

A Necropolitical Postwestern Myth: The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford

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Abstract

This article interrogates Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) within the conceptual horizon of postwestern cinema, theorizing the structural exhaustion and irreducible non-closure of modern heroic mythology in contemporary visual culture. Moving beyond historical, biographical, or psychological paradigms, the study reconceptualizes Jesse James as a fatigued mythic formation operating across interlocking regimes of visual representation, narrative organization, temporal experience, and political regulation. Within the film, heroism relinquishes its capacity to organize moral exemplarity or teleological progression and disarticulates itself through an aesthetic regime of silence, stillness, and withdrawal. The analysis unfolds along four analytically distinct yet structurally interdependent axes. First, the iconographic regime articulated around face, body, and gaze destabilizes the representational coherence historically sustaining heroic visibility. Second, the narrative configuration centered on Robert Ford reconfigures betrayal as a structural consequence of mythic unsustainability, thereby displacing individualized ethical explanation. Third, the film's temporal regime suspends logics of progression and closure and institutes a melancholic temporality configured through duration, delay, and repetition. Fourth, Jesse James's death functions as a necropolitical threshold that formalizes the administration, authorization, and symbolic regulation of death. The article advances the claim that the film rearticulates heroic form as an exhausted yet unresolved cultural residue, with efficacy persisting within the domain of cultural memory. Postwestern cinema assumes the status of an aesthetic field oriented toward the critical exposition of heroism's historical, ethical, and representational limits, rendering exhaustion and non-closure operative as constitutive conditions of contemporary mythic persistence.

Keywords: Postwestern Cinema, Necropolitics, Myth and Heroism, Melancholic Temporality, The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford.

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1. Introduction

Accounts of Jesse James seldom leave him as an ordinary robber, for his crimes drew much of their later meaning from the violent aftermath of the Civil War, especially in Missouri and the border states, amid Confederate loyalties, local resentments, revenge politics, and suspicion toward federal authority (Stiles, 2002:41–44; Settle, 1971: 88–91). In this charged historical atmosphere, robbery began to sound like defiance, and violence carried the residue of unfinished political conflict; ballads, pamphlets, newspapers, and later films held this doubleness in circulation by binding Jesse James's name to rebellion, regional grievance, outlaw glamour, and American violence. He consequently remained criminal and rebel, murderer and folk hero, historical actor and object of fascination, a doubleness that sent each retelling back to the Civil War, revenge, law, and the wish to read violence as heroism (Nora, 1989: 11–12; White, 1980: 6–7). Dominik's film begins with that inherited strain, presenting a Jesse James who appears after legend has started to outlive authority and the old heroic image has exhausted its moral force.

Late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century westerns return to the hero after the older belief in movement, conquest, and restored order has lost much of its authority. Action, territorial expansion, and moral repair had long underwritten the classical western, yet Dominik's film preserves them only as remnants of a heroic order that has ceased to command belief. The problem is not the disappearance of the western hero, but his survival after the collapse of the moral order that had made him intelligible. In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), Dominik installs Jesse James within a narrative field that denies him command over history or moral meaning; history slows around him, ethical steadiness withdraws from the narrative, and legend overtakes action. Public fascination and inner fatigue converge in his screen presence, a tension intensified by the film's visual design. The fog-bound train robbery slows violence into atmosphere, and the dim interiors extend that slowed temporality into spaces that should have offered narrative clarity. In the suspended minutes before the assassination, stillness and silence arrest movement until the story seems to have reached its end before the killing occurs. Jesse's body and mood bear exhaustion, yet that exhaustion exceeds the individual figure and recasts heroism itself after narrative and ethical command have collapsed. The film's postwestern intervention turns on this paradox: heroism survives after the authority that once granted it narrative and ethical force has collapsed.

Dominik's film reorients the western's moral logic before stylistic difference fully registers, hollowing out the older assumption that outlaw violence could still underwrite progress, justice, or restitution. Classical western narrative had often endowed violence with the promise of restored order, even at its most fragile; in *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, that promise lingers only as fractured residue. The train robbery, the domestic interiors, and the minutes preceding the assassination convert violence into accumulating pressure, as waiting, silence, dim light, and delayed movement arrest action within a lengthened temporal field. Each violent act retains the trace of a myth divested of authority and heroic decision; Jesse James's death therefore denies the narrative completion traditionally granted to heroic endings. The corpse, the reports, and Ford's later reenactments prolong the assassination beyond the moment of killing, transfiguring death into circulation, exposure, and repetition. White's account of narrative closure specifies the force of this refusal, since the film deprives death of the stabilizing function that narrative often assigns to historical endings (White, 1980: 9–10). Heroism endures as image, yet the violence that had underwritten its moral claim forfeits justificatory force.

