MONASH University

NO SUCH THING AS HEROES:

CLINT EASTWOOD, METAHISTORIAN

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Abstract

This thesis makes an argument for Clint Eastwood as a historian director with a demonstrable appetite for the use of the medium to champion and expand cinema's potential as a tool for the exploration, deconstruction and re-examination of traditional approaches to the past. A case is made that the eighteen dramatic historical films Eastwood has directed show a consistent emphasis on subverting the conventions of historical subgenres; reinterpreting historical events or individuals; rejecting certitude in favour of ambiguity; and inviting reflections on the insurmountable gap between the past and the histories we construct in order to recapture it. Dividing his career as a historian filmmaker into two key phases, the Mythology Phase (1959-1992) and the Metahistory Phase (1988–2014), this thesis provides an account of Eastwood's evolution towards becoming a director of metahistorical films, a term coined by Robert Burgoyne for any film that contains "embedded or explicit critiques of the way history is conventionally represented."

In Chapter One, an argument is made for Eastwood as a director of revisionist Westerns that sought to undercut traditional understandings of the past as they are often communicated through the Western Historical Myth. In Chapter Two it is argued that following Eastwood's exit from the Western genre, he entered into his Metahistory Phase with the Charlie Parker Biopic, *Bird* (1988), shifting his attention from questioning the historical myths upon which the United States has been established, to focusing on re-examining American history directly, continuing this project with *J. Edgar* (2011) and *American Sniper* (2014). In Chapter Three an analysis is undertaken of Eastwood's work within the War Film genre, most particularly his direction of *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* in 2006. It is argued that these films represent the peak of Eastwood's work as a metahistorical filmmaker, demonstrating a sophisticated re-examination of representations of war within American cinema. The thesis concludes with the proposal of a transferable methodology for assessing the approach to historiography of any filmmaker, inviting both historians and filmmakers to use this as a tool to reflect on the way cinema represents the past.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature: ……………………

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INTRODUCTION

"Study the historian before you begin to study the facts."
— Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History*?[1]

Historical films, by their very nature, earn their dramatic currency via the promise of delivering something fundamentally *true* to an audience. Viewers like to imagine they are being given a direct window into a lost past, investing their trust in the filmmakers who provide this illusory promise so as to ensure the most acutely satisfying experience. As such, very few historical films could avoid fading into irrelevance at the revelation that they are fundamentally inaccurate. Clint Eastwood's historical War Film *Flags of our Fathers* (2006) is a rare exception.

An account of the experiences of the men who featured in the photo *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* (1945) during the brutal World War II Battle of Iwo Jima, *Flags of our Fathers* centred around its protagonist, a medic by the name of John Bradley. Unfortunately, in 2016 it was revealed that Bradley was not actually in the photo at all, having posed for a similar photo earlier that same day at the actual raising of the flag at Iwo Jima. The now famous photo of the flag raising was itself a re-enactment of the actual event. Bradley was a real flag raiser and was therefore not one of *the* flag raisers. Any other film would have subsequently become an irrelevancy, but in a strange irony the incident only serves to bolster the importance of Eastwood's most impressive work of dramatic historical cinema: it is a film dedicated to challenging traditional representations of history, inviting the audience to reject traditionally reductive and misleading conceptions of the past in favour of a more critical lens.

Where a traditional historical film would provide a straightforward account of the events surrounding the taking of the photo, Eastwood instead sought to highlight the contrived and fundamentally empty nature of the image, from its facsimile nature to its misleading attempt to represent a victory that had not yet occurred. Where a traditional historical film might seek to valorise the heroism of its protagonists, Eastwood's film chose to highlight the absurdity of these individuals being singled out from their peers for simply appearing in a photograph. Where the average WWII film might seek to portray its soldiers as heroes willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their nation, Eastwood's film presents us with protagonists who are to be unwittingly sacrificed by their nation, only to be saved from likely death through the chance

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[1] Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 23.

occurrence that they have become a valuable commodity to be used for the purposes of propaganda. *Flags of our Fathers* is a call to question the very nature of historical representation in cinema, and the fact that its protagonist should turn out to not have been in the image at all only serves to support and augment the thesis that Eastwood has pursued throughout his career as a director of historical films: namely, that History is fallible and this fallibility should be incorporated in its telling.

Throughout this thesis, an argument will be made for Eastwood as a director who has made the problem of history's fallible nature a major part of his entire career. During the course of his career as a filmmaker, Clint Eastwood has directed a total of 38 feature films. Four of these films have been revisionist Westerns, reinterpreting the genre's representation of the American Frontier of the late 1800s. Four have been Biopics ingrained with a deep resistance to any reductionist or definitive summation of their subjects. Three have been War Films centred on historical incidents that seek to energise debate about the nature of war and the problematic nature of its representation in cinema. Seven more have been direct representations of historical events of some sort or other. However, despite Eastwood having directed a total of eighteen films that engage directly with American and/or global history, no serious attempt has been made to understand his work as a director of historical cinema. This, I will argue within the course of this thesis, is a significant oversight. Eastwood has shown a consistent but ever evolving approach to historical cinema, his work revealing a deep appetite for the use of the medium to champion and expand cinema's historiographic potential as a tool for the exploration of, and the deconstruction and re-examination of traditional approaches to, the past.

Reframing History in Cinema

The theoretical core of this examination of Eastwood's work as a director of dramatic historical films will revolve around the works of Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Rosenstone and Robert Burgoyne. Their respective arguments around notions of film as a historical "thought experiment", a potential tool for the exploration of a "metaphoric truth", and a form capable of metahistorical examinations of history will be used to provide a cohesive analysis of Eastwood's historical films and make a case for Eastwood as a director of metahistorical cinema.[2]

Before going further however, it is worth defining the distinction between two key terms which are often used interchangeably in popular parlance, these terms being

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[2] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

past and *history*. The definitions laid out by Keith Jenkins in *Re-Thinking History* are a good foundation here. Jenkins describes the past as "all that has gone on before" and history as "what historians make of it when they go to work".[3] In other words, the past is the objective and lost truth of what was, and history is the subjective attempt to reconstruct and interpret the remnants that the past leaves behind, giving them narrative.

History as a Thought Experiment

The subsequent question this raises is as to how such terms might be brought into the way in which we understand the representation of history in cinema; a commercial medium in which the filmmaker's use of history must inevitably be less loyal to the remnants of the past than traditional literary history. In *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*, a compelling and oft referenced look at the responsibilities of filmmakers to history, Natalie Zemon Davis makes an argument for historical cinema as a "thought experiment" in which the visceral reality of historical circumstances can be played out for the purposes of experiencing rather than reading historical events.[4] For Davis, while historical simplifications and inaccuracies should be avoided at all costs, she acknowledges the inevitability of cinema's limitations in this area, drawing on a comparison to pre-cinematic modes of historical storytelling.

Davis argues that, since the time of the Ancient Greeks, the historian has had to contend with the competing emotive and factual representations of historical representation – originally in the forms of poetry and prose. Davis refers to Aristotle's own argument that "the poet must choose from events, actual or fictitious, and shape them to a unified story, while the historian must tell whatever has happened within a time period, whether or not things fit neatly together."[5] She goes on to draw a direct parallel with the narrative practices of the Ancient Greek poet and the modern filmmaker in their limitations regarding historical representation:

> The ancient contrast between poetry and history, and the crossover between them, anticipate the contrasts between historical film and historical prose. Poetry has not only been given the freedom to fictionalize but it brings a distinctive set of techniques to its telling: verse forms, rhythms, elevated diction, startling leaps in language and metaphor. The conventions and tools of poetry can limit its use to convey some kinds of historical information, but they can also enhance

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[3] Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking history* (Routledge: Routledge Classics, 2003), 7-8.
[4] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 2.
[5] Ibid., 3.

its power for expressing certain features of the past.[6]

Attempting to map out what a historical cinematic "thought experiment" might look like, Davis seeks an answer to the question: "What is film's potential for telling about the past in a meaningful and accurate way?"[7] In order to map out the realistic potential of historical representation in mainstream cinema, Davis divides the historical film into two general categories, that of the biographical film (or "Biopic" as it is more commonly known), and that of the "microhistory." While the former refers to accounts of the lives of notable individuals, the latter term is traditionally used for a work of historical literature that explores "a telling example in depth" that acts as a microcosm for a broader historical circumstance.[8] From a cinematic perspective, Davis argues that:

> In their microhistories, films can reveal social structures and social codes in a given time and place, sources and forms of alliance and conflict, and the tension between the traditional and the new.[9]

Looking at how these forms should be best assessed, Davis points out that the traditional analysis of historical representation in film, primarily focused on a "chronological summary of the plot or storyline and the overall look of the moving picture in terms of costumes and props", is entirely inadequate for the medium. She argues that a far greater level of focus should be given to the oft ignored elements of cinema that construct meaning, like:

> the actors and their interpretation, the locations and sound, the film (black and white, color) and lighting; the ordering of time (flashbacks, jumps, slow motion, cutting from one event to another or presenting them simultaneously) and the ordering of space (close-up, bird's-eye shot, wide angle, movement around a room, view of the same scene from different angles); and the framing devices, objects, and props. These choices all have an impact on what is being stressed or questioned in the film, on the different reactions of participants to what is happening, on explanations for why events have taken place, and on claims for the certainty or ambiguity of the historical account.[10]

Given these complexities, Davis suggests a more sophisticated approach to

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[6] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 4.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 6.
[9] Ibid., 6-7.
[10] Ibid., 7-8.

assessment which goes back to the literary mode of representing history. Positing "honesty" as the foundation of historical writing, Davis lists five principles key to assuring success in this endeavour:

> First historians should seek evidence about the past widely and deeply, and should keep their minds as open as they can when they collect and assess it.... Second, historians should tell readers where they found their evidence and, when it is ambiguous or uncertain or contradictory, they should admit it.... Third, when historians decide what their evidence means and what account they want to give— whether they're explaining causes and consequences, ascribing motives and hopes, describing customs, systems, encounters, and styles, or whatever—they should make clear what they are doing and where they are coming from.... Fourth, whatever subjective or normative judgments historians make in the course of their historical tale, they should not let them impede their efforts to understand the mental world of all their participants.... Fifth, historians should not knowingly falsify events even in small matters, or suppress evidence so as to give a wrong impression.[11]

Davis believes that these principles are just as applicable to the cinematic medium, but that two exceptional elements should be considered as unique to history films. The first is that "the processes of research, interpretation, and communication are widely dispersed, even if directors put their stamp on the product along the way and in the final editing." And second is that "historical film and historian's prose venture into different turfs in regard to claims of truth."[12] In other words, while the filmmaker has an obligation to not falsify or mislead, they do not have an obligation to overtly present a case, so much as to simply approximate and represent appropriate events and characterisations. For Davis, the audience is not to be underestimated, and they are inclined to question and interrogate historical representations on the big screen, treating them not as truth but as objects of something much like the aforementioned concept of a "thought experiment."[13]

Throughout this thesis I adopt Davis' foundational expectations as the most basic requirements of the historical film whilst acknowledging that the obligations to history of a filmmaker are necessarily looser than that of the traditional historian. Put simply I take it as a truth that the successful dramatic historical film: should be as well

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[11] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, 10-12.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 12-15.

researched as possible; should not project a sense of definitive truth where reality is ambiguous without acknowledging this action as an imaginative exercise; should not impose an ideological reading on the past wherever possible without highlighting the innate bias of the text; and should not mislead or falsify significant facts for the purposes of entertainment. I will also make the case that Eastwood generally succeeds in adopting these principles.

Robert Rosenstone and History as a Parallel Discourse

In *History on Film/Film on History*, Robert A. Rosenstone concurs with Davis' assessment that cinema has a legitimate and valuable role in engaging audiences with history – a sentiment that has been prevalent in his writings on the subject since the publication of his essay '*Reds* as History' in 1982.[14] And like Davis, he acknowledges that while the filmmaker can be a historian of sorts, "the rules of engagement of their works with the stuff of the past are and must be different from those that govern written history."[15] Where Rosenstone departs from Davis is in his focus on a less literal approach to the *dramatic history film* which allows a less severe set of restrictions on ideas of historical truth:

> Film, particularly the dramatic film, makes special demands on the traditional historian in that it goes beyond (as theorists argue all historians do) *constituting* its facts, that is, creating facts by picking out certain traces of the past (people, events, moments) and highlighting them as important and worthy of inclusion in a narrative, and instead indulges in *inventing* facts, that is, making up traces of the past which are then highlighted as important and worthy of inclusion.[16]

Because of this, Rosenstone believes that the contribution of the *dramatic history film* can only be understood in two ways. These films may be seen "in terms not of the specific details they present but, rather, in the overall sense of the past they convey, the rich images and visual metaphors they provide to us for thinking historically."[17] Alternatively, they may be seen "as part of a separate realm of representation and discourse, one not meant to provide literal truths about the past (as if our written history can provide literal truths) but metaphoric truths which work, to a large degree,

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[14] Robert Rosenstone, "Reds as History," *Reviews in American History* 10, No. 3 (Sept, 1982)
[15] Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Educational Limited, 2006), 8.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

as a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse." [18]

Separating himself from Davis on the point of her belief that historical filmmakers have the same responsibilities to historical representation that traditional historians do, Rosenstone quite rightly notes that she never fully resolves herself to the innate differences between the historical film and written history, and when confronted with filmic devices that problematise the literal representation of history, often proposes solutions that do not take the dramatic nature of film into account. This is where their fundamental difference lies:

> At times it seems as if [Davis'] answer to the shortcoming of films would be to make them more like books – or at least to follow more closely the rules of traditional history. But we already have books, and a lengthy tradition of evaluating their evidence, arguments, and interpretations. What we don't yet have is a very good sense of historical film, and more precisely, its coordinates in the space time of our thoughts about the past; what we don't know is where history rendered in the visual media – with its movement, sound and colour – is located with regard to traditional history. [19]

For Rosenstone, it is quite apparent that "films use data in a much looser way than academic history", but it is also obvious that "the past on the screen is not meant to be literal" so much as it is meant to be "suggestive, symbolic, metaphoric" and that the real role of the historical film is to "intersect with, comment upon, and add something to the larger discourse of history". [20] Returning to Davis' own allusion to the past, Rosenstone goes so far as to note that the historical film creates a counter discourse on contemporary society that "bridge's Aristotle's distinction between history and poetry – such films include what happened and what might have happened." [21]

What Rosenstone is alluding to is what Hayden White positioned as the distinction between *historiography* and *historiophoty* – the difference between representing the past through words or images, with the latter being "capable of telling us things about its referents that are both different from what can be told in verbal discourse and also of a kind that can only be told by means of visual images." [22] These are terms I will be

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[18] Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 8-9.
[19] Ibid., 29-30.
[20] Ibid., 30-31.
[21] Ibid., 164.
[22] Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," *The American Historical Review* 93, No. 5 (Dec, 1988), 1193.

using to differentiate between the two modes during the course of my thesis, but I would add something to how the distinction between the two terms is defined. Whilst historiography is a means of attempting to articulate the past through the communication of information, thereby achieving something that is close to the literal truth of the information conveyed, historiophoty is necessarily more focused on human experience. In this sense, historiophoty is likely to produce an experience that *feels* more innately real than its historiographic equivalent, even as it communicates less contextual information. This tension lies at the heart of this thesis – that the cinematic experience of history is inclined to be felt as more real than written history, even as it is likely to be less concerned with accuracy. This challenge is most acute in the Hollywood dramatic historical film, in which commercial conventions are at least as likely to govern narrative decisions as historical accuracy does.

Taking the concepts of both Davis and Rosenstone that lead us to think of the dramatic historical film as either an act of history or poetry, of historiography or historiophoty, or even as either a thought experiment designed to deliver history into visceral reality or a parallel discourse on history itself, it is easy to imagine that we have arrived at a set of irresolvable binary alternatives in how a filmmaker might approach the problem of history. However, in this thesis I argue that the richest works of historical cinema are able to resolve this conflict, as is the case in much of Eastwood's body of work. An answer to the problem can be found in a concept introduced by Robert Burgoyne.

Robert Burgoyne and the Metahistorical Film

In *The Hollywood Historical Film*, Robert Burgoyne attempts to define and interrogate the Hollywood Historical Film as a genre. Burgoyne argues that there are three areas of consistency in the way that Hollywood historical films demonstrate a relationship with America's notion of history. In grouping together these three points, Burgoyne provides a sound framework for examining the way in which America's cinematic representations of its past have an impact on cultural memory. The first lies in the "relationship between historical films and an emerging or changing sense of national identity".[23] In other words, Hollywood historical films, as cultural artefacts, can be read as reflections of the ways that the United States perceives itself at the time of production. Recent examples include the Spike Lee War film *Da 5 Bloods* (2020), the Michael Gracey P.T Barnum Biopic *The Greatest Showman* (2017) and Quentin

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[23] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 19.

Tarantino's revisionist Western *Django Unchained* (2012). In *Da 5 Bloods*, the Vietnam War is revisited in the flashbacks of several African-American veterans whilst juxtaposing their experiences with various historical accounts of the exploitation of African-Americans, and highlighting both the broader history of racism in America and specifically during the Vietnam War. In the years of Black Lives Matter, this is a film profoundly linked to America's changing cultural identity and its attempts to wrestle with the past. Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, released eight years earlier, likewise taps into the nation's developing trend towards the re-examination and introduction of accountability in American history in the film's fictional account of an African-American slave's quest for revenge in the South just prior to the American Civil War. Ironically, juxtaposed with these films is *The Greatest Showman*, a favourable musical account of the life of the controversial figure P. T. Barnum, who made his fortune partially through the popularisation of "freak shows", and at one point even sold tickets to the autopsy of a slave billed as the world's oldest woman. Presenting Barnum as a brilliant entrepreneur and hero of the disenfranchised, the film is positioned in alignment with currently popular ideas relating to ingenious American innovators, capitalist success, and the embodiment of the American Dream in the form of embracing diversity. The former two films align to the appetite for uncovering truths about the African-American experience, and the latter film aligns to American social values through the creation of a myth.

Second, these films often elicit new interest in areas of history that might otherwise not have been so significant in the public consciousness. *Glory* (1989) is provided as an example by Burgoyne, its theme of African-American involvement in the American Civil War eliciting a new interest in the form of genealogical projects, exhibitions and artistic endeavours.[24] As above, both *Da 5 Bloods* and *Django Unchained* are also recent examples of films that seek to raise public consciousness of the past, albeit in alignment with the direction of broader public discourse. Two Steven Spielberg films are also frequently cited as works that revitalised and opened up public perceptions about the past: *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Schindler's List* (1993). The former has been praised for its highly realistic and visceral opening act covering D-Day, which was seen as a means of reminding a new generation of the scale and horrors of war.[25] *Schindler's List* was similarly seen as an effective attempt to bring to life the

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[24] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, 20.
[25] David Sims, "Revisiting the Grim Heroism of Saving Private Ryan, 20 Years Later," *The Atlantic*, Jul 24, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/07/saving-private-ryans-grim-view-of-heroism-20-years-later/565925/ (accessed Apr 2021)

horrific experiences of the holocaust for a generation in danger of forgetting.[26] Eastwood's Charlie Parker Biopic *Bird* also provides a good example. It opened up a public debate when Spike Lee questioned his right to direct stories about African-American historical figures and called into question the way Eastwood's perspective influenced the portrayal of Parker. Lee went on to direct *Mo' Better Blues* (1990) partially as an attempted corrective to Eastwood's vision of the jazz age, broadening the available narratives contributing to public discourse.

Third, Burgoyne points out how the weight of historical subject matter renders the historical film "a vehicle of artistic ambition and studio prestige", often encouraging public response to its accuracies and/or inaccuracies in the search for historical truth.[27] Burgoyne notes that it is a genre "both valorized for its cultural importance and denigrated for its commercial orientation."[28] This point will be repeatedly illustrated throughout this thesis, as the reception to Eastwood's dramatic historical films will consistently demonstrate both the weight given to, and the criticism levelled at, the way in which these films represent the past.

