Cowboy Gothic: Haunting and Memorialization in *High Plains Drifter*

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"*Why do the dead return?*" asks Slavoj Žižek. "T*he answer offered by Lacan is the same as that found in popular culture:* because they were not properly buried […]. *The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite* […]. *This is the basic lesson drawn by Lacan from 'Antigone' and 'Hamlet'*."[1] The theme of disturbed or improper burial producing restless spirits is a very old one. Around 100 A.D., Pliny the Younger related the story of a haunted house in Athens, which is only resolved once a body is discovered and properly buried.[2] This narrative is reinforced a thousand different times in a thousand different ways: our most basic duty as civilized humans is to mourn and memorialize the dead, and if we fail to do so, the boundaries of civilization and savagery, past and present, and life and death begin to break down. *High Plains Drifter* (1973), Clint Eastwood's first self-directed Western, places a similar sentiment in the mouth of Sarah Belding (Verna Bloom): "*They say that the dead don't rest without a marker of some kind.*"

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[1] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 23.
[2] Žižek, p. 183.

Sarah is speaking of the murdered marshal of the town of Lago, Jim Duncan, who lies in an unmarked grave in the town cemetery; Sarah was one of the few people who tried to intervene to prevent his unjust and violent death, horsewhipped in the center of the town, and will thus be one of the few spared its reckoning and conflagration. Duncan, we later learn, uncovered the fact that a local mine that has enriched the town actually lay on government property and was thus illegal. He was killed to keep this information secret. The townsfolk go about their daily lives, laboring under a collective curse, which is resolved through the violent actions of a gunfighter known only as 'The Stranger' (Eastwood). The fact that Lago is corrupt, cowardly and cursed famously drew the ire of John Wayne[3], and places the film squarely within the cycle of revisionist Westerns in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[4] For Teresa A. Goddu, the American Gothic exists precisely to refute that narrative of innocence through its spectral reminders of a history of slavery and genocide[5], and this essay explores how *High Plains Drifter* couples its genre revisionism to its supernatural themes, creating a 'Cowboy Gothic' narrative that deploys the trope of the disturbed burial as a challenge to the Western's construction of New World innocence and purity.

The Man with a Name

High Plains Drifter begins in a way that should be immediately recognizable to anyone even remotely familiar with the genre: a stranger rides into town. Its first image is of a stock Western landscape, a barren southwestern American desert, our view distorted by waves of heat. A slow dissolve provides our first, distant image of a man on a horse riding towards the camera, apparently materializing from nothing. Dee Barton's eerie score meanwhile uses synthesizers to approximate the sound of the theremin, for decades "*Hollywood's signature instrument of the 'otherworldly'*"[6], creating a Gothic ambiance. We first see the town of Lago from a nearby hill as the Stranger draws nearer. Even from this distance, it already looks like a haphazard collection of buildings rather than a fully realized outpost of civilization. Further defamiliarizing the environment of the Western town is the fact that Lago sits on the edge of a vast lake – the film was shot on the banks of Mono Lake, a salt lake in California. Looking to escape the convention of a Monument Valley-style setting, Eastwood noted that "*Mono Lake has a weird look to it, a lot of strange colors – never looks the same twice during the day.*"[7] The familiar yet strange setting helps defamiliarize the

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[3] John H. Foote, *Clint Eastwood: Evolution of a Filmmaker*, Westport, CN: Praeger, 2008, p. 12.
[4] Much has been written about the tendency of 1970s Hollywood cinema to interrogate the implications embedded in genres and strive to deliver fresh variations. See John Cawelti, '*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent Films', in Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 498–511.
[5] Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 10.
[6] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 120.
[7] 'Eastwood Direction', interview by Richard Thompson and Tim Hunter, in Clint Eastwood, Robert E. Kapsis, and Kathie Coblentz, *Clint Eastwood: Interviews*, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2nd. ed., 2013, p.

film's use of recognizable Western iconographies. The camera tilts upwards and re-frames Lago more fully against the lake, emphasizing its smallness, as if it were in danger of being swallowed by the water. Eastwood's title card, in the red of fire or blood, or the red paint that will become significant later in the film, appears against this image.

