The Buffalo Film Seminars

Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson

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March 20, 2012 (XXIV:9)
Clint Eastwood, THE OUTLAW JOSEY WALES (1976, 135 min.)

Directed by Clint Eastwood
Screenplay by Philip Kaufman and Sonia Chernus
Based on the novel by Forrest Carter
Produced by Robert Daley
Original Music by Jerry Fielding
Cinematography by Bruce Surtees
Film Editing by Ferris Webster

Clint Eastwood…Josey Wales
Chief Dan George…Lone Watie
Sondra Locke…Lee
Bill McKinney…Terrill
John Vernon…Fletcher
Paula Trueman…Grandma Sarah
Sam Bottoms…Jamie
Geraldine Keams…Little Moonlight
Woodrow Parfrey…Carpetbagger
John Verros…Chato
Will Sampson…Ten Bears
John Quade…Comanche Leader
John Russell…Bloody Bill Anderson
Charles Tyner…Zukie Limmer
John Mitchum…Al
Kyle Eastwood…Josey’s Son
Richard Farnsworth…Comanchero

1996 National Film Registry

Pennsylvania for Me

Drifter Lightfoot Wales

Eastwood: to out Asa Earl Carter.

star/director, to portray Eastwood

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Ku Klux Klan) of North Alabama, Carter was the head of a

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as a work of fiction)

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has TV writing credits for

Sonia Chernus (August 14, 1909 – June 29, 1990, Los Angeles, California) has only one screenplay credit—this films. She also has TV writing credits for “Mister Ed”, 1962 and “Rawhide”, and a story credit for 1947 The Big Fix.

Forrest Carter (Asa Carter, 4 September 1925, Anniston, Alabama—7 June 1979, Abilene, Texas.). From IMDb: “Forrest Carter, the author of the controversial memoir (now recognized as a work of fiction) The Education of Little Tree, was the pen-name of Asa Earl Carter...a rabid segregationist who was an infamous racist propagandist in the 1960s. A leader of the White Citizens Council (a group dedicated to opposing desegregation and one that was generally considered to be a front group for the Ku Klux Klan) of North Alabama, Carter was the head of a "klavern" of the Ku Klux Klan. He was an unofficial speechwriter for segregationist Governor George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama and candidate for the Presidency (1968, ’72). Asa Earl Carter wrote white supremacist literature, and was a major contributor to The Southerner, a white-supremacist publication that he edited and published first under the aegis of the racist White Citizens Council. Originally accepted as an actual work by a Cherokee Indian, The Education of Little Tree ranks as one of the great literary hoaxes of American literature. Taking the pen of name Forrest Carter, he published two Westerns, including The Rebel Outlaw: Josey Wales…. After the Eastwood film was released, the New York Times revealed that "Forrest Carter" was actually Asa Earl Carter, the segregationist. At the time it was fashionable among some critics, in line with Pauline Kael’s criticism of the movie-star/director, to portray Eastwood as a "fascist," and Carter’s outing was more likely made to embarrass Eastwood rather than to out Asa Earl Carter.


“Sergeant Preston of the Yukon”, 1953 Stalag 17, 1950 In a Lonely Place, and 1949 Knock on Any Door.


Christina Berry, “The Story Behind The Education of Little Tree,” All Things Cherokee, 17 March 2012.

Most of us have read, or at least heard of The Education of Little Tree, a book by Forrest Carter published in the 1970s and now celebrating more than 25 years in print. The book was first published as an autobiography, a touching tale of a Cherokee boy raised by his loving grandparents in the hills of the Appalachian Mountains. Readers responded to the naturalist themes and Indian spirituality of the book and it became an instant hit. The title helped to spark an interest in Native American literature which has since blossomed into its own genre. However, the title has also sparked decades of heated debate and controversy.

