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Spaghetti Shakespeare: *Johnny Hamlet* and the Italian Western

Abstract: The Italian Western, *Johnny Hamlet* (1968), directed by Enzo G. Castellari, draws on the revenge story of Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* for plot and characterization. While international distributors of the film downplayed its connection to highbrow Shakespeare, they emphasized the movie's violent content and action-packed revenge narrative, which was typical of the *western all'italiana*. *Johnny Hamlet* shares similarities with the brutally violent *Django* (1966), directed by Sergio Corbucci, whose avenging angel protagonist epitomizes the Spaghetti Western antihero. Although the filmmakers of *Johnny Hamlet* characterized Johnny as a vindicator, they also sought to develop the "broody" aspect of this gunfighter, one based on Shakespeare's famously ruminating hero. Using innovative film techniques, *Johnny Hamlet* shows Johnny as a contemplative pistolero.

Keywords: *Johnny Hamlet*, Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Italian Western, Spaghetti Western, Castellari, Corbucci, *Django*, western, revenge.

"It occurred to me that William Shakespeare
could have written some great Westerns!"
– Italian Western director, Sergio Leone¹

Italian Westerns, known as Spaghetti Westerns, illustrate the way in which filmmaking can function as an intercultural art form. Filmed largely in Italy and Spain, Spaghetti Westerns frequently drew on the cinematic talents of Italo-Spanish directors and producers, as well as European and North America artists, to generate action-filled Westerns. These Italian Westerns were usually set in the desolate, wind-swept landscape of the American Old West, especially the

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¹ Frayling, *Once Upon a Time* 75.

Southwest and Mexican borderlands.² The Italian Western, *Johnny Hamlet* (1968), provides a clear example of the cross-cultural spirit of the genre. Shot in Almería and Cuenca Minera (Huelva) Spain—as well as on the lots of Roman studios in Cinecittá and Elios—the film follows the homecoming of Johnny Hamilton, who has returned to Texas after serving as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War. The movie features a multinational cast of French, German, Italian, and Mexican-American actors, whose voices were dubbed (a standard practice in Italian Westerns) for international distribution.

Although *Johnny Hamlet* incorporates the stock traits of Westerns, such as brawling, gunfights, and barroom antics, it intriguingly draws on Shakespeare's Elizabethan play, *Hamlet*, for characterization and plotline. In the interview "Shakespeare in the West," the movie's director, Enzo G. Castellari, recalls the difficulty of making Shakespeare's play into a stylized Italian Western: "It was quite hard, really hard to do *Hamlet* as a Western." On the one hand, a film based on Shakespeare would be, in Castellari's words, "fantastic"; on the other hand, "there is no real action in *Hamlet*." Looking at the production of *Johnny Hamlet* lends visibility to the filmic problem of "no real action in *Hamlet*": the challenge of blending Shakespeare's "hero of consciousness" (Bloom 4) with the popular art form of the Spaghetti Western.

Hamlet Wears a Gun

In *Johnny Hamlet*, the Old West provides a conventional backdrop for a movie replete with the familiar array of fistfights and gun-slinging desperadoes, plus the more unusual Shakespearean-based outcast who carries a revolver instead of a rapier. Yet the appropriation of Shakespeare in Western films was not new to motion pictures. The tragic and dark underpinnings of plays such as *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* were transformed into several post-World War II Westerns: *Yellow Sky* (1948); *Broken Lance* (1954); and *Jubal* (1956), respectively (Días Fernández 178-84). More pointedly, R. S. White documents a handful of Westerns that specifically drew, to varying degrees, on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These transnational films include *A Sage Brush Hamlet* (USA, 1919); *The Arizonian* (USA, 1935); *My Darling Clementine* (US, 1946); *Apocalypse Joe* (Italy/Spain, 1970); and *Lust in the Sun* (France, 1971). White identifies two of the most prominent "shared themes" between *Hamlet* and many Western films: "revenge for injustice in a lawless social environment" and "individual

² Hundreds of European Westerns were produced from the early 1960s to the late 1970s. In the 1950s, Japan also made Western-themed films. However, the tropes and conventions of the Spaghetti Western can be traced to Sergio Leone's *Dollars Trilogy* (1964-66). See Ledbetter ix.