Robert Ford pulls the crisis of heroic myth into a more intimate drama of admiration, envy, and failed succession. He approaches Jesse James as an admirer before betrayal ruptures the legend from within, and this prior intimacy lends the killing its disturbing force. Ford's desire fastens on Jesse's

name as much as on Jesse himself, coveting the fame and authority that render Jesse publicly magnetic. In the domestic scenes, this desire enters ordinary gestures: Jesse answers Ford's admiration with evasion, mockery, and suspicion; Ford's watchful gaze and awkward attempts at intimacy compress closeness into pressure for both men. Girard's account of mimetic desire illuminates this attachment: Ford's admiration hardens into a desire for Jesse's symbolic position before it turns toward Jesse's death (Girard, 1977: 3–4). Jesse stands as model and obstacle at the same time, the object Ford imitates and the barrier he cannot cross. Ford seeks visibility by means of proximity, yet visibility refuses legitimacy. Jesse's disappearance turns into Ford's imagined passage into the legend, but the killing reveals the legend as unavailable to inheritance. The shot dislodges Jesse from the living centre of the myth and abandons Ford outside the place he expected to occupy, condemning him to repetition, performance, and failed recognition.

Dominik's postwestern cinema relocates the force of action into silence, darkness, duration, and space, so that conquest and movement gradually yield to delay, exposure, and regulated death. Prolonged silences, sparse dialogue, and low-lit images erode action's former authority; hesitation, foreknowledge, and waiting absorb that authority into a slower and more oppressive register. The train robbery submerges action in fog and low light, and the domestic interiors heighten the same pressure as speech obscures motive, suspicion congeals, and intimacy slips into surveillance. By the time the film approaches the assassination, death has already assumed visible form before the gunshot, held within the slowed duration produced by foreknowledge. The landscape intensifies this pressure: snow, fog, bare interiors, and low light strip the frontier of abundance, promise, and national purpose, leaving bodies exposed to suspicion and desire as arrival, settlement, and renewal lose their force. As those frontier promises deteriorate, expansion forfeits its power to justify violence and discloses the exhaustion of the stories that had made violence appear necessary. Jesse's death consequently moves from personal fate into public transaction. Mbembe's necropolitics supplies a precise vocabulary for this political logic: a political order authorizes Jesse as a target, rewards him as a death, displays him as a corpse, and preserves him as a usable image as political conditions make killing appear legitimate (Mbembe, 2003: 22–24). Jesse's assassination terminates a life, yet the reward, the public gaze, and later retellings sustain the death's political usefulness.

Jesse James's death refuses to close his story as a private end or a completed historical fact; Dominik's film propels the outlaw beyond the moment of killing into image, report, reenactment, rumour, and public memory. Ford's later performances restage the assassination without delivering the authority he expected, and that failed repetition unsettles the legend by intensifying the contradictions attached to Jesse's name. As Jesse disappears from action, his name continues to summon fascination, resentment, and national unease around civil war violence, legality, revenge, and the wish for heroic innocence. The film's melancholy grows from this suspended release: loss resists mourning's settlement and returns as image, repetition, and failed recognition. Heroism consequently reappears as an exhausted historical and ethical form, still visible after its authority has failed, and the narrative rehearses the same rhythm by circling absence, repetition, and delayed recognition instead of moving toward closure or renewal. Myth, memory, mimetic desire, and necropolitical power therefore arise from the film's own afterlife of violence, than from an external theoretical grid.

2. Theoretical Framework

Jesse James moves beyond historical outlawry as robbery, revenge, and postbellum violence enter the domain of legend. Ballads, newspapers, films, and popular retellings refashion these acts into stories of rebellion, grievance, and heroic fascination. Myth performs this repeated rearrangement: Jesse's name continues to operate inside cultural memory because the contradictions attached to it resist settlement. Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* builds itself around

this unstable legend, drawing its narrative force from meanings that resist moral closure. Jesse's name circulates across ballads, newspapers, films, and public imagination, binding criminality to heroism, illegality to legitimacy, and violence to national belonging. Nora's account of memory and White's account of narrative form ground this reading of repetition and historical meaning, since the past acquires meaning by selection, repetition, and narrative arrangement, exceeding the factual record (Nora, 1989: 11–12; White, 1980: 6–7). Jesse James retains cultural force precisely as myth keeps the violence of his legend morally unsettled.

Dominik's film forges the postwestern by eroding action's command, dilating time, and exhausting heroic authority. Classical western narrative had long invested violence with moral force: action propelled narrative advance, restored social order, and secured the hero's moral intelligibility. In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, this logic persists as a depleted cinematic trace. Violence decelerates, dialogue contracts, and dim light suspends bodies; duration, anticipation, and withdrawal absorb the interpretive pressure formerly carried by action. The train robbery loosens the bond between violence and resolution; the dim interiors and the suspended minutes before the assassination intensify that fracture. Long pauses and delayed movements deplete heroic action before moral certainty settles. Deleuze's time-image lends conceptual precision to this movement from action to duration: Dominik's film anchors perception in the pressure of time around characters, beyond the acts they perform (Deleuze, 1989: 34–36). Stillness and temporal extension assume ethical force by detaching heroism from action and submitting it to the pressure of time. The film draws the spectator into a postwestern world of exhausted heroism: the hero remains visible after the moral direction that had sustained him has failed.

