

THE END OF HISTORY AND AMERICA FIRST: 1990S HOLLYWOOD WESTERNS
AND POST-COLD WAR AMERICA

By

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To my two Andreas: my Mom, who was there when I started, and my wife Andrea,
without whom I never would have finished

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In the early to mid-1990s, a substantial stream of Hollywood Westerns again nourished American audiences. My dissertation explains why the Western cycle of the 1990s occurred. Chapter 1 surveys the critical literature on the genre in the '90s, which usually asserts genre revisionism as the cause. While revisionism is crucial, I assert that the larger national, even global, events of the '90s equally influence these films. Following Phillip Wegner's cultural analysis of the era as a period of openness and uncertainty, prior to the restrictive tragedy of 9/11, I argue that the reopening of the frontier and representations of mythic history in the Western support Wegner's analysis of the 1990s as an open, experimental space.

Chapter 2 closely examines numerous '90s Westerns and offers an overview of how these films changed some generic conventions to adapt to the post-Cold War political climate by branching into liberal and conservative modes.

In Chapter 3, I turn to Clint Eastwood and the development of his *senior persona*, which reflects an aging American population recalling its violent 20th century past. *Unforgiven* (1993) most obviously incorporates his senior persona and addresses a

violent past in frontier narratives. Traditional in terms of style, it subverts generic frameworks but ultimately affirms them within a new ideological balance.

Chapter 4 examines *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), which returns to the literary roots of the Western. It includes revisionism, like positive Native American portrayals and a sense of communal hope. This idyllic commune trying to survive a global struggle suggests the American populace during the Cold War, as the codes of racial struggle suggest the hidden costs of a brighter future.

Chapter 5 addresses *The Quick and the Dead* (1995), a postmodern piece that references Sergio Leone's films. The film is a pastiche that touches upon multiple critiques of Cold War American society, but that ultimately can only suggest a violent fantasy of revolution that results in the transition of power to a slightly more benign heroic individual.

Chapter 6 summarizes the Western cycle and concludes by examining its end, focusing on *Dead Man* (1995).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: CRITICISM OF THE 1990S WESTERN

In a famous scene from the first great film mythologization of the Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday story, John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946), Doc takes over for an inebriated Shakespearean actor and finishes Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. As Doc is dying from tuberculosis, the speech reflects his own existential dilemma of having to choose between selfishness and communal responsibility, which in turn suggests the existential dilemmas the United States and the world faced after World War II.

Nearly fifty years later, the Wyatt/Doc story is retold again in *Tombstone* (1993), but, in this version, the Shakespearean soliloquy is the St. Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V*. This speech's emphasis on camaraderie and a call to duty reflects Doc and Wyatt's friendship and eventual commitment to law and order and cleaning up the town (as well as the villainous Cowboys' gang mentality)—an appropriate thematic set for the United States post-Cold War, as the frontier narratives of the Western film genre were called upon to guide a nation looking for direction in the uncertain aftermath of the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. The Western film was omnipresent in the 1950s and '60s, but as the Vietnam War and American Cultural Revolution disrupted the nation's belief in the Cold War resistance to Soviet communism and cast the U.S.A.'s global involvement and expansion in doubt, so too was questioned the anachronistic casual violence, racism, and sexism of the classic Western. After 1969, production of Westerns rapidly dwindled through the 1970s, and although television Westerns were still popular, their numbers also declined. The low point was 1984, as no Western series aired on television, and the genre had a feature film market share of zero (Neale 29). The '80s seemed the

California of the Hollywood Western, the end of the frontier, as the Western as a major Hollywood franchise seemed all but dead. Currently, in 2012, and for the last decade or so, the output of Hollywood Westerns has returned to a trickle similar to the 1980s: one or two feature films a year that turn a profit if of high quality, an occasional television series, and a number of straight to video releases that satisfy niche markets. But not so long ago, in the early to mid-1990s, a substantial stream of Westerns again nourished American audiences, highlighted by two very popular Westerns, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Unforgiven* (1993), each winning the Academy Award for Best Picture—all the more shocking when considering that no Western had won that award since *Cimarron* in 1931.

This dissertation attempts to explain why the Western cycle of the 1990s occurred. One important reason is often-cited: following *Dances With Wolves*, which transformed the genre by making the “Indians” (in this case, the Lakota Sioux) the “good guys” and the Union soldiers the “bad guys,” the genre formula was revitalized by new levels of diverse characters and their stories—Westerns starring American Indians, women, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and others. Of course, this was not wholly new with Westerns—with thousands of Westerns produced into the 1970s, almost every permutation of the formula can be found, from gun-toting Joan Crawford in *Johnny Guitar* (1954) to sympathetic Indians and a bumbling Custer in *Little Big Man* (1970). What distinguished many of the ‘90s Westerns was a more thorough updating of the genre to reflect contemporary notions of the roles of women, American Indians, and non-white races in both the history of the west and of ‘90s America—as women and “minorities” climbed the corporate and political ladders, their roles in American history

were also rediscovered and inserted into the mythologies of the frontier. Even a conservative, traditional Western like *Tombstone* still had a neutral portrayal of a Mexican family wedding and a modernized, near-feminist love interest for Wyatt Earp—although balanced by a villainous Mexican stereotyped gang member and a former prostitute addicted to laudanum.

The post-Cold War era of the 1990s, however, is another factor behind the '90s Western cycle, and the focus of my arguments. Viewed from an American, always-already frontier-influenced perspective, the fall of the Berlin Wall, beginning on November 9th, 1989, was the equivalent of the 1865 end of the Civil War and the opening of a new frontier. Berlin, surrounded by the Iron Curtain, was analogous to every besieged frontier outpost and circled wagon train surrounded by "savage Indians." With the "savage" Soviet empire defeated, or at least on the run, the United States was now able to "leave the fort" and pursue new frontiers with resources freed from the stalemated conflict of the Cold War. The '90s Western cycle both looks back at the classic Cold War Western and imagines the future after it.

Considering the '90s Western as the capstone of the classical Western, it is a revealing coincidence that editor Jim Kitses finds the first of the great post-WWII Westerns, *My Darling Clementine*, to recur as a unifying thread in the 1998 collection of essays, *The Western Reader*, one of the first books to substantially address the '90s Western cycle. Kitses is one of the foundational analysts of the Western film, with his 1969 study, *Horizons West*. His introduction to *The Western Reader* explains the '90s Western as post-modern, where the "anti-Western," or revisionist Western, has become the core of the genre, always reacting to the classical, foundational past. Kitses' return

to *Clementine*, and his admittedly retroactive ideological reading of the film, positing that film as the urtext of the genre while still locating post-modern readings within it, indicates a nascent recognition of the ‘90s Westerns as the post-Cold War bookend to *Clementine*’s Cold War beginnings—a capitalist, cattle-driving Wyatt Earp and his brothers riding into the foreign territory of Tombstone, eliminating the threatening element, and establishing a safe haven for communal democracy.

Kitses further suggests, in his opening analysis of the ‘90s Westerns, that revisionism, particularly of race and gender elements, is the defining characteristic of the postmodern Western:

Blending mythology and demythology, revisionism and nostalgia, many of these films rework ancient conventions with panache and imagination, to incarnate the post-modern Western. An increasingly code-savvy image-culture persistently fine-tunes the Western now to define its frontier in racial and gender terms. (16)

This “revisionist shadow” slowly lengthens until, Kitses argues, it has become the dominant mode of the genre:

If the Western is no longer the grand narrative, central, totalizing, hegemonic, it has already shown its resiliency and value as a set of codes the can speak with authority to a new millennium. The totality of remarkable works corrective of America stretching back to the 60s has not eroded or diminished or killed off the Western, it now *is* the Western. (21)

This is Kitses’ key point: for decades, the anti-Western has produced the finest, most interesting examples of the genre. The classical Western, however defined, now serves as a starting point from which the contemporary anti-Western departs.

The primary essay for understanding the role of historic and genre revisionism in the ‘90s Western was also published in 1998, with Rick Worland and Edward Countryman’s “The New Western American Historiography and the Emergence of the New American Western.” Worland and Countryman begin by comparing the two modes

of Western history, the academic histories derived primarily from Frederick Jackson Turner, and the popular culture histories (primarily narratives) derived from Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West Show":

Like Turner, Cody had a vision of the West's past. Unlike Turner's, it did not consist of advancing stages of civilization, from trappers and traders through farmers until it culminated in city folk. Again unlike Turner's vision, the process that made Cody's West was not essentially peaceful...Whatever else might be said about the handling of Indians by Cody and his many successors, they at least possess enormous vitality. In Turner and the work that he inspired they figure hardly at all. (183)

While Richard Slotkin (to whom I shall return later) traces the narrative histories of "savage war" conflict much farther back, using the Wild West Show as an analytic starting point is justifiable because its visual, motion-based performance is an obvious precursor to the Western film. And as Worland and Countryman further argue, "for all their gaudy showmanship...Cody's spectacles recognized the fundamental truth that the land had never been free" (183). They summarize these opposing histories: "Cody and Turner both had stories to tell. Each story had and still has its truth. It is the academics' loss (in terms of both money and cultural influence) if their version of the Western story has been discounted for public consumption" (184).

They then turn their attention to more recent histories of the West, a movement that unsuccessfully tried to break with the term "frontier" (184). They identify the "fallow period" of the Western film as between *The Outlaw Josey Wales* in 1976 and *Dances with Wolves* in 1990, and then discuss the new movement in historicism:

In the late 20th century, it is no longer possible to write American history in terms of simple triumph. This is not because of mere 'political correctness' or pressure from interest groups. The 'new Western history,' associated with White, Limerick and a growing number of others, is part of a larger enterprise that has aimed at 'recovering the diversity of the American past'.

Newer historiography is more complex, both socially and morally. So are newer Westerns, and that is where intersection between the two streams of understanding finally appears to be possible. One of the central themes in the past two decades' historical work is the destruction of the hoary notion that Indians were simply and inexorably pushed back. What historians have seen instead is summed up by White's concept of a 'middle ground' on which empires, European colonies and Indian republics intersected, mingled and co-existed. (184-5)

This new, more complex version of a "melting pot" that include American Indians as primary characters also intersects with the revisionist Western, similar to how Kitses argues for the current primacy of revisionist Westerns. They write:

Refusing the by now well-worn paths of embittered revisionism or callow parody, the films of the 90s may describe a distinct 'post-Cold War Western' that attempts to balance a range of issue both historic and generic. Among these are attempts to assimilate the past (primarily the Vietnam War period and the acute racial consciousness fostered and reinforced by the civil rights movement); and an inescapable awareness of the genre's complex heritage in the films of Ford, Peckinpah and Leone especially. Combined, these two sub-texts suggest new efforts to move forward without ignoring or simply inverting the formal and ideological styles of earlier films. (187-8)

As with Kitses, Worland and Countryman heavily emphasize the revisionist aspect, but with a stronger link to the revisionist movement in academic histories of the West. And although there is a mention of "post-Cold War," what exactly that means for American during the 1990s remains unstated—perhaps because it was as yet unknown, still a period of uncertainty in 1998, before the tragic events of 9/11/2001 defined the decade.

Genre historian Steve Neale then examines Westerns since the 1970s in 2002, when the '90s cycle had clearly run dry, like a tapped-out gold rush vein. This greater historical distance is perhaps why Neale is able to move towards more recognition of the conservative strain of Western films, along with a bit more acknowledgment of the importance of the end of the Cold War. Neale's analysis of the '90s Western does include a version of revisionism, but he expands on Kitses' "reduction of the male hero"

and argues for another strand of the '90s Western, a more reactionary one. He first lists about forty Western feature films and television series released or aired between 1990 and 1995, and he traces this Western cycle back to '80s films such as *Silverado* (1985), *Pale Rider* (1985), *War Party* (1988), *Glory* (1989), and *Powwow Highway* (1989), grouping these films into two categories, or "threads": neo-traditional and new revisionist. Unlike the parodies and bitter anti-Westerns of the 1970s, the neo-traditional films restored both the Westerner male hero as the defender of the nuclear family and pioneer communities and the viability of an open frontier of opportunity, using standard generic elements and plotlines in a respectful manner. Writing of the reuse of these traditional elements, Neale states, "Rather than parody, quote or pastiche them, however, these films mobilized and recycled them with reverent solemnity, in the case of *Pale Rider*, and with enthusiastic exuberance, in the case of *Silverado*" (30). He sees *Lonesome Dove* (1989) as clearly fitting in this category.

On the other hand, new revisionist films began to emerge and include other, repressed voices within Western-like films: "*Glory*, *War Party*, and *Powwow Highway* began to complicate the picture, adding new elements to the cycle's mix of formulae, story-types, and cultural and ideological characteristics" (31). These new elements relate primarily to the prominence of African-American and American Indian characters, characters that Westerns usually presented as stereotypical and in minor supporting roles. Together, the two modes form the core of the '90s Western:

However, neo-traditionalism and new revisionism now consolidated themselves as two consistent cyclic threads, as two distinct but sometimes overlapping centers around which the cycle as a whole took shape. Feeding into and out of an equally expanding and equally plural 'New Western' culture, a culture that included novels, paintings, vacations, lifestyles and a revitalized country music scene, as well as a new wave of revisionist

academic histories, Westerns were able, in what was now a new post-Cold War world, to reassess as well as reassert a central element in America's national mythology." (32)

Neale further defines the common ground between the two threads:

What I would want to add is that both threads found themselves using or alluding to such fundamental conventions as the shoot-out or battle...and that both threads found themselves using or alluding to the trope of the frontier as a space in which personal or communal realization is, was, or might once have been a possibility. (33)

We have here the seeds for a more comprehensive socio-political analysis of the Western in the 1990s: roots in the '80s, the development of two connected yet opposed genre paths intensifying in the '90s after the Cold War, and the reemergence of a frontier space of possibilities for the individual and the community (as opposed to the pessimistic closing of the frontier in late '60s and early '70s Westerns). Previous scholars had noted the emergence of the '90s cycle and many of its aspects, but with his comprehensive survey of Westerns in the '80s and '90s, Neale has quantified the importance of the cycle. While production of Westerns has never ceased (except for the nadir of 1984 that Neale notes), and production is very unlikely to return to the levels of even the '70s, let alone the '50s or '60s, there was clearly a marked increase of Westerns in the early '90s (compared to the '80s), a period which coincides with the end of the Cold War. This increase in the popularity of the feature Western marks my starting point, and to sufficiently explain the importance of the post-Cold War '90s to the '90s Western film, I must move outside of analyses of the Western genre and frontier history.

In America Between the Wars: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror, Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier detail the political climate of the U.S.A. after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the end

of the Cold War. They argue that while America had a sense of relief and cautious optimism after the Cold War, there was also anxiety concerning what the nation's path and purpose should be without the defining opposition of the communist Soviet bloc. In this context, Chollet and Goldgeier examine two influential thinkers of the moment, Francis Fukuyama and Patrick Buchanan, whose ideas suggested to many the possibility that America could retire, to a degree, from the international scene and turn more towards a self-examination of domestic issues. In 1989, Fukuyama proposed that the end of history, in terms of the now-inevitable ideological triumph of liberal democracy and equality over forms of totalitarianism and communism, had arrived. Chollet and Goldgeier explain that to many, Fukuyama seemed to say that "the big challenges were over and that the United States could move on to other things, especially at home" (23).

Similarly, although from a much more conservative viewpoint, Buchanan argued for "a new nationalism, a new patriotism, a new foreign policy that puts America first and, not only first, but second and third as well" (23). While the influence of Buchanan's political discourse was relatively brief compared to Fukuyama's better developed and enduringly provocative arguments, Buchanan's flash of popularity (he won over twenty percent of the vote in the 1992 Republican primaries against the incumbent President Bush) exemplified a persistent American conservatism and nationalism that reacted to impending globalization. And although it would be a gross oversimplification to claim that America had become isolationist—for example, the most important "Clint" of the 1990s, President Clinton, certainly focused on domestic issues in his 1992 campaign, but he also argued that foreign and domestic policy were intimately tied—there was a

certain sense in the public sphere that given the end of the Cold War, America's international interventions were no longer of utmost importance and internal issues were now more of a priority.

Oddly enough, the events surrounding the invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf War seemed to confirm this, as President Bush saw America as part of international coalition, not the heavyweight leader in the fight against communism (as described by Chollet and Goldgeier):

"No longer can a dictator count on East-West confrontation to stymie concerted United Nations action against aggression," Bush told a joint session of Congress in September 1990, just a month after Saddam invaded Kuwait." A new partnership of nations has begun." He added, "We're now in sight of a United Nations that performs as envisioned by its founders." (7)

With most of the leading nations in seeming agreement, the United States would partner with many nations, as equals, in addressing foreign affairs, enabling America to focus on domestic issues. This turn inward assisted Bill Clinton's 1992 bid for the presidency; as noted, Clinton addressed foreign affairs, but he also realized he could not match Bush's experience in the international and military arenas. Thus, Clinton stressed that the conflicts of the Cold War were over and instead looked forward to a more open future; as he said in a 1991 speech: "Having won the Cold War, we must not now lose the peace...what we need to elect in 1992 is not the last president of the twentieth century, but the first president of the twenty-first century" (qtd. in Chollet, 38). Clinton's subsequent victory indicated that American voters, for the moment, agreed.

Similarly examining the 1990s, but from a cultural studies and theoretical perspective, Phillip Wegner views the era as haunted by its Cold War past but also as a space "of openness and instability, of experimentation and opportunity, of conflict and

insecurity—a place, in other words, wherein history might move in a number of very different directions” (9). Wegner could very well be describing the resurrection of the American frontier myth, the traditional history-centered vehicle of America’s belief in the limitless possibilities of the future. Almost simultaneously with the beginning of what Wegner calls the “long nineties,” the space where “history might move in a number of very different directions,” representations of the historical frontier in film Westerns returned in force to Hollywood. In 1989, *Lonesome Dove*, about two aging Texas Rangers on one last adventure, became a television mini-series sensation. Then, in 1990, *Dances with Wolves*, about a Civil War veteran heading to the closing frontier and interacting with the Lakota Sioux, was released and became an award-winning box-office success, and the film Western enjoyed a boom not seen since the 1970s. The return to the Western, ostensibly the most American of film genres, and its popular, mythic examination of ideological conflicts from both American history and contemporary culture and politics reflect both Buchanan’s call to consider “America first” and his emphasis on renewing nationalism and patriotism. Concurrently, the revisionist aspects of these new Westerns, which included relatively more complex representations of groups previously marginalized in Westerns, best exemplified by the more “politically correct” and improved portrayals of American Indians, coincides with Fukuyama’s “end of history,” the triumph of democracy and liberal equality—America needed a revised, inclusive history and relatively liberal ideology of equality to replace the paranoid and polarizing tendencies of the Cold War. Together, these approaches to the Western suggest some of the ideological hopes and self-image of the post-Cold War United States through the Clinton era; the nation had survived decades of strife and war, and

now seemed ready to move into new frontiers and away from the memories of a troubled past.

While Wegner touches on a wide range of both literary and film genres, and gives particular attention to science fiction, one genre that lies largely outside of his purview is that of the Western, despite its prominence in the period. I want to argue that the Western re-emerges so significantly in this moment precisely because of this quintessentially American film genre's capacity to address and deal with the problems of the moment Wegner identifies. As Michael McKeon argues of genres more generally,

Genres provide a conceptual framework for the mediation (if not the "solution") of intractable problems, a method for rendering such problems intelligible. The ideological status of genre, like that of all conceptual categories, lies in its explanatory and problem—"solving" capacities. And generic form itself, the dense network of conventionality that is both elastic and profoundly regulative, is the prior and most tacitly powerful mechanism of the explanatory method of genre. Genres fill a need for which no adequate alternative method exists. And when they change, it is as part of a change both in the need they exist to fill and in the means that exist for its fulfillment. (20)

The '90s Western, then, attempts to solve the problems related to ideas of new frontiers in post-Cold War America. The reopening of the frontier in the Western literalizes Wegner's point about the 1990s as an open, experimental space where "history might move in a number of very different directions"; the Western, a representation of history via the frontier myth, fills part of that open space and suggests revisions of American history by re-writing the Western, and thus American history, with frontier narratives that emphasize American Indians, women, African-Americans, and other under-represented groups and their stories. The history of the frontier is revised, not forgotten, and the Western is "back in the saddle."

The 1990s Western reappeared in response to the end of the Cold War, but it also had to address a daunting century of Westerns, consisting of thousands of films.

Dances with Wolves and *Lonesome Dove*, the originary '90s Western film texts, begin this response to the genre's history. Beginning with these texts, Chapter 2 offers an overview of how the many films in the 1990s cycle changed some generic conventions, and retained others, to adapt to the new political climate.

In Chapter 3, instead of focusing on one specific film, I turn to a singular icon, Clint Eastwood, and the development of his senior persona, a changing star image that perfectly reflects an aging American population looking back on its violent, and sometimes heroic, 20th century past. My primary text is *Unforgiven*, the film which most obviously incorporates his senior persona and also most obviously addresses a past of violence in frontier narratives. Arguably the most traditional of the new anti-westerns in terms of style, it subverts generic frameworks but ultimately affirms them within a new ideological balance that includes a sense of victory after the Cold War.

Chapter 4 examines the 1992 version of *The Last of the Mohicans*—a return to the literary roots of the genre, rather than an anti-Western. It includes some minor updates, like positive American Indian portrayals and reactions, and an indication of communal hope often lacking elsewhere. The idyllic commune of Indians and settlers caught in a global struggle they can only hope to survive reflects the American populace during the Cold War, as the codes of racial struggle suggests an allegorical extinction of some but a hopeful future for others.

In Chapter 5, I address *The Quick and the Dead*, a postmodern piece that updates the generic code through referencing the plot of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969)

and integrating the stylistics of its director, Sergio Leone, arguably considered the greatest Western director to contemporary audiences. However, the film ultimately feels flat and recycled, lacking an innovative spark, and in that regards, reflects the confusion and uncertainty of the nineties.

In Chapter 6, I conclude with a brief overview of the major '90s Westerns and their relation, as a group, to '90s America. By focusing on Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), the brilliant capstone to the cycle, I indicate the overall critique of the Western and the frontier in the nineties.

Before I proceed, however, I have two notes on methodology. The first concerns the experimental approach of this dissertation, as I use different methods of analysis in each of the remaining chapters. Chapter 2 uses a capsule approach, briefly examining dozens of films to provide an overview of the '90s cycle. Chapter 3 contains longer capsules, but each is focused on a particular star, Clint Eastwood, and one of his films. The core of Chapter 4 is a close analysis of the "Glen Falls" sequence from *The Last of the Mohicans* and the changes in its presentation in two film versions. The analysis of the 1992 film version also depends on an experimental approach based on a classic film studies essay by Charles Eckert. Chapter 5, broken into twenty-five short sections, is based on another classic film studies essay, from *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Similarly, part of Chapter 6 also is broken into short segments, but this time each with a title beginning with one of the letters of the film studied, *Dead Man*. The use of fragmented segments for cultural analysis can be traced back to at least Walter Benjamin, and it seems a particularly apt format for postmodernism, and the rise of hypertext in the '90s. While Westerns have little to do with the internet, they are a parallel product of that period,

and the ‘90s cycle certainly has postmodern aspects. My hope is that a fragmented approach to these films reveals some of the contradictory ideologies at work within them, derived from the more fragmented socio-political context that the Western attempts to unify.

The second methodological debt is to Richard Slotkin. Anyone who has read Slotkin’s mammoth examination of the frontier myth since the contact period will recognize his influence on my work, particularly that of *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, which focuses on film Westerns in his analyses of the frontier myth’s relation to American politics and society. *Gunfighter Nation* was first published in 1992 and ends with the 1980s; I like to think that this dissertation, in a small way, could serve as an epilogue on the ‘90s.

CHAPTER 2

GENRE POLITICS: THE WESTERN FILM AND THE 1990S

Narratives of the American frontier date back to at least the arrivals of the early European explorers to North America—and arguably to even earlier, when considering our current understanding of the instability of the concept of “frontier” and the surviving narratives of the many American Indian tribes. Journals, captivity narratives, sermons, paintings, dime novels, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, and myriad other texts contributed to the frontier mythos, and in the twentieth century, film’s ability to capture dynamic images of the former frontier landscapes, combined with the narrative style and genre production of the classical Hollywood cinema, has resulted in the exemplary form of the mythological frontier narrative, the Hollywood Western film. The Western film is as old as Hollywood, of course—with the birth of Hollywood located in southern California in the early 1900s, frontier life was still relatively fresh—and scholarship on the many Westerns produced during the silent era and throughout the 1930s has thrived in recent years. In particular, “B” Westerns, which followed the featured “A” film in “double features,” flourished in the 1930s, with stars like Tom Mix and a young John Wayne. However, when discussing the modern, feature film form of the genre, John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, released in 1939, is usually considered the first great exemplar of the modern Western film. World War II temporarily delayed the full flowering of the genre (many “B” and some feature Westerns were produced during the war, but war films and even film noirs better matched the temper of the times), but after the war, the golden era of the Western film commenced, with regular production of feature Westerns, and with most of the classical masterpieces of the genre released between

1946 (*My Darling Clementine*) and 1969 (*The Wild Bunch*)—1969 often considered the symbolic ending year of the Western (although, of course, production continued).

As this period matched the U.S.A.'s ascension to global superpower during the era of the Cold War, the popularity of the Western genre can be attributed to the fact that the genre reflects on national destiny and expansion in a time of relative global hegemony. Perhaps not so coincidentally, Westerns are most commonly set between 1865 and 1890, the period of America's post-Civil War expansion across the continent until the closing of the frontier (according to the U.S. Census of 1890). The following John Wayne (playing Tom Dunson) dialogue, uttered prior to outdrawing the nameless "Mexican" gunfighter, from Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948) summarizes the ruthless, expansionist ideology of the time:

Dunson: Tell Don Diego, tell him that all the land north of that river's mine. Tell him to stay off of it.

Mexican: Oh, but the land is his.

Dunson: Where did he get it?

Mexican: Oh many years ago by grant and patent, inscribed by the King of all of Spain.

Dunson: You mean he took it away from whomever was here before. Indians maybe.

Mexican: Maybe so.

Dunson: Well, I'm takin' it away from him.

Mexican: Others have thought as you, señor. Others have tried.

Dunson: And you've always been good enough to stop 'em?

Mexican: Amigo, it is my work.

Dunson: Pretty unhealthy job. (He backs up and warns Matt.) Get away, Matt. (Dirks)

Dunson wins the gunfight and establishes his ranching territory, and as the "river" here is the Rio Grande somewhere along the current Texas/Mexico border, the scene encapsulates the United States' expansion via manifest destiny into the western territories ("territories" from the United States' perspective, obviously).

While the Western genre as a whole seems linked through the frontier myth to dominant American ideologies, individual films within the genre vary widely in both their formal elements and their sociopolitical subtexts. Rick Altman writes of genres:

Whenever a lasting fit is obtained—which it is whenever a semantic genre becomes a syntactic one—it is because a common ground has been found, a region where the audience's ritual values coincide with Hollywood's ideological ones. (99)

Altman views a genre that endures, that is agreed upon by both audiences and producers, as a genre that melds both "semantic" and "syntactic" elements. While these terms are closely related and often debated, they can be used to differentiate two methods of constructing genre definitions. As Altman views them, "semantic" genre definitions favor a listing of the more basic elements of a genre, such as a frontier town or a cowboy with a six-gun, without necessarily stressing the connections between the elements. "Syntactic" approaches prefer to emphasize the meaning-giving structures (for example, narrative) which connect semantic elements, such as a motive of revenge resulting in a shoot-out in the town (which incorporates the semantic elements of the frontier town and the gun of the cowboy). The changing interrelations between the semantic elements and syntactic structures reveal changes in both audiences and Hollywood producers. By isolating and analyzing these changes, numerous histories of the Western that interpret changes in American ideologies have been written, and after briefly discussing the changes in the post-World War II Western, I will examine the changing elements and ideologies of the post-Cold War Western.

The American Western film genre is usually viewed as achieving a level of formal perfection in the 1940s and early 50s. Such films as *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Red River* (1948), and *Shane* (1953) are hailed as the archetypes of the form, the purest of

Westerns. From my perspective, those are the films which most closely match dominant American ideology of the Cold War period. Western scholars also note the presence of critical Westerns, which examine the contradictions of the Western, in the 1950s, films such as *High Noon* (1952) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954). Although usually viewed as examples of a genre locomotive that is running out of steam, I argue these genre-critical works indicate the eventual collapse of the ideology that underpins the genre. The 1950s, the decade after the American triumph over fascism, is the decade where a unified national ideology has achieved its greatest appeal, homogenizing the nation to an unprecedented (and heretofore unduplicated) extent. The doctrine of liberal individualism, positing a community of individuals who are completely independent of social forces but are still able to operate as a culture under the net of rationality, has been present throughout American history; but in the Cold War era, it had a heightened applicability. As the celebration of "the individual" was at its high point, "the individual" became meaningless as all individuals were supposed to be the same perfect American, allied against the "Others" of Communism and homosexuality and fighting for the nuclear family and the suburbs. America was in danger of slipping into the very fascist, conformist type of society that it had just defeated in the war.