hand-to-hand battle over succession to power” (173-74). To be sure, the motifs of retribution and villainous ambition that occur in *Hamlet* fit suitably into the “getting even” and “fight-for-justice” plotline of many traditional Westerns. As John G. Cawelti writes, “The Western hero is also primarily a man with a gun” (38). However, the presence of retaliatory violence that strongly characterizes the Italo-Western resonated especially well with Shakespeare’s classic drama of betrayal and vengeance.³ It also dovetailed well with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which supplied the storyline for the 1967 Italian Western *The Fury of Johnny Kidd* (as known by three other titles: *Love, Hate and Vengeance*; *The Ultimate Gunfighter*; and *Ride for a Massacre*). In this retelling of Shakespeare’s feud-based play, the families of the Monters and Campos—bitter and antagonistic—ruthlessly destroy each other amid the blossoming of young love. Yet the story of avengement in *Johnny Hamlet* brought a heightened level of bloodshed to Shakespeare’s play, and it augmented the theme of vindication by pitting the hero against a bevy of corrupt ruffians.

The revenge plot in *Johnny Hamlet* proceeds as follows. Johnny (Andrea Giordana, stage names Chip Corman and Burt Nelson) learns of his father, Chester Hamilton’s, death and the hasty marriage of his mother, Gerty (Françoise Prévost) to his uncle, Claude (Horst Frank). Claude tricks Johnny into believing that a Mexican bandito, Santana (Manuel Serrano), killed his father for a cache of hidden gold intended for the Confederacy. Soon after, Johnny sets out to avenge Chester Hamilton’s murder by searching for the cutthroat outlaw Santana, who, with his gang of brigands, is also hunting down Johnny. In the meantime, the town sheriff, Polonio (Giorgio Sammartino), arrests Johnny for the framed slaying of ex-girlfriend, Ophelia (Gabriella Boccardo), and he is temporarily crucified for the alleged murder. When Johnny finally discovers that Claude killed his father, he fatally shoots his uncle in a highly-orchestrated gun fight, one-on-one. Johnny rides off into the proverbial sunset with his quick-on-the-draw sidekick, Horace (Gilbert Roland), who has faithfully helped Johnny win slugfests and fend off his enemies, particularly the henchmen Ross and Guild (Ennio Girolami and Ignazio Spalla).

It was the Italian-Western director Sergio Corbucci who first conceived of *Johnny Hamlet* as a revenge story based on Shakespeare. Although Corbucci ultimately encouraged Castellari to make the film (due to previous commitments on other projects), Corbucci influenced Johnny Hamilton’s characterization as

³ The rise of the Italian Western can be said to have grown out of the political atmosphere of post-Fascist Italy in which corruption and violence mirrored the fictional Western environments of lawless wrongdoing and crime (Simpson 250). Additionally, Giovanna Trento argues that Spaghetti Westerns after Fascism tended to highlight “Marxist, populist, proletarian, revolutionary, Southern, and Third World sympathies” (52). About the politically engaged action cinema of the Spaghetti Western, see Fisher 37-68 and Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns* 217-44.

a vindicator hero. A few years earlier, Corbucci co-wrote the storyline for the 1966 cult hit *Django* with his brother, Bruno Corbucci. This film took the vengeance tale of the Spaghetti Western to a new “violent” and “perverse” level (Goodall 200). Due to its excessive brutality, in fact, it was banned in the United Kingdom until 1993. However, its unprecedented popularity spurred a host of Django spin offs during the 60s and 70s. Arriving in a ghost town with a prostitute, Django (Franco Nero) finds himself in the middle of a brutal conflict between Mexican revolutionaries and racist Ku-Klux-Klan members. Described as an “agent of death,” carrying out “God’s will,” and one who, incidentally, carries a machine gun in a coffin (Maddrey 102), Django possesses a hard cruelty that Johnny Hamilton lacks, even though both characters seek reprisal for the death of a loved one, and even though both demonstrate detached callousness. Significantly, both avengers in these Italian Westerns suffer debilitating hand injuries that nearly disable their ability to fire weapons. These bodily impairments not only deepen the characters’ unforgiving drive to win against the odds, but they also embody their determination to get, in the words of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “Oh, vengeance!” (2:2:501).