Ford's desire and Jesse's death place mimetic rivalry and political authorization in the same narrative movement. Betrayal grows out of Ford's attachment to Jesse, yet the assassination soon exceeds private rivalry and acquires public force. Admiration, resentment, and private grievance explain only part of Ford's attachment, for his desire takes Jesse's symbolic place inside the legend as its true object before it hardens into killing. Girard's account of mimetic desire exposes rivalry lodged inside admiration: Ford covets the admired figure's place beyond ordinary approval (Girard, 1977: 3–4). The domestic scenes translate this instability into glances, strained silences, and failed gestures of intimacy. Jesse's evasive responses and Ford's watchful attention compress proximity into pressure. As proximity intensifies, Jesse's admirability depends on distance; closeness damages the aura Ford seeks to possess. Betrayal develops from this failed proximity, as Ford imagines access to the legend as the removal of the figure embodying it. The killing withholds authority from Ford; it dislodges Jesse from action and strands Ford in repetition, performance, and failed recognition.

Jesse's death then carries this private rivalry into a public order of reward, authorization, display, and remembrance. The assassination exceeds Ford's desire, for the political world around Jesse already treats his death as useful. Mbembe's necropolitics clarifies this order by linking sovereignty to the regulation of death and to the public conditions that make killing appear legitimate (Mbembe, 2003: 22–24). In Dominik's film, Jesse becomes a sanctioned target, a rewarded death, a displayed corpse, and a preservable image. The assassination abandons the sphere of private betrayal and assumes the form of public transaction. The reward confers material legitimacy on the killing, but public memory refuses to convert Ford into a heroic successor. Death reallocates visibility and preserves the myth's unrest: Jesse's death amplifies his posthumous force; Ford's survival consigns him to symbolic failure. Heroic myth therefore gathers force from mimetic desire before the killing and from political circulation after death.

The film draws out these concepts from three interrelated pressures: Jesse's image persists as Ford's desire for recognition fails and death enters political circulation. Myth and cultural memory account for the persistence of Jesse's name; mimetic desire isolates the pressure that drives Ford toward

betrayal, and necropolitics defines the political order that authorizes Jesse's public death. Myth acquires material force in the film's bodies, gazes, suspended time, and public rituals of death. Jesse's face, Ford's gaze, the suspended time before the assassination, the displayed corpse, and the later reenactments inscribe myth, memory, desire, and death into the film's formal logic. In these scenes, heroic authority persists in damaged form; repetition, spectacle, failed recognition, and political authorization sustain that damaged authority. The film's own staging grounds the theoretical frame: authority fails, yet myth endures as repetition, authorization, and unresolved memory.

3. Historical Jesse James and the Residue of Myth

Jesse James first secured public prominence during the politically unsettled years after the American Civil War, especially in Missouri and the border states, as the war's formal end left political calm and legal authority unresolved. Older loyalties, local vengeance, guerrilla violence, and distrust of federal power continued to govern public feeling, while armed conflict splintered into irregular groups, paramilitary ties, and local networks of coercion, blurring the boundaries among legality, justice, and retaliation (Stiles, 2002: 41–44). This fractured environment invested Jesse's robberies and violence with the charge of political resentment and unfinished revenge, hastening his transformation from outlaw into mythic figure. Dominik's film inherits this residue and renders it as atmosphere: fog, silence, dim interiors, and a body already bearing the strain of legend.

In postwar Missouri, guerrilla violence, vengeance, Confederate loyalty, and distrust of federal authority continued to regulate public feeling, drawing Jesse James into a field of crime, retaliation, and political resistance that resisted moral simplification (Settle, 1971: 88–91). His robberies and violence drew their force from this unstable social world, as the fragile boundary between outlawry and political grievance charged violence with the unfinished tensions of a society moving from civil war into uncertain peace. Jesse James consequently absorbed regional resentment, Confederate memory, and revanchist feeling as his name circulated across rumour, popular print, and border-state memory, sustaining a visibility that exceeded exceptional criminality. Dominik's film converts this historical contradiction into visual atmosphere in the opening train robbery sequence (Dominik, 2007: 00:05:10–00:12:00), stripping outlaw action of the speed, confidence, and moral clarity expected from a western robbery. Fog, low light, restrained movement, and sparse dialogue turn the robbery into the return of unresolved violence, as Jesse's face, posture, and controlled stillness concentrate the pressure of repetition, rumour, and legend. Authority detaches from movement here and settles on a body already slowed by the history attached to it. The robbery exceeds the function of an introductory crime scene, transmuting postwar disorder into cinematic mood and installing Jesse James as the residue of unsettled history before the film unfolds his mythic afterlife.

Jesse James's legend drew force from a historical record resistant to any settled account of guilt, rebellion, or revenge. Folk ballads, sensational journalism, and popular pamphlets converted robberies and killings into narratives of defiance, grievance, and outlaw glamour, gradually displacing legal judgment with popular fascination. Robbery carried the force of resistance, violence absorbed the charge of political revenge, and Jesse's name outlasted the events that had first produced it (Stiles, 2002: 119–123). Repetition detached Jesse from factual closure: each retelling moved him further from the status of a solved historical case and intensified the public figure sustained by rumour, resentment, and unresolved feeling.

Dominik's film extends this movement from event to retelling in the aftermath of the assassination. In the sequences following Jesse's death (Dominik, 2007: 01:55:00–02:20:00), the corpse, public reports, and Ford's staged reenactments keep the killing suspended between murder and public memory. The event leaves the private room of violence and enters a theatre of spectatorship, judgment,

psychological motive, and the face withholds explanation as it absorbs the fatigue of accumulated legend and distance. Barthes and Deleuze situate the face as surface and duration (Barthes, 1981: 26–28; Deleuze, 1986: 96–99). Dominik ties that surface to a legend already worn by repetition. Jesse remains visible as heroic command drains away from the image.

