

AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Moments of Integration: A Close Analysis of *Odds Against Tomorrow*

In this audiovisual essay, I offer a close reading of a single overlooked film: the Harry Belafonte/Robert Ryan black-and-white 'anti-buddy' movie *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Robert Wise, 1959). Though sometimes remembered as a late-cycle film noir, and as a particular favourite of French director Jean-Pierre Melville, the film hasn't received the level of critical attention enjoyed by its postwar peers.

I find *Odds Against Tomorrow* compelling not so much for its noir trappings, exciting heist sequence or final, nihilistic message about the destructiveness of racial intolerance.

Instead, I find something quietly at work in its aesthetic unfolding. Specifically, I draw attention to the way *Odds Against Tomorrow*'s mise-en-scène creates a sense of overlap between different moments in the film. I trace this development starting from the film's unique opening credits sequence, which is designed around a series of transparent, overlapping spaces which momentarily come into sync near the frame's centre. Later scenes unfold in kind: spaces are revisited, traversed by opposed characters in scenes with opposing visual and dramatic designs, only for the camera to seemingly find brief moments of convergence.

In many ways, this audiovisual essay is a follow up to my earlier work (2021) on the *Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, 1958). Where I read that film's patterned use of the two-shot, which commits to a left-right framing for the black-white protagonists until flipping it by the film's end, as a kind of spatial (and racial) desegregation, I read *Odds Against Tomorrow*'s use of the camera as suggestive of the possibility of racial integration in Civil Rights Era America – one that is, like the film's credits, expressed only as a fleeting possibility.

Taking cues from V.F. Perkins' 2005 essay 'Where is the World?', I go on to read the very ending of the film not only with respect to how it activates a set of images from prior scenes, and some from different films entirely, but also with respect to how it draws us into a different kind of world, in a way that transcends the limited horizon of its characters.

Lastly, this audiovisual essay hopes to demonstrate something special about the format for the purposes of close

analysis – namely, how an audiovisual essay can give shape not only to the film we see, but to the film we experience, to that mysterious conjunction of images seen in the present, overlaid with those retrieved from our memory of the past. At times with overlapping images, at other times with disparate moments brought together in split screen and freeze frame, I attempt to conjure the sense of overlap I find in *Odds Against Tomorrow* in a way only an audiovisual essay could.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/1054108095>

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Works cited

Perkins, V.F. (2005) 'Where is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction' in Gibbs, John & Douglas Pye (eds) *Style and meaning: Studies in the detailed analysis of film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 16–41.

Rownd, Henry (2021), 'Desegregating the Two Shot: The Use of the Frame in *The Defiant Ones*' in *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, 9, 51.