Taking these principles, Burgoyne goes on to explore their implications within various sub-genres of the Hollywood historical film including the War and Biographical film, but the most relevant of which is a label of his own making, the *metahistorical* film. This is a subgenre defined not by its historical subject matter but in the way that it approaches history. He describes the metahistorical film as any film that offers "embedded or explicit critiques of the way history is conventionally represented" that "highlights the cinema's potential for a critical, historiographic questioning of the past and its strengths as a form of thought experiment."[29] Going further at a later point, he positions the metahistorical film slightly more specifically as a film that "starts by questioning the dominant understanding of a particular event, and that challenges the way the history of that event has been written and disseminated."[30] In this sense, Burgoyne suggests that the metahistorical film can either be a critique of the representation of a specific moment in history, or it can be a broader critique of the way in which history is traditionally represented – or it can be both. Notably, Burgoyne positions Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* as an example of the metahistorical film, pointing out that it:

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[26] Akiva Gottlieb, "Commentary: Why 'Schindler's List' remains brilliant and troubling 25 years after its release," *LA Times*, Dec 5, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-schindlers-list-25-20181205-story.html (accessed Apr 2021)
[27] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, 20.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 46.
[30] Ibid., 125.

exposes the public relations campaign that followed the famous photo of the flag raising over Iwo Jima, and the efforts to promote this image as a national icon. It provides a sobering account of the gulf between the actual event – and the men involved – and the way the event was promoted by the government for the purpose of raising war bonds.[31]

Burgoyne also goes on to make a case study of *JFK* (1991), but does not formalise the way in which one might conceive of the conventions of a metahistorical film, and one might argue that the term and definition are satisfactory and complete in their current right. However, if we are to understand the metahistorical film as a subgenre of the historical film in the same way that we think about the War Film, for example, there is an opportunity to elucidate any commonalities amongst films that fit within this subgenre to understand how one might go about encouraging more works that intelligently interrogate historical representation. Before doing so, however, it is important to briefly articulate the concept of genre, and how it will be utilised within this thesis.

History and Genre

In order to explore the way in which dramatic historical films approach the past, it is critical to understand the role that genre plays in the historiographic process. Genre is a concept that most viewers intuitively understand, but many find hard to articulate. If we attempt to define the War Film for example, our simple conception of what this term means soon proves to conceal something far more complex. A War Film is a film about war. But beyond this simple definition when an individual thinks of a War Film they will likely discover that they have a set of ideological, aesthetic and narrative expectations of what constitutes a War Film. They might imagine World War II films that feature a bleak visual aesthetic, negative portrayals of the consequences of war juxtaposed with portrayals of individual heroism, and conclusions featuring elderly men tormented by the past reflecting on the sacrifices of their fellow soldiers. They might imagine films about the Vietnam War that feature the lush green jungles and red sunsets of South East Asia, along with nihilistic monologues juxtaposed with a lively soundtrack of late 1960s rock and roll. So where do these expectations come from? The answer is that these expectations are formed at least partly via a feedback loop between film producers and consumers that produces self-fulfilling expectations and repetitions. As film director George Stevens noted in one interview in 1947*:*

Something sort of cannibalistic is taking place. Producers, writers and

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[31] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, 46.

directors have got into the habit of screening over and over again the pictures that have been proved in the past to possess something that made them box office successes. I don't mean that they simply make them over. They break them down into their component elements, study these carefully, and then use them again in different arrangements, as parts of a new story, depending on them to exert the same appeal they did the first time.[32]

In *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman breaks down the mechanics of the process further by outlining the steps, from a production perspective, that bring about the repetition and learning that go into the formation and constant evolution of genres over time:

1. From box-office information, identify a successful film.

2. Analyze the film in order to discover what made it successful.

3. Make another film stressing the assumed formula for success.

4. Check box-office information on the new film and reassess the success formula accordingly.

5. Use the revised formula as a basis for another film.

6. Continue the process indefinitely.[33]

Of course, this simple breakdown doesn't capture the complex process of discovering exactly what it is that has made a film a success, nor does it explicitly call out the fact that the expectations set by the formula in question feed into the expectations of audiences and thereby account for a film's success or failure. Genres can be defined by a combination of aesthetics, narrative structures, character archetypes, social values, dialogue, set design, geographic or period setting, degree of pessimism or optimism, or an almost infinite array of other variables.

For the purposes of the production and consumption of entertainment, all of this is completely logical, but it does represent a potential problem for representations of the past in dramatic historical films. In other words, if history needs to be moulded into generic requirements rather than the other way around in order to satisfy audience needs, then there is an inevitable cost to historical representation. If the contemporary Hollywood Biopic requires a rise-fall-and-rise-again narrative arc in

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[32] William R. Weaver, 'Seek new ways, says Stevens,' *MP Herald* 168, No.2 (Jul 12, 1947), 33.
[33] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (Great Britain: BFI, 199), 38.

order to satisfy audience expectations, then this is very likely to result in an approach to historiography that deliberately distorts the examination of a human life for the purposes of entertainment. If the Western comes loaded with expectations related to depictions of unflinching masculinity and violence in order to satisfy fans of the genre, then the means by which the genre might explore and navigate the past is necessarily restricted. And if the War Film and its depictions of the front lines of World War II come loaded with nationalist expectations relating to the moral righteousness of the conflict, then there is an inevitable impact on the stories and ideas that can be told without detracting viewers.

Having said this, genre also opens up the opportunity for innovation and subversion. Audiences do not attend a genre film to see something identical to what they have seen before. They are after something that is both the same and different, recognizable but also a creative addition to the whole. Once the conventions of a genre have been defined, those conventions can be stretched, reconfigured and subverted in order to create new meanings. This is the means by which genres evolve, and it is also the means by which conventions and their traditional meanings can be inverted or subverted for the purposes of the filmmaker. Eastwood, I will argue, is a director who does just that in his attempts to free history from genre's limitations.

Throughout the three core chapters of this thesis I will be extending the logic presented here to a general account of the development and evolution of the Western, Biopic and War Film genres in order to demonstrate their strengths, limitations and purposes as tools for historical representation. The purpose of this will be to juxtapose Eastwood's own contributions to these three genres as a filmmaker, highlighting the ways in which he has sought to highlight and subvert their aforementioned limitations. At the same time, the concept of genre will be used to formalize an understanding of the conventions that comprise the metahistorical film versus the concept of a standard dramatic historical film, and how those conventions might be used in the service of a historiographical process that might better serve the requirements of audiences and historians alike.

Expanding the Concept of Metahistorical Cinema

Taking all that has been covered above, the theoretical core of my examination of Eastwood's work will rest on assumptions drawn from the foundational concepts outlined above. These assumptions are as follows:

1. In an ideal situation, the representation of the past in any form comes with a suite of responsibilities relating to adequate historical research. These include: the avoidance of representations of truth where there is ambiguity related to past events; not allowing the author's biases to impede the accuracy of representation and highlighting those biases where they might exist; not deliberately misrepresenting the past; and acknowledging the fundamental limitations of historical representation as a source of truth.

2. Cinema is not written history, and comes with a suite of unique commercial, temporal and genre expectations. Filmmakers cannot realistically be expected to adhere to the aforementioned responsibilities as tightly as would be expected from a work of written history, nor can they be entirely absolved of those responsibilities.

3. The limitations of the medium aside, cinema affords the opportunity to provide a more visceral experience of the past that provides unique opportunities for a greater understanding for audiences.

4. Cinema also affords the opportunity to provide a parallel discourse to written history, exploring, testing, and conceptualising different ideas and ways of representing the past.

5. Cinema can be used metahistorically to: challenge the way in which specific events have been understood; examine the way in which the cinematic form is employed for the purposes of historiography; and explore the way history is understood generally.

6. There are multiple genres that overlap with the dramatic historical film, including the Western, Biopic and War Film. Each genre comes with a suite of conventions that enable and limit the way in which it is traditionally employed to navigate the past.

Accepting these principles, this thesis will argue that within the concept of the metahistorical film lies an opportunity to expand on Burgoyne's original intentions, developing a way of thinking about the construction of history in cinema that provides a means of: dealing with and partially negating the medium's innate formal limitations; managing the ambiguities of representing the past; and acting as a means of commenting on and contesting popular conceptions. The concept of genre will be used to formalise an understanding of the conventions that comprise the metahistorical film, and demonstrate how those conventions might be used in the

service of a historiographical process that might better serve the requirements of audiences and historians alike.

In order to do this, a selection of films directed by Clint Eastwood will be utilised as a case study against which this thinking will be tested. I will argue that throughout his career as a filmmaker, Eastwood has shown a deep commitment to new ways of approaching historical representations of the past that challenge popular conceptions whilst acknowledging and dealing with the innate problems of said representation both in general and within the cinematic medium. As will be articulated further on, Eastwood's unique body of work affords the perfect opportunity to engage with the project of expanding on the concept of the metahistorical film. By examining Eastwood's development as a historical filmmaker against the concept of the metahistorical film, this thesis will seek to enrich our understanding of Eastwood's body of work as a historical filmmaker, whilst also opening up a discourse about the fundamental characteristics that define successful metahistorical cinema.

Clint Eastwood, Anti-Reductionist

American cinema, particularly Hollywood cinema, has a long history of the exploration and celebration of history, most particularly American history, and has been critiqued on these representations of the past for just as long. One can look as far back as D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) for an example of a film still watched and discussed with derision for its racist portrayal of the events leading up to and following the American Civil War. However, despite the responsibilities that are innately interwoven with historical representation, Hollywood filmmakers rarely share the traditional concerns of the historian when reconstructing the past. Rather, Hollywood's primary purpose has long been to use the past as a means of providing entertainment aligned to the demands of the audience. This has generally meant providing views of the past that endorse or indulge the accepted ideologies, prejudices and predilections of mainstream audiences. The reasons for this are reasonably obvious: Hollywood is a commercial industry focused on providing a product satisfying to its customer base.

Generally, where Hollywood cinema has attempted to demonstrate a strong philosophical position or ideological critique of the past, it is usually with a kind of belated audacity that follows rather than leads the mainstream agenda. For example, as historically illuminating and morally righteous as Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) may seem in its assault on racism and the disenfranchisement of African-Americans, its production merely reflects the shifting sentiment of mainstream audiences at the

time of the film's release. The film may serve a political function in mobilising people to pursue African-American rights, but it aligns with rather than creates the current perspective of large portions of the mainstream audience. More than this, the perceived moral righteousness of the film's cause enables it to take a polemical approach to its characterisation of the past. Audiences walk away affirmed in their values and entirely unchallenged in their understanding of the complexities of the past, despite the film's formalised foregrounding of African-American history. If a Hollywood director as radical as Spike Lee is so constrained by a need to reflect cultural sentiment, it is easy to see how this is all the more true for more mainstream productions. Consider the recent accounts of the Battle of Dunkirk, Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour* (2017) and Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017). The former takes the perspective of Winston Churchill, setting aside any problematic issues relating to his alcoholism, history of military incompetence or racism in favour of the mythical representation of Churchill as England's saviour. The latter is an inspiring account of the experiences of troops at the frontline that emphasises Allied heroism and British fortitude. Both films seek to inspire positive feelings about the British response to World War II aligned to the popular understanding of these individuals and incidents, and have garnered significant positive critical and commercial outcomes as a result.

In this thesis, I will argue that as a director, Clint Eastwood has been underappreciated for his role as a director uniquely oriented towards deconstructing and questioning traditional readings or interpretations of the past for more than half a century. Juxtaposing Eastwood's contributions to dramatic historical cinema with the aforementioned assumptions based on the works of Davis, Rosenstone and Burgoyne, I will position Eastwood as director who has contemplated and engaged with history in an increasingly sophisticated manner over the course of roughly forty years, showing a deep intuitive appreciation for the concepts which they have articulated. I will propose that, in line with the foundational expectations put forward by Davis, Eastwood has commonly demonstrated a deep compulsion to represent the past as accurately as possible in a manner that incorporates ambiguity, and attempts to nullify his own ideological biases in favour of a measured perspective that brings to life the visceral experience of a past that has been lost. I will make the case for Eastwood's consistent use of the dramatic historical film as a means of providing a parallel discourse to written history that plays out alternate readings and possibilities, in line with the perspective of Rosenstone. And most importantly, I will argue that Eastwood's career has demonstrated, until most recently, an increasingly sophisticated metahistorical approach to history that forces viewers to fundamentally re-evaluate their conception of the past, as well as the ways in which the past is

traditionally represented. In doing so, it will be argued that Eastwood's career as a historian filmmaker led him towards the direction of several metahistorical films, and in studying these films a suite of broad conventions and approaches will be teased out to help elucidate some of the formal elements of this historical subgenre.

I will argue that, in the first half of his career as a filmmaker, Eastwood engaged with history indirectly through fictional depictions of Post American Civil War USA, engaging with and subverting the Western genre's conventions in order to reframe perceptions of the old west. In *Unforgiven* (1992), his final Western, he invited audiences to question the Western Mythology, reminding them that the realities of the past and the consequences of violence are unquestionably brutal despite the oft-sanitised accounts presented in cinema. Beginning with his first dramatic historical film as a director, *Bird* in 1988, Eastwood has since directed a substantial number of films covering historical incidents or individuals. Rather than providing comfortable narratives that align with audience expectations, he has sought out filmmaking projects that encourage the viewer to reassess the nature of their world. For example, in *Flags of our Fathers* he challenged audiences to put aside their simple reductionist conception of World War II and understand the ethical murkiness that lay behind one of history's most celebrated photographic images. In *Letters from Iwo Jima* he asked audiences to understand and reflect on the fact that the oft anonymised enemy in any War Film is comprised of human beings with families, feelings and identities. In *J. Edgar* (2011), *Bird* and *American Sniper* (2014) he invited viewers to understand that despite history's reductionist portrayals, an individual is neither good nor bad, hero nor villain, but a complex litany of positive and negative attributes.

Eastwood is seldom, if ever, framed as a champion of complex engagement with the human condition or history. It is very likely that the reasons for this come down to perceptions around Eastwood as a machismo-loaded filmmaker and movie star, as well as the public perception that his politics are conservative at a time that political discourse has been incredibly polarised. Eastwood's politics are not the subject of this thesis. However it is fair to suggest that the re-examination of Eastwood as a significant artist in the reinterpretation and deconstruction of American history – an individual whose career as a movie star has made him an almost archetypal symbol of white male masculine identity and conservative ideology and privilege in the 20th century – might not be perceived with great enthusiasm at the present moment in history. However, just as Eastwood has made a project of challenging traditional conceptions of the past through his body of work, there is an opportunity to put aside ideological biases here for a deeper evaluation of his contribution to cinema.

Throughout much of his career, Eastwood has been a highly politicised figure. When Eastwood appeared in Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971) Pauline Kael charged the film with being "deeply immoral" and "fascist", something which she noted was all the more concerning given the film was clearly "a stunningly well-made genre piece."[34] Her concerns were related to the film's explicit suggestion that society had become overly concerned with the rights of the perpetrator rather than the victim, and that the only way to bring about justice was by circumventing the rights of the suspected criminal. Roger Ebert noted that the film might be of interest to anybody attempting to chart the "rise of fascism in America."[35]

Dirty Harry propelled Eastwood from Western anti-hero to mega-star, and it is no coincidence that the critical consensus around Eastwood's work would be heavily influenced by Kael's review, and countless others, of Eastwood's work. However, this consensus seemed to mellow with the release of *Unforgiven*, which one critic acknowledged began the rare transition from an artist "being condemned as a fascist propagandist by the left to being condemned as a fascist propagandist by the right."[36] This, the critic argued, was the result of *Unforgiven* being "an ambivalently anti-vigilantism film" which looked to unpack and re-examine his previous works.[37] In *Variety*, Todd McCarthy praised the film as an exceedingly intelligent meditation on the West, its myths and its heroes."[38] Desson Howe of the *Washington Post* praised the film's revisionist elements, pointing out that it "dismounts at places usually left in the dust – the oppressed lot of women, the loneliness of untended children, adult illiteracy and the horrible last moments of the dying."[39] Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* admired the way in which "Eastwood gives *Unforgiven* a tragic stature that puts his own filmmaking past in critical and moral perspective."[40] And Michael Sragow of *The New Yorker*, the publication that once housed numerous anti-Eastwood reviews by Kael, praised the film and its "genuine compulsion to de-romanticize Western gunfighting."[41] That the film received nine Oscar nominations and four wins, including

[34] Pauline Kael, "Dirty Harry: Saint Cop," *New Yorker*, Jan 15, 1972, reproduced *scrapsfromthelot.com,* https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2017/12/28/dirty-harry-saint-cop-review-by-pauline-kael/ (accessed Jan 2021)
[35] Roger Ebert, "Dirty Harry," *Chicago Sun Times*, 1971, reproduced *RogertEbert.com*, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dirty-harry-1971 (accessed Jan 2021)
[36] Christopher Orr, "Dirty Harry or p.c. wimp?," *Salon*, Feb 25, 2005, https://www.salon.com/2005/02/24/eastwood_2/ (accessed Jan 2021)
[37] Ibid.
[38] Todd McCarthy, "Review: 'Unforgiven'," *Variety*, Jul 31, 1992, http://variety.com/1992/film/reviews/unforgiven-1200430212/ (accessed Jan 2021)
[39] Desson Howe, "Unforgiven," *Washington Post*, Aug 7, 1992, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/unforgivenrhowe_a0aeea.htm (accessed Jan 2021)
[40] Peter Travers, "Unforgiven," *Rolling Stone*, Aug 6, 1992 http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/unforgiven-19920806 (accessed Jan 2021).
[41] Michael Sragow , "Unforgiven," *New Yorker*, 10 Aug, 1992, 70.

for Best Picture and Best Director, only further demonstrates Eastwood's significant reputational shift during this period.

With the subsequent direction of films like *A Perfect World*, (1993) *Mystic River* (2003) and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), each of which took as its subject the consequences and costs of violence, an approach often seen to be a re-examination of Eastwood's earlier forays into violence as entertainment, perceptions of Eastwood as a conservative director continued to shift. One conservative critic, Richard Grenier, enthusiastically noted in 1984 that Eastwood's work was at least partially a critique of "liberalism gone mad"[42] only to return in 2005 to criticise him for "abandoning the moral values of the populace for those of the liberal elite".[43] Going one step further, Grenier noted that the "American public could probably forgive Eastwood his feminism" but that "going soft on the punishment of evildoers robs him of his very identity."[44] However, an incident in which Eastwood spoke at a Republican National Convention in 2012 to endorse Republican Mitt Romney via an adlibbed monologue to an empty chair implied to contain Obama saw a subsequent backlash that has resulted in a revised perception of Eastwood as a conservative director. Critics, it seems, have consistently struggled to understand Eastwood's politics and how they inform his films.