In *Django* and *Johnny Hamlet*, the theme of triumphing over physical adversity informs the characterization of both protagonists. Sergio Corbucci had named Django after the legendary French musician Django Reinhardt. As a young man living in a gypsy, Romani encampment, Django had permanently disfigured his hand—and also maimed his leg—in a house fire that nearly ended his life. Despite this hardship, Django went on to fully express his genius through his innovative jazz guitar work (Hughes 59-60). Similar to Django Reinhardt, the Italian Western characters Johnny and Django prevail in spite of tribulations. Moreover, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who states that “Man delights not me” (2:2:310), Johnny and Django seem to prefer solitude, more specifically a drifter’s life, rather than the company of others. Although both fought in the Civil War, Johnny for the South and Django for the North, neither ex-soldier shows a demonstrable eagerness to return home. In fact, Johnny is castigated by his mother and girlfriend for his delayed homecoming. Whether or not the characters’ predilection for drifting reflects back to Django Reinhardt’s life as a gypsy is unclear, as the famed guitarist was known to enjoy a freewheeling lifestyle.⁴ What remains clear is that Bruno Corbucci helped write the screenplay for *Johnny Hamlet* (along with Tito Carpi, Castellari, and Francesco Scardamaglia), and we can see that Django’s loner portrayal reverberates in the figure of Johnny Hamilton. Perhaps keeping in mind the popularity of the Django-avenger prototype, the director of *Johnny Hamlet*, Castellari, states in “Shakespeare in the West” that he and his screenwriting collaborators “did the script thinking to [do] Shakespeare but thinking to the audience to do a Western.”

⁴ For the most recent authoritative biography, see Dregni 2004.



Figure 1. “Broody Hamlet.” Still from ***Johnny Hamlet***. Credit to Daiano Film and Leone Film

Despite its avenger hero, the reference to Shakespeare’s play in the title *Johnny Hamlet* appears to have vexed international distributors. It evinces the cross-cultural complications of multiple translations. Upon its release, the name of the film underwent several baffling changes that either downplayed or eradicated the Shakespearean storyline. In Italy, the title curiously transformed into “Quella Sporca Storia Nel West” (“That Dirty Story in the West”). This title proved so unremarkable that, years later, even Castellari couldn’t exactly remember it. In “Shakespeare in the West,” he states that it had “a strange title, talking of a strange story in the West or something like that.” The Italian retitling of the movie aimed to promote a generic Spaghetti Western with the usual “dirty” villains and “dirty” violence. About this “strange title,” a reviewer called Scherpschutter in “Quella Sporca Storia nel West” writes that,

not the West is said to be dirty, but the story; the use of the demonstrative “quella” indicates in Italian that a specific, well-known story is meant, more than likely Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. You could read the title as “That dirty (Shakespearean) story (set) in the West.”

This interpretation suggests that viewers of the film would recognize the plot as essentially Shakespearean, even though the title’s connection to *Hamlet* is severally compromised.

In the US, distributors of *Johnny Hamlet* branded the movie diversely as “That Dirty Story of the West” and, more provocatively, “The Wild and the Dirty.” However, it was also released in the US with the original label “Johnny Hamlet.” In Germany, the movie bore the title “Django: Die Totengräber Warten Schon” (“Django: The Gravediggers are Already Waiting”) and in Spain

“Johnny El Vengador” (“Johnny the Avenger”). The Swedish title, “Det Kom en Farlig Hämnare” (“There came a Dangerous Avenger”), connoted similar themes of peril and vengeance. These name changes obviously point to Corbucci’s well-known avenger character Django. (The German title, however, most likely hints at the grave digging scene in Act five of *Hamlet* as well). By the time *Johnny Hamlet* entered into production, at least ten Italian Westerns had already capitalized on the commercial success of *Django*. In one of them, *Pocchi Dollari per Django* (“A Few Dollars for Django,” 1966), Castellari served as an uncredited director and Tito Carpi of *Johnny Hamlet* co-wrote the screenplay.