In the years since its publication, and the death of its enigmatic author, this title has gone from the top of critics lists to the bottom, but no amount of bad press seems to hurt its sales. So what's all the hubbub? Well, it would seem that the book's author has a past as an outspoken, professional racist. Forrest Carter, author of Outlaw Josey Wales and The Education of Little Tree, was first known as Asa "Ace" Carter. Always a talented writer, in the 1960s he lent his wordsmithing skills to George Wallace, and is credited with the infamous, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" Other inquiries into Asa's past connect him with racist publications and the KKK. However, in the 1970s, after losing the race for Alabama governor, Asa moved to Florida, changed his name to Forrest (an homage to Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general), and began to write genre fiction.

And so we come to the central question: what? Does it matter? After all, the book is fiction, and as such, the question of merit becomes a personal one. Fiction, an imaginative creation, is by its nature interpretive. The meaning and merit of the work becomes individual—the response of each reader to the work's themes and characters. So the question is: does the author's life really matter to you?

One issue which complicates the debate is the fact that this book -- the touching story of a Cherokee boy who comes of age, learning about the good and the bad of life through a warm relationship with his grandparents and abbrasive experiences with white culture -- was initially marketed as an autobiography. This has since been corrected and the book is now sold as fiction, but when evaluating the cultural worth of the work, this detail is noteworthy.

It would also seem that, upon closer inspection, the author hasn't abandoned his earlier convictions. Like his previous work, Outlaw Josey Wales, this book has a palpable anti-government stance. In a story about Native American life this is not entirely unheard of; after all, Native people, among them the Cherokee, were some of the first victims in a history of ignorant and intolerant colonial and US government policy. In the end, Little Tree and his family are victimized by white society and the government, and so it would seem to be to their benefit that they live separate ...segregated -- be it in the Mountains or off in "the Nations." Interestingly, it was this same paternalistic theory which fueled Andrew Jackson's fire in passing the Indian Removal Act that lead to the Trail of Tears.

But again, does it matter? Are those themes relevant if the reader derives different meaning from the work? Leni Riefenstahl's photographs and films were pro-Nazi and promoted themes of racial purity and eugenics. But despite that, she was a talented filmmaker and photographer. At what point do we separate the art from the artist, the work from its context? The Education of Little Tree is a great book. I was moved to tears the first time I read it, and when I first learned of the author's past I was angry and hurt, but I still like the book.

I would argue that the book has actually made an incredibly positive impact. It wasn't long ago that books and films filled with blatant stereotypes of savage Indians (played by white actors in red paint) was the norm. The mere fact that this title has generated so much debate and discussion regarding the plight of Indians in American popular culture is a positive step forward. Personally, I think that this is a great book, both for the themes of culture and life that the author himself addresses, and for the heated historical and cultural debate which has grown out of it.


In 1992, after almost forty years in the business, Clint Eastwood finally received Oscar recognition. *Unforgiven* brought him the awards for Best Achievement in Directing and for Best Picture, along with a nomination for Best Actor. Indeed, this strikingly powerful Western was nominated for no fewer than nine Academy Awards, Gene Hackman collecting Best Supporting Actor for his performance as the movies ruthless marshall “Little Bill” Daggett, and Joel Cox taking the Oscar for editing. It seems appropriate, therefore, that this film, which brought him such recognition, should end with the inscription “Dedicated to Sergio and Don.” For without the intervention and influence of his two “mentors,” directors Sergio Leone and Don Siegel, it is difficult to imagine Eastwood achieving his present respectability, let alone emerging as the only major star of the modern era who has become a better director than he ever was an actor.

That is not to belittle Eastwood, who has always been generous in crediting Leone and Siegel, and who is certainly far more than a passive inheritor of their directorial visions. Even in his *Rawhide* days of the 1950s and early 1960s he wanted to direct; more than once Eastwood has told of his attempts to persuade the series’ producers to let him shoot some of the action rather more ambitiously than as the TV norm. Not surprisingly, they were reluctant, but they did in the end allow him to make trailers for upcoming episodes. He was not to take on a full-fledged directorial challenge until 1971 with *Play Misty for Me*, but in the intervening years he had become a massive box-office attraction as an actor, first with Leone in Europe in the three famous and founding “spaghetti westerns,” and then in a series of films with Siegel back in the United States, most significantly *Dirty Harry*.

