

# From the Gunfighter Myth to Rock Performance: Transposition and Intermedial References in Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime*

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**Abstract:** Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) is a play that combines elements of myth, Greek tragedy, science fiction, Westerns, modern rock and roll and futuristic fantasy in a provocative and engrossing pastiche. Shepard's transgeneric network also provides a model to observe the media combination (of music and play) and media transformation (from film to theatre). Situated at the intersection of performance studies and intermedial studies, this essay explores how the playwright presents these intermedial relations and what effects he hopes to achieve. More specifically, Shepard transplants the gunfighter myth constructed by Hollywood Westerns into rock performance, and transforms the traditional story of gunfight and cowboy showdown into a musical duel between two rock stars through the use of transposition and intermedial references. In this ongoing process, the classic Western motifs like competition, showdown and "survival of the fittest" is revisited and criticized in the rock music scene. It could be argued that frontier stories and images "travel" across the borders between film, music, and theatre, become invested with new meanings, and thus gain a new lease of cultural life in changing sociocultural contexts. The transmedial travel of those stories and images has contributed to the persistence of the frontier myth on the one hand, and to the discovery of the potential of cultural mobility on the other.

**Keywords:** Sam Shepard, *The Tooth of Crime*, Gunfighter Myth, Rock Performance, Transposition, Intermedial References, Cultural Mobility

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## 1. Introduction

Sam Shepard (1943-2017), contemporary American playwright, screenwriter, director, actor and musician, has shown keen interest in American popular culture as expressed through mass media. "Shepard was the first playwright to construct his drama out of the materials of the popular arts, to infiltrate the sounds and images of popular culture into work." [1] Indeed, what initially attracted Shepard about the theatre was its transmediality, the fact that it was a "form where you could amalgamate all the arts." "You can show film," he says, "you can dance, you can incorporate painting and sculpture. For a renegade artist who hasn't found his niche, it's a way to engage all these things. It's very accessible and the rules are wide open." [10] The atmosphere in which Shepard began writing during the early 1960s nurtured these eclectic impulses. When he arrived in

New York, the off-off-Broadway movement was just beginning, and the boundaries between high art and popular culture were increasingly blurred, leading to artworks that combined various media. Shepard was particularly influenced by those visual media (the Western films, TVs, etc.) and the aural media of the then popular music (rock and jazz) and their mythic heroes.

*The Tooth of Crime* was written in 1972 when Sam Shepard, one of the greatest contemporary American playwrights, moved to London with his wife and son to become a rock star. It is a typical "rock play" that portrays a battle for dominance in the rock music industry between the reigning rock star and the newest rock singer sensation. Hoss, a traditional, Elvis-style rock star, is the established King in this science fiction future, but the rules of the bizarre battle game he dominates are crumbling on all sides during Act One. When Crow, a lone "Gypsy" (a lawless killer working outside

the rules of the game), breaks through security cordon, the stage is set for Act Two' battle between the two, which Hoss inevitably loses. He is forced into the only gesture he can think of to salvage his honor: suicide.

Shepard situates the play within two main cultural contexts: the rock music industry of the 1950s and 60s, and the myth of the American West in Hollywood Western films. Meanwhile, some critics have drawn attention to the play's combination of different media and genres. Leonard Wilcox, for example, points out that "*The Tooth of Crime* is a rock and roll western set in a futuristic present which is redolent with the historical simulacra of fifties rock music, 1930s' gangsterism, and the nineteenth-century Western gunslinger." [32] Ruby Cohn notices the play's references to films as the battle between Hoss and Crow "is staged as a prizefight, with resonances of the gunfight of Western movies." [7] In a similar vein, Martin Tucker remarks that "[t]he basic premise is one taken from the old West grafted onto the rock music scene—a duel between the top shot (gunfighter, rock star) and a man who wants to take over that spot." [29]

Despite all this discussion, there are still questions that need to be addressed: Why did Shepard choose to present media combination and media transformation in his work? How did the gunfight and cowboy showdown of Hollywood Westerns get transmitted and transformed in the play? What renewed cultural significance has it gained in the process? In what ways does the play reflect Shepard's dramatic innovations and serve as a cultural critique of specific social, historical and cultural issues? Based on new theories and analytical methods within intermedial studies, this paper focuses on various intermedial relations and investigates how meaning is generated in/by the interaction of various media. While existing intermedial studies have mainly focused on the aesthetic aspect of media, this paper will enter into dialogue with and contribute to this growing body of scholarship by focusing on the unity of formal innovation of intermedial art with the excavation of ideological content.

