**The Four Archetypes of The Three Burials (of Melquiades Estrada)**

Wickham Clayton

Forgive the spoilers, but this is the actual ending of a Western film: A hero rides off into the sunset, with dubious prospects for the future, in no small part due to his possible insanity. A villain cries, begs for atonement from someone who he has harmed, and calls after the hero to see if he will be okay. A housewife leaves the home to head back east. A saloon girl is perfectly happy in her job and with her life, turning down an opportunity to run away with the hero.

*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) ends, to use understatement, unconventionally. And while the final encounters with these characters seem to fly in the face of Western tradition, these are consistent with the entire characterological development within a film that relies on the understanding and expectations established by the generic tropes of the Western to achieve affect. The film centers on the killing of a Hispanic immigrant, Melquiades Estrada, on the borderlands of Texas; his initial burial in a shallow grave by the killer; his pedestrian burial by the local authorities; and the journey taken by his killer at gunpoint—by Melquiades’s closest friend—to his home town in Mexico to make a final resting place. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* uses this central narrative to examine the lives of four key characters surrounding the events, all of whom initially fit into classic Western generic archetypes.

Although there has been a significant amount of work on the film over the last ten years, and understandably so as it is quite a striking text, there seems to be few points of consensus on reading and interpreting it, which suggests the complex pleasures and heavy ambiguation the narrative itself communicates. Many writers, however, acknowledge the debt the film owes, at least in foundational principle, to the classic Western. Matthew Carter looks closely at the point in the film in which the “hero” steps into his role:

We are now in recognisable [sic] ‘Western territory’: when the lawful representatives of civilisation [sic] are unable or, in this case, unwilling to mete out justice, the gunfighter springs into action.

It is, of course, the borderlands that provide the geography in which Pete can live out his mythic role as the hero. Its constitution of deserts, mountains and canyons likens itself to the historical epic and immediately begs comparison with the aesthetic qualities of westerns past, the Monument Valley terrain of Ford or the apocalyptic deserts of Leone and Sam Peckinpah; perhaps also with the southwestern novels of Cormac McCarthy.

(174-75)

Carter, however, identifies this familiar “Western territory” as the groundwork for a film that relies heavily on metanarration and discusses this at great length in his book.

Camilla Fojas similarly identifies traditional genre tropes, utilizing a cultural and socio-political methodology, stating, “*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* is closer to the tone and aesthetic of the classical Western through its main features: the cowboy, the presence of the law, the contact between cultures, and the slow pace of the small town” (“Border Media,” 38). David H. Zimmerman finds characterological links to the classic Western through Melquiades Estrada himself. Zimmerman writes that this character “follows a clear tradition of cowboys whose importance is not tempered by death or the grave” (218). Furthermore, Claudia Gorbman highlights a very precise aesthetic link, in contrast to her other case study, *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995)*,* to formulaic and generic conceptions of filmmaking, stating:

*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* takes a more conventional approach to its music. Like a number of post-classical westerns, and indeed like numerous American films since the 1980s, it deploys both orchestral scoring and pre-existing songs in what is commonly called a hybrid score. The scoring generally complements the emotional tone of the narrative events, and the songs, all of which are diegetic, help constitute the characters’ world. The songs additionally work to comment on narrative action and indicate ethnic separations and mixing of characters. (208).

Some of these commentators note that the film establishes, then subverts, or offers commentary on, Western tropes. Carter writes, “*Three Burials* both deconstructs the myth and shows, in an imitative form, the fate of the man who follows it” (176). Fojas identifies a narrative element as a metaphor of the genre, stating, “As Pete and Mike search for Melquiades’ village. It becomes apparent that this mythic utopia, like its cinematic counterpart in the classical Western, does not exist” (“Border Media,” 38). Zimmerman notes how the overarching methodology for reading texts within the boundaries of his chapter falls short, writing that “the limitations of such an approach become clear; the reading strips the text of its ambiguities by assuming, affirming, and even reinforcing a shared point of view” (221). Lee Clark Mitchell similarly focuses almost entirely on the film’s ambiguities. He acknowledges that the film is a commentary on the classical Western, yet states that “Jones’s film seems hardly a Western at all, with neither nostalgia for a simpler past, nor investment in the triumph of law and order, nor contemplation of the redemptive power of violence, nor (most importantly) attention to appropriate forms of masculine behavior. All those aspects familiar to the genre are absent” (446). Though Mitchell does point out that, “Such questions notwithstanding, what does remain clear is that dead as the classic Western may appear to be, our own residual faith in the genre brings it alive once again” (447).