Eastwood himself has shown a reluctance to be identified exclusively with any particular political party over the years, despite incidents like that of 2012. In an interview with *Playboy* in 1976 he referred to himself as a "political nothing" who on some topics "could be called very liberal; on others, very conservative."[45] When asked to elaborate he noted that "I'm liberal on civil rights, conservative on Government spending."[46] At various times Eastwood has supported the causes of both Democrats and Republicans.[47] Since the mid-1990s he has generally referred to himself as a libertarian, which by his definition means "you're socially liberal - leave

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[42] Richard Grenier, "The World's Favorite Movie Star," *Commentary Magazine*, Apr, 1984, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/richard-grenier/the-worlds-favorite-movie-star/ (accessed Jan 2021).
[43] Richard Grenier, "Clint Eastwood Goes PC," *Commentary Magazine*, Mar, 1984, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/richard-grenier/clint-eastwood-goes-pc/ (accessed Jan 2021)
[44] Ibid.
[45] Arthur Knight, "Clint Eastwood: Playboy Interview," *Playboy*, 1974, reproduced *web.archive.org*, https://web.archive.org/web/20100726101724/http://www.playboy.com/articles/clint-eastwood-1974-playboy-interview/index.html (accessed Jan 2021)
[46] Ibid.
[47] Christopher Orr, "Clint Eastwood, Political Wanderer," *The Atlantic*, Aug 30, 2012, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/08/clint-eastwood-political-wanderer/261808/ (accessed Jan 2021)

everybody alone - but you believe in fiscal responsibility and you believe in government staying out of your life."[48]

During the 2016 presidential elections, whilst expressing some admiration for the lack of political correctness in Trump's approach, Eastwood expressed disappointment at the options available referring to both nominated candidates as "insane", ultimately refusing to endorse anybody.[49] And in 2020, unhappy with President Donald Trump's performance, Eastwood endorsed Democratic candidate Mike Bloomberg for president.[50] Eastwood has proven himself to be a staunch advocate of the American right to bear arms whilst also calling for greater gun control, questioning "'Why would anyone need or want an assault weapon?"[51] He holds a clear pro-choice position in line with his libertarian leanings.[52] He has also long held the position that America has been too fast to dive in to military conflict.[53] On the issue of gay marriage, Eastwood was a signatory amongst 131 other high-profile individuals identified as Republicans on a document calling for the removal of the gay marriage ban in California.[54]

Eastwood has also long demonstrated his dedication to environmental issues. During his stint as the mayor of his hometown of Carmel-by-the-Sea from 1988 to 1990, he worked as an advocate for the government Take Pride in America campaign that advocated for keeping public lands clean in the late 1980s. And most significantly, he was appointed to the California State Park and Recreation Commission from 2001 to 2008, advocating on numerous environmental issues, most significantly pushing

[48] Virginia Skeels, "No wonder Clint's smiling! Amy Adams dazzles in backless gown as she joins Eastwood at Trouble With The Curve premiere," *Daily Mail*, Sept 20, 2012, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2205913/Clint-Eastwood-Amy-Adams-lead-star-studded-premiere-Trouble-With-The-Curve-Westwood.html (accessed Jan 2021)
[49] Marcus Yam, "Eastwood and Hanks talk 'Sully,' their film about the "humble smiling hero" who landed on the Hudson," *LA Times*, Sept 1, 2016, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-0904-sneaks-sully-20160828-snap-story.html (accessed Jan 2021)
[50] Jordan Moreau, "Clint Eastwood Ditches Donald Trump for Mike Bloomberg in 2020 Election," *Variety*, Feb 22, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/film/news/clint-eastwood-mike-bloomberg-2020-election-1203511657/ (accessed Jan 2021)
[51] Larry King, "Clint not Exactly Making NRA's Day," *USA Today*, May 22, 1995, 2D
[52] Andrew O'Hehir, "After the chair: Clint Eastwood's tormented legacy," *Salon*, Sept 23, 2012, https://www.salon.com/2012/09/22/after_the_chair_clint_eastwoods_tormented_legacy/ (accessed Jan 2021)
[53] Peter Howell, "Think before you shoot, Clint Eastwood says of war: interview," *The Star*, Jan 13, 2015, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2015/01/13/think_before_you_shoot_clint_eastwood_says_of_war_interview.html, (accessed Jan 2021)
[54] Kristen A. Lee, "Meet the 131 Republicans who are urging the Supreme Court to overturn a ban on same-sex marriage," *New York Daily News*, Feb 28, 2013, https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/131-republicans-supporting-overturn-gay-marriage-ban-article-1.1276670 (accessed Jan 2021)

against the Republican Governor Schwarzenegger's attempts to develop a proposed highway toll road that would interfere with a state park.[55]

Of course, Eastwood's views on any particular political issue are not the subject of this thesis, but it is important to note that despite the way in which Eastwood has been popularly understood, his political life reveals an unwillingness to have his perspective subsumed and forced into alignment with a particular political ideology, despite his general conservative leaning. Instead, his decisions reveal an ongoing desire to understand and respond to context, even if these views skew towards conservatism on many issues. Throughout the course of this thesis, I will argue that Eastwood's unwillingness to be reductive but rather to engage with the complexity of any historical circumstance lies at the core of his contribution to historical cinema.

In order to demonstrate this I will be discussing Eastwood's work as a historical filmmaker in the context of three chronological phases: the Mythology Phase (1959-1992), the Metahistory Phase (1988-2014) and the Unforgotten Phase (2016-present). The Mythology Phase is comprised of Eastwood's early career and four directorial contributions to the Western Genre. I will argue that, influenced and informed by his work as an actor in television Westerns, spaghetti Westerns and Hollywood Westerns prior to his time as a filmmaker, Eastwood shows an increasingly sophisticated understanding of and desire to subvert the genre's conventions in order to find new ways of exploring America's past. The Metahistory Phase represents a period in which Eastwood becomes a director of films about historical events or individuals, and it is this phase in which this thesis is principally invested. I will argue that during this phase he shows a constant desire to subvert or interrogate traditional understandings of the past through cinema, and the means by which the past is traditionally constructed within the medium. The Unforgotten Phase, which will not be explored deeply within this thesis, refers to Eastwood's most recent historical works, which I argue put aside historical critique in favour of simple, distilled narratives that explore the experiences of underappreciated, disenfranchised or mistreated working class men.

Methodology

This thesis will provide a focused examination of Clint Eastwood's work as director within the context of three historical genres: the Western, the Biopic and the War

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[55] Samantha Young, "Schwarzenegger removes his brother-in-law and Clint Eastwood from Calif. parks panel," *Sign on San Diego*, Mar 20, 2008, reproduced *archive.nv*, https://archive.vn/20130630081414/http://legacy.signonsandiego.com/news/state/20080320-1635-schwarzenegger-parks.html (accessed Jan 2021)

Film. In each chapter I will begin with an account of the history of the respective genre and its conventions, particularly within the context of how those conventions have played out in terms of the representation of past events or periods. This will provide the foundation required to differentiate Eastwood's directorial contributions within each genre and assess how Eastwood adheres to and/or subverts the conventions of the respective genre. This will be done within the broader context of the principles articulated in this introduction, based on the work of Davis, Rosenstone and Burgoyne. I will also provide an account of Eastwood's forays and experiences within the genre, where there are such experiences, as an actor up to the point that he makes his own directorial contribution to said genre. In doing so, particularly within the Western chapter, I wish to provide an account of the experiences and influences that have informed his work as director.

Having done this, I will engage in an analysis of Eastwood's directorial contributions to the respective genre, with particular focus on those examples that would seem to: demonstrate an impulse to subvert or challenge genre conventions in the service of historical representation; reject or question accepted understandings of historical events or individuals; or reject reductionist interpretations of the past or ways of exploring the past. In these analyses I will tease out the consistent conventions or practices that contribute to "embedded or explicit critiques of the way history is conventionally represented."[56] In doing so, I will make the case for Eastwood as a director of metahistorical films whilst also defining the means by which the metahistorical film achieves its ends.

In Chapter One, I will provide an analysis of all four of the Westerns Eastwood helmed as a director, but with particular focus on *Unforgiven* (1992) making a case for the film as his first truly metahistorical work that seeks to deconstruct and reinterpret the American Western Myth. This chapter will account for the aforementioned Mythology Phase of Eastwood's career. In this chapter, I make an argument positioning Eastwood as a director of revisionist Westerns that sought to undercut traditional understandings of the past as they are often communicated through the Western genre. In doing this I lay the groundwork for an argument that Eastwood's early experiences with the Western lay the foundations of a filmmaking career focused on deconstructing and questioning traditional representations of the past. In this sense, I divide Eastwood's career as a director of historical cinema into two parts.

In Chapter Two, I continue the argument established in the previous chapter to argue

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[56] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, 46.

that, following Eastwood's exit from the Western genre, he continued to evolve as a filmmaker engaged in increasingly sophisticated approaches to ideas of historical representation via his engagement with the Biopic genre. Overlapping with the closing of Eastwood's Mythology Phase, I argue that Eastwood entered into the Metahistory Phase of his filmmaking career from 1988 with the Charlie Parker Biopic, *Bird*. I will propose that Eastwood here moves from questioning the historical myths upon which the United States has been established, to focusing on the traditional readings of historical events themselves. In doing this, an argument will be established suggesting that Eastwood's work within the Biopic genre positions him as a director of metahistorical films. Within this chapter, I contrast the examples of his work within the Biopic genre across *Bird* (1988), *J. Edgar* (2011) and *American Sniper* (2014) to make the case for Eastwood as a metahistorical filmmaker who subverts the Biopic genre's traditional conventions.

In Chapter Three, I continue my analysis of the Metahistory Phase of Eastwood's career with an examination of his involvement with the War Film genre, most particular his direction of two War Films in 2006, *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. In this chapter I argue that these two films, each of which interrogates the events during and following the Battle of Iwo Jima from both sides of the conflict, form an interlocked binary work, and are Eastwood's greatest works of metahistorical cinema. I will argue that the former is a masterpiece of subversive historical cinema which, by challenging traditional perceptions of a mythologised historical image, forces a fundamental revaluation of the reductive way in which World War II is represented through a nationalist lens in Hollywood cinema. The latter, I will propose, challenges reductive depictions of the way in which the enemy is represented in American cinema in order to support nationalist agendas, particularly in the context of representations of Japanese soldiers during World War II.

In the Conclusion, I will briefly account for Eastwood's Unforgotten Phase, which I identify as having run from around 2016 to the present moment. Comprised of *Sully* (2016), The *15:17 to Paris* (2018), *The Mule* (2018) and *Richard Jewell* (2019), this phase represents a move away from metahistorical readings of the past to a focus on simple, distilled narratives that explore the experiences of underappreciated, disenfranchised or mistreated working class men. This, I argue, is something of a late regression for Eastwood in his depictions of the past.

Conclusion

Throughout every chapter of this thesis I will position Eastwood's historical films as *thought experiments* in which he seeks to put aside traditional approaches to a particular event or period in favour of alternate, revisionist, or visceral interpretations of the past. I will argue for Eastwood as a director who seeks to incorporate complexity or unknowability into his representations of the past. By this I mean that he refuses to take an ethically reductionist approach to characters or events or to create answers or truths that cannot be extrapolated from historical records. I will make a case for Eastwood as a filmmaker with a deep understanding of the conventions of each respective genre, and the way in which that genre traditionally engages with the past. I will argue that he uses this understanding to highlight and subvert these conventions to both create new ways of representing the past and comment upon the limitations of the respective genre in doing so. I will argue that in doing all of the above, Eastwood pushes the boundaries of the cinematic medium's potential for engagement with the past whilst also providing a commentary on its limitations to do so. Most fundamentally, I will argue that at the core of Eastwood's work as a director of historical films is a melancholic commentary on the impossibility of the task at hand. The gap between the past and history is existentially unbridgeable, but Eastwood's work expresses the reality that we are inextricably bound to explore it as human beings.

At the conclusion of my thesis, I will have presented an account of Eastwood's works of historical cinema within three Hollywood film genres, making a case for his evolution from a filmmaker that seeks to critique the traditional historical mythology of the Western to one who wishes to directly critique the representation of historical events and individuals. I will have undertaken a deep analysis of key films in order to demonstrate the way in which Eastwood is a director seeking to highlight and explore history's ambiguities, opening up questions and refusing to take a traditional reductionist approach. And ultimately, I will have made a case for Eastwood as a director of metahistorical cinema, whose contributions to the cinematic examination of history have been vastly undervalued to this point.

Parallel to this analysis of Eastwood, I will have utilised the project to further articulate and define the metahistorical film, moving beyond Burgoyne's original intentions and articulating a suite of conventions that might be applied for the purposes of analysing the dramatic historical films of other filmmakers. It also provides opportunity for filmmakers to think about the means through which they might more compellingly and rewardingly engage with the past. By identifying these conventions, new avenues

may well be opened that help to: negate the innate limitations of cinema in representing the past; more effectively account for historical ambiguities; and more incisively contest popular understandings of the past.

CHAPTER ONE

Clint Eastwood and the Metahistorical Western

"This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." — *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

Before Eastwood ever directed his first dramatic historical film, he had a long-standing relationship as an actor and director with a genre that tackled ideas of American history indirectly: the Western. Throughout this chapter an argument will be made that Eastwood's work within the Western genre between 1959 and 1992 reveals a continually evolving interest in the nature of the genre's myths and its relation to American history. This period will be referred to throughout this thesis as Eastwood's *Mythology Phase*. This phase includes his early work as an actor in television Westerns, spaghetti Westerns and Hollywood Westerns in which Eastwood became familiar with the genre, its conventions, and its role in history. More importantly, it includes his four directorial contributions to the Western genre – *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Unforgiven* (1992) – each of which reveals an increasingly sophisticated understanding and desire to subvert the genre's conventions in order to find new ways of exploring America's past.

By demonstrating how Eastwood's work reveals an increasing tendency to interrogate the veracity of representations of the past as they have traditionally been framed within the Western, whilst also acknowledging that the Western operates as a history/myth hybrid, this chapter lays the groundwork for later chapters. Chapter Two and Three will demonstrate how this leads Eastwood towards becoming a director of what Robert Burgoyne refers to as the metahistorical film, which "starts by questioning the dominant understanding of a particular event, and that challenges the way the history of that event has been written and disseminated"[57] and offers "embedded or explicit critiques of the way history is conventionally represented."[58]

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part provides an account of the history of the Western genre in relation to issues of historical representation, detailing the way in which this genre has traditionally tended to explore, sanitise, obfuscate and ultimately mythologise ideas of the past. However, an argument is also provided

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[57] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 125.
[58] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, 46.

to demonstrate that a revisionist approach to Western mythology has existed almost as long as the genre itself, becoming most particularly prominent around the time Eastwood became the most prominent actor within the genre.

The second part provides an account of Eastwood's early entries into the Western genre, up to the point of his first Western as a director. Highlighting the nature of Eastwood's involvement with these projects, and the way in which they may have influenced his own approach, a path is traced towards the beginning of his career as a director of Westerns, and the revisionist impulses that are prevalent even in these early films. This section will cover Eastwood's early success as an actor in the TV Western, *Rawhide* (1959-1965), his work on Sergio Leone's Dollars trilogy, and his role in the Westerns he produced after forming Malpaso Productions, but prior to becoming a film director.

The third part provides a detailed examination of Eastwood's work as a director of four Westerns: *High Plains Drifter*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Pale Rider* and *Unforgiven*. Placing Eastwood's work within the broader context of the Western, a case will be made that the genre and its limitations both fostered and challenged Eastwood's impulse to subvert and reinterpret the genre's capacity to explore to the complexities of representing 'truth' when reflecting on historical events, periods, or individuals. Placing particular focus on his most recent Western, *Unforgiven*, an argument is put forward to suggest that his work within this genre has informed his views on the representation of history, and his ongoing project to avoid the temptations of accepting the traditional narratives associated with said history. This chapter will demonstrate that *Unforgiven* represents a pivotal step for Eastwood towards becoming a metahistorical director, a term that expands upon and moves beyond Burgoyne's initial parameters.

The History of History in the Western

Before endeavouring to deconstruct Eastwood's work within the Western genre in relation to issues of historical representation and how that work might be understood in contrast to the traditions of the Western genre as whole, it is first pivotal that we demonstrate a solid understanding of what is meant by the term "Western", and the relationship of this genre to American history. It is worth beginning with Jim Kitses' 1969 essay, "Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western," in which he attempts to break down and define the essence of the Western:

> First of all, the Western is American history. Needless to say, this does not mean that the films are historically accurate or that they cannot be made by Italians. More simply, the statement means that American frontier life provides the milieu and mores of the Western, its wild bunch of cowboys, its straggling towns and mountain scenery.[59]

Kitses goes on to clarify that the Hollywood genre's primary focus has always been on American frontier life during the period following the American Civil War, before elucidating on the complex list of binaries that he suggests govern the mechanics of the Western, all of which fall under two key labels: *wilderness* and *civilisation*. For Kitses, the core of the West lies entirely in the tension between these two concepts, resulting in "a philosophical dialectic, an ambiguous cluster of meanings and attitudes that provide the thematic structure of the genre".[60] The wilderness, broadly speaking, can be either positively or negatively represented in terms of ideas about the individual, nature and The West. Civilisation will always be conversely represented by ideas of community, culture, and The East. In other words, the Western is a mythologised version of late nineteenth century American history that takes as its subject the point at which civilisation meets, conquers, collides with, or is set upon by untouched America. Placing a specific emphasis on the characters that populate the Western, John Cawelti suggests there are three distinct groups:

> The townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes who are above all "men in the middle" … [The latter] possess many qualities and skills of the savages, but are fundamentally committed to the townspeople.[61]

The Western, then, can best be understood as a meeting of the wilderness, civilisation, and the men who straddle both worlds, set within the context of the American Frontier between 1865 and the late 1880s.

The structure mapped out here is clearly evident in the literature that would inevitably lead towards the Western. 'Dime' novels, which came into prevalence after 1860, were popular cheap paperback books that proliferated until the early 20th century, often featuring heroic tales of frontiersmen overcoming the challenges presented by the Western frontier. Factually dubious accounts of the lives of contemporaneous individuals like Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Jesse James, Calamity

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[59] Jim Kitses, "Authorship and Genre: Notes on the Western," in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 57.
[60] Ibid., 59.
[61] John Cawelti, *The Six Gun Mystique* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1984), 46.

Jane, Billy the Kid and Buffalo Bill became abundantly popular, and many are still accepted as facts in the public imagination today. Many of the protagonists featured in these fictional tales opportunistically toured America and the world to retell, reinforce and profit from them. After Ned Buntline launched William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody into superstardom with a series of exaggerated short stories and novels about his adventures as a scout and hunter, Cody went on tour across America and Europe numerous times between 1872 and 1906, regaling audiences with tales and re-enactments of former glories. In 1893 when Buffalo Bill crossed paths with Thomas Edison, Edison filmed Bill and his entourage for a series of short Kinetoscope films.[62] Buffalo Bill became one of the first Western figures to transition from the dime-novel, to the theatre, to the moving image. But given that countless adventures and stories had been fabricated out of thin air by novelists and Buffalo Bill himself in order to continue his legend, how do we approach this entity, and countless others like him, who are neither wholesale fact or fiction? The answer may well lie in the distinction between history and myth.

The Western as History, Myth, or Historical Myth

In *Westerns: Films Through History*, Janet Walker marks out the problematic nature of understanding the Western as a genre of historical representation. Walker identifies three paths through which to trace the Western's historicity. The first is the fact that the cinematic Western has "a history that dovetailed with that of frontier settlement" so that the earliest Westerns were able to "use extant Western settings" and "employ genuine Westerners as actors, directors, writers and consultants".[63] The second path is that of the Western being history in the sense that, while it is unlikely to be authentic to the period it represents, it is ultimately a product of its own contemporary context, and therefore a historical artefact. The third path is through a Western's depictions of historical people, events and, where a Western is a period piece rather than a dramatic historical film, its Western settings. Ultimately however, Walker acknowledges that the notion of the Western as a history film is problematic. A stronger case can be made for the Western as historical myth than as history.

In order to investigate the Western's place as a genre of either history or myth, it is crucial to begin with a clear idea of the meaning of each term. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, history and myth are two distinct modes of thought, which separate modern

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[62] Daryl E. Jones, "The Earliest Western Films," in *Westerns: The Essential Journal of Popular Film and Television Collection*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Michael T. Marsden (London: Routledge, 2012), 8.

[63] Janet Walker, ed. *Westerns: Films Through History*. (New York: American Film Institute, 2001), 2-3.

and "primitive" peoples.[64] For Lévi-Strauss, history is the product of an admittedly flawed process for empirically assessing the past, whilst myth is an analogical process of creating meanings based and/or imposed on the natural world. Developing this concept further, Will Wright in *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* suggests that modern society has moved towards "historical myths" which replace the traditional role of myth, projecting the present onto the past:

History:

1. Utilises the past to explain the present;

2. Demonstrates that the past is different from the present;

3. Demonstrates that the past is related through action to the present.

Historical Myth:

1. Finds meaning by mapping the present onto the past.[65]

In other words, history constructs meaning by relating "the present to the past" and myth creates meaning by relating "the past to the present" through analogical meaning.[66] In the context of the Western, we can take this to mean that the Western is less a representation of America's past than it is a reflection of the present and the way in which Americans would like to see themselves.