The Western responded to the challenge. The ideology of the lone white male against the Other, which had seemed to serve America so well for so long, began to be questioned. *Broken Arrow* (1950) addressed centuries of discrimination against American Indians; *The Searchers* (1956) exposed the irrational racist hatred of such a figure; *High Noon* perpetuated the loner myth, but exposed the society surrounding the individual as corrupt, consisting of self-interested and easily peer-pressured cowards.

The hero was no longer a cowboy that fought to establish a family and a society, but rather a self-aware gunfighter struggling merely to survive (*The Gunfighter*, 1950).

Nostalgic Westerns ran rampant, as the myth of American individuality was replaced by corporate conformity. Will Wright argues that the corporate Western (*Rio Bravo* in 1959, *The Magnificent Seven* in 1960) quickly became an alternative new model for the Western in the late 1950s and early 1960s, consisting of a small team of professional gunfighters working together to succeed, similar to a sports team, instead of the lone cowboy with a sidekick.

In the 1960s, the critique and demythologization of the lone Westerner hero proliferated. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *Ride the High Country* (1962) both retained a bit of nostalgia for the Western hero while focusing on his passing; however, Sergio Leone violently severed most of the ligaments which still connected the Westerner ideal to modern America society. Along with star Clint Eastwood, Leone's "Man with No Name" "Spaghetti Western" trilogy bared the arbitrariness and ruthlessness of the Western hero, reducing his motivations to simple greed. Extremely popular, the films struck a chord with the anti-establishment culture of the 1960s in its combination of self-destructive nihilism and social critique. However, not all Westerns were team-oriented or complete critiques of the hero; what subtly endured the transition was the stress on the individual male hero opposed to society. Earlier Westerns had fluctuated between the communal and individual hero, but what survived was the emphasis on the loner, the outsider, the "in-between" hero. Even though Leone, and later Peckinpah, irreparably criticized the specific syntax of the Western hero enabling the establishment of a community, the element of the lone hero endured. This

transition is most clearly seen in the career of Clint Eastwood; with films such as *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) and *Dirty Harry* (1971), Eastwood shifted the loner Western hero from the frontier to the city, from Westerns to action thrillers. Similar movements occurred in science fiction: "Space, the final frontier" in the *Star Trek* television series (beginning in 1966—note that the series mostly shows the corporate team of heroes, but individual episodes would often isolate the Captain Kirk character as a lone pioneer figure, sometimes accompanied by his sidekick "Other" Spock, an alien "Vulcan"), Charlton Heston mediating between devolved humans and intelligent apes in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), the science fiction/Western hybrid *Westworld* (1973).

But following the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the Westerner-type hero was irrevocably changed. Gone was much of the social responsibility, replaced by twisted self-interest, racial hatred, and psychoses. The hero still won, but the film's ending was often more somber or bitter than happy. The Western only survived as dark self-critiques (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* in 1971, *High Plains Drifter* in 1973) or self-parodies (*Little Big Man* in 1970, *Blazing Saddles* in 1974), both forms allowing the viewer simultaneously to enjoy the lynchpins of the Western myth while laughing at its absurd limitations.

The fight for civil rights was perhaps the predominant factor in this generic revolution. Alongside the struggle for African-American civil rights, American Indians began to speak out and act against hundreds of years of genocide and discrimination. Hollywood joined the fight, to a degree (perhaps most famously by Marlon Brando boycotting his 1973 Academy Award for *The Godfather* and having Sacheen Littlefeather, an American Indian woman, speak in his place in protest of the U.S.A.'s

treatment of Indians), by producing Westerns which ridiculed the racial politics of earlier Westerns, those of the "faceless savage" (*Little Big Man*, *Blazing Saddles*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* in 1976). Feminism also emerged, demanding a revision of the Western, although progressive Western roles for women were still relatively limited (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* being one interesting counter-example).

Ultimately, the Western could not accommodate such extensive revision to both its syntactic structures and semantic elements, based on the "settlers versus savage" frontier narratives and stereotypes. Sporadic attempts at revisionism occurred, like *100 Rifles* (1969), which includes relatively complex African-American, Mexican, women, and American Indian characters. Some Westerns included American Indians, but only in a comedic setting (*Little Big Man*). Conventional Westerns endured for a time on television, where classic shows such as *Rawhide*, *Gunsmoke*, and "Bonanza" could play out standard Western conflicts and changes for traditional audiences. But eventually, the changes in the semantics of the Western were too great. The popularity of the Western had been built on a racial opposition of white heroes and stereotypical "red/Indian/savage" villains, with women, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and Mexicans/Mexican-Americans relegated to stereotypical supporting roles. The semantic shift to these under-represented groups destroyed the appeal of the genre to its traditional audience, and younger audiences seemed interested only in self-mocking Westerns that parodied the genre. In the 1980s, sporadic attempts at Western feature films and television series appeared, only to fail at the votes of Nielsen ratings and weekly box-office figures. The cultural turmoil of the 1970s suggests that perhaps the

Western requires a stable, unified, and affluent society to thrive (similarly, the feature Western was less popular during much of The Great Depression and World War II).

Still, some elements of the Western survived. The figure of the lone individual on the fringes of society, whose mission is to defeat and kill his symbolic Other counterpart in a final bloody shoot-out, endured in other genres. In science fiction, the Other became monstrous aliens. In horror, the Other was a multitude of non-human supernatural creatures. In action/adventure, the Other reappeared as a twisted product of mass society. The white male hero of these genres braved a symbolic frontier (outer space, the subconscious, the degraded city), killed its version of the Other, and made it his own (men of other races, and some women, did emerge as the protagonists of these films, such as in the action "Blaxploitation" films of the '70s, but white male heroes still dominated the genres). However, none of these genres had the privileged status of the Western because they had no claim of *history*, of the (imagined) reality of the foundations of America. The Western always had a footing in historical reality, but these modern replacements could only claim fantasy status in horror and sci-fi or gritty, contemporary existentialism in action.

Arguably, all fiction moves on a continuum between representing historical reality and pure fantasy. This range of options is for two reasons of particular importance for the Western. First, the Western attempts to represent an actual period of American history, most often the development of the frontier after the Civil War. Second, the enormous numbers of Westerns creates a space where the history of the American West becomes transformed into the history of the Western film. Many later Westerns were based on the fictions of the film genre rather than the historical reality of the West.

All history is a form of fiction, and all fiction borrows from history—the absolute objectivity dreamt of by history is impossible, the belief that there is a representable reality outside of human intervention being one of the most abstract and important tenets of modern ideology. However, this conflict is of special interest in the Western because even its most mythic and fantastical manifestations have often been believed to be located in history. America, a country with relatively little history, has seized upon myth in the form of the Western to supplement the scanty past it does possess.

Moreover in the Western, the semantic elements of the genre have often been assigned the role of history while the syntactic structures have absorbed the mythic archetypes. The chase and pursuit narrative, the coming of age of "The Kid" character, and the climactic duel all resonate with narrative patterns present at least since the Greeks; far more accurate shootings and killings occurred in Western movies than ever took place in the historical West. The combination of semantic elements, such as the Western landscapes, the cowboy's practical "uniform," the stagecoach, and Billy the Kid, link the Western to America's unique history (of course, individual elements such as the landscapes can be replaced by mountains and deserts in Spain and Italy). The semantic and syntactic fields blur together in their links to history and fiction. For example, the semantic six-gun, a common enough occurrence in the West, unrealistically becomes transformed from a clumsy and inaccurate weapon into a compact and deadly firearm so that it better fits the syntax of the quick-draw shoot-out. Clint Eastwood's Westerns often take pains to display the awkward nature of early revolvers, yet in the hands of his mythical figures they become as accurate and rapid-firing as today's semi-automatic pistols. Despite this overlap, I argue that in a very

general sense the syntactic elements of the Western, its recurring narrative patterns, lean towards the constructed nature of American ideology while the semantic elements better retain the real history of the West, and the conflicts of historicity between these elements are fundamental to the genesis of the modern Western.

Many of the manifestations of the modern Western, following the pattern of *Dances with Wolves* (1990), attempt to re-historicize the West. In *Dances with Wolves*, the primary semantic elements of the “settlers versus savages” are deliberately reversed: the American Indians, the Lakota Sioux, become the democratic society that needs defense against the savage, destructive U.S. army soldiers. The U.S. army is portrayed as insane and murderous, both in the Civil War opening sequences and as the villains, opposed to the Lakota Sioux, in the final third of film. The film exhibits some degree of regression, however, as the lead hero, Dunbar (played by Kevin Costner), begins as a Union officer who eventually sides with and lives like the Sioux; also, there are still the standard, faceless, and murderous savage stereotypes present in the figure of the Pawnees. The film also lapses into a standard Western syntax, with the roles reversed: the Indians ride to the rescue of Dunbar, wreaking bloody vengeance on the white soldiers who torture him.

That said, however, the film was praised for depicting American Indians on the frontier as real people with a complex culture. Many aspects of Lakota culture, both extraordinary and mundane, were presented in detail; actual American Indian actors played the Indian roles instead of white actors in makeup; and the Lakota language was spoken by the actors and translated through the use of subtitles. This change in some of the basic elements of the Western had its precedents in such revisionist 1970s

parodies as *Little Big Man*. The *Dances With Wolves* revolution was one of degree, as the film was more serious, accorded more respect to American Indian culture, and was more historically accurate in depicting that culture.

These changes regarding the depictions of American Indians seem to have become permanently established in the genre. *Geronimo* (1993) tends towards exoticism of American Indians and their culture, but adheres to the new standards of American Indian actors, subtitles for American Indian languages, and accurate depictions of American Indian culture. *Maverick* (1994) also follows these norms; this film is a Western-comedy, but the comedy is usually at the expense of bigoted whites, exposing the stupidity of their stereotypical constructions of "Injuns." The comedy *Wagons East* (1995) plays on the clichéd fear of Indians, who turn out to be just as human as the settler characters. Family/children's films have also absorbed this semantic transformation, as shown by *Savage Land* (1994), which has a group of American Indians saving settlers and their children from some white villains. Ted Turner's made-for-cable television movies, including another version of *Geronimo*, also participate in this revision. And the changes resonate in one-shot roles in television series; in *Lonesome Dove: The Series*, "The Kid" figure of Newt Call learns lessons in manhood from a different Western character/mentor in each episode, including several positively portrayed American Indians and their tribes.

As with the much-maligned "political correctness," the revised depiction of American Indians in '90s Westerns is a popularized manifestation of the socio-cultural changes in race and gender relations over the decades. The racist stereotypes and prejudices inherent in earlier American ideology, and films, have been modified by more

historically accurate depictions. These historical revisions have become socially standardized to the extent that Westerns must include these new "historical truths" in order to reanimate the genre's claim of truthfully presenting aspects of actual American history, and thus be able to project contemporary ideology under the guise of natural, historical truth. Through a more complex narrative mechanism, the aspects of contemporary American society seen as positive are projected into the past through the reformulation of the Western frontier myth. Historical atrocities are revised in order to be forgotten; racial problems and stereotypes are located in the distant past and overcome in that fantasy setting, suggesting that America is socially progressive in the present cultural context. The bigoted frontier of the traditional Western and the evil racists of '90s films symbolize the America before the 1960s Cultural Revolution; those heroic, humane individuals in that lawless land have created a better community out of the racist wilderness. Their efforts have been properly eulogized and recognized, and the America of the present can continue its business of expanding freedom for all.

The counter aspect of this historical thrust is to foreground historical findings and revisionism in order to preserve Other voices and as a vehicle for social change. Although the presentation of American Indians in Westerns remains in many ways the most problematic, given the damage to American Indians caused by the genre over the decades, other groups have begun to assert their historical positions in the West through revising Westerns. A significant percentage of early cowboys, settlers, and soldiers in the West were African-American, and *Posse* (1993) focuses on their experiences. *Posse* tells the story of an African-American gunfighter, Jesse Lee, and his "posse," who flee from murderous prejudice as soldiers at war with Cuba to the all

African-American town of Freemanville on the Western frontier. There, Jesse Lee finds revenge for his father's murder and his exploitation by the U.S. army while saving the settlement from being destroyed by the incoming railroad and its economic interests. Director and star Mario Van Peebles admits that the film is primarily meant as entertainment, but justifies its over the top violence and pastiche of stock Western plots by its historical presentation of African-American Westerners on the frontier and the racism they encountered (Travers 76). *Posse* uses typical Western structure but alters the semantic character roles, presenting most of the white settlers as villains and African-Americans as heroes. *Posse* not only presents new historical truths, but actively works against decades of the near-absence of African-Americans from the genre. This absence is emphasized by the montage of rare instances of African-Americans in Westerns, from *Harlem Rides the Range* (1939) to Woody Strode, accompanying the film's closing credits to the modern rap song, "It's the Posse, shoot 'em up, shoot 'em up." While the style and politics of violence and sexism in the film are closely modeled after the nihilistic Leone Spaghetti Westerns, *Posse* does revive a forgotten history.

Although the changed semantic element of the African-American cowboy has not yet become standardized in the genre in the way the American Indian presence has, it does occasionally surface. For example, in *Unforgiven*, Morgan Freeman won a Best Supporting Actor Academy Award for his performance of Ned Logan, William Munny's (Clint Eastwood) longtime partner. *Rio Diablo* (1992) presents elderly Black and Mexican men as sources of frontier wisdom. The straight-to-video Western *Good Day to Die* (1994), starring Sydney Poitier, also presents an interesting variation on the African-American cowboy theme, suggesting a union of African-Americans and Indians to fight

racial oppression on the frontier. The heroes die in a final bloodbath, but attain a hopeful future for their children with the elimination of the primary racist characters.

1000 Pieces of Gold (1991) revises the Western through the story of Lalu (played by Rosalind Chao), a Chinese female protagonist. During a period of severe economic hardship in 1880s China, her father thinks he is selling Lalu into marriage in the American West, but instead the arrangement turns out to be into slavery, as a frontier saloon prostitute. She eventually wins her freedom and starts her own life married to a sympathetic white man (Charlie, played by Chris Cooper) in a historically realistic portrayal of Western life and its racism that does not slip back into conventional Western plot lines. In fact, this film can only be called a Western through its semantic elements, being set in the appropriate time period on the Western frontier; it lacks the syntactic structures of shoot-outs or chases, thus helping to avoid the clichéd stereotypes of other Westerns. Although Chinese major characters remain a rarity in Westerns, the genre has slowly begun to feature their presence. For example, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) has the title character saving a Chinese vagrant from a lynching by hiring him as a servant.

The Ballad of Little Jo is also an example of the increase of feminist role-reversal Westerns. Jo, a woman seeking her fortune in the West, masquerades as a man in order to avoid harassment. Grittily realistic, this film also avoids formulaic Western plot structures. The CBS mini-series *Buffalo Girls* (1995) centers more romantically around two women friends—one an accepted female cowboy, Anjelica Huston playing Calamity Jane, and one a prostitute, Melanie Griffith as Dora—and the changes in their lives as the frontier begins to close. Based upon a Larry McMurtry novel, the series exalts

feminine alternatives to the masculine Western showdown. It also eliminates the dark side of Sitting Bull revealed in the novel in order to present a more idealized American Indian for television audiences (perhaps due to Russell Means playing Sitting Bull; see Chapter 4 for an examination of Means' star persona). Furthermore, the series also elides the novel's revelation of Calamity Jane as a hermaphrodite in order to present a normalized female protagonist. In the 1990s, suggestions of sexual ambiguity seem to be the one area which the ostensibly heterosexual Western genre cannot yet accommodate (one exception is a minor comedic male homosexual role in *Wagons East*). The weekly television series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-98) displays the importance of women in the West as educators and healers, as the title character single-handedly introduces mainstream feminism to the West every Saturday night. Its success spawned a similar cable series, *Christy* (1994-95)—although it was short-lived and set in early 1900s Tennessee, the series did parallel *Dr. Quinn. The Quick and the Dead* (1995), which I examine at length in Chapter 5, provides an opportunity for Sharon Stone to play a deadly gunslinger out to avenge her father's death; with the help of an outlaw turned preacher, Stone frees the town of Redemption from the evil patriarchal tyrant, Herod. Stone's status as a woman gunfighter is briefly addressed at the beginning of the film, but once she proves her skill with a gun, the issue is dropped; this suggests that feminism in the Western has advanced to the point where a woman may play with the boys. *Bad Girls* (1994) also contains a role reversal, when a group of outlaw women adopt the lead Westerner roles of *The Wild Bunch* and eliminate deadly sexism in a climactic bloodbath. They begin as prostitutes, but quickly evolve into gunfighters. *Savage Land* also includes a female gunslinger.

Ranging from historical realism to fantastic gunslinging, all of these films overturn the limitations of previous Westerns' female stereotypes, usually limited to either blond schoolmarm or Mexican prostitutes. Historical accuracy seems linked to a rejection of Western structure, but even those feminist Westerns which indulge in traditional plots continually modify the genre through the revision of the semantic elements regarding women. For American Indians, African-Americans, Chinese-Americans, and women, all the films described above to some degree participate in a revision of the Western's semantic elements, pushing the genre towards a closer fit with 1990s American ideologies. With the goals of promoting diversity and reaping a profit from its fairly recent acceptance, '90s Westerns in the *Dances With Wolves* vein reflect the activism of previously excluded groups.

However, beyond Hollywood producers tapping into a then current hot cycle of films, the question remains of why some of these filmmakers chose the Western as a site of political intervention. Previously, I argued for the use of the Western as a means of avoiding still relevant social problems by presenting them as resolved in a fictional past. Still, that argument begs the question: why the Western, the emphasis on the frontier, instead of, for example, films set in 1880s New York? Yes, frontier narratives, exemplified by Westerns, are perhaps the richest and most unique of American genres, and concurrently, the one most in need of reform; but that evades the question by focusing on a closed textual circle of genre and eliding other social determinants. To begin to answer the question of why the Western, I will examine the other, more traditional, direction the modern Western took in the 1990s—the *Lonesome Dove* (1989) direction.

Based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove* aired in 1989 and quickly became one of the most watched mini-series ever. The plot centers around two aging Texas Rangers, Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call, who decide to take their outfit on a cattle drive from their home in Texas to the last open frontier, Montana. The series offers a fabulous story, filled with great dialogue, interesting characters, and unexpected plot turns (no small feat for a Western). At the same time, it is as traditional a Western as any ever made. As Steve Fore points out, *Lonesome Dove* assumes an air of modernity by utilizing the trope of random, unavoidable death, and adds some elements of the revisionist Western: the women are feisty and independent, a supporting character (Deets, played by Danny Glover) is an African-American member of the outfit, and McCrae talks a lot about how they wronged the Indians. However, the leading men are whites who made their fortune killing Indians, the main villain is a "Cherokee half-breed," and the women are prostitutes or settler's wives (59-62).

Critically acclaimed, re-run several times, and spawning a number of sequels and prequels, and a spin-off weekly series, *Lonesome Dove*'s enormous success suggests that something about the traditional Western frontier mythos became eminently applicable to American society in the very late 1980s and early 1990s and is partially behind the outburst of the 1990s Westerns. One of those meaningful Hollywood coincidences, the almost simultaneous production and release of two feature films based on the Wyatt Earp at the O. K. Corral legend, sheds further light on this development.

Wyatt Earp (1994), starring Kevin Costner, is an ambitious attempt at an epic Western which failed both critically and at the box office. The film is an overlong, pretentious biopic, following Earp from his childhood to his "retirement" hunting gold in Alaska. Gene Hackman, playing Wyatt's father, constantly lectures his children on the importance of family, and is the one who finally transforms Wyatt from an irresponsible child into a mature leader and marshal. Constantly moving west to seek their fortunes, Wyatt and his brothers eventually realize that the frontier will soon close. Instead, they become lawmen to make a living, and for legal justification in their feud with the Clantons. Like the emphasis on family, the bond of friendship shared by Wyatt and Doc Holliday is heavily stressed; civil responsibility is never an issue.

Tombstone (released in December of 1993) is a far more successful retelling of the Earp legend. Focusing on the Earps' and Doc Holliday's arrivals in Tombstone (a silver-mining boom-town), the film initially portrays the brothers as having retired from their duties as lawmen in order to make their fortune. Content to remain in town and make their living off of organized gambling, they do not seem to have any illusions regarding the romance of the frontier. However, the villainous Cowboys, an outlaw gang of murderers and opium-users identifiable by the red sashes they wear, soon begin to disrupt daily public life in Tombstone. As we might suppose, the Cowboys are the Clantons, Johnny Ringo, Curly Bill and the other bad men of legend. At first Wyatt (Kurt Russell) refuses to get involved with the Cowboys' crimes, but eventually his brothers, disgusted by the harm inflicted by the Cowboys, convince Wyatt to join them in cleaning up the town. Doc is Wyatt's friend and joins the fight. This leads to "The Gunfight at the O. K. Corral" sequence, which in turn precipitates a series of vengeance battles until

Wyatt and Doc are victorious. Val Kilmer effectively portrays Doc Holliday's excessive, conflicted nature; he is the virtual double of the primary Cowboy gunslinger, Johnny Ringo, but Doc's redeeming feature is his willingness to sacrifice his life for his friend Wyatt. Doc kills Ringo and eventually dies of tuberculosis in a sanitarium, clearing the way for Wyatt to marry his wealthy dream woman, Josephine, and travel the world, living on "room service" (a running motif of the Wyatt/Josephine romance).

Considering the social context of the 1990s, *Wyatt Earp* failed because of its lack of concern with community and civic responsibility. Although it stresses family and friendship, it does so in an extremely self-interested way, with the Earps' motivations primarily being vengeance and financial self-interest (this depiction of the Earps is probably more historically accurate, but it is not *generically* accurate).

In contrast, the themes of civic responsibility and morally justified violence are central to *Tombstone*. The town of Tombstone represents contemporary 1990s American cities with their perceived growing crime problems. The Cowboys seem a thinly-veiled allegory of urban gang culture, with their gang "colors" of red sashes and their willingness to kill and abuse drugs marking them as equivalent to young gangs involved in drug wars. Hollywood's regular retelling of the Wyatt/Doc story—*My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Gunfight at the O. K. Corral* (1957), *Hour of the Gun* (1967)—suggest an allegorical reading of the development of *Tombstone*'s Doc and the Earps as a microcosm of American history since World War II. The Earps' early lives as lawmen giving way to their self-indulgent pursuit of wealth suggest the patriotism of World War and Cold War America slowly ceding to the "me" decade of the 1980s. Similarly, Doc's alcoholic gambling at the edge of the law roughly equates to the anti-

establishment counter-culture of the '60s and '70s, which also influences the self-absorbed '80s. Post-Cold War, the union of Doc and Wyatt suggests a fantasy alliance of the right and the left in the 1990s to address pressing social concerns. Tellingly enough, though, the anti-establishment Doc passes away, but so too does the Earp family separate, even to the extent of Wyatt abandoning his drug-addicted wife in favor of the independent, exciting Josephine, suggesting not so much a return to traditional values but rather an updated merger of self-interest that still wants to forget the violent past.

Alongside the call to action in *Tombstone* are returns to traditional gender roles and typical Western stereotypes and violence. The heroes are all white men. Josephine is admittedly an interesting proto-feminist character, being an independent traveling actress, but she functions in the narrative primarily as an object of desire for Wyatt and a means to awakening his consciousness (before Josephine, he seems set on established paths of marriage and career). The other women are stereotypical homemaking wives or prostitutes. In fact, the Cowboys suggest that Doc Holliday is a pimp for his lover, Big Nose Kate. Wyatt's first wife, Maddie, is addicted to laudanum (which contains opium, linking her with the Cowboys)—his solution is to abandon her in favor of Josephine. The criminal element is simply wiped out through bloody violence; the jail is used in the film only once. And although a group of Mexicans at a wedding ceremony are shown being slaughtered at the beginning of the film by the Cowboys (who have some Mexican members in minor roles), that is the only significant representation of non-whites in the film. The racial Other is invisible, helpless, or a component of the Cowboys.

I find it telling that the Wyatt/Doc legend reemerges instead of other, more individual legends. The Wyatt/Doc legend more resembles Wright's "professional Western," emphasizing teamwork (Wyatt and Doc, Wyatt and his brothers) and community in a hostile, symbolically *urban* environment (*Tombstone* has to be cleaned up). Instead of a wild frontier with "savage" Indians being conquered and a community settled, a decaying civilization has to be purged through guerrilla-type violence. True, Billy the Kid received a resurrection in *Young Guns* (1988) and *Young Guns II* (1990), but the Kid legend was altered to make him the leader of an outlaw group of other young gunfighters banded against corporate interests. An update of the Jesse James legend, *Frank and Jesse* (1995) also participated in this trend; a virtual remake of the 1939 *Jesse James*, *Frank and Jesse* has the brothers and their gang working against the corporate tyranny of the railroad. Although these last two instances have a corporate villain, they share with *Tombstone* an emphasis on the team of heroes, and the obviously "common criminal" element in *Tombstone* suggests a more traditional focus on "cleaning up the town." Reading the film as an allegory, the Earps' early money-making self interest reflects the "Me Decade" of the 1980s, when pursuing self interest through capitalism was part of the Cold War battle against the communist Soviets. After the Cold War (after the "end of history"), however, there is a focus on "America first." Thus, the Earps' turn towards community, towards making *Tombstone* a fit place for future families, reflects America's turn inward, towards addressing domestic problems that had been pushed aside during the Cold War.

Although the Western may have seemed to fit perfectly the Cold War ethos of the '70s and '80s, it instead slowly weakened, due to a combination of the lingering disparity

of semantic elements and syntactic structures divided by the Cultural Revolution and the seemingly irrelevant call for civic (domestic) morality and engagement at the core of the Western genre. But freed from Cold War responsibilities, and at a moment of optimism when new frontiers seemed possible, the Western reemerged. Armed with a new fit of semantic elements and syntactic structures (for example, women gunfighters defeating men) to match a less-sexist and less-racist contemporary ideology, the Western could again ride to the rescue. Numerous obstacles, with Western-like bases in both myth and reality, barred the way to progress—crime, drugs, urban violence, racism, sexism—and they were to be approached as Americans had always approached problems: speaking softly but carrying a big stick, attempting a peaceful resolution on one's own terms but having the firepower to back up one's demands. If America couldn't fix the problem, it would eliminate it. Government had its necessary role during the clash of global superpowers, but it seemed once again the time for individuals, in small bands of family and friends, to improve the community and enact frontier justice on innumerable home fronts.

This is also the appeal of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (which I will examine in detail in Chapter 3). Despite its relentless self-deconstruction, *Unforgiven* ultimately affirms the necessary rightness of the Cold War era while exhibiting a willingness to move beyond it. And perhaps for that extended moment in the early '90s, with a booming American economy and a saxophone-playing urban cowboy in residence at the White House, it seemed that the Western's frontier was open.

CHAPTER 3

HOW THE 1990S REVITALIZED CLINT EASTWOOD

Clint Eastwood is the last great Westerner.¹ Born out of *Rawhide* and the Spaghetti Westerns, he is inextricably joined with the very idea of the Western, more so than any other living figure. And in the 1990s, his changing star persona was once again able to tap directly into his serape-covered core, not only with *Unforgiven* (1992) but also with his other early '90s films. Most Clint Eastwood fans are familiar with this narrative related to the '90s and *Unforgiven*: as the 1990s began, despite a measure of critical acclaim for directing *Bird* and *White Hunter Black Heart*, Eastwood had not had a significant film, both in terms of box-office receipts and cultural influence, since his turn at directing himself as Dirty Harry in *Sudden Impact* (1983) (most famous, perhaps, for President Reagan's appropriation of Harry's "Go ahead, make my day" line). *Pale Rider* (1985) was supposed to revitalize the Western, but, though it was moderately successful at the box office, it received mixed reviews, and failed to strike the popular chord that may have reinvigorated the Western. However, once *Dances With Wolves* kicked off the Western mini-boom of the early 1990s, Eastwood soon followed with *Unforgiven*, his masterpiece that established him as the most significant Western filmmaker and one of the most respected American directors.

There is nothing wrong with this narrative, but I would like to suggest a slightly different one: that the socio-political climate of the early 1990s is what made Eastwood, his changed star persona, and his films once again relevant. Paul Smith has suggested this direction with *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*, wherein he attempts to read

¹ A version of this chapter appears in a forthcoming collection, *New Essays on Clint Eastwood*. The title of my essay in that collection is "The End of History and America First: How the 1990s Revitalized Clint Eastwood."

Eastwood and his films as more than functions of a charismatic star and accomplished director. Focusing on the “tributary media” (interviews, new articles, and so forth) as much as the films, Smith argues that both Eastwood’s films and the mass media discourse that envelops, and often promotes, Eastwood’s career inexorably move him towards a role of “auteur-father,” a parental director with his own small, homesteader-like production company, Malpaso, and a carefully-protected family man image. Eventually, Eastwood becomes a “guardian craftsman” of American popular genre cinema, culminating in *Unforgiven*’s genre-as-art status. This development is partially based on Eastwood’s aging appearance onscreen (he was born in 1930), necessitating characters that differ from his youthful Man with No Name and Dirty Harry roles, and leading to a reworked persona associated with redemption; as Walter Metz notes in his discussion of Eastwood’s aging characters, his 1990s and later films “have invented a profound language of redemption surrounding questions of aging” (214).