Considering these established views of *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* and its relationship to traditional, classic films in the Western genre, I propose considering *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* a film which adopts the tropes of a genre (the Western), more specifically the character archetypes central to that genre, as defined by Philip French, and subverts the expectation of character archetype behavior through a precise means of temporal displacement. Most specifically, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* places archetypes established and developed during the “classical” period of Hollywood production to “modern-day” Texas. The film is populated by characters with established roles, carrying specific expectations, within a culture that recontextualizes the positions and motivations of these archetypes. The film is set in the Texan borderlands in the mid-2000s, where a mobilized, regimented group – the U. S. border patrol – brings race relations and federal (as well as social) politics into clear relief. What was traditionally conceived as a lawless land is now supervised, not always successfully, by authoritarian representatives. This is a time when many people in civilization travel in cars and trucks, and watch TV at home. And within this framework, we have the Hero, Pete (Tommy Lee Jones), the Villain, Mike (Barry Pepper), the Housewife, Lou Ann (January Jones), and the modernized Saloon Girl, Rachel (Melissa Leo). These four archetypes, over the course of the film, largely become uneasy in their roles and fail to arrive at their generically mandated end.

**Pete**

In this film, Pete, played by director Tommy Lee Jones, is our Hero. Or, more accurately, Pete is the character that most closely resembles (and is identifiable as) the hero archetype outlined by Philip French:

[...] the hero is the embodiment of good. He is upright, clean-living, sharp-shooting, a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant who respects the law, the flag, women and children; he dresses smartly in white clothes and rides a white horse that is his closest companion; he uses bullets and words with equal care, is a disinterested upholder of justice and uninterested in personal gain. He always wins. (French 30)

However, this description, in application to Pete, requires several asterisks. It should suffice to say that, coming long after the popularization of revisionist westerns in the 1960s and 70s, and holding firmly onto that tradition, the character, as do all archetypal characters in this film, problematizes the description quite consciously. Pete, though, is clearly recognizable as the “Hero” in a classical sense during the first half of the film, approximately – the period wherein all the archetypes are established, before a period of destabilization.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Pete is, obviously, a White Anglo-Saxon, and likely Protestant if he subscribes to any theological framework. He does dress, for someone who earns a living through physical labor, smartly, in light blue denim, often shot using desaturated, washed-out cinematography in outdoor location shots, which make these clothes, if not strictly white, appear white. On a purely visual level: White Man 🡪 White Clothes = Good/Hero

In terms of Pete’s personality and values, he again aligns with French’s description. At the start of the film, he is seen as a friend of the law – Pete is on a first-name basis with the sheriff – and most importantly, initially trusts the law to seek justice, by believing the authorities are searching for Melquiades’s killers. Although Pete does not express any sentiments about the flag, he is clearly seen as one who respects human life. Melquiades is a young man when they meet and Pete comes to think of him like a son; Pete is knowledgeable and accepting of other cultures, as is shown through his fluency in Spanish and respectful attitude towards the people he meets in Mexico; Pete appears to treat the women around him with kindness and care as evinced through his relationship with Rachel and his (relative) consideration for the comfort of Lou Ann when he kidnaps Mike. He does shoot rarely, but accurately, and only says what he feels is necessary. When he discovers that the police are not interested in seeking justice, Pete then becomes, as he sees it, the sole upholder of justice (though not disinterested), and is, indeed, absolutely uninterested in personal gain. Whether he is, in fact, the winner at the end of the film is questionable, though he consistently wins the smaller victories, for better or worse.