Figure 2. German-language Film Poster. Credit to Daiano Film and Leone Film

The French titling of *Johnny Hamlet*, “Django Porte Sa Croix” (“Django bears the Cross”), also invokes the lone avenger who suffers maltreatment, and it furthermore reminds us that Italian Westerns frequently interwove the symbols and iconography of Catholicism into their scripts.⁵ The Greek title, “O Stavromenos Tou Rio Grande” (“The Crucifixion of the Rio Grande”),

⁵ As Richard Aquila writes, “Reflecting the backgrounds of southern European producers, directors, writers, actors, and audiences, the [Spaghetti Westerns] made extensive use of priests, crucifixes, churches, statues, cemeteries, coffins, and angels” (206).

attests to the mixture of religion and Old West geography typical of the genre. Taken together, these examples indicate a collective uneasiness that box office promoters of *Johnny Hamlet* encountered. An overt reference to *Hamlet*—a play especially celebrated for its philosophical ruminations on life and death—would be, it seems, too risky for selling a shoot-'em-up flick.

An additional US title for *Johnny Hamlet*, “To Kill or Not to Kill?,” parodies Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy. In line with this ridicule, the movie title in Italy was also known as “Uccidere o Non Uccidere?” (“To Kill or not to Kill?”). Likewise, the Brazilian retitling of *Johnny Hamlet*, “Deus Criou O Homem E O Homen Criou O Colt” (“God Created Man and Man Created the Colt” [Revolver]), deflects attention away from arty Shakespeare and, instead, highlights the sardonic humor inherent in many Italian Westerns; such witticism in the Italian Western would be later exploited in the subgenre of Comic Spaghetti Westerns (Fridlund 231-55). Yet the title “To Kill or Not to Kill?” emphasizes the vengeance element of this particular action cinema, and the trailer for *Johnny Hamlet* foregrounds the idea of the lone avenger with a lethal gun. Using a montage of ultraviolet images, the clip opens with a series of moody close-ups punctuated by the sound of gun shots. Halfway through, a voice-over narrates the outline of the movie plot as Johnny’s solitary figure is seen galloping off near the Texas Gulf coast shoreline. The voice-over states:

To kill or not to kill. That was the question. A son hell bent to avenge his father’s murder rides home to find his mother married to her dead husband’s brother. His childhood sweetheart hides a terrible secret in the tortured recesses of her twisted mind. Death and betrayal lurk everywhere for the young soldier who is heir to one of the largest ranches in the Southwest. *Johnny Hamlet* follows a ghostly voice and a trail of death that leads to a stolen fortune in gold.

Fidelity to the film did not necessarily gain top priority in the trailer. Johnny, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, learns that his father has been “Wilfully Murdered”—as the tombstone states in the town’s cavern graveyard—only *after* returning to his family’s homestead. The idea of bloody revenge dominates the marketing of the movie, and the insinuation that Johnny’s mentally disturbed “childhood sweetheart,” Ophelia, has conspired against him redoubles the sense that Johnny, “hell bent,” stands alone against his foes. The family’s estate, called Ranch Elsinor, is located in Danark, Texas. Ranch Elsinor exudes with debased corruption, and the trailer trumps up Johnny as the prodigal heir targeted for assassination. In Shakespeare’s play Hamlet returns home and describes himself in the role of retaliator: “I, the son of a dear murdered, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell” (2:2:502-03). Similarly, Johnny Hamilton assumes the identity of the avenging angel to expose not only the crookedness and vice of Danark, but to attain payback for Chester Hamilton’s demise. In the trailer’s

voice-over, the “ghostly voice” that guides Johnny to seek reprisal adds to the gothic appeal of merciless rancor. The trailer is also haunted by the music of Francesco De Masi, whose song “Find A Man” (co-written by Alessandro Alessandroni and sung by Maurizio Graf) promises the audience tantalizing romance, even though the lyrics speak of man’s disillusionment and woman’s deceit.

