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## Now That was a Nice Hanging: The Hateful Eight as Parable?

### Abstract

The opening of Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* conjoins the iconic landscape of the Western, Christianity's chief symbol the crucifix, and Tarantino's oeuvre. The film gives the crucifix so much screen time that one wonders what its significance might be. That the film climaxes with the lynching of Daisy Domergue renders the crucifix teasingly parabolic. The opening-closing frame parallels the two hangings, as do the various eulogies associated with the lynching. That Daisy's lynching takes place at the hands of the film's two surviving characters—who, like the horses that lead the stagecoach team delivering Daisy to her fate, are black and white—seems to suggest that this crucifix raises some questions about U.S. racial violence. The crucifix is certainly atypical for cinema in that it does not hallow or bring triumph. Instead, this dangling crucifix (or aesthetics and ethics arising from it and the Western) may contribute to, rather than ameliorate, U.S. racial violence. At least, the deadliness of violent aesthetics is underlined by the combination in the film's lynching finale with the revelation of the fictional status of the hope for racial harmony in the film's Lincoln Letter, a haunting anti-War song, and the death or near-death of the film's last two actors.

### Keywords

Tarantino, myth, parable, violence, crucifix, Jesus films

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### Author Notes

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*The Hateful Eight* (2015) is in many respects a typical Quentin Tarantino film. It bears the trademarks of his oeuvre, which is known for its outlandish, comic-book levels of violence and for such copious popular culture references (music, film, and TV) that some describe his cinematic style as “pastiche.”<sup>1</sup> Tarantino films are particularly replete with references to earlier films, and, like his previous film, *Django Unchained* (2012), *The Hateful Eight* is especially indebted to Spaghetti Westerns.

One element in *The Hateful Eight*, however, surprises: the curious use of the crucifix (and other Christian imagery). This article explores possible reasons for the crucifix’s prominence in this film, as well as considering uses of the crucifix/cross in cinema more broadly, before suggesting that this crucifix and *The Hateful Eight* might be parabolic—or, at least, be capable of being read parabolically—vis-à-vis the interrelationships of the violence of the Christian crucifix, the (Spaghetti) Western, and U.S. race history.

### *A Crucifix, By Way of Introduction*

Like other Quentin Tarantino films, *The Hateful Eight* (2015) is divided into titled sections. A prologue precedes the first such chapter. As is typical in a Western, this introduction offers an extended shot of a foreboding, overwhelming landscape—a hard, vast, inhuman world. Despite a passing shot of a wooden fence, it is a world that only heroes and outlaws might dare to inhabit.<sup>2</sup> After a title identifies the film as Tarantino’s eighth (hence its name), the establishing landscape shot continues, now with a closeup of a road marker or shrine, a wooden crucifix, partly obscured by snow. The camera stays with the crucifix as the opening credits continue, showing first the head

and outstretched arms, then withdrawing so the viewer can also see emaciated ribs. On the distant horizon, one can see a small black object. The camera continues pulling back from the crucifix, which temporarily obscures the object. As the camera pulls back for a full shot of the crucifix, it also brings the black object gradually into view as an approaching stagecoach.<sup>3</sup> The stagecoach passes behind and to the (viewer's) right of the crucifix, but the camera stays on a full shot of the crucifix until fading to black (and then the chapter 1 title). The landscape, on screen for about a minute before the opening titles, and the crucifix, on screen for over two and a half minutes, are more important than this passing stage.

In its first few minutes, the film has presented the iconic Western shot—the foreboding landscape (dwarfing a stagecoach, instead of a lone rider, on the horizon)—and the Christian icon—the crucifix. The title stands between these two icons, connecting them both with Tarantino's cinematic oeuvre. Initially, the three seem simply “thrown alongside.”<sup>4</sup>

The meaning of the crucifix, if it has any real significance, in this juxtaposition is not immediately clear. The crucifix may simply be part of the *mise-en-scène*. Road-side crosses/crucifixes are hardly rare, and one might imagine a road-side crucifix in post-Civil War Wyoming, the setting of *The Hateful Eight*. Roman Catholic missions were more prevalent in Wyoming from 1840 until 1871 than those of Protestants, which might have erected a cross, rather than a crucifix. Political arrangements benefited the Protestants after 1871, but even in the 1890s, more Christians in Wyoming identified themselves as Roman Catholic than Protestant.<sup>5</sup> The crucifix, then, is not necessarily out of time or place.

Tarantino's tendency to pastiche, however, suggests the possibility that the crucifix is a deliberate reference to previous films or genres, and perhaps an homage specifically to the Spaghetti Westerns. Tarantino has often said that Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*

(1967) is his favorite film, and there are various indications of Sergio Leone's influence on Tarantino's films. Some reviewers described Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, as a Spaghetti or Leone Western. That film's title and theme music, however, indicate closer connections to Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966). Tarantino was also working on a book on Corbucci, whom many see as Leone's main competitor for the rank of chief director of Spaghetti Westerns, before he produced what he called his "Southern," *Django Unchained*.