Therefore, according to French’s identification of the Western hero, Pete is clearly positioned, both visually and narratively, as such. As the film progresses, however, Pete’s position as Hero becomes consistently undermined, although there is no apparent hero to take his place. The point of deviation for Pete is his kidnapping of Mike, the apparent western Villain. Although his treatment of Mike in this scene may seem somewhat brutal it is never fully framed as unjustified – it is, at best, ambiguous. The problem with “Hero” characterization comes with Pete’s treatment of Lou Ann. Pete knocks on the door of their trailer and catches Mike off guard at night as he is dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, and flip-flops, and Lou Ann is dressed in thin white clothes for bed. Instead of taking Mike when he is alone, Lou Ann is terrorized as well – Pete has to point his gun at her and threaten to kill her so she will stop screaming. He tells her that Mike has killed Melquiades, and takes Mike out to his truck after making him dress in his uniform. There is then a cut to Lou Ann tied to a chair with duct tape over her mouth. She is breathing and obviously panicked. While there is practical utility in these things – ensuring Mike is unarmed, preventing neighbors from alerting the authorities, and keeping Lou Ann from alerting the authorities herself– his personal mission overrides her well-being.

This is placed at odds with the final shots of them together, with Pete covering the bound and gagged Lou Ann with a blanket to keep her from getting cold, and paternally, if dazedly, stroking her cheek in an effort to soothe her as they watch TV. This is undercut by the apparent madness in his appearance and behavior. Furthermore, Pete’s role as the Hero archetype is complicated by his sadistic behavior towards Mike. Pete seems to go out of his way to ensure Mike gets hurt as they travel, although in the end Pete prefers not to kill him, rather, he wants Mike to ask forgiveness of Melquiades, before leaving him alive. However, Pete’s sensitivity to Mexican culture adds further complexity to this dynamic.[[2]](#endnote-2) Just as it is difficult to condemn the young Mexican woman whom Mike punches in the face at the beginning of the film, which I will discuss in the next section, for grudgingly hurting Mike when he needs her help, Pete justly (though potentially problematically) pointedly calls Mike a “*gringo* son of a bitch” when confronting him with his crime of killing an (to Mike’s knowledge) anonymous Mexican person. Pete rightly calls out Mike’s abuse of privilege, though he, as French’s ‘White Anglo-Saxon Protestant,’ is himself acting as avenger. Fojas reads this dynamic as particularly significant, saying, “*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* takes the idea of the benevolent Anglo, long a trope of the border film, to its logical extreme. This deconstructionism is a unique consequence of the cross-border collaboration between (screenwriter) Arriaga and (director) Jones. Arriaga locates the Anglo benevolence as part of an Anglo male fantasy about Mexicans and Mexico” (*Border Bandits* 194; parenthesis mine). Similarly, in a different piece Fojas locates this attitude within the character of Pete, stating, “In a relationship symptomatic of interracial transborder dynamics, Melquiades is a blank slate upon which Pete projects his fantasies of Mexico and Mexicans” (“Border Media,” 38).

However, Pete, as the film’s protagonist and Western Hero, cannot simply be deemed an anti-Hero, or a Villain in Hero’s clothing. More than any other character in the film, the character of Pete is the vessel of what Todd Berliner calls “*Characterological inconsistencies*, when characters behave in ways consistent with their previous characterizations. For example, the senatorial candidate has unbending integrity vs. the candidate does what he must to get elected (*The Candidate*, 1972)” (Berliner 27; parenthesis in original). This can manifest within Heroes particularly who behave in ways that complicate the audience’s ability to ‘root’ for them. The last half of the film continually depicts events and behaviors that alter the audience’s comfort with Pete, or at the very least ambiguates his motives. Characterological inconsistencies are mainly limited to Pete, however, other characters appear to act outside of their archetypal limitations, when, in fact, their actions are consistent with their archetypes within a fictional universe with fewer limitations.

**Mike**

As with the Hero archetype, French identifies the Western Villain:

The villain, on the other hand, is the embodiment of evil; he dresses in black, rides a dark horse and is doomed to die. He is often a smooth talker and has lecherous designs on women; he is only concerned with advancing his own cause but beyond that has a positive commitment to destruction. (30)

From the beginning, Mike is the film's Villain. He is a border patrol officer whose dark green uniform proves a direct muddy contrast to Pete’s almost white clothes. He isn’t a smooth talker, but he does speak forcefully, and his designs on women are, broadly speaking, lecherous. His own cause is self-defense, and he does appear inclined toward destruction. The death he is doomed to is not a literal one, but a spiritual, figurative one—which, in turn, results in Mike arguably being the film’s protagonist.