## 2. Transposition and Intermedial References

The phenomenon of intermediality has always existed in ancient and modern times, but it was not until the late 1990s that intermedial studies gradually became an important academic field and has made rapid progress in the last decade. In general, intermedial studies "is interested in the interaction of similarities and differences between media and the changes that may occur in communicative material when it is transported from one media type to another." [3] In their edited volume *Intermedial Studies: An Introduction to Meaning Across Media* (2022), Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirrmacher clarifies two main kinds of intermedial relations: media combination and media transformation. The former means "the combination and integration of media types in particular media products of qualified media types" while the latter "refers to all kinds of processes in which the

form or content of one media type is reconstructed and thus transformed by another media type." [4] According to Lars Elleström, media transformation can be further distinguished into two forms: transmediation (e.g., a film adaptation of a novel) on the one hand, and media representation (e.g., references in a literary text to a piece of music) on the other. [8] Media representation is sometimes discussed as an intermedial reference. For Irina Rajewsky, this subcategory of intermediality means that "the given media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means" (the "as if" character and illusion-forming quality of intermedial references; they create the illusion of another medium's specific practices). [19]

There is no doubt that *The Tooth of Crime* is a typical work of media combination as "theatre is a hypermedium that incorporates all arts and media." [5] But more importantly, there are references in this rock play to Hollywood Western films through the evocation or imitation of filmic techniques, characters, narratives, and ideas. Shepard once admitted that the play "would up somewhere between the old classic Western and rock nihilism." [33] This may be called "filmic ways of writing" or, in Christine Schwanecke's words, Shepard adopts "filmic modes" which "can establish the illusion of the filmic medium being (materially) present in the literary text even though it is not." [23] Moreover, in a letter to Richard Schechner, Shepard maintained that the play "is built like *High Noon*, like a machine Western." [22] In fact, the environmental production by Schechner and The Performance Group in 1973 hanged out the filmic qualities of the play. As Schechner wrote, "the techniques of film—especially montage, quick-cutting, musical back-up, and iconographic gesturing—have heavily influenced *The Tooth of Crime* ... it would offer the audience a film-like experience." [22]

In this process of media transformation, both form and content of films are transposed and thus transformed by theatre. Shepard's play presents the migration of characters and storyworlds to a different temporal or spatial setting. On the one hand, the story of Western showdown—the competition for the title of "top gun of the West" between gunfighters—has been transposed from Hollywood Westerns into theatre; on the other hand, the mythic cowboy is hybridized with rock stars.

## 3. The Gunfighter Myth in Hollywood Westerns

The stories about the gunfight and gunslinger have travelled across a variety of media and genres. Frontier violence served as a marketable commodity in literature going back to James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* novels of the early 1800s. In addition, dime novels, Wild West shows, fictions by Zane Grey and Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) all propagated the allure of the gun-toting frontiersman. After the closing of the frontier, much of the public's perception of America's

Western heritage depended on the movies, and the gunfighter has become a classic image of Hollywood Westerns. "Substituting the gun for the plough, Hollywood promoted a carbine version of Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis," Jones and Wills note. "Where Turner had envisaged the farmer as hero, Hollywood instead forwarded the gun-toting cowboy as a symbol of Western (and national qualities) of individualism, justice, freedom and self-reliance." [9]

American Western films in the postwar decade were characterized by the "cult of the gunfighter." As with all Westerns, the gunfighter Western commented on contemporary concerns through mythical narratives. The gunfighter, who rose to special prominence in the late 1940s and 50s, is a Cold War construct: "The image of the gunfighter as a professional of violence, for whom formalized killing was a calling and even an art, is ... the reflection of Cold War-era ideas about professionalism and violence and not the mores of the Old West." [28] Slotkin suggests that the link between the formal character of the gunfighter Western and the changes in ideology created a "cinematic resonance and made the heroic style of the gunfighter an important symbol of right and heroic action for filmmakers, the public, and the nation's political leadership." [28] The classic Western showdown between gun-toting cowboys and Indians evokes the U. S./Soviet conflict during the Cold War period. In this sense, Hollywood Westerns reactivate the myth of the gunfighter by transposing it into a Cold War context and reusing it to more explicitly political ends.

