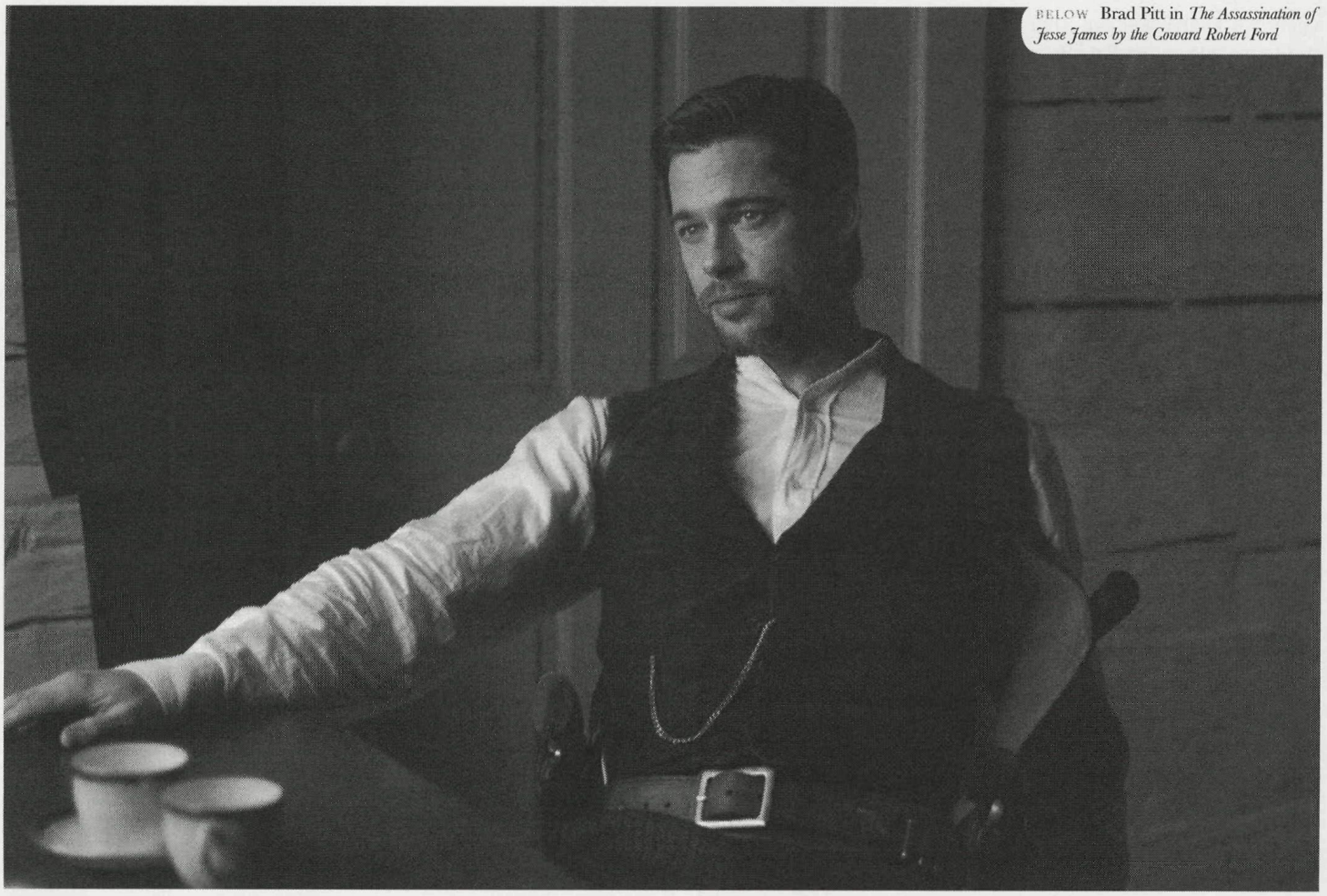

BELOW Brad Pitt in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford *is something of a throwback to 1970s Hollywood, a time when filmmakers such as Sam Peckinpah, Robert Altman and Michael Cimino were responsible for revising the Western.*

Industrial Change and Historical Revision in The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford

By Simon Dickson

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KEYWORDS: *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, Andrew Dominik, Brad Pitt, Warner Bros, genre revisionism, western.

Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) is something of a throwback to 1970s Hollywood, a time when film-makers such as Sam Peckinpah, Robert Altman, and Michael Cimino were responsible for revising the Western, the US film industry's most enduring genre. Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid* (1973), and Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980) challenged genre conventions and have been read by critics as left-liberal critiques of US history. These films also signalled the ways in which the studios – struggling with falling attendances – accommodated auteur-directors, allowing them almost unprecedented creative control. Considering the various industrial, economic and cultural changes since that period, *The Assassination of Jesse James* serves as an interesting case study: an avowedly revisionist approach to the Western made by a major studio gambling on an up-and-coming director, Andrew Dominik. This essay explores points of comparison between *The Assassination of Jesse James* and its 1970s counterparts, in particular the question of genre revisionism and the industrial practice of gambling on new talent.

High stakes filmmaking

The film's production dates back to early 2004, when Warner Bros. and Brad Pitt's production company, Plan B Entertainment, acquired the rights to Ron Hansen's 1983 novel *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*. Ridley Scott and his company Scott Free Productions also joined the project soon after its conception. It was Dominik who had shown initial interest in Hansen's novel "as a story of people and

BELOW Brad Pitt in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

The post-production process of the film can be seen as symptomatic of Warner Bros.' and other major studios' auteur-friendly attitude during the late 1990s and early to mid 2000s.

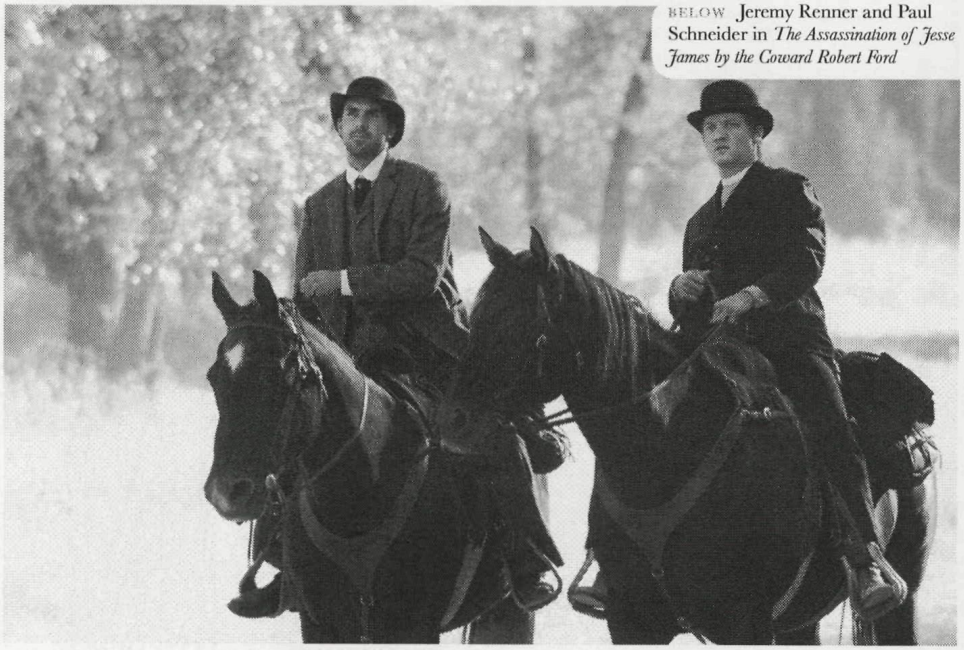
emotions that were vivid and realistic [...]. The fact that they happened to be two legendary figures of American history added a level of drama but was really a secondary issue" (Levy, par. 21). Dominik's early sentiments revealed his desire for a character-driven feature well in advance of production. Seemingly unconcerned by this commitment, Warner Bros.' decision to grant writing and directing responsibilities to Dominik, a relatively novice Australian filmmaker proved to be a big risk. Warner Bros. may have found some consolation in the fact that a major star, perhaps even the biggest star in the industry, was lined up to play the lead role. By the time of release though, even Pitt's considerable star power was unable to generate strong box office returns. Domestically, *The Assassination of Jesse James* recouped barely 10 per cent of its original budget of $30 million.

