



## Mining Westerns: Seeking Sustainable Development in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*

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### Abstract

*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* illustrates how Western U.S. legal history works for and against community building and the sustainable development ideals behind it. The film inspires an ecocentric postmodern reading for several reasons. First the film rests on a naturalist philosophy and takes a connection between dying men and a dying landscape even further than *Ride the High Country*, since the film's hero, McCabe (Warren Beatty), literally dies in the snow, his body buried in a blowing drift while the rest of the town of Presbyterian Church attempts to put out a fire burning down their house of worship. The film also grapples with the same "big guys" versus "little guys" conflict found in other mining films, catalyzing with an altercation between McCabe and a mining corporation from Bear Claw, the town down the mountain from Presbyterian Church, but in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the community nearly fails and is either bought or destroyed by a corporate mining company. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, eco-resistance destroys corporate gunslingers. But *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* illustrates the cost of that vigilante justice: the death of a hero and the community he attempts to build.

Most western films with mining at their center examine dichotomies between corporate and small time miners or between miners and ranchers or farmers in traditional ways, with the individual miner usually defeating the corporate miner or rancher. The conflicts in these westerns continue the big guy versus little guy theme found in other western

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films; yet the mining on display, no matter how buried in the action-packed plotline, reveals environmental issues worth exploring—those associated with both mining and the long-term consequences of mining techniques themselves. These issues and their consequences are especially evident in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). We assert, then, that *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* not only reveals that environmental history but also proposes a more effective way to maintain the ecology of the mining West: sustainable development.

For us, binaries between miners and an “other” blur when viewed through a postmodern ecocritical lens, revealing the environmental issues underlying the conflict on display. *The Tall T* (1957), for example, foregrounds a conflict between a drifting ex-ranch foreman, Pat Brennan (Randolph Scott), and a stage robber named Frank Usher (Richard Boone) and his gang. Mining becomes an integral part of the plot, however, because Usher discovers that one of the stage passengers, Doretta Mims (Maureen O’Sullivan) has a rich father, the owner of a corporate mine. Mining is peripheral here in a film that highlights ecology only in the grim dead landscape typical of Budd Boetticher western films. Yet the film breaks down binaries between ranchers and miners with the final connection between Brennan and Doretta. The film also rests on a history of environmental conflicts associated with mining, especially corporate mining, an environmental history we argue is manifested in western films in which mining takes center stage. We assert, then, that mining westerns not only make binaries between corporate and small time miners or between miners and ranchers or farmers more complex; they also (both explicitly and implicitly) highlight an environmental legal history that placed economics at the fore and underline the real issues behind such conflicts: land use and ecology. In the mining westerns we viewed, the conflict between corporate and individual miners also reveals two conflicting views of ecology: fair use methods of corporations and sustainable development aspirations of individuals wishing to maintain resources for future generations of a growing community. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* highlights a more effective way to maintain the ecology of the mining West: sustainable development.

*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* focuses on zinc mining and comments on environmental consequences of mining techniques, responding to an environmental history that highlights the dangers of unrestrained land ownership. The film both perpetuates and blurs the dichotomy between two “classes” of miners, while examining ecological issues in both obvious and opaque ways. The debate between miners and their methods of destroying or sustaining the land continues, whether in relation to a sampling of classic Anthony Mann westerns, cult westerns from Budd Boetticher, or revisionist westerns from Sam Peckinpah, Robert Altman, and Nils Gaup. We contend, however, that mining westerns like these grounded the conflicts they illustrate in an environmental history that has not as yet been resolved. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, especially, reveals that environmental history and proposes a more effective way to sustain the ecology of the mining West.

As we have demonstrated elsewhere, some of this environmental history is reconstructed in Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*. Here hydraulic mining is placed at the forefront and then critiqued in relation to California legal history (See, for example, "Eco-Terrorism in Film: *Pale Rider* and the Revenge Cycle" in our *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge*). *Pale Rider* not only problematizes corporate mining techniques, suggesting that the corporation should be obliterated; it provides a viable alternative to the consequences of hydraulic mining—individual tin panning in a cooperative community seeking to plant roots and raise families, an alternative that is attainable with the help of eco-resistance. *Pale Rider* offers a politically charged solution to the environmental destruction threatened by hydraulic mining interests, eco-activism that leads to eco-resistance. Since Preacher and Hull take a collaborative approach to an eco-resistance that merely destroys hydraulic mining camps and offers a way to defend against environmental exploitation, they promote communal sustainable development rather than individual or even populist progress like that Richard Slotkin describes in *Gunfighter Nation*.

