

# ***The Aesthetic Representation of Justice in Eastwood's 'High Plains Drifter'***

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The paper argues that Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter* (1973) presents an evolution of an aesthetic representation of justice common to certain Westerns. That representation depicts justice as determined by a moral or natural law that prefigures and grounds the authority and legitimacy of the civil order. Furthermore, the law tends to be depicted as one that cannot be properly known or determined by political discourse or perhaps any communicative or discursive actions of persons. It rather depends on a moral sense or intuition that is as likely to be obscured as clarified by deliberation. In *High Plains Drifter*, the law is aesthetically represented as a divine law, and the paper argues that this representation is a product of conceptual features defining the representation of justice common to certain Westerns.<sup>1</sup>

## ***1. Introduction: The Representation of Justice in the Western***

Before turning to *High Plains Drifter* (Eastwood, 1973), and in order to outline a representation of justice common to certain Westerns, let us first consider a Western standing clearly in the background of *High Plains Drifter*, namely *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952). In *High Noon*, the town of Hadleyville proves itself unworthy of the law when it fails to back Will Kane (Gary Cooper) against the return of outlaw Frank Miller (Ian Mac-Donald), sworn to vengeance against the lawmen who put him away. Miller has been *pardoned*, which as the act of a political official indicates that the civil order is here under siege due to a *political* failure. Indeed, as I shall

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argue, Hadleyville's failure is depicted in *High Noon* as a failure of the political, even of the political as itself a kind of failure.

Hadleyville's failure is foretold in a scene in which Judge Mettrick (Otto Kruger), who sentenced Miller, delivers a hasty "lesson in civics" to Kane, the marshal who arrested Miller. During that lesson, the judge takes down the U.S. flag, packs up his scales of justice and law books, and explains to Kane that the civil order is by nature weak, and that people will accept tyranny and fall in line behind the powerful, no matter how unjust the powerful might be. That is why the judge is hurrying to get out of town, and he recommends that Kane do the same. The civil failure is crucially depicted some time later in a sort of impromptu town hall meeting in the church. There the townsfolk, while acknowledging their debt to Kane for having brought law and order to Hadleyville, blame "politicians up north" for pardoning Miller. Furthermore, they claim that the conflict between Kane and Miller is now a private matter, since Kane has recently resigned as marshal. In order not to discourage the investment of those same northerners, the townsfolk ultimately encourage Kane to *run*, so that the inevitable fight with the Miller gang might not occur on the streets of Hadleyville. It would give the town a bad name, after all, recalling the days before Kane came to make the town safe for "women and children." In sum, this political discussion is shown not merely to be ineffective, but to reinforce and even extend the town's hypocrisy and cowardice. The town, in other words, proves the judge's point.

Interestingly, it may well be the *words* themselves, the very political dialogue, which the picture regards as corrupting. More than once Kane is asked why he is compelled to stay and fight Miller. He is generally unable to explain why, and often he, or others speaking on his behalf, refer to his reasons as something that cannot be explained if not already understood. Kane's predecessor and patron, the old marshal Martin Howe (Lon Chaney, Jr.), tells Kane that he is not surprised the town won't stand behind him, since people "got to talk themselves into law and order," and that they don't really care about or value the law and the lawman. Since Kane's reasons are something that cannot be explained, we already know that no amount of talking is going to improve their situation. The upshot of all of this is that when Kane eventually vanquishes the Miller gang, he throws his tin star in the dirt and leaves town as the residents of Hadleyville flow

slowly back into the street. Despite being saved from the Miller gang, the town has shown itself to be unworthy of the law. Bad times are coming for Hadleyville, in the form either of more Frank Millers or the northern politicians who pardoned him, or both.

What is it that Hadleyville lacks, making it unworthy, illegitimate, and ultimately incapable of defending itself against Frank Miller? Howe suggests that it is lack of care or respect for the law. But that answer is ambiguous. The town, after all, is courting the developed political order to the north, an order already revealed to be complicit in the problem the town now faces. It is not concern for the positive law, much less political order, that is at the heart of what Hadleyville lacks—not merely laws on the books, or a judge, or even a marshal.