It is not easy to untangle the respective influences of his mentors. In general terms, because they both contributed to the formation of Eastwood’s distinctive screen persona, they helped him to crystallise an image which, as a director, he would often use as a foil. The Italian Westerns’ “man with no name,” and his more anguished urban equivalent given expression in *Dirty Harry*’s eponymous anti-hero, have provided Eastwood with well-established and economical starting characters for so many of his performances. In directing himself, furthermore, he has used that persona with a degree of irony and distance. Sometimes, especially in his Westerns, that has meant leaning toward stylization and almost operatic exaggeration (*High Plains Drifter*, *Pale Rider*, the last section of *Unforgiven*), though rarely reaching Leone’s extremes of delirious overstatement. On other occasions, it has seen him play on the tension between the seemingly assertive masculinity of the Eastwood image and the strong female characters who are so often featured in his films (*Play Misty for Me*, *The Gauntlet*, *Heartbreak Ridge*, and in part at least, *The Bridges of Madison County*). It is, of course, notoriously difficult to both direct and star in a movie. Where Eastwood has succeeded in that combination (not always the case) it has depended significantly on his inventive building on the Eastwood persona.

It is important to give Eastwood full credit for his inventiveness in any attempt to assess his work. His better films as a director have a richness to them, not just stylistically—though in those respects he has learned well from Leone’s concern with lighting and composition and from Siegel’s way with in-frame movement, editing, and tight narration—but also a moral complexity which belies the one-dimensionality of the Eastwood image. The protagonists in his better films, like Josey Wales in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Highway in *Heartbreak Ridge*, Munny in *Unforgiven*, even Charlie Parker in the flawed *Bird* are not simple men either in their virtues or their failings. Eastwood’s fondness for narratives of revenge and redemption, furthermore, allows him to draw upon a rich generic vein in American cinema, a tradition with a built-in potential for character development and for evoking human complexity without giving way to art-film portentousness.

In these respects, Eastwood is the modern inheritor of traditional Hollywood directorial values, once epitomised in the transparent style of a John Ford, Howard Hawks, or John Huston (himself the subject of Eastwood’s *White Hunter, Black Heart*), and passed on to Eastwood by that next generation carrier of the tradition, Don Siegel. For these filmmakers, as for Eastwood, the action movie, the Western, the thriller were opportunities to explore character, motivation, and human frailty within a framework of accessible entertainment. Of course, all of them were capable of “quieter” films, harnessing the same commitment to craft, the same attention to detail, in the service of less action-driven narratives, just as Eastwood has done most recently with *The Bridges of Madison County*. But in the end their and Eastwood’s real art was to draw upon Hollywood’s genre traditions and make of them unique and perceptive studies of human beings under stress.
Though his directorial career has been uneven, at his best Eastwood has proved a more than worthy carrier of this flame.


Unforgiven opens with a sunset. Outlined against the red sky, a man is digging a grave beside a lonely shack on the prairie, beneath a solitary tree. Sunsets have a special resonance in the Western. It’s the time of day by which you have to get out of town or else, a tradition that goes back at least as far as Owen Wister’s seminal novel, The Virginian, first published in 1903. In ‘Duel at Sundown’, the title of a 1959 episode of the TV series Maverick in which Clint Eastwood appeared as a boastful gunslinger, he gives James Garner just such an ultimatum. But there’s more to it than that. The sun sets, after all, in the west; that’s the direction across the map the pioneers are always travelling, but it’s less metaphorically the direction we’re all travelling (We all have it coming, Kid’). One way or another, Westerns are always about death.

Hence the mood of melancholy with which so many of them are tinged. But this may also derive from the fact that Westerns are set in the past, a past that is gone for ever, cannot be recovered, and so there is often a sense that something has been lost. In the 1960s the mood of nostalgia deepened.

