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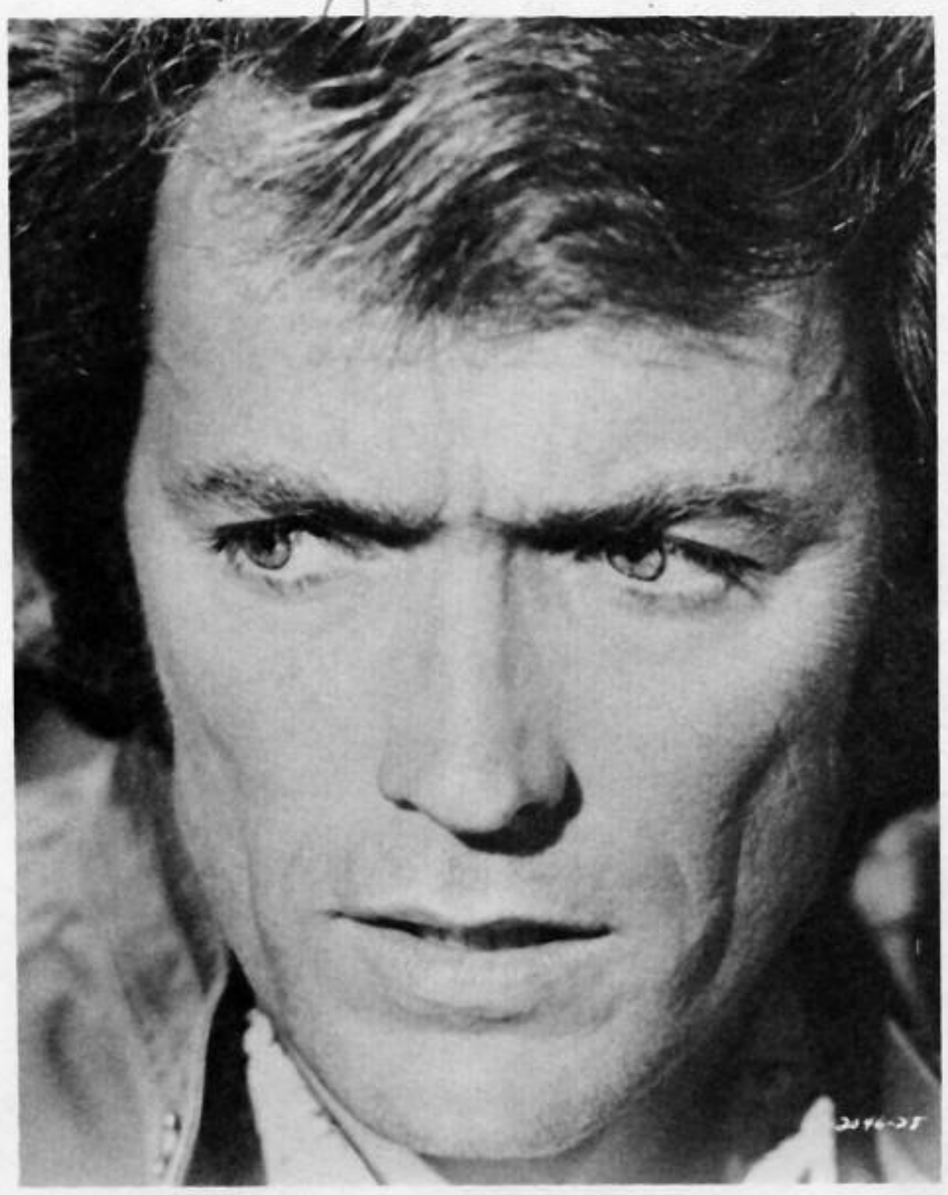
Director Ted Post's functional visual style is an effective manipulation and elaboration of an excellent script (by Leonard Freeman and Mel Goldberg) and a finely chosen cast. In the opening scene, as Jed Cooper is dragged across a stream by the hanging party, the mystery of the occurrence is conveyed by a crowded montage of grunting horses, grimacing faces and flashing spurs. All the horses and riders seem to climb out of the river simultaneously, yet we see these actions in separate shots. Like Cooper, we become surrounded by a disorienting forcefulness that suspends time. This identification with Cooper is quickly shattered as we hear the convincing evidence against him, but we still aren't in a position to condemn our star-hero. Our judgment is suspended by the alternating point-of-view shots between the hangmen and Cooper. As the hangmen ride off, we are literally "left hanging", with only a shot of Cooper's dangling boots as a remnant of our indecision.

