



“IT’S OFFICIAL OLD BUDDY, I’M A HAS-BEEN”: RICK DALTON, HOLLYWOOD, AND THE AGING STAR

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Set in 1969 Los Angeles over the span of a few days in the months leading up to Sharon Tate’s murder on the night of August 9, 1969, *Once Upon A Time in... Hollywood* (Tarantino, 2019) traces the day-to-day activities of aging actor Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his friend/stunt double Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt). Rick lives on Cielo Drive as a neighbor to Roman Polanski and his wife Sharon Tate, geographically representing Old Hollywood and New Hollywood as two coexisting forces.

At one point Rick was a promising young actor who starred in the Western television series *Bounty Law*, a fictional show established to have aired on NBC from 1959–1963. Rick had at least two successful films, the Western *Tanner* and the World War Two action thriller *The Fourteen Fists of McClusky*. By the time of *Once Upon A Time in... Hollywood* Rick’s career is on the decline and he struggles to adapt to the changes as the industry shifts towards New Hollywood. Yet Rick still clings to the old in many ways, such as maintaining his pompadour hairstyle, which is at least fifteen years out of date by 1969. The pompadour—which perfectly represents Rick’s old-school mentality and conservatism—is emblematic of his struggles, and at times refusal, to change in the ways that are necessary to progress his career. The pompadour, then, becomes a symbol of how Rick’s reluctance to change, even for acting roles, has negatively impacted his career and dried up his career opportunities. As much as Rick tends to blame others for his failures—the new androgynous male icon of New Hollywood is a particular target of Rick’s frustrations—this reluctance is essential to understanding Rick’s career trajectory.

During the filming of a guest spot as the villain on an episode of *Lancer* (an actual western television series that aired on CBS from 1968–1970), episode director Sam Wanamaker (Nicholas Hammond; Wanamaker was a director and sometimes actor who died in 1983) meets with Rick to discuss wardrobe for Rick’s character.



Wanamaker's vision has the villain in a fringed buckskin jacket, with a droopy mustache and long hair. Rick's reaction is less than enthusiastic:

Rick Dalton: You want me to look like a hippie?

Sam Wanamaker: Think, less hippie, more Hell's Angel. [imitating motorcycle noises] Vroom! Vroom! (Tarantino 2019)

Even though it is the vision for the villain, Rick is reluctant to change for the role because he fears the audience will not recognize him. It is apparent that Rick is stuck in an old-school mentality and is more concerned with celebrity than acting.

Rick's reluctance to adopt a different hairstyle, even if just for a role, illustrates how out of touch Rick truly is and how ill-equipped he is to deal with the emerging New Hollywood. The pompadour represents a conservative mindset, and Rick's hesitance over the change embodies his frustration with the new counterculture ethos that began permeating in Hollywood during the mid-to-late 1960s. Rick, with his outdated pompadour and binary view of the world, which is not that discordant from the simplistic cowboy philosophy of the Westerns he starred in, would not have adjusted well to this new cinematic landscape without a boost in fame from being the conservative icon who fought back against the evil of the Manson Family hippies (and by extension, the entire counterculture movement as well). Rick likely would have fallen into complete obscurity by the 1970s. Rick views the world in the same manner as his cowboy characters, negatively impacting his ability to find work in the new cinematic landscape of 1970s Hollywood.

Rick is confronted with the realities of his position in Hollywood after a meeting with Marvin Schwarz (Al Pacino) at Musso & Frank's Bar and Grill. Schwarz reminds Rick of his dwindling status by discussing Rick's recent track record and the pitfalls of always playing the villain in various guest spots on episodic television: "So Rick, who's gonna' kick the shit out of you next week? Mannix? The Man from U.N.C.L.E? The girl from U.N.C.L.E? How about Batman and Robin? [pantomimes a fight scene] Ping! Pow! Zoom! Choom! Down goes you, down goes your career as a leading man. Or, do you go to Rome to star in Westerns and win fucking fights?" (Tarantino 2019) Upon hearing this Rick is immediately despondent (inspiring his rant against "fucking hippie motherfuckers" afterwards), largely on the basis that he views Hollywood as the cultural center of film making. The prospect of going to Europe to make films fills him with dread, and Rick's lack of awareness over his position in the movie industry makes him highly emotional—although in general Rick does tend to be highly emotional and moody, constantly battling with his anxieties—when confronted with the reality of the situation.

Unfortunately, it is not a reality that Rick is prepared to deal with at this moment. Rick is largely a sheltered individual, having achieved success at a relatively young



age with a successful television series and two successful films (*Tanner* and *The Fourteen Fists of McClusky*) before his options started to dry up and his career went in a downward spiral. Rick has been ensconced in the artificiality of Hollywood, and indeed the artificiality of American movies for far too long to be able to look at his life with any kind of objectivity or common sense, which is why he gets upset over such a small hiccup as having to go to Italy to film a few pictures overseas.