During the 1960s, nostalgia extended from regret at the passing of the west toward the genre itself. The production of Westerns in Hollywood fell steeply, down to a mere eleven in 1963, barely ten percent of what it had been ten years earlier. For a time this decline was masked by the unexpected phenomenon of the Italian Western, in which, as everyone knows, Clint Eastwood made his name as The Man with No Name. John Ford, informed by fellow Western director Burt Kennedy that Westerns were now being made in Italy, could only respond, “You’re kidding.” But the several hundred spaghetti Westerns made in the middle of the 1960s helped revive Hollywood’s own contribution, not so much in absolute numbers, which remained stuck at an annual figure of twenty or so, but in terms of themes and styles. Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch, coming at the end of the decade, is inconceivable without the stylised violence and ideological disillusion of Sergio Leone’s films.

Yet the revival was temporary. As the 1970s progressed, the Western slipped to the margins of Hollywood production. there may be many reasons for this. Audience demographics were changing, with younger filmgoers finding the genre old-fashioned compared to science fiction or the newly reinvigorated horror film. The death or retirement of the genre’s greatest stars accelerated the decline. Ride the High Country had been Randolph Scott’s last performance. None of the other major stars continued beyond the 1970s. Henry Fonda’s last Western was an Italian production, Il mio nome è Nessuno in 1973. John Wayne and James Stewart made their last Western together, The Shootist, in 1976. It was directed by Don Siegel, and its story, of an elderly gunfighter who knows he is dying, could scarcely be more appropriate, either to Wayne’s own career (he was in fact dying of cancer at the time) or to the melancholy mood of the genre.

The ideological framework within which the Western has had to work has shifted markedly since John Ford’s high-water mark in the mid-1950s; already by the 1970s many of its certainties were being undermined. In particular, the central figure of the hero, confident in his masculinity and physical prowess, the man who knows what a man’s gotta do, was threatened by an alliance of forces, of which feminism was only the most directly challenging. Even in the 1950s deep-seated faults in the bedrock of American society were causing cracks to appear in the previously impregnable male carapace of the male hero. In the remarkable series of Westerns directed by Anthony Mann and starring James Stewart, beginning with Winchester ’73 in 1950, the Western hero is a troubled figure, in the grip of powerful, even irrational obsessions, his emotions barely under control. In the middle of the decade, John Ford’s magisterial The Searchers (1956) cast John Wayne, the embodiment of all that was most dependable and uncomplicated, as a man driven to near madness by his hatreds. Even works by lesser directors, such as Edward Dmytryk’s Warlock (1959), featured heroes, in this case the saintly Henry Fonda, whose motivations were complex and actions not always admirable.

By the 1970s, heroism itself seemed a troubled concept. Westerns were now full of anti-heroes such as the comic figure of Jack Crabb in Little Big Man (1970), forever changing sides in an attempt to avoid confrontations. Robert Altman’s demythologising Buffalo Bill and the Indians (1976) exposed the venality and cynicism involved in the creation of William Frederick Cody, who first saw the full possibilities of the west as a commodity, as packaged entertainment. Mel Brooks’s irreverent satire, Blazing Saddles (1974), sent up the whole genre. There had been parodies before, but they had been affectionate; for Brooks nothing was sacred. The historical foundations of the genre also came under systematic attack in films that debunked the real-life figures that previous decades had so assiduously built up. In Doc (1971) it was Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, in Dirty Little Billy (1972) Billy the Kid, in The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid (1972) it was Jesse James.

In the parallel field of the history of the west, the triumphalist version of western history informed by the notion of manifest destiny, the idea that the white race had a God-given right, even a duty, to expand into the lands which it misleadingly
called ‘virgin’ but which were already the preserve of native or Latino peoples, was already being questioned in the 1970s. Possibly this was propelled by events in Vietnam, which undermined America’s imperialist ambitions. In 1987 Patricia Nelson Limerick’s _The Legacy of Conquest_ mounted a full-scale assault upon the theories of westward expansion that had so far dominated the field and which originated in the so-called ‘frontier thesis’, first formulated by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. Limerick charged that this account (which saw America’s social and political virtues, identified as adaptability, ingenuity and energy, as deriving from the free and easy life of the frontier) left out a great deal, in particular the contribution of women and of ethnic minority groups, and was over-celebratory, ignoring much in the history of the west that was shameful or disastrous.

