

On *The Revenant*

I just finished watching *The Revenant* (2016) directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu. Here is a film that very much relies on the great American landscape, which had not been cinematically incorporated in depth before this film (at least I think). The landscape is masterfully shot not only to mirror the psychological conditions of each character (notably two characters well played by Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hardy) but also to emphasize the natural dictation of survival. Here in this film, survival is not portrayed in the sense of “survival of the fittest” but rather is portrayed as “the nature’s gift”. In the film nature ceaselessly offers food, water, shelter, clothes, and medication. Further, no human and no animal is killed by the conditions of nature (even at its harsh conditions) – each kill is committed by humans due to their own logic of survival. The main character’s logic of survival is that “as long as you are able to breathe you must push through life”. What is yours?

Although the way in which the film incorporates landscape closely resembles how Andrei Tarkovsky explored landscapes and the natural elements in all seven of his films, *The Revenant* does not reach the level of concentration that Tarkovsky’s films were able to manifest on screen. It is mainly due to the fact that the shots in *The Revenant* are cut too fast, and as a result the editing does not give enough time for the frame to relate humanity with nature in the rhythmic sense of time. Sadly, the American landscape that is marvelously filmed in *The Revenant* only serves as the psychological and the subtextual background of the characters and the narrative. For instance, there is a sequence in which the protagonist falls down a cliff through a tall pine tree and lands on a bed of snow. In the film, this sequence is presented in three shots (a. shot of a man falling down a cliff, b. wide shot of a man on a bed of snow, and c. close-up of the man’s face to show that he is still breathing). I noticed that a. is a bird’s eye view shot and the camera slowly cranes down to the pine tree and the shot cuts to b. soon after the frame begins to get close to the tree. I do not understand why the sequence was presented in three cuts. Shot a. has a tremendous potential of settling the mystique desolation of the cliff and the tree upon the man’s body, but the director decided to cut away from the crane shot to an establishing shot. All this does is that it explains to the audience that the man is still alive. The shot could have been a masterful concentration on life and death in relation to nature but it only ends up being a narrative tool. This is precisely why a film should not depend on telling a story. Shooting the subtext of the screenplay ultimately ignores the true potential of cinema, relating life with the director’s vision that comes often times in incomprehensible images. Filmmakers need not to worry about subtext’ filmmakers need only to follow their intuition. In the case of *The Revenant*, Inarritu’s cinematographic intuition is quite thoroughly damaged by the mediocre and inferior standard of Hollywood editing so-called continuity editing.

The Revenant, however, is in fact shot intuitively. Most shots, even though they had to be meticulously rehearsed, are nonetheless arranged intuitively. Tarkovsky films were the same way also – his films were all meticulously rehearsed but yet the compositions were decided intuitively. How can one tell if the shots were intuitively composed? It simply shows on screen. When things are done intuitively, they reach the level of masterfulness and you simply know that you are in the presence of one’s intuition.

Anyhow, I definitely recommend people to watch *The Revenant*. Although Hollywood’s continuity editing gets in the way film, it is not unbearable, and in fact Inarritu’s vision makes up for it. I have been a fan of Mr. Inarritu’s films and *The Revenant* is a no exception.

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Flying over the Pacific Ocean