The domestic interior sequences transfer this withholding to speech (Dominik, 2007: 00:45:18–00:52:04), as the face's unreadability returns in broken conversation. Dialogue contracts into brief remarks, evasions, and pauses; domestic closeness leaves the pressure intact, and the rooms thicken Jesse's authority. Ford watches Jesse as if proximity might unlock the legend, yet Jesse's silence converts that proximity into suspicion. Observation overtakes the room; intimacy assumes a threatening charge. Silence exceeds verbal absence and charges the room with unease. Authority persists as felt unease, with explanation withheld. As speech leaves motive, threat, and intimacy unresolved, posture, gaze, and delay govern perception. The domestic scenes continue the opening image's withheld clarity: Jesse remains visible as the sources of his authority recede into silence, stillness, and withheld affect.

In the domestic scenes, clipped speech erodes Jesse's command as evasive replies and unfinished pauses unsettle the room, leaving language unable to stabilize his authority. As words splinter into fragments and motive lingers unresolved, posture, gaze, and duration begin to assume the work abandoned by speech. Blanchot and Nancy provide the conceptual contour for this pressure, yet Dominik keeps it anchored in the room, the face, and the body rather than allowing it to drift into abstraction (Blanchot, 1995: 1–3; Nancy, 2007: 5–7). Pauses, room tone, and Jesse's unreadable face give that pressure sensory weight, carrying it toward the sequence preceding his death (Dominik, 2007: 01:45:22–01:48:10), where movement contracts into small gestures, slow turns, and measured pauses. Jesse inhabits the room as forward motion dissipates; waiting replaces initiative, and preparation overwhelms command. Classical western authority usually gathers around movement, decision, and action, yet Jesse's body interrupts that heroic code of motion by turning the loss of action into visible fatigue. His presence arrests attention even as mastery drains from the room. In this suspension, heroism survives as exposure: the body still commands the gaze, yet the room resists mastery and turns command into vulnerability.

Jesse's visibility culminates precisely as authority detaches from action; his presence still commands attention, yet that attention confers little command. Benjamin's account of aura specifies this fracture between visibility and power: Jesse's image preserves visual charge, even as the force surrounding that image has detached from any capacity to act or govern the scene (Benjamin, 2008: 22–24). Dominik makes aura adhere to the body as exposed image, sustained by looking, display, and repetition; after the assassination, this logic acquires its most concrete form as Jesse's body passes from living presence into public display (Dominik, 2007: 01:55:40–02:00:10). With movement, decision, and command withdrawn from the body, the corpse compels the gaze of others, and that redirected gaze proves decisive: the attention Ford expected for himself returns to Jesse's dead body. Ford's act releases a visibility he cannot master; the released visibility amplifies Jesse's image and diminishes the killer. Death preserves visibility by displacing it from agency to display, carrying Jesse from action into exposure, report, repetition, and public fascination. Ford's later reenactments reactivate this visibility, enlarging Jesse's image while leaving Ford's authority fractured. In this passage from body to corpse, Jesse's iconography assumes its final form: heroic command collapses, yet the image acquires the posthumous force that action failed to secure.

The film's iconography detaches Jesse James from biographical explanation and heroic action by converting his face, silence, body, aura, and corpse into a circulating image. In the opening sequence, the face withholds psychological clarity, and this withholding persists in the domestic interiors as speech contracts into unease. Before the assassination, Jesse's body accumulates authority as visible fatigue;

after death, the corpse redirects toward itself the attention Ford expected for himself. Ford's act collapses as succession, amplifying the image of the dead hero and diminishing the killer seeking recognition. The film therefore withholds Jesse's restoration as a commanding western hero and preserves his visibility after the collapse of command. Death intensifies this visibility by transferring Jesse from action into display, report, reenactment, and public fascination. Heroism endures as a damaged visual form sustained by the face, the corpse, repeated performance, and public memory. Jesse's iconography concentrates the film's central paradox: the hero forfeits authority over action, yet the image acquires authority over memory.

5. Robert Ford and the Structure of Betrayal

In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007), Dominik's sustained focus on Robert Ford reorients betrayal around recognition, proximity, and failed inheritance. Ford's earliest scenes render admiration as an unstable attachment: his fascination darkens into a craving for recognition as he scrutinises Jesse, tracks his gestures, appropriates his poise, and elicits only fragile acknowledgment in return. Proximity holds out the illusion of visibility, since Jesse's approval alone monopolises the power to legitimise Ford's place near the legend. Betrayal accrues pressure from this desire to inhabit and possess the symbolic world attached to Jesse's name. Ford's act forces into view the impossibility of inheritance by imitation or murder: he covets Jesse's visibility, kills the man, and secures notoriety stripped of mythic authority.