In this context, it seemed, only Clint Eastwood had the necessary star power and vitality to ensure the Western’s survival. From his first leading role in a Hollywood Western, _Hang ‘Em High_ in 1968, he was to make a total of ten Westerns up to _Pale Rider_ in 1985. If this could scarcely compare with the productivity of earlier stars (Randolph Scott made no fewer than thirty-nine Westerns between 1945 and 1962), it meant nevertheless that Eastwood was almost single-handedly carrying the genre upon his shoulders.

There is hardly space to trace in detail Eastwood’s career as a Western hero, but what is most striking, beyond the deepening of the actor’s and directors craft that has marked his progression, is the extent to which he has been alert to the shifts of tone and perspective which have been forced upon the genre over the past third of a century, as the result of changes both within the cinema and without.

As the above dates suggest, the Western film was in some respects in advance of the historians on the question of manifest destiny, having already done something to redress past imbalances in respect of the Indians and other ethnic groups, and readily acknowledging that the west was often a dark and dirty place. Eastwood’s Westerns were alert to these currents from an early date. As we shall see, the role of women in his films, including his Westerns, underwent a subtle development over time. But in other respects too his films did not simply recycle the traditional versions of the Western myth. In _Outlaw Josey Wales_ (1976) Eastwood as the eponymous hero, starting as a loner, as Western heroes traditionally are, gradually collects around him a disparate group of individuals, who include several women, an elderly Cherokee with a delightfully ironic take on the role of the Indian, and a stray dog. _Bronco Billy_ (1980), set in the present day, has Eastwood playing the owner of a wild west show whose innocent, even childish belief in ‘Western’ values, is tested almost to destruction by the cynicism of those around him. In _Pale Rider_, Eastwood’s last Western before _Unforgiven_, his role is certainly heroic, leading a group of gold-miners in their struggle against a heartless corporation. But there is something ultimately unhealthy about the hero-worship he attracts, in particular from the young girl who convinces herself she is in love with him, while in its focus on hydraulic mining and the damage it does to the environment, the film echoes the increasing consensus of the ‘new western historians’ that economic development in the west was frequently rapacious and destructive.

What all these films indicate is that Eastwood has been alive to the changing social milieu in which the Western has had to make its way since 1970. One could not simply reproduce the old certainties, whether of masculine or white supremacy, or of progress. If the Western was to continue to be viable, it would need to be adapted to contemporary sensibilities, show that it was aware of its own past and in touch with the present And that is precisely what _Unforgiven_ tries to do, by turns drawing its strength from the roots of the genre, the accreted meanings of character and convention, but then always inflecting them, adapting them, subverting them to refashion the genre into something viable for the modern age….

Living in a society in which women’s rights are minimal but where money talks (though ironically _Wyoming_, where the films is set, was the first state in the Union to give women the vote, in 1869), the prostitutes’ only means to empower themselves in by buying justice, and so they decide to hire gunmen to act for them; they want personal vengeance; an eye for an eye, or more; in effect capital punishment but outside the law, a life in exchange for a disfigurement. Both cowboys involved in the attack are eventually murdered at the women’s instigation, though one clearly has had only a minimal involvement and shows remorse. Yet though the roles of all the men involved in the unfolding of events, both heroes and villains, come under severe scrutiny, there’s never any overt criticism of the women’s actions. Implicitly the film sides with these women. It does not question their right to do what they do, only the motives and actions of those who perform on their behalf.