To get at what Hadleyville lacks, *High Noon* invites us to ask another question. What compels Kane to stay and fight? It is no longer his *professional* duty. It is also not the need to *protect* Hadleyville. It is made clear throughout the movie that some citizens of Hadleyville, notably the saloon owner, Gillis (Larry J. Blake), and the hotel clerk (Howland Chamberlain), actually think that their interests were better served when Frank Miller rode roughshod over the town. Things were livelier then, and business in the saloon and the hotel was likely better. Regulation, it seems, has always been bad for business. Certainly we sense that *something* is at stake for Hadleyville, but not the town's destruction. Whatever Miller threatens in the civil order cannot easily be accounted for in terms of safety, welfare, or private interests.

What compels Kane, I contend, is the fact that Miller has committed serious and violent wrongs, wrongs that strike at the dignity and status of persons as such, wrongs which must be opposed and negated. The reason Kane has trouble explaining this is that it cannot be easily or properly accounted for in terms of consequences to the interests of people, including even his own interests. The reasons of prudence do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that such wrongs must be opposed and negated. Rather, justice itself demands it.

This then is what Hadleyville lacks: clear insight into a demand of justice, a moral or natural law defining right and wrong, and especially the will or courage to execute that law. We may summarize this trait as *recti-*

*tude*.<sup>2</sup> In such a Western, the right kind of gunfighter represents this moral law, which prefigures, transcends, and grounds the legitimacy of the civil order. It transcends that order in the same sense in which it is a natural law. That is, its authority and perhaps even its actualization do not depend on the civil order, or on any legal or political system of institutions. On the contrary, the authority of these depends on it.<sup>3</sup> I will therefore sometimes refer to it as the law that stands behind the law.<sup>4</sup> Crucially, it is represented as a law that cannot be properly known or determined by political discourse or legislative action or perhaps any collective communicative or discursive actions of persons. This also suggests an epistemic sense in which the law is natural. Our knowledge of it, as in Kane's case, is a matter of clear moral sense or intuition, perhaps incommunicable to others. Deliberation regarding what the moral law is or ought to be, what amounts to a violation of that law, and what is required in its defense, has little place in this vision and is sometimes actively derided. At the very least, such deliberative practices are as like to obscure as to clarify the moral law.

With this representation of justice and the civil order in view, I turn now to Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter*. My main contention will be that that the representation of justice in *High Plains Drifter* is an evolution of the representation described above, one that follows from this depiction of the law that stands behind the law.

<sup>2</sup> The perpetually upright Gary Cooper was, after all, exceptionally well cast.

<sup>3</sup> This is one symbolic reason why the gunfighter is cast as an outsider even in Westerns that depict the civil order as somehow dependent upon him, as in *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), for instance. But even where the gunfighter is depicted as a more troubling, antisocial figure, I suggest that one will often find that he keeps this law, if only or primarily privately, as with Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962). The law is integral to him as an independent person.

<sup>4</sup> Hence I am ambivalent about André Bazin's claim that the Western emphasizes the need for law in the context of fragile human morality. For the positive law in many Westerns is also depicted as weak, and the civil order it establishes as not always justified or desirable. See Bazin, 1971, pp. 145-46. The question of how my observations relate to the Western genre is a complicated one. It may be that the traits I identify are common only to those Westerns Bazin calls "superwesterns" and Robert Warshow calls "aestheticized Westerns," *Shane* and *High Noon* being the favorite examples. See Warshow, 1954 and Bazin, 1971. For a broader account of the genre willing to embrace more of the elements I have suggested, see Durgnat and Simmon, 1980.