The Spaghetti Westerns are replete with Christian, usually Roman Catholic, religious imagery and motifs. The imagery is often broken, profane, or desacralized. In Leone's *Dollars* Trilogy, for example, "broken statues, disused and ramshackle crosses often marking death, crumbling churches, churches as bandit hideouts, and ominous church bells"<sup>6</sup>—are de rigueur. The films depict worlds in which God is absent or perhaps even dead where vicious, entrepreneurial bounty hunters ply their trades. Twisting Christian imagery, these characters are "murdering angels, resurrected killers, and trickster Judases."<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, given Corbucci's previous influence on *Django Unchained*, an important precursor to *The Hateful Eight*'s prominent crucifix might be an early scene in Corbucci's *Django*.<sup>8</sup> In that ultra-violent film, the title character—a drifter, wearing a Union uniform and dragging a coffin—comes across Mexican bandits whipping the half-breed prostitute Maria. The racist men of Major Jackson, an ex-Confederate officer, arrive and kill the bandits, and prepare to crucify the half-breed Maria, as a traitor to their race, on a burning cross. Django saves Maria, killing these men and embroiling himself in the ongoing conflict between the Mexican revolutionaries and the (former) Confederate renegades.

*Django*'s racist Confederates, many of whom wear red hoods, and the film's initial, fiery cross suggest the KKK (and are usually referred to as such by reviewers), although fiery crosses

became prominent in the KKK only in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Few viewers will likely see *Django*'s cross as sophisticated theology. Instead, the imagery bespeaks a profane, post-Christian world, like that of the *Dollars* Trilogy. The only thing remaining intact from Christianity is an aesthetics of violence. In fact, *Django*'s fiery cross replaces Christian theology with something more like the ideology of a Roman imperial cross.<sup>10</sup> *Django*'s cross is an instrument of torture, of execution. It dispatches the undesirable, the other. It humiliates its victim as it exalts the executioners. This cross is sadistic.

While such crosses appear in Spaghetti Westerns, as well as in other places,<sup>11</sup> *Django*'s cross is cinematically atypical. Normally, the cinematic cross/crucifix is shorthand for Jesus or for Christianity more generally.<sup>12</sup> It is, after all, Christianity's chief sign. The cinematic cross is also a sign of innocent suffering, noble sacrifice, and victory, despite all evidence to the contrary. Even when the crucified is not Jesus, the typical cinematic cross is Johannine—the gospel that presents Jesus' passion as his glorification (John 12:23-36) and as his action, as he determines when it begins (12:23) and ends (19:30)—or perhaps the cinematic cross is Eusebian—*in hoc signe vinces* (“in this sign you will conquer”: see his *Life of Constantine* 1.28). While no character may know the victim's death is victorious (although at least one usually does), the audience is fully aware of the death-defying victory because they applaud the sterling character of the one who dies “rightly” for a just cause and exalt him/her (resurrecting his/her memory). In fact, the audience may even see the noble death as foundational for—leading through the inexorable march of history to—their cultural situation and know by dint of their own cultural location that the heroic death eventually overwhelms all opposition.<sup>13</sup> The cinematic cross, then, typically has a magical or supernatural power. It is a talisman—as anyone who has ever watched a vampire movie knows.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike its initial fiery cross, *Django*'s final, tombstone marker is such a cinematic cross. In the film's finale, Django, whose hands have been crushed by a revolutionary, meets Jackson and his men in Tombstone Cemetery. Django has propped himself up behind his former lover's cross-shaped grave marker, whose death he has long wished to avenge. Jackson and his men do not think Django can shoot because of his injuries, so Jackson toys with him, shooting the cross repeatedly. Eventually, however, Django presses the trigger of his gun against the cross, killing Jackson and his men. His revenge accomplished, he leaves his gun dangling on the cross as he walks away. This cross—with a little help from the six-gun—is powerful and victorious. It is also vengeful.<sup>15</sup>

Gibson's *The Passion of the Cross* (2004) is similar and may represent the apogee of the typical cinematic cross—particularly when, at the cross, an apocalyptic teardrop falls to earth unleashing an earthquake that “deals” with Jesus' opponents; and in its garden scene which prefigures that apocalypse, when Jesus rises from prayer to stomp the Satanic snake's head. But the cross's triumphant symbolism is so common that the very appearance of a cloudy, heavenly cross at the end of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) completely rewrites that film's story (and its view of history as but a series of episodes) in which the innocent suffer at the hands of the intolerant. The heavenly cross ends that oppressive story, as it descends to open prisons and end war. The cross triumphs.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in the more recent *Son of Man* (2006), Jesus' followers protest an oppressive regime and Jesus' death at the hands of ruffians trying to consolidate their own political power by crucifying Jesus' corpse on a hill above Khayelitsha. The cross uncovers Jesus' surreptitious murder (a “disappearance”) and, thus, is Jesus and his community's public triumph. Although a dream-like resurrection appearance follows, this cross effectively resurrects Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

Where, then, does *The Hateful Eight*'s crucifix stand in this cinematic history? Is it atypical or typical of the cinematic cross? In this homage to the Spaghetti Western, the crucifix might simply be a matter of generic conventions. Given those conventions, it might also be a sign of God's absence or death. Extending those notions, it might be little more than a thoughtless parody of the sacrifice that founds Christianity. Or, the film's opening signpost might be something more like the heavenly cross that ends *Intolerance*. If it does not represent the victim's triumph—and, admittedly, even *Intolerance*'s final heavenly cross faces heavy going to offset and overturn the impression of the lengthy film preceding it—this crucifix might serve to hallow *The Hateful Eight*, Tarantino's entire body of work, and/or cinema as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Or, it might point in yet another direction. It might raise questions about the aesthetic and ethic of (righteous, just) violence embedded in Christianity's premiere icon and in the (Spaghetti) Western genre. In short, this crucifix might be parable—or might be read as such, as it is in this article—instead of mere pastiche/parody. At the very least, it is placed curiously “alongside”—if one recalls the meaning of the Greek preposition *para*, still visible in the prefixes of both *parody* and *parable*—Tarantino's violent film(s) and the Western genre.