Suitably, Post doesn't dwell over the Western landscape. The bleakly subdued scenery we see is merely a setting for the vastly more interesting faces and gestures of the men in society. Indeed, human groups are used as a substitute for landscape, particularly the men in prison and the crowd gathered for the seven-men hanging. Rachel Warren must seek her redemption in the prison's mass of sweaty faces much as Judge Fenton must seek an understanding of society by watching as it gathers outside his window to watch the hangings. The camera moves around and through the crowd which, deprived of the softening effect of individual gestures, appears especially disgusting.

As we watch with him, Fenton gives the sign to hang the men and, because of the point-of-view, commits us to his painful duty. He slowly shakes his head, echoing the bewilderment of the two young brothers as they were prepared for hanging, moments earlier. They express our confusion and resignation--this can't be right and yet it is.

Michael Mahern



ADIOS SABATA

Frank Kramer's ADIOS SABATA (Frank Kramer is a pseudonym for Italian writer-director Giancarlo Parolini, who previously made SABATA--Ed.) is the latest of a series of Italian-made Westerns that began with Sergio Leone's A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS in 1966. Like its predecessors, ADIOS SABATA is long on action and short on dialogue, the better to facilitate acting and dubbing with an international cast. The result is a film that even the most literary-oriented critic is forced to recognize as a product of the director's eye rather than the writer's pen. Thus I can dispose of the plot in a few lines.

Three Mexican revolutionaries form an uneasy alliance with Sabata (Yul Brynner) and an amiably dishonest American drifter (played by Dean Reed) in an attempt to hijack a shipment of Maximillian's gold. The American is constantly plotting to get the gold for himself, but his manner is so ingratiating that Sabata won't let the Mexicans kill him off. That's the story--only elaborated with countless killings and a good amount of crude humor.

Visually the film is as complex as its plot is simple. It might be termed a "close-up" Western, as the close-up is the primary shot. In this sense the film can be seen as a direct descendant of Samuel Fuller's I SHOT JESSE JAMES, the only film I have ever seen with

as many close-ups as ADIOS SABATA. Fuller used the close-up to create for the audience the psychological intensity of his guilt-ridden hero. A middle-length shot would allow us to judge the characters and the dramatic situation. The the film space becomes three-dimensional--the antagonists and protagonist face one another on the screen and the spectator assesses them from the audience.

With the close-up, the cinema collapses into a single dimension. The hero or the villain fills the screen, and the spectator is drawn out of his isolation and into the screen by the pervasiveness of the image. We are drawn to it and we cannot judge it. We look at the character and he looks back at us like the face in the bathroom mirror. Thus the close-up, not the over-the-shoulder shot, is the most subjective point of view. Because of its strong subjectivity, a film shot primarily in close-up could be confusing, unless the intended point of view is made extremely clear. Since both protagonist and antagonist are shown in close-up, we could end up seeing the action from both sides and, as a result, see nothing.

Fuller solved this problem by supplying only a protagonist, leaving the rest of the film's world to serve as the antagonist. The "I" in I SHOT JESSE JAMES clearly applies to the spectator as well as to Bob Ford. It is this oppressively singular identification that creates a psychological Western.