## **2. A Synopsis of 'High Plains Drifter'**

*High Plains Drifter* is set in Lago, a fictional mining town as isolated as it is odd and artificial. The buildings of Lago are new and clean, so much so that they appear un-lived in. There is no vegetation at all. Though the mine is the town's only source of wealth, the mine and its miners are nowhere to be seen. The town is static, its inhabitants pinned behind their doors and windows as the Stranger (played, of course, by Eastwood) rides into town, out of the cinematic haze of the heat and the hills.<sup>5</sup> The haze is significant. A great many Westerns open with landscape shots.<sup>6</sup> Jane Tompkins argues that among other things, they establish the preeminence of nature and the absence of culture and society in the Western.<sup>7</sup> But the haze in *High Plains Drifter* only gradually comes into focus as a landscape, as if to suggest that the earth is materializing before our eyes, and that whatever law this drifter represents comes from behind or beyond nature, out of something misty and strange. For the viewer the haze is disorienting, and this disorientation pervades the movie's uncanny, surreal atmosphere.

A marshal has been murdered in Lago, killed by assassins hired by the owners of the mine. He was bullwhipped to death on Lago's main and only street. Eventually we learn that the marshal, Duncan (Buddy Van Horn), had discovered that the mine was on government land, a fact that would invalidate its claim, drive the Lago Mining Company out of business, and presumably ruin the town. The marshal was murdered before he had a chance to reveal what he knew.

Lago's civil order is hopelessly corrupt. In the empty space of the frontier, the interests of the powerful mining company have come to dominate Lago, implicating the entire civil order in a deed whose bloodguilt hangs over the town. Early in the picture one of the mine owners, Dave Drake (Mitchell Ryan), "reminds" a fellow citizen that "the interests of the Lago Mining Company are identical with the interests of the town." Lago is filled with the wicked and the weak. In these opening shots the business of the town seems to have ground to a halt. There is no evident commerce. The mayor (Stefan Gierasch) is simpering, a figurehead and

<sup>5</sup> For a compelling synopsis and brief analysis, see Knapp, 1996, pp. 55-64.

<sup>6</sup> For a short list, see Tompkins, 1992, pp. 69-70.

<sup>7</sup> See Tompkins, 1992, pp. 69-87.

servant of the company; the sheriff (Walter Barnes) is fat and timid. The minister (Robert Donner) is a hypocrite; throughout the movie he talks loudly about duty and morality, but does nothing that costs him his own comfort. Eventually he is revealed as a profiteer willing to take advantage of the suffering of others. In short, the civil order of Lago is hollow. It has sacrificed its own legitimacy in its very attempt to hide its legal illegitimacy. It has subverted law, political representation, and even religious commitment in favor of the interests of the mining company, supposed to be identical with the interests of the town. Its inhabitants are depicted as ugly, sweaty, nervous people. With the possible exception of the mine owners, who are not weak but wicked, the people of Lago lack vivacity, dignity, and courage.

When the Stranger rides into town, Lago is waiting for revenge to rain down on it. The marshal's killers are soon to be released from jail. After the murder they were railroaded, framed for stealing a gold ingot from the mining company. Having recognized their power in a town in which power had expelled the law, the assassins had begun to take a little too much liberty. So the town, compounding its sins, got rid of them. But the people of Lago are sure Stacy Bridges (Geoffrey Lewis) and his partners, the Carlin brothers (Anthony James and Dan Vadis), will return for revenge, and so they have hired three gunfighters for protection. It is worth noting that Sheriff Shaw seems not even to be a candidate for protecting the town. He is an ineffective placeholder occupying an empty office, as though since killing the marshal the town has deprived itself of the law and its protection, and so must resort to hiring that work out to second-rate killers. Unfortunately for Lago, within minutes of his arrival the Stranger has killed all three gunfighters. The ease with which he kills them is remarkable. He is a virtuoso, a supernaturally gifted killer. When the gunfighters interrupt his drink, attempting to intimidate him by asking whether he thinks he's fast enough for life in Lago, he grabs a bottle of whisky before they can reach for their guns and replies, "A lot faster than you'll ever live to be." When they pursue him to the barbershop and threaten him again, interrupting his shave in the process, he shoots them all dead, after which he rapes Callie Travers (Mariana Hill), who has knocked the cigarillo out of his mouth and insulted him on the street.