Following Metz’s insight and Smith’s assertion that Eastwood can be considered a product of both his films and the discourses surrounding them, I argue that political and social developments in America during the 1990s meshed with the gradual reforming of Eastwood’s persona, beginning in the 1980s, from loner action hero to fatherly figure atoning for his sins. This new persona needed the post-Cold War zeitgeist of the 1990s to truly resonate with American film audiences, and I will trace the development of Eastwood from Smith’s “auteur-father” and “guardian craftsman,” where he is defined primarily as a director and producer, to a popular star persona that incorporates his “auteur-father” status into his filmic characters. This new persona, which I will term his *senior persona*, consists of an aging, single, flawed, heroic character grappling with the

sins of his youth and hoping to redeem them through a second opportunity, the winning of a violent, cathartic encounter. Additionally, the personal history of this character is explicitly tied to historical American events or period settings, suggesting that the film narratives with these characters serve as allegories for 1990s America.

To support the argument that Eastwood's senior persona resonated with 1990s audiences, I will examine five of his mainstream, commercial films, plus the Western genre in 1990s America—six long-range “bullet points,” if you will, in reference to Eastwood's famous six-shooters, whether Colt or Smith & Wesson. I will begin each of these six sections with a key image that serves as an entry point into each film (or period) and then focus on the relation of Eastwood's senior persona to the visions of America the films represent. From the formation of his senior persona in the Cold War-influenced *Heartbreak Ridge* and the revealing misfire *The Rookie* to the changes in America that led to the 1990s western boom and *Unforgiven*, *In the Line of Fire*, and *A Perfect World*, I intend to display that Clint Eastwood is, indeed, a socio-political production.

Heartbreak Ridge (1986)

Key Image: Gunnery Sergeant Tom Highway (Eastwood) has his marine recruits of “Recon Platoon” out early, about to begin their first day of training under him. One of them puts on a pair of designer sunglasses and yawns. Highway asks his name, removes the sunglasses, and then...

Close-up: Highway's traditional black leather boot crushes the glasses at the recruit's Nike-clad feet.

By 1986, Nike was already a billion dollar corporation and had Michael Jordan under contract, well on their way to becoming one of the most recognizable brands in the world. Eastwood, of course, can be considered a brand in his own right, and many have noted that his production company, Malpaso, means “bad step” and that Eastwood

enjoyed the irony when choosing the name for a company that would eventually become renowned for its small, efficient, under-budget ethos. Considering Malpaso and Eastwood's success, Highway's stepping on the sunglasses is yet another symbolic "good step," wherein the traditional American work ethic and frugality Malpaso represents stands before the excessive advertising of consumer products, the Nikes or Ray-bans of modern corporate America. The stepping on the sunglasses is also a "good step" in that it exemplifies the senior persona and Eastwood's move to it; he displays the discipline of the father figure to the recruits, informing them that his traditional Marine Corps values still trump those of modern America. For Highway, those values grow out of a lifetime of service, beginning in the Korean War, and a title sequence, consisting of Korean War documentary footage, introduces *Heartbreak Ridge*.

The sequence begins with a military drum score and shows intensive, mechanized, warfare—large cannons firing, machine guns, and so forth. Eventually, however, the music changes to Don Gibson singing "Sea of Heartbreak," and the images become more personalized, including wounded soldiers and war orphans. This contrast neatly encapsulates the film, as its plot of Korean/Vietnam War veteran Highway finding redemption in Grenada is balanced by his attempts to reunite with his estranged ex-wife, Aggie (a name similar to that of Eastwood's first wife, Maggie Johnson, divorced in 1978). In both his husbandly and military roles, Gunny Highway is old-fashioned. He is nearing mandatory retirement from the Marine Corps, and his traditional, gung-ho style does not fit with the other two options the film presents: the lax, self-absorbed soldier using the Corps as a job, symbolized by a supply sergeant offering bribes of Cuban cigars and other benefits that Highway flatly refuses, or the

modern rule of the corporate structure, epitomized by Highway's nemesis and commanding officer, Major Powers, a strait-laced Annapolis graduate who began his service in supply and logistics. But Highway's only home is the Marines; the narrative opens with him in jail after a drunken fight, and he clearly has no place in mainstream society.

Highway calls in a favor and is assigned to Powers' division to train Recon Platoon. Powers instantly despises Highway, considering him a "dinosaur" that is fit only for war—and whose career has been marked by failures in Korea and Vietnam. The raw recruits of Recon seem uninterested in the Marines, epitomized by their leader, Stitch Jones (played by Mario Van Peebles), and his obsession with a music career as the self-described "Ayatollah of Rock-n-rolla." As Highway trains them and eventually gains their respect and admiration, he also attempts to win back his ex-wife, Aggie, through his humorously-portrayed study of women's magazines.

As the renewed relationship with Aggie reaches a crucial point, Highway and the rest of the division are called away, to the invasion of Grenada. With the help of the platoon he inspired, most notably Jones's ability to repair a phone line and connect it using his credit cards so a "cavalry to the rescue" air-strike can be called in, Highway successfully guides his platoon through several engagements as the U.S. forces take the island (emphasizing the relevance of Highway's traditional character, the climactic battles occur in an ancient fort complete with relic cannons). Highway returns to his role as warrior and achieves a measure of redemption for past failures in Korea and Vietnam. Though somewhat ambiguously, the film's ending suggests that after his success in Grenada, Highway can now retire from the Corps and devote his life to

Aggie, who is waiting for him upon his return, along with a celebratory band (“for the first time,” Highway remarks to Jones, who is enjoying the celebration of his ascension to true Marine status).

Though a modest box-office success, *Heartbreak Ridge* seemed out of place during the muscular 1980s, ruled at the box office by Schwarzenegger and Stallone. Perhaps tired of the interminable Cold War, the public’s imagination was not captured by a film narrative dependent on a minor “police action” like *Grenada* (unlike, for example, the fantasy of re-winning the Vietnam War in Stallone’s *Rambo: First Blood Part II*—even the title is more exciting, and overblown). With Eastwood in his fifties, however, the film did prefigure the redemptive senior persona that perfectly meshed with his sixties and the 1990s: Highway is older, about to retire, estranged from his wife, and prone to drunkenness, a military hero who is haunted by overall failures in Korea and Vietnam, but ultimately he is able to justify and redeem his past via training and leading a new generation of marine heroes to violent victory in *Grenada*. Certainly, the redemptive narrative is nothing new to Eastwood’s characters (think of *The Outlaw Josey Wales*), or the Westerner in general, reflecting what Richard Slotkin calls “regeneration through violence,” but the aged character played by Eastwood literally adds a new wrinkle to the story. And the incorporation of the *Grenada* invasion adds an allegorical layer; as Paul Smith notes, the film suggests that the U.S.A. has, at least on a superficial level, regained a measure of post-Vietnam military might through *Grenada* and other 1980s military actions, such as Libya and Panama (200). Thus, as Eastwood’s character is renewed by returning to military conflict, so is America regaining its public self-image as a military power, albeit with tentative steps against

much smaller nations. While that militaristic message works for Tom Cruise in *Top Gun* (also 1986) and the aforementioned *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), Eastwood's character remains outdated; America was still locked in the lingering Cold War, and the socio-political climate had to change before Eastwood's senior persona could resonate.

Misfire: *The Rookie* (1990)

Key Image: Long shot: At the end of the film, Nick Pulovski (Eastwood) sits behind the desk in his own office, now a lieutenant, assigning a new partner to his former partner, David Ackerman (Charlie Sheen), the former rookie. Dirty Harry has become the authority figure.

The Rookie tries to be a bit of Dirty Harry, a bit of *Lethal Weapon*, a bit of a 1980s action blockbuster. It never coheres, though, and Eastwood's first mainstream film of the new decade fizzles, despite many loud action scenes. Aspects of the Eastwood senior persona are present: Pulovski is not an invincible Dirty Harry, as he continually needs his partner to save him, and his motivation stems from his regret at always finishing second in his career, whether as an automobile racer or cop. The exposition of Pulovski's motive only lasts a few minutes onscreen, though, and is not developed further or strongly tied to the narrative, as the film focuses more on the Sheen character, Ackerman, and his backstory (his brother died in a youthful accident, he became estranged from his rich parents, and he finally becomes his own man as a cop). And closing the film with Eastwood behind the desk as a mentor seems forced and out-of-character. Thus, without a strongly developed Eastwood redemptive character or any ties to American history, the film misfires as an attempt to cash in on the 1980s action cycle without tapping into the Eastwood senior persona, in contrast to the upcoming Eastwood successes. Tellingly, the climax of the film works a misfire into the plot, as Pulovski's second gun, taken from a security guard, only has five bullets in it instead of

the expected six, causing him to be shot by the villain. *Unforgiven*, of course, also works a misfire into the climactic shootout, but before examining *Unforgiven*, a brief overview of the 1990s and the accompanying cycle of Westerns is needed, beginning with a historical climax, the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The 1990s and the Western

Key Image: The Berlin Wall falls.

Eastwood's senior person needed the openness and uncertainty of the post-Cold War 1990s to truly resonate. Recall Wegner's frontier-like description of the era as a space "of openness and instability, of experimentation and opportunity, of conflict and insecurity—a place, in other words, wherein history might move in a number of very different directions" (9). I previously noted how the resurgence of the Western tapped into this '90s openness through revisionism, modifying the elements of the genre for a new era. Similarly, Eastwood is able to modify his own persona to match this era; he and his film perform an act of self-revision, a regeneration through violent films, and into this newly imagined frontier rides Eastwood with *Unforgiven*.

***Unforgiven* (1992)**

Key Image: Will Munny (Eastwood) has avenged Ned Logan (Freeman) by killing Little Bill Daggett (Hackman), his deputies, and Skinny Dubois, the owner of the bar and bordello where the narrative of the cut-up prostitute began. About to ride away into the pouring rain and the night, he stops in front of Ned's propped-up body and admonishes the townspeople of Big Whiskey, Wyoming, saying, "you better bury Ned right...you better not cut up nor otherwise harm no whores..."

Medium close-up: "or I'll come back and kill every one of you sons of bitches." Munny on horseback is on the left half of the screen, shot from a slight low-angle; an American flag in the background is clearly visible on the right half of the screen.

Munny might come back, but Eastwood definitely has returned. All three previous historical Westerns (set in the late 1800s) directed by Eastwood employ the Westerner-as-avenger: in both *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *Pale Rider*, Eastwood's character is a ghost-like figure who returns, in part, to avenge attempts at murdering him (or perhaps actual murder, depending on how one interprets the films), and in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), Eastwood/Wales first joins a band of post-Civil War raiders to avenge the murders of his wife and son, and then continues to seek vengeance for a murderous betrayal of him and his fallen comrades.

Unforgiven, however, presents a slightly different scenario: a prostitute, Delilah, is cut up and scarred by two cowboys, the other prostitutes post a thousand-dollar bounty on the cowboys, and Munny (with Ned Logan and the Schofield Kid) set out to collect the bounty. In other words, they are motivated less by revenge than profit. True, a certain avenging motive, to avenge the woman, does exist, and by the end of the film Munny is avenging both the murder of Logan and his own savage beating from Little Bill, but the initial motivation differs from his other self-directed Westerns. In fact, the “money”-driven “Munny” more resembles Eastwood’s bounty-hunting “Man with No Name” from the Eastwood and Sergio Leone collaborations—except that unlike the ahistorical and individual “Man with No Name,” Munny has a well-developed past, including being a widower with two children who gave up drinking, gun-fighting, and other vices through the influence of his late wife, Claudia.

I emphasize this seemingly minor difference because it distinguishes the Eastwood senior persona characters from previous roles. Most well-written film narratives will have well-developed characters with a back story important to the

narrative; even in *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider*, where Eastwood's ghost-like characters initially seem to have no past, the films eventually reveal that the Eastwood characters have returned for personal revenge. In general, back story motivation is usually tied directly into the action and conflicts within the main plotlines of the film (revenge, in the Eastwood-directed Westerns).

Unforgiven, however, by shifting the initial motivation from personal revenge to an impersonal bounty hunt, allows a more inner-directed, psychological motivation and back story to dominate the narrative; Munny grapples with his past as a mean, drunken killer, constantly repeating variations on "I ain't like that no more." The bounty on the cowboys serves as a plot device to release Munny's internal conflict; he has repressed his violent past, his personal history, but now he attempts to access it while controlling it, to use his capacity for violence for supposedly moral reasons (providing for his children and imposing justified punishment on the criminals, the cowboys who cut Delilah). Inexorably the release of his violence yields more violence and death. This obsession with the character's development away from a previous psychological state, as opposed to simply reacting to a past event, typifies Eastwood's senior persona. No longer an invincible killer or flawed-yet-dominant hero, he now becomes a vulnerable, near-elderly man wrestling with his past sins and denying the motivations behind them while seeking an opportunity to redeem them, to return to defining experiences and either reaffirm or overturn them.

In *Unforgiven*, despite his protests and all appearances to the contrary, Munny reaffirms that he still can be a cold-blooded killer. Eastwood even looks and sounds younger in the climactic scenes when he returns as an avenging killer; despite its

deconstruction of gun-fighting myths and critique of violence, the film ultimately reaffirms, and even glorifies in, the climactic heroic shoot-'em-up integral to the Western, wherein violent killing is legitimized. Granted, Munny was a murderer of women and children, but this time his violence is used justifiably.

Which returns us to the key image and its over-determined signifier of the American flag next to Munny/Eastwood's "or I'll come back..." warning. The allegory with America in *Unforgiven* is slightly more complicated, as Munny was not involved in an actual historical event, like Highway in Vietnam, which needs correcting. However, the flags are raised in Big Whiskey because the 4th of July was only a few days earlier—the day when Little Bill savagely beat English Bob, who entered town discussing the July 2nd, 1881 shooting of President Garfield by Charles J. Guiteau. Furthermore, the film contains references to violent historical figures and settings glamorized in Westerns, such as William "Billy the Kid" Bonney and Dodge City. Thus, while the film is not about a specific event in America's past, it does address the American preoccupation with individual violence that persists throughout our nation's history, politics, and representations of history in frontier narratives.

Particularly in the wake of the stunningly efficient American-led military victory in Iraq (at least in the short term) with Desert Storm in 1991, Munny/Eastwood's struggle with returning to his violent ways throughout the film and his final pronouncement form a warning to the rest of the world: the Cold War is over, America wants to put behind its violent, military past, but if we have to, we can return to violence by sending our armies around the globe (note that Munny and Logan travel far, for the 1880s, from their Kansas home to Wyoming for the bounty). And considering how Munny's murders of

Skinny, Little Bill, and the rest eliminate the immoral leaders of Big Whiskey while mirroring the assassination of Garfield, Munny's pronouncement also functions as a call to Americans to turn their individual abilities inward, to "clean up this town" and solve America's problems at any cost. Recalling the misfire in *The Rookie*, Munny's shotgun misfires during his showdown with Little Bill, but, unlike Pulovski, Munny easily overcomes that setback without aid and emerges victorious. Not only is the ultimately invincible Eastwood back (variations on "Eastwood is back in the saddle" permeated the media coverage of the film), but the Western and the frontier myth have also returned to help guide America and re-establish historical myths through a period of post-Cold War uncertainty and self-examination.

Unforgiven is arguably the most complex and most analyzed of Eastwood's films. David Webb Peoples' screenplay, one of the finest of all Western scripts, emphasizes reflexivity, irony, and genre deconstruction while sustaining contradictory ideological impulses, thus encouraging multiple interpretations and rich analysis. No single reading can definitively encapsulate a film that spends nearly two hours critiquing violence and demythologizing the Westerner hero—only to then present a climax that stunningly reconfirms the hero's justified use of violence. While the film and its sources can be interpreted in a variety of ways (for example, Peoples' script was first written in the '70s, which could lead to a comparison of *Unforgiven* to '70s Westerns), my reading focuses on the film's initial release in 1992 and argues that the popularity of the film exemplifies the political moment of the early 1990s. The critique of violence, the deconstruction of Western myths, and Munny's psychological self-examination mirror America reexamining its Cold War legacy and searching for a new national identity, while

Munny's triumphant gun-fight reaffirms that America's legacy of violence has been justified (America won the Cold War) and is still accessible in times of crisis (to maintain the global peace), when self-examination can be conveniently set aside. With its community of organized, angry prostitutes and the casual inclusion of an African-American cowboy as a primary character (who has an American Indian wife in a non-speaking part), the film accepts the revisionist view of the frontier as a potential site of limited liberal equality (following Fukuyama), while stressing that the hero who ensures that equality is a conservative patriot, a white male capitalist espousing traditional family values and notions of justice supported by violence (following Buchanan). *Unforgiven* cloaks its climax in rain and darkness, much as the narrative is permeated by ambiguity and deconstruction, but after Munny rides out of Big Whiskey, the film visually ends with a sunset scene of Munny at Claudia's grave; the hero has ridden gloriously into the sunset of innumerable other Western finales, triumphant in his use of violence and protection of democratic values.

In the Line of Fire (1993)

Key Image: Secret Service Agent Frank Horrigan (Eastwood) speaks on the phone with Mitch Leary (Malkovich), the would-be presidential assassin. Leary says to Horrigan that "I'm watching your movie"—a documentary of the events in Dallas in November of 1963. As Leary questions Horrigan about his role as an agent protecting President Kennedy on the day of his assassination, taunting him with statements like "JFK and Jackie and you, you looked so young and able, what did happen to you that day, Frank?"

Close-up: Horrigan's face, looking pained as he remembers the tragedy, is superimposed over a montage of footage of the Kennedy assassination (several of which have been altered to include images of a young Horrigan/Eastwood). The camera slowly tracks in to an extreme close-up of Horrigan's eyes, superimposed over the infamous Kennedy head-shot. The Horrigan close-up is a long-take, over a minute, only interrupted by an extreme close-up of Leary's eye for several seconds.

Although Eastwood did not direct or produce *In the Line of Fire* (Wolfgang Peterson directed, Jeff Apple and Bob Rosenthal produced), the script (by Jeff Maguire) seems tailor-made for Eastwood, and his performance dominates the film, though balanced with a superb villainous turn by John Malkovich. As the key image suggests, Horrigan was Kennedy's favorite secret service agent, but he failed to react at his assassination, a failure he has been haunted by for thirty years. Leary, an ex-CIA assassin who wants to kill the current president as revenge against the government that he believes betrayed him, provides Horrigan with a chance at atonement—if he can prevent Leary from killing the president.

Eastwood's senior persona perfectly fits this plot. Horrigan's past failure permeates his life; after the assassination, he became an alcoholic and his wife and daughter left him, and now he lives alone and is considered a borderline burnout at the service. While Eastwood cannot be an avenger here—he cannot strike back at Kennedy's assassin—he can at least partially redeem his failure by preventing Leary's assassination attempt (although, by formula, some personal revenge motivation does enter the narrative, as Leary kills Horrigan's partner). And despite the efforts of hundreds of Secret Service agents, only the iconic, experienced Eastwood is a great enough figure to prevent another tragedy. The film establishes that Eastwood is an American monument; the President is only a peripheral character, often in the far background while Eastwood/Horrigan looms in the foreground, and at one point Horrigan explains that he doesn't like to get too close to the First Family because "You might decide they're not worth taking a bullet for." The Washington, D. C. setting of much of the film allows Eastwood to be framed with various monuments, most notably

at the Lincoln Memorial when he turns to talk to Lincoln's statue, Eastwood's iconic face in close-up, equaling the statue in the background, saying "Damn...wish I could have been there for you, pal."

Eastwood/Horriган's monumental status inevitably leads to an allegorical reading. When fellow agent, and love interest, Lilly Raines argues that Horriган cared more about Kennedy's dignity than the current President's, Horriган claims that:

Horriган: That was different. He [Kennedy] was different.

Raines: Maybe you were different.

Horriган: I was different. The whole damn country was different.

Everything would be different right now too if I'd been half as a paranoid as I am today, fuck.

While Horriган cannot change history, the film suggests it can be revised through its altered documentary footage that inserts images of a young Eastwood, thus implying that Eastwood is a key figure in American history, "JFK and Jackie and [Eastwood/Horriган]." Leary, being a former CIA assassin presumably involved in Cold War international scandals (Horriган asks a CIA man, "What the fuck did Leary do for you anyway? Run coke for the Contras? Sell arms to Iran?"), symbolizes the dark legacy of the Cold War. Horriган represents the protection of presidents, and by extension, the nation; his defeating Leary and taking the bullet for the current President suggests that America has learned from, and overcome, its mistakes, putting the dirty but necessary illegal acts of the Cold War behind, even to the point of re-writing the tragedy of the JFK assassination, which can finally be forgotten as the nation moves towards a new future. Horriган's role of preventing assassination seems opposed to Munny's role of bounty killer and assassin, but, of course, the common link is that the true evil-doers are punished, whether they be outlaws or leading citizens, at the hands

of the Eastwood senior version of the western hero, who has agonized over his own past, but is ultimately not limited by it.

In the Line of Fire is clearly not an explicit Western or frontier narrative, but it arguably functions as a “disguised Western,” as Robert Ray terms the structural affinity that many Hollywood films share with the Western (I explain the “disguised Western” more fully in Chapter 4). Horrigan is an in-between hero, “the man who knows Indians” (as described by Slotkin), with his near psychic power to sense Leary’s presence and his repeated line of “I know things about people.” And, of course, Horrigan regenerates his life through violent conflict. Overall, like *Unforgiven*, *In the Line of Fire* looks back at and revises history but firmly moves into the symbolic frontier of an open future with “America first.”

Leary’s presence, and thus the past of the Cold War, does linger, however, as over Horrigan’s denials, Leary points out that Horrigan never would have been able to take the bullet if Leary hadn’t taunted him and kept him in “the game,” as he calls it. Horrigan can only redeem himself by eliminating his doppelganger, a federal agent who decided to rebel, implying that America can only renew itself by purging itself of its checkered Cold War past. When Horrigan and Raines return to his apartment, however, Leary’s ghost fills the room via a final message left on the answering machine before his death. Horrigan seems to walk away from it and move on with Lily, but the voice plays on, haunting an otherwise happy Hollywood ending of Lily and Frank cuddling on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, shot nearly from the Lincoln statue’s point-of-view, the Washington Monument rising in the background in front of the lovers, suggesting that Eastwood/Horrigan’s achievement has been similarly memorialized and America’s

victorious status reaffirmed. But the tinge of unease left by Leary's recording, a counter-history, leads to the tragedy and failures of Eastwood's next film, *A Perfect World*.

A Perfect World (1993)

Key Image: Red (Eastwood) has finally tracked down the escaped convict/killer Butch (Costner). Even though neither has a gun at this point, each advances towards the other in a Texas field, Butch holding the hand of Phillip, the young boy who was initially a hostage, but is now his friend...

Extreme long shot: Red on the very left of the screen, Butch and Phillip on the right, in the classic showdown shot of hundreds of Westerns.

The plot of *A Perfect World* revolves around a manhunt; Butch escapes from prison and takes a hostage (Phillip), and Red is the Texas Ranger leading the chase. Although Butch kills two people (including his partner in the escape), he seems a sympathetic character whose goal is to find his long-absent father, supposedly in Alaska. Similarly, Phillip's father is gone, and Butch becomes a father-figure to him. As the hunt progresses, we discover that Red had convinced a judge friend of his to harshly sentence the young Butch, in effect causing him to become a career criminal. At the climax, Phillip shoots and wounds Butch to prevent him from possibly killing a family that had taken them in. Meanwhile, Red and his crew finally catch up with them, so Phillip convinces Butch to surrender, and Red seems sympathetic to their plight. However, a trigger-happy FBI sniper fatally shoots Butch.

The key image, the western-style shot, suggests that *A Perfect World* addresses the limitations of the return of the genre and the frontier myth in the 1990s. When the film was released in 1993, Clint Eastwood was the consensus last great western star, but Kevin Costner, thanks to directing and starring in *Dances With Wolves* and an earlier, memorable supporting role in *Silverado* (1985), was perhaps the only other A-list Hollywood star who could claim to be a Westerner. This film also marked the first time

that Eastwood had directed a major star other than himself, resulting in a film that features Costner, with Eastwood only in a supporting role—which, perhaps, is partly why the film was a box-office flop in the U.S.A., grossing only \$31 million, a very disappointing result for two major stars following up hit movies (*Unforgiven* and *In the Line of Fire* for Eastwood, *The Bodyguard*, *JFK*, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, and *Dances with Wolves* for Costner). The film was well-reviewed, though, and made over \$100 million in the foreign market (more than *Unforgiven* or *In the Line of Fire*), indicating that it was not the quality of the film as much as American audience expectations and preferences that caused its relative failure in the domestic market.

American audiences may have expected more interaction between the two stars (they only appear together onscreen at the very end of the film), or they may have been off-put by Costner's somewhat dark turn as a convict and killer, despite his likeable performance as a father figure to Phillip. Most obviously, the film's tragic ending, with Butch/Costner suddenly killed by a FBI sniper, may have left American audiences uneasy, with neither a clichéd happy ending nor at least a cathartic sense of purpose or meaning to Butch's death (unlike Eastwood's self-sacrifice at the end of 2008's *Gran Torino*, to cite a recent, relevant example).

I argue, however, that another significant factor, closely related to the tragic ending, in American audiences rejecting this film was that the optimistic expectations of Eastwood's senior persona are not met in *A Perfect World*, and the resulting tragedy fails to resonate with a nation uneasily excited about its present and future. While *Unforgiven* and *In the Line of Fire* both contain aspects that undercut the successes of the Eastwood characters, *A Perfect World* has Red explicitly failing on multiple levels

without redemption: his unjustified punishment of the young Butch and his inability to atone by bringing in Butch alive, with the FBI agent out of his control. Similarly, Butch is unable to escape his past by escaping to rejoin his father in the symbolic final frontier of Alaska. By denying the possibility of righting past wrongs, and instead only bloodily eliminating them, the film rejects the redemptive appeal of Eastwood's senior persona.

At the allegorical level, this film also invokes the Kennedy assassination. The film is set in Texas prior to Kennedy's visiting Dallas; the custom trailer that Red appropriates for the manhunt is meant for the Governor's use during the President's visit. In this context, the FBI sniper who kills Butch invokes Oswald, and, without dipping into conspiracy theories, the film suggests that the inability to prevent either shooting results from America's failure to address its institutionalized violence, whether carried out by a government agent or a lone gunman. Therefore, in the 1990s, American audiences declined to embrace a film that fails to optimistically heal the Cold War's legacy, but instead suggests that the wounds of past violence remain open. While this message is partially mitigated by setting the film in the 1960s and having the young Phillip survive and be reunited with his family, audiences can only assume Phillip has been scarred by these events, as the nation was post-JFK, without the possibility of escape to a new frontier.

Heartbreak Ridge begins with "Sea of Heartbreak," a song that is also played on Butch and Phillip's car radio in *A Perfect World*. With lyrics such as "lost love an' loneliness," "memories of your caress," and "I wish you were mine again," this melancholy love song matches Eastwood's senior persona and its obsession with recovering the past, but while the song is primarily nostalgic and regretful, Eastwood's

senior persona films and characters of the early 1990s move beyond nostalgia, as those characters are able to revisit and redeem their past mistakes and continue forward into an uncertain, yet often hopeful, future, a trajectory that mirrors audience sensibilities and expectations in the United States after the Cold War. While variations on the senior persona persist in Eastwood's later films (such as *Space Cowboys* in 2000 and *Million Dollar Baby* in 2004), those films lack the intertwined allusions to specific, grandiose historical events and frontier mythology that enabled an obvious, allegorical connection to post-Cold War America, a connection that makes the films of 1992 and 1993 among the most historically interesting and socially relevant of Eastwood's career.

CHAPTER 4

THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS: FILM ADAPTATIONS, RACIAL CONFLICT, AND AMERICAN INDIAN RESPONSES

In the 1820s, James Fenimore Cooper heeded a general call to help create an American literature with his Leatherstocking novels, the most enduring of which has been *The Last of the Mohicans*, first published in 1826. In the 1990s, Patrick Buchanan called for “America first!”—and how better to respond than with a new version of Cooper’s foundational classic, the 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans* (directed by Michael Mann)? This chapter will examine Cooper’s novel and the 1920 film version, the first feature-length adaptation, before turning to a close analysis of the 1992 film, its relation to contemporary America, and its portrayal of American Indians in the context of the 1990s Western cycle.² I will attempt to reconcile competing interpretations of the film through a form of structuralist analysis borrowed from Charles Eckert. And, I will put forth an alternate interpretation of the film that considers Chingachgook, played by Russell Means, as an important figure relegated to the narrative periphery. I intend to examine what space, if any, Hollywood films provide for the advancement of American Indian stories and characters in relation to more general questions of race.