Ford's early scenes (Dominik, 2007: 00:30:12–00:35:48) inscribe this desire in hesitant speech, watchful posture, and awkward attempts at intimacy before assassination takes command of the narrative. His gaze solicits approval, gauges distance, and strains toward recognition, yet Jesse's presence summons him closer only to reinforce his exclusion from the symbolic place he hopes to occupy. Girard's account of mimetic desire specifies the mimetic logic of this attachment: Ford covets Jesse's position inside the legend before any ordinary relation to Jesse takes root (Girard, 1977: 3–6). Rivalry inhabits admiration from the beginning, for Jesse's continued presence seals off the place Ford desires. Physical closeness magnifies the contradiction: Ford narrows the physical distance to Jesse, yet the authority attached to Jesse's name withdraws further beyond reach.

Ford's sustained proximity to Jesse (Dominik, 2007: 01:10:05–01:19:42) turns intimacy into pressure, denying belonging and leaving desire unresolved. Shared interiors, tables, and uneasy conversations draw Ford toward the recognition he craves, yet Jesse's guarded replies, testing silences, and faintly contemptuous distance make that nearness humiliating, stripping it of intimacy. Ford reads Jesse's gestures, courts acknowledgment, and tries to inhabit the aura surrounding him; the authority attached to Jesse's name withdraws each time Ford approaches it. Mythic authority in the film rests on distance and singularity, so Jesse's place may be approached but never possessed. Ford mistakes physical access for symbolic succession, and the Girardian logic of mimetic desire gathers force here: each movement toward Jesse inflames rivalry around a position that recedes from him. Closeness therefore enlarges the gap between adjacency and inheritance until betrayal embeds itself in the very contradiction that proximity has produced. The nearer Ford stands to Jesse, the further inheritance recedes, and the demand for recognition turns toward removal.

Failed proximity reaches its endpoint in the assassination sequence (Dominik, 2007: 01:49:12–01:51:03). Dominik drains melodrama from the killing by holding the frame around Jesse's exposed back, Ford's controlled movement, and the delayed stillness after the shot, so that murder assumes the coldness of an administrative act emptied of heroic confrontation. The gunshot removes Jesse from the room and strands Ford outside the place he expected to enter; heroic authority refuses passage from Jesse to his killer. Jesse's death empties the centre of the myth and suspends succession, leaving Ford

newly visible yet marked as a failed successor. That failure continues after the assassination (Dominik, 2007: 02:05:10–02:20:30), as Ford reenacts the murder, courts recognition, and stages the killing as spectacle. Each reenactment redirects fascination back to Jesse and binds Ford to the role of killer before a legend beyond his inheritance. Ridicule and hostility displace the recognition he expected, turning public response into another scene of humiliation. His performances multiply the assassination but prevent authority from settling around him. Death amplifies Jesse's image; Ford's notoriety records the murder and denies him the inheritance he sought.

Jesse's authority refuses transfer to Ford, and this refusal shadows every scene after the assassination. In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, mythic power clings to singularity: the hero's place survives in image, rumour, and performance, yet it resists inheritance. Ford appears before the public as Jesse's killer, but the visibility he gains only makes Jesse's absence more forceful. Notoriety comes to him in place of succession. The reenactment scenes (Dominik, 2007: 02:15:00–02:30:00) make this irony public: Ford restages the killing, repeats the fatal gesture, and demands the recognition that the audience refuses to grant. On stage, the act meant to secure his authority returns him to exposure. Ridicule, uneasy fascination, and withheld approval drain command from his public presence, so that each performance strengthens Jesse's posthumous force and binds Ford more tightly to the murder's aftermath. The scene of killing repeats, but it never becomes inheritance. Attention returns to Jesse, recognition retreats from Ford, and narrative time begins to move in circles around the death that was supposed to release him into command.

The assassination therefore fails to end Jesse's hold over the story. It kills him, yet his name continues to command the field of memory, image, and public fascination. Ford lives under the sign of the murder, and his public life narrows into delay, repetition, and humiliation. Girardian mimesis gives this paradox its structure: Ford eliminates the model, yet the model's position endures as a place sealed against him (Girard, 1977: 8–12). The dead Jesse keeps the symbolic place that Ford sought to occupy. Ford bears the burden of the murder, but the authority attached to Jesse's name recedes from him with every repetition. His performances repeat the killing and suspend succession; they turn the assassin into a belated imitator before an audience still drawn to the dead hero. Ford remains inside a post-assassination time of recurrence, failed recognition, and unreachable inheritance. Jesse's death preserves the force of his name and bars his killer from the myth he tried to enter. Betrayal discloses the fragility of heroic myth: Jesse's authority rests on singular presence and refuses transfer to Ford; the assassination removes the hero yet leaves inheritance suspended, binding Ford's trajectory to repetition, failed recognition, and unresolved absence.

6. Visual Poetics of Time and Stillness

In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007), time wrests authority from action and presses violence, waiting, and exhaustion into a single aesthetic pressure. Movement scarcely discharges tension; gestures slacken, silences thicken, and images accumulate force before violence arrives. As action forfeits its capacity to release this pressure, duration assumes the narrative labour that the classical western had entrusted to pursuit, confrontation, and decisive movement. Stillness, delay, and exhaustion recalibrate perception, compelling suspense to relinquish acceleration and leaving anticipation suspended. Deleuze's time-image supplies the critical vocabulary for this pressure, since perception loosens its dependence on action and begins to register time directly (Deleuze, 1989, pp. 34–36). Dominik gives this temporal logic a postwestern inflection: time bears down on bodies, arrests violence, and turns waiting into an ethical burden.