A sign of both its desperation and its turpitude, the town turns to

the Stranger for help. The sheriff is recruited to convince him. He explains the situation and in the course of doing so reveals the story of the marshal's murder, without revealing the identity of the killers. "Now why would anyone want to do a thing like that?" asks the Stranger. The sheriff pleads ignorance, claiming that the killers weren't anyone from Lago anyway. "This is a good town," he says. "These are good people." "You like 'em?" the Stranger replies, "you save 'em." Though the Stranger is initially disinclined, he agrees to help after he has been assured a free hand in the town. Under the pretense of preparing Lago to defend itself against the Bridges gang, what unfolds is a perfect exposure and negation of Lago's corrupt civil order. Economic exchange is reversed, as the Stranger appropriates and redistributes goods according to his whim. He drives guests from their lodgings in the hotel, and when the preacher calls the dispossessed his brothers, the Stranger suggests that he take his "brothers" in, which the preacher does, at just the same rates the hotel was charging. He exposes the loveless marriage between the hotel owner, Lewis Belding (Ted Hartley), and his wife, Sarah (Verna Bloom), whom we learn in flashback was the only townsperson to attempt to intervene on Duncan's behalf, though her husband restrained her. The Stranger elevates Mordecai (Billy Curtis), town "runt," to the offices of both mayor and sheriff. The inversions and rearrangements make explicit the truth of Lago as they unleash the antagonism at the heart of the town.

In the course of this exposure, the Stranger dreams more than once of Duncan's murder, appears to dream of himself as Duncan murdered, in fact. After an attempt on his life, which he effortlessly escapes, he rides out to torment the Bridges gang, already close to town. Invisible in the hills, he fires down on them with uncanny accuracy, only to frighten them and stoke Stacy Bridges' vengeful fury. When the time comes, the Stranger, having painted the town red in preparation for a "welcome home" celebration, abandons Lago to its destruction by the Bridges gang. That evening, as the gang's revenge is near to climax, the Stranger returns unseen and kills the assassins one by one. Retribution comes to them as the ghost of their own deed, in the very place they had bullwhipped the marshal to death.

### **3. The Representation of Justice in 'High Plains Drifter'**

The order of justice in *High Plains Drifter* is distinctively retributive. It is a matter of answering for a crime, of getting precisely what is deserved. Consider, for example, the reversals and exposures that unfold once the Stranger is placed in charge. The greed that led to the town's corruption is turned on its head. Economic exchange is reversed, as the Stranger appropriates and redistributes goods according to his whim. These reversals occur while the Stranger ironically attempts to teach the town the courage it needs to defend itself. Hence, in the process of teaching Lago the importance of courage, the Stranger exposes the corruption that flowed from the town's lack of moral courage when it acquiesced to Duncan's murder. That lesson is fully learned when Mordecai (Billy Curtis), the town "runt" who had cowered beneath a porch during Duncan's murder, kills Belding as Belding aims to shoot the Stranger in the back. It is the final killing in the movie, marking Mordecai's moral elevation and ensuring Sarah's liberation.

At the heart of these reversals is punishment for Duncan's murder, and the punishment is startlingly precise. The wicked are killed; the weak are terrified. Those who bullwhipped the marshal are whipped in turn. The mayor (Stefan Gierasch) and the sheriff, who abdicated their duty to the law, are stripped of even the trappings of their false authority, replaced in their offices by Mordecai. Callie Travers, who used her sexuality to curry favor with powerful men, is raped. It would be no overstatement to say that in the universe of *High Plains Drifter* desert is the only engine that drives the narrative.

