

A Deadly Walk in the Sun: A Comparison of the Final Scene in Frank Norris' "McTeague" with Erick von Stroheim's "Greed"

Although Erich von Stroheim's intent was to follow Frank Norris' novel, *McTeague*, as closely as the film medium would allow, we must consider his work through the mutilated version left us by the scissor-wielding MGM editor. The resulting unusual condensation of a film makes comparisons with the text difficult. Nonetheless, I persevere. Few sections appear to be left relatively intact. But one that appears less mutilated is the final scene, the desert scene. This scene experienced editing shears; regardless, it maintains a close integrity with Norris' novel.

I approach the scene as Marcus stealthily advances towards the sleeping McTeague. Marcus foolishly makes his way into the heart of Death Valley after separating from the sheriff and his men; they wisely give vent to their common sense by refusing to go into this deadly alkali hell. Marcus' rash decision is spurred as much by his ego as by his greed for the gold and his hatred for the man he claims stole it from him. At the point I catch up with him, he has ridden his horse to death in the hellish heat. Following Mac's obvious trail in the crusty alkali, he presses on by foot, refusing to give up. A title card says, "But hatred and the greed for gold kept Marcus up ... closer and closer he came." When he finally espies Mac, the shot shows him within a wide, panoramic view of Death Valley, with Mac, at the bottom of the frame, sleeping on the alkali, his mule standing off to his left.

The entire scene accents the barrenness of this hell on earth by simply showing the actual desert landscape as it exists: nothing but miles of white alkali under an oppressively hot sun. In the far distance, the faint outline of mountains can be seen. The sight of Death Valley can never be overstated. The landscape provokes an unparalleled feeling of immense nothingness. It is one of the most frightening places on the face of the earth. For maximum visual impact, von Stroheim's genius insisted filming on location—Norris, of course, the original genius who chose this frightening setting for his tragic ending. I doubt that a studio could design a set to excel the visual impact of Death Valley. (I speak from first-hand experience. I've been there several times and, in fact, have a special affinity for this unworldly place!) The valley's name gives the written text an additional advantage. What could be worse than the name "Death Valley"? The author can use this name more frequently for added effect than can the film.

In the film, Marcus approaches Mac from behind. However, in the book, he approaches in front. No doubt, the director simply made a logistical decision here. Marcus' approach after the title card is one long take. In this shot, the mule standing in the lower left side of the frame nicely balances Marcus slowly approaching on the right—both are upright; plus, the long horizontal line of the distant mountain range in the upper left balances the prone, sleeping figure of Mac in the lower right. Most of the shots are well-balanced, but I feel this one is exceptional.

Replacing this shot is a horizontal, full-body shot of the two men lying flat on the ground. The camera films at their level. As Mac raises his head from sleep, a close-up shot reveals his face and a look of surprise. Then, in a quick crosscut to a close-up of Marcus' face, we see a look full of vile intent. The camera cuts quickly back to the previous full shot of the two men flat on the ground. Marcus orders Mac to stand. As he does, Mac rises slowly and cautiously. The camera capitalizes on Mac's slow, guarded rise without changing shots, allowing tension to mount. When he nearly reaches full height, the shot changes to a semi-close-up (the lower torso to tip of heads) of the men staring fiercely into each other's eyes. This shot also lingers, sustaining the tension, as Marcus searches Mac for weapons.

The appearance of Marcus crawling on the ground towards Mac resembles the motions of a snake. The image is eerie and suggestive of evil. In addition, seeing both men lying on the ground suggests how far each has fallen. Facial expressions are snarling images, showing the animal state these men have regressed into. At this point, a title card appears: "What did you do with the \$5000?" The camera returns to both men, though a tighter close-up of them face-to-face, while Marcus points the gun at Mac's stomach. As Mac indicates with a motion of his head that the gold is on the mule, the camera opens to a wide shot to provide a distant view of the mule and the two men. This shot evidences the enormity of the desert, minimizing the size of the men—thus, trivializing their existence. This landscape shot reminds us where they are and exposes the futility of fighting in this isolated and forbidding place. Then, we return to the previous face-to-face shot.