The film's first image from within Lago looks outside, at the Stranger rides into town through its graveyard. The gravestones are wooden and plain, with names painted crudely on them; the graveyard itself seems overgrown and unmaintained. After the Stranger rides out of the frame, the camera draws our attention to the names on them through racking focus, a subtle detail that grows in significance once we learn of Jim Duncan's unmarked grave. The next shot shows the Stranger riding past a similar wooden sign, this one bearing the town's name. Later in the film, the Stranger applies red paint to the sign and renames the town 'Hell', echoing Duncan's final curse: "*Damn you all to Hell!*". More than just a stranger, Eastwood's character is 'The Stranger', not so much an individual instance of a convention as its amplification into a walking archetype. The Stranger's lack of a name is more thematically significant than in any of Sergio Leone's *Dollars* trilogy. Though Eastwood's character in the trilogy is known popularly as 'The Man with No Name', he had names, or at least nicknames, in all three of those films. And if the Leone character was implicitly superhuman and invincible[8], it becomes more literal with the Stranger, who casually avoids a near point-blank gunshot early in the film and later seems capable of teleportation and other supernatural feats. So, who or what is the Stranger? Is he the Devil, or an Old Testament-style avenging angel?[9] Is he the ghost of Marshall Duncan?[10]

I offer no fresh insight if I comment that *High Plains Drifter* has supernatural implications. Vincent Canby's contemporary review noted that *High Plains Drifter* is "*part ghost story, part revenge Western*"[11], and numerous other scholars have explored it along those lines. According to Eastwood, the character was initially written as the marshal's brother. But, Eastwood "*took out references to the brother because I felt that I wanted to present it as an apparition or a ghost. Maybe it's a ghost – I let the audience decide*."[12] It is possible to see the Stranger as a baroque amplification or even self-parody of Eastwood's

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27. For more on the significance of this location, see Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr, *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 244–46.

[8] For a reading of the 'undead' aspects of Leone's protagonists, see Matthias Stork, 'The Ghost from the Past: The Undead Avenger in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*', in Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, eds., *Undead in the West: Vampires, Zombies, Mummies, and Ghosts on the Cinematic Frontier*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012, ch. 13, pp. 207–19.

[9] Eastwood would play a more unequivocally angelic dead gunfighter in *Pale Rider* (USA, 1985), which he also directed.

[10] The name 'Duncan' echoes the king in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, whose murder triggers waves of disorder that are only corrected by his murderer's death.

[11] Vincent Canby, '*High Plains Drifter* Opens on Screen', *The New York Times*, 20 April 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/20/archives/high-plains-drifter-opens-on-screen.html, accessed 8 December 2015.

[12] Kevin Avery and Jonathan Lethem, *Conversations with Clint: Paul Nelson's Lost Interviews with Clint Eastwood, 1979–1983*, New York: Continuum, 2011, p. 84.

screen *persona*, especially as established in Leone's trilogy (*A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (It/Sp/W. Germ, 1964, 1965, 1966): as William Beard notes, the earlier films' "*suggestion of the supernatural has become literally true… The heavily marked air of invincibility surrounding the Man With No Name here becomes the literal, actual invincibility of a supernatural being; the disdain of Leone's character for the corrupt world becomes the implacable project of an avenging demigod.*"[13] There is no need to parse between the Stranger's identities as a hyper-archetypical gunslinger, a ghost and an avenging angel; he is all at once.

Supernatural Westerns would seem to be innately odd beasts, in part because of the role death conventionally plays in the genre. Peter A. French writes: "*The westerner is death-accepting … He accepts a two-pronged conception of death. Death is inevitably for us all … and it is the annihilation of the person. The only thing related or identifiable with the deceased that lives after his or her death are the memories the living have of the deceased, and those memories are framed in purely nonspiritual terms, in terms of the actions and the attitudes of the deceased while alive*."[14] Certainly, churches are important locations in the Western, with prominent examples including the half-finished church in Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (USA, 1946), which, stands in for the unfinished American project, and, in a revisionist mode, the neglected church in Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (USA, 1971). The church in Lago, probably in homage to *High Noon*, functions more as a town meeting venue than a place of worship. The genre as a whole contains very little discussion of a Christian afterlife: dead in the Western is dead.