The Stranger avenges Duncan's murder, but he also forces Lago to acknowledge its guilt, which is essential to the retribution. This is clearest at the movie's climax, when the townsfolk fearfully realize that the assassins are being killed by bullwhip at the site of the marshal's murder. It is telling that nearly everything the people of Lago say about themselves and their town is false. Indeed, the movie's first piece of dialogue seems designed to tell the viewer just this. The lead thug, or at least the most talkative one, tells the Stranger that most people find life in Lago a little too fast for them. But we have just seen the Stranger ride through a town that is motionless. What follows is a series of lies in which Lago attempts to hide

its true identity. Of course, all of the lies flow from the town's attempt to cover up its crime, a crime motivated by the need to keep the marshal from revealing the truth about the mining company's claim, and so also about the founding and the legitimacy of the town itself.<sup>8</sup>

Sarah and Mordecai are the only townspeople who speak sincerely to the Stranger. Reflecting upon the threat the Stranger poses to the town, Sarah says: "You are a man that makes people afraid, and that makes you dangerous." The Stranger replies: "It's what people know about themselves inside that makes them afraid." He is out to expose what they know inside and force them to acknowledge the truth about Lago. But everywhere in the civil order he would turn to discover the truth, he finds only lies. Instead, the truth about the whipping of the marshal is revealed in his dreams. The dream sequences recall the disorienting affect of the haze at the beginning of the movie. At first the viewer cannot discern what is going on, who is being whipped or why. But gradually the disorientation fades and the truth about Lago is revealed to us, even as the citizens of Lago try to obscure it, thereby revealing all the more about themselves.<sup>9</sup> The Stranger need not bother with ordinary methods of discovery, and the viewer has access to what he knows via his dreams, which are perhaps revelations to him, but seem more likely to be tormenting reminders of something he already knows. And given the precision with which he metes out punishment, he seems to know it perfectly. The use of dreams makes the Stranger a kind of seer of hidden truths, and we are privy to his vision. They tell us, among other things, that knowing the relevant truth here, namely the guilt of the town, will not require investigation or argument. In short, no trial or deliberation will be necessary for justice to be done to

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<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of Westerns as meditations on our myths of "founding" the American west, rather than as themselves mythologizing that west, see Pippin, 2010. While Pippin does not discuss *High Plains Drifter*, this aspect of the movie and the way in which Lago has denied itself legal standing with a series of false "claims," fits reasonably well with Pippin's account. However, *High Plains Drifter* seems much less interested in the necessity and the fate of mythologizing the founding. It is rather a narrative about exposing (and rectifying) a particular falsification.

<sup>9</sup> The Stranger's dreams in fact fuse with one other flashback of the event: Mordecai's traumatized recollection of it from his own perspective, on the ground like the dying marshal, hiding beneath a porch. That recollection ties Mordecai to Duncan and the Stranger all the more decisively.

Lago.

The Stranger materializes out of the heat and descends from the mountains, killing and raping with ease. He paints Lago red, renames it "Hell," and burns it clean in a ritualized acknowledgement of and atonement for its crime. He punishes all transgressors. He liberates Sarah and elevates Mordecai, the only two citizens who seem to have acknowledged and felt genuine remorse for Lago's crime. Above all he avenges the murder of the marshal. When he leaves the town, though it has been decimated, the remaining inhabitants can breathe and even smile at last, their bloodguilt having been lifted, their civil order cleansed.<sup>10</sup> He leaves Lago in the direction from which he came, through the cemetery. He was not passing through; Lago was his destination, his goal.<sup>11</sup> Having done what he came to do, the Stranger returns into the haze of the hills, into whatever it is that stands behind nature, on the other side of the cemetery.

As the Stranger leaves town he passes Mordecai carving Duncan's name into a grave marker. Duncan has been acknowledged, and this is a sign that the civil order has returned to legitimacy, each individual having received his due and recognition. Mordecai looks up at the Stranger and remarks that he still doesn't know his name. The Stranger contradicts him. "Yes, you do," he says. The final scene invites speculation about the identity of the Stranger.<sup>12</sup> One possibility is that the Stranger's name is Duncan, the dead marshal's brother.<sup>13</sup> Or perhaps the Stranger is the ghost of Duncan himself, who like the ghost of Banquo has returned to avenge his own murder.<sup>14</sup> But the Stranger's enigmatic claim that Mordecai knows his name also suggests that the name of the Stranger has been announced sometime before, or is eternally known. Death is his name. He rides a pale horse. Hell follows him. The first man he shoots, he shoots in the forehead, the crimson hole gaping as if to indicate that he did not have the seal of God

<sup>10</sup> In this I disagree with Drucilla Cornell, for whom the movie implies no serious moral repair, but instead depicts the trauma survivor's reproduction of evil. See Cornell, 2009, pp. 10-18.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Rayna Patton for alerting me to that anagram.