Mike is a lawman whose zeal for the job, intense bigotry, and strong interest in self-preservation results in the use of disproportionate violence in the execution of his duties. In the first scene that shows him working as a border patrol agent, he chases a young couple crossing the border illegally farther than his colleagues. Once he catches up with them, he kicks the young man in the stomach, and punches the young woman in the face, breaking her nose, yelling “Stay down, bitch!” His supervisor admonishes him, saying “You were way overboard there, boy,” to which Mike replies, “No, sir, fuck it. They were trying to get away.” Mike refuses to acknowledge the severity of his violent actions even when confronted by his supervisor, while clearly and forcefully asserting his view. This is echoed later, once Mike has been kidnapped by Pete, who verbally confronts him about killing Melquiades. Mike merely responds that Melquiades shot first.

Primarily, Mike does have lecherous designs on women, of a fashion. While his physical interaction with women is limited to the time he spends with his wife, Lou Ann (which includes an instance of sexual intercourse – rape, in fact – which is ultimately cold and selfish, only focusing on his own pleasure), he is often looking at pornographic magazines, even while he is working. In fact, he is trying to find a private place to masturbate to one of his magazines when he hears a gunshot, which causes him to panic, ultimately killing Melquiades. This is also observed by Michele Aaron, who writes that Mike’s ‘self-serving, onanistic place in the world is epitomized by the cold, one sided sex he has with his wife (ignoring her “stop it,” his swift pleasure-taking barely interrupts her view of the television) and his repeated attempts to “jerk off.” Indeed, his unwitting shooting of Melquiades arises directly from his getting out of his jeep to masturbate (Aaron 195; parenthesis in original). Significantly, the film doesn’t adopt a moralist position towards pornography or sex work, as I will show in the next two sections, but it appears indicative of the character’s tendency towards the objectification of women, of which his sexual encounter with Lou Ann is evidence.

As I have stated, “his own cause” is self-preservation. As a law enforcement officer, his killing of Melquiades, a Hispanic man, would not only compromise himself but the Border Patrol Agency. This is even more important following his physical violence toward the young couple at the beginning of the film. Mike is silent about the incident, even with his wife, who hears about it from Pete. This is all linked to Mike’s “commitment to destruction,” however, this is only apparent in the first half of the film, as Pete’s kidnapping of Mike shifts the power structure between the two characters, and is the catalyst for the most significant character arc of the film.

After the kidnapping, the Western Hero has complete power over the Villain. Mike is tied and taken on a journey at gunpoint, first to exhume the body of Melquiades, then across the US/Mexico border, and finally to find Jiménez to bury Melquiades. Throughout the journey, Mike, unsure of his fate at the hands of Pete, and due to extreme discomfort, tries to escape repeatedly. This is still indicative of his goal of self-preservation instead of seeking peace and atonement – Mike is obviously troubled about shooting Melquiades, for example when he chokes after lighting up a cigarette in the mall parking lot, resulting in silent tears, a sequence broken up by images of him panicking over the dying body of Melquiades. However, the journey forces Mike to accept responsibility for the murder, to develop familiarity if not empathy for others, as is seen when he is talking with and sharing tequila with people as Pete asks for directions to Jiménez, and to atone for his wrongdoings both physically (being beaten by the young woman whose nose he broke) and spiritually (crying and begging Melquiades, at Pete’s prompting, for forgiveness at his final grave). He is seen as at peace in the penultimate sequence where he is sleeping deeply. It is through this journey and character development, atypical of the Western Villain, that we see how *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* can be seen as a unique case study of the Western genre. Fojas writes that “It is Mike who undergoes forced migration to face his racialized prejudices and imperial chauvinism” (“Border Media,” 39). Fojas elucidates this at greater length, writing,

Mike is literally dragged through the desert to face all of his prejudices about Mexicans; for instance, he meets one of the migrants whom he beat up and debased as a border patrol agent and accepts his fate when she returns the favor. We sense that he is changing at various points in the journey and at the end, when Pete demands that he ask Melquiades for forgiveness, Mike is truly contrite. (Fojas, *Border Bandits*, 194)

However, the characterological inconsistencies of the Hero, and the inversion of character development of the Villain are only evidence of how the film approaches the male characters. The female characters are, in very subtle but significant ways, both examples of Western character archetypes and subversions of generic conceptions of Western female characters.