Mining in the West and the films that represent them also rest on an American cultural history that legitimates a pioneer spirit meant to "tame" a Wild West by not only ranching and farming, but also mining. Just as there were homestead acts that provided free land for ranchers and farmers, there was also "The General Mining Law of 1872," which stated:

All valuable mineral deposits in lands belonging to the United States, both surveyed and unsurveyed, are hereby declared to be free and open to exploration and purchase, and the lands in which they are found to occupation and purchase, by citizens of the United States and those who have declared their intention to become such.

According to Robert McClure and Andrew Schneider, "public lands the size of Connecticut have been made private under the terms of the 1872 law." Although the law has its roots in an 1848 push by Colonel Mason to obtain, as Mason put it, "rents for ... land, and immediate steps should be made to collect them, for the longer it is delayed the more difficult it will become" (quoted in McClure and Schneider), the mining law evolved into "an incentive to those [miners] willing to push West and settle the frontier" (McClure and Schneider), an incentive that has had dire effects on the environment.

Opening lands for mining meant increased deforestation and erosion of topsoil. It also resulted in toxic runoff. According to McClure and Schneider, "The ore is often high in sulfides, and water passing through the rock and soil creates sulfuric acid, which in turn leaches poisonous heavy metals into runoff water, with iron in the rock turning streams an orange-red." McClure and Schneider's news report traces decades of environmental problems from 1872 to 2001, when the article was published. The 1872 law remains on the books and still allows private companies to open public lands for mining, and repercussions of cyanide use still have an impact on Western environments. Today the

largest liquid waste pit in the United States in Butte, Montana, has become a tourist attraction.

## Film and Environmental History

Only a few texts reading western films through a historical lens address environmental history as one element affecting the films and their interpretations of history. J. E. Smyth's *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: from Cimarron to Citizen Kane*, for example, seems to promise a new view of history similar to that of some environmental historians in conjunction with historical film, since it seeks to legitimize historical film as history and rereads gender, race, and multicultures in a sampling of historical films.

But Smyth does not address environmental repercussions of westward expansion illustrated by western films represented in the text, including *Cimarron*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Plainsman*. Smyth argues, "that a filmic writing of American history flourished in Hollywood from 1931 to 1972" and seeks to "reconstruct a critical understanding of classical Hollywood's American historical cycle and its engagement with professional and popular history, traditional and revisionist historical discourse, and modern history" (19). Smyth shows us that these films provide what he calls "a critical revisionism," but he stops short of extending that revisionist approach to environmental history.

Scott MacDonald's *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films About Place* highlights "the history and geography of the *depiction* [emphasis Macdonald's] of place, in literature, painting, and photography and especially film and video" (xxi). MacDonald's text includes a chapter "Re-envisioning the American West" in relation to Wayne Franklin's outline of American narrative forms: "the discovery narrative," "the exploratory narrative" (89), and "the settlement narrative" (90). MacDonald's work, however, concentrates on visual and narrative representations of place as they valorize Franklin's narrative descriptions; he applies his lens to contemporary independent films from the 1970s forward rather than traditional Westerns; and he avoids elucidating environmental consequences in the films he explores.

Although Smyth's text looks through a revisionist lens at a variety of historical films, not just westerns, Scott Simmon's *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century* highlights both the western and the American West as historical and cultural artifacts. Simmon's work asserts that the western film gained prominence when film narratives highlighted both Native Americans and an explicitly American landscape. Simmon, then, does take landscape into consideration, but only as a setting, that differentiates American films from those of France and Italy (9). As his title suggests, he offers a cultural history of the western rather than a redefinition of history or a historiography.