This leads to Rick's emotional outburst and mental breakdown after leaving the meeting with Schwarz:

Rick Dalton: It's official old buddy. I'm a has-been.

Cliff Booth: What are you talking about? What did that guy tell you?

Rick Dalton: He told me the goddamn truth, is what he told me. [Rick starts crying]

Cliff Booth: Whoa, whoa.

Rick Dalton: Oh shit.

Cliff Booth: Hey.

Rick Dalton: I'm sorry about that.

Cliff Booth: Here. [hands over his sunglasses] Put these on. Don't cry in front of the Mexicans.

Rick Dalton: Son of a bitch.

Cliff Booth: Now, what's got you so upset, man?

Rick Dalton: If coming face to face with the failure of your career ain't worth crying about, then I don't know what the fuck is.

Cliff Booth: Right. That guy in there turn you down?

Rick Dalton: No. He wants to help me get into Italian movies.

Cliff Booth: Then what's the problem?

Rick Dalton: I gotta' do fucking I-talian goddamn movies is the fucking problem!
(Tarantino 2019)

Rick's still desperately trying to cling to his heroic cowboy persona that he crafted in his career, despite the fact the iconography of the cowboy was well out of fashion by the mid-1960s (even though Rick and Cliff both still seem to cling to outdated racist stereotypes). The juxtaposition confronts the viewer with an equally sobering reality as we are challenged in how we view men and the concept of masculinity on the screen, who, especially in the repressive mass media of the 1960s, were required as part of their image to remain stoic and tough.

The scene following shows Cliff driving Rick to his home (as an earlier narration informed the viewer, Rick was arrested for a Driving Under the Influence charge and has his license taken away and now relies on Cliff to drive him everywhere) and we can hear news about the Vietnam War faintly going on through the car radio, and meanwhile Rick is crying over his career. What this contrast illustrates is Rick's total self-absorption only in his own world. The social unrest and conflicts that are occurring for the rest of the world do not impede on his reality as Rick lives in a bubble of



his own making. This total self-absorption is also evident in the conversation that happens between him and Cliff, which also shows how self-aware Cliff is about his status in the world and how in denial, not to mention narcissistically isolated and ignorant of the world around him, is Rick:

Cliff Booth: Look, I never had much of a career to speak of, so I can't say I really know how you feel.

Rick Dalton: What are you talking about? You're my stunt double. Come on now, shit.

Cliff Booth: Rick, I'm your driver, man. I'm your gofer. I'm not complaining, man. I like driving you around. I like doing shit around the house and house-sitting in the Hollywood Hills when you're gone. But I haven't been a full-time stuntman for a while now, and from where I'm standing, going to Rome to star in movies does not sound like the fate worse than death that you seem to think it is.

Rick Dalton: Come on now. You ever seen an Italian Western, huh? They're awful. It's a fucking farce.

Cliff Booth: Yeah, how many you seen? One? Two?

Rick Dalton: I've seen enough, alright? Nobody likes Spaghetti Westerns. (Tarantino 2019)

By "nobody likes Spaghetti Westerns," what Rick really means is "I don't like them, therefore nobody likes them." Rick lives in an increasingly insular existence, ignorant to the world's troubles outside of his own and unaware that cinema not only exists outside of his narrow confines of Hollywood, but that it is popular as well. Rick is unaware that Clint Eastwood would make his name doing Italian Westerns for Sergio Leone in the films *A Fistful Dollars* (1964), *For A Few Dollars More* (1965), and the most commercially successful of the films, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966).

Rick clings to the image of the cowboy as it exists in the popular imagination rather than any historical perspective of the Old West, and this affects his acting. The fabricated image of the cowboy forms a central part of his identity, and even though acting requires one to abandon one's own identity to adopt a part, Rick is unable to do so because it also threatens his limited world view. The white hat cowboy does not only exist in Rick's cinematic imagination, but is essential to his own reconstruction of history.

Rick's personal hero, Hopalong Cassidy, is emblematic of his narrow view of the world and the hold that the mythical cowboy has over the American imagination. Roderick McGillis in the book *He Was Some Kind of Man: Masculinities in the B Western* describes a scene from one of his films: "In *Outlaws of the Desert*, Cassidy and his side-kicks travel to 'Arabia' to buy horses. There they meet conniving thieves and a dangerous desert sheikh dubbed a 'half-breed.' They also meet the English-educated (read: good) Sheikh Suleiman, played by Duncan Renaldo" (McGillis 2009, 125). Rick's



childhood media has subjected him to the damaging effects of colonization and the United States' troubled history. Rick's childhood nostalgia is for a regressive and heavily mythologized interpretation of history, not the actuality of history. American popular culture has distorted public awareness of history with a highly romanticized and ideologically-driven view of history. The popular image of the cowboy has supplanted a troubling and violent real history of subjection and oppression of Indigenous people and systemic racism. Rick, being as obsessed with cultural nostalgia and the past, or at least his version of the past, has integrated these pop culture figures into his political viewpoints.