During the same year, similar films touting some of the industry's biggest stars suffered a similar fate, including Oliver Hirschbiegel's *The Invasion* (2007; starring Nicole Kidman, Daniel Craig), Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart* (2007; Angelina Jolie), and Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs* (2007; Tom Cruise, Meryl Streep, Robert Redford). In the case of the latter, Cruise's influence approximated to little, making the film one of his lowest grossing of all time. In terms of critical success, *The Assassination of Jesse James* fared better than these other left-field projects, opening to enthusiastic praise at the Toronto International Film Festival, and some estimable reviews (McCarthy, Ebert). The approval of reviewers was far from unanimous, however, with various critics condemning the film's indulgent three-hour running time and lack of immersive action sequences. Warner Bros. had predicted this reaction during the film's post-production period, which lasted well over a year, and had applied pressure to Dominik to make changes, leading to a delay in the film's release. However, in a dispute over the final cut, the major studio faced opposition from Scott, as well as Pitt and Dominik. In an interview, Pitt commented: "We were fortunate to have the time we needed to get it just right. The first version was four and a half hours long and I thought it was fantastic" (Foley). Regarding Pitt's influence, Dominik stated: "He was definitely the most powerful person involved with the movie [...]. He's the only reason the movie happened" (Carnevale). Indeed, the power dynamics between stars and studios has been consistently in flux since the industry's Golden Age. For instance, the Jimmy Stewart starring *Winchester '73* (1950), directed by Anthony Mann, proved to be a great success, which Universal Studios had not expected. Stewart was granted half the profits thanks to a lucrative studio deal made by his agent, Lew Wasserman. Such a deal "established a precedent of granting stars far greater power and creative control over projects in which they appeared" (Mann 50–51). Whilst Pitt's star power may have had little effect on the box office, it certainly held sway in enabling Dominik to make the film according to his original vision.

The implication here is that as a result of concerted pressure by Pitt and Scott, Dominik's artistic vision was maintained during the editing process despite Warner Bros.' concerns. And, in general, the post-production process of the film can be seen as symptomatic of Warner Bros.' and other major studios' auteur-friendly attitude during the late 1990s and early to mid 2000s. During this period, Paramount Pictures' specialty division, Paramount Vantage, also made compromises to suit certain filmmakers' demands, particularly with regard to film running times. For instance, Sean Penn's *Into The Wild* (2007; 148 min.) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007; 158 min.) substantially exceeded the average running time of 120 min. So, as in the 1970s, the early 2000s witnessed major studios gambling on auteur-directors, while offsetting this risk with big-name stars and trusted producers.

The major studios' willingness to "just-say-yes" was a hallmark realized by various powerful figures in the industry, including Jeff Robinov, who assumed his position as president of Warner Bros. Pictures Group in January 2008. However, as a result of the commercial failure of *The Assassination of Jesse James* (along with *There Will Be Blood* and *Into the Wild*), this attitude began to shift. After transitioning to president, Robinov had Warner Bros. merge with New Line Cinema and then went about closing their respective specialty divisions, Warner Independent Pictures and Picturehouse. Paramount Pictures made a similar move by consolidating Paramount Vantage into the parent studio. More recently, Robinov's strategy "involves making fewer but more ambitious movies, cutting back on sweetheart producer deals and at long last integrating its corporate sibling DC Comics more tightly into the movie division" (Barnes). These changes constitute an emphatic move away from the kind of artistic semi-independent production that *The Assassination of Jesse James* embodied; a shift evidenced by various directors running into difficulty in seeking funding for their films, including Dominik, whose upcoming *Killing Them Softly* (2012) is backed again by Pitt's production company, but financed independently, and Paul Thomas Anderson, who even after the critical success of *There Will Be Blood*, could not entice Universal Pictures to greenlight his

latest project, *The Master* (2012). Robinov's recent strategy (and a wider conservatism in the industry at large) seems to echo this turn away from auteur-driven films in the late 1970s and 1980s (with the spectacular failure of *Heaven's Gate* [Michael Cimino, 1980] seen as a key driver of this change). Prominent figures in the current industry who are willing to gamble on risky, artistic projects are now few and far between and the shouldering of risk has, once again, become the province of independents: the distribution rights for Dominik's and Anderson's forthcoming features, for example, have been acquired by the Weinstein Company.