Still, some works read western films through an eco-critical lens. Janet Walker's edited AFI anthology, *Westerns: Films Through History* and Deborah A. Carmichael's *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre* both, to differing degrees, apply notions of environmental history like those of environmental historians to the western film. Walker draws on arguments that resemble Smyth's, insisting that, as Jim Kitses and Andre Bazin explain, "the western is history" (quoted in Walker 1). For Walker, the western is history because of not only the films' setting but also "by virtue of the period in which a given film was produced" (2). She argues in her introduction against those who would claim that the western film is a-historical and includes a series of essays in her volume that reread history in western films, typically through a postmodern lens. In spite of this revisionist approach to the western film as history, however, none of the essays Walker includes examines environmental history and its impact on the western film. Although these works confront history in relation to the western film, they fall short of an eco-critical reading.

Deborah Carmichael's edited anthology, however, successfully explores the intersection between environmental history and the western film. Although most essays explore the connection between land and American cultural mythmaking rather than environmental history, others (including our own, "Hydraulic Mining, Then and Now: The Case of *Pale Rider*") move beyond the place of landscape in films addressing the American West. In Carmichael's anthology, chapters like "Western Ecological Films: The Subgenre with No Name," "Tulsa (1949) as an Oil Field Film: A Study of Ecological Ambivalence," and to a certain extent "Haunted by Waters: The River in American Films" provide eco-critical readings of Westerns grounded in environmental history, readings more focused on the genre than those in David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*. The text also extends definitions of the western film to include readings of films set in the west but more influenced by, than defined by, the western genre, including *Chinatown* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

## **Mining Westerns and Sustainable Development**

Although not always discussed in film scholarship, Westerns with gold mining at their center, illustrate some of the environmental consequences of a variety of mining techniques. Although environmental repercussions of gold mining are sometimes a peripheral issue in western films, in films like *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1947), environmental degradation caused by mining techniques is addressed more directly. In *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, miners in Mexico battle a desert ecology where water is so scarce it is "sometimes more precious than gold," in order to dig up a fortune they can divide by three. With an emotionally unstable American named Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) at the helm, the miners in the film primarily battle greed and emotional unrest. But the film also carries a powerful environmental message that begins when Howard, the old-timer (Walter Huston), lets them know when they have taken "about all the gold this mountain has."

Dobbs and the third partner, Curtin (Tim Holt) agree to call it quits, pack up, and leave their mining sites after they have exploited all the gold resources in the area. But Howard sees the mountain as the owner of the gold they are taking and feels they should treat it like a living thing. He explains to them that it will “take another week to break down the mine and put the mountain back in shape...make her appear like she was before we came.” The old-timer first feminizes the mountain, but he further humanizes it when he explains the reasons behind his argument that they should put it back in shape: “We wounded this mountain, and it’s our duty to close the wounds,” he explains. “It’s the least we can do to show all our gratitude for all the wealth she’s given us.”

Dobbs notes how much Howard has both humanized and feminized the mountain and exclaims, “You talk about that mountain as if she were a real woman.” The old-timer only agrees, saying that it’s “been a lot better to me than any other woman I ever knew.” Both Dobbs and Curtin agree to help Howard with his task, and then before leaving, they all thank the mountain for the wealth it has provided them. Howard’s statement about making the mountain appear like she was before they came gains an ironic tone at the end of the movie when Dobbs is killed by bandits, since the bandits steal only his burros and hides, leaving the gold sands to blow in the wind because they think it is nothing more than dust. Howard bursts out laughing when he sees the gold blowing around him. For him it is fate or nature that caused it, since the “gold went back to where [they] found it.” The film comes out on the side of nature, in spite of its more complex psychological themes.

Gold mining western films set in the nineteenth-century United States seem to respond to consequences highlighted in the evolution toward the 1872 General Mining Law, consequences based on free access to mining lands. But impact on the environment is most clearly generated by the extraction and refining of the gold ore itself, either from veins (primary formations) or placers (secondary formations), whether it is found on public or private lands. According to Edward Sherwood Mcade’s “The Production of Gold Since 1850,” written in 1897, when extracting veins of gold, “the ore must be mined, often at great depths. It must then be sorted, crushed, stamped, and amalgamated with mercury. Special processes are necessary to treat gold ores which contain sulphur or certain other substances” (3).

Mcade delineates this process as a way to demonstrate the difficulty of extracting veins of gold ore, but his description also highlights environmental consequences that include the deep extraction, as well as the amalgamation of the ore with a toxin—mercury. In the late nineteenth century, this amalgamation was “improved” according to Mcade, with the inclusion of “smelting, chlorination, and the cyanide process” (14), all of which result in toxic runoff that pollutes ground and surface waters and anything with which they come in contact.

