

Signs and Motifs



It is possible to regard the western as a continuously shifting and developing ideogram of the American national psyche. A western is never the autonomous work of a single gifted individual (though the director may be – and usually is – the prime determinant of its particular quality). Its nature is determined by an intricate complex of crosscurrents, social and political as well as aesthetic, the more potent for being assimilated part-consciously. Rooted in American history and American myth, the western can also be a remarkably suggestive sociopolitical barometer of its contemporary climate. The Italian western has in recent years contributed its own complicating factors, and *High Plains Drifter*, Clint Eastwood's second film as director, has been seen primarily (and understandably) in terms of his obvious debt to Sergio Leone (of the 'Dollars' movies). Yet, for all the Leone influence (chiefly in the emphasis on brutality, ritual and grotesquerie), *High Plains Drifter* is very much an American movie.

It can be related iconographically to three fundamental western motifs, each of which I shall exemplify here by reference to a single film; in each case, the motif is brutally inverted or parodied in *High Plains Drifter*. Most obviously, there is the theme of the Hero – whether Marshal or freelance gunfighter – who defends the Town (civilization) against the Lawless. *High Plains Drifter* bears a particularly interesting relation to *High Noon*. The gunfighter-hero's mobilization of forces and defence of the town proves to be mere ironic concealment of his real intentions. Having armed and deployed the hopelessly ineffectual and pusillanimous citizens, who rely absolutely on his leadership; having had the entire town painted blood-red and changed its name on the signboard to 'Hell'; having had a formal picnic set out across the main street to 'welcome' the returning gunmen into the supposed ambush; he rides out of town as they ride in, awaiting at a distance the inevitable holocaust he has thus set up. It is as if the marshal of *High Noon* were revenging himself for the citizens' failure to support him.

The second motif is that of the mysterious Hero who rides in from the prairie to right wrongs: one thinks of *Shane*, and its eponymous hero on his white horse, archetype of purity, defender of hearth and home, of farm and family. *High Plains Drifter* begins and ends likewise, with Eastwood emerging from and disappearing back into the wilderness. In between, he deals with the western's twin emblems of civilized security, hotel and barn, by blowing up the former and systematically demolishing the latter

(with the help of Mexican labour; Indians also figure briefly as his beneficiaries); he also deals summarily with the western's opposed female archetypes, the Fallen and the Pure, Whore and Wife, by means of rape and seduction respectively. Finally, he burns down the town. His identity remains perhaps ambiguous, but he is either the reincarnation of the marshal the citizens earlier abandoned to his fate, or the Devil himself. The coming of total Apocalypse, of Hell on Earth, makes this the ultimate in Revenge westerns.

Third, there is the Town: newly established on the shore of a lake, in process of construction. The western has traditionally provided America with images of her own beginnings. One might here refer to Ford's *My Darling Clementine* with its dance on the unroofed church floor signifying communal togetherness, the skeletal wooden tower and American flag standing against the prairie in precarious but hopeful affirmation.

The changing image of primitive society in the western – America's image of her own roots – would need a study in itself, much of which would be devoted to the development of Ford's work, from the forward-looking idealism of *Drums Along the Mohawk* to the disillusionment and nostalgia of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Recently, the key film has been Altman's *McCabe and Mrs Miller*, where there is again an unfinished church but where the centre of the community is not the church but the whorehouse. *High Plains Drifter* discloses its town's establishment and growth as rooted in corruption and duplicity, and finally equates it with Hell. It seems peculiarly fitting that American civilization, having used the western to express its pride in its roots, its hope for its future, should now be using the same genre, in the Nixon era, to pronounce its own death-sentence and write its own epitaph.

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