BELOW Jeremy Renner and Paul Schneider in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

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A Jesse James to suit the times

Historian T. J. Stiles notes that the story of Jesse James "has been remade again and again" in history books, popular fiction, and Hollywood films, including Henry King's *Jesse James* (1939), Nicholas Ray's *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), Philip Kaufman's *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972), Walter Hill's *The Long Riders* (1980) and more recently, Warner Bros.' *American Outlaws* (2001), directed by Les Mayfield (qtd. in Robinson). Undoubtedly, there is an attraction to Jesse as a charismatic and enigmatic figure and most accounts, filmic or otherwise, perpetuate the myth of Jesse as a romantic outlaw, a kind of Robin Hood figure. Dominik's film, which adheres closely to Hansen's novel, is a fictionalized account yet it has been commended for its accuracy, especially in its refusal of the Robin Hood trope. In his review of the film, Stiles comments: "I felt that I was watching a James movie truly rooted in historical reality [...] that I was watching Jesse James" (Stiles).

The film's close examination of the relationship between Jesse and Bob Ford, one that had been simplified in previous manifestations, and in Hansen's opinion "was far more complicated than anybody had ever presented" is one of the key strategies for complicating the Jesse myth (qtd. in Robinson). The film uses the story of the two men to comment on fame, infamy, and hero worship, as well as a nascent nineteenth century celebrity culture. Dominik had already explored some of this subject matter in his Australian debut, *Chopper* (2000), an influential film for Pitt, who praised its "authentic, original storytelling" (qtd. in Foley). *Chopper* is a semi-fictionalized account of the life of Australian ex-criminal, Mark "Chopper" Read. It is worth noting that Jesse and Mark bear similarities, especially a self-consciousness of their own mythic status ("All of America thinks highly of me," as Jesse declares in one scene) and a deep-seated paranoia. In addition, both were "savage murderers, and both masochistically put themselves in harm's way" (Ebert). On Jesse, Hansen asserts that "fundamentally he was a psychopath, he exhibit[ed] almost all the characteristics" (qtd. in Robinson).

There is a duality to Jesse's character that is dealt with effectively in Dominik's film. On the one hand, Jesse appears to display paranoid, psychopathic tendencies, which lead him to murder one of the ex-members of his gang, Ed Miller. On the other, there is an emotional side to Jesse, who often conveys a capacity for empathy. In a scene where Jesse severely beats a boy to extract information from him, he is interrupted and the realization of his actions brings him to tears. Here, both sides of Jesse's character are shown simultaneously, indicating how the film wishes to populate its evocation of the west with rounded, complex and contradictory characters.

Ultimately, it is Jesse's children that seem to affect him more than anything else. In the events that lead to his death, he playfully swings his daughter in the backyard, causing her shoe to fall off, unnoticed. Shortly after, Jesse stares inquisitively at his son and asks Charley: "What do you think goes on in that noggin of his?" Finally, in a poignant, pivotal sequence, Jesse gazes out of the window at his daughter's shoe on the ground. Dominik's *mise-en-scène* is loaded: sounds of Jesse's daughter's singing and the wind are amplified, resonating in the room where Jesse stands. The choice of shot from outside the house shows Jesse's face, subtly distorted by the windowpane. The sequence "suggests isolation [...] although a hero to millions of admirers and a devoted family man, he remains a prisoner of his own celebrity" (Raw 24). The windowpane shot underpins Dominik's distortion of the folklore image of Jesse as a heroic outlaw, focusing rather on Jesse as a lost soul, psychologically unstable, burdened not only by the emotional weight of his proto-celebrity status but more thoroughly by his profligate, murderous way of life. Here, in his last moments, Jesse finally confronts an image of himself whilst the affective power of his children lingers. The shoe symbolizes a fatal memento, which seems to push him closer towards his destiny as he makes the uncharacteristic decision to remove his gun belt. Eventually, whilst dusting a picture, he sees in it the reflection of Bob, who swiftly shoots him in the back of the head. This kind of assisted suicide is a crucial revision to the Jesse James tale, which in turn causes a re-evaluation of Jesse's character. One is reminded of an earlier scene, in which Jesse is pondering over the concept of suicide, he says to Charley, "you won't fight dying once you've peeked over to the other side; you'll no more want to go back to your body than you'd want to spoon