Mcade claims that the process is much simpler when extracting ore from placer formations, since “the gold is almost entirely freed from foreign substances [because of running water], and it usually lies at no great depth.... The miner’s work consists merely

in the further application of running water to the gold-bearing sand and gravel” (4) by use of pan, cradle, and sluice. These are the tools the miners in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* used. These tools acted more lightly on the land than did those needed for obtaining vein formation ore. Another more devastating tool, however, emerged a little later—hydraulic mining. Hydraulic mining and its impact on the landscape are addressed, as noted, in *Pale Rider*, as well as in Warner Brothers’ cartoons like *Gold Rush Daze* (1939) and *Daffy Duck in Hollywood* (1938).

Herbert A. Sawin, however, in his “One Hundred Years of California Placer Mining,” discusses the impact of hydraulic mining on water sources from the 1870s forward to 1949. Sawin cites a bulletin from the California Division of Mines that discusses the impact of immigrant farmers on hydraulic mining. The bulletin notes that with the arrival of these farmers, “land... steadily mounted in value,” as did the value of the farmers usurping power once monopolized by mining corporations. The debris from hydraulic mining that accumulated in rivers caused “considerable damage to the farmers” (Haley, quoted in Sawin bulletin). Battles like these culminated in the Caminetti Act of 1893, which restricted runoff and tailings from hydraulic mining.

Dredging, which came later in the nineteenth century, caused further damage to rivers and farmlands, multiplying amounts of debris accumulating in rivers and flooding farmlands. Yet, according to Clark C. Spence, “There would be far less criticism of their impact than there had been of hydraulic mining, although ‘hysterical devotees of aestheticism’ and ‘sycophantic black-mailers,’ as die-hard mining men called them, did mount limited and ineffectual attacks” (409-10).

These testimonies make clear that just about any form of gold mining had catastrophic environmental results, yet most gold-mining westerns provide only a cursory view of such destruction. Most of these films highlight environmental consequences only in oblique ways. Early western mining films like *Greed* (1924), *The Gold Rush* (1925), *The Trail of '98* (1928), and *Smoke Bellew* (1929) play off gold rush history, highlighting the consequences humans suffer from gold fever, as did the later *The Badlanders* (1958), *Ride the High Country* (1962), and *MacKenna's Gold* (1969).

Although Montana outlawed hydraulic mining in 1972, repercussions related to prior mining practices still affect environmental health. Montana’s 1972 Constitution provides protection for the environment in Article IX, sections 1-4, especially. Section 1 states that “the state and each person shall maintain and improve a clean and healthful environment in Montana for present and future generations” and that “the legislature shall provide adequate remedies for protection of the environmental life support system.” Section 2 centers on reclaiming “all lands disturbed by the taking of natural resources,” and section 3 on water rights, where “the legislature shall provide for the administration, control, and regulation of water rights,” so the amount of water required by hydraulic mining techniques would be all but impossible to acquire. Section 4 focuses on preserving state lands for “use and enjoyment by the people.”

Reclaiming lands from disturbances caused by mining, however, is difficult to regulate. *Time Magazine* ran an article on September 25, 1995, documenting the presence of arsenic in old Montana and California mines. In Montana, Crown Butte is attempting to mine for gold under protest, “in spite of Crown Butte’s promise not to harm the area surrounding the mines in their projected 10-15 year life-span” (Greenswald 36). One of their opponents, Jim Barrett, chairman of the anti-mine Beartooth Alliance declared, “When [the company] gets the gold, they’ll be gone, but we will be here tomorrow. We will suffer forever.” However, the Crown Butte mining project was on federal lands outside Montana’s control. Crown Butte mining, as of 2002, has failed to acquire these lands, but legal battles are still in play today regarding the use of cyanide to extract minerals in Montana.