In this respect, _Unforgiven_ seems to go against the grain of the genre. The Western is not celebrated for favoring women. Traditionally there’s a limited range of roles on offer (young marriageable girl, wife, schoolteacher, whore), all of them subordinate….No one would claim Eastwood for feminism, but by the early 1990s his films had come a long way from the straightforward macho attitudes of _Dirty Harry_ (1971). Eastwood has always been a canny player in the industry. When muscle men like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger were flaunting their torsos in the early 1980s with movies like the initial Rambo _First Blood_ (1982) and _Conan the Barbarian_ (1981), Eastwood had already moved on to _Bronco Billy_, an ironic take on the whole myth of the Western. By the time of _In the Line of Fire_ (1993), when the Eastwood character shows a lack of respect for the presence of female agents in the secret service, agent Rene Russo is allowed to refer to him as a dinosaur….
One of the most pleasurable things about *Unforgiven* is the variety of different ways it finds to inflect a story that is in essence as generic as they come: a retired gunfighter is called out of retirement to do one last job. Ageing is a common enough theme in the Western. In Henry King’s *The Gunfighter* (1950) Gregory Peck is Jimmy Ringo, a gunman who is looking to finally settle down. He’s weary of the wandering life. Tragically, just at the moment he has made his decision, he’s gunned down by just the sort of glory-hunting little punk he has been trying to avoid. In *The Searchers* John Wayne as Ethan is self-conscious about his age (“No need to call me sir, either, nor grandpa, nor Methuselah”). Both *Ride the High Country* and *The Shootist*, as we’ve seen, explore this theme, and in *Monte Walsh* (1970) Lee Marvin and Jack Palance are two aging cowboys threatened by unemployment. So having Eastwood play a character who may be too old for heroics is not a novel idea. What’s fresh is the ingenuity and subtlety with which it is played out.

Eastwood was over sixty when he made *Unforgiven*, and for the first time, perhaps, he looks his age. He has an emaciated look, the skin stretched tight on his face and the thinning hair greying and wispy. The film goes to some length to emphasise just how unheroic he is. …

There’s a consistent pattern to the opening of a Clint Eastwood Western. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales* the hero is a poor southern farmer who is attacked by northern guerrillas during the Civil War. His wife is raped and murdered, his child killed, his farm burned. So Josey, at first seen peacefully ploughing his fields, is turned into an implacable pursuer of his assailants, thirsting for revenge. In *Pale Rider* he is a mysterious preacher, apparently a man of peace, who is persuaded, after witnessing a brutal assault on an unarmed man, to assist a group of miners against a large corporation which is attempting to drive them away. *Unforgiven* goes even further in emphasising the hero’s unwillingness to get involved in the situation that confronts him. His life has been changed by the love of a good woman; he has left violence behind him. And he’s too old anyway.

Of course it’s not just Eastwood who has employed this structure. In his book *Sixguns and Society*, Will Wright identifies the hero’s reluctance to get involved as a key constituent of the classical Western plot. …

The hero’s reluctance to pick up his gun provides tension and drama for the narrative. In terms of motivation there may be several reasons why the hero holds back. But there is always an underlying imperative. As we have seen, violence is necessary to the establishment of civilisation. Savagery and outlawry cannot be defeated by reason and good example alone. Yet the hero must not be seen to relish violence. That would put him on a level with the lawless, with those he must overcome.

His anger must be slow to burn, and when it comes to the boil he must have adequate cause. As so often in American cinema, it is the personal rather than the political that is the ultimate motivation. Men fight for families, for sweethearts, for friends, for property, but rarely in the Western for an abstract cause alone. The cause may give legitimacy to their violence, which has a redemptive quality beyond its merely contingent causation, but it is rarely enough to cause the hero to draw his gun.


During the shoot of *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, at the end of 1975, Eastwood already had four films under his belt as director. Yet in some senses *Josey Wales* should really be regarded as his real directorial début. It is with this film’s definitive success and artistic accomplishment that Eastwood found his feet and confirmed any unresolved questions about his future ability as a genuine filmmaker.