BELOW Casey Affleck and Zooey Deschanel in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

As with the so-called Hollywood renaissance in the 1970s, when a number of major studios gambled relatively high budgets on difficult, character-driven films made by auteur-directors, a similar window of opportunity appeared in the early to mid 2000s.

up your own puke." This depiction of a self-destructive, suicidal Jesse is at once faithful to Hansen's version of events (and one might argue history itself) and at odds with previous portrayals, filmic or otherwise.

Dominik's understanding of celebrity culture has significant contemporary resonance and translates persuasively through the Western genre. As Peter Fonda commented, "the Western can talk about today in the past tense" (Corliss). Jesse's assassin, Bob, is the person who has worshipped him the most. Dominik characterizes Bob's attraction to Jesse as "typical fan stalker stuff, where he's got an imagined relationship with this person that he idolizes but it doesn't bear much resemblance to reality" (Robinson). Bob is adamant in the belief that by getting close to Jesse, he will attain a degree of fame. In an initial scene, Bob says to Frank James, "I got an appetite for greater things. I hoped by joining up with you, it'd put me that much closer to getting them." On top of this, Bob's stalker-status is heightened to a degree that shades into lust. As Ebert rightly suggests, "If Robert cannot be the lover of his hero, what would be more intimate than to kill him?" Only after murdering his hero does Bob achieve celebrity status, but ultimately, it amounts to a short-lived, fifteen minutes of fame, so to speak. Richard Slotkin notes: "I don't think anyone at the time could have had the understanding of what celebrity was becoming, in a society which, [...] by the 1880s had the beginnings of real mass media" (qtd. in Robinson). After the public's fascination with Bob subsides, they are unable to sympathize with him, and soon brand him "that dirty little coward, who shot Mr. Howard." The ballad, sung by Nick Cave in the film, "feeds into this national pop culture interest" (Slotkin, qtd. in Robinson), hence, Bob suffers severe public humiliation engendered by this early standard of mass media, eventually culminating in his own assassination.

An anti-Western?

This self-consciousness regarding the construction of celebrity and the mythologizing of the west as it was being settled was also a key feature of a number of 1970s Westerns, including *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (Robert Altman, 1976). The influence of these 1970s Westerns is also given away in the film's title, which features both the protagonists' names, as in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid*. By foregrounding the character names, all three titles intimate that the respective couple's relationship exceeds the narrative itself. Perhaps what distinguishes Peckinpah's film is an elegiac yearning for the romance of the west that is very much downplayed in Altman's films, or is at least directed

more intensely towards the characters themselves. Indeed, both Altman's and Dominik's films are invariably described as "anti-Westerns" for the way in which they evade and subvert generic conventions. For instance, Dominik virtually erases the popular cowboy image from his film, instead faithfully pinpointing the era's Victorian look. He elaborates: "Nobody wore cowboy hats, they wore homburgs and bowlers [...] the idea of making a Dickensian Western was very appealing" (qtd. in Whitington). His comments are equally applicable to Altman's films, which also highlight period dress.

Dominik comments on the look of his film: "Jesse is wandering through the ashes of his life, so we tried to keep things sort of autumnal, like one long funeral" (Chagollan). The cinematographer, Roger Deakins, achieved this impression by having lenses created, which yielded images with a vignetting effect. Deakins also desaturated various images, adding colors such as yellow and red-black to produce a melancholic look, the "sort of luminosity that [Dominik] was after" (Chagollan). Vilmos Zsigmond, the cinematographer on *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* opted for a similar textured, daguerrotype look executed by using an irreversible technique known as pre-fogging, which involves flashing the film negative in order to alter the contrast. It meant that the studio couldn't make demands about how Altman's film should otherwise look.