Broody, Sunbaked Hamlet

The production and marketing of *Johnny Hamlet* attempted to suppress bookish Shakespeare by accentuating the action in *Hamlet*’s revenge plot, while downplaying the metaphysical ruminations of the hero. The task of converting Shakespeare’s play into a Spaghetti Western involved reshaping Hamlet into a bona fide avenger with a pistol. Yet in many ways, the literary archetype of the Western hero was, indeed, Hamlet. John H. Leinham maintains that the frontier hero is rooted precisely in this literary exemplar. Hamlet “acted on behalf of, but apart from, the larger society to correct some injustice or moral imbalance in the universal schema” (16). This depiction of Hamlet as a virtuous outsider works especially well with the idealized hero of revenge Westerns, who “lived by an individual standard of justice and honor” (Cawelti 53). Such definitions do not fully encompass the vendetta-driven pistolero, or anti-hero, of the Spaghetti Western, who is often motivated by personal gain and/or money. He lives in a male-dominated world where, according to Frayling, masculinity is represented in part by “rugged faces, twitching hands and fetishized weaponry” (*Spaghetti Western* xvi). The anti-hero of the Italian Western inhabits a morally ambiguous world in which guns and horses dictate authority. The unwritten laws of good and evil do not exist, and life depends upon a gritty understanding of humankind’s capacity for dominance and greed: “It is clear that, in order to survive in such a world, one needs a quickness of head and mind, determination, a big dose of cruelty and a good knowledge of weapons” (Brizio-Skov 87).⁶ Shakespeare’s Hamlet does not completely fit the Spaghetti Western profile, although his character does demonstrate knowhow and mettle (additionally, he apparently can fence well). Hamlet strives to fulfill his filial obligation to rectify a wrong, however much he distrusts in humankind and however much he considers the globe a “a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors” (2.2.263-64). Johnny Hamlet resembles the “cool” and “doomed” avenger Django, an outcast,

⁶ Brizio-Skov equates the popularity of the Italian Western anti-hero with the rise of capitalist individualism in the 1960’s and 70’s: “The idea of an individual who achieves success through skillfulness and cold determination is a celebration of the new professional” (87).

amoral gunfighter who is considered “the model for the Spaghetti Western hero” (Cox 92-93). Like Hamlet, however, Johnny enacts vengeance to correct evil behavior directed at his father. His private retribution just so happens to cause an avalanche of death and destruction in his wake.

Notwithstanding the fact *Johnny Hamlet* is an action-driven film, the movie contains some Shakespearean moments that address the psychological complexity of Hamlet as “the gloomy Dane.” The Romantic notion of Hamlet as the broody thinker, or what Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to as the Prince’s “everlasting broodings” (137), expresses itself in the cinematic space of the film. In his seminal essay “Cinema Space,” Alexander Sesonske argues that cinema space is constituted by two fundamental components: screen-space and action-space. The term “screen-space” designates the rectangular two-dimensional frame of the screen upon which visual images are cast: “it provides the basic structure in terms of which we can talk of balance, tension, symmetry, movement” (405). The word “action-space” signifies the three-dimensional place of motion: “Movement within this three-dimensional space, through its relation to the frame, acquires a clarity of magnitude and direction” (405). Action-space allows for artistic creation within the framework of the film. As Katherine Thomas-Jones explains, “The frame created by the screen gives motion a direction and magnitude that it lacks in real life; editing can give motion a new and aesthetically significant rhythm; and, camera work can lend expressive force to even the tiniest movement” (14). In essence, the action-space in *Johnny Hamlet* enables the audience to imagine Johnny as an introspective character. More than a broody avenger intent on recrimination, Johnny is shown to have a troubled mind triggered by war trauma and guilt. These emotional states are exacerbated by Chester Hamilton’s death and Gerty’s marriage to Claude. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet says, “O most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets—It is not, nor it cannot come to good” (1:2:156-58).