**Lou Ann**

As many commentators have indicated, the Western is overwhelmingly the province of the male. [[3]](#endnote-3) It either concentrates on masculinity or features a cast largely comprised of men. However, in writing about the characters in *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), John Saunders writes, “The roles allotted to women in the western are painfully circumscribed, and it is fitting that we should meet her indoors, the ‘Angel of the House,’ leaving the outside world to men and their doings.[[4]](#endnote-4) Saunders here identifies one of the archetypes typically attributed to female characters in the classical western: the Housewife.

Furthermore, French also identifies archetypal female characters that frequently appear in Western films including the Housewife: “the unsullied pioneer heroine: virtuous wife, rancher's virginal daughter, schoolteacher, etc” (38). French claims these characters “are in short supply, to be treated with respect and protected” (38). Lou Ann fits this description at the film’s outset. As the pioneer, she travels with her husband, Mike, from Cincinnati, Ohio to Texas as he starts his new job. She may not be happy, but in the beginning she quietly and steadfastly helps keep and decorate their home. She complains little, though the film regularly highlights her loneliness. She is shown sitting in the local diner in the middle of the day, reading a magazine and smoking a cigarette. Her investment in her reading material appears limited as she regularly looks out of the window, and at her surroundings.

The film reframes this archetype early on: not only is Lou Ann seen as bored and lonely, but she even stands by her man, so to speak, by quietly staying still and bending over her counter top while Mike quickly, artlessly, and without a hint of romance or love, fucks her from behind. The fact that when he first touches her, she says “Stop it,” indicates this as an instance of rape.[[5]](#endnote-5) She continues to watch television, showing alternating expressions of boredom and discomfort, while he finishes, smacks her on her behind and walks back to his chair. She is doing what this generic character type is supposed to do, due to generic mandate, and clearly does not enjoy it, a position framed by the film to elicit identification and sympathy with the audience. Her husband, after all, is both appropriately and ironically the Villain.

To complicate this position, Lou Ann later, and quite suddenly, appears as an escort for Melquiades. Pete's implication that she is one of the “girls” he has hired for sexual favours for Melquiades comes as a surprise, considering the generic conventions surrounding this character. However, the film doesn't explicitly imply that they had sex, and the screen time spent with them privately shows Melquiades nervous, and Lou Ann kindly trying to calm him. The viewer only witnesses the two talking and dancing. This does not fully undercut the fact that she seems fully prepared to sleep with Melquiades, but the film appears to attempt both justification and identification with Lou Ann – she is not only unhappily married, but unhappily married to the Villain. The same Villain who has killed the man we see her, in flashback, showing kindness and tenderness toward. While this sequence, on a moment-to-moment basis provides a complex experience, undermining the expected behaviour of a character archetype while establishing a justification and identification with the character, it also functions as a significant step in the character's story arc: this event informs her character, her potential (and unseen) response to the news that her husband has killed the man who she was kind to, and he to her in turn, and her dissatisfaction with her married life all point toward her final scene.

Toward the end of the film, Lou Ann returns to the diner and talks to the waitress Rachel, whom she has befriended, and tells her that she is leaving to return to Ohio. Though little dialogue occurs in this sequence, Lou Ann makes it clear she is dissatisfied with her life and feels no loyalty to her husband, who she has not seen for a long time. Lou Ann is then seen, bag packed, getting onto a bus and leaving. This is diametrically opposed to the fundamental function of the Housewife archetype, to support her husband.[[6]](#endnote-6) However, her husband has mistreated her, harmed others, and killed an innocent man. So when Lou Ann leaves, as surprising as it is due to this uncharacteristic deviance from the genre's character formula, it is consistent with the specific character's trajectory, and even potentially meets not only with viewer sympathy, but viewer relief. Similarly, the other key female character archetype in the film benefits from the contextual reframing of the generic elements.