The cowboy emerged as the mythical representation of the Turner thesis—prompted by historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1893)—that developed the notion that expanding the borders of the frontier and the colonization of Indigenous populations was necessary for the promulgation of American democracy. Such a set of beliefs has since become obsolete, so has the popular image of the stoic and noble cowboy. This stoic cowboy is evident in Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*, which was made into a film in 1945. The image, however, would be revised and modernized by directors such as Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone who contemporized the laconic, stoic, classic tough guy into a brutal, violent, and often immoral or at least amoral character. Writing in *The Sagebrush Trail: Western Movies and Twentieth Century America*, Richard Aquila observes that “The cinematic West was always more myth than reality” (Aquila 2015). So Rick's opportunity to progress in New Hollywood is threatened, despite the fact that the actor clearly has the skills and talent to advance farther if he would just let go of his preconceived political ideology.

Rick is unable to confront the realities of the world, and the realities of his situation, because he lives in the same bubble as his simplistic cowboy characters. *Once Upon A Time in... Hollywood* builds on this idea by having the movie open with an Alan Kincaid (Spencer Garrett) television interview for his Western series *Bounty Law*, and ending with a mid-credits scene of Rick doing an advertisement for Red Apple cigarettes. Essentially Rick's life is being framed by mass media on both sides. Or, rather, the commercialized and popular culture aspects of mass media. News, whether televised or on the radio, is a distant din vaguely heard in the car while Cliff is driving him. Even Rick's house is decorated solely by movie posters from his own projects; no other art or even other movies adorn his walls. The only posters or art not dedicated to Rick in his own career are a series of Hopalong Cassidy coffee mugs that he collects. These mugs, however, only reinforce the idea that Rick lives isolated in a world of his own making, populated entirely by good cowboy heroes and evil hippies, and the morally ambiguous reality of the outside world does not intrude on his existence.

To further add to this idea of Rick's media-obsessed life where status is an all-encompassing goal for him, the first proper scene in the film that begins the story shows Rick and Cliff getting in a car, with a large movie poster of a Rick Dalton movie taking



over the frame. The effect resembles a drive-in movie theater, with the camera slowly zooming out from the visage of a painted Rick on the poster to show a kind of back-seat view, almost as if the audience are passengers in this drive-in movie. This has the twofold effect of framing *Once Upon A Time in... Hollywood* as a narrative, as a deliberately cinematic experience rather than a true crime or realistic biopic, as well points to the level of Rick's self-absorption. This is especially evident in the follow-up scene where we follow Cliff to his trailer, which is situated behind a drive-in theater. Cliff lives on the periphery of Hollywood, while Rick is consumed by the celebrity status aspect of the movie industry. Rick is reluctant to accept the work in Italy because his ego has taken on the same proportions as the movie poster, and he equates Hollywood in its American form as the barometer of success.

Rick's decline as a notable star can, in fact, be attributed to his attachment to the Western genre. As John Cawelti writes in *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, "The erosion of the Western genre is clearly connected to the increasing abandonment of the Turner thesis and other conceptions of American exceptionalism which have for so long dominated the historical imagination of Americans" (Cawelti 1999, 6). Rick's aversion to foreign-made Westerns, then, is concordant with his conservative mentality. Rick lives in the highly mythologized and symbolic worldview of America's place in the world, which is why events such as the Vietnam War, or the student-lead protests, the Civil Rights protests, are all absent in the film, only appearing as radio clips heard in the background on his car radio. As a corollary Rick's career opportunities become more limited because of his insular and traditionalist perspective on the world.

Rick's binary view of the world (good versus evil, the moral majority versus the counterculture movement) fits in with the simplicity of the Western genre. Jane Tompkins in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* points out that the genre is structured around compacted codes of meaning: "The arch-images of the genre—the gunfight, the fistfight, the chase on horseback; the mounted horseman outlined against the sky, the saloon girl, the lonely landscape itself—are culturally pervasive and overpowering. They carry within them compacted words of meaning and value, codes of conduct, standards of judgment" (Tompkins 1993, 6). For Rick, this is a comforting prospect. Rick has absorbed the codes of the Western genre fully into his ideological matrix. Westerns, as Thompkins argues, "strive to depict a world of clear alternatives," which suits Rick's ideal world (Tompkins 1993, 48). The changing of Hollywood threatens not only his career, but his personal political ethos as well. Rick lives philosophically within the black hat versus white hat codes of the cowboy.

The compacted codes inherent to the Western, specifically Rick's white hat cowboy version of the Western, did not transition well into New Hollywood as they were emblematic of a colonialist power structure. In Old Hollywood the aging white male cowboy was often seen as a symbol of power, experience, and virtue, whereas in New Hollywood the aging white man was a symbol of violence and cynicism. By contrast,



aging female stars, especially in that era of filmmaking, were largely ignored altogether. Women, when present, were plot devices for the male star. The wife/mother/daughter of our heroic cowboy lead. Rick could have easily aged into good roles, his own anxieties and insecurities aside, if not for his unwillingness to adapt.

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