The opening train robbery sequence (Dominik, 2007: 00:05:10–00:12:00) subordinates western action to slowed time, denying the acceleration expected from pursuit and violence. Movement,

coordination, and threat animate the robbery, yet the scene resists momentum: the camera dwells, the editing compresses nothing, and the sound design dampens urgency until the robbery dissolves into fog, silence, and watchfulness. Duration displaces the force of decisive assault, and Jesse's stillness inside the fog intensifies this slowed authority; his command accrues in delay, controlled presence, and restrained movement. The train's arrival, the gang's movement, and Jesse's silent command accumulate tension but resist narrative propulsion. Anticipation thickens before outcome asserts itself, and action sinks into time as it relinquishes its privilege as the primary organiser of meaning. Deleuze's time-image lends conceptual precision to this pressure, for the sequence loosens perception from action and registers time directly (Deleuze, 1989: 35–38). Dominik inscribes the western robbery with a postwestern rhythm: violence persists, duration governs its impact, and action forfeits its classical power to secure moral clarity, momentum, or release.

The domestic interiors (Dominik, 2007: 00:40:00–00:55:00) draw this temporal strain into rooms, bodies, and pauses, extending the robbery's slowed pressure into spaces of intimacy. Jesse and Ford inhabit the same rooms, yet shared space cultivates surveillance and corrodes intimacy as brief remarks collapse back into silence. They sit, watch, exchange clipped remarks, and retreat into silences that heighten the room's unease and withhold release; the camera fixes bodies in stillness until unease settles in posture, glances, and the intervals between words. Ford's watching prolongs the room's suspended time: his desire for recognition lingers in deferred expectation, and Jesse's silence holds the room under strain. Time stretches inside the room and presses on the characters before visible change arrives, so silence acquires the density of sound; it fills the room, delays speech, and renders attention bodily. The present thickens as unresolved tension settles in the room: dialogue withholds release, proximity unsettles the relation between Ford and Jesse, and immobility renders domestic space a chamber of waiting. Nancy's listening-oriented temporality articulates this density's sensory logic, for meaning accrues from duration, attention, and perceptual endurance (Nancy, 2007: 5–7). Dominik invests endurance with organising force; stillness assumes an active, oppressive, and ethically charged intensity.

The sequence preceding Jesse James's assassination (Dominik, 2007: 01:45:00–01:49:00) intensifies temporal suspension as the outcome already bears upon the scene, yet this certainty refuses to quicken the film's rhythm. Dominik instead extends the present around Jesse's exposed body, the quiet room, Ford's measured movement, and the delayed rhythm of the scene, allowing foreknowledge to immobilise time, strip anticipation of urgency, and recast waiting as endurance. The moment before violence consequently commands greater force than the gunshot itself, since death seems to inhabit the room before the act unfolds. Blanchot's account of withdrawal clarifies this suspended imminence, as the event approaches and recedes at the same time, prolonging arrival by means of deferral and endurance (Blanchot, 1995: 1–3). Dominik renders this withdrawal cinematically: time refuses haste, and death arrives first as atmosphere before the act unfolds.

After the assassination (Dominik, 2007: 01:55:00–02:20:00), time loosens from causal movement and folds into repetition, so Ford's reenactments return him to the killing instead of releasing him from it. Each repetition leaves meaning unstable and closure unsecured, redirecting fascination toward Jesse as Ford remains bound to the murder that was meant to free him from obscurity. The future scarcely separates itself from the past, for performance reopens the same scene of violence, and the event yields stasis in place of transformation: Jesse dies, his image continues to organise the narrative, and Ford's public life circles the act that denies him authority. Deleuze's account of repetition specifies this drift, since the film holds meaning inside recurrence, synthesis, and resolution withheld (Deleuze, 1989: 52–54). Across these scenes, withdrawal structures the film's temporal grammar as characters

recede from action, narrative recedes from progression, and time relinquishes teleological promise. This withdrawal signals saturation; time congeals into resistance, inertia, and ethical charge.

Withdrawal commands the film's temporal experience as exhaustion: acceleration ebbs, the future recedes into deferral, and the present condenses into oppressive duration. Time retracts its promise of resolution and enthrones endurance as its dominant mode, a logic resonant with Blanchot's account of disaster as an arrival endlessly delayed (Blanchot, 1995: 2–4). This visual poetics of duration engraves exhaustion into temporal experience: action forfeits its authority over duration, events arrest progression, and time contracts around delay, repetition, and suspended movement. In this condition, time claims the role of an aesthetic index of depletion and occupies the primary terrain of meaning. The film draws the spectator into the same temporal field, compelling endurance of waiting, stillness, and recurrence in place of anticipation. Deleuze's time-image and Nancy's listening-oriented temporality specify this aesthetic pressure, as duration formalises exhaustion and positions time as a locus of ethical significance (Deleuze, 1989: 34–36; Nancy, 2007: 6–8). This temporal exhaustion leads directly into the film's treatment of death as a politically regulated and temporally administered event.