Yet by the same token, burial grounds are hugely important in Westerns. Cemeteries both large (the sprawling graveyard of the final showdown in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) and small (the intimate, rosy-hued graveyard in Ford's *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon,* USA, 1949) and, smaller still, the family tombstones of Ford's *The Searchers,* USA, 1956 and Eastwood's *Unforgiven,* USA, 1992) play an important role in the genre's iconography and mythology. In *The Searchers,* Mrs. Jorgensen (Olive Carey) asserts that "*Someday this country's gonna be a fine, good place to be. Maybe it needs our bones in the ground before that time can come*." She accepts that American nation-building will require generations of sacrifice and articulates how the colonization of the West requires ties of earth and bone to secure the legitimacy of white civilization. It is thus unsurprising that indigenous burial grounds figure more rarely, largely in revisionist works; one example is the Crow burial site in Pollock's *Jeremiah Johnson* (USA, 1972) the transgression of which unleashes a cycle of furious interracial violence.[15] In *The Searchers,* Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) mutilates the

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[13] William Beard, *Persistence of Double Vision: Essays on Clint Eastwood*, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2000, pp. 24–25. Original emphasis.
[14] Peter A. French, *Cowboy Metaphysics: Ethics and Death in Westerns*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997, p. 57.
[15] Indeed, it is in horror films that disturbed Native American burial grounds have traditionally figured, for example in Rosenberg's *The Amityville Horror* (USA, 1979), Kubrick's *The Shining* (UK/USA, 1980), Ray's *Scalps*

freshly unearthed corpse of a Comanche warrior, shooting out his eyes so that he cannot enter the spirit land, but is obliged "*to wander forever between the winds*" – a ghostly fate that anticipates Edwards's own final inability to rejoin the society he has fought to protect.

Graveyards in Westerns often serve as memento mori (along with the stock figure of the black-clad undertaker) and as reassuring evidence of white civilization's inexorable presence; it is certainly more than happenstance that so many significant Westerns take place in the real-life town of Tombstone, Arizona (with its famous 'Boot Hill'), since tombstones and Western towns serve a similar iconographic function as emblems of the fragile yet growing frontier society. Yet all the same, there is a tradition of ghostly returns from the dead in Western media. One could look to the more overt Western-horror hybrids – including films like Dein's *Curse of the Undead* (USA, 1959) and McCarthy's *Ghost Town* (USA, 1988) or Pittman's *The Twilight Zone* episode 'The Grave' (USA, 1961) – but also within the conventional confines of the Western genre.

While films like Hurst's *The Haunted Range* (USA, 1926), James' *Tombstone Canyon* (USA, 1932), Hill's *The Vanishing Riders* (USA, 1935) and Newfield's *Wild Horse Phantom* (USA, 1944) generally resolve by unveiling hoaxes, they suggest a certain naturalness to themes of hauntedness within the Western milieu. One familiar example is not a film but a song: '(Ghost) Riders in the Sky', written in 1948 by Stan Jones and initially subtitled 'A Cowboy Legend'. It has been recorded by artists as diverse as Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Tom Jones, Fred Penner, Judy Collins, Peggy Lee, R.E.M. and the Dixie Chicks, and tells the story of a lone rider encountering a herd of infernal cattle being rounded by a group of cowboys, apparently a Sisyphean fate for unspecified transgressions. The ghost riders admonish the observer to "*change your ways today/or with us you will ride*". '(Ghost) Riders in the Sky' became a standard in part because of its transposition of European 'Wild Hunt' imagery into the wide-open plains of the imaginary West, which blends with the trope of ghostly rootlessness, as *High Plains Drifter* also does so effectively.

Let us re-phrase the question from Žižek that opened this essay: why do the dead return in the Western? Writing in the context of the British Empire, Simon Hay notes a body of ghost stories where "*the colonial landscape is populated with white ghosts (rather than indigenous ones), and the story thus provides a sense of legitimacy through history to imperial occupation*".[16] In *High Plains Drifter*, rather the opposite is true: ghostliness is invoked to construct white civilization itself as phantasmic and temporary. It thus materializes a subtext in the Western genre itself. The trope of the 'ghost town', left behind

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(USA, 1983), and Lambert's *Pet Sematary* (USA, 1989). The 'old Indian burial ground' convention is also referenced but disavowed in Hooper's *Poltergeist* (USA, 1982).