The seminal film in the development of the gunfighter Western was *The Gunfighter* (1950). Instead of the traditional law-and-order themes, the film takes up psychological concerns like the relationship of an old gunfighter to a young one, or the paranoia born of a life of violence. Jimmy Ringo is the dominant figure in the contemporary gunfighter myth, "top gun of the West," in the same way as America was politically dominant in the postwar period. He attempts to return to the town in which his wife and son live. This is an attempt to escape his legend and reconcile their relationship, wrecked precisely because of his infamous past. Yet, he has not been able to escape the past, but finds himself trapped in the role and reputation he has spent his life seeking. "That mood of entrapment," as Slotkin points out, "was to shape the narrative and the landscape through which the gunfighter would move, seeking refuge or escape from his special history and failing to find it." [28] Ringo is locked into an inevitable destiny of having his position constantly challenged, a situation that will only end when he is killed. The main threat to Ringo lies in the form of the town "squirt," Hunt Bromley, a replica of the young, dead cowboy. Ringo recognizes in the young cowboy something of himself in the early days, a youngster trying to make a name for himself. In the end, when Ringo mounts his horse, Bromley jumps from the shadows and shoots him in the back before he can turn. The dying Ringo declares that Bromley outdrew him, thus condemning the youngster to the same life of constant threat and movement that Ringo himself has led—a life he now sees as a terrible

doom.

*The Gunfighter* is explicitly a Cold War Western, which is concerned with and readily illustrative of the nature of existence under a looming threat. "Jimmy Ringo can be seen to represent an American nation weary of conflict but aware of the existence of and the need for readiness against new threats." [15] A United States in a period of strange contradiction—of controlling massive power while existing in a state of vulnerability — is reflected in the oft-repeated phrase, "he doesn't look so tough." While *High Noon* and *Shane* present the new gunfighters who have free will to make choices, where to go, when to leave, which side to fall in with, *The Gunfighter* "presents the gunfighter character as unable to avoid destiny, unable to transcend the narrative, and unable to play the hero." [15] Ringo could be the hero, but his life is at the mercy of an already mapped fate. He has neither upheld justice and order nor had any ability to transform his role and values, a situation that moves far away from the accepted heroic and romanticized histories of the conventional cowboy hero. If the Cold War Western is traditionally invoked to repeat the endless victory of cowboys (America) over Indians (the Soviet), *The Gunfighter* seems to be delivering a negative message steeped in pessimism and determinism.

#### 4. Transplanting the Gunfighter Myth into Rock Performance

Though Shepard once maintained that the production of *The Tooth of Crime* should be built like *High Noon*, the play has many references to gunfighter westerns such as *The Gunfighter* in terms of the showdown motif, the articulation of a tangible, looming threat, and the central concern with competition, entrapment, violence, fate, etc. While *The Gunfighter* deals with a duel between Ringo, the "fastest gun," and Bromley, the local "fast kid," Shepard's play depicts a "style match" between Hoss (the gifted "killer" who has labored to the top of the rock-gunfighter confederation) and Crow (the upstart rocker who pursues a renegade path to fame and glory). The competition for the "fastest gun" title between gunfighters is transformed by Shepard into a musical duel between two rockers who are competing for top place in the pop charts.

Hoss emerges as a multicolored figure, who can be briefly outlined by Shepard as a top rock star who enters in a black leather outfit with silver studs and black kid gloves, a combination of rock star and Western gunfighter. Hoss is at the top of the charts, but like the old gunfighter of the classic Western, he is constantly being challenged by newcomers. He comes to grips with the knowledge that his "turf" is going to be usurped by an aggressive "new gun." Crow, the younger rock star who wants to replace Hoss on the throne of rock, is described as a "Gypsy" who has no political, social, or ethnic "turf." Like Hunt Bromley in *The Gunfighter*, Crow is marked as a Gypsy Killer from Vegas, a young gunfighter who wants to challenge and kill the old-timer. Although the guns and knives deployed in Act One imply a physical battle, Hoss and

Crow finally choose language as the means of battle.

Round 1 starts with Crow's quick, vicious attack on Hoss's personal history and identity. While Hoss recalls his teenage memories of the gang rumble against the rich kids as "like John Wayne, Robert Mitchum and Kirk Douglas all in one movie," [24] Crow fills round 1 with a capsule biography of a coward and a loser. He develops a seething and violent narrative around Hoss's shameful past, the adolescence of a battered sissy. Crow usurps Hoss's history and rewrites it in terms of fear, sexual frustration and regressive masturbatory activity. The Ref is not interested in whether Crow's story is true, but in whether it's a winning text, powerful and convincing. Hoss barely gets a blow in during this round and the Ref declares Crow the winner.