I am addressing the ‘90s Western cycle; however, is the 1992 *The Last of the Mohicans* actually a “Western” film? A strict definition of the Western genre might argue against it. Set in 1757 colonial New York, *Mohicans* lacks the genre’s typical post-Civil War setting of the American West (meaning west of the Mississippi River, or thereabouts). Of course, when Cooper’s novel was first published in 1826, the Western genre as we now know it did not exist, although the frontier and stories about it

²This chapter expands upon my previous essay, “White Romance and American Indian Action in Hollywood’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992).”

obviously did. And Cooper's story and characters certainly have a strong connection to the twentieth-century Western hero. D. H. Lawrence famously identified the pairing of the white man and American Indian (subordinate) companion—of Leatherstocking (or Hawkeye, or Natty Bumppo) and Chingachgook (or Indian John, or the Great Serpent)—as fundamental to American literature, as is Hawkeye's role: "The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic and a killer. It has never melted" (65). Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* further traces the prevalence of this homo-social, sexless bond (which thereby avoids miscegenation) in American literature, and Henry Nash Smith's section of *Virgin Land* entitled "The Sons of Leatherstocking" connects Leatherstocking, Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and others to the genesis of the Western dime novels that precede film Westerns. At the very least, then, we can say that Cooper's characterization of Leatherstocking epitomizes the "man who knows Indians" that Richard Slotkin identifies as the central character of the American frontier myth, and the core of the film Western (15-16). John McWilliams asserts in his survey of Cooper's critical reception, "the one unchanging response to the Leatherstocking Tales has been admiration for Cooper's characterization of Leatherstocking himself" (21).

To consider the 1992 *Mohicans* a Western film, I ask the reader to refer to Martin Barker and Roger Sabin's *The Lasting of the Mohicans: History of an American Myth*, an exhaustive examination of the myriad adaptations of Cooper's novel in children's classics, movies (silents, sound features, serials), television (cartoon and live-action), and comic books. Barker and Sabin point out that "*Mohicans* became inextricably tangled up with the Western genre, an association that has not disappeared to this day" (29). Thus, Hollywood film versions, dependent on recognizable genres and appropriate

stars for marketing, adapt the story of *The Last of the Mohicans* to conform, at least in part, to Western generic conventions. For example, the 1936 film version casts Randolph Scott, closely identified with Westerns, as Hawkeye, despite his star persona not quite meshing with Cooper's characterization (Barker and Sabin 90). The 1920 film has a more imagistic example: at the Glen Falls scene, a number of long shots locate the camera inside the cave, facing out, in such a manner as to frame the civilized characters within against the outside wilderness. This type of shot is a staple of Western film composition, most famously employed by John Ford in *The Searchers* (1956).

Furthermore, Barker and Sabin argue for another aspect of Cooper's novel that seems to have reached something like consensus: the incoherency of the source text, at least on an ideological level. Barker and Sabin conclude that one primary reason for the persistence of the *Mohicans* myth is that it remains indeterminate, presenting a number of contradictory impulses without resolving them:

We are suggesting that *The Last of the Mohicans*, because of the particular circumstances under which it was written, balances with great precision on top of a nest of contradictions. Born on the cusp of a contradiction in Cooper's own politics, born at a time of very fast transition in the image of Indians and the wilderness, *Mohicans* holds within itself, in tension, a wealth of possibilities for subsequent use. To be brutally paradoxical, it has a coherent incoherence.

But that does not mean it can be used for anything. It retains, like a birthmark, like Achilles' heel, the sign of its birth, and therefore lends itself to certain uses...hardest of all would be to turn the story into one that questioned the equation of "naturalness" with "respectability" with "virtue," because that would be to challenge the very sources of the story's power. If, as Alexander Sexton has argued, race is a deformed substitute for class, then wilderness is a beautified substitute for property. (201-202)

Following Barker and Sabin, whom she quotes several times, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick also states that the "complex and even contradictory nature of Cooper's ideas...has made the story so adaptable by filmmakers and others who have made the story their own"

(71). McWilliams refers to Cooper's "conflicts," "anomalies," and "inconsistencies," all of which still exist in American society (6). H. Daniel Peck traces this trend in reading Cooper to Thomas Philbrick's 1971 argument that *The Last of the Mohicans* stands out from the other Leatherstocking tales in that it chaotically rejects meaning; thus, any attempt to find meaning or pattern supposes an "ideological scheme" by the author that does not exist (qtd. in Peck 14). Significantly, Philbrick uses Cooper's description of the rushing, disordered waters of Glens Falls to symbolize the overall disorder of the novel. I shall soon return to the Glens Falls scene for my own argument.

I cannot say for certain whether this emphasis on Cooper's incoherence, following periods of praise for his founding of an American literature, is a result of a lingering fascination with ambiguity or a poststructuralist affinity for deconstruction. However, assuming that Cooper's *Mohicans* does contain ideological and/or structural incoherence, or at least provokes such readings, then that incoherence not only allows multiple film adaptations, it exemplifies the type of ideological project that Hollywood prefers. Following Fiedler, Robert Ray argues that "disguised westerns," wherein a reluctant hero embodies both outlaw and approved normative characteristics, form the basis for the typical American story: "the western's importance derives from the national ideology's eagerness to assert an American exceptionalism as the basis for avoiding difficult choices" (74). This ideology of avoiding hard choices manifests itself both in the plots of Hollywood films (the reluctant hero, caught between two opposing forces, finally makes the morally right decision, but only temporarily, before reasserting himself as an individual) and in the film style (the invisible, continuity editing preferred by Hollywood

always provides the ideal vantage point for the spectator while masking the fragmented decision-making processes of film production) (Ray 32-33).

Thus, we can refine Barker and Sabin's interpretation of the *Mohicans* myth specifically for Hollywood film production: the "coherent incoherence" they find in Cooper's original tale is precisely the type of story that Hollywood prefers in order to present difficult ideological dilemmas without choosing between them. To test this, I will examine the aforementioned Glens Falls scene that Philbrick views as central to Cooper and that also plays a key role in the 1920 and 1992 film versions.³

In the Cooper novel, the Glens Falls sequence (Cooper names it "Glenn's") is substantial, covering roughly forty pages and spanning all of Chapters 6 through 9 and the beginning of Chapter 10. The film versions, on the other hand, last for fewer than ten minutes. While this is obviously a necessity for Hollywood feature films—reducing the 350-plus pages of the novel to approximately two hours—exactly how the novel sequence is condensed into a film scene is revealing. These action-oriented films obviously emphasize moments of conflict and other physical actions, but they also retain other story points that highlight each film's ideological project. Wayne Franklin examines how Cooper, who visited the falls in 1824, when they were already dramatically transformed by human "improvements" (bridges, buildings, mill work, stones and watercourses moved), had to visualize the falls as they would have appeared in the 1750s. To consider Cooper's task in a more critical sense, Franklin

³Interestingly enough, the 1936 film version does not include this scene; while the 1936 film is often referenced by critics examining the 1992 film, as the 1936 Dunne screenplay is credited in the 1992 film and Mann has stated that he was influenced by the 1936 film, some key moments in the 1992 film seem heavily influenced by the 1920 film.

argues that Cooper had to erase the modern, civilized United States to achieve the imaginary foundations of the savage, violent wilderness of *The Last of the Mohicans*:

In the case of the Glens Falls scene, it is as if he held the falls in his mind's eye and, object by object, removed the accumulated burden of culture from the place until he got down to the rock that underpinned it all. He found the wilderness, in other words, *under* the nation. (33)

Cooper himself suggests as much in one of the historical footnotes he occasionally inserts into the novel (following the lead of Walter Scott): "Thus, in a new country, the woods and other objects, which in an old country would be maintained at great cost, are got rid of, simply with a view of 'improving,' as it is called" (51). This quotation reveals Cooper's ambivalence towards civilization and preference for some aspects of an imagined unsoiled frontier landscape. Following Franklin, and Cooper's own prompt, my task is to reveal the rock of ideology beneath the narrative burdens of the various Glens Falls scenes.

Cooper's original text is notable for the extended conversations between the characters that intersperse the narrative moments of suspense or action. One of these occurs after Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook have saved Cora, Alice, Heyward, and Gamut from Magua's attempt to lead them astray into the wilderness and into the hands of his Huron allies. Hawkeye and the Mohicans decide to hide at their cave retreat, formed and hidden by Glens Falls, and located on a secure island. Their relaxation over venison, with singing, is interrupted by hideous screams that Heyward eventually recognizes as a horse in terror, signaling that Magua and the Hurons have found their horses and are on their trail. A restless night follows, and, as they ready to leave at dawn, they are attacked by the Hurons. A gunfight ensues. Eventually, several Hurons land on the island, and tense hand-to-hand combat ensues—with the climactic,

cliff-edge battle between Heyward and a Huron, with Uncas coming to the rescue, immortalized by an N. C. Wyeth illustration that is subsequently adapted for numerous comic book covers (Barker and Sabin 187). The Hurons are defeated; Uncas, Heyward, and Hawkeye return to cover in the rocks, and the gunfight continues. The battle is punctuated by an image of a wounded Huron dangling from a tree before plunging to his death in the river. Eventually, the Mohicans and company run out of powder (the Hurons steal the canoe with the extra powder), and Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook prepare for the final onslaught—until they decide instead to escape down the river in the hope that they will be able to return and eventually save the rest of the party. They leap into the river, and the Munro sisters, Heyward, and Gamut hide in the cave, where Magua and the Hurons soon discover them and lead them away in captivity.

What this plot summary omits is the character development and interactions that most blatantly convey the ideological messages of the novel. Cora, Alice, and Heyward openly admire Uncas' physical perfection and nobility of form. This strongly suggests the stereotype of the “noble savage.” Uncas further displays his noble nature through his close attention to the sisters, particularly Cora, his love interest. Hawkeye, even when eating, remains ever vigilant, suggesting the American man of action, a trait further emphasized by his puzzlement at Gamut's lack of practical skill. And while Gamut's musical talents, accompanied by the Munro sisters, seem for a moment to bring European harmony into the wilderness, the screams of the horse quickly remind the reader that frontier wilds are dangerous and savage. After Uncas saves Heyward, their gestures of respect and friendship suggest the idealized harmony of the official hero with the noble Indian—which nevertheless ends in the death of the Indian, at the

end of the novel. Duncan and Heyward debate whether to shoot the dangling Huron. Hawkeye ruthlessly refuses because powder must be conserved, but as the Huron falls, Hawkeye shoots him out of unthinking pity, revealing the heart of gold in this not quite stoic killer—a natural morality born out of the American frontier.

Finally, the sequence concludes with the Mohicans and Hawkeye stoically preparing for inevitable death, revealing their natural grandeur as epic warriors. However, exemplifying Protestant self-sacrifice, Cora beseeches them to save themselves. Hawkeye realizes the Christian sin of de facto suicide, though it would be “right and proper in a redskin” (76), and convinces Chingachgook, who sees the practicality of the act, to swim away. Hawkeye soon follows. Uncas remains, nobly and resolutely protecting his intended, until Cora convinces him to fly as the only means to save them, and he gloomily follows the others. Heyward is unmoved and remains because he fears that most horrible of savage war outcomes, the rape of white women by savage Indians (the racist fear of miscegenation is central to the myth of savage war). Perhaps most surprising to those who see one of the films before reading the novel is that Cora insists on the flight of Hawkeye and the Mohicans and is willing to possibly sacrifice herself and her sister, both for the survival of the men and for a remote chance of later rescue. This stance—emblematic of the Puritan captivity narratives that partially inspire Cooper’s work—interestingly shifts in the film versions.

According to Barker and Sabin, the 1920 silent film *The Last of the Mohicans*, at seventy-three minutes, is the first feature length adaptation of Cooper’s story. Directed by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown (although Brown supposedly directed the majority of the film due to Tourneur’s illness), the film was shot on Californian locations,

including the Yosemite Valley (66). Barker and Sabin interpret this film as a response to American racism prevalent in the 1910s, such as anti-immigration and eugenics laws and a widespread belief in social Darwinism (75). They also argue that as Tourneur was the main rival of the legendary racist director D. W. Griffith, the 1920 *Mohicans* is a response to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the Civil War and Reconstruction film that most infamously depicts the racist attitudes of the period and which directly inspires the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan (73). Barker and Sabin note that this *Mohicans* emphasizes the lead characters Uncas and Cora's romance and sexual attraction, along with Magua's desire for Cora, and relegates Hawkeye and Chingachgook (named "Chief Big Serpent") to supporting roles. The film also introduces a new character, British Captain Randolph, who is disgusted with Cora's attraction to Uncas. Randolph is clearly a cowardly, villainous character, who refuses to accompany the women in the wilderness and betrays Colonel Munro and the fort to the French (72-73). Uncas is played by a white actor; Cora's African heritage is elided; and Cora and Uncas' love remains unconsummated, consisting only of longing looks and a final, *Romeo and Juliet*-style hand-holding in death. However, given the racially charged politics of the era, the decision to make the Indian character Uncas the clear protagonist and the obvious race-blind attraction between Uncas and Cora makes a strong statement against racism.

An analysis of the Glens Falls sequence supports Barker and Sabin's conclusions. Despite the introduction of the Randolph character, the film adheres to the novel's plot rather closely, and the Glens sequences is no exception. At eight minutes in length, slightly more than ten percent of the film's running time, it closely approximates the

portion of the novel Cooper dedicates to it. In the film, the sequence also appears in Cooper's order, following the initial rescue of the Munro sisters, Heyward, and Gamut from Magua's trap and before the second rescue and trip to Fort William Henry. All the major plot action points remain, although the dialogue is heavily abridged (as in any film version of Cooper, but even more so, being a silent film dependent on intertitles). In the novel, Hawkeye is the most talkative of the bunch and the leader of the action—although it can be argued that both the Mohicans and Hawkeye collectively decide on the course of action while conversing together in the Mohican language. However, Hawkeye is the one who translates those decisions into English for the benefit of the British characters and the reader. Moreover, Heyward, Alice, and Cora all admire Uncas. Conversely, in the film, Hawkeye and Chingachgook sit to one side, silent for the most part, while Uncas speaks English and leads the action; and here, only Cora gazes at Uncas.

Those gazes are in fact somewhat unusual. Laura Mulvey famously argues that Hollywood cinema restricted, and indeed often punished, independent female characters, a restriction exemplified by shots from the male protagonist's point of view, or gaze, that positioned women as sexual objects. Before the institution of the Hays Code in 1930 and accompanying dominance of the studio system, Hollywood is considered to have a wider range of expression and artistic freedom. Moreover, the 1920 film, though a major production, was financed by the independent Associate Producers. Thus, the film was not subject to the restrictions most commonly associated with Hollywood films, and so the romance between Uncas and Cora is allowed (the

Hays Code later explicitly banned depictions of miscegenation), as is the depiction of Cora as a relatively strong woman character who gazes lustfully at Uncas.

The film initially presents Cora as very conventional. An intertitle says that women “maintain the grace and dignity of life.” Soon after, Cora is introduced in close-up, playing a harp for a dance at the fort, a typical Western film convention, with roots in 1903’s *The Great Train Robbery*, indicating the stereotypical women’s realm of domesticity and civilization. Another intertitle, with a flower in the upper corner, states that Cora has mothered Alice from childhood, and the following shots indicate that Randolph is interested in Cora. However, when Uncas makes his entrance, framed in a long shot standing in a doorway, Cora, framed in a medium two-shot sitting next to Randolph, turns her head, and surprised gaze, from Randolph to Uncas. She then exclaims (in an intertitle), “Surely among his own people he is a prince!” Randolph, in the same medium two-shot and intertitle setup, criticizes Cora, the “daughter of Colonel Munro,” for “admiring a filthy savage.” Chastened, though obviously bored, Cora turns back to Randolph before resignedly staring into space as Randolph talks. At this point, still in the British Fort Edward, Cora’s transgressive attraction to Uncas is contained, both by Randolph’s words and by the film structure which presents her either at the side of the harp or with Randolph. Within the fort, emblematic of the restrictions of British society, Cora cannot yet act on her impulsive attraction.

When the scene shifts to Glens Falls, however, these social restrictions are lifted, and replaced by the frontier mythos of limitless possibilities. Initially, hiding inside the cave, Cora is framed in a manner similar to at Ford Edward: a medium shot, Cora again on the right, with Heyward instead of Randolph on the left and Alice squeezed in the

middle. But after Chingachgook announces “Uncas watches,” we see a medium close-up of Cora alone. Similar to the Fort Edward shot, her eyes shift from screen left to screen right to look at Uncas, who is shown in a long-shot, framed in silhouette, and shirtless, in the cave entrance, similar to the Fort Edward building doorway. The film cuts back to an even tighter close-up of Cora, who steadily gazes at Uncas for a relatively long take of seven seconds, her interest obvious. Again in long shot, Uncas turns toward her, an intertitle announcing “a common danger...drawing together these two, so widely separated by the mystery of birth.” The film returns to a close-up of a smiling Cora, and Uncas joins her in a medium long shot to point out the rising moon outside the cave entrance. Located in a wild, natural location, the framing has cut Cora off from civilized restrictions represented by her sister and Heyward, and her admiring sexual gaze can now attract Uncas to her, both in appreciation of the wild beauty outside. Framed together in a medium close-up two-shot, Cora cautiously turns towards Uncas.

Later in the scene, immediately prior to the attack by Magua and the Hurons, Uncas escorts the sisters to an inner chamber of the cave. Cora and Uncas now exchange smoldering close-ups, directly gazing at one another. This further emphasizes their central roles. I should note here that the close-ups in the film are reserved for Uncas and Cora; while it is not surprising that a Hollywood film would reserve close-ups for the male and female leads, the filmic strategy reinforces the elevation of Uncas to the lead role over Hawkeye and stresses the interracial romance of Cora and Uncas. As the battle begins, with Uncas leading both the gunfire and hand-to-hand combat, Cora leads Alice out to help with filling the rifles, a marked increase over Cooper's novel in

the active roles of women. The scene of the Huron hanging from a tree is included; unlike Cooper's novel, the film has Uncas, framed in medium long shot with Cora at his side and Hawkeye at the very edge, shoot the Huron with the last bit of powder, followed by the intertitle "A deed of mercy." Once again, the film places Uncas at the center, with Cora involved visually, admiring his "civilized" qualities.

Uncas again exhibits his primary leadership role as he directs Hawkeye and Chingachgook in a "desperate" plan—they will attempt to draw off Magua and the Hurons while the British hide in yet another hidden portion of the cave. Hawkeye and Chingachgook escape; before Uncas leaves, Cora runs to him, and they share a medium close-up two shot, in profile, staring at one another, seemingly about to kiss—though, ultimately, they do not. And lest we begin to think that this is a truly radical film, an intertitle reads, "Glad to be risking his life for the sake of the wonderful white maiden." Uncas leaves them and dives off the cliff, over the falls, to try and draw away the Hurons; however, the ruse does not succeed, as Magua locates them and leads them away as captives.

The change in the film to Uncas devising the diversionary escape plan weakens Cooper's stronger portrayal of Cora—in the novel, Cora thinks of their escape and selflessly exhorts them to flee—but it does add to the portrayal of Uncas as the central, goal-oriented action hero. As Barker and Sabin argue, the 1920 film endorses a stronger portrayal of race relations (for the time). I would also suggest that it adds a more positive portrayal of women. Tourneur and Brown adapted Cooper's novel, particularly the Glens Falls sequence, to move an Indian man and white woman into leading roles, while minimizing the dominant mediator role of Hawkeye. This makes for

an interesting and unconventional leap in racial and gender roles, suggesting that the partial incoherency of Cooper's novel lends itself to progressive racial depictions on celluloid.

The 1992 version, on the other hand, seems rather conservative, excepting its updated portrayal of American Indians. In this version, Nathaniel (the exclusive name for "Hawkeye" in this film) again becomes the center, the "man who knows Indians." Although Nathaniel is presented as more Indian than white, an adopted Mohican who closely works as a team with Uncas and Chingachgook, the film clearly elevates him to the central protagonist with an intense love affair with Cora (who once again has no discernible African ancestry). Steve Neale has referred to the Westerns of the 1990s as tending towards the poles of "neo-conservative" and "new revisionist," while noting that the poles are not mutually exclusive (32). The 1992 *Mohicans* is one film that has aspects of both. Following *Dances with Wolves'* example, it is revisionist in its portrayal of American Indians: the Mohicans' language is spoken aloud and translated in subtitles, American Indian actors play the leading Indian roles (Uncas, Chingachgook, Magua), Magua's desire for revenge is explained as a function of British violence, and most of the Indian characters, along with Nathaniel, are environmentalists who respect nature.

The neo-conservative streak in this film is more difficult to explain. One aspect is its extremely violent nature, including gory stabbing, bludgeoning, chopping, scalping, and even the cutting out and displaying of a human heart (Colonel Munro's by Magua). A hostage burned alive is thrown in for good measure. Another aspect lies in the problematic portrayals of Indians: the Hurons are depicted as excessively violent; and

Uncas and Chingachgook usually float around following the white Nathaniel (who is of European descent, despite his integration into Mohican culture), in clearly supporting roles.

Ultimately, the neo-conservative aspect of this film seems to lie in its withdrawal, its emphasis on survival outside of the surrounding political contexts, a withdrawal that the 1920 version does not endorse. Barker and Sabin note that the film portrays “a world gone mad, out of control, and people are digging into their inner resources to survive it, or to die in dignity if necessary” (109). On one level, this is a variation of Slotkin’s “regeneration through violence” thesis, where the frontier is a chaotic, violent site that tests and strengthens the peoples and cultures that encounter it. At the same time, the traditional sense of purpose, of Manifest Destiny, seems lacking. In Cooper’s novel, again following Scott’s lead, the events are definitely portrayed as in the past, as precursors to the realization of United States democracy. Thus, the second half of the novel, the interaction amongst the Indian tribes, resonates as part of the foundational history of America, even though in Cooper’s view the Indian nations must disappear for the new American empire to rise. The 1992 film never presents a historical framework suggesting that the rise of the United States is inevitable. The film does contain substantial dialogue about the corruptness of the European powers versus the pluck of the frontier settlers, but that message always seems secondary, *pro forma* for a colonial period narrative, and is never conveyed with any conviction. In the last third of the film, political struggles disappear, replaced by struggles for survival. Magua and the Hurons massacre the British vacating Fort William Henry, and the filmic world remains chaotic

afterwards, with the only goal being Nathaniel and the Mohicans' quest to save Cora and Alice from Magua and the Hurons.

Barker and Sabin interpret the film as a failed entry in Mann's oeuvre, his attempt at a humanist, anti-capitalism message that cannot exceed Cooper's text because of the American political moment in which it was produced. Discussing Nathaniel's ability to speak for the yeoman farmers/settlers and for natural conservation against economic exploitation in general, they write:

The idyll, therefore, is still the American idyll: a nation of small farmers honoring their land, with the depths of "nature" inside them. This is the hollow idyll Bill Clinton rode to power (also in 1992) as he shouldered aside the hard market ethics of George Bush's Republicanism. Its hollowness has been painfully exposed in the short and beleaguered presidency Clinton has enjoyed.

Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans*, we would argue, is the fragile utopia of 1990s Democratic politics...[Mann] has here sunk away into a middle-American dream/nightmare. Partly, that is surely due to the progressive decline in American radical politics in the last thirty years...Something about the story of *Mohicans*, taken as the vehicle for Mann's radical vision, turns to constrain and defeat that radicalism. (117)

While this is an interesting interpretation, it remains overly general and vague. As with the 1920 film, a closer analysis of the film through its Glens Falls sequence will provide further specificity to their claims.

In the 1992 film, the Glens Falls setting and action is moved to after the Fort William Henry massacre, and instead the film substitutes a partially equivalent scene after the initial rescue of Cora, Alice, and Heyward from Magua's ambush. This substitute scene is a night spent at an Indian burial site, where Nathaniel and Cora first begin to be drawn to one another, as Cora is thrilled by the excitement and danger of the frontier that Nathaniel embodies. Their mutual attraction grows over the course of the film—the love affair's development can be tracked by the unruliness of Cora's hair:

initially bound up and under a proper hat at afternoon tea, it gradually becomes unloosened until it is as richly flowing as Nathaniel's own locks—and is consummated at the besieged Fort William Henry, where Nathaniel is soon imprisoned for sedition. Separated by the cell bars, Nathaniel and Cora discuss the fort's inevitable fall and Nathaniel's potential hanging, leading Cora to proclaim, "The whole world's on fire, isn't it?" Surely a memorable line for multiple reasons, it does suggest that their intense love affair is, in the finest Hollywood escapist style, a refuge from the larger social problems of the war between France and England.

Colonel Munro soon surrenders the fort, as the French commander Montcalm agrees to let him leave in honorable fashion, colors and weapons intact. Magua, however, has other plans (tacitly agreed to by Montcalm), and he and his Hurons ambush the retreating British, resulting in a bloody massacre, wherein Magua kills Munro after promising to exterminate his "seed" (his daughters). Nathaniel, Uncas, and Chingachgook rescue Cora and Alice and flee the scene in canoes. They soon encounter Heyward, who has also escaped with some soldiers via canoe. The equivalent of the Glens Falls sequence now occurs, as they ditch the canoes over a waterfall and hide in a cave behind it.

The most striking aspect of this scene is its abundance of rushing water. This is not an inanimate cave of stone; rather, the openings of the caves face into the waterfall, a continuously falling sheet of water that Mann lights in various ways to cast across the actors flickering patterns of light and shadow. Thus, when Nathaniel closely embraces Cora while informing her of her father's death, in close-ups and long shots, the viewer sees either the translucent rushing waters behind the characters or the flickering

shadows and lights upon the bodies of the actors, with the darkness of the cave behind them. While such a universal symbol as falling water can have many meanings (mourning, washing away sins, and so on), I believe the primary meaning of the visual play caused by the falls is a return to the chaotic indeterminacy that Philbrick sees in Cooper's description of the falls. Cora's father is dead due to the madness of the war between French and English involving Indian and colonials, and against the madness rushing past them, Nathaniel and Cora can only grasp one another. That is, until Magua returns and Nathaniel and the Mohicans must leap into that chaos, if they hope to survive. His voice straining with emotion, Nathaniel holds Cora's arms and yells, "You survive. You stay alive no matter what occurs. I will find you"—life has been reduced to simple survival, subsisting only on hope.

Thus, the 1992 *Mohicans* (filming dates: 17 June 1991 to 10 October 1991) reflects an isolationist, survivalist trend. But exactly what survivalist trend? National politics, as the First Gulf War had ended in 1991, and the U.S.A. now wanted to isolate itself from involvement overseas? The surge of the militia movement, as the Ruby Ridge confrontation occurred in 1992? Fear of and endurance through the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, following the 1991 Rodney King beating and subsequent investigation and trial? The ties to 1990s racial conflict seem the best place to start, as racial conflict lies at the heart of Cooper's novel and reverberates through its adaptations. A closer examination of the film's ideological messages is needed, especially around the crux of the film and its predecessors, the Glen Falls sequence. To further unravel these messages, I will consider the reception of the 1992 film's racial politics in conjunction with a close reading of the structuring racial conflicts in the film text.

Any film adaptation of *Mohicans* must address the filmic depiction of American Indians and racial conflict with whites. This is an issue of primary importance because Hollywood has rarely portrayed complex, fully developed Native American characters. Countless Westerns have propagated the stereotypes of the “noble savage” and/or the “bloodthirsty savage,” and Hollywood producers have viewed hiring American Indian actors and accurately depicting American Indian culture as both unimportant and unprofitable. Not until the revisionist Westerns of the 1970s did Hollywood begin to offer more complex and accurate American Indian characters; however, Hollywood representations of American Indians remain problematic at best.

The 1992 film *Mohicans* arguably continues the Hollywood tradition of underdeveloped American Indian characters. Although *Mohicans* was a financial success and often praised in the mainstream press, many critics have censured the film for its stereotypical representation of American Indians. Nevertheless, a few American Indian voices have praised the film and its portrayal of American Indians. These paradoxical stances towards the film are what most intrigue me, and I will begin this section by surveying the critical and popular reception of the film in order to compare various readings of the film.

Much of the scholarly criticism of the 1992 film derives from the differences between the film version and Cooper’s original 1826 novel. One effect of these changes is to slight the American Indian characters in favor of the white characters. Critics argue that because the film emphasizes the individual hero Nathaniel and the white romantic triangle of Nathaniel, Cora, and Duncan, the film fails to develop fully the American Indian characters or their relationships, romantic or otherwise. As Jeffrey Walker states

in his examination of Hollywood's adaptations of Cooper's novel: "Of all the many revisions of Cooper's novel that appear in the 1992 version, Mann's decision to turn *The Last of the Mohicans* primarily into a love story and to ignore the essence of the American Indian theme is the strangest and most damaging plot twist of all" (173). Similarly, Henry Sheehan addresses the transfer of sexuality from the novel's Uncas and Cora to the film's Nathaniel and Cora: "Aside from rendering the film's title meaningless, the switch perpetuates a racist interpretation of acceptable sexuality...When Mann kills off Uncas and Alice, it's just a way of avoiding racial complications" (46). Both Walker and Sheehan further argue that the film's reworking of Cooper's characters and plot serves to elide American Indian presences and sidestep issues of race, racial conflict, and miscegenation.