<sup>12</sup> Speculation I take to be in marked contrast to the anonymity of No Name, the Eastwood *persona* of the Leone pictures.

<sup>13</sup> Eastwood himself, fantastically, in my view, apparently has favored this interpretation. See Knapp, 1996, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> Buddy Van Horn, who plays Duncan, was Eastwood's stunt double.

on him.<sup>15</sup> And though he kills the Bridges gang for their murder of Duncan, he also uses them as instruments of Lago's destruction. Those three, Bridges and the Carlin brothers, are the other riders of this apocalypse.<sup>16</sup> Hence the Stranger is an agent of God's punishment. It is important that he remain nameless, though we are told that we know his name. This fact keeps him as close as possible to God the unnamable, to a strange and remote God. It keeps him from being one among the named inhabitants of the civil order.

His strangeness and his precision are further keys to understanding the relation between the civil and the moral orders depicted in the movie. I spoke above of the moral law of some Westerns as transcendent in the sense of having authority independent of civil institutions. But here that transcendence appears to involve an authority beyond even nature itself. It is supernatural in contrast to the worldliness of the civil, and outstrips even the power of nature. It enjoys absolute authority over the civil order. It is supreme. When the civil order strays, its transgressions trigger retribution from beyond. This civil order of Lago cannot keep its own justice. To be righted and provided with at least the possibility of legitimacy, Lago needs an emissary, an executioner of the law beyond. *High Plains Drifter* represents that law as not only absolutely authoritative, but also as perfectly, metaphysically precise. The Stranger's retribution is without error and in perfect keeping with the nature of Lago's various crimes. He turns Lago inside out, cleanses it, while he and his law are utterly independent of it. The purity of his authority requires such transcendence. Far more radically than the gunfighter riding into the sunset, the Stranger rides out of materiality, out of corporeality, and into another world, into the domain of a perfectly just, and, for all we know merciless God.

#### **4. *The Evolution of the Western's Representation of Justice in 'High Plains Drifter'***

*High Plains Drifter* therefore depicts the law that stands behind the law as divine law. This is the law that gives Marshal Kane's tin star meaning. It

<sup>15</sup> See *Revelation*, 7:3 and 9:4.

<sup>16</sup> See Knapp, 1996, p. 61.

is the law that *Warlock* (Dmytryk, 1959) distinguishes from two deficient kinds of law: the law identified with the peace and order brought by the powerful man, the law the town of Warlock *buys* when it hires Marshal Clay Blaisedell (Henry Fonda), and the positive law associated with the distant political order, the law advocated for in *Warlock* by the disabled and often drunk Judge Holloway (Wallace Ford). In addition to providing a fabulously satisfying mythical template for the telling of a classic revenge story, I contend that the representation of such law as divine in *High Plains Drifter* can also be understood as a kind of self-consciousness about the law that stands behind the law in those other Westerns. As a result, it also represents an evolution of the moral vision of such Westerns.

I argued above, via *High Noon*, that some Westerns not only depict the civil order as vulnerable, they also tend to regard with suspicion if not outright cynicism the political and legislative aspirations of that order. Law books and political association are regarded as at best irrelevant to the matter at hand, and at worst corrupting, especially emasculating ventures.<sup>17</sup> The people of Hadleyville or Warlock may long for law and order, but the Westerns themselves are wary of the moral value as well as the efficacy of securing law and order through political association and legislative action. To avoid disintegration, the civil order seems poised between two normatively undesirable options: order imposed by the powerful or order secured through political association. I maintained that one resolution of this dilemma is to appeal to a moral or natural law grounding the legitimacy of the civil order. It is the first law that the civil order must keep. But in the context of the Western, to call this law a *natural* law is problematic. For the nature commonly presented in the Western is a nature shorn of moral sentiment,<sup>18</sup> a nature reflected in the attitude of Abe McQuown (Tom Drake), leader of a gang of cowboys, who declares that he terrorizes Warlock and runs off its lawmen to remind the people that he was there first, and that he will call the shots as long as he wants to. In the face of that kind of nature, the only natural law to which to appeal is the law of a stronger man, exactly the law Warlock buys when it hires