Rather than attacking his opponent's past, Hoss in round 2 attacks Crow's lack of past: his rootlessness. Hoss's status as a 1950s' rocker gives him a privileged relationship to African-American culture. Hoss's diction imitates the black man's South as he evokes the birth of the blues, music born of the black slave's "moan." Hoss performs in round 2 as the incarnation of the origins of rock music and accuses Crow of denying his musical roots. But Crow remains indifferent to Hoss's narrative and rejects the demands of history: "I'm in a different time," he counters. "Bring it up to now. ... I got no guilt to conjure! Fence me with the present." [24] Hoss has found Crow's weakness, but the Ref intervenes and calls the round a draw. Recalling a litany of blues heroes, including Little Brother Montgomery, King Oliver, Ma Rainey, and Chuck Berry, Hoss in essence gives Crow a history lesson—the history of rock and roll.

In the final round of the battle, Crow sneers in rhyme that Hoss's music is obsolete, imitative, impotent. "So ya' wanna be a rocker. Study the moves. Jerry Lee Levis. Buy some blue suede shoes. Move yer head like Rod Stewart. Put yer ass in a grind. Talkin' sock in to it, get the image in line." [24] Crow presents Hoss as derivative and inauthentic. Hoss, in Crow's view, is no more than a collage of pop voice—"Tries trainin' his voice to sound like a frog. Sound like a Dylan, sound like a Jagger, sound like an earthquake all over the Fender" [24]—an erector set of movements and gestures taken from the "real" stars. The violence of the words causes the Ref to step in and declare the match over. Hoss, after a technical knock-out has been awarded against him, shoots the Ref.

In depicting the musical duel between two rockers, Shepard in fact displays a confrontation between two worldviews, aesthetic styles, cultural identities and the like. Ruby Cohn notes that "*The Tooth of Crime* is at once a contest between rock stars, a histrionic match of performers, a bout between generations ... and a class war between the haves and have-nots, between the recently rooted Westerner and the catch-as-catch-can Gypsy." [7] Leonard Wilcox has written most insightfully about the conflicting aesthetic stances of the play and argues that Hoss recalls a modernist temperament, one that values coherence, unity, and aesthetic standards. Crow, on the other hand, represents a postmodern attitude, one fascinated with surfaces, style, and shifting, ever-combining images. [32] Malkin argues that the confrontation between

Hoss and Crow is fact a conflict between "historical memory and nostalgia for the past" and "futuristic jargon and an unmemoried faith in 'now,'" and between "age" and "youth." [13] Hoss's style "combines a modernist faith in art with a traditionalist belief in the sustenance of the past—especially the myths of a no-longer-available West," [12] whereas Crow represents "a postmodern generation of culture 'outlaws' unfettered by ideology, roots, biography, or cultural memory." [12]

Hoss highlights the cultural values of roots, tradition, and originality. He laments the breakdown of the code, the loss of tradition, the degeneration of the game into street fighting. Shepard situates Hoss in a vacuum, an industry emptied of authentic music, a country without ranchers, cowboys, open space, where a Western hero like Hoss is an anachronism. In fact, Hoss was once "a mover" [24] who needed to wander. But now he is trapped by his past like Ringo in *The Gunfighter*. Crow, by contrast, is the figure who best embodies Shepard's mobile ways of thinking that emphasizes movement, play, and change over stasis, attachment, and stability. Hoss is too static to keep on playing, but Crow is aware of the freedom associated with play and movement. Crow chooses flight over the fixed niche. "Crow asserts that it is not stasis or stability or being 'true' that counts but that you keep moving, keep alive, keep playing the game." [14] Saddik finds in Crow the transformative power of play and performance: "Crow survives and wins because he knows that the only reality lies in performance, and freedom is the ability to invent and reinvent oneself, to manipulate image." [21] There is an inevitability in the defeat of the "rooted" Hoss by the "nomadic" Crow. Shepard's characters seek redemption through the search for authenticity, origins, a stable self, but ultimately realize that redemption lies in movement and change.