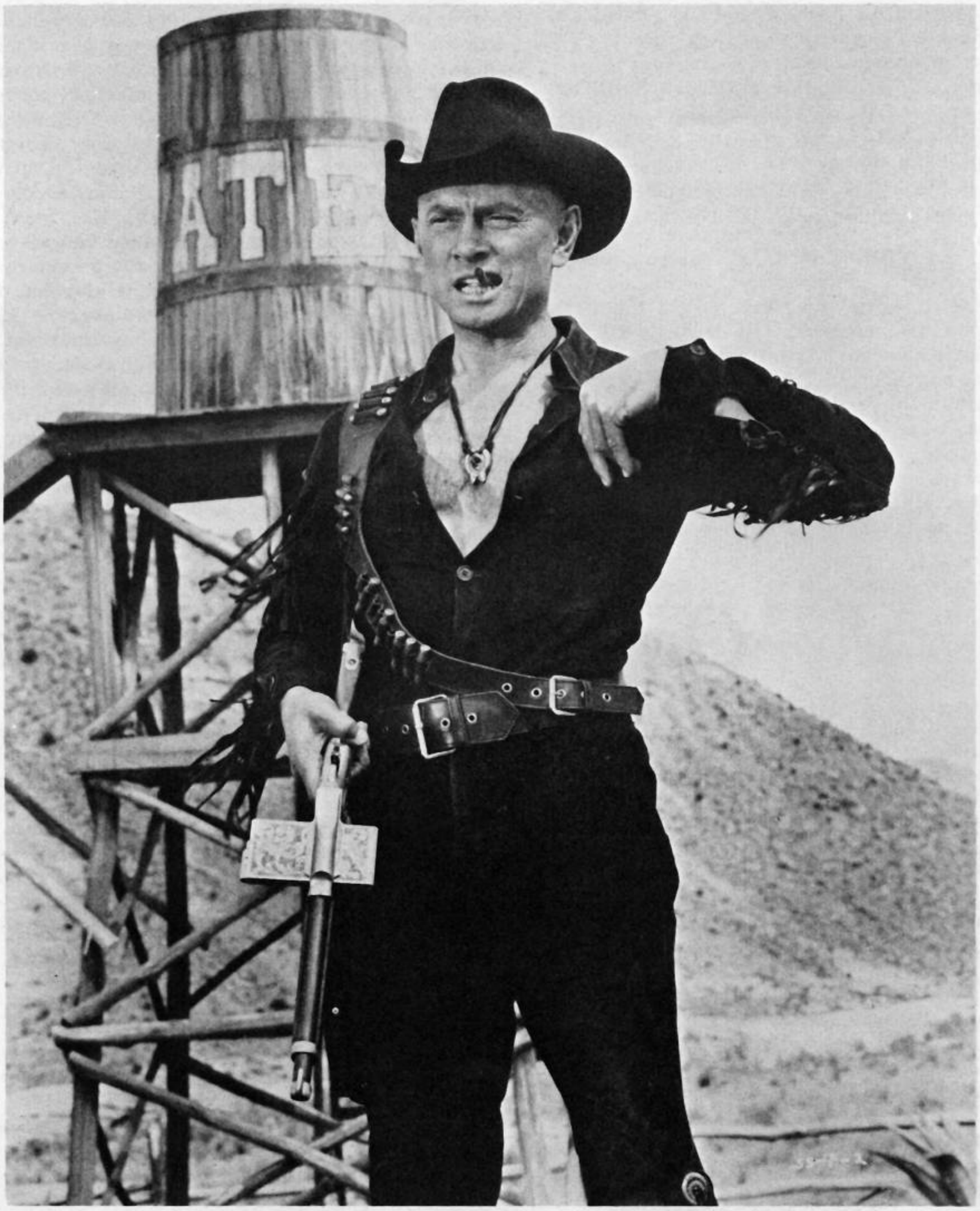
In ADIOS SABATA Kramer has not identified us with a single character and as a result, the film is absolutely free of any psychological overtones. Nor has he given us a mixture of close-ups and mid-shots from a multiple point-of-view which would allow us to identify with or assess the group of men on the screen. Kramer has shot in close-up and not identified us with a single character--yet we are not left blind and confused. He poses the central group of five men against the troops of Maximillian and thus, in the broadest sense, we are given an antagonist, with the five men a collected protagonist. They may curse and despise one another, but they need one another to get the gold. Where Kramer is unique, and quite unlike say, Hawks, is in his refusal to show us the five men as a group. We see them primarily in single- or two-shot close-ups. Rather than seeing the group, we become a part of it and its action world.