<sup>17</sup> John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) is a brilliant meditation on the attractions and deficiencies of positive law and political association. See also Pippin, 2010, pp. 61-101.

<sup>18</sup> See Tompkins, 1992, pp. 72-73.

Marshal Blaisedell. What the natural law provides is therefore something more like a Hobbesian sovereign than the law that stands behind the law in *High Noon*. In the Western, the moral law cannot be rooted in nature.

The Western's doubts about our capacity to make our own law, as well as about rooting the moral law in nature, come to explicit aesthetic representation in *High Plains Drifter's* depiction of the moral law as divine, as beyond our civil institutions *and* beyond nature. This logic is reflected in Eastwood's own Western *persona*, notably the one that made him famous: No Name of the Leone pictures. No Name is surely a drifter, but he is hardly a representative of the moral law, even in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, where he ironically stands for the good. He is the gunfighter as anti-hero; his independence is worldly independence, not an independence associated with moral authority. On the contrary, his independence is a function of moral disorder, the disorder that flows from the deficiencies of the forms of law discussed above. The biblical proportions of *High Plains Drifter* indicate that Eastwood could not reclaim No Name from amorality simply by returning to the lost innocence of moral intuition and the courage of the good man.<sup>19</sup> If the attitude toward nature and society grows too cynical, the moral authority that might establish the latter's legitimacy (or redeem the former) requires that the moral law be increasingly remote, absolutely authoritative, and perfectly precise. It also requires that its agent be something more than the decent man. This turns the gunfighter into the Stranger, executioner of a divine law whose authority is strange and terrible.

*High Plains Drifter's* self-consciousness is already implicit in the peculiar nature of Lago's misdeed. The marshal discovered that the mine was on government land. The very order about which the Western is typically so cautious, sometimes to the point of cynicism, here is the linchpin of the wrongdoing. In killing the marshal, Lago deprived itself of law in many ways. Not only does the town eliminate the law's enforcer, but also the connection to the state as a whole; political authority is being evaded. It

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<sup>19</sup> A number of critics have seen in the Stranger such a project of reclamation. See Guérif, 1984, pp. 95-96. See also Smith, 1993, pp. 37-42. Smith follows Guérif, and reads Eastwood's Westerns generally as attempting to restore the form after the subversion he helped Leone execute against it. And see Knapp, 1996, p. 58, who especially emphasizes the supernatural dimensions of the reclamation.

is not clear that the nullification of the company's claim would have been fair, so I don't mean to suggest that the movie encourages us to adopt the federal perspective. But the fact remains that the core of Lago's corruption, its violation of the moral law, involves its repudiation of the legitimacy of the government's claim to the land. This fact, in turn, erodes any legitimacy the civil order of Lago might have generated out of its own political and legal institutions. Lago's own act of cynicism toward political and legal authority (the fact that the mine is on government land is at one point referred to as a "mere technicality, really") serves to isolate it in its corruption. Lago exposes itself to transcendent retribution by severing its ties to worldly accountability.

*High Plains Drifter* therefore reclaims the idea of a law standing behind the law, but does so as if aware that the civil order, or a common attitude in Westerns toward that order, has created out of itself the need for transcendent retribution. When the normative authority of the civil order breaks down, when we doubt our own normative resources, justice itself must be depicted as transcending our civil order, as an ideal toward which we strive or from which we have fallen. To think the relation between the civil order and justice then requires a world beyond the civil (and, in the Western, beyond nature), from which the moral law may descend and into which it may return.<sup>20</sup>

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