The opening of *Johnny Hamlet* uses a dream sequence to suggest that Johnny’s character ails from combat fatigue. Sleeping on a Texan beach, Johnny’s reverie unfolds like a nightmare (Art Director Enzo Bulgarelli). Amid a battery of artillery noise, Johnny covers his blood-stained head with clenched fists even as the camera focuses on Johnny’s horrified and bewildered face (Cinematographer Angelo Filppini). The clamor of arms, along with the frantic neighing of horses, indicates the brutality of a battlefield. Wearing a rebel uniform, Johnny slowly observes a smoke-filled area that evokes a sooty field where weapons have been discharged. The scene morphs into a red, fiery landscape in which a ghastly form, clad in black, looms with his back to Johnny. This unidentified silhouette resides in a frightful region, purgatory or hell itself. Since action-space gives “perceived motion” a “tremendous range” (Thomas-Jones 14), the viewer can easily shift from a battleground to the afterlife. In fact,

the two regions merge together in this cinematic frame to convey Johnny's vexed psychological state. (The conflation of the battleground with the afterlife may also imply that war is Hell). In his nightmarish vision, Johnny does not speak to the spirit, nor does the specter communicate with his son. As James K. Folsom writes, "The conventions of the Western film are all aimed at asking us to understand the Western world visually rather than linguistically" (203). Since this scene doesn't impart verbal information to the audience, it functions as a visual manifestation of Johnny's anxiety and discomposure.

By contrast, the ghost of Hamlet in Shakespeare's play reports critical material to Hamlet: his punishment in purgatory and the details of his horrible murder. The Ghost declares,

Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand
Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatched,
Cut off even in the blossom of my sin.

.....
Oh, horrible, oh, horrible, most horrible! (1:5:74-80)

Hamlet, upon hearing this news, is rattled to the core: "Hold, hold, my heart" (1:5:93). Hamlet's broodings, his "giving substance to shadow" (Coleridge 137), intensify after this supernatural visitation. Yet in *Johnny Hamlet*, the horribleness of war is conflated with the horribleness of a father's murder, and Johnny's broodings are essentially connected to war trauma. At the same time that Johnny sees the apparition of his father, a flashback interrupts the moment of recognition. It shows Hamlet frolicking in edenic surroundings with Ophelia. Filmed in the picturesque Monte Gelato near Rome, a place famous for its cascade of waterfalls and historic mill, this romantic locale conjures up a carefree, innocent time in Johnny's life far from the present cruel realities of slaughter and vice. Like the opening dream, the pastoral world of simplicity suddenly vanishes. Wartime carnage has made Johnny more vulnerable to feelings of perturbation and uneasiness, and thus the flashback permits an interior landscape to develop. The perceived motion of action-space encompasses present and past times, supplying a back narrative (external analepsis) that helps to shed light on Johnny's pain. As Maureen Turim writes, "The flashback is a temporal moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal experience" (1). Johnny has become traumatized by wartime killing, but he will eventually use violence to rectify a way of life now lost. Thus, past, present, and future are fused in a singular filmic scene. As an avenger, he has paradoxically become desensitized to bloodletting.

In the interview "Shakespeare in the West," Castellari discloses a camera technique he invented to give greater intricacy to Johnny's thought process. When Johnny reaches home, he first visits Danark Cemetery. This graveyard is

located in a candle-lit cave attended by the town's comic gravedigger (Franco Latini). Here Johnny discovers the tomb of his father, Chester Hamilton. To portray Johnny's agitated state of mind, Castellari created a mechanism to suggest inner conflict: "I invented something that my colleagues still ask me about: how did you invent that shot? To have Johnny talking to the ghost of his father was quite difficult to find a way, so I invent something—a camera going around, around, around his face, Giordana's face." As Johnny lies next to the gravestone of his dead father, the camera closes in on his upper body and slowly turns around his head. The circular movement reifies the idea that Johnny's mind is spinning with distressed shock. About directing this scene, Castellari states, "I put the camera on a wheel, moving the wheel, and the camera was going around the wheel." At this point, the revolving camera and Johnny's voice-over create the effect of a dramatic Shakespearean soliloquy. Johnny thinks to himself in the English-language version:

All the tears on earth are not enough to cry for a man like you. And me,
Why wasn't I here? Where was I when they killed you? So far away from my
home, from my land for such a long time. Defending a flag, a piece of honorable
cloth instead of protecting my own flesh and blood. Did he call my name at the
very moment like in my dream.