At this point in the book, Marcus begins to feel a little abashed. He does not know quite what to do with Mac. To me, he steps out of character here. If this momentary deviation in his character appeared in the uncut film version, the loss of it really is not a loss. Anyway, his anger seems to be subsiding somewhat when it finally sinks in just where he is and how uncomfortable he feels under the raging sun. He asks Mac if he has any water. The "abridged" version of the film follows this fairly close. Marcus and Mac both suffer the effects of the intense heat as they glance about the seemingly endless desert. The shot changes to a "close-up" view of the white-hot sun. It fills the entire frame. The camera angle points up, which maximizes a sense of the sun's massive power. The entire frame is nearly white to capture the blinding glare, but still shows the faint outline and rays of the sun. A pan back returns to the two men as before, and Marcus asks: "Got any water?" Mac nods towards the mule again and Marcus walks away towards the animal. The camera changes shots, pulling back to reveal the mule dashing away, Marcus in "hot" pursuit. Mac remains standing with his hands in the air, showing again the man's slow-witted nature. The camera shifts to a broad shot of just the mule, from its backside, in the oppressive scene. Then, it quickly returns to the men, semi-full body, from lower torso up.

Another title card reveals Marcus asking: "Is that all the water we got . . . on the saddle?" Back to the previous shot, Mac shakes his head yes. Again, we see a wide panoramic shot of the mule walking in the mid-left foreground. Watching one small animal in this endless, flat, white alkali generates a feeling of utter hopelessness. After we see the hapless mule, the camera quickly swings back to the men. This shot is different than the previous shot of them and appears to have been cut

at this point. The positions of the men relative to each other has changed. Prior to the mule shot, the men were facing each other, Mac on the left and Marcus on the right. This returning shot shows them standing side-by-side, Marcus now on the left and upstage from Mac. If something was cut out here, it doesn't violate the novel's story line.

Another title card reveals Mac saying: "He ate some loco-weed. We'd better finish him . . . tain't right to let 'um suffer." The return to the men after this card is now the same shot just prior to the mule shot, further evidence things were rearranged at this point in the scene. The two men now take off after the mule, running completely out of the frame. The next series of shots alternates quickly from the mule to the men. The mule is seen standing alone in the wasteland, then a quick cut back to the men—Marcus shoots at the mule, a full-body shot (both the camera's and Marcus'). A return to the mule, the same shot as before, cuts back to the men chasing the mule. A shot of the mule now reveals that a bullet hit him and falls forward on his front legs; then back to the men in pursuit. The quickening tempo of shots during the action produces a sense of urgency and desperation. The camera could have shown a wide, stationary shot fixed on the mule and the men. Two possibilities why this wasn't done. First, the takes of the mule may have been shot independently of the men, and the frames later spliced together. The second possibility suggests dramatic purposes: a rapid switching back and forth from the pursued to the pursuers creates a stronger sense of desperation than if both elements were seen together in the scene. Watching the mule separately shows the poor beast isolated and cut off, making his pending doom all the more poignant. And seeing the men together, although they are also desperate, makes them appear more powerful and evil, especially as Marcus stands firm, aims the gun, then fires. He represents a destructive force, ironically, in an area that seems merciless to all living things. The evil of Marcus outstrips momentarily this perception of the desert.

The mule is then seen lying on its side, his feet kicking and then they stop. The men enter the frame and approach the dead mule. Marcus quickly unfastens the canteen. A close-up shows Marcus with the canteen, looking at Mac (who is not in the frame) with a look of horror. Then, we see a cut to a close-up of Mac, then back to Marcus shaking the canteen, finding it empty, then discovering why it's empty. A close-up of the canteen betrays the bullet hole. The series of shots alternates quickly from Marcus (as in previous shot), then again to Mac, to emphasize the men's quickening doom. Curiously, we recognize in these shots a conspicuous lack of anger and hatred. Their common bond of inescapable doom temporarily displaces their prior hostilities.

Now, we're shown the result of the men's self-destructive actions as the camera pulls back, showing the two men standing side-by-side. Both turn to look towards the ground by the dead mule. A close-up discloses the ground, soaking up their precious, life-sustaining water; the possibility of escape is now sealed. The shot seen previously returns. At this point, there is evidence cutting probably occurred. Earlier, as the camera cut back and forth from a close-up of Mac to a close-up of Marcus, it appeared the men were standing apart from and facing each other. However, the later shot of the two together showed them standing very close, side-by-side—a definite change in perspective. If something was cut here, however, the story-line integrity of the novel is still unaffected.

Two deviations from the novel were made, however, not obvious in the film. The first is the men's pursuit, then fatal wounding, of the mule. Norris' characters pursue the mule for hours. Only then, after miles of fruitless pursuit, Marcus and Mac decide it is best to shoot the poor devil. They are desperate for the water the mule carries on the saddle, and the mule is apparently crazed from the loco-weed. In comparison, the chase scene in the film version is comparatively short, lasting perhaps ten or fifteen minutes (story time). Whether or not this is a change made by von Stroheim, it doesn't significantly alter the story line. The longer pursuit time in the novel deepens the desperate need for water. A shorter space of time can be used in the film because of the medium's visual advantage to create this affect.