The changing face of the Western Historical Myth

For Wright, writing in the early 1970s, the Western provided this analogical meaning through four different possible narrative structures: The Classical Plot, which relies on the narrative that an outsider saves society and is subsequently accepted into that society;[67] the Vengeance Variation, which is like the classical, except that the protagonist begins as a member of society before deep trauma forces them to move outside of society's boundaries in order to gain revenge;[68] the Transition Theme, which goes a step further, with the protagonist beginning inside society before realising that they can no longer defend its values;[69] and the Professional Plot, which posits that a collective of amoral outsiders are called upon to protect society, albeit

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[64] Claude Levi-Strauss. *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 127.
[65] Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1975), 211.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 32.
[68] Ibid., 59.
[69] Ibid., 74.

for their own gain and despite the murky morality with which that society is associated.[70]

I have created a graph based on Wright's list of all Western films between 1931 and 1972 that earned over $4 million USD and mapped them based on the aforementioned categories (see Appendix A).[71] What is clear is that, if we accept Wright's categorisation up to the time of writing, an evolutionary shift is clearly occurring within the mythology of the Western, as the classical plot is perceived to be increasingly naïve, and a cynicism or distrust of mainstream society becomes more and more engrained. If nothing else, this diagrammatic representation of Wright's categories is evidence of changing cultural tastes and a shift in the conventions expected from the Western genre over time in order to satisfy expectations of authenticity. As will be demonstrated throughout this chapter, Eastwood's work within the genre will be both a result and cause of the ongoing evolution of the genre beyond this point.

Stepping backwards to the early formations of the Western, we can see the way in which the Western, during its earliest cinematic stages, developed the foundations of these ideas of contemporaneous authenticity, despite the historical illegitimacy of many of the stories being told. Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), which has become the iconic representation of the genre's birth, provides an impressive account of a train heist by Western outlaws, concluding with a now infamous self-reflexive shot of a gunslinger firing at the audience. However, it is worth noting that the label of 'Western' is retrospective up to this point. The term 'Western' only starts to appear around 1910, intermittently, and as Steve Neale points out, the popularity of *The Great Train Robbery* derived from the way it was sold as a "melodrama", "chase film", "railway film" and a "crime film".[72]

Marketed as a "faithful imitation of the genuine 'Hold Ups' made famous by various outlaw bands in the far West", *The Great Train Robbery*'s emphasis on authenticity in its representation of the period was an early indicator of what was to come in the formations of the genre.[73] This emphasis continued to evolve as an increasing pressure was placed on the importance of location-based shooting. In 1909, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* captured this spirit when it lambasted stage shot Westerns: "cowboys, Indians and Mexicans must be seen in proper scenic backgrounds to

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[70] Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society*, 85.
[71] Ibid., 31-32.
[72] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (Routledge: London, 2005), 44.
[73] Michael Glover Smith and Adam Selzer, *Flickering Empire: How Chicago Invented the U.S. Film Industry* (London: Wallflower Press, 2015), 71.

convey any impression of reality."[74] An argument can be made then that, at the very same time that the cinematic medium was being formed and provided a new and exciting means of capturing the present and real moment, a significant concern was that the medium could only achieve verisimilitude through the perception of an authentic approach to representing the past. Cinema captures something real, and therefore the past should be presented as realistically as possible, even if 'real' did not mean 'true'.

This notion of the Western as being either authentic or a historical representation was rendered even more problematic as this innovative new tool turned into an industry. A case in point lies in Gilbert M. Anderson, who had appeared in T*he Great Train Robbery*, before becoming the Western genre's first star.[75] When Anderson appeared as Broncho Billy in *Broncho Billy and the Baby* in 1915, the performance proved so popular that Anderson officially changed his name to the titular character, playing him in 148 short films shot on location in California.[76] This was the birth of the serial Western, a model that set the expectation that "exhibitors were expected to buy not a selected Ken Maynard or Hoot Gibson film, but the whole season's output" and stars quickly became synonymous with their Western roles.[77] Indeed, when Gene Autry eventually became a star of series Westerns in the 1930s and 1940s, his characters were always simply named Gene Autry.[78] Broncho Billy and Gene Autry were, quite literally, constructed images, intended to give the appearance of authenticity through consistency. Like Buffalo Bill, they positioned themselves as one in the same as their characters. In order to ensure that distributors and audiences knew what they were getting from these serial Westerns, a streamlined approach was taken to their content, which went much of the way to developing the basic conventions of the Western as we understand them today:

> The films were, in so far as the necessity for a minimum of novelty permitted, virtually identical. Each one was conceived as part of a package of films, all with the same star and with uniform production values, story-lines, running times and so on. A knowledgeable audience would know exactly what to expect. Narrative expectations were standardized: there would be a fistfight within the first few

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[74] Sandra K. Sagala, *Buffalo Bill on the Silver Screen: The Films of William F. Cody* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 1891.

[75] Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 24.

[76] "Bronco Billy Anderson," *TheWildWest.Org*, http://www.thewildwest.org/cowboys/wildwestshowbizcowboys/295-broncobillyanderson (accessed Sept 2016)

[77] Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, 37.

[78] Ibid.

minutes, a chase soon after and, inevitably, a shoot-out at the end. Plots were usually motivated by some straightforward villainy which could be exposed and decisively defeated by the hero. Even such novelty as the films did possess was sometimes only relative to the audience's ability to recall previous films, for not only did the series Western endlessly recycle plots in a succession of remakes of past successes; it was also common for footage to be reused. Costly scenes of Indian attacks or stampedes would re-appear, more or less happily satisfying the demands of continuity, in subsequent productions.[79]

While the move towards location shooting was an attempt to capture the visceral reality of the old west, this formulaic approach undermined the idea of the Western as any kind of window into the past. However, while this compressed mode of endless repetition in the series Westerns represented a limitation, it also played a major role in solidifying the genre's conventions into a comprehensible whole. At some point, the serial Western had turned the frontier into a genre, creating a cohesive Western Historical Myth.

The Western Historical Myth as problem

In his 1991 essay, "How the Western Was Lost," J. Hoberman concurs with the suggestion that the Western is ultimately a mythologised version of American history. Arguing that this makes the Western problematic, he compares the genre with baseball in that both are "a sacred part of America's post-Civil War national mythology – a shared language, a unifying set of symbols and metaphors, and a source of (mainly male) identity", to make the point that following the Second World War baseball was integrated, as opposed to the Western which "remained overwhelmingly white."[80] Highlighting the fact that this flies in the face of historical reality – more than a quarter of cowboys during the late 19th century were of African descent – Hoberman comes to the conclusion that the Western may be as much concerned with *concealing* history in favour of a white American mythology as it is with *illustrating* history.

This was a point that filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer controversially drove home in a 2014 interview while discussing issues of genocide in relation to the release of his recent documentary on the mass-murders that occurred in Indonesia during the 1965

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[79] Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, 37.
[80] J. Hoberman, "How the Western Was Lost" in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 86.

revolution, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Alluding to the fact that winners always get to write the history books, he declared that "the whole [Western] genre exists because of genocide, to celebrate and justify genocide. It's the genre's whole *raison d'être*."[81] In other words, the genre was born out of a need to justify the violent persecution and destruction of Native Americans and their culture. Both he and Hoberman raise valid concerns about the idea that the Western could in any way be responsibly seen as "History". As Christopher Frayling notes, in *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys from Karl May to Sergio Leone*, the truth has always been far too unpalatable:

> Stories about post-Civil War unemployment (Jesse James – who oscillated between ex-Yankee and ex-Rebel factions, using the Civil War 'as an excuse'), the economic implications of the range wars (Billy the kid – who hired himself out to both the sides fighting for social and economic power) and Wyatt Earp's family vendettas (the O.K. Corral – where the Clantons were shot, either to protect the Earp family investments, or else to silence those who could make a charge of robbery with violence stick against the 'fighting pimps', as they were called) do not make good box-office in the United States. At least one assumes they do not; no one seems to have actually tested the hypothesis.[82]

The Western Historical Myth was not born out of a desire to investigate the past or uncover unpleasant realities about the heroes of the past. It was about reinforcing and celebrating the belief that the United States was essentially good, and had been built on morally sound foundations, without any problematic introspection.

Revisionism as a means of repairing the Western Historical Myth

Like any cultural myth, the Western has never been a stable entity, constantly evolving and adapting to maintain cultural relevance. But up until the outset of World War II, the Western had evolved more in terms of its formal qualities than its thematic ones. That is to say, the genre's aesthetics and conventions had developed, but its focus on propagating the sanitised Western Historical Myth of the Frontier period remained unchanged. However, in the period during and following WWII, a greater tendency to undermine the traditional values of the Western Historical Myth became apparent, with numerous films taking the genre in new directions.

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[81] Janet Kinosian, "Joshua Oppenheimer on 'The Act of Killing,' reconciliation," *LATimes.com*, Feb 18 2014, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-joshua-oppenheimer-act-of-killing-20140218-story.html (accessed Feb 2021)
[82] Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2012), 193.

In 1955, André Bazin published an article in *Cahiers du cinéma* suggesting that the Western had reached its generic zenith around the beginning of America's participation in World War II, and that the subsequent four years of war had the incidental effect of delaying and then modifying the genre as a whole.[83] Identifying a new trend in the Western genre, Bazin only half-knowingly signposts the birth of the revisionist Western post-WWII. First holding up John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) as the idea example of the Classical Western, he provided the list of ingredients that made this the case:

> John Ford struck the ideal balance between social myth, historical reconstruction, psychological truth, and the traditional theme of the Western *mise en scène*. None of these elements dominated any other. Stagecoach is like a wheel, so perfectly made that it remains in equilibrium on its axis in any position. [84]

Arguing that the post-war reinvigoration of the Western was also deeply influenced by WWII, Bazin makes a vague but likely connection between the horrific trauma of that period and the cultural impulse to move the Western from a classical approach that used history as its material to something more substantial. Bazin derisively describes the films that made up this new approach as "superwesterns":

> The superwestern is a Western that would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence—an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political or erotic interest, in short some quality extrinsic to the genre and which is supposed to enrich it.[85]

Bazin seems to be identifying a trend in the rise of Westerns which seek to exceed the traditional boundaries of what he calls the Classical Western by taking on social issues, introducing greater character depth or even taking elements from other genres, and fundamentally diluting to polluting the genre. What is perhaps most interesting about Bazin's claims is that, along with the above he makes the point that "History, which was formally only the material of the Western, will often become its subject" in the superwestern.[86] Going further Bazin highlights this trend by pointing out that "we see the beginning of [the] political rehabilitation of the Indian" in such

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[83] André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Western" in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 49.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 51.
[86] Ibid.

films as *Fort Apache* (1948) and *Broken Arrow* (1950), both of which make an argument for Native Americans.

Bazin was right in observing this new movement that sought to reject or interrogate the meanings projected in the classical Western up to that point, but his attempts at suggesting the classical Western represented the zenith of the genre seem naïve in retrospect. The new move to revisionism sought higher truths than had been hitherto available within the genre. There are countless examples. In *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) William Wellman used the Western landscape to explore the horrors of pack mentality, following the story of a lynch mob eager to avenge a murder, but with little patience for proper procedure. As Edward Buscombe notes in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, the film's exploration of the absence of justice, and its emphasis on complex character motivations, makes it a precursor to the "'adult' or 'social' or 'psychological' Western".[87] Buscombe never mentions the revisionist Western, but implicit in these terms is the notion of a Western that seeks to interrogate rather than simply celebrate the past and/or the human condition. Delmer Daves' *Broken Arrow* highlights the plight of Native Americans, following the story of an Apache tribe persecuted by reactive and racist townsfolk to subvert the wilderness/civilisation binary of the Western by inverting its traditional meanings. And Henry King's *The Gunfighter* (1950) follows Jimmy Rango (Gregory Peck), a tormented gunslinger whose notoriety forces him to kill naive young men, eager to make a name for themselves. Here we are presented with a complex anti-hero, cursed by his own earlier evil and ambition, compelled to murder until he ultimately finds relief in death. This was not a traditional hero or villain, but a conflicted and far more believable fusion of both: a new type of hero more common in film noir than the Western up to that point.

While Bazin held up Ford's *Stagecoach* as the epitome of the classical Western, Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) and George Steven's *Shane* (1953) were put forward as definitive examples of the superwestern. For Bazin, the former film, which he acknowledges as a strong work, is a superwestern due to its sub-textual critique of McCarthyism and the director's ability to combine a narrative that could appear in any genre with the formal codes of the Western. But Bazin is far less accepting of *Shane*, which he describes as the height of "superwesternization", due to what he sees as self-conscious attempts to highlight its own status as a Western myth.

Both films would later become major influences for two of Eastwood's four Westerns as director: *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider*. If Bazin was opposed to the self-

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[87] Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, 44.

consciousness of the superwestern, one can only assume that he would have been horrified at the prospect of Eastwood's super(natural)westerns, and their attempts to elevate Western mythology beyond the very boundaries of reality. Interestingly, John Wayne found *High Noon* to be deeply problematic, precisely because it sought to undercut the problematic Western Historical Myth: "It's the most un-American thing I've ever seen in my whole life. The last thing in the picture is ole Coop putting the United States marshal's badge under his foot and stepping on it".[88]

Fittingly, decades later John Wayne would make similar comments about Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter*. Had Wayne reflected on his own career at its conclusion, he may have noted that he himself had starred in several films that could easily be marked as revisionist and potentially "un-American" on this basis. Perhaps the most iconic and interesting of these is Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), a revisionist Western that goes out of its way to highlight the distinction between historical truth and the Western Historical Myth. In some ways, this film is a bridge between the classical Western of old and the countercultural ideals that would soon follow, leaving the classical Western behind almost entirely.

Revisionist Westerns became increasingly popular in the decades that followed, but it was only with the rise of the American counterculture of the 1960s that the volume of films taking the revisionist approach began to exceed the traditional. As Richard Slotkin notes in *Gunfighter Nation*, the loss in the Vietnam War and its repercussions for America's international standing, along with the national divide about the value of that war and the economic crisis brought about by its cost, led to a national crisis of faith:

> Historical events (like the defeat in Vietnam) always call into question the validity of "the guiding myth." In a healthy society the political and cultural leaders are able to repair and renew that myth by articulating new ideas, initiating strong action in response to a crisis, or merely projecting an image of heroic leadership. But leaders are recognized and empowered only in an ideological system whose public myth imagines a place and a role for heroic action.[89]

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[88] "John Wayne: Playboy Interview 1971," *Playboy*, May, 1971, reproduced *pages.shanti.virginia.edu*,
https://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/Wild_Wild_Cold_War/files/2011/11/John_Wayne_Playboy_Int2.pdf (accessed Feb 2021)
[89] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 626.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is at this moment that revisionism becomes both overt and highly irreverent, often being referred to with labels like "the anti-Western", "the modern Western", or "the de-mythologizing, realist" or "new wave" Western".[90] Whatever we call them, Kitses makes the point that "such attempts to characterize [revisionist Westerns] implicitly recognize an epochal turning point, the wave of revisionism driven by the period's counter-culture".[91] *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (1971), *The Shooting* (1966), *Ride the Whirlwind* (1966), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976) and comedies like *Cat Ballou* (1965) and *Blazing Saddles* (1974) are all pivotal examples in this movement. Just as important is the Eastwood starring *Hang 'Em High* (1968), and his first Westerns as director, *High Plains Drifter* and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. If these films all have one thing in common, it is that they depart from the traditional understanding of the Western, providing problematic visions of the past as alternatives or parodies. In a sense, the Western Historical Myth became innately reflexive during this period, making it implicitly revisionist.

Up to this point, the above account of the history of the Western sits well with popular thinking about the evolution of genre in which, as Jim Collins notes in "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," there are three broad evolutionary stages:

> [There is an] initial period of consolidation in which specific narratives and visual conventions begin to coalesce into a recognizable configuration of features corresponding to a stable set of audience expectations. … [A second] "Golden Age," in which the interplay of by now thoroughly stabilized sets of stylistic features and audience expectations is subject to elaborate variations and permutations. The final phase is generally described in terms of all-purpose decline, in which the played-out conventions dissolve either into self-parody or self-reflexivity.[92]

However, as Collins notes, the Western saw a resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s that was in many ways unprecedented in genre filmmaking, which he traces not to a new fourth Western stage but to a broader:

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[90] Jim Kitses, "Introduction: Postmodernism and The Western," in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 18.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 295.

"renaissance" phase in terms of technological and cultural changes that have produced a set of circumstances in which the central function of genericity is in the process of being redefined. The "recyclability" of texts from the past, the fact that once-forgotten popular texts can now be "accessed" almost at will changes the cultural function of genre films past and present.[93]

The result, Collins argues, is the appearance of Westerns that demonstrate "an ironic hybridization" and those that epitomise a ""new sincerity" that rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity".[94] The former might be represented by the likes of *Back to the Future III* (1990) or *Wild Wild West* (1999) with their collision of Western, science fiction and pop culture tropes. The latter can be found in Eastwood's *Pale Rider*, and its attempts to locate an innocent America in the form of a small colony beset upon by the tainting forces of corporate greed and environmental destruction. It can also be seen in the likes of *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and its attempts to locate a simpler time in the form of a mythic depiction of a Native American culture almost entirely untainted by white colonialism. It is within this context that Eastwood's *Unforgiven* was released, its tone sitting in radical juxtaposition with many of the ironic or saccharine Westerns released during this period.

Conclusion

The Western has ultimately always been about representing the meeting of the wilderness and civilisation on the American Frontier of the late 19th century, and usually centred around a protagonist who quite literally embodies these two opposing forces. But while the genre is tied up with notions of the past, it is pivotally important to understand that the Western has never been about representing history so much as it has been about representing a myth of the past that serves to reinforce America's understanding of its own cultural identity through analogous narratives that retrospectively imply a supposed truth about manifest destiny. The Western is a vision of a nation in a state of pre-determined and righteous becoming.

In becoming this myth, the Western was naturally compelled towards rejecting those elements which did not feed the aforementioned narrative. Where the story behind a historical figure like Wyatt Earp might be deeply problematic, the Western takes only the elements that feed the heroic myth. Where the Native American tribes were numerous, unrelated and culturally diverse groups that were frequently persecuted to

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[93] Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties," 295.
[94] Ibid., 291.

the point of retaliation, the Western focuses only on the acts of retaliation. Where African American men made up twenty-five percent of all cowboys, the Western disregards the reality in favour of a more palatable and commercially viable white cast. And where violence is brutal, horrific, and causes endless emotional trauma, agonising pain, and unnecessary death, the Western presents it within a sanitised and palatable frame, framed by a retrospective sense of purpose and shaped within the context of an almost mediaeval code of honour.

The revisionist Western that arose out of the 1960s was the vehicle through which the genre could be salvaged from cultural irrelevancy, allowing filmmakers to re-examine the Western Historical Myth and its relationship with American history. It was within this context that Eastwood's career as an actor and filmmaker began, fundamentally shaping his conception of the Western and its possibilities and limitations, both in terms of its place as a mode of representing the past and its relevance to the present.

Eastwood's Early Westerns

In order to understand Eastwood's work within the Western as a director, it is critical to understand the early formative experiences he had within the genre as an actor, during which time he worked within some of its most conventional and radical expressions. In doing so, Eastwood gained deep exposure to the way in which the genre functioned as an expression of the Western Historical Myth, and the way in which that myth might be subverted.

A few minor appearances aside, Eastwood first appeared on television screens in the role of Rowdy Yates in 1959, a friendly young ranch-hand easily distracted by young women, in the Western TV show *Rawhide*, which followed the adventures of a group on a cattle drive across the old west. By the television standards of the time, the show provided an enticing and seemingly authentic representation of the lives of cattle-herders, even if most episodes were fairly by-the-numbers in their plotting. As Eastwood notes in Michael Munn's biography, *Clint Eastwood: Hollywood's Loner*: "We did honest stories … pretty much the way they happened. Now and then we may have rearranged things to heighten the drama. But in general, we respected historical truth."[95]

Of course, *Rawhide* was not a show that represented real historical figures, and Eastwood is not here implying this to be the case. Rather, the show's makers strove

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[95] Michael Munn, *Clint Eastwood: Hollywood's Loner* (London: Robson Books, 1992), 37.

to make its representation of the post-Civil war period as believable as possible based on audience expectations, occasionally tackling period-related issues like racism and post-war tensions. This was the Western Historical Myth at its most earnest, simple and conventional, its characters straddling the boundary between the wilderness and civilisation as they sought out their own version of the American dream.