### *The Crucifix Redux*

The importance of the film's opening crucifix becomes clearer in two subsequent scenes. The first is the flashback chapter, which shows another stagecoach, driving past the crucifix and arriving at Minnie's Haberdashery before the stagecoach seen in the prologue. While a much briefer scene,<sup>19</sup> it echoes the prologue. Significantly, that flashback interrupts the frenzy of violence that brings *The Hateful Eight* to its climax.



The second connecting scene is more complex. It is the lynching of Daisy Domergue, a climax that forms a bookend for the prologue's crucifix. This lynching is a different, more troubling version of the vengeful "cross shoot-out" that ends *Django*. The story betwixt the initial and final hanging is about a post-Civil War bounty hunter, John Ruth (Kurt Russell), who takes his bounty, Daisy Domergue (Jennifer Jason Leigh), by stagecoach to Red Rock for hanging. Known as the Hangman, Ruth always delivers his captives alive, even at great personal risk, so that he can watch them hang. For Ruth, everyone may not need to be hanged, but "mean bastards" certainly do. En route to Red Rock, Ruth's stagecoach (the one seen in the film's prologue) stops twice to pick up another bounty hunter, Major Marquis Warren (Samuel L. Jackson), and Chris Mannix (Walter Coggins), who claims to be the new sheriff of Red Rock. The four passengers ultimately stop at Minnie's Haberdashery to ride out a blizzard.

While Minnie and her husband are not there, the station is full of people, many of whom have just arrived in the other stagecoach (seen later in the flashback chapter). Most of these people are part of Daisy's gang, as the flashback indicates, and have come to rescue her. General Smithers, still dressed in his Confederate cloak, is another matter. He is at the center of tensions that lead to a division of the cabin's occupants into Northern (including Ruth, Warren, and the unwilling, captive Daisy) and Southern sides (including Mannix, Smithers, and others). Warren eventually baits Smithers into drawing on him by confessing that he killed and sexually abused Smithers's son. Thereafter, Mannix dons Smithers's Confederate cloak. When the murderous plot to save Daisy begins shortly thereafter, everyone except Daisy, Warren, and Mannix is killed—in trademark Tarantino violence. Those three are injured; Warren being shot, as one character says, "in the huevos."<sup>20</sup>

Despite their racist attitudes, Warren and Mannix join forces to survive, and Mannix ultimately saves Warren's life by shooting Daisy. In most of this scene, Mannix and Warren lie in bed together and both wear black vests and pants, with white shirts that nicely set off their copious bleeding.<sup>21</sup> Daisy herself is bathed in so much blood that her face is almost unrecognizable.<sup>22</sup>

After Mannix saves his life, Warren admits that he may have misjudged Mannix, and they decide to hang Daisy in Ruth's honor and to avenge his murder by her. The two men struggle manfully to hang Daisy from the rafters.<sup>23</sup> Tarantino offers numerous shots of her pained, bloody face and of the hangmen throughout, as well as the gleeful laughter of Warren and Mannix when they finally succeed. Warren caps the scene, and the film, by saying, "Now that was a nice hanging." Mannix agrees, and they both collapse onto the same bed again.

### *Parody or Parable?*

Warren's eulogy turns the lynching into an official state execution (a hanging).<sup>24</sup> The "nice" is even more transformative. It is uncomfortably close to the "good" Christians apply to the Friday of Jesus' crucifixion and to the Christian idea that the cross is salvific.<sup>25</sup> This eulogy suggests Daisy's lynching reprises the film's opening crucifix—as *Django*'s cross finale reprises its opening, fiery cross. Significantly, as Daisy hangs, snowshoes on the wall behind her flair out like angel wings. If these visuals do not turn *The Hateful Eight* into a gospel (or passion narrative), they do call attention, whatever differences there might also be, to the aesthetics (and ethics) of violence shared by this film, Tarantino's oeuvre, the (Spaghetti) Western, and the Christian crucifix/cross. Notably, Mannix responds to Warren's eulogy and to the Daisy framed by angel-wing snowshoes by saying, "That sure was pretty."