Discussing another modification from the novel to the film, Martin Barker (in an article separate from his book with Sabin) says of Nathaniel's new status as the adopted son of Chingachgook:

This shift in perspective is linked in Mann's version with an overall tendency to make Nathaniel the most Indian character of all...Nathaniel/Day-Lewis is interracial, therefore all political issues about race are 'resolved' in and through him. Thus does multiculturalism find a myth to bear it...Mann has made a clever, beautiful, but in the end hollow film, celebrating cultural pluralism but depoliticising racial politics. (29)

In Barker's view, the film treats race as a non-issue through the white Nathaniel's appropriation of American Indian characteristics. As Deborah Root explains, "We see in this film an old device—the white man as a mediator, presented as the one who best understands what it means to be Native" (46).

With the emphasis on the white protagonist Nathaniel, the film pushes the American Indian characters into the background. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick asserts that:

This film is about the English, French, and white Americans, with the Indians as colorful backdrops and sidekicks for the hero, and in the end, as the white Bumppo and his adoptive Indian father stand on a mountain and look over the wilderness, we hear only that he is the "last of the Mohicans." It would be a poignant scene, except that it seems a fitting ending for some other film. (142-143)

Kilpatrick concludes that Uncas and Chingachgook are relegated to supporting roles despite the film's effort to include American Indians. Root also criticizes the film's token integration:

The film marks its supposed 'sensitivity' to the Native community by hiring Native actors and acknowledging the American Indian Movement in the credits at the end of the movie (it would be very interesting to hear how that went down) and having some of the characters speak Mohawk. But the narrative shamelessly reproduces old stereotypes, which clearly demonstrates that hiring Native actors is not enough. (46)

Root and other critics recognize that the film depends on the stereotypical dichotomy of "noble versus bloodthirsty savages." Gary Edgerton perhaps best summarizes this established critique of the film's reliance on stereotypes:

In terms of plot structure, Chingachgook and Uncas remain the evidence throughout this film that Michael Mann's formal stylistic decisions actually undercut his stated intentions to revise the negative stereotyping of American Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans* from Cooper through Hollywood's many versions. (13)

In pointing out the film's adoption of a colonial point of view, Edgerton concludes that, "In the process, American Indian images continue to be used in this newest version, intentionally or unintentionally, to present the viewpoint of the historically privileged rather than the oppressed" (16).

I agree with these critics' interpretations. *Mohicans* only minimally attends to the American Indian characters and instead accentuates the white lead characters of Nathaniel and Cora. This film is a mainstream, big-budget, Hollywood star vehicle, and unfortunately, such a film usually has white lead stars and a heterosexual romance-

driven narrative. In his historical examination of classical Hollywood cinematic style, David Bordwell identifies the most commonly recurring motifs and elements of Hollywood narrative structure. Regarding the inevitable inclusion of a love story, he points out that:

The classical film has at least two lines of action, both causally linking the same group of characters. Almost invariably, one of these lines of action involves heterosexual romantic love. This is, of course, not startling news...The tight binding of the second line of action to the love interest is one of the most unusual qualities of the classical cinema. (16-17)

Writing for a more popular audience, Janet Maslin similarly notes the seeming necessity for a romantic story with popular stars:

It took a lot more than tomahawks to make a box-office success of "The Last of the Mohicans," that's for sure. What it took was the inclusion of heartthrob elements, plus a strain of modern-day silliness, in a story not previously known for its sex appeal...Now Mr. Day-Lewis, teamed smolderingly with the beautiful Madeleine Stowe, brings serious chemistry to a role that seemingly had no romantic potential at all. (Maslin 13)

Both Bordwell and Maslin suggest Hollywood's dependence on romantic storylines for box-office appeal. What remains unsaid, however, is that most big-budget Hollywood films also feature white lead stars. At some fundamental level, big-budget, profit-driven Hollywood filmmaking is racist. Such films must reach the largest possible audience in order to maximize profit, and Hollywood tacitly assumes that a romance plot with a white star and a white love interest most appeals to the largest possible audience. Hence, non-white characters are usually relegated to supporting roles and rarely are involved in the romantic line of action. Occasional exceptions occur, of course (and the exceptions are slowly becoming more frequent), but the majority of Hollywood films follow this pattern. Thus, it would be surprising if *Mohicans*, given its status as a big-budget Hollywood production, had become anything than the white star vehicle it is. I

am not attempting to somehow excuse the filmmakers of *Mohicans* for the problematic depictions of American Indians within the film—even a film with white leads can offer complex Native American supporting roles. Rather, I am suggesting that emphasis on white stars and subordination of American Indian supporting characters is more of a problem with the institutions of Hollywood film production than of the individual film or its creators. Therefore, supporting Native American characters should be examined very closely, and not easily dismissed as subordinate roles, because the supporting roles are the most prevalent depictions of American Indians. The construction and reception of these roles illuminates the assumptions and preferences of the larger social constructs that both produce and consume these films. Big-budget Hollywood films will not radically change by departing from white lead actors and instead presenting truly progressive, American Indian-centered stories any time soon; the question is, rather, whether or not a specific Hollywood film like *Mohicans* improves, in any way, Hollywood's traditional portrayal of American Indians.

Some American Indians think it does. Given the stereotypical depictions of Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and in Hollywood films in general, I was surprised to find a few Native American sources that endorsed the film. Two of these voices belong to actors Russell Means (Oglala Lakota) and Wes Studi (Cherokee), who play Chingachgook and Magua in the film. Both actors view Magua as a complex, fully developed American Indian character. Studi says that the film will "allow more people than just Indians to identify with Magua...They'll see that he has reasons, that it makes him feel better to act ruthless" (qtd. in Arnold D1). Also referring to Magua, Means says, "For the first time in cinematic history, the so-called 'bad' Indian has character

development and is portrayed as intellectually superior to his non-Indian counterpart, a French general. It's fantastic, and it's revolutionary" (qtd. in Arnold D1). Both actors regard Magua as more than just a "bloodthirsty savage" stereotype. Instead, Magua is intelligent and motivated. Magua often acts savagely, but he acts in response to the savagery of the English: Colonel Munro's actions caused the death of Magua's children, the remarriage of Magua's wife when she thought he was dead, and Magua's enslavement to the Mohawks. As John Christian Hopkins, who identifies himself as "an Eastern Woodlands Indian," says, "Only deep down, you understand why—the English commander led an attack that killed his family. Magua is driven by a lust for power but the loss in his heart warped his mind" (Hopkins).

Further praising the film, Means comments on the characterization of Chingachgook and the progressive depiction of American Indians in the film:

The aging Indian patriarch "is what I aspire to be," Means says, drawing a parallel between his own life and that of the movie's Chingachgook." He has a presence of dignity, of courage and integrity; integrity for his way of life and integrity for his family...This movie is the movie that, from now on, pictures about American Indians are going to be measured against," Means adds." It sets a standard for Indian actors and the role of Indians as human beings. Hollywood is starting to reach its potential for eradicating racism." (Hackett 1G)

Means argues that *Mohicans* contains well-developed American Indian characters that work to counter Indian stereotypes. Other American Indians agree with Means; Bob Curtright presents reactions from "a number of Wichitans with Indian roots from students to Indian center officials who previewed the stunning new film" (1C). Two of the respondents are concerned with stereotypes in the film, but on the whole the comments are positive. Because Curtright quotes and paraphrases the respondents' comments, I have assembled the following excerpts from his article:

"I didn't see any negatives," said Betty Nixon, chairman of the board of the Mid-America All-Indian Center in downtown Wichita. "I thought it was well-put. It's different than the cowboys and Indians most people think about."

"I liked how it showed what the Indians were like back then. It showed how everybody survived. The scenery looked right for the movie. So did the costumes. There was nothing out of normal," said Tahlo Moore, a sophomore at North High School.

Many of the Indian characters are portrayed as intelligent, quick-witted and practical whether as hero or villain. They are well-rounded characters, said Indian Center director [Jerry] Aday.

"They really went out of their way and spent the money to get the details accurate. I respect them for that. There are so many details that you can easily miss the subtleties," [Jim] Mendenhall said. (1C)

Some American Indians, at least, applaud the portrayal of Indian characters in *Mohicans*. Hopkins similarly approves of the film:

The characters were Indian, but more importantly they were real. They were humans, displaying emotions that any person—regardless of race—would feel in similar circumstances.

This movie gives New England tribes their rightful due. And they offer something for all Indians.

It is good to see Hollywood letting real Indians play themselves. I, for one, was tired of always seeing olive-skinned Italians running around with feathers in their hair in those old John Wayne flicks.

Hooray for Hollywood. (Hopkins)

Despite Hopkins' cheer for Hollywood, *Mohicans* certainly doesn't overturn decades Hollywood film stereotypes. But the fact that some American Indians do sanction the film suggests that it contains some redeeming aspects. How, then, to account for these disparate readings of *The Last of the Mohicans*? How to reconcile the scholarly condemnations with the assertions of complexity for the American Indian characters? Perhaps a reading of the film exists that simultaneously critiques the film for its conventional plot and stereotypical characters while acknowledging a potential view

of the film as progressively depicting American Indians. The remainder of this chapter is my attempt at such a reading, and I will begin with a methodology borrowed from a work of film studies by Charles Eckert.

In “The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner’s *Marked Woman*,” Eckert uses Marxist, Freudian, and structuralist methods to analyze the title film. Eckert first notes a striking contrast in emotional levels between the scenes that develop the standard melodramatic plot and other scenes interspersed throughout *Marked Woman* (1937). Then, beginning with Lévi-Strauss’ assertion that a dilemma lies at the heart of every myth and is expressed through layered pairs of oppositions that transform a primary opposition, Eckert argues that the oppositions of the film’s melodramatic plot are transformations and displacements of underlying class conflict. In other words, the latent class tension is resolved through displacement into the manifest content of the reassuring, myth-like melodrama. Eckert discovers this displacement by examining micro-structures within the film. He first outlines the essential pairs of oppositions from one of the thematic-laden songs in the film and discovers that the pairs are variations on the common “city life versus small town life” opposition that runs throughout. He then uses metonymic substitution of a seemingly incongruous pair (“witty people versus people who lead the right life”) and a similar analysis of another song in the film to deduce that “city life versus small town life” substitutes for the “wealth versus poverty” opposition of class conflict. The class conflict is defused through its displacement into the melodramatic conflicts that structure the film’s plot. Ultimately, the gangster figure that serves as the prime mover of the plot in *Marked Woman* is an overdetermined

condensation of class conflict because he represents both the wealth of the upper class and the street-wise sensibility of the urban lower class.

My description of Eckert's argument sufficiently illustrates his methodology for an analysis of *Mohicans*. I begin with the white romance story, which stands out because it so forcefully overlays the rest of the plot. The romance reaches an emotional crescendo at the Glens Falls scene, the surrender of Fort William Henry and the subsequent Huron massacre, that I previously began to analyze. Now, using Eckert as a model, I can more thoroughly dissect the ideological currents of the film, related to racial conflict, isolationism, and survivalism.

Previously, I partially quoted Nathaniel's parting exhortation to Cora at Glens Falls. Here is the complete quotation:

You stay alive. If they don't kill you they'll take you north up to Huron land. Submit, do you hear. Be strong. You survive. You stay alive no matter what occurs. I will find you. No matter how long it takes. No matter how far, I will find you.

Following Eckert's model of outlining oppositions in *Marked Woman*, I will now extract the essential oppositional pairs from this dialogue, based on Nathaniel's directives to Cora on the left and their implied opposites on the right:

stay alive	:	become dead
submit	:	struggle
be strong	:	be weak
survive	:	perish

These pairs are transformations of a primary opposition, "survival : extinction," that immediately suggests the myth of "savage war" as defined by Richard Slotkin:

The premise of "savage war" is that ineluctable political and social differences—rooted in some combination of "blood" and culture—make

coexistence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation. Native resistance to European settlement therefore takes the form of a fight for survival; and because of the “savage” and bloodthirsty propensity of the natives, such struggles inevitably become “wars of extermination” in which one side or the other attempts to destroy its enemy root and branch. (12)

Slotkin further argues that the myth of “savage war” lies at the heart of American frontier narratives from the colonial era to the present day, including Cooper’s novel and most film Westerns. The film situates the waterfall romance dialogue in the context of racial survival or extinction: remember, Nathaniel has just informed Cora that Magua killed her father when the Huron attacked the English, and Magua now pursues Cora and Alice in order to eliminate all of the Munro family. While ending a family lineage is not the same as racial extinction, of course, the two parallel types of extermination do symbolically reinforce one another in relation to the overarching theme of “savage war.” These tropes of familial and racial conflict, survival, and possible extinction also reverberate throughout the remainder of the film: the Mohicans are the last survivors of their race, and they perish with Uncas’ death; Nathaniel was orphaned but survived through Chingachgook’s adoption; in retaliation for the death of Magua’s children caused by Colonel Munro, Magua desires the death of “the grayhair” and his daughters so his bloodline is eliminated; Duncan urges a fight to the death with the French rather than surrender the fort; the English General Webb considers the French an inferior race; the Huron led by Magua massacre the defeated English; Magua became Mohawk in order to escape slavery; a marauding war party kills all of the Cameron family in their frontier cabin; and the colonial militia at Fort William Henry passionately argue for leave from the battle to defend their frontier homes and families.

As in Eckert's analysis, however, one pair of oppositions seems incompatible with the others: "submit : struggle." "Struggle" seems to better match "stay alive," "be strong," and "survive," while "submit" seems to belong with "become dead," "be weak," and "perish." Stereotypical gender roles partially explain the linking of submission and survival. Nathaniel directs Cora to assume the passive, enduring feminine role of the frontier captivity narrative that heavily influenced Cooper's novel, while the male characters often actively "struggle" in bloody combat. Nevertheless, even the hyper-masculine Nathaniel must "submit" at key points in the film. He allows the English to arrest him at Fort William Henry for encouraging sedition among the colonial militia. And most strikingly, Nathaniel passively endures being pushed, cut, and clubbed on the head as he enters the Huron village in order to negotiate for Cora and Alice's lives.

This important scene involves Magua and Nathaniel debating before an elder Sachem of the Huron who will decide the fate of Magua's prisoners—Cora, Alice, and Duncan. Magua declares that the Huron will become traders as powerful as the whites, and Nathaniel responds as follows:

Would the Huron make his Algonquin brothers foolish with brandy and steal his lands to sell them for gold to the white man? Would Huron have greed for more land than a man can use? Would Huron fool Senecans to take in all the furs of all the animals in the forest for beads and strong whiskey? Would the Huron kill every man, woman, and child of their enemy? Those are the ways of the Yangees and the Français traders and their masters in Europe infected with the sickness of greed. Magua's heart is twisted. He would make himself into what twisted him.

Edgerton observes that "this speech is obviously an indictment of the Euro-colonial tradition," because for the Native American characters, "any degree of assimilation or accommodation is now defined by the film's hero as being tantamount to total corruption" (11). I agree with the indictment of colonialism, but believe the notions of

assimilation are more complicated. After all, even the heroic Mohicans trap for pelts to trade with the Dutch for silver, Chingachgook adopts the white orphan Nathaniel, and he sends both of his sons, Uncas and Nathaniel, to an English school. Using Eckert's method to analyze the oppositions in this dialogue, based on the potential actions in Magua's plan and their implied opposites, will best illustrate the complexity of assimilation:

make foolish	:	make wise
steal/take	:	give
have greed	:	have generosity
fool	:	inform/educate
kill all	:	spare all

The items in the first column ("steal/take," "have greed," "kill all") obviously relate to colonialism and the accompanying racial conflict of "savage war," and the items in the second suggest some anti-colonial ideal of interchange and convergence between cultures. The implied basic opposition, then, is "conflict : convergence," or, including the implied racial context, "racial conflict : racial convergence."

The key pairs are the very similar "make foolish : make wise" and "fool : inform/educate"; Nathaniel twice emphasizes a variation of "fool" in his indictment of Magua. The opposite "make wise" or "inform/educate" suggests an alternative to the physical conflict between Europeans and American Indians. Themes of education, dialogue, and discovery surface occasionally in the film: Chingachgook sent Uncas and Nathaniel to a white school as children so they could learn English and the culture of the Europeans; the three Mohicans often hunker down together to discuss their options; Cora speaks of her thrilling discovery of America and the wilderness; the colonials

debate among themselves whether to join the English against the French; Nathaniel and the colonial militia hold council concerning whether to desert the fort or not; and Magua learned the ways of the Mohawk in order to survive and wants to learn and master the ways of the Europeans. The most important dialogic scene in the film is the debate between Magua and Nathaniel conducted before the Huron Sachem—a scene I will closely examine later in the chapter.

To return to Eckert's model, comparing the primary oppositions and key pairs from the waterfall romance scene and the Nathaniel and Magua debate scene yields the following:

submit	:	struggle
(racial) survival	:	(racial) extinction
(racial) convergence :		(racial) conflict
inform/educate	:	fool

The seeming incongruity of “submit” with “survival” and “struggle” with extinction is now explained: *Mohicans* abandons “savage war” in favor of a more harmonious myth. In “savage war,” a racist myth from the white European perspective, racial “convergence” with Indians leads to “extinction” of whites. Only all-out war or “conflict” with Indians ensures the “survival” of whites and the “extinction” of the Indians. In the “savage war” model, “struggle” and “conflict” are inherent to both “survival” and “extinction”; the winners of the struggle or conflict survive, and the losers perish. *Mohicans*, in contrast with the outdated “savage war” model, denies the necessity of “conflict” and “struggle” in race relations. The film is fundamentally concerned with a modern mythic version of race relations, one that places “convergence equals survival” against “conflict equals extinction.” To “struggle” with and to “fool” another race leads to “conflict” and mutual

“extinction.” Conversely, to “submit” to and to “inform and educate” another race—to recognize the other race’s right to exist and to promote peaceful interaction and interchange between races—lead to “convergence” and mutual “survival.”

The film’s opposition of “convergence equals survival” against “conflict equals extinction” is a reflection of a dominant ideology regarding race relations in the 1990s United States. Mainstream America views any violent conflict between races, whether it be white hate crimes or the Rodney King-inspired Los Angeles riots, as threatening and destructive to all involved. The alternative is a harmonious vision of a “cultural stew” where all races work together to overcome racist ignorance with tolerance, understanding, and education. While the ideal of a society without racism is a real goal that people believe in and work towards in modern America, violent racial conflict is equally real. This real, immediate opposition surfaces in *Mohicans* as “convergence equals survival” versus “conflict equals extinction.” The film, viewed as a popular myth, has a certain cultural sensitivity for current American ideological dilemmas regarding race, but the immediacy of these issues are weakened through displacement into the romantic and action plot lines of the film.

The romantic plot line functions as a displacement for “racial convergence.” Nathaniel, the adopted son of Chingachgook, is a displaced Mohican, in part, and Cora represents the English. Thus, the union between Nathaniel and Cora stands for the convergence of the Mohican and the English, or, metaphorically, American Indian culture and white Euro-American culture. Nathaniel’s “blood” is Caucasian, but he is clearly more aligned with the Mohicans than the Europeans—he acts as Uncas and Chingachgook do, speaks Munsee Delaware with them, and is similar to them in

physical appearance and dress. Nathaniel also has strong links with the American colonials and interacts with them; Nathaniel himself is a condensed symbol of cultural convergence between American Indians and Euro-Americans due to his adoption by Chingachgook and education in a white school. The Nathaniel character suggests that the truly “American” race mixes Indians and whites, and “purely white” Europeans become the savage “Other” that generates racial conflict: the “pure” English and French in this film treat the American colonials and the American Indians equally badly.

While Nathaniel and Cora represent Indian and white convergence, Magua represents divergence, or racial conflict. Munro’s colonizing actions have forced Magua, Huron by blood, into first becoming Mohawk and then adopting the colonizing methods of the Europeans. Having become as greedy and ruthless as the white European colonizers (“what twisted him”), Magua is a condensed symbol of cultural conflict between Indian Americans and white Europeans. Magua learns from the whites in order to better fight and remain separate from them; as Magua says to Duncan early in the film, “I understand the English very well.”

The struggle between racial conflict and divergence reaches a climax in the scene at the Huron village. Nathaniel and Magua engage in a multicultural, multilingual debate before the Huron Sachem with the lives of Alice, Cora, and Duncan literally at stake—Magua wants to burn them as trophies of war. Mohican, Huron, Mohawk, French, English, and Euro-American cultures intersect in this debate: set in the Huron village, spoken in French and English, with Magua representing the Mohawk, Huron, and French; Nathaniel, the Mohican and Euro-Americans; and Duncan, Alice, and Cora, the English. As the Sachem and Huron listen, Magua boasts how the Huron will become as

powerful as the whites, and Nathaniel rebuts him by pointing out that Magua wishes to adopt the colonial methods of the Europeans. Referring to Magua's plans, Nathaniel declares, "Those are the ways of the Yangees and the Français traders and their masters in Europe infected with the sickness of greed." The Sachem orders a compromise: Magua will wed Alice to heal his heart and preserve the Munro lineage, Duncan will be returned to the English as a goodwill gesture, and Cora will burn as compensation for Colonel Munro causing the death of Magua's children. Vexed by the decision, Magua leaves angrily with Alice. Duncan saves Cora by trading his life for hers (Nathaniel also offers his life, but the traditional European must be sacrificed within this film's ideological structure), and Nathaniel leaves with Cora.

The importance of this scene lies in its adherence to convergence instead of conflict. Multiple cultures interact without physical conflict, and settle their differences through dialogue. The Sachem carefully considers both arguments and mediates a compromise that does not award complete victory to one side or the other. Also, the compromise does its best to promote racial survival by proposing union between Magua and Alice so that both Magua's and the Munro bloodlines are preserved. Although Nathaniel does not receive fully what he requests, the "racial convergence" he represents triumphs over the "racial conflict" Magua espouses as Nathaniel escorts Cora safely away.

The displacement of "racial convergence" into Nathaniel and his love story with Cora accounts for scholarly censuring of the film. The film explicitly channels the "racial conflict" through Magua: his hatred for Colonel Munro and desire for revenge most obviously displays ungovernable racial conflict. Except for an early, brief scene where

Uncas, Chingachgook, and Nathaniel visit and peacefully interact with the Cameron family, any further indications of racial convergence are subsumed under Nathaniel's character and his romance with Cora. Since Nathaniel and Cora are white characters, and Nathaniel only indirectly connotes "American Indians," viewers may easily conclude that the film lacks any indications of racial convergence. The Nathaniel/Cora relationship appears to be a typical white romance, and Magua's embodiment of racial conflict and the *Mohicans'* secondary status suggest that the film portrays American Indians as noble or savage stereotypes.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, however, *The Last of the Mohicans* does contain a complex, though transformed and displaced, treatment of relations between American Indians and whites. How, then, do some audiences, like the American Indians who support the film, relate to and appreciate the progressive elements of the film's depiction of American Indians? I have already provided some possibilities: the film explains and justifies, to an extent, Magua's actions; the historical detail for the props, settings, and costumes seems authentic; Magua, Uncas, and Chingachgook, though supporting characters, are intelligent, multilingual, and very capable.

Additionally, American Indian activist Russell Means plays Chingachgook. Means became nationally famous as a leader of the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. He is even more well known among audiences with a knowledge of American Indian history and issues, so he functions as a "star" for such audiences, an immediately recognizable celebrity figure. Moreover, his casting in the film lends it a certain credibility for authentic portrayals of Indian characters. As one viewer of the film states: "Russell Means is such an activist that he can be a real problem if there's something he doesn't like. If he went along with this movie, then they did it

right," said Jim Mendenhall, who is on the board of the Kansas Association for American Indian Education. (Curtright 1C)

Because Means plays Chingachgook, his role in the film assumes much more importance for a viewer like Mendenhall than it does for most filmgoers. The "star power" of Means, his celebrity status among American Indian-oriented audiences, works to overcome the limitations of his supporting role, and such audiences will likely attach more narrative and thematic weight to Chingachgook's actions than will mainstream audiences.

Considering Russell Means as a major star for certain audiences suggests another way to interpret *Mohicans*, as an American Indian-centered film. In this interpretation, Chingachgook dominates the beginning and end of the film, and his actions and dialogue produce a lasting impression. In the first scene of the film, Chingachgook, Uncas, and Nathaniel work together to hunt and kill an elk. Nathaniel shoots the animal, but only Chingachgook speaks in the scene as they stand over the slain creature. In two close-up shots that are intercut with close-ups of Nathaniel and Uncas, Chingachgook speaks in Munsee Delaware that is translated in subtitles as, "We're sorry to kill you, Brother. We do honor to your courage and speed, your strength." This opening scene establishes Chingachgook as the elder to and leader of Uncas and Nathaniel. Throughout the film, as Nathaniel becomes the central protagonist, these three characters still consult one another and fight together, and both Chingachgook and Uncas are indispensable.

Chingachgook again becomes the prime agent of action in the climactic sequence of the film, after Nathaniel debates Magua in the Huron village. This approximately eight minute long sequence is intensely affecting. The sequence is silent

except for one word of dialogue (Nathaniel's cry of "Uncas!") and various non-verbal sound effects (shrieks, thuds, and so forth), but the crisp editing, painterly visual compositions, and emotionally stirring score enhance the impact of the life-or-death actions and emotions presented. Set upon a high mountain path amidst breathtaking scenery, the sequence resolves the conflict between Magua and the Mohicans and the Munro sisters in a burst of action. Magua and a group of Huron leave with Alice; Uncas, Chingachgook, Nathaniel, and Cora pursue. Uncas first reaches Magua, but Magua defeats him in hand-to-hand combat and shoves his body off a cliff. Alice then leaps off the cliff rather than remain with Magua.

Right before Magua kills Uncas, the viewer sees a close-up of Magua holding his knife to Uncas' throat. This sets up what I consider the most important shot of the film, a slow-motion shot that tracks forward into a close-up of Chingachgook as he moves towards the camera. The viewer sees Chingachgook scream as he recognizes his son is about to be killed and he cannot prevent it—but his scream is silent, the only audio the viewer hears being the relentlessly droning background music. Nathaniel soon follows up with an audible cry of "Uncas!" and Cora sobs aloud at her sister's death, but Chingachgook remains unheard. With the death of his blood son, the "pure" Mohican tribe is dead, and Chingachgook's voice as a Mohican literally disappears (at least temporarily).

Chingachgook furiously chases Magua, with Nathaniel's help killing Huron along the way. Finally he confronts Magua like Uncas did, but Chingachgook quickly disables Magua. As Chingachgook stares at the stunned and injured Magua, Chingachgook shakes his head with a conflicted look on his face, hate and pity simultaneously at play.

He seems to realize that he, Uncas, and Magua are all trapped within the deathly structures of racial conflict, and he has no other option but extermination. He deals Magua the death blow, and the sequence concludes.

Chingachgook is the action hero of this climactic sequence, the Westerner who displays remarkable fighting ability in the service of blood vengeance. As the epilogue of the film reveals, however, this hero's day is done. Surveying the landscape and looking into the sunset (like riding into the sunset in many Westerns), he says a funeral prayer for Uncas, much as he did over the elk at the start of the film. This time, however, he speaks in English, not Munsee Delaware:

Great Spirit and the maker of all life, a warrior goes to you swift and straight as an arrow shot into the sun. Welcome him and let him take his place at the council fire of my people. He is Uncas, my son, tell him to be patient and ask death for speed...for they are all there but one, I, Chingachgook, the last of the Mohicans.

The message here is clear: conflict results in extinction. Magua's insistence on "savage war" racial conflict results in his own death and the extinction of the Mohicans. Remembering that white colonialism and its influence on both whites and Indians are displaced onto Magua, the racial conflict of colonialism has eradicated American Indians, represented by the Mohicans, and destroyed itself as well.

The film's finale certainly resonates with the damaging stereotype of the noble, and thus disappearing, savage: the American Indian only exists in history and has no place in a culture dominated by whites. But closely studying Chingachgook implies an alternate reading: it is the stereotype of the noble, disappearing savage that has become extinct." Mohicans" seems to stand for "white view of Indians prior to the white invasion," or "noble savages," and that image constructed by white culture will soon be extinct. Chingachgook, however, survives, and he now speaks his prayer in English; he

has made contact with white culture while retaining his Mohican culture. Also, Nathaniel stands beside him with Cora; as previously noted, Nathaniel represents American Indians and racial convergence with whites through his relationship with Cora. Chingachgook, though no longer purely "Mohican," and Nathaniel exist as part of an interchange between Indians and whites. Magua and racial conflict have perished, but Nathaniel, Cora, Chingachgook, and racial convergence survive.