**Rachel**

There is one other type of woman in what French calls the “model traditional western woman”: the Saloon Girl, “with her entourage of dancers,” and such characters are “reasonably plentiful, sexually available and community property” (French 38). In *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, this role is filled by Rachel, the waitress at the local diner owned and operated by her husband, Bob.

The diner, like the saloon in classical period westerns, is a place of refreshment and sustenance. It is owned by a male figure, who hires a woman to interface with the customers. Rachel, as the Saloon Girl, also engages in sex with at least two people apart from her husband. Rachel is seen arranging to meet the sheriff, Belmont (Dwight Yokam) while he openly gropes her as she serves him at the diner. Furthermore, she is twice shown with him, sitting on a couch, both completely undressed (save his socks and a pillow). However, on both occasions, Belmont has apparently had difficulty getting an erection, and Rachel attempts to comfort him. When she tries to tell him that this happens sometimes to Bob, he mainly responds in frustration, saying “Fuck Bob.”

Rachel is also seen with Pete, who seems to engage in regular encounters with her.[[7]](#endnote-7) It appears to be Rachel who has recruited Lou Ann to be a companion for Melquiades when Pete claims to have found sexual partners for himself and Melquiades. Whether these interactions involve a monetary exchange or not, which is never made entirely clear, it seems to be a regular occurrence for Rachel, and something that she is both familiar and comfortable with. However, the film resists objectifying her, or settling her comfortably into the archetype, instead opting to present her as a sympathetic character.

The fact of her promiscuity, unbeknownst to her husband, initially establishes this archetype and calls into question her likeability. The first hint of a sympathetic framing comes with her revelation that her husband regularly has erectile dysfunction in the first sequence with Belmont. This clearly suggests sexual loneliness and dissatisfaction, which to an extent at least explains her sleeping, seemingly regularly, with two other men. However, the sequence that most strongly elicits sympathy from the viewer, takes place in the diner, at a point when Lou Ann is the only patron. Rachel, sweeping the floor, stops and looks pointedly at Lou Ann. Then she calls, “Hey Bob? How long we been married now?” Bob responds, “Twelve...,” followed by a long pause, then “Hell, I don’t know. What is it?” Rachel doesn’t respond to this, only maintains eye contact with Lou Ann throughout and then begins working again. In this moment, the viewer not only sees how unappreciated Rachel feels by her husband, but gains sympathy and understanding for her, and this moment of identification not only explains her actions, but develops the character past generic archetypal configuration.

Lou Ann and Pete appear to be the closest thing that Rachel has to friends: Rachel treats Lou Ann apparently with admiration and respect, Rachel seeming to fill a maternal role with respect to her; and Pete, who may act macho in front of Melquiades when Rachel is there, is set at odds with Belmont. Pete and Rachel appear to have fun together (as opposed to the lecherous/glum dynamic presented by Belmont), and while we are not privy to their sexual relationship, at the very least Pete doesn’t openly grope her in view of her husband. Furthermore, it is Rachel that informs Pete of the identity of Melquiades’s killer, suggesting a relationship that goes beyond sexual. This relationship culminates when Pete ultimately asks Rachel to marry him. However, Rachel doesn’t just choose to stay with Bob, but responds as though she had never considered doing so; when Pete asks her why she won’t marry him, she responds in a bemused tone “I love Bob, Pete,” as though she’s surprised she even has to explain it. She expresses love for her husband – in generic terms, the Saloon Owner – and appears confident in her decision to stay with him.

