Chapter 12

Midnight Cowboy:
A Love Story

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John Schlesinger’s Midnight Cowboy (1969), the only X-rated film in history to win the Best Picture Oscar, is one of the most unusual love stories ever filmed. The picture also offers a keen assessment of the 1969 status of the Western genre, putting an ironic twist on some of its key idioms. This ironic reevaluation begins with the opening shot—a little boy riding a toy pony in front of the huge white screen of a drive-in cinema to the forceful sounds of the galloping horses and gunfire from his imagination. The image suggests that the once-glorious idea of American manhood of the Westerns by 1969 may have remained such only in a child’s mind. The film’s protagonist is indeed a man-child, a naïve Texan dishwasher Joe Buck (Jon Voight), about to head off to New York to try his luck as a hustler offering sexual services to rich women. Joe’s West-to-East route is also a subversion of the classic Western itinerary, which had always been westward, away from the greedy and corrupt urban East. Joe dresses like a cowboy, talks like a cowboy, and thinks of himself as a cowboy, riding—albeit on a bus—into a new town. Once in town, Joe himself gets hustled by about everyone he meets, including a sickly street-smart conman Ratso Rizzo (Dustin Hoffman). Their unlikely friendship eventually develops into the first and only meaningful relationship of their lives, even more intimate than the male bonding in the Western world of John Ford and Howard Hawks. Ratso invites Joe to share his “rent-free” apartment in an abandoned building. For several months
they live there together without heat or electricity, Ratso trying to manage Joe’s hustling operation, Joe trying to take care of his ailing friend. They become each other’s surrogate family, not unlike the odd companions of Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), united by random chance and bonding together to survive. Joe’s crushed dream of making a fortune in New York is now pushed out by Ratso’s dream about going to sunny Florida, where Ratso would recover from his sickness and their hustling business would prosper. With the approaching winter, Ratso’s health deteriorates rapidly. Desperate to save his friend, Joe commits a violent crime to get the money for their trip. On the bus to Florida, Ratso dies in Joe’s hands. This heartbreaking finale is reminiscent of John Ford’s sentiment that Peter Bogdanovich called “glory in defeat” (Giannetti, 155). Their dreams get crushed and Ratso dies, but this friendship and this death transform Joe Buck forever. He leaves us not as a sexually troubled man-child playing a cowboy, but a grown man mourning the loss of his only friend.

According to *Midnight Cowboy*’s producer Jerome Hellman, approaching the material as a love story was central to the project. He recalls his conversations with director John Schlesinger and screenwriter Waldo Salt during the development period:

What we talked about primarily was Joe’s need for love and connection, and Ratso’s need to make a connection. We shared a view that *Midnight Cowboy* was a love story. The only way that it would work, in terms of our intent, would be for that to be thematically something we would always be aware of. The peculiarities of the characters and the peculiarities of the context in which they connect don’t make it any less a love story. They were both totally disconnected people who had never had a mutually inter-dependent relationship anywhere in their lives. Ratso was an exploiter and Joe dreamed of being an exploiter but in reality their need for each other was so great that they fused. And so we had a love story.

(Hellman, 94)

This approach was thematically faithful to James Leo Herlihy’s novel *Midnight Cowboy* on which the film was based. Herlihy’s name is rarely mentioned in association with the celebrated film version of his creation. Although brilliant and daring for its time, the novel has been out of print since 1965 and today is virtually forgotten. But reading it now gives the impression of very contemporary vibrancy, humor, and tenderness. Herlihy shows a rare gift of seeing human beauty in dark and ugly places, and genuine understanding and compassion for the lost and fallen. Much of the film’s strength is owed to its