In early 1964, while still working on *Rawhide*, Eastwood received an offer to star in an Italian Western entitled *The Magnificent Stranger*, to be directed by Sergio Leone, then a relatively unknown filmmaker. The film was ultimately released as *A Fistful of Dollars*. Eastwood played Joe, a stranger who arrives in San Miguel, a Mexican border town run by two rival gangs led by Mexican Ramon Rojo (Gian Maria Volonte) and the American Baxters respectively. Playing the two groups against each other, Joe is able to force a violent conflict which ultimately leaves all dead, save for an innkeeper, an undertaker, and a Mexican family which is stuck in the middle. As Eastwood noted in one 1967 interview, his character was the "epitome of anti-heroism" and the film was "one of the few Westerns in which the hero instigates conflict." [96] Going further, Eastwood seems to anticipate his own career, suggesting that in the future Westerns may "not have the white-hat hero be so white-hat" and may "get away from the obvious clichés."[97]

Leone had adapted the screenplay of *A Fistful of Dollars* from the Akira Kurosawa samurai film, *Yojimbo* (1960), but had failed to secure the rights. Lawsuits ensued which delayed the release of the film in the United States until 1967, three years after it was released in Italy. But in the meantime it had done remarkably well in Italy, where Eastwood had unwittingly "become a superstar".[98] With *Rawhide* coming to a close at home, Eastwood had no reason not to sign on for the second and third films in what became known as Leone's "Dollars Trilogy": *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), respectively. All three films ultimately ended up being released in the United States within a twelve-month period.[99] In each, Eastwood played a different character with a different name, but that didn't stop people referring to his characters across the three films as the "Man With No Name".

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[96] "Clint Eastwood Interview 1967," Facebook.com, accessed September 2016. https://business.facebook.com/explosivemediagmbh/videos/806693346103216/

[97] Ibid.

[98] Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone: Something to do with Death* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 164.

[99] Stuart Galbraith IV, *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune* (New York-London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 311-312.

For a Few Dollars More once again placed Gian Maria Volonte in the role of the bad guy, this time a drug addled, bank robbing psychopath named Il Indio. Il Indio and his gang are pursued by two rival bounty hunters, Manco (Eastwood) and Colonel Douglas Mortimer (Lee Van Cleef). *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* saw the return of both Eastwood (the good) and Lee Van Cleef (the bad), with the introduction of Eli Wallach (the ugly) in an epic conclusion to the trilogy that outdid the previous films in scope, length, historical commentary and brutality. All three amoral gunslingers find themselves in pursuit of the same treasure against the horrific backdrop of the American Civil War, leading to a series of cat and mouse adventures culminating in one of cinema's most infamous shootouts. Even for those who seen no other Western, the cinematography and score of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* are still iconic enough to immediately invoke an image of the Western genre.

When *A Fistful of Dollars* finally made it to American screens in 1967, it made almost $3.5 million dollars, and Eastwood's name was becoming widely recognised across the country. Audience popularity aside, critics were fixated on the film's brutality. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* argued that the film was an entertaining but violent disgrace, and singled out Eastwood's performance suggesting that "he succeeds in being ruthless without seeming cruel, fascinating without being realistic."[100] Philip French of *The Observer* declared that "the calculated sadism of the film would be offensive were it not for the neutralising laughter aroused by the ludicrousness of the whole exercise."[101]

For a Few Dollars More received similar feedback, with Crowther disparagingly suggesting that it was "constructed to endorse the exercise of murderers, to emphasize killer bravado and generate glee in frantic manifestations of death."[102] *Variety* praised its "bigger-than-life style, which combines upfront action and closeup details with a hard-hitting pace".[103] And reflecting on the trilogy in his review on *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, Roger Ebert was struck by a strange and edgy realism to the way in which characters are depicted, both conceptually and aesthetically:

[100] Bosley Crowther, "Screen: 'A Fistful of Dollars' Opens: Western Film Cliches All Used in Movie Cowboy Star From TV Featured as Killer," *The New York Times*, Feb 2, 1967, https://www.nytimes.com/1967/02/02/archives/screen-a-fistful-of-dollars-openswestern-film-cliches-all-used-in.html (accessed Feb 2021)
[101] Philip French, "Under Western Disguise," *The Observer*, Jun 11, 1967, https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/258884102/ (accessed Feb 2021)
[102] Bosley Crowther, "Screen: 'For Few Dollars More' Opens: Trans-Lux West Shows New Eastwood Film 2 Rivals in Murder Are Presented as Heroes," *The New York Times*, Jul 4, 1967, https://www.nytimes.com/1967/07/04/archives/screen-for-few-dollars-more-openstranslux-west-shows-new-eastwood.html (accessed Feb 2021)
[103] "Review: 'For a Few Dollars More'," *Variety*, 1965, http://variety.com/1965/film/reviews/for-a-few-dollars-more-2-1117791012/ (accessed Feb 2021)

All three movies are filled with close-ups of memorable faces, and these are not Hollywood extras with stuck-on whiskers but Italian peasants who have worked in the sun all their lives and will go back to work tomorrow. Most of them -- like the legless beggar or the witnesses at the hangings -- populate scenes only a few minutes in length. Yet they supply atmosphere, like those strange people who hover in the shadows of Dickens novels, and when the beggar crawls into the bar and says, "Hand me down a whisky," that is the kind of macabre detail unthinkable in Hollywood.[104]

Whether or not they saw it as a good thing, critics agreed that something very different was happening in Leone's Westerns. And such morbid details, which lend themselves to a bitter representation of the past, did not emerge from a vacuum. In *Spaghetti Westerns*, Christopher Frayling notes that the Italy Leone came of age in shared a commonality with Japan and Germany in that all three were defeated in WWII. This he suggested might be seen as a reason that they would produce "'Westerns' in which the hero lives on his wits, prefers survival to 'honour', revenge to social morality, and has little faith in the 'progressive' aspects of the era in which he lives – this in an atmosphere of extreme brutality."[105] It should come as no surprise that in a 1982 interview with Frayling, Leone recalls seeing *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* upon its release in 1962 and thinking: "at long last a work of disenchantment."[106]

All three films in Leone's Dollars Trilogy are marked by: his use of extreme close-ups that highlight the haggard and rough faces of his weathered characters; dynamic and melodramatic cinematography; exaggerated performances and gunplay; brutal violence; operatic Ennio Morricone scores and amoral protagonists and antagonists. All the aforementioned elements collude to suggest a brutal world of heightened amorality that might easily be mistaken for nihilism. Leone's work was a declaration of love for the Western and a rejection of the Western Historical Myth. It was the angry, anarchic irreverence of these films which would reinvigorate the genre in the United States and shift the genre towards perpetual cynicism and revisionism. As Kevin Grant notes, the Spaghetti Western genre was single-handedly forged in "equal parts [of] homage, parody and critique":

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[104] Roger Ebert, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1968, reproduced *RogerEbert.com*, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-1968 (accessed Feb 2021)
[105] Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 65.
[106] Christopher Frayling, *Sergio Leone: Something to do with Death*, 127.

the genre thrives on paradox and contradiction, proffering superhuman protagonists while skewering heroic clichés; pitting comic-strip mayhem and baroque stylisation against gritty physical detail; absurdity and escapism against anti-imperialism and other socio-political currents. This mixture … [made] Westerns relevant again to Sixties filmgoers who had grown tired of conservative, simplistic cinema.[107]

The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly was particularly powerful in this context, playing against the backdrop of the American Civil War and featuring several scenes that highlighted the brutality and madness of war. A particularly cynical line from a drunk general captures the tone: "Whoever has the most liquor to get the soldiers drunk and send them to be slaughtered ... he's the winner." Surveying this scene of destruction, even Eastwood's cynical protagonist is horrified, stating, "I've never seen so many men wasted so badly." The analogous nature of these scenes to the events of WWII is striking. Leone seems to be using the Western to reject not just the Western Historical Myth, but also a sanitised view of the past and humanity.

In an extensive series of interviews with Paul Nelson, undertaken sometime between 1979 and 1983, Eastwood singles our first Leone and secondly Don Siegel when asked about directorial influences.[108] Eastwood enthusiastically elaborated on what he loved about the experience of working with Leone: "All the pent up frustrations of years of doing television, years of watching American Westerns decline because they were repeating themselves – and [Leone's] doing every crazy thing you'd want to do.[109]Similarly, In an interview with Frayling in 1985, Eastwood uses the example of Leone's breaking of an old Hollywood convention to highlight the exciting sense of irreverence and freshness that he brought to the Western:

> For years in Hollywood there was a thing called the Hays Office, there were certain taboos that were put on the Western, even more so than other things. One was that you never could tie up a person shooting with a person being hit. You had to shoot separately, and then show the person fall … We did it that way on *Rawhide* … Sergio never knew

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[107] Kevin Grant, *Any Gun Can Play: The Essential guide to Euro Westerns* (Farleigh: FAB Press, 2011), 50.
[108] Kevin Avery, ed. *Conversations with Clint: Paul Nelson's Lost Interviews with Clint Eastwood 1979-1983* (USA: Continuum International Publishing Group. 2011), 30.
[109] Ibid., 29-30.

that, and so he way tying it up and that was great – that's terrific, tie up the shots.[110]

If Eastwood learnt anything from Leone, it was to reject the status quo in pursuit of his vision, showing a respect to the genre whilst rejecting its traditions of historical representation. Leone had developed a violent, anarchic and nihilistic set of Westerns that reflected a far more cynical European sensibility. Eastwood had now seen what was possible and would take these revisionist impulses back to the United States and make them his own. Whereas Leone had focused on a condemnation of humanity and its past, Eastwood would be about utilising the Western to examine significant cultural and historical ideas, proffering ambiguity and ambivalence as a means of generating discourse rather than expressing opinion.

Having returned to the United States, Eastwood established his own production company, Malpaso Productions. In a 1984 interview with David Thomson he says "I saw a lot of inefficiencies and I thought I can screw up as good as the next person. I'd rather be the cause of my own demise."[111] From this point on, as David Sterritt points out in *The Cinema of Clint Eastwood: Chronicles of America*, Eastwood might not direct every film he appeared in, but "he would generally have the final say about scripts, directors and casting."[112]

Setting aside multiple offers for larger Westerns, Eastwood took on the script by Leonard Freeman and Mel Goldberg for *Hang 'Em High* and placed TV veteran Ted Post in the director's chair. It was the story of a former lawman who, after being wrongly hung and saved from death at the last minute, is forced throughout the film to confront the morality of execution. Exploring the arguments for and against capital punishment against a Western backdrop, the film provides an interesting examination of the social function of execution on The Frontier, offering ambiguity rather than a fixed position, and inviting the viewer to reflect on the ideas being presented. This was an early sign of Eastwood's impulse towards moral ambiguity as a means of opening up a text to multiple readings, which he would later put to service in his dramatic historical films. In a conversation with Paul Nelson, Eastwood said:

> I liked the way the script had been laid out: the analysing of capital
> punishment without making a statement for or against. I liked the way

[110] Christopher Frayling, "Eastwood on Eastwood," *Clint Eastwood: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Kathie Coblentz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 108.
[111] David Thomson, "Cop on a Hot Tightrope," *Clint Eastwood: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Kathie Coblentz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 68.
[112] David Sterritt, *The Cinema of Clint Eastwood: Chronicles of America* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 46.

the hero started out against, became for, then became against again, and went around in circles due to various things that happened to him in his life.[113]

It is possible that Eastwood was inspired by the earlier revisionist Western, *The Ox Bow incident*, a film that he praised for "what it had to say about capital punishment, about mob violence, about justice".[114] But while that film takes a clear moral position, Eastwood chose a script that proffered ambiguity. Utilising the wilderness/civilisation binary to articulate the difference or lack thereof between lynching and capital punishment, the film raises questions about whether the practice of execution on The Frontier could be accepted as a necessary evil required to civilise the West. The question itself inevitably undermines the sanitised Western Historical Myth by challenging the moral certainty that the myth represents.

In *Clint Eastwood: Filmmaker*, Daniel O'Brien laments the film's "awkward attempt to combine the liberal/historical approach of *Rawhide* with Leone-inspired brutality." [115] Some critics gave lukewarm reviews, like Roger Ebert who noted that the film "sets out to gather enough scabs, scars, blisters and rope burns to satisfy the sadomasochistic standards set by Leone" while the "moral of the story is vaguely against capital punishment."[116] And *Variety* considered the film to be a "poor-made imitation of a poor Italian-made imitation of an American Western" that "glorifies personal justice, and mocks orderly justice."[117]

What is most interesting is the way in which views were split on which side of the capital punishment debate the film sat. In retrospect, these critics appear so used to filmmakers using cinema to make statements rather than explore issues that they seem compelled to read moral certitude into the text. In reality, Eastwood had chosen a screenplay that delivered quite the opposite.

Apart from his appearance in the critically and commercially disastrous musical Western *Paint Your Wagon* (1969)[118], Eastwood's next Western was *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), a comedy-Western featuring a gunslinger who saves a nun from rape. Over the course of the film, it turns out that the nun is in fact a prostitute

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[113] Kevin Avery, ed., *Conversations with Clint: Paul Nelson's Lost Interviews with Clint Eastwood 1979-1983*, 34.

[114] Thierry Jousse and Camille Nevers, "Interview with Clint Eastwood," *Clint Eastwood: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Kathie Coblentz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 137-138.

[115] Daniel O'Brien, *Clint Eastwood: Film-Maker* (London: Butler & Tanner, 1996)

[116] Ebert, Roger, "Hang 'em High," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Aug 5, 1968.

[117] "Review: 'Hang 'Em High'," *Variety*, 1967, http://variety.com/1967/film/reviews/hang-em-high-1200421637 (accessed Feb 2021)

[118] David Sterritt, *The Cinema of Clint Eastwood: Chronicles of America*, 66.

secretly supporting Mexican revolutionaries, who ultimately ropes the reluctant gunslinger into her cause in the final act. Co-starring Shirley MacLaine, the film was directed by Don Siegel. Eastwood had worked with Siegel two years earlier on *Coogan's Bluff* (1968), a film about a modern-day cowboy cop from Arizona escorting a criminal to New York city. The film is an uneven production, beginning brutally, continuing as a light comedy and culminating with brutal violence. It seems likely that Eastwood was attracted to the idea of having his star image undercut by an irreverent female lead, whose idealism challenged the cynicism of his persona. The film certainly attempted to highlight the problematic relationship of the Western myth of progress, albeit within the context of a French/Mexican conflict rather than one of the Frontier, highlighting Eastwood's growing interest in new approaches to the genre.

Next was *The Beguiled* (1971), once again penned by Albert Maltz and directed by Siegel. Set during the American Civil War and based on a novel of the same name by Thomas Cullinan, the film cast Eastwood as an injured Union soldier John McBurney, taken in and hidden by the students and headmistress of a Southern boarding school. As he flirts and charms the young women of the school, the repressed females turn on each other. Becoming increasingly morbid, the headmistress is haunted by flashbacks of an incestuous relationship. McBurney turns against the women when his gangrenous leg is amputated, and ultimately the women conspire against McBurney and kill him. The film's intent was lost on most, but Eastwood saw the film as an interesting anti-war statement: "*The Beguiled* was our version of an antiwar movie, and how people's lives are affected being even on the periphery of a war and how adversely it affects the civilian population".[119]

Variety captured the spirit of most major critics, referring primarily to the film's problematic gender politics to argue that it "resort[ed] to tired symbolism, including that chestnut that equates southern womanhood with incestuous dreams."[120] All of this aside, *The Beguiled* marks an interesting moment in Eastwood's career, demonstrating an attempt to break away from the roles he had been involved with up to that point and showcasing his increasing impulse to explore the problematic nature of the human condition within the context of American history.

The last Western in which Eastwood acted but did not direct was the John Sturges helmed *Joe Kidd* (1972). Scripted by Elmore Leonard, *Joe Kidd* tells the story of the

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[119] Kevin Avery, ed., *Conversations with Clint: Paul Nelson's Lost Interviews with Clint Eastwood 1979-1983*, 57.
[120] "Review: 'The Beguiled," *Variety*, 1970, http://variety.com/1970/film/reviews/the-beguiled-1200422405/ (accessed Feb 2021)

titular character (Eastwood), a bounty hunter who finds himself assisting the rich land-baron Frank Harlan (Robert Duvall) in his pursuit of a local Mexican revolutionary names Luis Chama (John Saxon), who has encouraged a revolt amongst the local peasantry. Soon enough, Kidd finds his values compromised as he is caught between the oppressive violence of the local oligarch, and the excessive and unacceptable brutality of said revolutionary as it becomes clear that both are willing to kill to fulfil their ambitions. Again, Eastwood chose a screenplay that avoided any clear-cut sense of good and evil, revealing the hypocrisies, contradictions and brutality of each side. The equation between the wilderness and civilisation is destabilized here, as the supposedly civilised dominant forces reveal the savagery required to maintain power over The Frontier, and the disenfranchised peasantry, in some ways positioned as representing the wilderness, resort to violence in order to protect their rights. The screenplay engaged with the moral complexities involved in similar socio-economic struggles throughout history and seemed to condemn the actions of both sides, even as it empathised with the cause of Chama. Here was yet another hint of the refusal to moralise or impose ideology on to the past that would soon appear in Eastwood's works as he transitioned towards being not just a filmmaker, but a filmmaker historian.

Eastwood as a Western Director

High Plains Drifter (1973)

The huge popularity of *Dirty Harry* finally made Eastwood's ambitions to direct a possibility, and he took on his feature-length directorial debut *Play Misty for Me* (1971), an economically produced thriller that achieved moderate critical success. Soon enough this move towards direction led him back to the Western, resulting in the release of *High Plains Drifter*. In its attempts to take the persona that Eastwood had co-crafted with Leone in the Dollars films*, High Plains Drifter* came to be after Eastwood read a brief treatment by screenwriter Ernest Tidyman for a Western for Universal:

> I started to do it on the basis of a treatment of only nine pages. It's the only time that that has happened to me. The starting point was: "What would have happened if the sheriff in *High Noon* had been killed? What would have happened *afterwards*?[121]

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[121] Michael Henry Wilson, ""Whether I Succeed or Fail, I Don't Want to Owe It to Anyone but Myself": From Play Misty to Honkytonk Man," *Clint Eastwood: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Kathie Coblentz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 75.

The appeal was clear. Here was a concept that would take a much-respected Western and propose an alternate conclusion to that film involving the murder of its protagonist by gunslingers.

High Plains Drifter begins not long after the death of the town sheriff, Jim Duncan. The Stranger (Eastwood), an ominous and possibly supernatural being, arrives in the town of Lago and soon kills its local corrupt lawmen. Rather than arrest The Stranger, the townsfolk recruit him as their replacement lawman following the news that the town's previous protectors, Stacey Bridges and the Carlin brothers, are about to be released from a prison term for which they hold the people of Lago responsible. Meanwhile, The Stranger is inexplicably haunted by visions of Duncan's death in which it is revealed that these three men whipped him to death while the townsfolk looked on. No direct connection is made between The Stranger and Duncan. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Duncan's murder was arranged by the hypocritical townsfolk to prevent him revealing key information relating to a property dispute which would hand the land required for a planned prosperous mining deal over to Native Americans.