## 5. Revisiting the Motifs of Competition and "Survival of the Fittest"

In the process of media transformation, Shepard not only refashions the old story of Western showdown, but also revisits and criticizes the classic themes of competition and "survival of the fittest" in the rock music scene. The play is "a rearguard guide to the survival of the fittest in the dog-eat-dog world of rock-'n'-roll where even the fittest fail to survive." [17] In Saddik's view, it is "a Darwinian staging of competition and survival of the fittest where the winners know how to manipulate image." [21] Shepard re-presents a Darwinian world where the brutal competition between Anglo-Americans and Native Americans in the Old West has become a struggle for the "top shot" between rock stars in the dog-eat-dog world of rock music. In this sense, Shepard dramatizes what Slotkin recognized about the myth of the frontier: "Its ideological underpinnings are those same 'laws' of capitalist competition, ... of Social Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' as a rationale for social order, and of 'Manifest Destiny' that have been the building blocks of [America's]

dominant historiographical tradition and political ideology.” [27]

It is obvious that Hoss is defeated because he has lost fluidity, flexibility and adaptability which are necessary in the highly competitive rock industry. “You’re a master adapter. A visionary adapter,” [24] Hoss says to Crow, conceding his defeat as a failure to “adapt,” to imbibe and become the style and language of the day. Like the gunfighter who lives by the mythical “code of the West,” he is trapped in the code of rock culture. Throughout the play, Hoss sits in his black chair like a caged tiger. He was once a cold killer who played “outside” the code of the game. But now he is “[s]tuck in [his] image.” [24] In the now established rock and roll industry, “his performance is codified, his image commodified, his succession predetermined, his linguistic performance a show of pop discourses.” [2]

On the other hand, Crow’s victory is depicted by Shepard as a result of natural selection. In contrast to Hoss, Crow is proud of his fluidity, flexibility and adaptability. “He has no code, no history, and no sense of mission to impede his virtuosity. If Hoss is stuck in image to which he has commitments, Crow has the complete flexibility of no commitments at all.” [18] This flexibility makes him the perfect survivor for the contemporary world, a “a master adapter” who can successfully adapt to changing demands of the rock music industry. “*The Tooth of Crime* leaves us with the grim victory of a ‘master adapter,’ a Melvillian confidence man of shifting identity for whom alienation can have no meaning, for whom the world of image and simulacrum is home.” [32]

The play thus has the potential of re-visioning American mythic history and its subject in its rewriting of canonical texts. If the Western history is defined by the Anglo-Americans’ triumph over Native Americans, if the classic Westerns are characterized by the victory of cowboys over Indians, Shepard’s play seems to explore the opposite extreme. Hoss, a rooted cowboy, is finally defeated by a rootless Gypsy. In John Ford’s 1962 film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) kills the brutish, lawless Liberty Valence (Lee Marvin). But the outcome is reversed in *Tooth*. “I can’t do a Lee Marvin in the late sixties,” Hoss claims [24] But Crow (the Liberty Valence/Lee Marvin figure) can and does, decisively winning the match against Hoss (Tom Doniphon/John Wayne). Crow is Faust, Ahab, Lear—a terrible vision of mankind’s quest for power and control, here played out in rock culture, the place of brutal competition.

Indeed, Shepard’s plays are often about competition and conquest. “His characters fight for power, they usurp others’ territory, steal their turf, stake their claims, and they fight, usurp, steal, and stake in his own hybrid language of picture shows and secret codes.” [20] Shepard often links the artist’s drive with an ambition for power. “The urge to create works of art is essentially one of ambition,” Miss Scoons says in Shepard’s play *Angel City*. “The ambition behind the urge to create is no different from any other ambition. To kill. To win. To get on top.” [25] Similarly, Hoss and Crow are killers who battle it out for power and territory. “And using those people in a rock ’n’ roll context. They’re all killers, but they treat their

situation like a rock musician—this whole ‘macho’ thing, y’ know, this masculinity trip.” This he saw as an apt representation of an ethos operating “in every aspect of American life, from pimps up to Nixon. People competing in life and death situations with their images of who they are.” [26]

The structure of the rock and roll gunfight in the play clearly follows the pattern of a classic agon, a sacred combat between the Old King and the new. Crow, having defeated Hoss, takes his place as the new king of rock. “The play moves toward the inevitable sacrifice of the reigning king by this year’s usurper, the death of the father at the hands of the son.” [11] In the play, Hoss is the old, the father, the past, while Crow is the young, the son, the future. Hoss, like Ringo in *The Gunfighter*, is trapped by his history and his identity. “Crow’s immediate model is the young Western gunslinger out to kill the old-timer with the reputation as the fastest on the draw,” Mottram notes, “but as an archetype he is as old as myth itself. He is Cain hating Abel and the aspirant to the office of priest/king who kills his predecessor in the darkness of the primeval forest.” [16] He also represents the youth of the 1960s counterculture who revolts against establishment values and the patriarchal, corporate world which was fostered by the conformist ethos of the 1950s.