[16] Simon Hay, *A History of the Modern British Ghost Story*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2011, p. 131. In the 19th Century, 'Indian' spirits played an important role in the practices of American spirituals (Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, espec. 66–93), simultaneously memorializing Native Americans and contributing to the narrative of their erasure.

by depleted resources and failed industries, and with buildings standing as silent testimonials of the civilization that has been and gone[17], speaks of the fragility of white inhabitation in the West, the fear that it too may be as transient as the 'vanishing' Indigenous peoples themselves.[18] Lago seems to lack children altogether and its sole married couple, the Beldings, are deeply unhappy, with Lewis Belding (Ted Hartley) ultimately being cuckolded and then killed. Furthermore, the fact that the town has a Spanish name (for 'lake') but few Spanish-speaking inhabitants suggests that another regime of colonizers has come and gone, leaving barely any evidence except the tombstone-like town sign. And with the income from the local mine lost, Lago is likely to become a ghost town itself after the film ends.

Blood and Fire

Much has been written about the Stranger's first actions in Lago, as he casually kills three men and then rapes Callie (Mariana Hill) as a punishment for questioning his manhood, an action that she seems to enjoy; later events imply that it was also part of the punishment meted on Lago itself, since Callie was among the townsfolk who passively allowed the murder of Duncan to occur. It is a deeply troubling sequence, one that Eastwood later admitted was probably unnecessary.[19] Drucilla Cornell provocatively reads *High Plains Drifter* as "*an allegory of how evil comes to be reproduced by the very failure of the perpetrators and bystanders to admit what they have done and seek reparation or forgiveness*"[20], a dynamic in which the rape scene needs to be read as a traumatic act which is itself the consequence of trauma. Any reading of the Stranger's masculine self-security is complicated if we also see him a brutalized, traumatized subject – both haunted and haunting. Indeed, the opening sequence also has a moment when the Stranger reacts to a horsewhip and briefly registers fear and panic.

Shortly after the rape, we see this traumatic haunting play out graphically, in a sequence dense with codes of the cinematic supernatural. We see the Stranger enter his hotel room. In a lengthy take, he adjusts the blinds, removes his hat, takes two slugs of whiskey and lowers himself back onto the bed. The camera slowly pushes in on his face until its horizontal length fills the frame. His eyes clap shut quickly, almost mechanically. While eerie electronic music reminiscent of the opening plays, the camera pushes into a close-up

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[17] For both the legend and the historical reality of these ghost towns, see Jane Veronica Charles Smith, 'Ghost Towns', in Richard W. Slatta, ed., *The Mythical West: An Encyclopedia of Legend, Lore, and Popular Culture*, Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2001. For a more thorough reading of *High Plains Drifter* through the 'ghost town' trope, see María del Pilar Blanco, *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2012, espec. 98–9.

[18] The Stranger forces the owner of the general store to give free supplies to a Native American family, the only indigenous characters in *High Plains Drifter*; the notion of a primal debt owed to the land's original inhabitants is a definite but underdeveloped thread in the film.

[19] Richard Schickel, *Clint Eastwood: A Biography*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, p. 292.

[20] Drucilla Cornell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2009, p. 18.

of his face, over which another, barely recognizable face appears, superimposed. Is it a dream? A memory? Before one image threatens to dissolve into the other, the other face vanishes and we are left with the Stranger again. If he is sleeping, he is sleeping uneasily; his mouth and eyes twitch. Once again, the other image appears superimposed over his face, this time more clearly: a worn face covered with lines of blood.

In an unusual variation on the editing convention known as the graphic match, the shape of the two men's heads and their composition onscreen invites a connection between them. Meanwhile, a new sound comes onto the soundtrack: the repeated cracking of a whip. Once again, the superimposed image fades back to the Stranger, and he flinches in time with the whip. The third time, however, the image of the bleeding man replaces the Stranger altogether, not as a superimposition but as a more familiar dissolve. But soon after it dissolves back to the Stranger, who once again flinches. On the sound of the whip, the film cuts to images of what in retrospect becomes legible as the brutal death of Marshal Duncan, including a number of point-of-view shots either of the whip-wielding assailants or the indifferent bystanders. It is night-time and their faces are draped in shadow, and the unearthly score adds to the unearthly, nightmarish feeling of the event. The scene eventually dissolves from a point-of-view shot of whips flying towards the camera back to the Stranger's face. The composition, however, is now quite different, and the light in his eyes cues us that it is now morning.