Additionally, reading Mean's closing speech meta-textually, in terms of "Russell Means" as much as "Chingachgook," further indicates a movement towards convergence rather than extinction. The speech suggests Means' real life roles as activist and entertainer. The move from conflict with Magua to wistfully speaking in English mirrors Means' move from militant activist to cultural mediator, from fighting against white American culture to trying to educate it about Native culture. In other words, Means himself has moved from "racial conflict" to "racial convergence." This shift is indicated by the following quotations from Means:

Wittstock's comments suggest an even deeper criticism of Means—that he has turned his back on the struggle to secure equality for Indians." I haven't abandoned the movement," he said, "I've just taken it to Hollywood. The Great Mystery [or Great Spirit] has opened another door. The movies and television are a powerful way to reach a huge audience, and I intend to take advantage of that." (Parsons 1E)

The movies, he writes, offer him "a better way to get messages about my people to the world. Ours is a celebrity-driven society...After my decades of devotion to my people, the Great Mystery had led me to a place where what I had to say would have more credibility." (McCombs D01)

Instead of martial conflict with white culture, Means has decided to use his celebrity status to teach other races about American Indians. The ideological work of *Mohicans* is done: attempts at racial convergence have finally superseded the traps of racial conflict. Gerald Vizenor calls Means "the postindian warrior of cinematic simulations" (21). While

this is probably a back-handed compliment, it does describe Means' role in *Mohicans* as he fights to change the filmic portrayal of American Indians through the gradual modification of "cinematic simulations," or Hollywood stereotypes. Such modification necessitates American Indian convergence with the white culture that created the stereotypes. The danger in such a move, of course, is that white culture may "fool" Indian cultures by appropriating the many unique aspects of American Indians' identities. While a reading of the film centered around Means does provide some progressive aspects to the depictions of American Indians, considering the global political context alongside the racial context provokes other readings.

Within the film, the battle of European powers, the French and English, over colonial America symbolizes the conflicts of the post-Cold War world; they are out there, they exist, they may even want to entice American participation, but America has already accomplished its goal in the global context. It is now time for America to leave those conflicts behind, to hold onto itself in the face of the rushing waters (or the "world on fire") of chaos around it. That "hollow idyll" that Barker and Sabin note is a fruitless attempt at isolation from the global context. The "fragile utopia," however, is even more complex, for it points towards the uneasy state of race relations that must remain at the core of any *Mohicans* adaptation, and that is ever present in American society. The aforementioned Rodney King beating in 1991 and the subsequent 1992 Los Angeles Riots were concurrent with the production and release of this film; in that context, the film's attempts at racial convergence seem as mocking as the misquoted "Can we all just get along?" Eventually, the "hollow idyll" is proven impossible by 9/11, and the "fragile utopia" of racial peace seems impossible at the time of release. At best, the

1992 *Mohicans*, with an assertion of American Indian presence and identity through an ancient stereotypical trope of the vanishing Indian, uneasily reflects the slow, incremental progression and regression of American race relations.

CHAPTER 5

SHARON STONE'S *THE QUICK AND THE DEAD*

Gene Hackman wouldn't give me an inch [in *The Quick and the Dead*], and I was so proud that he wouldn't, that he respected me enough to do that was a big deal to me.

—Sharon Stone, *Above the Line* (Grobel 313)

There's no rule against ladies, it's just that women can't shoot for shit.

—Herod (Gene Hackman), *The Quick and the Dead*

To the contemporary movie fan, *The Quick and the Dead*, a Western released in 1995, is most interesting for the supporting roles of two emerging mega-stars, Russell Crowe and Leonardo DiCaprio. Or perhaps, the interest lies in director Sam Raimi's transition into mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. Aficionados of Westerns will note that Gene Hackman played a role similar to his Oscar-winning performance in *Unforgiven* (1992). But some may recall that the film starred Sharon Stone at the height of her career as a star actress and sex symbol, still flush from her breakthrough in *Basic Instinct* (1992). Moreover, departing from sex thrillers and starring in a Western was a radical move (despite the trailers that featured the only shot in the film of a partially dressed and prostrate Stone). In part because of Stone's mostly asexual role, the film was a box-office bust, and contemporary reviews of the film were ambivalent, largely viewing it as caught between a Raimi-type parody of the genre (as in his *Evil Dead* movies) and an attempt at serious horse opera. Most critics also recognized the film's debt to Sergio Leone in Raimi's stylized direction, and identified Stone's character as very similar to Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name" in Leone's Spaghetti Westerns and Eastwood's own Westerns. Although the critics did not praise Stone's acting skills,

her performance is arguably similar to Eastwood's early ones, which were also often denigrated as emotionless and wooden (which is, of course, the point).

Although *The Quick and the Dead* does not fully succeed as an entertainment, due in large part to a rather predictable and extended second act, I find it interesting for its attempt to create a political film towards the end of the 1990s Western cycle. The film is quite clearly a feminist role-reversal, but it so blatantly reverses roles, without the expected Hollywood agonizing over such a radical gender switch, that the implications of the reversal seemed to have escaped contemporary critics. Perhaps more radically, the film also strives for an over-the-top patriarchal and capitalist critique. Keeping in mind Jim Kitses' observation that the anti-Western has become the standard mode of the genre, *The Quick and the Dead* is a fine example of an allegorical anti-Western.

The Quick and the Dead tells the tale of Ellen, or The Lady (Stone), a lone gunslinger who rides into the town of Redemption, populated by a group of stock Western characters, as the annual quick-draw contest is about to begin. The quick-draw contest is sponsored by John Herod (Gene Hackman), the villain running the town who also participates in the contest. The rules of the contest are simple: any participant can challenge any other participant to a one-on-one quick-draw shoot-out, the winner advances to the next round, the contest continues until one person remains standing, and the winner receives the prize money provided by the Wells-Fargo corporation. Ellen is ostensibly in Redemption to win the contest; however, a series of flashbacks reveals that her true goal is personal revenge—she wants to kill Herod for having murdered her father when she was a child. After many twists and turns, including Herod killing his own son (Leonardo DiCaprio) in the contest, Ellen finally faces Herod and his army of hired

guns. With the help of Cort (Russell Crowe), a former protégé of Herod who attempted to become a priest, Ellen defeats Herod and rides off, leaving Cort in the marshal position held previously by her father.

1. Explanation

In 1969, *Cahiers du Cinéma* published an editorial, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, that outlined the future project of the journal as the rigorous ideological analysis of films. As a precursor to this goal, they separated films into seven categories according to the level of explicit and reflexive engagement with politics and ideology, in both content and film-form. The fifth category consisted of “films which seem at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner” (Comolli 27). The mission of the journal was to reveal those disruptions and gaps in the film that worked against its apparent ideological stance. In retrospect, many of the great Hollywood films perfectly fit this category.

The next year, *Cahiers* published such an analysis, entitled “John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*” and credited as “a collective text by the editors” (*Cahiers* 493). After two epigraphs, one from Engels and Marx and one from John Ford, and a summary of the film credits, the analysis is divided into twenty-five numbered sections. The first numbered section does not have a title (only the Roman numeral “I”) and explains in detail the essay’s objective. The following twenty-four numbered sections each have a title (and content) referring to some element from or aspect of the film, or some context related to the film. For example, the third section is “3. The USA in 1938-39,” as the film was released in 1939. The first numbered section (the explanation of the objective)

argues for a politically-oriented, Marxist/structuralist re-reading and re-writing of the film and its ideological fissures.

What follows is my attempt to appropriate their method, using the structure of “John Ford’s *Young Mr. Lincoln*” as a framework for analyzing *The Quick and the Dead*. For each section, I have created a new title based on the original article’s section title, and I have included the original title in parentheses, along with a brief explanation when the title’s referent is not obvious. I have attempted to remain as close to the original order as possible. These two films, however, are very different in form (one of the most important differences is that *Young Mr. Lincoln* unfolds in chronological order, while *The Quick and the Dead* contains flashbacks and numerous personal stories of the past related by the characters), and thus I have had to alter the order of the original article’s sections in order to match a sequential reading of *The Quick and the Dead*’s scenes. I opened this chapter with two epigraphs, and then my brief introduction to the film, including a plot summary, replaces the summary of film credits from the *Cahiers* article. This section (my section “Explanation”) matches *Cahiers*’ section “I” by explaining the objective of this chapter. Sections 2-7 examine the contemporary social and production contexts of the film and introduce the methodology; sections 8-23 read the film, scene-by-scene; sections 24 and 25 summarize and conclude the analysis. Obviously, in comparing two separate Hollywood films made over fifty years apart, the sections cannot match exactly; however, a surprising number of connections and coincidences exist. In part, this speaks to the endurance of many aspects of classical Hollywood filmmaking and dramatic storylines. It also speaks to generic similarities: even though *Young Mr. Lincoln* is not strictly a Western, it is directed by John Ford, arguably the first

great auteur of Westerns, and its setting in Illinois at the start of Lincoln's political career is a frontier narrative. Perhaps most tellingly, it speaks to the recurring American issues of violence and the social order that many Westerns examine.

2. The USA and Westerns in 1994-95

(“The USA in 1938-39”)

In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. As communism crumbled, the United States seemed to have won the Cold War, the new frontier of the Internet appeared, and Bill Clinton rode a wave of optimism into the White House. Francis Fukuyama proposed that the end of history, ideologically speaking, had arrived; Patrick Buchanan argued that it was now time for a foreign policy that considered “America first” (Chollet 21-24).

Then, in 1990, *Dances with Wolves* was released and became a Best Picture-winning box-office sensation, and the genre of the film Western enjoyed a boom not seen since the 1970s. The return to the Western, ostensibly the most American of film genres, reflects Buchanan’s call to consider “America first,” while the revisionist aspects of these new Westerns, best exemplified by the improved portrayals of American Indians, coincides with Fukuyama’s “end of history”—America needed a new, revised history and ideology to replace those of the Cold War. The Western was back in the saddle again.

3. Hollywood and Westerns in the 1990s

(“Hollywood in 1938-39”)

By the 1990s, Hollywood had fully embraced the blockbuster style of filmmaking, producing action and special effects laden films with big budgets, both for production and marketing, that anticipated big box-office returns. However, more modestly budgeted star vehicles were regularly produced, although the average budget for those

productions also rose significantly. Additionally, the “independent film” movement of off-beat films with smaller budgets made outside of the major studios was then at its peak, and many of the early independent filmmakers had begun to move into more mainstream Hollywood productions. Sam Raimi was one of those directors, and Sharon Stone explicitly wanted him to direct her new star vehicle, *The Quick and the Dead*.

Thanks to the critical and commercial successes of *Dances with Wolves* and *Unforgiven* (1992), and the lesser success of *Tombstone* (1993), Westerns were still able to secure financing; however, the cycle was winding down, due in large part to the poor box-office receipts of a number of Westerns, including *Posse* (1993), *Wyatt Earp* (1994), and *Bad Girls* (1994). *The Quick and the Dead* was one of the last of the mainstream Westerns produced in this cycle, and its poor showing did little to sustain the genre.

4. Sharon Stone

(“Fox and Zanuck”—the producers)

At the height of her fame in the mid-1990s, Sharon Stone's sexually aggressive star persona participated in aggressively violent restructurings of traditional feminine roles in Hollywood films. For example, in her breakthrough role in *Total Recall* (1990), Stone plays a loving housewife who is actually a secret agent assigned to play a housewife, using her sexuality to keep a reprogrammed Arnold Schwarzenegger safely at home. When Schwarzenegger discovers the deception, Stone morphs into a deadly agent and engages in violent combat with him. In her biggest hit, *Basic Instinct* (1992), Stone plays a sexually aggressive bisexual (and possibly murderous) woman who is also an extremely intelligent novelist. She uses her sexuality to manipulate men and women alike and create situations which lend themselves to her scandalous novels. By

this point, Susan Knobloch (citing Christine Holmund) identifies Stone as a “deadly doll,” a 1980s-1990s update of the “femme fatale,” who now uses justified violence in reaction to violence against women or their families (128-129). For example, the plot of *Sliver* (1993) revolves around Stone’s character’s transformation from a passive victim being spied upon by a man using high-tech surveillance equipment to a powerful woman who seizes control of the electronic equipment in order to escape her tormentor. Stone’s character in *The Specialist* (1994) acts as a mistress in order to attain personal vengeance. In one scene, Stone punches the male villain in the jaw after pretending to offer a kiss. For the movie-going audience, these roles defined their expectations for her character in *The Quick and the Dead*.

Despite her popular success in these roles, film critics often deride Stone’s acting abilities. In one study, Rebecca Feasey finds that “Stone is presumed to be not only a bad actress but also one who is defined by her body and hence assumed to be a dumb blonde...she is an actress whose appeal is presumed to depend on her status as an object of sexual display” (175). Feasey also notes, however, that such critics often depend on the stereotypical equation of feminine beauty with artifice and masculinity with authenticity. Women “are seen as other-directed and objectified while men are independent, individualized and self-possessed” (176).

Moving beyond such sexist stereotyping, Knobloch points out that despite the attention given to Stone’s sex appeal and glamour, most of her roles involve her character inflicting violence as well as receiving or reacting to violent actions (124). Knobloch observes, “Stone’s star image works...because viewers can use both feminist and antifeminist, ‘backlash’ reading strategies to make sense of her violence” (125).

Further, responding to the nearly universal criticism of her acting ability, Knobloch argues that Stone's "artificial mannerisms" and often emotionless, supposedly "nonrealistic acting" is appropriate for her often shockingly (to the mass audience) violent women characters. All this indicates that "the culture cannot, from an angle either feminist or not, quite conceive of a violent woman who is convincing in her emotion" (126). In other words, the codes of realism for violent women do not yet exist in Hollywood cinema.

For *The Quick and the Dead*, Stone was much more than the lead actress; she was also one of the co-producers of the film. The film had six producers overall (not unusual for modern Hollywood), but due to her star status, Stone seems to be one of the driving forces behind the film. She discovered the script by Simon Moore and brought it to Columbia; moreover, she insisted on Sam Raimi directing: "He was the only person on my list, and if Sam hadn't made this movie, I don't think I would have made it" (qtd. in Muir 178-9). She also insisted on Crowe and DiCaprio being cast in their roles, and was certainly aware of her power over the film, at least according to screenwriter Moore: "I'm afraid people like Sharon Stone just treated me as though I was the guy who brought her latte or something. The first meeting I had with her, she sat down and told me who this character was and what this character would do. She never once asked a single question" (qtd. in Muir 179). Despite the anecdotal nature of this evidence, we can, I think, safely assume that Stone used her powerful status to fit this film into her evolving star persona. Unfortunately, *The Quick and the Dead* was the apex of Stone's unconventional, "deadly doll" star persona, as 1995 also saw her greatest critical success, winning a Golden Globe for her more traditionally passive

feminine role in *Casino* (1995), a film in which she entered the Hollywood boy's club of Scorsese and DeNiro on their terms. Aside from an interesting role the next year in *Diabolique* (1996), Stone's star quickly faded.

5. Sam Raimi and the Everyman Hero

(“Ford and Lincoln”)

Prior to directing *The Quick and the Dead*, Sam Raimi was best known for his stylish parodies of the horror genre that lent themselves to a capitalist critique. *The Evil Dead* (1981) and *Evil Dead II: Dead by Dawn* (1987) both situate a small group in an isolated cabin in a deep forest. An evil demonic power possesses various members of the group, who then attempt to kill the others. The demonic power is referred to as existing "out there"; the only possibility of survival consists of the group barricading themselves away from its pervasive influence. Of course, the demonic power does manage to infiltrate the group, until enough of its members are killed off to ensure survival.

One reading of the films argues that the demonic force represents the inexorable, crushing oppression of a modern capitalism that undermines the closest human bonds and forces intense competition. The campers' attempts to escape from mass society fail; they can only survive through active resistance, killing those possessed by capitalist logic. This theme is further explored in the third installment of the trilogy, *Army of Darkness* (1992). Ash, the hero of the trilogy (played by Bruce Campbell), is transported through time and space into medieval Europe, where two feudal clans are at war. Enslaved at first, Ash manages to become a leader against the forces of the dead, led by a magical doppelganger of Ash and which seem to exist only to consume the living. The evil doppelganger represents Ash's selfish interests: Ash at first wants to escape to

his own time and leave the people to their fate, rather than fulfilling the role that has been prophesized for him. Ash unites the two clans against their common foe and defeats his evil counterpart. He then returns to his own time in the present with harmony established in the past.

Although by no means an in-depth critique of capitalism, *Army of Darkness* suggests such a reading both through its replacement of pointless in-fighting and competition in favor of cooperation against larger problems affecting all society, and through Ash's transformation from a ruthlessly self-interested individual to being a communal leader. Raimi develops a more explicit critique of capitalism in *Darkman* (1990), a horror/action/sci-fi revision of the "Phantom of the Opera" story. Darkman (played by Liam Neeson) is a scientist who was horribly disfigured in an explosion caused by his corporate investors, who stand to profit from the accident. Left for dead, Darkman uses his scientific skill to create a form of synthetic skin which enables him to wear anyone's face—but only for a limited amount of time before the synthetic skin begins to decompose. The major villain is the president of a corporation, inherited from his father, which is constructing a huge industrial and residential complex. After Darkman eliminates all of the corporate president's hired goons, the two meet in a final showdown on the steel girders of an under-construction high rise. Darkman turns the patriarch's own symbolic building against him and kills him before vanishing into the city's masses, declaring, "I am every man, I am Darkman."

Darkman's ability to assume anyone's appearance makes him the symbol of the body politic, his power deriving from his honest scientific labor and ability to concentrate numerous individuals into one "collective" body. Darkman uses his power against a

voracious capitalism, symbolized by the head villain who ruthlessly exploits labor for his own profit. Raimi's early films, when he is an industry outsider or lurking on Hollywood's fringes, do suggest a critique of capitalist ideology, something I will show that becomes most explicit in *The Quick and the Dead*. However, Raimi is eventually integrated into the Hollywood mainstream when he directs the *Spider-Man* trilogy, one of the largest grossing franchises of modern Hollywood—a destiny suggested perhaps by the ambiguous conclusion of *The Quick and the Dead*.

6. Ideological Undertaking

(“Ideological Undertaking”—of the film)

The Quick and the Dead is ostensibly a classic Western: the lone hero rides into a frontier town, and, desiring revenge, eliminates the evil villain. To paraphrase Slotkin, The Lady is “the woman who knows Indians.” Neither one of the townspeople nor one of the villain’s henchmen, she must eventually choose to face the villain Herod both to save the town and fulfill her internal motivations. The irreconcilable is thereby resolved; the American hero, once again, gets to satisfy individual desires while serving the community.

The film is also, however, clearly modeled after Spaghetti Westerns. The screenwriter, Moore, has explicitly stated that he wanted to “access” and refer to Sergio Leone’s Spaghetti Westerns (Muir 176-7). The invoking of the Spaghetti Westerns appropriates their critical, revolutionary, anti-Western aspect: the Spaghetti is not only a Western, it critiques the Western and its ideological underpinning.

How, then, can *The Quick and the Dead* function as both classic and Spaghetti? If the anti-Western has become “The Western,” can there be an anti-anti-Western, a generic negation of the negation? In a time of conflicting claims about national identity,

what exactly does this synthesis of Westerns say about the U.S.A.? Only a thorough rescanning of the film can offer an answer.

7. Methodology

(“Methodology”—of the article)

The editors of *Cahiers* argued that because *Young Mr. Lincoln* unfolded in classical chronological order, a step-by-step rewriting of the film would most effectively explore the text’s becoming, enabling a different reading of the ideological gaps hidden within and between that apparently seamless narrative.

The Quick and the Dead does not present itself through such a straightforward *syuzhet*. Instead, a recurring flashback occurs four times within the film, and multiple past narratives, occurring before the present of the film begins, are recounted by multiple characters. This film is not a *Last Year at Marienbad* or *Rashomon* or *Memento*, as it mostly follows conventional chronology, and the departures are clearly indicated as such. Thus, I will attempt to follow and re-write the film’s sequencing as closely as possible, but with the caveat that certain leaps will be necessary.

8. The Leone Style

(“The Poem”—a poem that occurs after the credits, from the viewpoint of Lincoln’s mother)

The Quick and the Dead begins with an extreme long shot of a lone rider in a vast desert landscape; the camera then tracks back and pans to reveal numerous holes in the earth, and a man (Kelly) digging and muttering, searching for buried gold. In the next shot, the rider is again visible in the distance; suddenly, the scruffy head of Kelly is thrust into the frame from below in extreme close up. Kelly fires at the lone rider, who is Ellen, and puts a bullet hole in her hat. Ellen eventually subdues him, switches hats,

and rides off, leaving him chained to a wagon wheel and cursing. These opening shots refer to *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), directed by Sergio Leone. The first shot of that film is an extreme long shot of a dry Western landscape, which is obscured by a head entering the frame from the side. The film ends with Tuco (Eli Wallach) tied up with his bags of gold dug out of a grave and screaming at the departing Blondie (Clint Eastwood) who shackled Tuco.

The Quick and the Dead abounds with other similarities to *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and the other Leone Spaghetti Westerns. The score by Alan Silvestri is very similar to Ennio Morricone's scores for the Spaghettis, full of jangly guitars, blaring horns, and cracking whips. The elaborate, finely-detailed costumes worn by Ellen and other characters evoke those of the Spaghettis; in fact, one review stated that Sharon Stone "raided Sergio Leone's 1960's Spaghetti Western stashes in old Italian warehouses" (Shulgasser). Ellen, like Eastwood, smokes cheroot cigars. The emphasis on faux-historical details in the mise-en-scene is similar to Leone's films. Both filmmakers also walk a fine line between parody and homage in their revisions of the Western. The flashback structure of *The Quick and the Dead*, revealing the traumatic childhood hanging incident which fuels Ellen's quest for vengeance, is borrowed from Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969). And most strikingly, Raimi and Leone share similarly flamboyant visual styles, filled with sweeping pans, lightning zooms, ridiculously extreme close ups and low-angle shots, and jarring quick cuts.

One reason why *The Quick and the Dead* imitates Leone's Westerns is to refer to their implicit cultural critique. Christopher Frayling notes how the excesses of style in the Spaghettis not only parody the genre but also create an alternative space: their critique

of the American ideology that forms the matrix of the Western attempts to empower oppressed cultures and their own alternative ideologies (34). Similarly, *The Quick and the Dead* not only parodies the genre, but also criticizes the patriarchal capitalist ideology behind the Western while inserting an opportunity for its revolutionary overthrow.

The excesses of style are also a means to rebellion for both Ellen and the film itself. Ellen's laconic manner and elaborate costumes enable her to stand outside of the film's conformist society, marking her as an individual opposed to those ruled by the patriarchal Herod, who demands submission and conformity. The film's style, both visually and in the soundtrack and wild sound effects, marks itself as a radical entry in the Western genre. Both Ellen and *The Quick and the Dead* strive for change through an inculcation into the standards of the Western and a radical renovation of those standards. The dominant classical Hollywood style functions as a prop of dominant American ideology; drawing upon the unique style of the Spaghetti Westerns indicates resistance to that hegemony and suggests alternate histories.

Catherine Russell claims that extreme violence and deaths in narratives are often ways of disrupting the ideological closure favored by texts complicit with the dominant ideology (21). *The Quick and the Dead* certainly fulfills these extreme requirements, as Herod's killing of Sergeant Cantrell demonstrates. Herod spins and shoots; the film cuts to an extreme close-up of the rear of Cantrell's head, which is blasted through by the bullet, leaving a large hole through which Herod is visible in extreme long shot. One effect of such artifice is to highlight Herod's cruelty; the wounds inflicted by Ellen are never so graphically depicted. Another effect is to shock the viewer out of a comfortable

consumption of the film, to insist upon considerations beyond mere entertainment. In these ways, Raimi and the film do not merely copy the Leone style; they build upon it, further expanding the genre's formal boundaries.

9. Misogynist Speech

(“The Electoral Speech”—presumably Lincoln’s first political speech)

Upon riding into Redemption, Ellen asks the saloon owner for a room; he replies, "Whores next door." Ellen says, "Say that again." He does, and she stylishly slaps him around in front of his awestruck daughter, Katie. Having learned his lesson, he sheepishly prepares her room. The gunslinger Ace soon enters and asks Ellen if she wants to play (cards) with him; Ellen replies, "Looks like you're doing fine playing with yourself." Ellen walks outside as another gunfighter, Scars, appears in town after just having escaped from prison. Scars leers at Ellen, "You're pretty." "You're not," replies Ellen. He says, "I need a woman," and she retorts, "You need a bath." With these exhibitions of physical prowess and cool wit, Ellen immediately transcends the Western stereotypes of the woman as virgin or prostitute. Instead, Ellen assumes many of the traditional masculine characteristics of the Western hero, and in the stereotyped world of the mythical Wild West, *The Quick and the Dead* presents a Hollywood example of the liberated modern woman. In the private sphere, Ellen acts as she pleases—she cries, she drinks heavily, she wears fashionable outfits, she has one-night stands, she alternates between fiercely independent and caring partner. In short, Ellen's attributes are not gender-role specific, and she is not forced to adopt a mothering, nurturing role. Additionally, her private life has little influence on her activities in the public sphere; when Ellen socially interacts in her role of gunslinger, she does her "job" as well as anyone. She's cool, tough, and fast, and she fights and wins; Ellen is a success by

current American standards. At least within the limited roles of the Western, she establishes herself as a “masculine,” active character through a role reversal that seems appropriate to her star image of a violent woman with restricted emotions. Knobloch only briefly examines *The Quick and the Dead*, noting “Stone’s stillness and silence” (135) in the opening scene with the saloon owner, before summarizing the film’s theme as “center[ing] upon and celebrat[ing] her nameless heroine’s violent yet principled retribution in collaboration with principled men against the uncontrolled violence of one town’s unprincipled patriarchy” (136).

I find Knobloch’s lack of attention to the film surprising (for example, “Ellen” is clearly named in the film dialogue), especially since Stone’s Western role reversal perfectly fits her deadpan approach to violence from previous films. Perhaps, *The Quick and the Dead* suggests that all along, Stone has been adopting stereotypically masculine acting codes towards violence and sexuality; and this may account for the critical dissatisfaction with her acting abilities. The next logical step would be to apply those masculine codes to a traditionally masculine role. Here, in *The Quick and the Dead*, her emotionless approach meshes nicely with the laconic Westerner tradition, running from Gary Cooper to Clint Eastwood. I should note, however, that it is easy to exaggerate Stone’s emotionless acting. She clearly shows anxiety and anger in various scenes, and she even cries before the final confrontation, something rare in Westerns. Nevertheless, for the most part, Stone in her performance adopts the masculine codes of restraint and confidence that typify the Western actor, and her role reversal thus expands the genre. Once again, Stone plays a character with numerous antecedents, but with new features that update and reinvigorate the type. Earlier Westerns have

utilized feminist role reversal, such as *Johnny Guitar* (1954), but such Westerns also included a male lead to "assist" the woman defined in part by traditional feminine aspects. *The Quick and the Dead* is not immune from this creeping influence of past Westerns and patriarchal American society, but those aspects are overcome by the independence, resourcefulness, and strength of Ellen's character, and this more so than in any other mainstream feminist Western.

10. The Telescope, the Gaze, the Patriarch

("The Book"—Blackstone's *Commentaries*, which then introduces Lincoln to the Law)

The Quick and the Dead also examines head-on the male gaze used to control women, which Laura Mulvey has canonically described in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The first near-appearance of Herod occurs when the blind kid explains Redemption's situation to Ellen; from his mansion, Herod surveys the town with his telescope, lingering his gaze on Ellen, while the kid says, "[Herod] gets fifty cents of every dollar in this town." Ellen asks, "What's the town get?" The kid replies "It gets to live." Since Herod is the capitalist patriarch, controlling everything from money to rules to stories, he also possesses the all-powerful look. He even controls the vision and lives of others; as he later says, "This is my town. If you live to see the dawn it's because I allow it. I'm in charge of everything. I decide who live and who dies." In addition, Herod is obsessed with appearances, altering Cort's clothing and continually commenting on Ellen's wardrobe, because he wants to enforce his images of the world that enable him to remain the patriarch. As Ellen ascends the steps to Herod's mansion, he peers down on her from a high-angle shot and declares, "You look at me and think, we have absolutely nothing in common." He assumes that Ellen's gaze is somehow inadequate.

Herod is the executive officer of the corporate exploitative system that permeates Redemption and the quick draw contest. The \$123,000 in prize money for the quick-draw contest is supplied by both Herod and Wells-Fargo. The dead bodies of the losing contestants are immediately stripped clean; pulled gold teeth are especially prized. One contestant, Gutzon, announces himself as “Swedish champion” and receives raucous laughter; prior to the first match, a parallel montage contrasts Gutzon’s careful maintenance of his exquisite, older cap and ball pistol with his opponent’s (The Kid) flashy preparations. Old world craftsmanship and patient labor cannot compete with the quick thrills and high pressure atmosphere of Redemption, as The Kid (heir to Herod) easily defeats Gutzon to begin the contest.

Herod's ability to control the gaze is condensed in one subtle aspect of the mise-en-scene: a statue of Perseus, carrying Medusa's head, on the deck of Herod's mansion. Perseus is the slayer of the Medusa, the archetypal paranoiac masculine nightmare of the power of female gaze. Perseus' severing of Medusa's head is an appropriate reference for Herod's quick-draw contest, both effective means for consolidating control of the gaze through elimination of the other who might utilize it against the patriarchy. And, of course, Herod's name is a reference to the New Testament story of King Herod, who ordered the Massacre of the Innocents to prevent his usurpation. John Herod in the film uses the contest to “massacre” any successors who might challenge his power.