However, like *The Gunfighter*, the play is a darker, more complex rock Western that reflects on and criticizes the motif of competition and conquest. Just as Ringo in *The Gunfighter*, Hoss recognizes in the young gunfighter (Crow) something of himself in the early days. Hoss’s legacy and reputation have been passed to Crow who defeats him. Although Crow proves himself more apt in manipulating his image than Hoss does, he is not saved from being contained within and determined by the fate of the game either. Crow is now open to the constant threat and challenge that Hoss has been. “This repetition in the representation of the characters is indicative of their inability to transcend their pre-destined role in the gunfighter cycle.” [15] The cycle of violence continues, and Shepard indicates that for gunfighters/rockers there is no escape from the repetitive cycle of killing and competition. As Robert Warshow notes, the gunfighter “can do nothing but play out the drama of the gun fight again and again until the time comes when it will be he who gets killed.” [30] Both Hoss and Crow, like Ringo and Bromley in *The Gunfighter*, are unable to avoid destiny, unable to transcend the narrative, and unable to play the hero.

And it is through the cyclic pattern of the play and the repetition in the representation of the characters that the audience comes to understand Hoss’s predicament and sympathize with his world-weariness, as he expresses a fatigue with the repetitive cycle of killing, violence, and competition. Often taken as a comment on American artistic-commercial life, the play is much more universal. It is not difficult to notice the analogy between Hoss’s situation and the 1950s middle-class man who had grown weary of the “rat race.” “In *The Tooth of Crime*, fierce competition in the world of rock-and-roll symbolizes the dehumanizing competitive scramble of American big city life. Hoss is on top, but he is filled with doubt, and fears that he might be slipping.”

[31] This makes the rocker/gunfighter a resonant figure for postwar Americans on several levels. Furthermore, *Tooth* is specifically redolent of the atmosphere of the Cold War era which was characterized by conflict and confrontation. Like Ringo in *The Gunfighter*, Hoss represents a parody of the Cold War situation, “at once the most powerful and the most vulnerable man in the world.” [28] Hoss is the dominant figure in contemporary gunfighter myth, “top gun” of the rock world, in the same way as Ringo (America) is dominant. Yet he exists in an atmosphere of almost constant threat. He cannot prevent confrontations and control his own destiny, in the same way as Ringo (America) is unable to shape the course of crucial events. For Shepard, therefore, rock is the theatre in which an entire generation of Americans enact their cultural disillusionment. As Coe points out, “events of the early 70s struck a hardy blow to the fundamental optimism of the 60s rock culture.” [6] There is a sense of pessimism that the innocence of the 1950s and the idealism of the 1960s die out and that in spite of power and success, people could not escape the cycle and control their destiny.

## 6. Conclusion

Most critics and writers have focused on the intermedial relations between film and novel, and between theatre and fiction. Yet Shepard blurred the lines between theatre, music and film in a fresh and invigorating way in the 1960s and 70s. In the case of *The Tooth of Crime*, intermedial studies examines how drama and music coexist and interact in a single work, and how the play’s references to films have revolutionized and enriched artistic expression and the reader/audience’s aesthetic experience. Theater not only has a long tradition, but is also in constant renewal and development. New forms of media combination and media transformation are constantly emerging, thus providing rich resources and useful nourishment for Shepard’s dramatic innovation.

Transposition and intermedial references are not just an innovation in the form of a play, but they are also a means of facilitating cultural mobility and historical updating. Shepard’s play transposes the gunfighter and its corresponding myth into a late twentieth-century present, and retells the story of Western showdown through the language of contemporary popular culture. In their ongoing transmedial “travels,” these stories and images can act as agents of counter-memory that help to revise the hegemonic views about the past and reflect Shepard’s cultural critique of contemporary social issues.

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