Between nightmare, hallucination and flashback, this sequence is redolent of those theories of traumatic recall emphasizing "*the inability on the part of the victim to distance himself from the trauma, but only to suffer from it, through repeated reenactments (flashbacks, nightmares, etc.) so literal that they cannot be described as recollection of the event in question*".[21] These peculiar dissolves suggest another referent: the spirit photograph, in which superimposition allows multiple sets of images, putatively those of the living and the dead, to coexist on a single photographic surface.[22] It overturns linear understandings of space and time by registering different multiple levels together[23], and its

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[21] Dorian Stuber, 'Review of *Trauma: A Genealogy*', *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 3 no. 2, Fall 2002, p. 4, https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol3/iss2/2?utm_source=repository.brynmawr.edu%2Fbmrcl%2Fvol3%2Fiss2%2F2&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

[22] For key sources on the spirit photograph, see Tom Gunning, 'Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations: Spirit Photography, Magic Theater, Trick Films, and Photography's Uncanny', in Patrice Petro, ed., *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015, pp. 17–38; Martyn Jolly, *Faces of the Living Dead: The Belief in Spirit Photography*, London: British Library, 2006; John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007; Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Simone Natale, 'A Short History of Superimposition: From Spirit Photography to Early Cinema', *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol. 10 no. 2, March 2012, pp. 125–45.

[23] I examine the quality of 'co-registration' common to spirit photographs and cinematic superimpositions in Murray Leeder, *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; dissolves, such as those in *High Plains Drifter*, accomplish something similar. See also Claire Sisco King, 'The Ideological Use of the Dissolve', in Steffen Hantke, ed., *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004, pp. 21-34.

invocation in *High Plains Drifter* helps us understand the film's structures of haunting. The simultaneous presentation of the Stranger's time and the marshal's speaks to the intermingling of a traumatic past and a haunted present.

A nearly identical audiovisual strategy cues a different flashback to the beating death of Duncan later in the film. This time, the flashback is triggered by the impressions of Mordecai (Billy Curtis), the dwarf who becomes the Stranger's staunchest ally in Lago, seemingly because he was a traumatized witness to the murder of Jim Duncan. After Mordecai dodges a punch from one of the cruel townsfolk, he takes cover under a walkway. The camera slowly zooms onto his face and the electronic hum and the sound of whips comes on to the soundtrack, and once again, the image dissolves to the face of the dying Marshal Duncan. We see that Mordecai was hiding in the same place when the killing occurred. The second flashback is slightly longer and more coherent than the first, and is harder to describe in an uncomplicated fashion as a memory of Mordecai's, since it breaks away from his perspective altogether.

One might be inclined to say that the fact that the same audiovisual strategy accompanies a flashback of the seemingly un-supernatural Mordecai shows it to just be technique and muddies the film's supernatural affinities in general. But one could also reasonably suggest, with Laurence F. Knapp, that "*the dream is a collective memory-curse that will hover over the town until morality is restored and Duncan's grave is properly marked*."[24] This flashback ends with Mordecai's face surrounded by darkness, the only one of the onlookers showing emotion at this brutal murder. (Presumably the reason that the Stranger immediately connects with Mordecai upon his arrival in town is because of the latter's marginality and their shared trauma from Duncan's murder.) The collective curse on the town is later visualized by the Stranger's insistence on painting the entire town red: "e*specially the church!*" he barks at the feckless preacher who was one of the silent mass who allowed Duncan's murder to happen. Allan Cameron observes that in horror, the opposite is true: all red on the screen tends to suggest blood.[25] The Stranger's red paint job makes graphic the hidden stain on the town of Lago, the blood on the hands of virtually all[26] – save for Mordecai and Sarah Belding, the only characters whom the Stranger treats with respect.

The Stranger's post-coital conversation with Sarah contains the earlier-quoted dialogue about Duncan's murder and his unmarked grave. The Stranger is evasive about whether he knows about Duncan and about his purpose in coming to Lago. She remarks "*You're a man who makes people afraid and that's dangerous*", to which he replies "*It's*

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[24] Laurence F. Knapp, *Directed by Clint Eastwood: Eighteen Films Analyzed*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996, p. 61.

[25] Allan Cameron, 'Colour, Embodiment and Dread in *High Tension* and *A Tale of Two Sisters*', *Horror Studies*, vol. 3 no. 1, Spring 2012, p. 89.