The Stranger agrees to defend and train up the locals to defend themselves, but makes a series of increasingly difficult demands, including painting the town of Lago red, renaming it Hell, and organising a "Welcome Home" party for Bridges and the Carlin Brothers. When the trio finally arrive in town they are shocked at the audacity of the townsfolk, who are as disabled by fear as they were during Duncan's whipping. The three killers lay waste to much of the town, set it on fire, and kill many of the key figures implicated in their arrest. The town's remaining survivors are kept hauled up in the local tavern as the town burns. But in the film's final minutes, the almost demonic silhouette of The Stranger appears by night, cast against the flames of the burning town, and kills each of these men one by one. The next morning The Stranger rides out of the decimated town, having left nobody the wiser as to his motives.

Critically, reviews were mixed, but they did showcase a recognition that Eastwood's first directorial foray into the genre was attempting to engage with the conventions of the Western form, even if they did not all recognise the value of this. Arthur Knight in *Saturday Review* suggested that *High Plains Drifter* "absorbed the approaches of Siegel and Leone and fused them with his own paranoid vision of society."[122] *The New York Times* described the film as "part ghost story, part revenge Western, more

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[122] James L. Neibaur, *The Clint Eastwood Westerns* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 107.

than a little silly" and "a high parody of the soft-featured, brutal Man With No Name."[123] While *Variety* suggested that it was a "nervously-humorous, self-conscious near satire on the prototype Clint Eastwood formula of the avenging mysterious stranger."[124] It seems that few critics were willing to take the film seriously, possibly an ongoing bias based on the negative criticism around *Dirty Harry*. Either way, the film was a significant commercial success.

Interestingly, the supernatural ambiguity of the film would not have been present if the screenplay had been directed in its original form. Eastwood made it clear in an interview with Paul Nelson that The Stranger character was:

> written as the brother in the original treatment and in the script, but I took out references to the brother because I felt that I wanted to present it as an apparition or a ghost. Maybe it's a ghost – I let the audience decide. … I feel audiences are intelligent and they want to be stimulated and think about things.[125]

It seems that Eastwood's intuitive approach to his first Western as director was to take the concept of the Man With No Name that had worked so well in the marketing of the *Dollars* films and extend this concept to its most literal extreme. In Laurence F. Knapp draws a similar correlation between Eastwood's "No Name" character and the character in *High Plains Drifter*, but suggests that the differentiator lies in a greater sense of moral force and omnipotence: "In *High Plains Drifter*, Eastwood redefines No Name as an eschatological force, a spiritual entity who has much more command over the frame and narrative. Unlike No Name, who, in *A Fistful of Dollars*, must wear a piece of armour to survive a gunfight, the Stranger is truly invincible."[126] Indeed, The Stranger is presented as infallible throughout *High Plains Drifter*, his every action bringing about a consequence that leads to the film's fiery conclusion. At no point is the protagonist ever shown to be at risk throughout the film. Eastwood's character had become a moral arbiter rather than an opportunist, as Eastwood himself has noted:

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[123] Vincent Canby, "'High Plains Drifter' Opens on Screen," *The New York Times*, Apr 20, 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/04/20/archives/high-plains-drifter-opens-on-screen.html (accessed Feb 2021)
[124] "Review: 'High Plains Drifter'," *Variety*, 1972, http://variety.com/1972/film/reviews/high-plains-drifter-1200423023/ (accessed Feb 2021)
[125] Kevin Avery, ed., *Conversations with Clint: Paul Nelson's Lost Interviews with Clint Eastwood 1979-1983*, 84.
[126] Laurence F. Knapp, *Directed by Clint Eastwood: Eighteen Films Analyzed* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1996), 58.

In the Leone films, the story was more fragmented. It was a series of vignettes that were rather loosely linked. In *High Plains Drifter*, all the elements overlap, even though there are several sub-plots. Everything is relating to the lynching that haunts the protagonist. And there's a moral perspective that only appeared episodically in the Leone films.[127]

Perhaps what is most interesting is Eastwood's desire to break away from the Leone's work, which he saw as preferencing aesthetic over narrative. In a sense, Eastwood is attempting a revision of a revision, taking his own persona and reconfiguring it an entirely different mode. This constant drive to deliberately disrupt the preconceptions around his own career and potential continues to be evident through much of Eastwood's work.

The film is, as Richard Slotkin argues in *Gunfighter Nation*, one of the formalist alternative Westerns of the early 1970s, a term referring to a Western which "features abstract, fairy-tale-like plots, gunfighter protagonists who ignore the normative motives of Western heroes, and landscapes devoid of historical association."[128] Such films are a subsidiary part of the revisionist Westerns coming out during this era, as discussed earlier in the chapter. On one level then, the film is ahistorical: pure myth. But it does carry through the revisionist concerns of *High Noon* with an even greater sense of moralising indictment. While the protagonist of *High Noon* went unsupported by his townsfolk, Eastwood's film makes those townsfolk complicit in murder, cowardice, conspiracy and the persecution of Native Americans. While the protagonist of *High Noon* reflects his contempt by throwing his star in the dust, Eastwood has his avenging angel come and lay waste to those who were directly or even implicitly involved in murder through their silence. But going further, it becomes clear that the town's moral core is not rendered toxic primarily by the murder of a sheriff, but by the willingness of the townsfolk to disenfranchise Native Americans in order to line their own pockets. As Sara Anson Vaux notes in *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood*:

> In *High Plains Drifter*, there is never a doubt how appeals to humanity
> to do the right thing will stand up in the fact of money's corrosive

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[127] Michael Henry Wilson, "Whether I Succeed or Fail, I Don't Want to Owe It to Anyone but Myself," 75.
[128] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 628-629.

influence. The normal response in the face of someone else's disaster is to do nothing.[129]

And so, if we turn to the formal structure of the Western as a genre which seeks to explore the intersection between the wilderness and civilisation (the two forces that are embodied in the form of the outsider protagonist) we are once again confronted with a deliberate attempt by Eastwood to render this binary problematic in its conception of the past and the humans who populated it. While civilisation is represented in its purest form through the memory of Jim Duncan, the righteous martyr murdered under almost Christ-like conditions, and the wilderness is most literally embodied in the form of the three antagonist gunslingers who murdered him, the place of the townsfolk in this binary deeply undercuts the virtuous values around which The Frontier is positioned. Here, the drive to civilise the wilderness out of greed has resulted in the contortion of the notion of civilisation, The Stranger leaves only a persecuted dwarf and a disenfranchised woman free from his vengeance. This is a Western in which the tenets of modern civilisation are under scrutiny, its people comfortable with persecuting and stealing from native Americans, its preacher unwilling to house those rendered homeless by a fire, its shop owners interested in little more than making a quick dollar. Indeed, when one character in the film makes an argument for killing Duncan, he makes it pretty clear: "Sometimes we have to do what's necessary to do ... for the good of everybody. That's the price of progress."

In his essay, ""One Hang, We All Hang": *High Plains Drifter*" Richard Hutson astutely notes that Eastwood's film "presents a portrait of a community that has an amazingly rich and complicated resonance in the history of Westerns", and highlights that the film exceeds all others in presenting "such a negative portrait of a frontier town", reflecting a growing cultural concern at the time about the myth that "American democracy was founded, maintained, and continually renewed, in these frontier communities."[130] As Vaux concisely notes, *High Plains Drifter* "dismembered any thought of the new settlements in the west as utopian."[131]

It is fitting then that John Wayne, who criticised the cynical social critique of *High Noon*, would send a letter to Eastwood, suggesting that *High Plains Drifter* "isn't what

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[129] Sara Anson Vaux, *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 19.
[130] Richard Hudson, ""One Hang, We All Hang": High Plains Drifter (1973)," *Clint Eastwood, Actor and Director: New Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Engel (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007), 101.
[131] Sara Anson Vaux, *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood*, 41.

the West was all about. That isn't the American people who settled this country."[132]
But in his exploration of the possibilities contained within the Western, which would
ultimately lead him to take a similar approach to representations of history in the
latter part of his career, it seems Eastwood had arrived at a far less lofty conclusion
about Frontier life and the way it could be represented on screen. While this film was
highly polemical in its approach to the Western Historical Myth, but unlike his
previous American Westerns *Hang 'Em High* and *Joe Kidd* which both interrogated
the reductionist elements of said myth, *High Plains Drifter* revealed the continuing
pattern of a director focused on disrupting accepted ideas, and rejecting reductionist
truths within the genre.

The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976)

In 1976 Eastwood released his second Western as a director, *The Outlaw Josey
Wales,* his first indirect attempt as director at engaging with historical events. In this
case, it was the traumatic aftermath of the American Civil War represented through
the experiences of a traumatised soldier. This in itself was not new ground for the
Western, which commonly alluded to the aftermath of the conflict through depictions
of the divide between characters from the north and south. Often there was an
implication that the war itself was the catalyst for a protagonist being torn from the
civilised world, subsequently living out their post-war existence in the wilderness. *The
Searchers* (1956), *Shane* (1953), *Vera Cruz* (1954), *The Naked Spur* (1953), and
The Hateful Eight are just a few examples. What was new ground in Eastwood's film
was its nihilistic sense of futility, which it utilised to disrupt the Western Historical
Myth, and privileges the Civil War as a moment in which the nation's ideals were
fermented. In Eastwood's film, this war was, much like the conflict in Vietnam, an
unredeemable waste of life. More than this, Eastwood showed a disinterest in
moralising about the war, instead privileging a more introspective reflection on the
traumatic experience of war itself. As Eastwood notes in one 1984 interview:

> In the case of the Civil War, there had to be something particularly
> traumatic there. Americans were fighting other Americans. You had
> one people, but split in half. And according to the state or county
> where you were living, you were recruited to join one camp or the
> other.[133]

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[132] Peter Biskind, "Any Which Way He Can," *Clint Eastwood: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis
and Kathie Coblentz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 150.
[133] Michael Henry Wilson, ""Whether I Succeed or Fail, I Don't Want to Owe It to Anyone but
Myself": From Play Misty to Honkytonk Man," 79.

The film follows Josey Wales (Eastwood), a farmer who joins the Confederate cause after seeing his wife and son murdered by Union soldiers. The bulk of the narrative takes place after the war, with the deeply traumatised Wales on the run from Union soldiers having witnessed their extermination of surrendering Confederates. In hot pursuit of Wales are soldiers led by his former friend turned informer, Fletcher (John Vernon), caught between saving his own life and betraying Wales. As Wales runs, his attempts to remain a lone figure are continually disrupted as a growing number of individuals join him in his travels, including two Native Americans, a young woman from the north, her proud Unionist grandmother and a dog. Ultimately, Wales is able to move beyond his sense of trauma and loss to live with the new family he has inadvertently found.

Pervading the entire film is a sense of personal and national trauma, overtly articulated through the titular character, whose original ambitions to join the war out of revenge have amounted to nothing more than an escalation of his suffering. An early scene in which Wales' war-weary comrades surrender to Unionists only to be massacred provides an immediate sense of this waste. Without even the morbid comforts of victory or revenge, the futility of Wales' situation is laid bare. As a result, the story becomes that of a man attempting to avoid the emotional risks of re-establishing human connection whilst finding himself pulled into the very kind of community/family he wishes to avoid. As Vaux notes:

> Eastwood, unlike most of the directors of American Westerns from 1903 on, refuses to glorify the Civil War or its aftermath, or to submerge the race and class conflicts of those years (almost always ignored in the sanitized accounts of that conflict), or to forget the acres of rotting corpses and the postwar resurgence of racial hatred that engulfed the country.[134]

Eastwood seems to be taking a subversive perspective on the representation of the conflict, seeking to privilege the visceral representation of the experiences of a traumatised soldier following the war, whose direct experience does not align with the broader reality of the Civil War as an event that brought about the end of slavery. Given the period of the film's release, it is possible see the film as a deliberate attempt to tie the traumatic return of soldiers to a divided America following the American Civil War with contemporary concerns following the end of the Vietnam war. Philip French suggests that:

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[134] Sara Anson Vaux, *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood*, 22.

> The Civil War, in the aftermath of which Josey Wales takes place, is
> clearly a substitute for Vietnam, and the shaping into a community of
> the disparate outcasts who join the fugitive Wales on his travels is a
> binding up of the wounds caused by the Indo-Chinese War and the
> social divisions of the 1960s.[135]

David Sterritt makes similar suggestions when he notes that the film's status as a post-Vietnam allegory is most acutely demonstrated within two key moments: the first being "when Josey enters a truce with a Comanche chief that calls for the sort of mutual deterrence and detente that was promoted in East/West diplomacy between 1973 and 1977"; and the second being when "Josey, implicitly pictured as a Confederate counterpart of aggrieved Vietnam veterans, symbolically accepts the peace movement by marrying a 'flower child' from northern climes."[136]

Eastwood acknowledged the allegorical aspects of *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, even as he sought to disassociate himself from a self-conscious decision to introduce them. Speaking to Frayling in a 1985 interview, Eastwood said that "it was inherent in the story" and that "I guess it made it attractive to me." At the same time he rejected the notion that he was "doing this now because this parallels some situation in history, then and now, like Vietnam." Going further, he noted that "the dislocation could be the same after every war… *is* the same."[137] Intentionally or not, Eastwood here argues for the film as a universal statement on the traumatic experience of war and violence, a hint of the preoccupation with the subject of war and its human consequences that would continue later in his career.

The Outlaw Josey Wales certainly demonstrates a clear change in approach to issues of violence. As Brett Westbrook notes, "In the classic Western, the hero protects the family from violence with violence. ... Josey Wales, however, walks away from no fewer than four possible altercations."[138] The movie is notable for Wales' attempts to avoid conflict. The first incident sees Wales sabotage his pursuers' attempt a raft river crossing rather than killing them. A second incident in a saloon sees him warn an aspirational bounty hunter that "Dyin' ain't much of a livin'." The third is the aforementioned negotiation between Ten Bears and Wales, in which Eastwood asks for permission to live on his land. And the fourth incident occurs during the final scene, in which Eastwood finds himself confronted by Fletcher, his

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[135] Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre and Westerns Revisited* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2005), 107.
[136] David Sterritt, *The Cinema of Clint Eastwood: Chronicles of America*, 114-115.
[137] Christopher Frayling, "Eastwood on Eastwood," 109.
[138] Brett Westbrook, "Feminism and the Limits of Genre," *Clint Eastwood, Actor and Director: New Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Engel (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007), 38.

old friend turned nemesis. The two men, pretending not to know each other, have this exchange:

> Fletcher: I think I'll go down to Mexico to try to find him. … I think I'll try to tell him the war is over. What do you say, Mr. Wilson?
>
> Wales: I reckon so. I guess we all died a little in that damn war.

By privileging ideas about the dehumanising effects of violence and creating analogous associations with the Vietnam War, Eastwood chooses to revise the Western Historical Myth and its glorification of the American Civil War in favour of something aligned with the realities of war as perceived by contemporary audiences. In doing so, Eastwood once again showcased his impulse to reject traditional understandings of the past in favour of a deeper, broader and more exploratory approach.

While mixed, reviews suggested a general understanding that *Josey Wales* marked a fundamental shift for Eastwood.[139] However they did not necessarily show an engagement with or receptiveness to his morally ambiguous approach to historical representation. Richard Eder of the *New York Times* was unsatisfied with what he perceived to be the depiction of southerners as markedly more civilised than those in the Union: "There is something cynical about this primitive one-sidedness in what is not only a historical context, but happens also to be our own historical context. To the degree a movie asserts history, it should at least attempt to do it fairly."[140] In approaching the film with a preconceived perception about the role of a filmmaker historian in representing the American Civil War, Eder here begins a long-standing tradition of missing the critical point of Eastwood's work as a historian. By putting aside a discussion of the morality of the war and placing a confederate soldier at the centre of the narrative, Eastwood's film subsequently shifts its subject matter away from any ideological binary, instead privileging a reflection on the consequences of war.

Apart from the representation of the war, the film is also notable for its representation of Native American peoples. In the Classical Western, Native Americans were generally represented as savages that needed to be exterminated in order to civilise the west. Notable exceptions include *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Fort Apache* (1948),

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[139] Roger Ebert, "The Outlaw Josey Wales," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1976, reproduced, *RogerEbert.com*, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-outlaw-josey-wales-1976 (accessed Feb 2021)
[140] Richard Eder, "The Outlaw Josey Wales," *The New York Times*, Aug 5, 1976, https://www.nytimes.com/1976/08/05/archives/clint-eastwood-aims-at-war-epic-in-josey-wales.html (accessed Feb 2021)

but while those films highlight the oppression of Native Americans, by the 1970s the influence of the counterculture on the Western saw a shift to films that Slotkin notes "suggested that Native American culture might be a morally superior alternative to "civilization.""[141] Works like *Little Big Man* (1970), *Chato's Land* (1972) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* fundamentally reassessed Native American representations in cinema and the Western. As Westbrook notes The *Outlaw Josey Wales* "puts the "savage" into the same category as the hero, someone wronged by corrupt and duplicitous governments."[142]

This is particularly apparent in the scene in which Wales comes across Lone Watie (Chief Dan George), an elderly Cherokee "who once went to Washington as a representative of the "Civilized tribe". The term refers to the five tribes who were considered civilised due to their adoption of Western mores. Lone Watie provides his own definition: "I'm an Indian, all right; but here in the nation they call us the 'civilised tribe'. They call us 'civilised' because we're easy to sneak up on. White men have been sneaking up on us for years." It is likely that Lone Watie's trip to Washington D.C. was as part of a delegation in 1830 who appeared before the Supreme Court, requesting that their land not be taken away after gold was discovered at Dahlonega, Georgia on Cherokee land. As Sickels notes, "Both men have lost their families to the forces of the Union, and that turns into a bond."[143]

Later, Wales intervenes in the beating of a young Native American woman, Little Moonlight, who cannot speak English and must communicate through Lone Wattie. Whereas her character might in another era have been an expendable addition to the film – as was the case with the character "Look" in *The Searchers* who was used for comic effect before being butchered – Little Moonlight becomes an invaluable member of Wales growing community of travellers. At this point, all three characters are "united across the lines of identity prescribed by the usual generic demands of the Western that pits Anglos against all Indians."[144]

And finally, there is the scene with Ten Bears, the Comanche chief on whose land Wales' ragtag community attempts to settle. Within the Western, such a moment would traditionally end in violence. Instead, Wales rides out to the Comanche tribe and has an interaction, described by Cornell as "truly remarkable among Hollywood

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[141] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 629.
[142] Brett Westbrook, "Feminism and the Limits of Genre," 40.
[143] Robert C. Sickels, "A Politically Correct Ethan Edwards: Clint Eastwood's The Outlaw Josey Wales," in *Westerns: The Essential Journal of Popular Film and Television Collection*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton & Michael T. Marsden (London: Routledge, 2012), 159 .
[144] Brett Westbrook, "Feminism and the Limits of Genre," 36.

depictions of dialogue between white men and Native Americans."[145] This epitomises Eastwood's intent to "portray Comanche attire and dialogue with historical accuracy, to be respectful of the land and to be representative of a different mode of life" and highlight the nature of a culture "which was hostile to 'White Man Civilization' only as a response to the latter's cultural and territorial aggression."[146]

After reluctantly partnering with Lone Wattie and Little Moonlight, Wales also rescues two northerners, Grandma Sarah (Paule Trueman) and Laura Lee (Sondra Locke), from a group of Comancheros. The former is a loudmouthed and prejudiced woman, whose preconceived ideas are quickly forgotten off the back of her interactions with Wales, Wattie, and Moonlight. The latter is an introvert whose love will be the final catalyst that sees Wales embrace this small community as his family. As Westbrook notes of this group made up of three women and two men, or one southerner, two northerners and two Native Americans, "the company remains united in opposition to generic expectations, all pushing towards that ranch in Texas."[147]

As David Denby noted in a 2010 article in *The Telegraph*: "Landscape as moral destiny, a miscellaneous community as the American way – these were the first signs in Eastwood of both a wider social sympathy and an incipient distaste for the conventions of genre plotting."[148] Denby is astutely noting Eastwood's impulse to push against the expectations of the genre, particularly in the context of his own image as a lone stranger within earlier Westerns. Perhaps the most indicative symbol of this shift lies in the film's conclusion in which Wales, having left his surrogate family in order to exact his revenge, finds himself in the aforementioned final verbal exchange with Fletcher. Rather than ride off into the wilderness as is most common with the Western protagonist unable to re-join civilisation, Josey Wales rides in the direction from which he came. As Paul Smith states in *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*, the moment "represent[s] a significant shift in the standard Western paradigms where the hero precisely cannot return since he is forever alienated from the communities that he saves because of his profession."[149]

In *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood*, Sarah Vaux makes the argument that Eastwood uses the notion of community to dissect "the myths that perpetuate egoism and greed" and in order "to replace national protectionism, racism, and class

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[145] Drucilla Cornell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 142.
[146] Ibid., 144.
[147] Brett Westbrook, "Feminism and the Limits of Genre," 37.
[148] David Denby. "Clint Eastwood: Immortality in His Sights." *The Telegraph*, May 28, 2010.
[149] Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 44-45.

hierarchy, he models generous, tolerant, border-free communities where all can live in peace."[150] In the context of the Western, a genre whose classical elements are more focused on providing a justification for Manifest Destiny, this is a major act of subversion by Eastwood that fundamentally rejects the conservative impulses of the traditional Western.