We don't become all five members of the group; rather, we become a sixth member. We shoot, we are shot at, we steal and are stolen from. We are given no psychological point of view because the only psychology we have as the sixth member is that which we have brought into the theater with us. We are given no sociology to explore because we are not give mid-shots with which to judge the group. We are deprived of thought and are left only with action. To see ADIOS SABATA is to experience it. The only spectator required to think is the critic who must figure out <u>why</u> the movie is purely an experience.

But ADIOS SABATA is not only unique in its use of close-ups and its establishment of an independent yet uninvolved point-of-view. Kramer manages to add a third dimension to Bazin's opposition of deep-focus and editing. He doesn't use <u>either</u> to achieve his effects. His focus is shallow and his editing is minimal. Considering that the picture is shot in close-up, his neglect of editing is astounding. When Kramer has one character speaking and he wants to show the reaction of another character, he doesn't cut to the traditional reaction shot of the listener. Neither does he place both characters in a deep-focus "stage" in which we can see the actions and reactions of both characters simultaneously. Instead, Kramer will cut through the dense fog of his shallow focus by pulling focus from one character to another, or else by panning, tracking, or dollying from one huge face to another. The resulting style is probably the most "realistic" in cinema, realistic in the sense that his camera operates most like our own eyes would if we were actually amidst the film's action.

The argument has been advanced that our eyes simulate cuts as we glance at various objects and persons about us. While one's mind does ignore the intervening objects and space as we look from one point to another, we perceive this space nonetheless. Editing chops out this superfluous space and presents us with a more efficient but less realistic version of what the director wants us to see. Kramer's reproduction of actual perception is further heightened by the speed of his focus-pulls, pans, tracks and dollies. We see the space between the two faces, but we aren't given time to record the information. His camera operates at break-neck speed and therein lies the primary defect of his style. To make films in this perceptually "realistic" style creates immense technical problems. The director cannot make every movement precise, simply because there are so many complicated camera maneuverings and only a limited amount of time to make the film. As a result, Kramer's is a very inexact cinema--a cinema of force rather than precision.

Kramer's style raises a question as to the relationship between the director and his audience. The director who relies heavily on editing presents himself in full view of the audience. He is constantly telling us, "Now I will show you this precise thing, followed by this precise thing, followed by this precise thing, etc." As Bazin has pointed out, this



style is perfect for the fast-paced comedy where we delight in being led to wilder and wilder heights of humor--the fact that we are not in control being an essential part of the fun.

The "deep-focus" dirctor, on the other hand, attempts to set up a puzzle which the audience must solve. There may or may not be a "correct" solution; the important factor is that the audience is intellectually engaged. The director is able to introduce a degree of ambiguity impossible in cross-cutting, and thus deep-focus is the normal style for "serious" drama.

Where does this leave Kramer, the inventor of a veritistic, "human-eye" style? The evidence from ADIOS SABATA is that Kramer is not telling us what we're seeing in the montage director's self-conscious style. Neither is he playing an intellectual game with us, as the deep-focus director does. Instead, Kramer merges his own point of view with that of the audience. His moving camera is both himself conceiving the action before the film is made and ourselves seeing the action as we sit in the theater. As a result, Kramer's film has nothing to tell us and nothing to ask of us. It is simply an opportunity to revel in the forceful and exciting imagination of Frank Kramer.

Michael Mahern