Johnny's angst-ridden emotions run the gamut from disbelief, to guilt, to disgust, to doubt, to sadness. The allusion to his "dream" ("Did he call my name at the very moment like in my dream") has the effect of a flashback (internal analepsis), and it asks the viewer to fill in the gaps that are absent in the vision. In the initial flashback, Johnny does not dialogue with the Ghost, even though the above-quoted soliloquy suggests that the Ghost spoke to Johnny: "Those words in my dream were true. But who did it?" The device of the camera-wheel that Castellari creates further develops Johnny's representation as a broody hero in the macabre scenography of the cemetery.

The horror of Johnny's dream and the graveyard visitation send an impassioned Johnny directly into his absolute commitment for revenge. Johnny's encounter with a group of travelling actors, who are performing Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, augments the visceral impact of Johnny's desire to even the score, while simultaneously situating him in a cerebral atmosphere of grief. After Johnny's dream, the audience hears the Hamlet actor, who is dressed in an Elizabethan costume, rehearse the "To be or not to be" speech. (Johnny later ends up sleeping with the seductive actress who plays the role of Ophelia, and she eventually ends up murdered by Claude's thugs [Stephanie Careddu]). The camera cuts to the lines "to die, to sleep; / To sleep, perchance to dream" just as Johnny opens his eyes from sleep (3:1:66-67). The Hamlet actor then recites, "To be or not to be: that is the question," thus underscoring the philosophical

nature of Hamlet's mediation (3:1:58). Johnny awakens to the reality of Chester Hamilton's death and to the recollection of wartime destruction. This metatheatric moment in *Johnny Hamlet* gives depth to the image of Johnny as an abject avenger. According to Lionel Abel in *Metatheatre*, the term "metatheatre" designates a "theatrical piece about life seen as already theatricalized" (60). More than denoting a play-within-a-play, metatheatre, like metacinema, breaks down the distinction between reality and illusion. Here, the action-space of the photodrama reaches outside of the realistic narrative frame of film into the space of another text and artistic medium. Through the dramatic lens of Shakespeare, the movie fashions Johnny as an Italo-western Hamlet, who directs his ardor and aggression to procure justice on the frontier.



Figure 3. US Film Poster. Credit to Daiano Film and Leone Film

Johnny Hamlet utilizes cinema space to build on the idea of Hamlet as the broody avenger of the Italian Western. In "Space Construction in Adaptations of *Hamlet*," Judit Pieldner distinguishes different uses of action-space in filmic versions of Shakespeare's play, and she coins the phrase "the simultaneous use of space" to describe appropriations of *Hamlet* that relocate the play to the modern era: "The timeless character of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* makes it possible for the story to appear in the most varied space constellations" (56).

The transposition of this late sixteenth-century play to the modern age demands, of course, novel scenery and metaphoric ways of expression (Pieldner 56-57). By design or not, the surreal geography of the mushroom rocks in Cuidad Encantada, Spain, bestows an otherworldly remoteness that reflects Hamlet's pensiveness. It also suggests "the pervasive growth of something fungal, if not rotten, in the state" (Cox 223). In *Johnny Hamlet*, Elsinor castle transmutes into Ranch Elsinor. The nation of Denmark is restyled as Danark, Texas; the threat of Fortinbras turns into the threat of Mexican outlaws; the tragic events in Scandinavia transpire in the mythic context of the wild Old West. Moreover, important episodes in *Hamlet* take place in common cliché Western sites: Johnny wonders about his cowardliness while downing shots of whisky with Horace in a saloon; Gertrude dies from a gunshot wound on the desert floor; and Ophelia's murdered body floats in a river with a revolver next to her. The Spaghetti Western hero disguised as the Anglophone Hamlet becomes a metaphor for the avenge loner of the mythic West. While the crew of *Johnny Hamlet* created a film that stayed true to revenge action of the Italian Western, they also expanded the role of the hero to show Johnny as a contemplative gunfighter.

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