The Outlaw Josey Wales reveals a sophisticated understanding of the Western Historical Myth and its problematic representation of history. By utilising the Western to examine the consequences of post-war trauma for a confederate soldier without moralising, whilst also creating parallels the Vietnam War, Eastwood subverts the Western Historical Myth to create a broad and introspective meditation on the inevitable consequences of war. Going further, Eastwood reflects the growing cultural concerns of the 1970s by re-examining the role of the Native American in the Western and in history, acknowledging that the nation's native peoples are victims of colonisation rather than perpetrators of violence. The twin concerns of post-War trauma and the Native American experience are both subsequently resolved by the narrative through the formation of a community made up of northerners and southerners, and whites and natives. This subverts the conventions of the Historical Western Myth that resolve division and difference through violence. *The Outlaw Josey Wales* is a revisionist Western that shows all the signs of Eastwood's growing preoccupation with deconstructing and reinterpreting both the past and the means by which it has been traditionally represented.

Pale Rider (1985)

It was nearly a decade before Eastwood returned to the Western with *Pale Rider*, a film that seemed to reflect the broader shift in cultural climate in the United States and within the genre. Gone was the countercultural frustration that had made the 1960s and 1970s an age of revisionist Westerns. It was replaced by the Reagan era with its move to restore American ideals into the national narrative. With *Pale Rider*, it seemed that Eastwood had moved away from his violent revision of the traditional Western Historical myth, foregoing the cynicism of earlier works with a return to something that sought to recapture an innocence in the classical mode of Western filmmaking, one in keeping with Collins' concept of the "new sincerity" outlined earlier in this chapter.

Pale Rider is a conscious remake of George Stevens' classic *Shane*, which reimagines the original as the story of a gold panning community, faced with the

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[150] Sara Anson Vaux, *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood*, 25.

prospect of being forcibly and illegally removed from their own land by a local mining magnate (Richard Dysart). The magnate's ecologically unsound use of hydraulic mining, a technology banned in California in the 1880s, is destroying the land and making it impossible for this community to live and work.[151] When a fourteen-year-old girl named Megan (Sydney Penny) sees her dog killed by the magnate's henchmen in a raid on a small gold panning village, she says a prayer over the animal's grave, asking for a saviour. Enter The Preacher (Eastwood), a quiet religious figure who acts more like a gunslinger, appearing out of the wilderness to save Megan's surrogate father Hull Barret (Michael Moriarty) from a vicious beating in town by the very same henchmen. The Preacher quickly becomes a popular figure in the community, his example giving hope to the disenfranchised gold panners who were just about ready to give up and abandon their land.

Conversely, the magnate brings in a gang of violent marshals for hire led by Stockburn (John Russell) who knows The Preacher and appears to believe he was already dead. The history between the two characters is never made explicit, and through the use of cinematography and religious allusions, an implication is made that The Preacher and Stockburn could be literally interpreted as angelic and demonic forces, bound to war over the fate of the small community. As a result of these attributes, Eastwood notes, "*Pale Rider* is kind of allegorical, more in the *High Plains Drifter* mode."[152]

Both Barret's fiancé and surrogate daughter are deeply enamoured with The Preacher and his swift justice, before coming to a realisation that The Preacher represents something other-worldly, unattainable, and reprehensible. A deliberate contrast is made between The Preacher, a mythic figure of violence, and Barret, a heroic family man fighting for his community with little thought for his own safety. Together The Preacher and Barret ultimately destroy LaHood's hydraulic mine, and The Preacher faces Stockburn and his men, bringing about the inevitable result.

If *High Plains Drifter* and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* both sought to do something new with the Western, then *Pale Rider* was clearly an attempt to take the traditions of the classical Western and use them to highlight the importance of old fashioned values relating to family and community. As Steven McVeigh notes in his essay "Subverting *Shane*":

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[151] James L. Neibaur, *The Clint Eastwood Westerns* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 147
[152] Christopher Frayling, "Eastwood on Eastwood," 110.

> In an administration [the Reagan presidency] that has attempted to return to former ideals and better times, what better proof of success than reproducing a text of such innocence, clear-cut morality, and pure mythology, which ten years earlier could not be made without horrific violence and perversion, cynicism, and irony?[153]

Reviews of the film were mixed, but generally recognised Eastwood's return to the Classical Western. They lacked the hostility that had become prevalent in reviews of Eastwood's work throughout the 1970s, with critics showing an appetite for the attempt to recapture the innocence of a previous era. In these reviews, an appetite for Collins' "new sincerity" is clear. Rex Reed of the *New York Post* suggested that "*Pale Rider* owes such a nostalgic debt to George Stevens' *Shane* that the similarities, scene by scene, become almost a parody."[154] In the *Chicago Sun-Times* Roger Ebert suggested that *Pale Rider* "is, over all, a considerable achievement, a classic Western of style and excitement."[155] The *LA Times* referred to the film as a "fond backward glance at a slice of the past"[156] Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* was exceptionally impressed: "Mr. Eastwood has continued to refine the identity of his Western hero by eliminating virtually every superfluous gesture. He's a master of minimalism. The camera does not reflect vanity. It discovers the mythical character within."[157] Despite concerns that the Western was well and truly deceased, *Pale Rider*, which cost seven million dollars, went on to gross forty million, perhaps reflecting that the film's traditionalist concerns resonated with the audience of the time. [158]

For Eastwood's part, his declared ambition was about bringing together the classical Western tradition and contemporary ecological concerns: "Basically I wanted to have contemporary concerns expressed within … the classical tradition."[159] In some ways, Eastwood's position here mirrors the approach he took with *Josey Wales* and its function as an analogy for the Vietnam War. But in this instance the impulse was not so much to subvert the Western as it was to revert to an understanding of the

[153] Stephen McVeigh, "Subverting Shane: Ambiguities in Eastwood's Politics in Fistful of Dollars, High Plains Drifter and Pale Rider," *Clint Eastwood, Actor and Director: New Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Engel (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007), 147.
[154] Rex Reed, "Pale Rider," *New York Post*, 1985.
[155] Roger Ebert, "Pale Rider," Chicago Sun Times, 1985, reproduced RogerEbert.com, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/pale-rider-1985 (accessed Feb 2021)
[156] Howard Hughes, *Aim for the Heart: The Films of Clint Eastwood* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 38
[157] Vincent Canby, "Film: Clint Eastwood in 'Pale Rider'," *New York Times*, Jun 28, 1985, https://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/28/movies/film-clint-eastwood-in-pale-rider.html (accessed Feb 2021)
[158] James L. Neibaur, *The Clint Eastwood Westerns*, 150.
[159] Richard Schickel, *Clint Eastwood: A Biography* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2012), 403.

classical Western. In an interview with Tim Cahill around the time of release, Eastwood elucidated on the Westerns' place within America, and what the "classic Western" meant to him:

> If you consider film an artform, as some people do, then the Western would be a truly American art form, much as jazz is. In the sixties, American Westerns were stale, probably because the great directors – Anthony Mann, Raoul Walsh, John Ford – were no longer working a lot. Then the Italian Westerns came along, and we did very well with those; they died of natural causes. Now I think it's time to analyze the classic Western. You can still talk about sweat and hard work, about the love for the land and ecology. And I think you can say all these things in the Western, in the classic mythological form.[160]

The word "analyze" here would seem to contradict the sentence that follows. Rather, it seems Eastwood is actually talking about utilising, without irony, the sincerity of the classical Western to explore contemporary concerns. However, despite the fact that Eastwood has acknowledged that the film is quite firmly contextualised by the hydraulic mining practices that were banned in the 1880s (long "before ecological concerns were as prevalent as they are today" because they "literally mow the mountains away"), he still sees *Pale Rider* as sitting firmly within the mythological tradition.[161] In an interview around the time of the film's release, when asked about his interest in the West and its history, Eastwood stated: "In a personal capacity [I am interested], of course, but in my pictures the approach has mainly been in the realm of mythology, *Pale Rider* is no exception."[162] This off the cuff remark would seem to reject the significance of the historical circumstances alluded to in *Hang 'Em High*, *Joe Kidd*, and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, but it does demonstrate an acute understanding of the difference between the Western Historical Myth and history itself. The former is about sustaining American identity through a positive foundational narrative; the latter is about representing as accurately as possible the realities of the past. This is an issue which Eastwood would later tackle quite directly in *Unforgiven*.

It could be tempting to read *Pale Rider* as a desire to succumb to traditionalism and move away the revisionist mode of Western filmmaking, but it is also worth

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[160] Tim Cahill, "Clint Eastwood: The Rolling Stone Interview," *Clint Eastwood: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis and Kathie Coblentz (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 102.
[161] Christopher Frayling, "Eastwood on Eastwood," 110-111.
[162] Michael Henry Wilson, ""Whether I Succeed or Fail, I Don't Want to Owe It to Anyone but Myself": From Play Misty to Honkytonk Man," 89.

highlighting that in doing so at this point, Eastwood is once again subverting the expectations around his own image as Western anti-hero, placing himself in contradistinction to his own legacy. By making a Western that aligns with the Western Historical Myth of noble frontiersmen toiling the land and making a place for themselves in America, Eastwood can be seen to be moving away from the expectations that precede his presence in a Western. Also notable is the changing depiction of violence in this far more conservative film, which would become the very subject of his next and final Western. As Cornell notes, the film is centred largely around "the theme of how law, when reduced to the authority of the biggest gun, is completely evacuated of its moral underpinnings."[163]

This is a theme very much shared with *Pale Rider*'s source of inspiration, *Shane*. Both films depend on the traditional protagonist of the Western myth, a mysterious stranger who straddles the line between wilderness and civilisation: someone who rides into town, has a shootout with the villain, but must ultimately leave because of his symbolic status as a being stuck between two worlds. Both have their final acts instigated by the brutal and unwarranted murder of a foolish but loveable community member. Both champion what Drucilla Cornell calls the "the heroic artisan, the Tin Pan who makes his way in the world with knowledge of the land and tools of his own making" over the "capitalistic self-made man."[164] And as is the case in *Shane*, "[Eastwood's film] uses the Preacher and his interactions with this group to reveal one more troubled episode in the ongoing move to 'conquer' the west. He exposes greed and rapacity as a threat to human values."[165] Both even culminate with their respective child characters screaming longingly after the disappearing protagonist, "Shane!" and "Preacher!"

In many ways, *Pale Rider* is a clunky entry in the Eastwood oeuvre, dealing awkwardly with the values of the classical Western whilst reinforcing the traditional values of the Western Historical Myth. For Eastwood, it marks an attempt to pivot in his approach to the genre, placing itself in contradistinction to both his own work, and the revisionist Westerns to come out of the counterculture movement of the late 1960s to mid-1970s. More than this, by returning to the classical Western, Eastwood reconfigures his approach to representations of violence, initiating a new approach to the genre that would ultimately come to full fruition with *Unforgiven* seven years later. Above all, Eastwood's attempts to reinvent his own approach to the genre hint at the

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[163] Drucilla Cornell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 20.
[164] Ibid., 22.
[165] Sara Anson Vaux, *The Ethical Vision of Clint Eastwood*, 53.

metahistorical approach to representation of history that will come to the fore with *Bird*, as detailed later in this thesis.

Unforgiven

Following the release of *Pale Rider* in 1985, it was seven years before Clint Eastwood directed what he maintains is likely to be his final Western, *Unforgiven*. In the interim, Eastwood directed four films, two of which were his first forays into the world of representing historical events or individuals. The first was an ambitious biopic on the life and times of Charlie Parker, *Bird* (1988). The second, released in 1990 was an adaptation of *White Hunter, Black Heart*, Peter Viertel's fictionalised account of his time working with director John Huston on the set of *The African Queen* (1951). *Bird*, which is covered within a later chapter of this thesis, was a major turning point for Eastwood, demonstrating a sophisticated dedication to ideas of authenticity and truth in representing its subject, employing a metahistorical approach to historical representations. As it turned out, *Unforgiven* proved to be every bit as sophisticated as *Bird*, and thematically similar, revealing an Eastwood as reflective about the relationship between the Western and history as he was about the problematic nature of representing the life of a historical figure.

Eastwood had optioned David Webb People's screenplay for *Unforgiven*, which had been floating around Hollywood since 1976, not long after the release of *Pale Rider*. Eastwood has joked that the long delay prior to finally making *Unforgiven* was due to his need to grow into the role, which he ultimately filled at the age of 62, but the more likely reality is that making another Western did not seem commercially viable at the time.[166] As Kitses notes in *Horizon's West*, it's more likely that the massive success of *Dances with Wolves* in 1990, a key example of Jim Collins' "new sincerity," was the greatest impetus for the film moving into production.

Unforgiven takes as its subject William Munny (Eastwood), a former gunslinger whose past is littered with transgressions, including countless acts of murder, some committed against women and children. Having found something akin to salvation with a young Christian wife, her recent death has left him alone with two children, and he is seduced back into the world of violence by financial necessity and a latent attraction towards violence that he refuses to acknowledge. Having been informed of a bounty on the heads of two men who have assaulted a prostitute – a crime which,

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[166] Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing The Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 306.

though horrible, has been exaggerated in order to incite righteous indignation – he sets out to collect.

In many ways the film functions as a kind of postscript to the Western Historical Myth, providing a protagonist who has finally left the wilderness to integrate into civilisation, only to be haunted by the interior call towards the violent brutality of said wilderness. Using this traditional binary, Eastwood frames his protagonist as a man whose past has become the material from which the Western Historical Myth is comprised, but whose present plays out within the context of a world that demonstrates the real consequences of violence and the fraudulent reality of said myth. However, while the protagonist knows his mythic status is an empty contrivance, he is also cursed with the compulsion to live out the myth, and ultimately be subsumed into it once more. In *Unforgiven*, Eastwood has pushed the revisionist Western to its furthest extremes, delivering the first metahistorical Western to audiences. Eastwood presents a fictional work that opens a dialogue about the nature of the human condition, the reality of violence, and the profound distinction between the Western Historical myth and the past.

Critical Reception

While *Bird* was a significant shift for Eastwood creatively, and both *Bird* and W*hite Hunter, Black Heart* had earned praise from some quarters, the release of *Unforgiven* in 1992 marked a radical change in the way Eastwood's work was viewed critically. The consensus was that Eastwood had directed an intelligent Western that subverted both the genre's traditional conventions and Eastwood's own place within the genre's history to examine its tendency to mythologise violence. Through the film's critical and academic reception, Eastwood's project of delivering a film that invited a meditation on the role of violence in the Western, and implicitly in American history, played out. Todd McCarthy celebrated *Unforgiven* as "a classic Western for the ages", arguing that Eastwood had "crafted a tense, hard-edged, superbly dramatic yarn that is also an exceedingly intelligent meditation on the West, its myths and its heroes."[167] Desson Howe of the Washington Post praised the film's revisionist elements, pointing out that the film "dismounts at places usually left in the dust -- the oppressed lot of women, the loneliness of untended children, adult illiteracy and the horrible last moments of the dying."[168] Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* admired the

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[167] "Review: 'Unforgiven'," *Variety*, Jul 31, 1992, http://variety.com/1992/film/reviews/unforgiven-1200430212/ (accessed Feb 2021)
[168] Desson Howe, "Unforgiven" *Washington Post*, Aug 7, 1992, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/unforgivenrhowe_a0aeea.htm (accessed Jan 2021)

way in which "Eastwood gives *Unforgiven* a tragic stature that puts his own filmmaking past in critical and moral perspective."[169]

Reacting to the critical reception of *Unforgiven*, Paul Smith, in a coda to *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* which was released not long after the film's release, suggests that "the claims for the complexity and ambiguity of the film are a little difficult to fathom", rejecting the plot points around which he sees the film's alleged themes developing.[170] For Smith, Munny's motivation within the film is clearly to utilise his old skills for the betterment of his struggling family, and there is no real sense of ambiguity in his motivations. Likewise, the film's conclusion, which sees Munny taking up the mantle of the mythological gunslinger and exacting revenge without remorse against his enemies, is read by Smith as a by-the-numbers Western moment of revenge that fundamentally undermines the anti-violence and revisionist tendencies of the film up to that point. Smith draws parallels between Eastwood's final Dirty Harry movie, *The Dead Pool* (1988), and *Unforgiven*, suggesting that it is "unable to criticize convincingly the very violence that it itself is involved in and that it does not shrink from re-representing."

In Janet Thumim's essay "Maybe He's Tough But He Sure Ain't No Carpenter: Masculinity and In/competence in *Unforgiven*", she concurs with popular critics generally, suggesting that *Unforgiven* "invites a meditation on history—the stuff of the Western—calling into question both the morality and the veracity of propositions about America's past as delivered in Western myths."[171] For Thumim, *Unforgiven* is a meditation on masculinity in all its manifestations, which insists on drawing "our attention to the meanings underlying the myth of the west—for America."[172]

In "A Fistful of Anarchy: Clint Eastwood's Characters in Sergio Leone's Dollars Trilogy and in his Four "Own" Westerns" David Cremean takes an alternate position, suggesting that the film, in its portrayal of a protagonist who ultimately shakes off the forgiveness that he has received in order to revisit his violent tendencies, may well be a rejection of the very idea that Eastwood should apologise for the films of his past, especially given the film's tendency to wallow in the very violence it critiques.[173]

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[169] Peter Travers, "Unforgiven"
[170] Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*, 266.
[171] Janet Thumim, ""Maybe He's Tough But He Sure Ain't No Carpenter": Masculinity and in/competence in Unforgiven," in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), 341.
[172] Ibid., 342.
[173] David Cremean, "A Fistful of Anarchy: Clint Eastwood's Characters in Sergio Leone's Dollars Trilogy and in his Four "Own" Westerns," *Clint Eastwood, Actor and Director: New Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Engel (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007), 72.

And in Jim Kitses' *Horizon's West: Directing the West From John Ford to Clint Eastwood*, he acknowledges that there is room for readings similar to that of either Cremean or Thumim, believing *Unforgiven* to be a fundamentally flawed film that attempts to have it both ways – a tendency that Kitses identifies as existing throughout Eastwood's work with mixed results.[174]

As will be demonstrated throughout the remainder of this chapter, it is Kitses' analysis with which I most agree here, although I suggest that he has failed to see that the very word 'apology' misses the nature of Eastwood's project, in which the film's own third-act indulgence is the very contradiction which renders the film a complex and cohesive act of introspection.

With *Unforgiven*, Eastwood is attempting to use contradiction to layout a roadmap of the male impulse to violence and the way in which it drives, undermines, and seek to indulge the Western mythology. For Eastwood, the Western Historical Myth is deeply problematic in its representations of the past, glossing over the causes and consequences of violence, and misrepresenting the individuals who perpetuate said violence. At the same time, Eastwood's work demonstrates that the drive towards violence and the mythologising of said violence is an innate part of masculinity, and even as men reflect upon the truth of their nature and the reality of their actions, they are inexplicably attracted by violent acts. Moreover, Eastwood consistently demonstrates an understanding that his star image has always been inextricably bound with these ideas of masculinity and the thrill of violent action.