The second change, which has to be a change made by von Stroheim, is the bullet hole in the canteen. Norris' mule falls on the canteen as it goes down after being shot, bursting the canteen, the contents spilling. I'm not sure why von Stroheim decided to make this change. The impact of von Stroheim's version doesn't seem to have any particular advantage over Norris'. In fact, I feel it's a little less believable. The bullet hole is relatively small and appears to be towards the center of the canteen. Some time would be needed for the canteen to drain all the water. Plus, it would need to be laying in a certain position for it to run out at all.

After the two stunned men look at the water-soaked ground, a title card displays Marcus' comment: "There's no water within 100 miles o' here!" The camera returns to Marcus dropping the canteen to the ground. The camera pulls back to a full-body shot of the dead mule in the foreground, with an extensive view of the desert in the background. After returning to the previous close-up of the men, a title card shows Marcus saying: "We ... are ... dead ... men!" The camera returns again to the previous shot. The men are breathing heavily, obviously suffering from the overwhelming heat. Once more we see the shot of the scorching, merciless sun. Then, a speedy shot series: the two men; a close-up of Mac; a close-up of Marcus staring out at the desert, turning to look at the spilled gold coins; a close-up of the gold; and finally back to the two men. They are standing together in this shot, and a card of Mac's words: "Even if we're done for, I'll take some o' my truck along," returns afterwards to the previous shot. Another card shows Marcus saying: "I ain't so sure 'bout who that money belongs to!" The men are now facing each other aggressively. Another card shows Mac warning: "—an' don't try and load that gun either!" and returns to the previous shot. The camera takes a tight focus on Mac's face alone, with a threatening expression. Then, it drops to a close-up of his hands, squeezing into fists, then another look of the facial close-up. The camera crosses over to a close-up of Marcus' face, equally menacing, and a card states: "Don't you lay your fingers on that sack!" A full shot appears of both men preparing to fight; the camera pulls back to show a very wide shot of the desolate landscape with the men in the foreground beginning to fight, the dead mule just behind them. The camera pulls in tighter to follow the two men fighting; Mac ultimately knocks Marcus to the ground. The camera zooms in to reveal two pair of hands struggling to possess the gun. The gun is finally wrenched free from the possessor's hand, and quickly the film cuts to a shot of Mac's back as he beats Marcus beside the dead mule. We see a gruesome close-up looking down on Marcus' face as he goes unconscious; then a close-up of Mac beating Marcus. In this shot, the camera faces Mac head on, at his eye level, as he kneels on the ground. While he beats Marcus, this shot shows only the top of Mac's head. His face is visible only as he lifts it to look at Marcus, an eerie illusion that he is looking at the viewer. Von Stroheim deviates somewhat at this point, too. Norris has Marcus trip backwards over the dead mule, and the cuffs are fastened to Mac's right hand.

Although the various shots of the fight are in quick succession, the following series of shots is flashed even faster. The shot series alternates several times between Mac beating Marcus, then of Marcus' face dying. Finally, the camera pulls back, showing the murderous scene as Mac continues to beat Marcus, then another quick shot of Marcus' dying face. The tempo then dies off rapidly as Mac realizes Marcus is dead. He stops beating him, he hesitates, then he rises up almost in slow motion. Not until now does he discover the handcuffs locking him to Marcus' dead body. A close-up of his left wrist reveals the cuffs. The camera closes on Mac's dazed look. The whole deadly scene emerges as the camera pulls back: the men—one dead—and dead mule in the immediate foreground framed by the endless desert, which comprises 3/4 of the frame. Mac vainly works at the cuffs and gives up. This wide shot emphasizes the total irreparable condition of the situation, because there is nothing around him but death and he is locked to it. A prolonged facial close-up of Mac captures his slow recognition of the impact of what has befallen. The sluggish action, compared to the previous rapid shot series during the fight, calls attention to Mac's slow-moving wit and suggests that all he has now is time: time to wait for a slow death. In contrast, his quick physical movements during the fight, culminating in the murder of Marcus, recalls Trina's fate, as well as the suggestion that Mac lives close to the animal realm, reacting to situations from a sensate level. The two wrists cuffed together appear again, slowly returning to the previous shot of Mac, and again the shot of the dead Marcus' face—which still moves! A shot of Mac returns, dazed, looking over toward the mule. A close-up of the gold coins exposes the object of his stupefied stare; a return to Mac as he moves his gaze elsewhere. The empty canteen is shown in a close-up, then again a wide shot of the dead and Mac and miles of desert behind them. Interestingly, the mountains fade out almost completely in this shot. It appears that von Stroheim had the far landscape "bleached out" to create an even more intense feeling of the tremendous heat in this wasteland. The shot lingers on Mac, who slowly sits down, lifting his arm to look again at the cuffs as if he can't quite comprehend the finality of it. A closer view shows Mac gazing at the cuffs, and once again Marcus' dead face, moving in that ghostly way, as if he can't quite give up the ghost. It is obviously the same shot each time. I wonder if this is the work of von Stroheim or the MGM scissor-hand. Mac moves his head to look at Marcus, then towards the mule.