In their respective films, both Altman and Dominik favor cold, bleak landscapes that engulf their protagonists, showing that nature is as much a part of their deaths as anything else. Dominik takes this idea further in his film by using time-lapse footage of clouds moving through the sky, indicative of a sense of propulsion towards the inevitable fate of the characters, the titular main event. Dominik's final shot of Jesse, embedded in ice, echoes the last images of Altman's film, in which McCabe sits pathetically in a blizzard, dying slowly from a gunshot wound. An aforementioned sequence, in which Jesse discusses suicide with Charley, prefigures Dominik's final ice shot by placing the characters against a vast, desolate backdrop, wandering out over a frozen lake. Jesse fires his pistol blindly at the fish swimming beneath the ice. The image recalls the target practice motif in *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid*, where Billy and Garrett each take part in firing at chickens. Another sequence shows Garrett and a stranger both firing at an empty bottle floating in a river. Pointlessly, and inevitably, the two men end up aiming their guns at each other. Mark Cousins suggests that this scene is meant to signify how "idealism has long since flowed down the river" (Cousins), or similarly, has been completely frozen over in Dominik's film. In both examples, there is a rejection of any heroic characteristic that may have been present in earlier accounts of these mythic figures.

In Dominik's script, his description, "Jesse walks like Jesus out onto the frozen water" (Dominik 68), bears religious imagery that can be extended to a Jesus-Judas subtext, underlining Bob as the Judas figure who betrays Jesse. Peckinpah also exploits this motif in his film, in which Billy The Kid resembles a Christ-like figure at various points, most notably when he is gunned down by Pat Garrett. Before he is killed, Billy "appears to give in mildly, without volition, to his fate while he holds his gun to his side, arms out in a crucifixional pose" (Merrill and Simons 131). As the sequence continues, Garrett shoots his own reflected image in the mirror. For Brad Stevens, this "represents the destruction of everything positive within Garrett and his recognition of, and revulsion at, the dark side of his personality" (Stevens 273). The sequence resonates with Dominik's climax: despite the role reversal, Stevens's interpretation can still be applied to Jesse, who confronts his reflected image in the picture frame before his death. Jesse has more in common with Billy though, as both characters are aware of the myth they inhabit, and both share a fatalistic attitude. Stevens notes that "Billy participates in his own destruction: rather than going to Mexico, he chooses to remain at Fort Sumner to await his death" (Stevens 271). Like Jesse, Billy does nothing to counter Garrett in the final sequence, and instead opens his arms to embrace death. The film's title – clearly indicating the film's ending and thereby frustrating the conventional pleasures of a Hollywood film – is a clear indicator of the film's wider self-consciousness about myth.

Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) is often cited (including by Dominik himself, as well as Pitt) as a major influence on the film, yet this is based mostly on a similar visual style between the two films, characterized by repeated shots of nature and landscape. Dominik showed an earlier, longer cut of the film to Malick, who was unimpressed by it, particularly the length, and the use of voice-over (Salisbury). It is a salient, common criticism that the omnipresent narration (spoken by Hugh Ross) in Dominik's film creates a distancing effect between viewer and film (Raw 25). Whilst this is also true of Malick's films, the difference is that Malick's narrators are usually firmly rooted within the diegesis. The narration in *The Assassination of Jesse James* represents a kind of co-authorship between Hansen and Dominik, who found the language of the novel most appealing: "I loved the way Jesse was written. He was a character with magical thought" (Salisbury).

As with the so-called Hollywood renaissance in the 1970s, when a number of major studios gambled relatively high budgets on difficult, character-driven films made by auteur-directors, a similar window of opportunity appeared in the early to mid 2000s. *The Assassination of Jesse James* exploited this opportunity, modeling itself on the 1970s revisionist Western, and in particular a dialectical capacity of the genre to debunk a romanticized view of the west and comment on the cult of celebrity, past and present. The film's failure to secure a large audience can no doubt be attributed to its challenging revisionism and anti-Western character. By way of contrast, the success of the Coen Brothers' *True Grit* (2010) ($250 million from a $38 million budget) is surely predicated on the fact that it is a relatively straightforward genre exercise.

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