This framing and the eulogy may render the Christian crucifix another lynching. If so, they may raise questions about the interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion as salvific.<sup>26</sup> Or, they may hallow the lynchings (and lynchers) in U.S. race history. Or, they may hallow the victims of such a history, like Daisy.<sup>27</sup> In any of these cases, the juxtaposition of the crucifix with Daisy's lynching—and with the ultra-violence of the Spaghetti Westerns and Tarantino films—resembles a parody of the gospel, in parody's traditional sense. Classical parodies imitated the style of the heroic ode, but with non-heroic subjects in order to mock the heroic. If it is such a parody, *The Hateful Eight* demeans the opening crucifix. But, of course, any cruciform Christ figure diminishes Jesus' crucifix similarly, although far more subtly.<sup>28</sup>

But, is *The Hateful Eight*'s crucifix truly mockery? The film does not mock the Spaghetti Western. It is an homage, a pastiche. It treats that genre with some respect (as Christ figures typically treat Jesus Christ). Perhaps, then, the film does not mock the “Christian” crucifix either. Perhaps, the film's crucifix and its juxtapositions are a more modern form of parody, a way of innovating in the face of dominant genres or texts—like the gospels and the Western.<sup>29</sup> The resulting innovations (parodies) are intertextualities.<sup>30</sup> Such works make sense only in the context of (all other) literature, culture, or language itself, and, thus, they may have various tones and relationships to the dominant texts of specific cultures.

With respect to texts' relationships to their larger cultures, J. Dominic Crossan makes a helpful heuristic distinction between myth and parable: 1) myths are texts/images that support a culture's structure, hierarchy, and worldview; and 2) parables are those that critique culture or part of culture or some cultural program/issue from within the culture.<sup>31</sup> As Crossan has observed repeatedly, one can hardly do without myth. Nonetheless, given the power of cultural myths to masquerade as the natural or the true, rather than the historically created constructs they are, given

the overwhelming institutional support for myths, and given the fact that any culture privileges some groups over others—something like parable/fantasy is also salutary.<sup>32</sup> Even atheist Marxist philosophers look for “transcendence” (of global capitalism, if not something supernatural) these days.

The gospels and the Western are—or, at least, once were—U.S. myths. At least, some of the Spaghetti Westerns were parabolic of or anti-mythic challenges to the classic U.S. Western.<sup>33</sup> Where does *The Hateful Eight* stand here? It may be simply the exploitive, escapist entertainment of consumer capitalism. If so, it likely supports U.S. myth(s) unthinkingly. It may, however, raise serious questions about contemporary U.S. culture—precisely, but not wholly, through its homage to the Spaghetti Westerns and its use of the crucifix. Thereby, it may be suggesting that U.S. cultural roots in the Christian tradition and in the Western, which both share an aesthetics of violence, are part of what makes lynching (of undesirables) possible.<sup>34</sup> After all, if (a) death is good/beautiful/salvific, how does one stop the violence in the name of that aesthetic sign?

Tarantino’s comments about this film indicate that such possibilities were not far from his own mind. In fact, he claims *The Hateful Eight* comments upon the violent racial history of the U.S. Before the film was released, Tarantino also made a public stand supporting the Black Lives Matter movement that led to some police forces boycotting the film.

Like most Tarantino films, almost every character uses racist language (both about African Americans and Hispanics). Warren and Mannix address each other with one slur after another, and both black and white characters opine, at one point or another, that each of their race’s security depends on the deadly “control” of the other.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, however, Warren and Mannix work together to lynch Daisy. In fact, the prologue already suggests this outcome. As the stagecoach travels past the crucifix, a black and white horse are yoked together at the front of the team. Slightly

later, Tarantino returns to this yoking with a slow-motion shot of the two horses struggling together through the snow. Correspondingly, at the end, Warren and Mannix struggle together to lynch Daisy. Black and white make their violent bed together with “a nice hanging.” The only thing here holding black and white together is a shared history of violence and revenge. In fact, this history may be Warren and Mannix’s death bed. They have bled copiously. If they are dying as the film ends, their joint deaths would nicely visualize the ultimate end of race violence and revenge.

Read so, the film surpasses both Griffith and Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* films. Griffith imagines the just, white violence necessary to put down a black uprising oppressing whites. Parker imagines Turner’s revolt as the just, black violence necessary to respond to an oppressive white society. Instead, Tarantino imagines black and white yoked together in senseless, meaningless violence. It also seems to suggest, with its Western landscape and dangling crucifix, that those significant cultural icons may contribute to this history.

Perhaps, however, this end is no more thoughtful or parabolic than films like *Grand Canyon* (1991) and *Remember the Titans* (2000), which address U.S. racial problems by telling stories of the development of one interracial friendship (at a time). The Lincoln Letter, read twice in the film and, most importantly, in the epilogue after the hanging, speaks differently. In that epilogue, Mannix reads the letter that he knows Warren himself created “to disarm white folk” with feeling and admiration. The reading is made even more poignant by the fact that Mannix, earlier in the film, denied that a “n...” could have such a letter. While the letter has Lincoln praise Warren’s service to the nation and claim that they will arrive at the goal only if they work hand in hand, the letter’s acknowledged fictional status undercuts any sense that the U.S. has arrived at racial harmony (arriving one friendship at a time).<sup>36</sup> The preceding visuals of Daisy’s lynching suggest that the only racial harmony is shared violence. The background music as the film ends,

the anti-war song, “There Won’t Be Many Coming Home,” further underlines the absence of peace and harmony. In fact, the disjoint between Warren and Mannix’s glee in lynching Daisy and their own violent end, as well as the juxtaposition of the fiction of racial harmony in the Lincoln letter with the visuals of Daisy’s lynching and the tragic realities of the Orbison song, leaves questions, not answers.