*Pale Rider* also responds to changes in Montana’s laws and the state’s early efforts to inspire mining companies to clean up their ecological “disasters.” The film endorses both community values associated with the small miners and sustainable development illustrated by their less invasive mining techniques. Such a clear and strong environmental message deserves serious examination, especially since Eastwood “made a point of discussing the environmental subtext of *Pale Rider* with Todd McCarthy of *Variety*” (McGilligan 377) at the Cannes Film Festival where it was screened in 1985. Whether as a subtext or centerpiece, *Pale Rider* offers a powerful argument against extreme mining techniques associated with a “fair use” philosophy that justifies exploiting all natural resources on one’s own property. LaHood and his men follow a fair use philosophy, taking extreme measures to extract minerals quickly and without thought to maintaining the land for future generations. As a testament against extreme environmental exploitation, the film highlights the degradation caused by LaHood’s hydraulic mining techniques with three focused scenes and two explanations of the process and its results: one from Hull Barret, the community miners’ leader (Michael Moriarty) and one from Josh LaHood, the mining baron’s son.

Two other gold mining films offer powerful statements against destroying the earth by mining it, this time based in Native American spirituality and worldviews: *Warrior Spirit* (1994) and *North Star* (1996). These films provide clear assertions about how best to care for the land—even if we choose to mine it for gold. Unlike *Pale Rider*, however, the films fall short of commenting on mining and mining methods. Instead, they demonize Western culture and its drive for land ownerships, a romantic critique that rests on ideology rather than environmental history.

Westerns with copper mining at their center emphasize toxic wastes resulting from smelting the ore, a process Jared Diamond, F.E. Richter, and Otis E. Young, Jr. document in their study of the Anaconda Mining Company and its continuing affect on the landscape of Arizona. In *Back in the Saddle* (1941), for example, copper mining runoff is examined, and a solution is offered for environmental pollution, so that cattle ranching and copper mining can coexist. Other ramifications remain unexplored, but the film’s message is definitely environmentally conscious and based in an ongoing environmental history. In *Back in the Saddle*, Gene Autry represents a community



battling exploitative corporate miners and literally implements a better way—drainage pits—that will sustain the environment for all.

In *Broken Lance* (1954), a cattle family, the Devereauxs, led by patriarch Matt (Spencer Tracy), confront a copper mining company and its manager when they discover that thirty or forty of their cattle have been killed by a drinking from a stream poisoned by its smelter's runoff. Matt, Joe (Robert Wagner), Ben (Richard Widmark), Mike (Hugh O'Brian) and Danny (Earl Holliman) Devereaux and their ranch hands destroy the mine, burning it down in what looks like an act of eco-terrorism. Although the Devereauxs lose, and the youngest son, Joe, who is half Native American, goes to jail to save his father, the poisoned stream acts as both plot device—providing a reason for Joe's jail time and the father's death—and as integral environmental message that condemns the mining company for its hazardous waste practices.

### ***McCabe and Mrs. Miller: When Style Becomes Environmentalism***

*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* illustrates how that legal history works for and against community building and the sustainable development ideals behind it. The film inspires an ecocentric postmodern reading for several reasons. First the film rests on a naturalist philosophy and takes a connection between dying men and a dying landscape even further than *Ride the High Country*, since the film's hero, McCabe (Warren Beatty), literally dies in the snow, his body buried in a blowing drift while the rest of the town of Presbyterian Church attempts to put out a fire burning down their house of worship.

The film also grapples with the same “big guys” versus “little guys” conflict found in other mining films, catalyzing with an altercation between McCabe and a mining corporation from Bear Claw, the town down the mountain from Presbyterian Church, but in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the community nearly fails and is either bought or destroyed by a corporate mining company. The mining company wants to buy McCabe's holdings and take over the town, but McCabe holds out for too much money and is killed after a long shootout with the corporation's assassins. In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, eco-resistance destroys corporate gunslingers. But *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* illustrates the cost of that vigilante justice: the death of a hero and the community he attempts to build.

Much has been written about landscape in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, primarily by examining the film's setting in relation to plot and character and defining the setting as a character or source of conflict without interrogating its environmental implications. Robert MacLean's “The Big-Bang Hypothesis: Blowing up the Image,” for example, suggests that the film “may be thought of as a film about snow” (2). Doris Borden and Eric Essman, on the other hand, assert that Robert Altman's post-Western “demythologizes both the landscape and the hero within it” (38) because nature is no longer redemptive, and the hero “would rather flee and avoid the fight” (9). And Robert T. Self's *Robert Altman's McCabe and Mrs. Miller: Reframing the West* highlights the countercultural context of the 1960s and '70s in which the film was produced and released. Connecting

the film to both late nineteenth century environmental history and legal history provides an ecocritical perspective on landscape and setting that is missing from these studies.