The small covered bird cage appears in a close-up. Mac returns, the shot changing to a full horizontal shot. Mac retrieves the bird cage, brings it back, and sits down pulling the cloth off the cage. In a close-up, Mac is seen kneeling, reaching in for the bird, retrieving it and looking at it compassionately. The camera flashes a close-up of the tiny bird—his constant companion—held within his bloodied hand. The power of this shot hits hard. The tiny bird's helplessness is contrasted by Mac's huge bloody hand. The blood on the hand is incongruous in such a tender shot but suggests the irony of Mac's life. A series of shots here deepens the tragedy—of the bird and of Mac—the shots move from Mac, to the bird, and back to Mac where he raises his little friend to his lips and tenderly kisses it. He then tosses it in the air to let it fly away. But, the next shot is utterly heartbreaking, for it shows the little creature lying on the canteen, half dead and unable to fly. That the bird landed helplessly on the canteen adds greater poignancy to this little scene, because due to the lack of water, the little bird meets its cruel doom, as does Mac. The shots move in quick succession now: from Mac, to the gold, to Mac again. Now the camera pulls back for a last tragic view of a scene of desolation and death, with Mac sitting amidst the death waiting the eternity of his own unalterable destiny—a horrid death under this relentless sun, without water or the ability to leave. The camera moves away from this tragedy and shows a wide shot of the unforgiving, cracking and vast alkali desert. It is a long, slow look at Mac's living hell, as the circular lens contracts slowly and the scene fades to black.

Von Stroheim makes one final change in the last sequence of shots. In the novel, the men knock the birdcage off the saddle as Marcus falls over the mule, causing the cover to fall off. After Marcus dies, Mac just sits down. He does not retrieve the bird cage. Von Stroheim's change adds heart-wrenching drama. More importantly, Mac seems more in character here than he does in the novel. When reading the book, I was disturbed by Mac's actions at the end and couldn't accept that he would just sit and watch the bird die. This canary has been part of him. Because of Mac's love of the little creature, he has carried it everywhere with him. Inherently, Mac is not a mean character, just simple. The murder of Trina is unforgivable, nonetheless, he's still a sympathetic character—unlike Marcus. Mac's violent tendencies come to life through provocation and not through aggression. I think von Stroheim must have felt great empathy for Mac, which he shows by his changes in the closing scene.

Because so many drastic cuts were made throughout this film, why was this scene left relatively unharmed? Because this scene not only provides a dramatic end to the lives of these men, it also serves as a summation of their wretched lives. In the wilderness, for the first time, Mac looks natural. He belongs to the land and remote areas, away from large centers of civilization. He is a simple creature like the animals he loves so much. As a dentist, in suits and fashionable dress, he appears uncomfortable and out-of-place. When he wears the garb of a miner or simple laborer, it seems a natural part of him. Even his beard looks natural on him. At his core, Mac is a good-hearted man. His downfall was to be taken out of his element.

Marcus, on the other hand, is a despicable individual. He had no right to Trina's gold and his insistence on his "rightful" ownership of it is as senseless as his foolish decision to go into the desert. Mac probably would have survived the crossing to the other side of the desert because he seems to belong here. But Marcus' irrational insistence on the gold causes his own senseless destruction. Given the fatal situation the two men faced, if they had agreed to split the gold evenly and part peaceably, both may have survived. At least, the water wouldn't have been destroyed. Once the water was lost, both knew the hopelessness of ever leaving there alive. The gold, then, was useless. The fight over the gold, therefore, was as senseless an act as Marcus' life. One might suggest that he was revenging Trina's death, but he never mentioned her—only the gold. Mac reacted to him, as he always did. Had he possessed greater intelligence, he may have offered to give up the gold completely. The gold obviously didn't mean much to him. He walked away from the wealth he could have had from the gold strike he found with his partner (assuming he could remain uncaught—wealth can buy many things). His need for Trina's gold was based on principle only. Giving up the gold would have improved his chances of survival, and he might have been able to escape capture. So, ultimately, why were they fighting such a hopeless fight in the heat of God's oven? Without water or the mule, they were doomed; the gold was useless. They fought because neither could transcend their own basic instincts of greed, pride, and hatred.