*Conclusion: An Aesthetics (and Ethics) of Violence?*

Any parable may lie in the film’s (ironic?) crude aestheticizing of violence. “Now that was a nice hanging” jars—even before one realizes that it is pinned narratively and visually to the crucifix.<sup>37</sup> The film’s comic book level of violence (and that of Tarantino’s oeuvre) sits there parabolically, festering within U.S., cinematic, and Christian mythologies. Incarnating itself in meaningless violence, the film focuses on violence’s material effects, not on any spiritual or ethical interpretation or justification of the violence.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps, this violence does to lynchings, including the crucifix, exactly what Gibson said he wanted to do with the gruesome, gory violence of *The Passion of the Christ*: to make the audience forget pretty crucifixes on the wall. If so, what the film “means,” differs from what the last characters standing say about such deaths: “nice,” “pretty.” Gibson, of course, used violence to justify his film’s revenge finale and his hero’s triumph. *Django* works similarly with its mangled hero combining cross and six-gun to destroy the enemy. In *The Hateful Eight*, however, there is no such triumph.<sup>39</sup> The hanging is sadistic; it “honors” the sadistic John Ruth. (Is this the reason for scripting a female victim? Does the female victim increase the shock?)<sup>40</sup> Violence follows

violence. Lynching follows lynching (or crucifix). The justness or civilized nature of any individual case hardly seems worth considering. If anyone is left alive, they are seriously wounded.

Myth strives to justify (or cover up) “necessary” or “righteous” violence—the violence needed to put the myth’s dominant in place. In contrast, the denial of any meaning to violence—other than the aesthetic “that was a nice hanging”—may alone be parabolic. The cinematic parable might force the audience to ask who they are (mythically), what violence they accept and/or have forgotten in order to ground their mythic identity, or, in more biblical language, who their neighbors are or, even, who they can “afford” to lynch.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps, like Gibson’s violent attack on pretty crucifixes, this film’s aestheticizing of violence resists the attempt to see any death as beautiful. Perhaps, that is the parabolic query in Tarantino’s dangling crucifix and strangely angelic lynching.<sup>42</sup> Such questions will not end race violence in the U.S., but they might undermine the myths that justify it.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 46, 79. On cinematic intertextuality in Tarantino, with frequent reference to the films of Leone, see the essays in Richard Green and K. Silem Mohammad, eds., *Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy: How to Philosophize with a Pair of Pliers and a Blowtorch* (Chicago: Open Court, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> As in Sergio Leone films, Native Americans are conspicuously absent.

<sup>3</sup> In these visuals, the stagecoach approaches the crucifix from the horizon. That nicely prefigures the film’s own movement, which proceeds toward Daisy’s lynching. The “foreshadowing” conjoins crucifix and Daisy’s lynching.

<sup>4</sup> The roots of the Greek word for “parable” might be translated as “alongside” and “cast” or “throw.”

<sup>5</sup> On the religious history of Wyoming, see Warren Murphy, *On Sacred Ground: A Religious and Spiritual History of Wyoming* (Cody: WordsWorth, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> James G. Crossley, “Once Upon a Time in the West...The Fate of Religion, the Bible, and the Italian Western,” in *The T & T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, ed. Richard Walsh (London and New York: T & T Clark, forthcoming), n.p. Crossley shows that Christianity is not a means for socio-economic transformation in Leone’s *Dollars Trilogy* or *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969). He cites Sergio Sollima’s *The Big Gundown* (1968) and *Face to Face* (1976), as well as Damiano Damiani’s *A Bullet for the General* (1968) and Carlo Lizzani’s

*Requiescant* (1967), as examples of politically radical 1960s Italian Westerns. Santo in *A Bullet for the General* defends Christians who use violence for the poor by saying that Christ was always for the downtrodden and died between two thieves (bandits, revolutionaries?). Pier Paolo Pasolini plays the role of rebel priest in *Requiescant*. On political radicalism in the Spaghetti Westerns, see Austin Fisher, *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2011). On the Spaghetti Westerns as an attempt to demythologize the American Western and, then, remythologize it for Italian audiences, see Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Crossley, “Once Upon a Time in the West,” n.p.

<sup>8</sup> *Django* is not the only contender, however, as crucifixes are quite common in Spaghetti Westerns. *A Bullet for the General*, for example, features a crucified officer on a railway early on, hung there by bandits to stop a military ammunition train. The officer in charge finally orders the train to run over the victim in a vain attempt to escape the deadly bandit trap. Given *The Hateful Eight*’s focus on the lynching of Daisy, *Django*’s female victim makes it seem slightly closer to *The Hateful Eight*. Unlike *A Bullet for the General*, *Django* and *The Hateful Eight* also return to the cross (crucifix or lynching) imagery in their finales as well.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, the fiery crosses of the KKK are first prominent in fiction, in Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s 1905 *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1905), accessed June 14, 2017, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/26240/26240-h/26240-h.htm>, and in the film indebted to it, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In fact, the rebirth of the KKK began in the year that film was released. On Griffith’s glorification of the KKK as a Christ figure, partly through the imagery of the fiery, bloody cross, see Richard Walsh, “*The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) and *Intolerance* (Triangle/Wark, 1916): Griffith’s Talismanic Jesus,” in *The Silents of Jesus in the Cinema (1897-1927)*, ed. David J. Shepherd (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 188-90. Griffith’s film, in which the KKK carries a flaming cross to subdue the black threat and usher in a white paradise, has now been answered cinematically by Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* (2016). Parker depicts Nat Turner as a Christ-figure (through *Braveheart* [1995] and, thus, *The Passion of the Christ* [2004] imagery) to justify violence against an oppressive white culture. Both Griffith and Parker’s films are revenge dramas—and, thus, not far from the Western or the gospels for that matter, particularly as the gospels have been interpreted in passion plays and in film.

