FILM 2332 — Understanding Film, Essay 2 — Rango and the Saloon

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In this essay, I discuss the use of elements of style in the saloon scene from *Rango* (Verbinski, 2011). This paper uses terminology specific to live-action film; however as the film is animated, note that the film only imitates these elements of style. *Rango* is about, an anthropomorphic chameleon stranded in the desert searching for identity in a Wild West town named Dirt. In this scene, Rango enters a saloon unsure of himself, but confrontation with the citizens of Dirt forces him to fabricate the identity of a formidable gunslinger - one which Rango uses throughout the remainder of the film.

As Rango enters the saloon, he is framed for the first time by the doorframe. This shot is tight, drawing attention to Rango's facial tics. This reveals his uncertainty about his place in his new environment. After several seconds, Rango glances to the right. The camera displays a sequence of shots of the patrons turning to look at the camera. At this point, the music is diegetic, known by the increasing volume as he enters the saloon.

In the first shot in the sequence, the film uses the 180° system to establish the orientation of the characters. Here, the characters look directly into the camera, matching Rango's glance and giving the impression that they are looking directly at Rango. The music here stops as the spider looks at Rango, leaving behind only a rattling sound, which we assume to be non-diegetic. The following shot presents two characters, a turkey and lizard seated at a table. As the lizard looks at Rango, the camera racks, drawing attention to the size of the movement. The sequence ends with a shot of Spoons, who stops shaking his spoons. We realize that the sound is diegetic, making it even more unnerving when it stops.

The lighting in this sequence helps exaggerate the menace of the characters. In each of these shots, the light from the windows is sharp and does not fully illuminate their eyes or faces. It gives the opposite effect of glamour lighting, highlighting the shadows and holes in the characters' faces and emphasizing ruggedness over beauty. Where light shines directly, it is on the characters' hands and nearby objects, pointing to the stops in action. Additionally, the unmoving bluish haze surrounding the background gives the impression of emptiness and help to establish the sudden stillness from Rango's entrance.

The two shots following give a view of the saloon from two angles. In the first, from the bar, the haze takes up most of the screen and draws attention to the comparatively warm-colored (and bloodshot) eye of the character sitting at the bar. When the character sitting at the bar looks sideways while the camera racks to Rango, the audience's eyes are subtly moved toward Rango, still standing in the doorframe. Again, Rango is framed as a nervous and shy lizard by his posture. The next shot shows the entire saloon, and we see and hear the fan. Its movement and creaking juxtapose the stillness of the saloon. The saloon's color has high contrast, with Rango's shadow standing out against the silhouette of the doorframe.

Again, we switch from Rango in the doorframe to a pan over the saloon, following Rango's head movements. It begins, with a view of the patrons, showing his disruptiveness, and ends at the bar, telegraphing Rango's path.

As Rango moves, the scene shows another sequence of the characters' glares, interspersed with shots of Rango walking from the side. This time the eyes move to match Rango's movement across the scene. In the first walking shot, the camera is shallow-focused on Rango, with menacing out-of-focus objects in the foreground implying a sense of danger for Rango - and that the objects may be used against him should he make the wrong move. In the shot of the owl's match on the action of putting down cards, we see the shot glass first, with Rango in the background, but are drawn to him by the saturated colors of the liquor compared to the grayish hue of the cards.

When Rango arrives at the bar and sees the rabbit, the camera looks at Rango from below, conveying trepidation. As Rango sits down, looks to his left, and nods, his bright colors and rapid movements juxtapose the shadowy patron beside him. This, and the almost unmoving background draws the audience's eye. He sits away from the light from the windows, growing the

shadows on his face. As he coughs and asks for a glass of water, his movements make him the center of focus, until the audience is directed to the frog by the movement, a rack focus, and the glow of his eyes.
Although we cannot see other characters in the background, the bartender's gaze towards Rango directs the following shot of patrons laughing as sitting along his line of site. This is confirmed when we see these characters in the background in the shot of the drunk rabbit. The lighting at this point suddenly shifts. Although the shadows still hide many character's faces, the lighting becomes higher-key, relieving some of the tension in the scene. We see a tight shot of Rango glancing back and forth, with the laughing in the background, restating his nervousness.
Once the barkeeper begins serving the beverage, the sound begins to drive the understanding of the scene. The bottle makes a the sound of a cork as the bartender opens it, and as it is moves on the surfaces the sound establishes it as a glass bottle (contrasting with the image of a piece of cactus). This relies on the audience's past experiences with liquor bottles and establishes cactus juice as the equivalent of hard liquor in the universe. The volume here also varies as the camera switches from the bottle sliding away to sliding towards the camera. Here, the 180° system is used for sound and images, and give the impression of distance.
When Rango stops the bottle, we are reminded that the sequence is animated, and the harshnes of Dirt. This is stated again when the fly drinks a drop of the juice and it dies and begins to steam. Along with Rango's reaction to the drink, we find that the liquor is extremely strong.
While Rango is frozen, our eyes are drawn to Spoons's hand's movement as it is the only movement in the frame. The camera assumes Rango's eyes' position when he looks down at Spoons. His wide-brimmed hat, shadows his face, making his tone seem more threatening. This angle makes the threat feel more personal.
As Rango looks in the mirror, he is framed again. The camera zooms to the frame, dramatizing Rango's question of identity. When the camera looks at the bottle, and Rango moves his thumb over the words, the is cued towards Rango's new name and identity
As the camera looks at Rango again, the shot tracks to become tighter, emphasizing the moment's importance. Rango slides the bottle across the table, awakening the rabbit. This disturbance and the rabbit's new attention gives the audience the impression that the entire bar has now awakened and has begun to pay attention to Rango.
As Rango spins around, he steps into the light and is fully illuminated for the first time in the scene. Rango's new posture leaning forward and the citizens' new posture leaning forward convey their shock. For Spoons, his tone of voice even becomes fearful. For the rest of the scene, Rango's facial tics disappear, revealing his bravado. Although the saloon is still dusty, the lighting changes slightly to become high-key.
As Rango begins to walk forward and explain his backstory, the camera tracks Rango's movement, contrasting the passive observation in the scene's introduction. The change in camera movement makes Rango seem in-charge, and in contrlo of the narration. The music here begins non-diegetically, which we know by the instrumentation.
His movements also become more sudden and large, he begins to strut, and the lighting makes his colors more saturated and easier to follow along the screen. When he steps into the light, the same shadowed effect that made the patrons meancing previously makes him intimidating and establishes credibility with the patrons. The use of deep focus in the shot allows the audience to truly appreciate all the reactions, even those in the background, and confirms the effectiveness of Rango's new character.
When Rango concludes his story, the camera tightens onto Rango's face, pausing just before his most dramatic statement: "Rango". This time, when he drinks the liquor, he does not react, showing the change in his character.
The pan across the saloon focused on the lizard, whose eyes have widened along with the arpeggiato chord conveys the awe of the patrons. After being questioned, the camera zooms in for Rango's response, magnifying the drama of his answer. The scene ends with Rango looking directly into the camera as he says "Complicated". The tight shot and the music's cadence foreshadows his grandiose answer.