Paired with Herod's power of gaze is his lack of control over sound, best exemplified by the blind kid. This adolescent male is a kind of black market merchant, running a small mobile store which supplies various unusual commodities. The blind kid

provides Cort with an extra bullet in his showdown with Spotted Horse, and he provides Ellen with information and the red ink used to fake her death. Both instances frustrate Herod's plans, suggesting that the blind kid's lack of vision enables him to circumvent Herod's controlling gaze; for example, the blind kid is able to hear an incoming gunfighter seconds before Herod spots him.

I do not find a specific pattern concerning the status of sound versus the image in *The Quick and the Dead*, but there does seem to be a sense that sound is somewhat freer and less controlled than the image. The blind kid disrupts the system, Cort and Ellen are able to succeed in the contest by hearing a faint click in the clock tower, and a recurring aural motif of a chirping bird in flight suggests joyous escapes from Herod's cage. Perhaps the use of sound is more impressionistic because its relative freedom is dependent on its status as relatively more abstract than the visual image, and it thus provides opportunities unseen by Herod.

11. The Day of the Dead, the Hire

(“The Tomb, The Bet”—Anne Rutledge’s tomb, Lincoln’s first love, and a bet he makes with himself that steers him into the Law, and Politics)

With its roots in frontier narratives pitting European settlers against supposedly “savage” American Indians, Westerns have always tended to demonize or obscure the racial other, whether they be American Indians or Mexican-Americans. In *The Quick and the Dead*, the townspeople are mostly Mexican-American, and they function as an underprivileged minority whom the capitalist Herod exploits. The importance of the Mexican community is underscored by the Day of the Dead festival that ensues the night before the contest begins. Strikingly vibrant and dynamic, the festival in the film presents beautiful candle and torch-lit camera shots of death-costumed people dancing

and carousing. The Day of the Dead is a time when the past and the present co-exist, when ancient traditions and ancestors affect present-day life. This festival is of great importance to the Mexican community, and, in the context of the film, can be read as a form of cultural resistance to Herod's colonization. Herod attempts to appropriate the Day of the Dead for his own self-interests by scheduling the contest around it; however, the true repressed power of the festival returns to haunt him in the form of Ellen. The Mexican-Americans, however, only function as stereotypical "local color"; many visual shots of Mexican-American permeate the film, but none of them have a significant speaking role.

The one significant action by the Mexican-American townspeople is their hiring of Cantrell to kill Herod in the contest. Sergeant Cantrell is African-American, presumably a veteran of the Civil War. He is a self-proclaimed shootist for hire, only interested in earning money through his skill with the gun. In the scene where they hire him, Cantrell is concerned exclusively with the quality and quantity of the precious goods used for his payment. Herod deduces Cantrell has been hired to kill him, and Herod asks him who hired him; Cantrell replies that he is a professional and cannot reveal his employers. Herod says that he is going to make an example out of Cantrell, and Cantrell laughs. When they meet in the shoot-out, Herod changes the rules from the winner being the last one standing to the winner being the last one alive. Cantrell agrees to the rule change, saying, "I was planning to kill you anyway." Herod, however, easily eliminates Cantrell.

The subject of Cantrell's race is never addressed in the dialogue of the film, but the casting of an African-American man in a role that does not seem racially specific

suggests an allegorical reading akin to that of the other characters in the film, and the Western in general. Cantrell represents the stereotype of the African-American who accepts the capitalist system imposed upon him and succeeds within it—but only to a certain extent. Cantrell imitates Herod, using his skills for killing to increase his personal wealth; however, he lacks the support of the system Herod enjoys. Cantrell plays by Herod's rules to such an extent that he allows Herod to change the contest in such a way that it directly leads to his own death. This stresses how an imitation of the white patriarch role only serves its leaders and cannot possibly overcome Herod. If Cantrell had won, nothing in his character suggests he would not simply step into Herod's role of exploiting others.

The only other significant non-white character is an American Indian, Spotted Horse; the film provides no specific tribal affiliation because he is a Western stock character, "The Indian," like "The Kid" or "The Lady." Spotted Horse's gimmick is that he has been shot dozens of times but never been killed and is covered with bullet hole scars. He proclaims, "Spotted Horse cannot be killed by a bullet!" before launching into the story of his battles. He is eventually killed in the contest by Cort, but only after he recovers from a seemingly fatal first shot in the chest. Cort's second shot hits him in the forehead; the prone Spotted Horse still manages to thrust his gun arm in the air and startle the gathered crowd before dying. Stereotypical in the portrayal of the mystical powers of the Indian, the film attempts to summarize one version of the history of the American Indians in this allegorical character: fierce and valiant resistance to the European invasion, that nevertheless eventual succumbs to superior numbers and technology. Within the limited historical and social framework of *The Quick and the*

Dead, stubborn resistance to the patriarchy only results in hopeless resistance. Spotted Horse fails because he plays Herod's game, hoping to endure through the strength of his own beliefs rather than challenge the system itself. The oral culture of many American Indian societies depends on the ritual repetition and remembrance of certain phrases and narratives; Spotted Horse believes in his spoken mantra, and as a "noble savage," the film suggests he cannot accommodate a capitalist society where words and stories are powerful ideological weapons used against the Other.

Playing by Herod's rules leads to failure for all of the participants of the contest, and not just for exploited races. But *The Quick and the Dead* recognizes some of the racial politics involved with capitalism, and Cantrell is especially emphasized because he is clearly a professional, a disciplined worker within the system who also happens to be a member of an oppressed minority. The capitalist promise of success for any who play by the system's rules is ultimately negated by the dominant patriarch. And the film's failure to fully characterize the lone Indian character or any of the Mexican-Americans suggests that it retains much of the Western's traditional "blind eye" towards race—creating a link between Herod's controlling gaze and the film's implied point of view.

12. The Murder in Flashback

("The Murder"—begins the mystery plot of the rest of the film; two brothers are accused)

AND

13. The Lynching

("The Lynching"—Lincoln prevents the lynching of the suspected murderers)

Despite her self-assured entrance into Redemption, Ellen has yet to prove herself as the rugged, masculine Westerner—she has not demonstrated her skill with the phallic six-shooter. Thus, she must enter the quick-draw contest. The sign-up for the

contest consists of manly boasting and posturing, until Herod arrives at the saloon. Herod has his flunkies abduct the gunslinger turned priest, Cort, and stand him on a chair with a noose around his neck. When Cort refuses to enter the contest, Herod begins to shoot the legs off the chair. Cort remains silent, accepting his fate, but Ellen rises up to enter the contest and thereby delay Herod. Someone objects to a woman entering the contest; Herod says, "There's no rule against ladies, it's just that women can't shoot for shit," and the crowd responds with approving laughter before he fires the final shot which causes the chair to collapse. But before the rope can snap taut, Ellen draws, severs the rope with three quick shots, spins and holsters her pistol, and coolly sits down. Herod is surprised but laughs, saying to put both Ellen and Cort into the contest.

This scene is followed by the first of Ellen's flashbacks, a dream Ellen has following her sexual encounter with Herod's son, The Kid. Beginning with a close-up of Herod's boots and spurs (a reference to *Pursued*, a 1947 noir Western), the flashback begins a larger sequence; during the course of the film, the flashback reveals that Herod caused the death of Ellen's father in a manner very similar to the attempt on Cort's life. Herod put her father in a noose, stood him on a chair, and began to shoot out the legs. Herod then offered the young girl Ellen a chance to save her father by shooting the rope; with her father's approval, Ellen tries, but accidentally shoots him in the forehead. Through this reference to *Once Upon a Time in the West*'s flashback structure, Ellen's actions in the sign-up scene are more clearly motivated. This is Ellen's entrance into the male/gunslinger sphere, her statement that she now has the power to affect events that she lacked in the past. No longer victimized, she can now prevent

victimization. Ellen's actions with the gun demonstrate to the other gunslingers that she is not a woman playing dress-up. After this point, the men in the film still treat her as an object of sexual desire, but now through the Western's traditional homoerotic bonds of masculine respect. Herod first forced Ellen's entrance into Oedipal conflict and the patriarchal system, and now she has attained power within it.

14. The Clock Tower

(“The Balcony”—Lincoln rejects Mary Todd, temporarily, in favor of the Law)

A massive clock tower looms over the town of Redemption. The tallest structure in the town and often used as a sniper position by Herod's hired guns, the clock tower figures prominently in the story because it is the “starting gun” for the match-ups in the quick draw contest. Each showdown is assigned a time on the hour, and the contestants, under penalty of being shot by Herod's men, are not allowed to draw until the minute hand hits the twelve.

Two key sequences illustrate the importance of the clock and time in the film. In the first, three close-ups of pocket-watches are juxtaposed with a shot of the clock tower. The time is three minutes before the hour when the first shoot-out of the contest will occur. The first two pocket-watches match the time of the clock tower, but the third is two minutes slow. The person holding the watch hastily adjusts it, and the showdown commences. This sequence works as a joke, but it also illustrates the power over time Herod holds. Time as defined by a clock is a man-made invention to help regulate industrial society, and the clock-tower is a phallic symbol of the capitalist assembly line, the punch-clock around which the workers scurry. The viewer only sees the hands and arms of the people holding the watches, and these anonymous body parts emphasize the conformity engendered by this regulatory system. And it is a system controlled by

the patriarchy, symbolized by Herod's men stationed on the clock tower, both guarding it and enforcing Herod's edicts.

The second sequence presents a method for escaping the clutches of this patriarchal and capitalist time. As Ellen walks into the street for her first contest, Cort informs her that there is a barely audible click from the clock tower right before its hands hit the hour. Being able to hear this click is a significant advantage because it provides a split-second head start. Ellen's opponent, Kelly, taunts her and calls her yellow, and Ellen indeed appears nervous. But as Cort's words return to her in a subjective voice-over, the camera swiftly pans from Ellen to Cort and tilts up to the clock tower. A classic montage ensues, the camera moving closer to the clock tower with each shot, and the sound of the clock's ticking steadily increases in volume with each cut. The next shot returns to the close-up of Ellen, now wearing a confident smile, which causes Kelly's bravado to melt. The click—Ellen begins to draw—the strike—Kelly begins to draw—Ellen guns him down—the crowd cheers.

Cort's voice and the sounds of the clock are clearly from Ellen's aural point of view, indicating her intense concentration. This sequence implies that one method of survival within an oppressive patriarchal system is to excel at its norms: by accepting the premise of the controlling clock tower and scrutinizing all aspects of it, Ellen is able to triumph. However, this initial victory is only the first step on a journey that eventually leads to Ellen's triumph over Herod (which begins with the demolition of the clock tower). Ellen analyzes her enemies, Herod and the clock, and overcomes both.

The use of flashbacks in the film also ruptures the smooth flow of time. First, it disrupts the seamless sequence of narrative, revealing the ellipses all narratives cover

over. Second, it points out how events are dependent upon previous events rather than an abstract representation of time. Film is arguably the art form that most rigidly controls time, as it depends on projection of still photographs at a constant rate to create the illusion of movement. While this Hollywood film does not overtly disrupt the timed, mechanized film apparatus (unlike, for example, the shot of the melting film frames in Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, or the explanation of the reel change cue marks in David Fincher's *Fight Club*), the use of flashbacks and the emphasis on the clock tower do suggest a critique of the standard linear chronology of most Westerns. The flashbacks reveal the developments that motivate Ellen and the overall story of the film. Thus, her showdown with Herod becomes a progression of events from her past rather than a tightly controlled sequence dictated by Herod's clock and contest. This system, which eliminates his potential usurpers, is challenged by Ellen's refusal to adhere to his rules, chronological and otherwise.

15. The Contest over Narrative

(“The Celebrations”—Independence Day events and contests)

Like many good genre narratives, *The Quick and the Dead* is exceedingly self-reflexive. The quick-draw contest, one of the central structures of the plot, serves as a Western within the Western: a group of spectators gather to watch a shoot-out between individuals, just as an audience gathers to watch a Western film that inevitably climaxes in a gunfight. The contest is Herod's tool for maintaining his regime, diverting the townspeople with bloody entertainment while giving them a sliver of hope (that Herod will be killed) which is never fulfilled. This contest functions similarly to Westerns (and Hollywood films in general), which are often understood as placebos for the masses that allow them to live out fantasies without challenging the reigning patriarchy. However,

the film audience sees a part of the spectacle which the townspeople never do—Ellen's flashbacks to her father's death. The film thereby situates itself as serving other purposes than Herod's contest by presenting the flashbacks as an intensely real part of the history of the contest that has been elided. The film suggests that focusing only on the results of the individual showdowns is exactly what the patriarchy wants the spectator to do; thus, in order to act against the patriarchy, alternate and forgotten histories must be revived. This emphasis on historical revision links *The Quick and the Dead* to the revisionist 90s Westerns (although it is obviously restricted to an individual backstory instead of larger historical projects, like better presentations of Native Americans).

Storytelling through dialogue emphasizes Herod's control of narrative as well. Ace, one of the gunfighters in the contest, is extremely vain, endlessly boasting of his exploits. Herod confronts Ace with one of his boasts, asking if he was the one who killed a certain gunslinger; Ace confirms the story. Herod then reveals that he was actually the one who killed the gunslinger, and then challenges and easily defeats Ace. Herod controls storytelling, cementing as truth his version of events. Herod will not allow anyone to usurp the stories that have earned him a reputation, a condensed autobiographical narrative that helps Herod maintain his hold on Redemption (although in the end Ellen is the one who achieves redemption).

Herod repeatedly prevents and usurps others' stories. Whenever Cort attempts to tell his story of salvation through becoming a man of the cloth, Herod mocks him and has him beaten. When his son, The Kid, brags about one of his exploits, Herod enters into the scene and nullifies the story with a biting insult. When Cort begins to tell Ellen

about his past with Herod, Herod appears behind them and finishes the story in his own fashion. And when Cort and Ellen plot to avoid facing each other in the contest, Herod walks in from offscreen and tells them they will fight each other or else his men will shoot them both. Ellen rises in anger at this, saying "Nobody tells me what to do!" Herod slaps her and laughs as his goons restrain her at gunpoint. All this indicates his complete dominance of his world. Herod's sudden appearances into the frame from offscreen, seemingly materializing from the void, suggest his complete integration with the diegetic world of *The Quick and the Dead*. These offscreen entrances are another marker of Leone's style, suggesting the omnipotence of the Man with No Name characters, and Raimi's referencing of this stylistic element suggests the extent of Herod's power. Even though the film is focalized around Ellen, Herod is omnipresent, ruling the narrative until Ellen and Cort defeat him. Moreover, although Herod is present in Ellen's flashbacks and has greatly affected them, their historic and subjective status allows Ellen to utilize a forgotten aspect of the past diegesis to disrupt Herod's control of the present.

Herod resembles another Gene Hackman Western character, Little Bill Daggett in *Unforgiven*. Both are control freaks who run their towns, and both delight in dismantling fictions and revealing the truths they hold. These similarities between the characters suggest two things. Firstly, they emphasize how the patriarchy they represent controls everything, including narrative, and uses that control to fortify their positions. Secondly, they indicate the extent to which they believe their own myths; they know only their own terms until a factor beyond their comprehension, such as Ellen or Will Munny, intrudes upon their fantastic constructs.

Herod's control of the rules of the contest brilliantly symbolizes his control of narrative. Herod manipulates the contest and its rules in order to create ever more intense climaxes, ensuring that the strongest in the system survives (namely, himself). He even controls the spectators' reactions; after Herod dispatches an opponent, he often gestures to the silent crowd (silent because they had hoped for his death), demanding and receiving applause. This patriarchal control of both the contest and narrative in general provides spectacular conflict that obscures its self-regenerating nature, devising variations on the Western theme that tend to obscure the importance of the theme.

Herod can be read as attempting to be the individual author of the film itself, the *auteur*, directing every aspect of the narrative and manipulating the audience. But film is an art form with a collective authorship, open to the influences of an Ellen (or Sharon Stone) and beyond the complete control of one individual; so, while ladies "can't shoot for shit," Ellen can, and Stone does, control the "shooting" of this film.

16. The Oedipal Conflict

("The Family"—Lincoln empathizes with the family, particularly the mother, of the two brothers he will represent as their lawyer)

Before Cort's first gunfight in the contest, Herod forces Cort into his son's (The Kid) gun shop to buy a gun. The Kid and Herod engage in verbal jousting, resulting in Herod insulting The Kid for having "farmer's hands" while he and Cort are real killers. Herod distances himself from his biological son while associating with his adopted son, Cort.

The Western is often read as a dramatization of the Oedipal conflict: in the climactic shoot-out, the hero kills the villain, a symbolic father for the hero. Thus, the

hero comes of age and is able to assume his rightful place in society. But the Western's Oedipal conflict is inevitably burdened with American ideology: the villain is an evil monarch, enslaving the helpless farmers or townspeople until the hero overthrows the tyrant, establishing democratic ideals through his right to bear a six-gun. Inevitably, the allegory goes, the young United States casts off the parentage of the ancient British Empire. Multiplying the number of climactic shoot-outs, *The Quick and the Dead* overflows with permutations of the Western's version of the Oedipal conflict. Herod is the father/patriarchy, and he maintains power by circumventing the Oedipal process; like Kronos or King Herod, he kills the children who may replace him.

The most obvious Oedipal conflict is the struggle between Herod and his son, The Kid. Throughout the film, Herod and The Kid confront each other verbally, and The Kid always loses because his father is more aggressive. Herod demands that his son withdraw from the contest, but the son refuses and eventually challenges Herod. As he walks out to face his father, The Kid revels in the crowd's wild cheering as the grand musical score swells—that is, until Herod appears in the frame, once more calling for The Kid to quit the contest. Instead, The Kid turns to the crowd and makes a speech, saying the gunfight is “in the head, not the hands.” He further declares that Herod is invincible because everyone thinks he is, but “time catches up to every man.” Herod is not as fast as he used to be, and The Kid is in his prime. They face each other and draw as the clock strikes; Herod goes down. But then The Kid slowly falls down as Herod struggles back up; The Kid only wounded his father, grazing his neck, but Herod fatally shot his son. As Ellen tends to the dying young man, the father approaches. The Kid stretches his out his hand in one last attempt at reconciliation, but Herod does not

respond, and The Kid dies. Herod attempts to excuse himself, saying that he gave The Kid every opportunity to back out and that it was never proven that The Kid was his son, before walking away from the silent crowd.

This is one of the few scenes in the film which evokes any sympathy for Herod. Herod clearly does not desire to kill his son and regrets doing so; however, he is so involved in the competitive system he has created that he cannot do otherwise once the showdown begins. One argument in favor of the self-interest of the patriarchy is that it exists not solely for personal gain but rather for the good of the family. Herod's killing of his son refutes that argument, demonstrating how the patriarchal capitalist order poisons even the closest blood relations. In this system, the personal gain of Herod must necessarily outweigh any other considerations, even those which Herod also desires.

For his part, The Kid never had any other choice. A photograph of him as a young child shows him holding two pistols and wearing gun belts draped around his neck and shoulders. Ellen asks The Kid, "How can you live like this?"; he can only respond with a puzzled, "Live like what?" His job is running a gun shop, and his proper name is Fees, indicating his inherently commercial nature. Indoctrinated his whole life into the ruthless and confrontational patriarchal system, The Kid can only imitate his father. Even in their final showdown, he adopts Herod's manner of lecturing to the crowd, affirming his prowess before facing the enemy. But in mimicking Herod, he fails to defeat him. The Kid recognizes that given time he will eventually overturn Herod, but he does not understand that for the moment, time is still firmly in the grip of Herod's

strong hands. The gunfight is equally in both the head and the hands, in a system geared towards psychological dominance as well as material ability.

On the other hand, The Kid almost does overcome Herod. The eventual supplanting of the father by the son is an integral component of patriarchal capitalism, as Herod acknowledges when he declares, “I’m not old, or sick.” Eventually, the son is able to fulfill his self-interest, but only by displacing the father. The townspeople may cheer for The Kid as their savior, but the details of his lifestyle reveal that the promise of the prince will turn to the terror of the tyrant. Trapped within the system, neither The Kid nor the townspeople have any real hope.

17. The Innocent Victim

(“The Plaintiffs”—Lincoln settles a dispute over money and damages between two farmers)

Ellen also takes up the feminist equivalent of the Western hero’s role of tutoring the young boy. Katie, the saloonkeeper’s adolescent daughter, wants to emulate Ellen. Ellen at first ignores her, but then gradually develops a friendship with the girl. However, she rebuffs Katie’s praise of her gunfighting ability, indicating a healthy skepticism on her part regarding violence. The only advice Ellen offers Katie is when Eugene, one of the local gunfighters, buys Katie’s virginity. Ellen tells her, “Wash wherever he touches you.” Eugene abuses Katie and throws her out. Outraged, Ellen assaults the man and can only avenge Katie by killing Eugene in the contest. After this point, Katie appears simply as one of the spectators in the crowd.

In classic Western fashion, the innocent victim is used to justify the hero’s actions. The revenge motive is omnipresent in the genre, but it always exists uneasily, being too close to the self-gratification represented by the villain. So Westerns link revenge to the

motif of protection of the innocent. Ellen can gun down Eugene because he has corrupted an innocent. Even then, Ellen cannot coldly kill him; she shoots Eugene twice, but refuses to kill him when he appears helpless, and only finishes him off when he attacks her again. Killing must be completely justified. This is a synecdoche for the film's larger conflict. Ellen initially desires to kill Herod for revenge, but eventually continues on because she will save the townspeople he controls and exploits.

Katie's disappearance from the film, however, suggests an uneasiness regarding the effectiveness of this kind of self-interested motivation for action. Even though Ellen eventually wins the contest and frees the town, to do so she must become a murderer, another Herod. The only revolution imaginable is a *coup d'état*, seizing control of the system. Whether the system can then be replaced by any alternative remains unbroached. Similarly, Ellen's awareness of the male exploitation of the young girl clearly indicates the film's awareness of feminist critique, but the film's failure to continue that critique beyond the revenge structures of the genre suggests the film's lack of radical direction, reflecting the uncertainty of the 1990s.

18. The Dinner Invitation

(“The Dance”—Lincoln attends a dance hosted by Mary Todd)

Herod invites Ellen to his mansion for dinner. His sexual interest in her is apparent. He then reveals to her the story of his childhood. Herod's father was a judge who forced Herod to witness the hangings of those the judge. One day, Herod's father forced Herod and his mother into a game of "Russian Roulette." Herod's father pulled the trigger to no effect five times, and then calmly blew his head away with the sixth and final shot. No further mention is made of Herod's mother; the father's monstrous actions effectively excise her as well.

Herod's father may be read as a symbol of the law, or Western justice. This is not the law of *Young Mr. Lincoln*, however, which protects the rights of all, including the poor and oppressed. The judge's law is flawed and voracious, as shown by his turning its deadly power against his innocent family. Without justice, the judge's law becomes a random abstraction exploited by those who are best able to thrive under its edicts. It is the law of the capitalist patriarchy, a self-interested competition, which favors those with wealth and power. The "luck" involved in not losing the Russian Roulette game symbolizes the better chances of winning for those who are already among the "elite." This naturalizes the system's results, which are credited to the abilities and fortunes of the individual instead of larger social dynamics. When justice is viewed as blind luck, social problems seem insurmountable. With the judge's suicide, the law/justice has removed itself, and only the rule of "survival of the fittest" endures.

Apparently, the Oedipal conflict has not occurred; however, the judge has forced a variation of the conflict that ensures the destruction of one of the participants. Setting the rules of elimination, the judge calmly accepts the results. The son (Herod) survives and takes his place. The lack of attention to Herod's mother only emphasizes the marginal role of women in the exploitative system. The game of Russian Roulette mirrors Herod's quick-draw contest, both being ruthless arenas.

Herod's contest can thus be read as his repetition of the lessons learned from his father, forcing children into deadly Oedipal confrontations. The system ensures that the strong survive, and the deck is stacked in Herod's favor. Herod remarks of the contest, "At least I get to face my enemies." He anticipates revolt and channels it into a situation almost certainly resulting in his triumph. Herod also reenacts the childhood trauma of

hangings, emulating his father by forcing others into their own hangings. This is one expansion of the hanging motif in *Once Upon a Time in the West*; in that film, the hanging is more an allegory of lynching in general, and a random act of cruelty. In *The Quick and the Dead*, the hanging becomes repeated systematic trauma.

Despite Herod's token attempt at seduction, this film has little concern with marriage. Westerns often have ended in the establishment of the heterosexual couple, but one could argue that the Western never directs its energy towards the sexual act. Rather, the violence of the shoot-out replaces the sexual act, phallic guns exploding. Perhaps the Western avoids sex because of its stress on the individual; sexual energy is not used for romance or reproduction, but for the destruction of the Other. In the classic Western, the male hero eliminates the Other before marrying and reestablishing the social bond in the film's conclusion. Sex and reproduction only occurs offscreen, after the film ends, as allowed by the Puritan-based ideology of the Western.

However, Sharon Stone's stardom depends on explicit portrayals of sex. Early in the film, Ellen has a drunken encounter with The Kid; however, no physical contact is portrayed onscreen. Yvonne Tasker describes a sexual encounter between Ellen and Cort that was cut from the final version of the film: "the night before the final contest, Ellen storms into the brothel where Cort is being held and takes him for herself since they both may be dead the next day." Tasker's description supports her assertion that Ellen "offers a sexualized version of female strength" (57-58). I would argue, however, that the scene's removal instead reflects the genre's tradition of sexual energy being contained and reserved for the showdown. It also marks a reluctance on the film's part

to support Hollywood's traditional ideology of reinforcing the monogamous heterosexual couple (unlike, for example, the 1992 *The Last of the Mohicans* I discuss in Chapter 4).

These sexual relations are best exemplified in the rest of the dinner scene. Herod invites Ellen to dinner only after she wins her first match. Ellen wears a beautiful dress and a concealed pistol, intending to kill Herod. They converse, Ellen building up her nerve to shoot. Herod explains how he killed his wife because she was unfaithful. Ellen finally cocks her pistol under the table, Herod tells the story of his father the judge, and then responds with a click of his own. Ellen rushes away, saying, "I shouldn't have come here." Herod catches her and embraces her, demanding her answer to, "What do you want?" Ellen struggles free, and as she departs, Herod reveals that he did not have a gun and made the hammer cocking noise with the spring top of a lighter.

In this scene, Ellen attempts the sort of assassination that would be allowed to a woman in a traditional Western, using her sex appeal to get close enough to shoot. She operates so deeply within Herod's patriarchal system, even to the point of being in his house, that she fails. The patriarchy is so powerful that it can overcome any resistance from those playing under its rules. Herod desires the heterosexual union, reveling in the clichés of the mysterious woman and the patriarchal conquest of her frontier. Ellen escapes only because of her knowledge of his past, knowledge that exists beyond his controlling gaze.

19. Religion, Higher Law, and the Feminine Masculine

("Nature, Law, Woman"—interrelationship of the three on a symbolic level)

Cort's backstory reveals more of Herod's Oedipal meddling. Herod adopted Cort, taking him off the street and training him as a gunslinger and outlaw. Wounded in a botched bank robbery, Herod and Cort are taken in and healed by a priest. When they

recover, Herod orders Cort to kill the priest to cover their trail. When Cort refuses, Herod holds a pistol to Cort's head and counts down from ten—reminiscent of Herod's father and foreshadowing Herod's countdown in the quick-draw contest. Cort kills the priest. Sickened, he renounces violence and enters the ministry.

Herod attempts to make Cort into a son, a version of himself. Killing the priest fulfills two functions for Herod: it allows Cort to become a double for Herod, and the murder enables Herod to eliminate a competing force, religion. Or so Herod thinks; the one thing he does not anticipate is Cort's entry into the church. Cort's priesthood disrupts Herod's patriarchal plan through the denial of self, which is exaggerated in the film when the Christ-like Cort endures multiple tortures: rusty chains, beatings, starvation, lack of water, brainwashing. Denial of the self negates the Oedipal process. Another facet of the priesthood, however, is non-resistance and a refusal to take sides. This is what Cort overcomes during the course of the film. Cort gradually reverts from his revocation of all violence to his former state as a deadly shootist. Herod forces Cort into this transformation, thinking that it will turn Cort into the self-interested killer he once was. However, again he does not anticipate the effect of recognition of the Other. Cort's martyrdom allows him to sympathize with the oppressed, but he rejects the passive edicts of the Church in favor of action against Herod and the patriarchal capitalist system. These acts transform Cort into an anti-capitalist agent.

Cort's subservience is further coded by his relatively feminine appearance. He is the only one of the major male characters with long hair, and his priest's frock resembles a dress. This feminization enables some identification with Ellen. Also, Cort

most closely resembles Ellen's father, indicating that Herod's forcing other men into the stereotypically feminine or passive role is part of the patriarchal system.

Ellen's flashbacks reveal the first of Herod's forced Oedipal conflicts. As I noted earlier, Herod places Ellen's father, the Marshal, on a chair with a noose around his neck. Herod then gives the young Ellen a chance to save her father; if Ellen shoots the rope of the noose, they are both free to leave. Herod hands Ellen a gun, she cries and refuses to shoot; the Marshal convinces her to try, saying not to blame herself no matter what happens. Ellen shoots, and hits her father in the forehead. Herod rides off with the Stars and Stripes, leaving behind a stunned Ellen.