<sup>10</sup> Or, with a lynching tree, as the present article argues vis-à-vis *The Hateful Eight*. See James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Non-salvific, non-victorious, non-providential crosses appear even in the orbit of Jesus films. See, for example, *Barabbas* (1961), *La ricotta* (1962), *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989).

<sup>12</sup> While the cross and the crucifix are obviously different images, with different connotations, within Christianity, crosses and crucifixes are typically interchangeable in cinema.

<sup>13</sup> The Christian epics, those depicting characters converting to Christianity (usually) during and despite Neronian persecutions, typically present the martyrs’ death and the ultimate historical victory of Jesus (or Christianity) in this way.

<sup>14</sup> The typical cinematic cross is definitely not a lynching tree. Compare Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 180: “It is one thing to think about the cross as a theological concept or as a magical talisman of salvation and quite another to connect Calvary with the lynching tree in the American experience.”

<sup>15</sup> See the discussion of Griffith and Parker in n9 above and the discussion below.

<sup>16</sup> Walsh, “*The Birth of a Nation*,” 186-87, 193-95.

<sup>17</sup> When the politicians tell him that they will kill him, *Son of Man*’s Jesus borrows the last words of Steve Biko, in responding, “How long will it take you?” The resurrecting cross effectively says the politicians have not yet “finished” Jesus. On *Son of Man*’s Biko Jesus and resurrecting cross, see Richard Walsh, “A Beautiful Corpse:



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Fiction and Hagiography in *Son of Man*,” in *Son of Man: An African Jesus Film*, ed. Richard Walsh, Jeffrey L. Staley, and Adele Reinhartz (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 192-205.

<sup>18</sup> Griffith’s *Intolerance* was, in part, a riposte to the many critics of *The Birth of a Nation*’s racism. One might see Tarantino’s crucifix as a subtler reply to the many critics of his films’ cartoonish violence.

<sup>19</sup> The film presents the crucifix on this occasion in a full shot as the stagecoach draws near and passes it. The camera follows the stagecoach so the audience sees the crucifix from the rear in a medium shot. From the rear, it appears more like a cross than a crucifix. The scene lasts a little more than twenty seconds.

<sup>20</sup> The flashback chapter interrupts the battle in Minnie’s Haberdashery, which begins with the poisoning of Ruth and Warren’s discovery of the murder of Minnie and her husband. Part of the battle is filmed in slow-motion and the whole is depicted with comic book-level violence. (Both are Tarantino trademarks.) The flashback is also excessively violent. Daisy’s would-be saviors arrive and kill everyone at Minnie’s, most of whom are black, and make, as one character says, “a pile of n...” Not all in the pile (Gen. Smithers almost makes the top of the pile) are black, but, as Daisy’s brother opines, all the dead are “n...” This scene is suggestive of the Black Lives Matter concerns prominent when the film was released.

<sup>21</sup> The visuals resemble bloody scenes in Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

<sup>22</sup> Compare Jesus’ battered, bloody face in *The Passion of the Christ*. As with that Jesus, abuse is heaped upon Daisy throughout the film. Her most emotional response to this comes when her brother is killed. She does also cry out to “Jesus” when shot in the foot. After this ejaculation, Warren asks sarcastically if she is a believer now.

<sup>23</sup> The physical struggle involved in this hanging is reminiscent of that depicted in Caravaggio’s *Crucifixion of St. Peter*.

<sup>24</sup> Oswald, who purports to be the hangman hired by Red Rock, says hanging is civilized justice while lynching is frontier justice and, therefore, considered wrong. He locates the difference between the two in the official, professional, dispassionate hangman.

<sup>25</sup> Like Warren’s “nice,” Christian interpretations of Jesus’ death are eulogies. The various people who show up at Brian’s crucifixion in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, offering various interpretations of his death, nicely demonstrate the workings of this eulogizing process.

<sup>26</sup> Struggling with connections between the cross and the lynching tree, Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 120-51, ultimately rejects the cross as salvific in favor of the cross as an emblem of God’s suffering with “the crucified of history.”

<sup>27</sup> Compare the connection between the hanging of the Christ-figure Nat Turner and the lynching tree in *The Birth of a Nation* (2016). Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 93-119, finds more connections between the cross and the lynching tree among artists than theologians. For examples, see Langston Hughes, “Christ in Alabama,” *Contempo* (December 1, 1931), accessed June 14, 2017, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma05/dulis/poetry/Hughes/hughes2.html>; and W. E. B. Du Bois, “Jesus Christ in Texas,” in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920), accessed June 14, 2017, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm#Jesus\\_Christ\\_in\\_Texas](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm#Jesus_Christ_in_Texas). Cinematically, see the 2006 *Color of the Cross*, which presents a black Jesus crucified as the result of racism.