**Crossing over, taking the plunge**

Right from his early success as an actor in the United States and then with his later work with Siegel, Eastwood had never been fully satisfied with the way Universal had promoted his work….In 1975, between Universal’s release of *The Eiger Sanction* and the beginning of the filming of *Josey Wales*, Eastwood decided to definitively jump ship and change studio, moving his production company Malpaso to the Warner buildings….This new approach and environment played a definitive role in the success of *Josey Wales*, which heralded a fruitful partnership between Warner Bros. and Eastwood that endures to this day. The film benefited from and also marked the beginnings of other important encounters for Eastwood, in particular his meeting with Sondra Locke, who would go on to be his personal partner for thirteen years and would also act with him in seven of his films. More than this, *Josey Wales* marked Eastwood’s coming out as a director. In fact, Eastwood fired the film’s original director and scriptwriter Philip Kaufman after just fifteen days of shooting, taking his place and securing absolute authority over the film. Although he received fines and reprimands from the Directors Guild of America as a result, his action clearly demonstrated his belief in his own artistic vision and an irrepressible desire to express himself as a filmmaker, even using this new role to assure his freedom as an actor. It is precisely with *Josey Wales* that Eastwood finally gains control over his image and his concept of character. In fact, from here on in, every film in which Eastwood acted was to also have him in the director’s seat. And later on, if the credit of certain films list another as director—for example James Fargo, Richard Tuggle,
Richard Benjamin or Buddy Van Horn (whose careers were promoted by Eastwood) or even credits the name of an established professional like Wolfgang Petersen, the director of In the Line of Fire (1993), who was not part of the Malpaso ‘stable’—one thing remains constant: if Eastwood is acting in a film, he ultimately runs the creative show.

In Josey Wales, Eastwood’s character has an inner violence that cannot be exhausted by any outward violent action, but during the course of his journey he becomes the ringleader of a group of disparate characters brought together by fate, who in return lead him to a form of inner peace, as long as he is able to be in charge. In a sense this character is a reflection and sublimation of Eastwood the person and filmmaker, who would similarly show himself able to take on the collective experience, making it one of his most important cinematic subjects. Between the years 1976 and 1985, the filmmaker was to gather around him and organize various different communities, in his films as in his life.

Towards a cinematic destiny
Converging many strands of his career artistically and professionally, The Outlaw Josey Wales required Eastwood to explore his own cinematic influences and modes of storytelling. After Leone and his game of massacre, what could one add? Indeed what could one do that went beyond the graphically staged pessimism of Siegel’s works? Clearly for both filmmakers, their films were not simply about cynicism or nihilism. Leone’s films expressed the idealist’s disappointment and Siegel’s films were an almost prescient display of man’s progressive inhumanity. And equally, their characters were always individualists, if only as a result of circumstance. As the 1970s reached their mid-point, the question seemed to be what kind of fiction could one create to bring closure to the events of Vietnam, which had officially ended but which had left in its wake millions of dead on both side, shell-shocked survivors and an America now at war with itself? How could one believe in a system stripped bare by the Watergate scandal which had forced Nixon to resign and had created a crisis about representative government? After so much destruction, deconstruction, distortion and collapse. Eastwood’s western seems to take the only path left at that time—that of rebirth and reconstitution. Using the stories of cinema and the state of the world to suggest a new kind of humanism, this centres on the idea of a man that abandons no one at the roadside and restores the thread of humanity and lines of narrative by taking up the continuity of the western genre’s founding myths, through a rereading and re-examination of them….

Critical voices and vox populi

...One wonders whether Welles, like Wales (Josey), had the fictional hero’s outlaw and maverick tendencies—as well as having a similar name. Or maybe Eastwood and Welles had a common enemy in Kael. However, it was not until 1982 that the maker of Citizen Kane unexpectedly appeared on American TV publically praising The Outlaw Josey Wales’s as well as decreeing that Eastwood was ‘the most underestimated director in the world’.