The film's plot centers on McCabe and a whorehouse madam, Mrs. Constance Miller (Julie Christie), who together build a prosperous community. But because both McCabe's community values and the law are usurped by the power of corporate miners and their paid gunmen, the town of Presbyterian Church falters, its previous community ideals visually burning down with the church, as McCabe freezes to death in the snow. Yet the rest of the community bands together and extinguishes the church fire, demonstrating its move from McCabe and Mrs. Miller's gritty commune resting on alcohol and prostitution to a more traditional community based on more sustainable values. Ultimately, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* illustrates the end of an era as it grapples with environmental and human consequences of mechanization. This simple plotline is augmented by Robert Altman's direction, Leonard Cohen's score, and Vilmos Zsigmond's cinematography, all of which set the tone for a film chronicling the death of the old West and its emphasis on both the individual and community, as well as the rise of invisibly powerful corporate interests.

The opening of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* illustrates both the hopeless battle between humans and a fateful natural world and the drive toward community building. A lone rider climbs a muddy trail in the rain, his buffalo fur masking his face and body. He rides past lines of tree stumps and massive piles of lumber, signs of environmental exploitation. But he also rides past the skeleton of a church, complete with steeple, a sign of community. When the stranger dismounts and takes off his coat, the town's desolate condition becomes clearer. A sluice, more lumber, a bridge, and a saloon look grey in the wet gloom. This is a mountain town in the Pacific Northwest that sprang up for and because of mining.

That mining seems peripheral at first. Sheehan (Rene Auberjonois), the saloon owner, first broaches mining when he tells McCabe about the Chinese in the area: "The Chinese don't own no property. They're just poaching mines," he declares. But McCabe is more concerned with community building than mining and buys prostitutes for his new Presbyterian Church business, a brothel to serve the mining town. McCabe rides past the same cut lumber there when he entered town through ice-covered puddles beside a working steam engine. The conflict between the natural environment and technology enacted by the steam engine's entrance foreshadows the conflict between a pioneering "natural" McCabe and corporate mechanized mining interests.

Even after Mrs. Miller brings in the "class girls" for a real brothel, mining seems peripheral, the hidden source of income for the community. Instead, Mrs. Miller's role as businesswoman and partner to McCabe is seen as breaking gender and genre rules by Brittany R. Powell and Todd Kennedy. According to Powell and Kennedy, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* "works with largely the same themes as *Brokeback [Mountain]*, namely those of sexuality, gender, violence, and capitalism, but in a manner that deconstructs the very Western genre within which [Altman] is careful to situate his film" (116). Powell and

Kennedy assert that “this genre destruction, furthermore, becomes the driving conflict in Altman’s film, and it does so in a way that makes the audience question and define sexuality instead of simply accepting it as a part of an even more fully defined mythic structure” (116).

It is an equal business partnership between McCabe and Mrs. Miller rather than mining that seems to center the film, so when McCabe’s men seem lackadaisical about their work, McCabe tells them, “I’m paying you boys ... hour after you’ve been in them mines all day, so you’ll have something to do besides go home and play with Mary Five Fingers.” Instead of focusing on individual mining, McCabe and Mrs. Miller together build a community in Presbyterian Church where men bathe before entering their brothel, listen to music on a music box, and celebrate a prostitute’s birthday. Mrs. Miller even provides a home for a widowed mail-order bride (Shelley Duvall). Although Patrick McGee highlights McCabe and Mrs. Miller’s capitalist tendencies, their drive for money rests on a yearning for community, if not in Presbyterian Church then in San Francisco.

That community is shattered, however, when Eugene Sears (Michael Murphy) and Ernie Hollander (Antony Holland) confront McCabe as representatives of the M. H. Harrison Shaughnessy Mining Company. Sears explains, “The truth of the matter is, Mr. McCabe, we’re interested in the mining deposits up here.”

McCabe still sees mining as peripheral to his business, so after a drink, McCabe responds, “There’s nothing to misunderstand. You want to buy out the zinc. Go ahead. I don’t own any goddamn zinc mines.” But then he tells the story of a frog that “got ate by the eagle” and, in the punch line, seems to get away with his cleverness, like Brer Rabbit and the briar patch. Still in the eagle’s stomach, the frog asks how high they’re flying, and when the eagle say’s they’re “up about a mile, two miles,” the frog exclaims, “Well, you wouldn’t shit me now, would you.”