<sup>28</sup> In such a reading, Christ figures (who are legion) do to Jesus’ crucifixion what Walter Benjamin claims mechanical reproduction does to a work of art. See his “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217-51. The films mentioned in n11 go further in this direction to the extent that they present crucifixions without providential meaning. *Jesus of Montreal* is by far the most complex. The protagonist Daniel’s revised passion play substitutes a bastard magician for the divine Christ of the traditional play. That seems a parody (as are, in another sense, the human historical Jesuses of scholarship), as is the humorous scene in which the troupe tries out various styles of acting the passion. The film’s real focus, of course, is how Daniel takes on Christ-like qualities in his life outside the

play. That is far less parodic and may even be parabolic, although Daniel's non-providential death on a non-salvific cross turns the parody/parable screw yet again.

<sup>29</sup> Frayling takes this view of Leone's films, describing them as "critical cinema," cinema commenting on earlier cinema and its mythology. See *Spaghetti Westerns*, xiv-xv, 40, 126, 160, 175. In particular, Frayling sees Leone's films as critical of the optimism of John Ford, of Turner's frontier thesis, and of the Hollywood Western's implicit claims to offer a universal ethic. See *ibid.*, 40-41, 130, 159, 189-91, 199.

<sup>30</sup> Gérard Genette says that every quotation is a parody. See his *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 17. For Genette, parody is far more complex than classical parody, which he renames satirical pastiche. Starting with parody and pastiche and extending them into satirical and serious forms, Genette charts various types of hypertextuality, the possible relationships between a text and an earlier text. Some Christ figures might be a more serious form of parody—and not satirical pastiche or mock heroic.

<sup>31</sup> See John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, IL: Argus, 1975); *idem*, *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). Crossan relies on Sheldon Sacks, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964). For a different, but comparable, distinction between myth and ideology (rather than parable), see John C. Lyden, "To Commend or to Critique: The Question of Religion and Film Studies," *Journal of Religion & Film* 1.2 (1997): article 6, accessed June 14, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1865&context=jrf>. For a discussion of several (cinematic) theorists working with a similar distinction, see Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns*, xiv-xv. For something like "parable," Frayling opts for "critical cinema," although he does himself use "parable" on a few occasions. See *ibid.*, 126, 132-33. For a recent reading of films parabolically challenging the American Dream, see Matthew S. Rindge, *Profane Parables: Film and the American Dream* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016). For an anthropological defense of films as part of a culture's negotiation and critique of its "categories," or its way of construing reality, depending on the work of George Johnson and Mark Lakoff, see Louise Krasniewicz, "Round Up the Usual Suspects: Anthropology Goes to the Movies," *Expedition* 48.1 (March 2006): 8-14, accessed August 13, 2017, [https://www.academia.edu/723534/Round\\_up\\_the\\_usual\\_suspects\\_Anthropology\\_goes\\_to\\_the\\_movies?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/723534/Round_up_the_usual_suspects_Anthropology_goes_to_the_movies?auto=download).

<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes is devastatingly clear here. See his *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Levers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). One should not, however, so privilege parable (or resistance) that one overlooks the ubiquity and inevitability of myth. Privileging parable easily becomes surreptitious mythic or anti-mythic work. Thus, Barthes's critique of myth is in the service of politics—open debate about the public good—versus myth's surreptitious privileging of the dominant class.

<sup>33</sup> See Crossley, "Once Upon a Time in the West," n.p. On the Hollywood Western's mythic character, see Matthew Carter, *Myth of the Western: New Perspectives on Hollywood's Frontier Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); and Robert Paul Seesengood, "Western Text(s): The Bible and the Movies of the Wild, Wild West," in *The Bible In Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and its Reception in Film*, ed. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, 2 vols., (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 1:193-205. In addition to those sources and the plethora of references they cite on the Western, see also Karen R. Jones and John Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), which gives particular attention to changing scholarly attitudes about the "mythic" place of the Western in U.S. culture; and Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First-Half Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), which gives particular attention to John Ford's Westerns vis-à-vis film noir.

<sup>34</sup> Other elements also uncomfortably juxtapose Christian symbols with morally questionable violence. E.g., when Ruth arrives at Minnie's Haberdashery, he demands to know everyone's identity. Joe Gage, who is part of Daisy's gang and later poisons Ruth to try to free her, claims to be a simple cow puncher going home to see his mother for Christmas. Ruth underlines the incongruity of Gage's appearance with this claim by calling this story "funny," and by saying that Gage "doesn't look like the coming-home-for-Christmas type." Later, the equally murderous Bob plays *Silent Night*, rather badly, as Warren begins the confrontation that leads to his vengeful execution of Gen. Smithers. The music is incongruous background for the hostile, sexually demeaning provocation. Although the

music stops before Warren shoots Smithers, Bob only closes the lid on the piano's keys afterwards, redirecting one's attention to the carol. In both instances, as with the film's deployment of the crucifix, Christian symbols are yoked with unexpected violence.

<sup>35</sup> Mannix says to Warren, "When n... are scared, white folks are safe." Warren says to Ruth, "You have no idea what it's like to be black facing down America. Only time blacks are safe is when white folks are disarmed. This letter disarmed white folks." Warren says to Mannix when he first meets him: "You joined the war to keep n... in chains. I joined to kill white Southern crackers any way I can." Is this a Black Lives Matter moment?