7. Necropolitical Configurations of Death, Reward, Erasure, and the Administrative Logic of Killing

In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007), Jesse James's death assumes the form of authorised disposal, displacing tragic closure with reward, report, display, and repetition. The assassination removes the outlaw from the narrative and propels his name into public compensation, official acknowledgement, visual exposure, and posthumous performance. Jesse's exposed body, Ford's controlled gesture, and the subdued rhythm of the scene drain passionate excess from the killing and recode it as an authorised procedure. The reward attached to Jesse's body transfers private betrayal into the language of public authority: payment legitimises killing, regulation orders visibility, and memory divides unevenly between the dead outlaw and the rewarded killer. Mbembe's necropolitics specifies this logic of authorised death, as permission, price, authorisation, and public legibility attach to Jesse's killing (Mbembe, 2003: 11–16). Ford secures material compensation; symbolic legitimacy gathers around Jesse. This uneven distribution anchors the film's necropolitical logic: death amplifies Jesse's myth; survival contracts Ford into notoriety. Ford's erasure materialises in a visibility emptied of honour, as public response recodes reward as disgrace and performance as humiliation. The temporal suspension discussed earlier acquires political force as death refuses narrative closure and binds Jesse and Ford to unequal circuits of memory. This uneven distribution defines the film's necropolitics: Jesse accrues posthumous myth, Ford inherits rewarded disgrace, and death persists as an administrative, temporal, and memorial process.

The reward attached to Jesse James's killing draws betrayal into the sphere of state authority. Public power has already priced, authorised, and recognised his death. In the assassination sequence (Dominik, 2007: 01:49:12–01:51:03), restrained framing and subdued rhythm visualise this sanction by concentrating attention on Jesse's unguarded body, Ford's controlled hesitation, the quiet room, and the delayed timing of the shot. These formal choices strip the act of passionate excess and place it within authorised procedure: Ford enacts the killing; legitimacy adheres to the authorising order. Payment unsettles the distinction between crime and justice and places elimination among remunerated public actions. After the assassination (Dominik, 2007: 01:55:00–02:05:10), Jesse's body, reports of death, and the promised reward remove the act from private secrecy and submit it to public acknowledgement; the act circulates as report, reward, and display. Dominik's restraint concentrates the scene's necropolitical force: Ford's motive recedes behind the conditions that administer Jesse's death.

Jesse's political value comes into focus at the moment power marks his life as disposable. His cultural centrality and narrative force secure public legibility for his death, suspending him between mythic centrality and political expendability. The film refuses stable victimisation or villainisation; Jesse's death registers as managed killability. In the post-assassination sequences (Dominik, 2007: 02:05:10–02:20:30), visibility, compensation, and theatrical repetition attach to Ford. Recognition gathers around Jesse's name, each reenactment sends fascination back to the dead outlaw and consigns Ford to the role of rewarded, dishonoured survivor. The asymmetry grows sharper: the dead man gains mythic force, and the living killer suffers symbolic depletion. Jesse accrues posthumous force as image at the same moment power defines his life as removable, Ford survives inside a visibility emptied of legitimacy.

Jesse James's authorised death leaves Ford as a rewarded yet dishonoured survivor: money, exposure, and theatrical repetition attach to him, yet legitimacy gathers around Jesse's name, so that each reenactment redirects fascination to the dead outlaw, binds Ford more tightly to recognition withheld from him, and reveals necropolitical power as a mechanism that grants visibility, withholds honour, and marks survival with symbolic depletion; this unequal distribution structures the film's memory politics, amplifying Jesse's myth as Ford's survival contracts into ridicule and historical diminishment, and leaving killing to persist as repetition, administration, and unequal remembrance. The gunshot rewards Ford and returns Jesse to legend; afterward, memory crowns the dead outlaw and empties his killer of honour.

8. Afterlife of Myth and Melancholic Temporality

In *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007), Jesse James's death disperses his name across rumour, image, and repeated telling. After his body withdraws from the scene of action, bodily presence recedes and public image assumes priority: Jesse circulates as a remembered face, a repeated name, and a story absorbed by rumour, spectacle, and public attention. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination (Dominik, 2007: 01:55:00–02:05:10), the body passes from the private room into talk, display, and fascinated spectatorship. Ford's later reenactments (Dominik, 2007: 02:05:10–02:20:30) restage this passage as theatrical repetition. Ford restages the assassination to seize its meaning; each staged return enlarges Jesse's posthumous authority, attaches fascination to the murdered outlaw, and hollows out Ford's theatrical presence. The stage exposes Ford to the public gaze and strips legitimacy from his performance. Jesse's legend takes on posthumous density as Ford's attempt at mastery leaves memory unresolved.

Benjamin's historical afterlife offers the critical frame for this movement: the body endures as fragment, gesture, image, and public trace, as completed historical totality recedes (Benjamin, 1968: 90–92). Dominik grounds this persistence in bodies, reports, gestures, and reenactments; Jesse's death unsettles the narrative and multiplies Jesse's visible traces. Ford repeats the killing on stage and solicits recognition that the stage repeatedly withholds. Each reenactment intensifies Jesse's posthumous presence and erodes Ford's claim to recognition. Repetition arrests narrative advance and binds loss to recurrence. Jesse's absence haunts each reenactment, and his legend expands as death lodges in public memory, theatrical reiteration, and unfinished remembrance. This movement from unmastered loss opens the passage from Benjaminian afterlife toward Freud's melancholic temporality, as loss endures as recurrence, delay, and unresolved attachment.