Instead of laughing and joining McCabe in a drink, however, Sears gets right down to business. They do not wish to join the community McCabe and Mrs. Miller have built here. They would like to “buy out [McCabe’s] holdings ... in Presbyterian Church” for \$5500.00, a price McCabe turns down, thinking he is negotiating with reasonable businessmen.

But Sears and Hollander reject McCabe and Mrs. Miller’s community, even baulking at free offers for women at Mrs. Miller’s brothel. After McCabe turns down another offer—for \$6250.00, the men leave. McCabe still believes he is negotiating with members of a community rather than representatives of a corporate mining company with no such ideals. When McCabe discusses his deal with Mrs. Miller, however, she understands the contrast between them and Shaughnessy: “Zinc. I should have known. You turned down Harrison Shaughnessy. You know who they are? You just hope they come back. They’d soon put a bullet in your back as look at ya.”

When McCabe gives Sears his final “no,” they too fail to comprehend McCabe’s position, since their corporate mentality rests only on profit at any cost. “You’ve done a wonderful job here. You’ve built up a beautiful business. And here we are, ready to give you a substantial gain in capital. An offer from one of the most solid companies in the United States, and you say, “no.” Well, frankly, I don’t understand.” And Sears warns him about the possible outcome: “I don’t have to tell you that our people are going to be quite concerned, if you know what I mean.”

McCabe, on the other hand, still believes they share a communal business relationship and replies, “The way I feel about this is that you gentlemen come up here, and you want a man in my position to sell off his property. I think there’s got to be a good reason” and provides the men with a possible price for a buyout. He still thinks they will negotiate, but Mrs. Miller realizes they share a different ideology and attempts to persuade McCabe to leave.

McCabe still believes the company will negotiate with him, even after Sears and Hollander are replaced by a huge gunman named Butler (Hugh Millais), Breed (Jace Van Der Veen), and Kid (Manfred Schulz). Butler won’t make a deal with McCabe, claiming he is bear hunting, but he does reveal much about the kind of mining Shaughnessy’s company wants to implement in Presbyterian Church and also highlights environmental concerns related to the incorporation of mining—a movement from placer to vein mining techniques that include hydraulic mining and dredging:

Up in Canada now, they're blasting tunnel for under \$10.00 a foot, all done with a pigtail. They've got some new explosives up there. Fantastic stuff. They give it to Johnny Chinaman, send him in, down comes 45, 50 tons of rock, and one dead Chinaman. But you sir, do you know what the fine is for killing a Chinaman? Fifty dollars maximum. The inspector's working for the company; four times out of five, it's an accident. You could do this here with your own zinc. All you've got to do is give the bugger a box of this stuff, put him down the hole, up to the rock face—crash—and there's your zinc. Sixty-five cents a foot.

Although we never see mining in the film, miners populate the town and support its saloons, warehouses, and restaurants. The interruption made by the corporate mining company’s thugs portends the death of the frontier, a death that literally destroys McCabe and ushers Mrs. Miller into a permanent opium dream. For us, references to dynamite and its power to blast tunnels and kill “Johnny Chinaman” most clearly highlight the environmental message hidden behind the narrative: With corporate mining (led by Shaughnessy) comes blasting that leaves no room to rebuild the mountain as they do in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*.

In *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, even the law supports this unfettered progressive vision of progress embraced by Shaughnessy and his men. Unlike *Pale Rider*, where the government outlaws hydraulic mining, a fair use option that destroys rather than sustains

the environment, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* shows how powerless he and even the law are against the power of corporations. McCabe visits the Harrison Shaughnessy Mining Company, but Sears and Hollander have left, so he turns to a lawyer, Clement Samuels (William Devane), to save his own life through legal channels. Samuels agrees to represent McCabe for free, as “a little guy” because he believes winning the case will help him become “the next senator from the state of Washington.” Samuels makes a powerful speech about McCabe’s status as a pioneer, but it rests on his own belief in community rather than corporate exploitation:

When a man goes into the wilderness and with his bare hands, gives birth to a small enterprise, nourishes it and tends it while it grows, I’m here to tell you that no sons of bitches are going to take it from him.... You take that company, Harrison Shaughnessy. They have stockholders. Do you think they want their stockholders and the public thinking their management isn’t imbued with fair play and justice, the very values that make this country what it is today? Busting up these trusts and monopolies is at the very root of the problem of creating a just society. McCabe, I’m here to tell you that this free enterprise system of ours works. And working within it, we can protect the small businessman, and the big businessman, as well.