<sup>36</sup> The letter reads: "Dear Marquez, I hope this letter finds you in good health ... wish more hours in the day ... so much to do ... times changing slowly but surely it's men like you that will make a difference. Your military service is a credit not only to you but to your race as well. I'm very proud every time I hear news of you. We still have a long way to go but, hand in hand, I know we'll get there. I just wanted to let you know that you're in my thoughts. Hopefully, our paths will cross in the future. Until then, I remain your friend. Old Mary Todd is calling so I guess it must be time for bed. Respectfully, A. Lincoln."

<sup>37</sup> In C. H. Dodd's classic definition, parable is a vivid, strange metaphor (comparison) "leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (*The Parables of the Kingdom* [Glasgow: Collins, 1961], 16). Cf. Krasniewicz, "Round Up the Usual Suspects," 14.

<sup>38</sup> Devin McKinney argues for a distinction between strong and weak violence. The latter is the mindless, exploitive violence of guilt-free entertainment. Such violence is typically "just" or "mythic," meeting with the audience's ethical (or unthinking) approval. The former stops one (parabolically) in one's tracks, forcing one to struggle for meaning ("Violence: The Strong and the Weak," *Film Quarterly* 46.4 [1993]: 16-22.) Critics usually consider Tarantino's violence weak. See, for example, the discussion of *Django Unchained* in Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "American Slavery, Cinematic Violence, and the (Sometimes) Good Book," in *The T & T Clark Companion to the Bible and Film*, ed. Richard Walsh (London and New York: T & T Clark, forthcoming), n.p. By contrast, Kevin McGeough finds both strong and weak violence in recent biblical films ("The Roles of Violence in Recent Biblical Cinema: *The Passion*, *Noah*, and *Exodus: Gods and Kings*," *Journal of Religion & Film* 20.2 [2016]: article 35, accessed June 19, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1325&context=jrf>). The argument here is that, while *The Hateful Eight*'s violence seems that of comic-book entertainment or exploitation cinema (weak violence), its failure to mean and, particularly, the juxtaposition of Daisy's lynching with the crucifix opens the possibility for thought (acts as strong violence). Speaking only of films in the 1990s, Bryan Stone argues, to the contrary, that the cinematic juxtaposition of religious images and violence serves simply to enhance entertainment and to reinforce audience preconceptions (or myths) ("Religion and Violence in Popular Film," *Journal of Religion & Film* 3.1 [1999], article 5, accessed June 19, 2017, <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1839&context=jrf>). Interestingly, Stone's one major example of a place where religion motivates the eschewal of violence is Jules's transformation in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*. Perhaps, then, Tarantino's violence is not always weak and myth-supportive. For more on Tarantino's violence and ethical issues, see Green and Mohammad, *Quentin Tarantino and Philosophy*.

<sup>39</sup> Broadly speaking, one might see Tarantino's work as moving from conundrum films to revenge dramas. This film's revenge is hardly as satisfying as that in *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), or *Django Unchained*. In fact, the end, as read here, and the dangling crucifix suggest a return to the conundrum film. One might read the film as a mystery, even though it is clearly set and shot as a Western.

<sup>40</sup> Tarantino's oeuvre contains several female characters, who exercise their own violent agency, refusing to be simply victims. See, particularly, *Kill Bill 1*, *Kill Bill 2*, and *Jackie Brown* (1997). The female victim in *The Hateful Eight* may simply be a nod to Maria's role in *Django*. Or, Daisy's fate may underline the "least of these" statuses of those who typically suffer in society. If so, it may be a subtler connection to and critique of Christian violence. After all, it is the least (slaves and women) who are singled out for attention when believers are told to imitate Christ's sacrificial suffering in 1 Pet. 2:11-3:2.

<sup>41</sup> Krasniewicz, "Round Up the Usual Suspects," 14, contends that some films cause audiences to think about their habitual categories by "purposely scrambling accepted and expected categories" and, thus, subvert "telegraphed meanings."

<sup>42</sup> One of the most intriguing discussions in Rindge's *Profane Parables* is the chapter devoted to *American Beauty* (1999). The film's title focuses attention on beauty, and Rindge demonstrates that Lester's drug-peddling, voyeuristic adolescent mentor—Ricky Fitts—is the key to the film's redefinition of beauty as Jane (not the cheerleader), a dead bird, a funeral, and a plastic bag. Having learned his lessons well, Lester's final VO describes all of this, this life (including his death), as beautiful (ibid., 47-68). There is something vaguely Eastern and quite comforting here. Not only does the film suggest the possibility of the individual surviving death (not a very Eastern conception), its flirtation with images and particularly the plastic bag comes very close to providing mythic support for U.S. mass media and consumerism. Rindge reads the film instead as struggling parabolically against this myth (forcing the audience to embrace their mortality). Nonetheless, the film also aestheticizes death (ibid., 62), as does the crucifix, Tarantino's oeuvre generally, and (Spaghetti) Westerns, albeit in different ways. Tarantino's crucifix, and *The Hateful Eight*'s refusal to find a single-meaning ending, is different. It may challenge the audience to reject an aesthetics of violence altogether and to say with the Julia Roberts' character in *Flatliners* (1990): "Death is beautiful; what a load of crap."

<sup>43</sup> Another possible interpretation of the parabolic joining of the crucifix and (Daisy's) lynching might be a critique of capital punishment, reducing all executions to no more, or little more, than lynchings. One could certainly read Ruth's and Oswald's defenses of the justice of hanging as unsatisfying.

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