Herod has forced Ellen into the Oedipal trajectory even though she is a woman and would not normally participate in this system. Herod provides her with the phallic gun and pushes Ellen into a masculine role. The Marshal is trapped within the system, and can see no alternative other than to indoctrinate the young Ellen; he hopes that Ellen can adopt the masculine role of skill with the gun. But Herod made the rules, so once again he wins: the law/justice of Redemption (the Marshal) is eliminated, leaving Herod free to make his own law, like his judge father before him.

However, Herod does not anticipate the eventual rupture to the system caused by these actions. Although Ellen understandably blames herself, she also directs blame to its appropriate source, Herod. Because Ellen is an Other forced into the Oedipal role, she is able to recognize her Other status and identify Herod and his system as its source, and hence her enemy. Because the capitalist patriarchal system is an invisible, immaterial entity, most of its subjects remain ignorant of its power. Herod's meddling, however, materializes the patriarchal structure, providing Ellen with a concrete object

upon which to focus her vengeful and revolutionary efforts. Unlike Herod, and because of her recognition of her Other status, Ellen is able to assume her father's role of the law/justice while realizing that the role has social consequences beyond her personal interests. She thus avoids falling into the trap of exploiting others because of her refusal of the primacy of individual self-interest.

20. Trial of the Soul

(“The Trial”—Lincoln begins the defense)

Ellen has killed Eugene, and the film implies it is the first time she has killed. She decides to flee the contest, sickened by the act. She rides to the graveyard, searching for her father's resting place. The elderly doctor, a friend of her father's, finds her there, give her father's badge, and exhorts her to return to defeat Herod—not for vengeance, but because the townspeople await a champion like her: “They're cowards, like me, they're waiting, hoping, someone like you will come and stop him.” Ellen renews her resolve and returns to the contest.

With this, the moral character of the hero is reaffirmed. Ellen has rejected the contest, foregone revenge, yet she chooses to return to defend the townspeople. Trapped within generic conventions, the film must have the final confrontation; wanting to be revolutionary, it motivates Ellen to act as defender of “the people.”

21. Before the Dawn

(“The Night”—before the final day of the trial, Lincoln is inspired)

Ellen, supposedly dead, does not appear before the climactic gunfight at dawn; to do so would spoil the surprise. Cort is beaten by Ratzi, Herod's employee, and has some fingers broken; this heightens the narrative drama, and prepares the viewer for Cort's martyrdom. Herod sits alone in his mansion, cleaning and adjusting his pistols,

and muttering to himself. He wears glasses and cuts a pathetic figure. The viewer eventually hears snatches of prayer: "into the valley of death...fear no evil." The filmmakers probably intend to present Herod as a complex character; however, another reading occurs to the critical viewer. Shockingly, the supposedly evil and self-sufficient Herod is revealed to be another victim of the patriarchal system, desperate for any father figure, as represented by prayer to God. Herod quickly returns to his domineering self for the public contest, but at this moment before the dawn, the viewer realizes he too is trapped by the competitive system in which they all operate.

22. Victory

(Victory—Lincoln solves the enigma, revealing the true murderer and acquitting the brothers)

At dawn, Herod and Cort meet on the street, the assembled crowd silent. Increasing the tension, Herod fixes the situation so they will both draw left-handed. As the clock strikes the hour, Herod draws, but is instantly flung to the ground as the clock tower explodes. Herod tries to aim and fire again, but his mansion explodes. A third time he tries, but several more town buildings erupt into flames. Throughout, Cort remains immobile and impassive. As the buildings burn and singed money flutters down around Herod, a figure appears out of the smoke and debris. It is Ellen, of course. Herod's goons take aim at her, but Cort intervenes and quickly kills the four who survived the dynamite, leaving Ellen and Herod to face one another.

Herod is shocked, fooled by her faked death. Herod demands to know who Ellen is; she responds by throwing her father's badge at his feet. Comprehension dawns on Herod as the enigma of Ellen's past is revealed, and he and Ellen seem to share the final flashback which shows how Herod caused the Marshal's death. The flashback

ends, and Herod and Ellen draw and fire. Ellen is hit and staggers back; Herod smiles until the film shows, from his point of view, his shadow in front of him with a hole in it because Ellen's bullet has penetrated all the way through him. Ellen is only hit in the shoulder, and she shoots Herod again before he can fire, killing him as his body somersaults backwards.

The feminist role-reversal continues through the climax. The crowd expects a final reckoning between Herod and Cort, between bad father and good son, until Ellen literally blows away this traditional patriarchal system and asserts her right to face Herod. After killing Herod, Ellen jams her pistol into her holster, now positioned directly over her crotch, signifying possession of the phallus. The small, communal group (Ellen, Cort, the blind kid, and the doctor) works together and overcomes the domineering individual; the collective helps free the oppressed townspeople.

The references to the Spaghetti Westerns also accentuate the climax. Ellen emerging from the clouds of dust and smoke caused by the dynamite mirrors Eastwood's entrance at the climax of *A Fistful of Dollars*. Moreover, the shared flashback preceding the final gunfight is very similar to the climactic scenes of *Once Upon a Time in the West*. However, in the latter film, the protagonist Harmonica (Charles Bronson) does not reveal his past secret to Frank (Henry Fonda) until after Harmonica has shot Frank and Frank is about to die. The revelation is strictly a form of personal satisfaction, reflecting the masculine withholding that defines the Man with No Name characters. In *The Quick and the Dead*, Ellen uses the revelation to startle Herod and gain an advantage in the gunfight; she deploys a specific history in order to create a radical end. The flashing and deafening explosions, complete with deep focus

compositions and flying stuntmen, unsettle Herod by destroying the material aspects of his power. They also serve to jolt the viewer out of the familiar Western narrative pattern—although a series of explosions is common in the action/adventure genre, it is less frequent in the Western, Leone's films notwithstanding. Stone's charismatic reentrance, complete with flowing hair unfettered by the convention of a cowboy hat, reestablishes her outsider status. Her aggressive star presence has been the single most important factor in transforming *The Quick and the Dead* into a critical anti-Western. Moreover, the stylish excesses of the hole in Herod's torso and his somersault fall over-determine his death, stressing how unnecessary and empty his position is in fact. Herod ceases to be a real person and instead turns himself into an empty image, much like the hollow statue of Perseus outside his mansion. Ellen has become the non-monstrous Medusa and the sympathetic Other.

Ellen's destruction of the clock tower removes Herod's abstract power over time. Cort began this process by calling for the confrontation at dawn, instead of dictated by the clock. Having the flashback immediately precede the final shoot-out reasserts the natural order of events over the constructions imposed by Herod." You're not fast enough for me!" Herod yells at Ellen. She replies, "Today I am," suggesting the importance of an understanding of time based on contextual events. The Marshal's badge is vital in returning Ellen to the struggle, and triggers Herod's memory. Past events become condensed in this sign of the real, a material token with its own history. Herod's fatal flaw is that he forgets the histories of his victims, replacing them with self-serving stories of his individual past. Ellen is able to reclaim an erased history and thereby disrupt an abusive system.

Herod's gaze ultimately proves ineffective. Ellen fakes her death at the beginning and end of the film in order to defeat the self-interested Kelly and Herod. The patriarchy depends on controlling concepts of reality and identity. Ellen and Cort perform their assigned roles and thus appear to conform to Herod's expectations. However, they actually fool his gaze and overcome it. Herod views a reality outside his making only when he sees the ray of light shining through the hole in his constructed image of himself. To emphasize this realization, the blasting dynamite and howling wind at the climax suggest naturalist, disruptive sounds reasserting themselves over Herod's contrived images.

As Herod's power disappears, so does his control of narrative. This is indicated by Ellen's story entering through the flashback. Prior to his showdown with Cort, Herod tells him, "There's a lot of people here who want entertainment," and Herod orders his men to gun down Cort if Cort somehow wins. Herod still controls the narrative, even posthumously. But Cort and Ellen steal his narrative power. After the explosions, Cort kills the henchmen and declares, "We changed the rules, John." With this act, they eliminate Herod's patriarchal rules and contest, and his authority over narrative and others.

23. Towards Her and His Destinies

("Towards His Destiny"—victorious, Lincoln faces an approaching storm as the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" plays)

Having killed Herod, Ellen walks over and kicks his body, grunting her satisfaction. She picks up the badge and hands it to Cort, saying, "the law is back in town." She then rides off to the townspeople's cheers and the triumphant score as Cort remains, standing alone, looking about with a hint of anxiety. Fade to black; the end.

At first, the endless cycle of Oedipal conflict seems terminated, as Cort evades the cycle by deferring to Ellen. But uncertainties remain; Ellen was able to kill her father's killer only with Cort lurking in the background, suggesting that the priest has become a symbolic father to her. The cheering of the Mexican-American townspeople for the departing Ellen suggests their dependence on a white savior, as does Cort's new position as marshal. Even the shadow of the heterosexual couple creeps back into the film. Ellen has a sexual encounter with The Kid when they are both drunk; in the morning, The Kid's bed is revealed as being made out of cases of dynamite. Ellen and Cort use this dynamite to defeat Herod in the orgasmic explosions of the climax, indicating that the heterosexual union can only be temporarily repressed in Hollywood Western ideology. Moreover, the presence of the father still looms; Cort and Ellen may avoid Herod's lineage, but they seem to take the place of the Marshal, Ellen's father. Cort even physically resembles the Marshal. The legacy of the good father remains; only that of the evil Herod perishes.

Finally, Ellen rides off into the West, but where is she headed? This is a common Western ending, but Ellen is not an aging or dying gunslinger society no longer needs. Rather, she appears young and healthy, and no indication is given of her future. Cort is now the marshal, but as Ellen rides off, he seems anxious and uncertain. The silent Cort appears extremely unsure whether or not he should assume the position. The relatively abrupt fade to black does not even provide a false sense of closure typical to Westerns, such as a long shot of the rider traversing the plains or riding into the sunset as the credits roll. Thus, the film disrupts conventional Hollywood closure, leaving the viewers as uncertain as Cort.

24. Attempt of the Film

(“Work of the Film”—summary of the ideological work of the film)

Within the Western cycle of 1990s Hollywood, *The Quick and the Dead* stands as a brilliant attempt at an ideological critique of the misogynist, racist, patriarchal, and capitalist ideology that has always existed in the Western genre. This film also aspires to a thorough critique of older American ideologies, suggesting that the U.S.A. has moved past its repressive history (Ellen is the future, Herod the past). But is the ambiguous ending a hope for a new frontier, or a disturbing lack of closure of the past, leaving open a return of the repressed patriarchal system? This ambiguity reflects the uncertainty of the 1990s, a post-Cold War moment when new frontiers seemed reachable, but no one was quite sure where to find them, let alone map them.

25. Violence and Law

(“Violence and Law”—longer, concluding summary and analysis of these key themes)

Analyzing the unstable message of *The Quick and the Dead* relies on the Western's status as a reflection and examination of American values. Westerns since *Stagecoach* (1939) regularly have been viewed as statements regarding dominant American ideology. The myth of the importance of the Western as a cultural reflection of contemporary ideals has influenced the production of modern Westerns. This is, in part, why the anti-Western has become the dominant mode of the genre; both in order to adjust to the rapidly changing status of underrepresented groups in American society and to make fresh contributions to an overworked genre, any new Western has to react to and transform its generic predecessors.

Thus, *The Quick and the Dead* is a film, and part of a genre, which had absorbed a 1990s ideological critique of the capitalist patriarchy. After decades of activism by

underrepresented groups (the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, the American Indian movement), American society had moved towards an uncertain inclusion of all such groups. The political battles between liberal and conservative were battles over the value of cultural diversity versus maintenance of the old power structures. Or, to use Neale's terms, the new revisionist Westerns leaned toward the liberal side; the neo-conservative, towards the conservative. The Western cannot remain immune to such cultural battles, and so not surprisingly, a liberal Western like *The Quick and the Dead* incorporates a liberal critique of the white male capitalist patriarchy. Even though the film is mostly concerned with critiquing patriarchy and capitalism, it also acknowledges the importance of race, however obliquely.

However, in the 1990s, increased opportunity for diverse groups is the only metaphorical frontier that both is clearly desirable and falls within the scope of the Western. While the post-Cold War 1990s seemed a moment of limitless possibilities for America, the uncertainty regarding which possibilities to imagine and pursue arguably resulted in a continuation of the status quo, minus the Soviet evil empire as a savage adversary (a role to be eventually filled by Islamic terrorism). The structure of the Western depends on an adversary, and by emphasizing the role of the shoot-out, *The Quick and the Dead* becomes trapped within the generic parameters that inevitably lead to repetition of the symbolic structures that reinforce the system it meant to critique. No matter how it is justified, the shoot-out always requires the elimination of an Other. Thus, in *The Quick and the Dead*, the only way the Western can imagine a challenge to the system is by seizing control of it—but this leaves the system in place. The ending of the film is ambiguous—generic requirements have been met, the evil villain has been

eliminated, but now what? Like 1990s America itself, no alternative socio-political system is suggested; the only possibility offered is that Marshal Cort creates a more benevolent system (a Ben and Jerry's Western).

This is an underlying problem related to the 1990s Western's representation of contemporary American society; despite the advances of underrepresented groups, they have occurred within the system of competitive patriarchal capitalism that continued to dominate America. The townspeople in the film weren't worried about their freedom or other living conditions; they were unhappy because their taxes were too high. Once the barriers of race and sex are removed, or at least weakened, then competition and the profit motive become balanced, the "level playing field" for exceptional individuals that Cort and Ellen establish at the end of the film. The Western ignores contemporary problems of poverty, limited access to education or health care, recent immigration, and so forth. Forgotten are those who are not exceptional, who cannot compete. While parts of the 1990s world undergo significant change, the American capitalist system remains in place, with only the make-up of the elite changed.

The only option the film can propose is for ambitious individuals to gain control over the corporate system. Likewise, Raimi used *The Quick and the Dead* as a stepping stone to big-budget Hollywood filmmaking. Stone at last got to join the boys' club, going toe to toe with an actor of Gene Hackman's stature, and finally proving that she could "shoot," both as a film character and as a producer of an interesting, well-made film. Ultimately, however, her attempt at a revolutionary character fails because the audience is unable to consume Stone's sexualized body. With the hunger of audience expectations unsatisfied, the film and Stone are rejected and regarded as failures.

Stone achieves a momentary victory, being able to produce a role reversal film that displays a woman triumphant, but that triumph is not accepted by the audience that needs to support it. As Ellen/Stone rides off, we may hope that she moves to a brighter future; but the historical fact is that she rides into the sunset of her career. In the end, the film's lack of a vision of an alternative socio-economic system returns to haunt its leading lady ("The Lady"), but not the men with the names of Crowe, DiCaprio, and Raimi.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS: *DEAD MAN, DEAD END*

As previously noted, the failure of *The Quick and the Dead* at the box office marked the end of the Hollywood Western cycle in the 1990s. Also in 1995, Walter Hill's *Wild Bill*, starring Jeff Bridges in the title role, flopped by grossing only \$2 million. While the genre was not completely moribund for the rest of the decade, it had returned to a minor, often hybrid mode. For example, 1999 saw Will Smith starring in the sci-fi/comedy/Western mishmash *Wild Wild West* and Ang Lee's Civil War-themed *Ride with the Devil*.

This limping end to the genre cycle was almost inevitable, given that even the most popular films in the cycle, despite moments of hope and possibility within their narratives, always contained the seeds of their own destruction. *Lonesome Dove* started with the conceit that it was one last adventure for its senior citizen ex-Rangers, and Gus, the vibrant core of that movie, dies rather than lose a leg. Woodrow Call survives, but cannot acknowledge his illegitimate son, preventing any implied hopeful future. *Dances with Wolves* celebrates Lakota Sioux life on the plains, but the specter of nostalgia, of that specific plains culture ending, along with the end of the frontier in general, permeates the film. *The Last of the Mohicans*, of course, cannot escape its title, overtly ending with the disappearing of the Indian/noble savage, despite Means' best efforts, and an emphasis on survival above all. *Tombstone* ends with the heterosexual couple continuing their frontier adventures, but again, like Gus in *Lonesome Dove*, the vibrant heart of the film, Doc Holliday, dies at the end. *Tombstone* is admittedly more upbeat, but Wyatt and Josephine's union seems more like a flight from the pervasive killing and maiming throughout the film than a journey into a new

frontier. *Unforgiven* similarly reaches a thrilling climax, but one based on murders by both sides and preceded by a regretful critique of violence. It is also a last ride for the last Westerner, Clint Eastwood, with Munny's retreat with his family to California paralleling Clint's farewell to the genre and life in Carmel. *The Quick and the Dead* best allegorized this problem: despite a thorough critique of the Western genre, and without a symbolic frontier to progress into, no alternative can be imagined, or even suggested, outside the inevitable generic framework.

One could argue that the anti-Western, or even the genre overall, has always been primarily nostalgic, foregrounding the end of the Western hero and the passing of the frontier. The '90s cycle adds a new take to this elegiac tone, however, because the cycle contains the hope and excitement of new frontiers related to revisionism. Perhaps the nostalgia is for a certain type of white masculinity (embodied by Augustus McRae and Doc Holliday) that disappears in favor of heroic women, Native Americans, and other groups. However, the disappearing Indian figure also permeates these films, and I have already discussed the failure of *The Quick and the Dead* to suggest any future for the woman hero. To further pinpoint these problems of the moment, I turn to Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995).

Dead Man tells the story of an accountant from Cleveland, William Blake (Johnny Depp) who travels west to the town of Machine, promised a job from the local factory owner, Dickinson (Robert Mitchum), via letter. The employment is refused, and being broke, he meets a woman, Thel (Mili Avital). Their tryst is interrupted by her ex-lover and the son of the factory owner (played by Gabriel Byrne), who shoots at Blake, lodging a bullet in his chest, but only after the bullet passes through Thel, killing her.

Blake uses Thel's gun to kill the shooter. These are the first of the absurd deaths in the movie. Now on the run, Blake meets Nobody (Gary Farmer), an American Indian. They are pursued by bounty hunters hired by the ex-lover's father, Dickinson. A series of darkly comic and weirdly beautiful frontier encounters ensue, with multiple gunfights and killings, until Nobody delivers Blake to the ocean for his final dying journey into the ocean. The grim mood is considerably lightened by the intriguing performance by Farmer as Nobody and his interactions with Blake/Depp. As Blake floats away, Nobody and the lead bounty hunter (Cole Wilson, played by Lance Henriksen) kill one another on shore.

Like other Jarmusch films, *Dead Man* is hard to describe. It is clearly set in the standard frontier period in western America, it has gunfights galore, and the typical “interracial buddy” relationship between the white shootist Blake and the Indian Nobody is the crux of the film. But it is so unconventional that it seems less a Western and more an art film. Or perhaps the distancing is more than it is hyper-conventional in plot but without stereotypical characters; Nobody is a deeply nuanced character, and Depp plays a Westerner unlike any previously seen. This film has a linear, chronological narrative, but it somehow is simultaneously episodic and disjointed—due in part to the avoidance of clear psychological explanation of all character motivations and a certain randomness to the gunfights and other violent encounters (many of the fights are won by a seemingly accidental shooting or other incident, instead of through the hero achieving his goals). In order to analyze this episodic narrative, I will break this analysis into eight sections, each with a title that begins with a letter from the film’s title (seven letters plus one “blank space” between “Dead” and “Man”).

Depp, Johnny

Johnny Depp is not an obvious choice for a Westerner; nothing about his star persona, particularly in the early '90s, suggests rugged masculinity. William Blake, as played by Depp, is not a typical western hero in any way. Rather, he is a comedic straight man who stumbles through his adventures. Nobody repeatedly calls him a "stupid fucking white man," whose first achievement is to get himself shot. At the same time, he gets into gunfight after gunfight and quite coolly, Eastwood-like, shoots dead most of his antagonists, despite there being absolutely no indication he has any skill or experience with a gun. This is due, in part, to nearly everyone else clumsily and randomly shooting their guns (with the exception of the "professional" bounty hunters on his trail). The generic convention of the shootout is there, the syntactic element, but Jarmusch has a radically altered semantic hero. He is a classic American figure, an orphan heading west, but at first glance, this bespectacled accountant is more Bartleby than Boone.

Europe

Although Blake is the clear protagonist, present in almost every scene except for the parallel pursuit by the bounty hunters, Nobody is the equivalent of the in-between hero, and Blake is his sidekick and pupil. Nobody's background is a "reverse captivity narrative"—captured as a young boy, he was sent back east as an exhibit in a cage, eventually reaching London. There he goes to school and learns the works of the great revolutionary poet William Blake. He eventually returns to his tribe as "the man who knows Europeans," but they scoff at his stories and do not accept him, naming him "he

who talks much and says little." So he prefers Nobody⁴ and is now permanently caught in-between Europeans and Indians. Depp/Blake's appearance is a cosmic coincidence, to become the killer of white men, and directing him to that goal becomes Nobody's purpose.

Art

Any narrative that depends on references to and multiple quotations from William Blake clearly has aspirations to Art beyond being simply entertainment. Perhaps the most striking feature of this film is the gorgeous black and white cinematography (a hallmark of Jarmusch's early films). The camera lingers over beautiful Western landscapes, from mountain passes to redwood forests, from rushing rivers to the sea. The black and white is again the hyper-convention of the genre, making these familiar landscapes fresh again (a cinematic equivalent of Ansel Adams), while at the same time referencing the black and white history of the film genre. Depp/Blake's quest to death is, if nothing else, Romantic.

Death

Even more strikingly, these sublime landscapes are dotted with death. On the train out west, Blake experiences a shocking moment when the mountain men on the train start shooting buffalo. The thesis is set: the European settlers bring not only exploitation of natural resources, but the wasteful elimination of them. This emphasis on death resulting from frontier expansion permeates the film.

⁴ "Nobody" may be a reference to Odysseus calling to the Cyclops, and/or to Emily Dickinson's poem that begins, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"

Blank Space

Instead of clean cuts between scenes, Jarmusch often employs quick fades to black. These are slightly motivated by convention, as they do suggest the jumps in time and location that often occur between scenes, as well as being typical of Jarmusch's style. However, the fades are used so frequently that they serve to disrupt the invisible flow of narrative, forcing the viewer to consider the film as a collection of somewhat random, loosely connected episodes instead of a classic Hollywood progression of goal-oriented events. Also, the fades to black suggest the death that haunts the film.

Machine

Machine's main street is filled with hides, bones, and skulls on display and presumably for sale, although no one is buying. The center of the town is the huge, black smoke-belching factory where Blake is turned away. This town efficiently symbolizes the devouring nature of frontier expansion and is clearly meant as historical precursor and allegory of modern corporate capitalism. Initiated into violence and death in Machine, Blake then leaves a trail of bodies behind him. When he arrives at the final Indian village near the coast, they too have bones and hides, and the brilliant image of a wavering sewing machine (shot from Blake's only partially conscious, shaky point of view). The white European presence is now everywhere and there is no unspoiled frontier band of Native Americans (such as *Dances With Wolves* tries to imagine). White settlers bring death, including the genocide of Native Americans.

Anti-Western

From a generic point of view, *Dead Man* is the "tombstone" for the 1990s cycle. Theater of the absurd, it mocks the shootout conventions of the genre (unlike the experimental reveling of them in *The Quick and the Dead*). The desolate landscape,

dotted with crazy characters, the death of Machine and the Indian village, and the other incursions by Europeans effectively forestall any notion of a limitless, hopeful frontier. Blake's quest is spiritual and dependent on the death drive; thanks to the bullet near his heart, he is slowly dying for most of the narrative. This slow death can be read as the lingering decay of the genre itself, or of the promise of the post-Cold War era slowly fading away.

Nineties

In the context of the 1990s Western cycle, *Dead Man* is the obituary, declaring that the frontier myth is a dead end. While the other films of the cycle always carried an internal emphasis on death that haunted the cycle, they still attempted variations on the Hollywood happy ending, and at least presented moment of excitement over revisionist characters. But as these hopeful moments were always constrained by the fatalistic elements of the films, it is retroactively clear that the generic attempts to open the frontier were doomed because the frontier of the Western, any Western, has already been closed. The post-World War II Western could sustain a duality, of the historical closed frontier allegorizing the international expansion (into new frontiers) of the U.S.A., because the international expansion had metonymic qualities of the Western frontier: new borders, new lands, new peoples.

The '90s Western, and the frontier it depicts, was always already limited, though, because globalization had already occurred. Without any new territories (no new land masses or countries to explore or invade), the frontier in the '90s could only function as an abstract allegory for new ideas, new concepts, but ultimately as a set of signifiers without a signified.

Dead Man suggests this through its fidelity to generic syntax, but a syntax overloaded with the semantic elements of death. The key narrative structures are there—voyage west, chase, racial conflict—but the ties to the semantic elements are severed. This was, of course, the revisionist project of the '90s Western. The semantic elements were thoroughly revised, so that American Indians, women, and other formerly subordinate groups in Westerns were now the protagonists. For a brief time, the '90s Western held the hope that including these new groups could reinvigorate a dying genre. However, saving the genre was not a matter of simply expanding opportunity to all. Rather, the larger context of the frontier would need to be reinvigorated. For the optimist of the early nineties, aware of the centrality of the frontier to American history, the uncertainty of the Cold War period suggested that there must be another frontier available now, finally.

The genius of *Dead Man* is that it baldly presents the frontier narratives, but so thoroughly presents them as historical moments leading to death that the hope of a new frontier is squashed. Obviously, the frontier had its positive, progressive, nation-founding-destiny aspects. But now it is clear that inextricably tied to those were the genocide of millions of American Indians. Clearly, that is the most heinous crime linked to the frontier myth. And, from the modern environmentalist stance, frontier expansion also resulted in innumerable other environmental disasters and near-extinctions, from buffalo to forests.

The '90s cycle tries to balance the positive and negative frontier elements; *Dead Man* asks, why bother? We now know it was all tied to genocide and environmental destruction, why try to reclaim the old happy mythology? Instead of wasting moments of

new possibilities, in the '90s, by trying to awaken the past, the film reminds everyone how brutally vicious frontier expansion was. End the cycle and move on. America, post Cold War or not, simply cannot put on the historical blinders and return to a progressively updated version of the frontier myth. The '90s Western could only attempt to exhume the frontier; *Dead Man* slams the lid back on the coffin.

Depp/Blake is a parody of an average, corporate 1990s America white collar worker (down to his ridiculous plaid suit)—how in any possible way could his going West on a frontier adventure improve his lot? It can't; leaping into the generic clichés, stereotypes, and plots only results in him being shot quickly and dying slowly. Similarly, America attempting a return to the frontier is only shooting itself in the foot; there is nothing at the end of the Western trail except a slow boat into an ocean of death (which, unfortunately, seemed the inevitable progression into a post-9/11 world, a slow movement into perpetual war in the Middle East).

The root of this generic pessimism lies in the limitations of the 1990s. The end of the Cold War seemed a decisive moment, a break from the past appropriate for the Western. However, it arguably was more a moment of uncertainty, lacking a clear path towards progress (without an obvious symbolic frontier). The '90s Western reflects this; there is obviously some revisionist work to be done, to bring under-represented groups into the mainstream. However, once they are there, then what? More people have access to opportunities, but the opportunities are ultimately the same as before. There should be a new frontier, some new direction after the Cold War—but as the American system has won, why actually change? Instead, the '90s Western is primarily nostalgic for an older audience, recalling the heady days of post-World War II expansion and

suggesting it as an analogy and potential model for the future. However, the '90s lacked the clear national path of the United States growing into a world leader (after World War II). True, the internet bubble did provide some semblance of a frontier, but that advanced technology was clearly something for other genres, not the Western. As the optimism of the early '90s faded with the rise of domestic terrorism (the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995) and continued genocide abroad (the Bosnian War continued until late 1995), the glimmer of frontier hope in the '90s Western faded behind the cycle's emphasis on aging and death. Like the hopeful yet inevitably doomed flashes of new frontiers in the films themselves, the cycle was luminous yet limited, an exhilarating run that produced genre-changing films. However, in retrospect, *Dances With Wolves* and *Unforgiven* and *The Quick and the Dead* were not genre-regenerating; rather, they were *Dead Man* and William Blake's brilliant moments of transcendence made possible only by his inevitable death, and an American Indian "Nobody" not interested in reclaiming the frontier mythos. The Westerner's stay in town was brief, as he or she was quickly turned around to ride once again into the sunset.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A Minnesota native who quickly adapted to Florida, Craig Rinne received his Doctor of Philosophy in English from the University of Florida in 2012. Prior to his doctoral work, he received his Bachelor of Arts in English from Carleton College and his Master of Arts in Film Studies from the University of Iowa. Specializing in Film Studies, he primarily researches texts related to the American frontier myth, including his dissertation topic, the boom (and quickly bust) cycle of Western motion pictures in the late 1980s and early '90s. His interests can be more succinctly stated by paraphrasing the great Western director John Ford: "My name's Craig Rinne. I study Westerns." He has published an article on the 1992 film version of *The Last of the Mohicans* (in *Studies in American Indian Literatures*), and an article on Clint Eastwood's early 1990s films in the collection *New Essays on Clint Eastwood*. At his time at the University of Florida, he was an active member of Graduate Assistants United, through which he met his wife, Andrea Wolf Rinne.