Interestingly, the genre encourages the expectation that Rachel will say yes to Pete. While the coupling of the Hero, Ringo Kid (John Wayne) and the Saloon Girl, Dallas (Claire Trevor) in *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939) subtly undermined the Hays Code, and gently subverted contemporary genre expectation, the development of the Western since that time has presented many such romantic pairings, successful or no.[[8]](#endnote-8) Therefore, when Pete telephones Rachel from Mexico, the viewer is coaxed into expecting acceptance; not only because Rachel has demonstrated dissatisfaction with her life, but as part of a generic mandate. Her refusal elicits a sense of admiration from the viewer, while at the same time seeming at odds with the narrative information regarding her character to that point. It is through these spare characterological inconsistencies that Rachel, the Saloon Girl, closes the door on the dictates of the genre for female characters.

**Conclusion**

These four archetypes in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* – the Hero, the Villain, the Housewife, and the Saloon Girl – according to French’s definitions, all initially establish consistency with their generic heritage, before complicating, subverting, or rendering incoherent viewer experience and expectation. This is consistent with other research on the film, such as work done by Carter, Fojas, and Mitchell, which identifies the uneasy and knowing relationship *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* has with the Western genre, whether playing with gender and racial representation, or narrative ambiguity.

Whether this film can be conceived as revisionist, postmodern, post-postmodern, post-classical-revival revisionism, or deconstructive modernism, the film still clearly utilizes tropes and character archetypes seen throughout the Western. However, the re-situation of this Western from the 19th century west, the typical temporal framing of the Western, to contemporary (mid-2000s) borderland Texas, creates a complication for these traditional tropes. The development of legal systems to prevent lawlessness; increasing and developing population, housing, and common technological usage; and the relative liberation of women (despite a continued climate of institutionalised misogyny and racism), results ultimately in re-representation of the classical tropes as stale and less believable. Furthermore it provides a fertile groundwork for believably subverting these tropes. The brilliance of *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, then, lies not in its wholesale discarding of generic elements and expectations, but through establishing and subsequently undermining what we have been generically guided to anticipate.

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1. **NOTES**

   It should be noted that the ‘revisionist’ Western did not wholly replace traditional genre offerings. Films like *Silverado* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1985), *Tombstone* (George P. Cosmatos, 1993), *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1994), and, one of my personal favorites, *Open Range* (Kevin Costner, 2003) do not so much re-establish classic genre tropes and update them for a more contemporary aesthetic, as simply use the classic genre as a model. They appear less a reaction to revisionism than generic exercises. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We see this dynamic, with a different character framing, in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) – Ethan is a hero who is extremely well versed in Native American culture. However, in *The Searchers*, Ethan’s cultural awareness doesn’t alter the fact that he is quite an exceptional racist. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Mitchell 446, French 41, Saunders 16, Hayward 503-4, and Neale 59-60 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Saunders 16. It should be noted that *Shane* is a very interesting case study here. While the character is, in fact, bound to the home, this particular character seems to be screaming for agency in an overwhelmingly patriarchal structure. Or, to put it more truthfully, this female character is shown and written, albeit subtly, to have much more complexity than other such characters within the genre. It’s arguably one of the reasons *Shane* is widely considered (see number 69 on the 2007 updated American Film Institute list *100 Years... 100 Movies* [n.p.]) a great American film. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In addition to the quote by Aaron in the previous section, Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer similarly discuss this sequence:

   ‘Mike’s casual rape of Lou Ann at the kitchen counter while she is watching a TV soap opera and chopping vegetables for dinner expresses in one succinct scene the nature of the relationship. As he pushes into her from behind, showing as much concern for her as he does for the porn magazines he regularly masturbates over or the toilet that he masturbates into, she endures, rolling her eyes, her gaze fixed on the TV on which another marital drama unfolds.’ (Kord and Krimmer 81) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. One could draw attention to the example of *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), where the new wife of the hero is vocally opposed to his taking action against the villains. I argue that this is keenly opposed to generic trend, which heightens the narrative tension, and contributes to the film’s highly regarded status (again, see the AFI’s 2007 ‘100 Years... 100 Movies’ list at number 33). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Rachel’s relationship to Bob, Belmont, and Pete is also briefly discussed by Kord and Krimmer (81). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, 1959) for a straightforward example, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971) provides an example from the Western’s highly revisionist wing, and the television mini-series *Lonesome Dove* (Simon Wincer, 1989) proves a more traditional example. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)