Angeles hotel, his reading about the two dead Armour employees.

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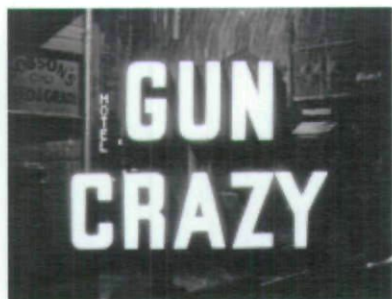


Fig. 1 Hotel Gun Crazy



Fig. 2 Laurie Ascending



Fig. 3 Bart Leaning Forward



Fig. 4 Laurie Swiveling



Fig. 5 Disguises 1: Gun Queen Laurie



Fig. 6 Disguises 2: Gun King Bart



Fig. 7 Disguises 3: Work clothes



Fig. 8 Disguises 4: Nice, Young Couple



Fig. 9 Disguises 5: Soldier Bart: "It doesn't feel like me."



Fig. 10 Disguises 6: Armour Employees: "I've got a girlfriend who works in the front-office."



Fig. 11 Bart's Ear



Fig. 12 The Voice in Bart's Ear 1: "When are you going to begin to live?"



Fig. 13 The Voice in Bart's Ear 2: "I love you," followed by burglar alarm.



Fig. 14 Les Vampires, day



Fig. 15 The Voice in Bart's Ear 3: "I can just kill."



Fig. 16 Finally face to face. "I'll do anything."



Fig. 17 Bart's Hand



Fig. 18 Laurie's fingers



Fig. 19 The Other Side of the Screen 1: Behind the Cracked Window



Fig. 20 The Other Side of the Screen 2: Behind the Cracked Mirror



Fig. 21 Hampton, Cross-purposes: "Shoot!"



Fig. 22 Infinite Desire, Laurie



Fig. 23 Infinite Desire, Bart



Fig. 24 The Woman in the Mirror 1



Fig. 25 The Woman in the Mirror 2



Fig. 26 The Woman in the Window 1



Fig. 27 The Woman in the Window 2



Fig. 28 The Woman in the Mirror 3



Fig. 29 Les Vampires, Night



Fig. 30 Window and Mirror, "Death at Work"



Fig. 31 Hampton in Reverse



Fig. 32 At Ruby's Window



Fig. 33 Bart Descending



Fig. 34 Looking Back at the Look Forward



Fig. 35 Face to Face, Mouth to Mouth



Fig. 36 Waking Dream



Fig. 37 Sunrise, Dreamscape



Fig. 38 The False World



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