Samuels draws on community values in his argument, but McCabe is now convinced that Butler intends to kill him, so a long court battle won’t save him, even if it stops Shaughnessy. Samuels, however, asserts that McCabe’s death could work for the community: “Until people stop dying for freedom, they aren’t going to be free. I can see it now, on the front page of *The Washington Post*, right next to a picture of William Jennings Bryan: “McCabe strikes a blow for the little guy.”

McCabe is nearly convinced and returns to Presbyterian Church and Mrs. Miller. But refusing her pleas to run away, McCabe confronts the real violence Butler and his men bring with them, the violence that blasts mountains and kills an innocent cowboy (Keith Carradine). As if fulfilling the lawyer’s dream, McCabe sacrifices himself for the town. Once he has killed off his three pursuers one by one, a wounded McCabe tries to drag himself back to town through the snow. With Mrs. Miller deep in an opium dream, the town joins forces not to help McCabe but to save the burning church, set on fire when Butler mistakenly shoots the pastor who has just forcibly evicted McCabe from the sanctuary within, as if he is evicting him from the community.

*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* deconstructs the Western genre, blowing up the hero myth McCabe at first seemed to represent. The film does not valorize violence or a Western hero. Instead, McCabe hides in an open shed and shoots his pursuers stealthily and out of fear. The community works together to put out the church fire. McCabe fights alone. He eradicates the three faces of the corporation, so the community can rebuild itself on the values of a church rather than the brothel both McCabe and Mrs. Miller have left behind. But neither McCabe’s death nor Mrs. Miller’s departure are valorized. Instead, extreme close-ups show McCabe’s snow-covered body and ice-streaked face and Mrs. Miller’s oblivious opiate stare, two views that illustrate their powerless state. McCabe and

Mrs. Miller confront nature and build a business community, confront a mining corporation and seem to succeed, even in the face of their own sacrifices. But they die in the face of change—a dying frontier and the drive toward a more traditional community like that in *Pale Rider*. Like Barret, the community members won't quit, instead, they will build homes, schools, churches, raise their families, and sink roots—just as they did in *Pale Rider*. And those roots rest on zinc mining without the corporate interference that kills off towns and community ideals.

## Conclusion

The ongoing debate regarding mining issues and toxic waste removal in and around mines, sometimes from more than a hundred years ago, is reflected in recent films like *Silver City* (2004) and *Eight Legged Freaks* (2002), films set in the American West and addressing toxic waste issues and mining, as well as current events. *Silver City* highlights corruption and environmental damage surrounding a governor's race in Colorado. Ironically, cyanide waste disposal is at the film's center: Instead of cleaning up cyanide waste, governmental officials dump it into an abandoned silver mine, where it leaks into surface waters and kills both fish and people. *Eight Legged Freaks*, a science fiction comedy, also foregrounds toxic waste disposal. Even though the waste does not come directly from mining practices, it is dumped into a pond and into an abandoned mine, enters the water system, and genetically alters various spiders.

The continuing impact of the 1872 General Mining Law and repercussions of toxic waste disposal make it clear that mining in the West still affects us and our ecology today. The Anaconda Mines cited in Jared Diamond's *Collapse* are still causing ecological damage. On March 30, 2006, for example, Michelle Chen notes in *The New Standard* that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers authorized a gold mining corporation to dump millions of tons of mine tailings into pristine Lower Slate Lake in Alaska. Mining Westerns from the 1920s until today reflect an ecological and legal history resting on politics that are ecologically destructive. The western films we viewed reinforce this message, either implicitly or explicitly. They all have ties to unsound environmental policies. So, when Preacher and Hull Barret blow up hydraulic mining tools, Matt Devereaux or a Gene Autry sidekick blast and tear down a copper smelter, or McCabe dies in the snow, early environmentalists are on display taking the law in their own hands to save the land. Environmental legal history like this seems to go hand in hand with eco-resistance. Both are reflected in American western films.

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