

Serpent Charmer

SE

Achievement in Mood - Shortlist 2011
Achievement in Vidding - Shortlist 2011

The review below may contain spoilers for *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford*.

Nicky: *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford* (what a title!) is beautifully shot. *Serpent Charmer* showcases the source cinematography, but more than that, the editing is charged with such brilliant energy and focus, subtly shaping the viewer's experience into a nuanced study of psychological motivations. This vid works for me on so many levels - as two separate and interwoven character pieces, as a complex relationship study, and as a straight-up mood piece.

HWG: This film is truly a feast for your eyeballs worthy of the Terrence Malick stamp of approval. (So many wheat fields, so little time!) Isn't it amazing how SE managed to chip away a 2.5 hour film and masterfully tell this story in under three minutes?! She cut straight to the core of Mr. James and Mr. Ford without losing any part of the world these men come from. I honestly couldn't look away.

Nicky: The central relationship is absorbing and capable of so much interpretation. I love that the vid suggests sexual motivation behind the character beats. I'm not sure if the film intended for such a reading, but when presented this way in the vid, it's hard to see it as anything but. What I find particularly masterful is how this vid manages to take that slashy reading and weave it back into the film's central theme.

HWG: See I think the film definitely intended for sexual motivation to be the undercurrent of everything that Robert Ford was going through.

Nicky: I thought it was the intention until I read that the descendants of Jesse James fully endorsed the film. Just can't see that reaction if they were totally down with the gay. But I digress!

HWG: Ford might not have even been aware of it but it's there in the subtext of every scene. The vid makes it even more apparent to the point where I am certain that we just witnessed one of the earliest stalker/stalkee relationships in history.

Nicky: The use of detail shots is beautiful against the pull of the music. I particularly loved the fall of the spoon at 0:46, and the movement of light across the segment of clips from 1:11 - 1:16. I love how all these detail clips have such meaning in the overall narrative and thematic tone. In a place where sexual desire collides with death wish, all these languid sensations and tiny moments of light and beauty serve to underline the constant shadow of death that hangs over the entire vid.

HWG: Speaking of the light theme, I'd like to hurl us into the land of metaphors for a little bit. The vid starts off with perhaps the most thematic shot of all; the headlight of an on-coming train. Not only is the train James' claim to fame (and therefore his downfall), but when juxtaposed directly with the end of the vid (James' death) that shot suddenly becomes the proverbial "light at the end

of the tunnel" which the viewer is never allowed to forget as the train finally collides at 2:27. It's an ominous beginning and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Nicky: I do love me some circular narrative metaphors!

The vid echoes the film Ford's obsessive fascination of James, but sharpens it to a keen point by using some beautifully observed character moments. The cutting back-and-forth to Ford spying James in the bath around the 0:50 - 1:00s felt particularly telling in the use of facial expressions and the way the vidder pulls the visual focus to the way his hand strokes the doorframe. Another highlight for me is when he really experiences the full range of tactile sensations from 1:56 - 2:04 as he is pulled deeper and deeper into the "relationship" of sorts.

HWG: I'm glad you mentioned the cutting because to me the frantic pace of the edit *perfectly* mirrors the obsession building in Ford's mind. The vid flutters through all the little things about James that possess Ford through and through. The little details that only a true fanboy would notice: the coffee stirring at 0:46, James getting the paper at 1:05 intercut with the bath, and as you mentioned the tactile experience of touching his things at 1:56 - 2:04. The pace is so fervent that a slower moment like 1:24 - 1:26 really sticks out for me. That is pure love we see on Ford's little face and it is beautiful. The vidder lets us swim around in that emotion for an eternal two seconds.

Nicky: The man at the heart of all this is the enigmatic Jesse James. The vidder used some amazingly evocative clips to showcase the character, which really shows us James' mystery and almost-mythical beauty as seen through Ford's eyes. The intercut face and body shots at 0:34 - 0:40 in particular linger with me. The word "legendary" comes to mind, the idea enforced by Ford's little keepsake box filled with not just James, but specifically *representations* of him, not just as a man but as a larger-than-life idol.

HWG: You know, if this story was set in modern times, I can totally see Ford running "fuckyeahjessejames" on Tumblr. Being a giant fangirl myself I think it's easy to empathize with what Ford is going through (except maybe the murder parts). James starts off as such a legend, such a huge celebrity that we never really see his face. This is literally the case at 0:34 - 0:40, but even without the mask we only see this man in profile (0:17), three-quarter shots (0:31), or even medium/wide shots (0:22, 0:42). If by chance we glimpse his face in close up, he quickly looks away. But we see lingering shots of Ford and we understand his wanting. The further he slithers into James' world, the more we are allowed to see of James' face until he is looking right at us (2:11).

Nicky: Ah, I love that observation! For me, James stays a cipher for so long that when he eventually shows a crack in his exterior, it hits hard. At 1:28, watching his expressions on the carried head movement through the intercut clips, it feels revelatory how this character is drawing Ford in with that sense of sexual promise, punctuated by the brief moments of real or threatened violence like 1:36 or 1:40.

HWG: He is a super skilled serpent charmer! And Ford happily coils around him like one of the snakes at 1:32, never anticipating the true nature of James' affection.

Nicky: The vid beautifully aligns Ford's latent desire with James' world-weary wish for death and peace. As James raises his head and squarely meets Ford's eyes at 1:53, it just feels so much like he knows exactly what is running through Ford's head, and how he is grooming Ford in multiple senses. When he finally hands over the pistol - a metaphor for both sex and death - at 2:05, it feels so much more a tragedy for Ford than it is for James.

HWG: Ah, you're talking about that shot of James through the opaque glass and to me that shot is from Ford's POV. He knows that James knows that he knows, you know? By giving him the pistol (which I agree is absolutely a sexual metaphor - he's practically giving Ford the OK to "take him") James basically destroys Ford while securing his own legend. Thematically I think this is evident in the shot at 2:20 when James literally steps into the foreground and Ford is out of focus in the

background. After that he is never the same man as he was before, punctuated by the innocent kid at 2:28 trying to "capture" the legend of James into his little collector's box.

Nicky: As the boundaries between the two characters blur at the gorgeous mirrored head movements at 2:07, followed by the putting on the gun belts - again, sex and death in equal measures - we are inextricably pulled into Ford's headspace, carried along on the torrent of James' death wish, and there's a real sense of helplessness and confusion as the images grow more frenzied and emotive. At the end, it seems inevitable that Ford would pull out the gun with what appears to be James' full knowledge and blessing. And the vid hurtles towards its inevitable conclusion just as the train hurtles towards us.

HWG: It's simple, smart editing like this that sets a mood and cuts to the core of the story which makes me want to scream to the world, "THIS IS WHAT VIDDING IS ALL ABOUT!"



THE FOURTH WALL