Did you say westerns?
Yes: more than two hundred episodes of Rawhide, Sergio Leone’s historical trilogy, Hang ‘Em High, Two Mules for Sister Sara, Joe Kidd (to a lesser extent), two films that are unclassifiable (The Beguiled, Bronco Billy) and, of course, High Plains Drifter, The Outlaw Josey Wales, Pale Rider and Unforgiven. Having made it late both on screen and behind the camera within the genre (some might say the last of its great figures), Eastwood still managed to leave an indelible mark on this singularly american invention, which, continuing the tradition of Homer, creates an epic of America’s Wild West. He devised his own new blueprint for the genre, as well as bringing its themes full circle to cover new ground and directions. Eastwood’s Josey Wales, released in 1976, was already bringing up the rear of a highly criticized and disenchanted form of western made in the early 1970s (including Sam Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch as early 1969 and Arthur Penn’s Little Big Man of 1970). Called ‘Vietnam westerns’, they indirectly explored America’s aggression in Southeast Asia and rewrote American history and the rules of the genre. As a result, the flow of westerns ground to a halt after 1976 and except for the sublime Heaven’s Gate (Michael Cimino, 1980), it barely survived—apart from Eastwood’s westerns, which would appear every ten years and the last of which, Unforgiven (1992), was to masterfully strip to the core America’s founding myths about its conquering race.

Even more so in relation to each other, Eastwood’s westerns seem to have an ongoing dialogue, each new one in the series suggesting a response to an earlier offering. Pale Rider seems to take up the motifs of High Plains Drifter (an unknown man who appears on the horizon and ultimately returns to it), while also inverting its themes (the essence of cowardice/the birth of courage), and Unforgiven, his most recent contribution, contains
and summarizes all his earlier forays into the genre. Not only do Eastwood’s westerns have a finality—a way of closing the door behind them before setting back off into the horizon, returning to the eternity and nothingness of the final shot of John Wayne in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956)—they also present a review of some of the genre’s most important and iconic works of an earlier era. *High Plains Drifter* radicalizes and mocks *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) and pays a last tribute to Leone’s ironic approach to the genre, while *Josey Wales* refers to and draws inspiration from at least three earlier important works: *Yellow Sky* (William Wellman, 1948), *Run of the Arrow* (Samuel Fuller, 1957) and, as already mentioned, *The Searchers*. These earlier films all exhibit a similar anxiety around the need to establish a sense of elusive community, as well as introducing a central character who is full of rage and resistant to the laws of the conquerors and the progress of civilization. One can say that *Pale Rider* evokes *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) and *Unforgiven*, although seemingly taking up the themes of *Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, 1958) in its study of a former murderer forced to take up the bloodshed of his past again. *Unforgiven* also reversed John Ford’s famous axiom ‘When the legend becomes a fact, print the legend’, continuing the demystification project already present in Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (19620, which was prompted by the political necessity of disrupting a persistent set of western imagery in films whose power was able to pass off various fictions as historical truths. Ultimately, Eastwood’s westerns conclude the genre’s place in history but also the history of the genre itself. They have this sense of dual justification but are also tempered and counterpointed by Eastwood’s inimitable on-screen presence, the scale of his body and particular face simultaneously evoking a memory of the origins and earlier archetypal characters. Eastwood’s cinematic presence recalls another large body and unique face, that of William S. Hart (1864-1946), one of cinema’s first true cowboys, a handsome hero of the silent era, known at the time as ‘The man from nowhere’ and ‘The man with the light eyes’. He too was an elegant actor and filmmaker, and seems an earlier form of Eastwood’s characters, an older brother even: “No one knows where he comes from. He passes through, roaming the West and its great vastness. He arrives on horseback, comes down off his horse into the land of men. The time he spends in the company of men is a time of suffering, meaning it is a time he spends trying to love others. When his brow has been sufficiently furrowed and he has shaken his fists enough...he refuses to continue suffering on the land or the confines of a room and he gets back up on his horse and that’s it, he’s gone...I think we have cinema here.’ (Louis Delluc, February 1919.)

**FIVE MORE IN THE SPRING 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIV**

Mar 27 John Woo, *The Killer* 1989
Apr 10 Terrence Malick, *Thin Red Line* 1998
Apr 17 Fernando Meirelles, *City of God*, 2003
Apr 24 Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight* 2008

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