[26] Blood is prominent elsewhere in the film as the mining company man Morgan Allen (Jack Ging), wounded by the Stranger, leaves a trail of blood that the Stranger follows to the Bridges gang. On stabbing him to death, one of the gang members remarks on how much blood he had left in him.

what people know about themselves inside that make them afraid", seemingly referencing the town's unexpressed guilt. Immediately, the film cuts to Mordecai supervising the digging of fresh graves for the men the Stranger killed the night before. One of the townsfolk wonders whether they should mark the graves or not, and this scene ends with the revelation that the Stranger has renamed the town 'HELL' by defiling the town's sign.

The last plague on Lago is one of fire. The Stranger is never more impressive than framed against the fire; it seems to be his home, his natural terrain, as he strikes suddenly and brutally against his killers. We are encouraged to see the Stranger as the purifying force that wipes away the corruption of Lago. Within the film's intertextual generic web, it invokes Swickard's classic *Hell's Hinges* (1916), in which the wicked town of the film's title is burned to the ground by the gunslinger Blaze Tracy (William S. Hart); at the end of the film, Blaze and his love Faith Henley (Clara Williams) retreat into the wilderness together, having sloughed off the corrupt values of the town in favor of a Western Eden. In light of its parallels with *Hell's Hinges*, it is all the more striking that *High Plains Drifter* does not supply an ending that unites a heterosexual couple or promises a new, purer social contract, or even presents the wilderness as a hospitable alternative to the decadent town. Amid all the death, fire and carnage of its finale, the only signal of catharsis comes in the form of a single tombstone.

Rest in Peace?

Colin Davis writes that "*The ghost's appearance is the sign of a disturbance in the symbolic, moral or epistemological order. Once that disturbance has been corrected, the ghost will depart again, this time (all being well) for good. So the ghost returns <u>in order to be sent away again</u>.*"[27] To an extent this description would apply well to the ending of *High Plains Drifter,* where the Stranger departs, as many Western heroes do, when no longer needed. Simultaneously, Duncan's corporeal remains lie in the ground, his tombstone attesting to his incorporation into nascent history of white civilization in the West. In his important structuralist treatment of the Western, *Six-Guns and Society,* Will Wright proposes a 'Vengeance Variation' to the genre's 'Classic Plot', in which the narrative is driven more by the hero's desire for vengeance than to safeguard white society (though, as in Ford's *Stagecoach* [USA, 1939], one often indirectly accomplishes the other). *High Plains Drifter* fits the Vengeance Variation's 13-point plot-line reasonably well, especially if you regard the Stranger as an incarnation of Duncan, who "*is or was once a member of society*" per Point 1. Wright's formula ends with "*The hero enters society*", which in order to apply to *High Plains Drifter* must describe the proper burial Duncan receives only after the villains are defeated.[28]

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[27] Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*, Basingstoke, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 2.
[28] Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001, p. 69.

Is Duncan indeed the protagonist of *High Plains Drifter*? The end sequence seems to disclose the truth about the Stranger's nature. Riding out of the smoldering ruins of Lago, he passes by the bodies of the freshly dead lying in their caskets and then shares a meaningful look with Sarah Belding, who is preparing to leave town. The Stranger then rides out to the cemetery, where he finds Mordecai carving a new tombstone. For the second time, Mordecai raises the question of the Stranger's name: "*I never did know your name*", he says. The Stranger answers, "*Yes, you do*." The camera tracks around to reveal the writing on the tombstone:

MARSHAL
JIM DUNCAN
REST
IN PEACE

It is briefly framed with the Stranger directly behind the stone, and the camera zooms closer until it dominates the screen. The natural sounds of the wind blowing are replaced by the eerie electronic drones of the film's opening. These grow louder as, in an inversion of the opening sequence, we see the Stranger ride off, not into the sunset, but into thin air, vanishing into the mythic landscape of the West. Finally paralleled and contrasted are the forms of closure for Duncan (embodied) and the Stranger (disembodied), within the two key environments of the Western, civilization and the wilderness.[29] Yet that very doubling complicates and muddies *High Plains Drifter*'s motion towards closure, as do its supernatural and Gothic affinities. Conspicuously, the film closes, with all the men directly responsible for Marshal Duncan's murder themselves dead, though the issue over which he was killed remains unresolved: the fact that the mine, Lago's principal source of income, lies on government land. Echoing Goddu's construction of the Gothic as a challenge to New World innocence, its closure without catharsis reminds us the issue of 'ownership' of the West is far from settled, and may never truly be settled so long as the national crimes on which the settlement of the West was founded remain unresolved.

[29] Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood,* London: British Film Institute, 2nd. ed., 2007.