Jesse James's unresolved death charges the film's melancholic temporality, as the narrative orbits the assassination's aftermath, Ford's reenactments, and the public memory fastened to the dead outlaw (Dominik, 2007: 01:55:00–02:20:30). Jesse withdraws from physical presence, yet his name, image, and silence bind the film to the killing. Ford's repeated performance of the assassination

theatricalises this unresolved death, and the act recurs compulsively, tightening attachment to Jesse and foreclosing Ford's recognition. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia grounds this reading of repetition, as the film stages loss as something that resists detachment and lodges in psychic and temporal experience (Freud, 1917/1957: 243–245). Dominik inscribes this condition cinematically: embodiment withdraws, presence reverberates as image, name, and silence, and time clings to an absence that refuses settlement.

Jesse's afterlife assumes the force of a haunting, for the dead figure occupies the interval between disappearance and full presence, a condition Derrida's hauntology articulates (Derrida, 1994: 10–12). His silence after death resonates in the images, names, and reenactments that repeatedly circle back to him, so visibility falls unevenly: Jesse's image swells into legend, and Ford's survival contracts into betrayal. Ricoeur's account of forgetting specifies this selective movement, as memory forges meaning from retention and exclusion (Ricoeur, 2004: 412–415). The reenactments materialise that selectivity by enlarging Jesse's posthumous presence and compressing Ford into betrayal's afterimage. Myth draws endurance from this unequal labour of memory, as memory magnifies the dead outlaw's absence and consigns the living killer to diminished survival after the act meant to secure recognition. Melancholic time refuses to settle Jesse and Ford into moral finality: Jesse James eludes redemption and condemnation alike, and Robert Ford enters public exposure as recognition withdraws from him. The myth draws its durability from this unfinished relation, since the killing returns through spectacle, reenactment, and spectral recurrence, drawing the spectator into unsettled memory with final verdict withheld. Jesse's death amplifies the legend, and Ford's erasure entrenches the imbalance of memory, leaving myth to settle into unfinished cultural remembrance.

9. Conclusion

This article situates *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007) as a postwestern inquiry into exhausted heroic form, marked by the collapse of moral certainty, narrative closure, and exemplary authority. Jesse James retains posthumous command as image, rumour, corpse, and repeated story, whereas public visibility gathers around Robert Ford only to leave recognition and succession beyond his reach. This asymmetry allows the film to sever heroic authority from restoration and bind it instead to damaged memory, violence, and ethical unease. The same exhaustion marks the film's visual, narrative, temporal, political, and memorial structures: Jesse's face and body separate visibility from authority, Ford's betrayal carries that separation into failed inheritance, suspended time deprives action of decisive force, authorised death invests killing with administrative and memorial force, and myth's afterlife sustains Jesse's presence as absence. These registers converge around a heroic form that endures as a damaged remainder after the collapse of its moral and narrative ground. Exhaustion therefore governs heroism at the point of collapse, as heroic form forfeits resolution and returns as disturbance in memory, spectatorship, and ethical judgment.

Jesse James dies, yet the legend resists burial as the body withdraws from action and resurfaces as name, image, corpse, rumour, and repeated story. Ford survives the killing, yet inheritance recedes from him; each new exposure redirects symbolic authority toward Jesse and carries the killer further from recognition. Death disperses the heroic across memory, spectacle, and repetition, replacing closure with an ethical unease the film refuses to pacify. The assassination draws the spectator before a damaged heroic image that solicits judgment, denies resolution, and keeps myth suspended between fascination and discomfort. That discomfort extends beyond the death scene, for Jesse eludes redemption, Ford resists stable condemnation, and the reenactments return the spectator to a myth that refuses settlement. Rumour, public attention, and Ford's failed visibility keep the killing unsettled; the legend survives as memory, spectacle, and belated judgment. Heroism therefore withholds instruction and consolation; it remains as a fractured cultural form, an open wound in American myth.

The film's ethical force lies in its refusal of closure: withheld completion strips heroic myth of consolation, and reassurance yields to endurance, uncertainty, and critical attentiveness. Jesse's death, Ford's failed recognition, and the repeated reenactments turn heroic myth into an unresolved ethical problem, returning responsibility to the act of watching as the spectator finds judgment withheld from Jesse, Ford, and narrative closure. Dominik's film matters beyond Jesse James because it exposes a larger postwestern exhaustion of heroic form and recasts heroism as a damaged residue deprived of teleology and normative authority yet resistant to disappearance. Myth endures in the repeated return of Jesse's image, the failure of Ford's recognition, and the story's refusal of settlement.

Dominik's film ultimately locates heroism at the exhausted threshold between visibility and authority, death and remembrance, repetition and failed succession. Withdrawn bodies, suspended time, authorised killing, and melancholic remembrance gather around an exhausted postwestern heroic form. The heroic outlives its power to resolve, redeem, or instruct. Jesse's image returns insistently, Ford's recognition repeatedly fails, and the story resists settlement; heroism lingers as an unstable and melancholic cultural form, sustained by Jesse's unresolved death, Ford's failed recognition, and the story's refusal of completion.

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Çalışmanın yazarı, herhangi bir çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmektedir.

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

Araştırmacıların Katkı Oranı (Author's Contributions)

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