However, knowing all of these things is not the same as viewing them through a moral lens. Eastwood's work is rarely so polemical, favouring nuance and even-handedness in its approach. In *Unforgiven*, it will be argued, Eastwood presents violence as a part of the human – and particularly male – condition. It will be argued that the film acknowledges that he has been a conduit for satisfying this impulse. And forgoing any moral position, Eastwood does not judge the human condition, but implies that we are much better off being aware of our own nature than ignorant of it.

Complex characterisations

At first glance, the narrative of *Unforgiven* is a simple one, but unlike many earlier Eastwood Westerns, in this film Eastwood shares much of the screen time with an ensemble cast of complex characters. Each of these characters plays an indispensable role in Eastwood's exploration of the human capacity for - and attraction to - violence, and its horrific effects. *Unforgiven* presents the viewer with

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[174] Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*, 312.

the idea that violence is not an act committed between good and bad people, but that it is a contagious and ugly impulse acted out by three-dimensional human beings with complex and competing motivations. A quick survey of the key characters reveals the moral ambiguity prevalent throughout.

There is Delilah (Anna Levine), the aforementioned prostitute whose well being as a victim quickly becomes secondary to the self-interest of all involved, even those believing they are acting in her interest. Then there is Strawberry Alice (Frances Fisher), a fellow prostitute whose sense of disenfranchisement drives her to take excessive and unwanted steps towards revenge on behalf of Delilah, posting the bounty, complete with an exaggerated or mythologised account of the attack involving severe mutilation.

There are Quick Mike (David Mucciand) and "Davey-Boy" Bunting (Rob Campbell), the two men on whom the bounty has been placed, the former being the perpetrator of the crime, committed in retaliation for Delilah's involuntary giggle at the size of his penis, and the latter being his friend, who has the misfortune of attending the brothel at the same time. Despite attempts at appeasement Munny and his colleagues will murder both.

There are Munny's colleagues. First, The Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), an aspirational young would-be gunslinger who seeks out and partners with William Munny. He is deeply invested in the myth of the Western gunslinger but must ultimately confront the morbid reality of taking a life when he murders Quick Mike as he sits on an outhouse toilet. Secondly, there is Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), a former gunslinger friend of Munny's whose loyalty to his old friend sees him join his mission, despite his content and peaceful existence. Despite ultimately refusing to kill the two men on whom the bounty has been placed, Ned will be murdered as a consequence of his involvement.

There is English Bob (Richard Harris), a contrived but skilful British gunslinger eager to seek out the bounty. Bob is deeply invested in his own shallow constructed image in keeping with the kind of caricatures prevalent in Western dime novels of the time. Pursuing Bob is W. W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek), a biographer from the East, writing a series of fanciful dime-store novels about Bob's career as a hired gun - the kind that forged the literary beginnings of the Western Historical Myth.

And finally there is Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman), the brutal but effective sheriff of Whiskey, whose unwillingness to properly acknowledge the film's original crime, seeing it as an issue of damaged property rather than violence, sees things escalate

beyond his control. Eventually, he will be murdered in a dramatic and very Western mythologised fashion by Munny, after accidentally killing Ned Logan during an inquisition.

Each of these characters ultimately renders problematic the Western Historical Myth by both representing and subverting its conventions. The bad guys are not bad. The good guys are not good. The narrative's propulsion towards violence and death is not experienced as virtuous or cathartic, but as the tragic consequences of human beings who find themselves trapped within the generic conventions of the Western Historical Myth.

Violence as myth or reality

Amongst these characters are two whose preoccupations with the mythologising of violence is narratively juxtaposed with its reality, highlighting the way in which the Western as a myth conceals the brutal realities of history. These two characters are The Schofield Kid and W. W. Beauchamp. Both are deeply invested in the myth of the West; the former in his desire to become a gun slinging anti-hero, and the latter in his desire to quite literally create this myth.

The Schofield Kid is marked from the beginning as a naive boy with a love of Western dime store novels, arriving on Munny's door looking for a partner in the collecting of the bounty around which the film centres. He tells Munny, "Uncle Pete says you was the meanest goddamn son-of-a-bitch alive, and if I ever wanted a partner for a killin', you were the worst one. Meaning the best." And that "I'm a damn killer myself. 'Cept, uh, I ain't killed as many as you because of my youth." It is immediately clear that the young man has never killed anybody in his life.

Eastwood has noted that *Unforgiven* contains "two stories that coexist in parallel, the one of the journalist who wants to print the legend of the west, and the one that runs through the film and contradicts it completely."[175] Beauchamp, the journalist (aka dime-novelist) in question, arrives in the town of Big Whiskey with English Bob, who intends to collect on the aforementioned bounty. Braggadocio aside, it soon becomes clear that Bob is quick on the draw and that his reputation precedes him. The meek Beauchamp, who follows Bob like an adoring sidekick, taking notes for his next book, is the most significant representative of the Western myth within *Unforgiven*. While almost every moment of *Unforgiven* is dedicated to unravelling the moral certainty and justifiable violence that lies at the heart of the Western tradition, it is Beauchamp

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[175] Thierry Jousse and Camille Nevers, "Interview with Clint Eastwood," 141.

who sits on the sidelines creating the very Western Historical Myths the film rallies against. This significance is most clearly highlighted within two key scenes.

Soon after arriving in the town of Whiskey, Little Bill Daggett recognises English Bob from a past encounter, disarms him, and places him in prison. Later, as Bob lies beaten, bruised, and immobile in his cell, Daggett reads through Beauchamp's latest book, an account of the life and times of English Bob, entitled *The Duke of Death*. Beauchamp, watching from his cell, acknowledges some visual exaggerations on the cover "for reasons of the marketplace", but insists that the story is based on eyewitness accounts. Daggett suggests that the only eyewitness was clearly English Bob himself, before revealing that he himself was present for one of the pivotal scenes depicted in the book.

According to the novel, English Bob rescued an innocent maiden from the clutches of "Two-Guns" Corcoran in a tavern, killing him in a duel. Daggett reveals that Corcoran didn't carry two guns as was depicted in the book. The name derived from the size of his genitalia. Secondly, Corcoran had simply slept with a woman Bob was infatuated with. Thirdly, there was no duel. Corcoran's gun backfired, exploding in his hand, leaving Bob to execute him as he writhed in agony. Beauchamp is stunned at the revelation that Bob's story of heroism was a blatant lie. Daggett's response is pragmatic enough: "Well, old Bob wasn't goin' to wait for Corky to grow a new hand." Going further, Daggett questions the very mechanics of the Western, explaining to Beauchamp the most fundamental lesson to be garnered from this story. That being "quick on the draw" is vastly overrated:

> Look son, being a good shot, being quick with a pistol, that don't do no harm, but it don't mean much next to being cool-headed. A man who will keep his head and not get rattled under fire, like as not, he'll kill ya. It ain't so easy to shoot a man anyhow, especially if the son-of-a-bitch is shootin' back at you.

This scene is perhaps the most pivotal in Eastwood's film, overtly making the distinction between the long-abandoned realities of the past, and the contemporary Western mythology - in this case the classic trope of the man who is "quick on the draw". Eastern Dime-novelists like Beauchamp, writing within the contemporaneous realities of the mid to late 1800s, leapt into the dramatic possibilities of the untamed West, forging the all-American myths that would eventually give birth to the Western film genre, with its cowboys and Indians, murderous villains and untainted heroes. Beauchamp is a lazy researcher, prone to exaggeration and apt to adhere to the

motto espoused by a writer in another Western, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

It's worth noting that the lesson Daggett gives Beauchamp is soon forgotten, with Beauchamp abandoning English Bob to become Daggett's biographer. Soon enough, Daggett regales Beauchamp with his own set of self-interested tales of heroism. Conversely, intercut with these scenes are two scenes involving The Schofield Kid, Munny and Ned. In the first scene, around a campfire, the kid questions Munny about a famous incident in which he killed two deputies who "had the drop on him". Munny claims to have been too drunk to remember. In the second scene, Ned quietly suggests to Munny that he remembered there being three deputies. The juxtaposition between the Beauchamp/Daggett and Munny scenes contradictorily positions Munny as the *true* gunslinger at the same time that it undercuts the myth of the west once again.

When The Schofield Kid finally gets to kill a man, it is in spectacularly unglamorous fashion, kicking in the door of an outhouse and shooting his helpless victim, Quick Mike, as he sits on the toilet. Afterwards, his attempts to conceal his deep guilt with bravado quickly disintegrate, and The Kid breaks down in front of Munny:

> The Schofield Kid: It don't seem real... how he ain't gonna never breathe again, ever... how he's dead. And the other one too. All on account of pulling a trigger.
>
> Will Munny: It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. Take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have.
>
> The Schofield Kid: Yeah, well, I guess they had it coming.
>
> Will Munny: We all have it coming, kid.

The Schofield Kid has arrived at the kind of moment through which the Western myth is forged, an act of vengeance delivered via quick, brutal and supposedly righteous violence. The reality, he discovers, comes with far greater consequences.

And it is in the film's final showdown that this contradiction reaches its zenith. When Munny rides into Big Whiskey and avenges the death of his friend by murdering Little Big Daggett and a half-dozen other people in the film's final duel, Beauchamp looks on in fascinated horror. He waits a moment in silence, building up his confidence, before speaking:

Beauchamp: Who, uh, who'd you kill first?

Munny: Huh?

Beauchamp: When confronted by superior numbers, an experienced gunfighter will always fire on the best shot first.

Munny: Is that so?

Beauchamp: Yeah, Little Bill told me that. And you probably killed him first, didn't you?

Despite the film's attempts to deconstruct the myth of the West, in its final moments Munny has arisen from the ashes of morality and human complexity to become the kind of grandiose, invincible gunslinger that Beauchamp writes about and that The Schofield Kid aspires to be. And while Little Bill extolled the virtues of various practical skills that make for a good gunslinger, Munny's response suggests a kind of raw, predestined superiority that highlights his own status as a fictional mythic figure: "I was lucky in the order, but I've always been lucky when it comes to killin' folks."

(In)competency in Unforgiven

This seemingly inexplicable correlation between the revisionist impulses of the film and the Western myth in the third act is possibly best understood through a concept outlined by Janet Thumim in her essay "Maybe He's Tough But He Sure Ain't No Carpenter: Masculinity and In/competence in *Unforgiven*". Thumim suggests that *Unforgiven* "proposes a distinction between the moral axis, good:bad, and the functional one, competent:incompetent," suggesting that a balance of the two is required for social order.[176] The film provides a gradient area for these axes, providing a deep contrast with the traditional Western myth which generally presumes a clear cut good/bad binary in its protagonist and antagonist, as well as an assumed competency for each. As for *Unforgiven*, Thumim notes:

> Competence (gun-fighting, love-making, carpentry) is necessary to a convincing demonstration of masculinity, but moral rectitude (right action, responsible concern for the self and others, the knowing use of hindsight and foresight) marks maturity.[177]

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[176] Janet Thumim, "Maybe He's Tough But He Sure Ain't No Carpenter," 345.
[177] Ibid.

Indeed, if we look at the film, one of the ways that it most effectively undercuts the myth of the West is in its portrayal of practical fallibility in its characters. Munny commences the film as a failing pig farmer, desperately working with his young children to separate his diseased pigs with healthy ones. In his old age, he is comically shown to have difficulty riding his horse, aiming his gun, and catches a severe cold at the first sign of bad weather. In his recollections of the past, he argues that much of his memory is obscured by his alcoholism during this period. But, we are shown, Munny is good in the sense that he has abandoned his old ways to align himself with his deceased wife's Christian values.

The Schofield Kid does much to conceal his poor eyesight during the film, which severely limits his ability to engage in a shootout with one of the targets of the bounty later in the film. Ultimately, his only kill is an amateurish and reprehensible execution of a man sitting on an outhouse toilet. Only through deep guilt does The Kid forego his ambitions, handing his gun to Munny: "You go on and keep it. I'm never going to use it again. I don't want to kill nobody no more. I ain't like you Will." Munny gives him his share of the reward: "You keep the rest, you can get them spectacles, now."

Ned, who is the one character in the film that, it is suggested, can still handle the rugged lifestyle of a gunslinger, and hasn't lost any of his competency as a marksman, is also the one character who ultimately bows out of the action. When it comes to the moment when he is to shoot one of the bounty targets, he cannot. He is both righteous and competent. When he is subsequently tortured and murdered by Daggett, it is the ultimate negative act in the context of the competency/moral axes.

Daggett is competent in his official role as sheriff, demonstrating his abilities with the sadistic beating of the defenceless English Bob in front of a public crowd. Based on his position; the faith placed in him by the townsfolk; the reticence of English Bob to take up arms against him; and the conversation he has with Beauchamp about the myths of the West, we assume he is a skilled shooter. However, we're also made comically aware of his incompetency as a carpenter, with multiple scenes taking place in the wonky house he is building for his retirement. Observing countless roof leaks one rainy night, the biographer Beauchamp interrupts a story to joke that Daggett should shoot his carpenter. Daggett is unamused. It could be suggested that Daggett is also the closest thing to bad within the context of the film's events, even as it must be acknowledged that, like for like, Munny is likely to have committed far worse acts in his past. Daggett made the morally abominable decision to resolve the incident of Daisy's mutilation as a property dispute, demanding compensation in the form of horses be given to her 'owner' who runs the brothel, thereby setting about the

narrative that follows. His violent acts against English Bob and then Ned are extreme, as is the ultimate decision to showcase Ned's corpse outside the hotel brothel where the narrative began.

By the time the final scenes arrive, Munny has heard of Ned's death. He arrives in town having left behind him both his incompetency and the Christian virtues he had borrowed from his late wife. Finding Ned's corpse, Munny enters the town hotel and encounters a posse, led by Daggett. Firstly, Munny executes the unarmed hotel brothel owner who "shoulda armed himself if he's gonna decorate his saloon with my friend." At this point he is confronted with Daggett, who uses this moment to point out the crimes of Munny more overtly than at any other point in the movie:

> Little Bill Daggett: You'd be William Munny out of Missouri. Killer of women and children.

> Will Munny: That's right. I've killed women and children. I've killed just about everything that walks or crawled at one time or another. And I'm here to kill you, Little Bill, for what you did to Ned.

Moments later, Munny has murdered much of the room, and has the aforementioned discussions with Beauchamp in which he is questioned about his competency. Refusing to endorse his own abilities, Munny seems to acknowledge that he has been saved from death not by his ability, but by the genre conventions that have rendered this ability innate: "I was lucky in the order, but I've always been lucky when it comes to killin' folks."

Daggett, revealing himself to be barely alive then has this final exchange with Munny, still on the theme of competency.

> Little Bill Daggett: I don't deserve this... to die like this. I was building a house.

> Will Munny: Deserve's got nothin' to do with it.

> Little Bill Daggett: I'll see you in hell, William Munny.

> Will Munny: Yeah.

And here may lie the fundamental point of the movie, as linked to ideas of competency and morality within the context of the Western. That the traditional amoral masculine ethic of the Western, which privileges its gunslingers, both good and bad, as inverse sides of the same competent coin, is fundamentally a myth.

Within the context of violent acts, the higher ground does not go to the most competent, nor the most moral. Munny is a murderer of women and children, and an old man who cannot manage his farm nor even properly mount a horse. Bill is a violent sheriff and poor carpenter who makes unethical and un-pragmatic decisions, but he does so in the interest of what he believes is right. Despite what might be traditionally communicated through the Western Historical Myth, "deserve's got nothing to do" with real violence, even as the film allows us a hypocritical cathartic pleasure in seeing the man who killed Ned, the least deserving of death, die.

The fact that these ideas are explored within the narrative context of a Western provides the opportunity to juxtapose the realities of violence with the Western Historical Myth of violence, as well as to highlight the human tendency to mythologise violence in the first place. Eastwood's film presents the case that the Western myth is not to be trusted as a source of historical authenticity, and that a core difference between the Western Historical Myth and the real Frontier lies in how the former approaches ideas of absolute morality and purposeful violence, while the latter was a period, like any other, in which the complexities of human history played out, and people died whether they were good, bad or ugly.

Further accentuating these ideas is the presence of Eastwood in the lead, who can be seen in some ways to be playing the aged and regretful version of the Man With No Name. By inverting his own star image, which is inextricably tied to the countless ambiguous Westerns and cop movies in which Eastwood has happily executed bad guys with absolute moral certitude, we are also implicitly presented with the contrast provided by his own career. Many have argued that this implicitly reveals the film to be an apology or expression of regret of some sort. To take this interpretation is to misunderstand Eastwood's approach entirely, attempting to read an observation – that the Western Historical Myth renders violence palatable by giving it a moral impetus – as a clear-cut moral stance.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this chapter, an argument has been made to position Eastwood as a director of revisionist Westerns that sought to undercut traditional understandings of the past as they are often communicated through the Western Historical Myth. This is not to suggest that Eastwood's revisionist impulses are unique, but that in becoming a seminal part of the genre and the ongoing project of subverting its conventions and meanings, Eastwood fundamentally evolved as a historiographical filmmaker. By showcasing this evolution, an argument has been

made to demonstrate his move towards a metahistorical approach to cinema towards the tail end of his engagement with the Western. In making this argument, I have positioned *Unforgiven* as a metahistorical work, whose elements have all been combined to provide a complex and nuanced meditation on the Western Historical Myth.

I have argued that Eastwood's work as an actor and director reveals an ongoing involvement and interest in revisionist Westerns which sought to undermine the traditional Western Historical Myth. His eight years on *Rawhide* saw him develop a sound understanding of the generic expectations of the classical Western. Leone's Dollars trilogy provided him with a set of experiences that revealed the plasticity of the genre, both formally and in terms of representations of the past. And his multiple Westerns as an actor/producer following the formation of Malpaso Productions, beginning with *Hang 'Em High*, allowed him the opportunity to select and engage with a series of ambiguous texts that opened up questions about America's Frontier past.

In *High Plains Drifter*, Eastwood found a way to subvert his Man With No Name persona to produce a revisionist Western that served as a moral sequel to *High Noon*, offering a brutal challenge to the Western Historical Myth that signalled the beginning of a move towards subversive historical representation. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Eastwood's attempt to tackle the trauma of war provided a radical revision to the Western Historical Myth that challenged traditional depictions of a conflict that played a foundational role in American history. And whilst *Pale Rider* lacked the subversive elements of Eastwood's other Westerns, its focus on Frontier era ecological issues invited a meditation on the long history of America's problematic history with its natural environment.

And most importantly, with *Unforgiven* Eastwood moved from directing revisionist Westerns to making what could be referred to as a metahistorical Western. Breaking down the moral certitude that had long informed the Western Historical Myth, Eastwood's final contribution to the genre operated as a collision between the genre's traditional narrative conventions and a more consequential world in which complex characters find themselves destined to collide with the horrific and very real impacts of violence. Eastwood's work was, at core, an attempt to highlight the very real gap between the Western's relationship with morality and violence and the way in which said violence could be imagined to have played out in the real world of the Frontier.

Ultimately then, throughout his career and most particularly through the four Westerns Eastwood directed, a clear path towards an increasingly complex approach to deconstructing the Western Historical Myth is apparent, culminating in the metahistorical Western, *Unforgiven*. In mapping out this development, this chapter has sought to establish the argument carried through subsequent chapters, that the Western was the form through which Eastwood established his understanding of how history is traditionally communicated in American cinema, and where this approach might be deeply problematic - either through the nature of its formal elements, content, or ideological positioning. Eastwood reminds us that past does not adhere to the retrospective moralising mythic codes we attempt to project onto it, because ultimately, outside of the parameters of the Western Historical Myth, within the real world, "Deserve's got nuthun' to do with it."

CHAPTER TWO

Clint Eastwood and the Metahistorical Biopic

"I don't need to tell you that what determines a man's legacy is often what isn't seen." – *J. Edgar*

As discussed in the previous chapter, the first half of Eastwood's career was, from the very beginning, strongly embedded in representations of the American Historical Myth via the Western. However, despite his extensive experience directing Westerns, it was not until the Charlie Parker Biopic, *Bird* (1988), that Eastwood directed a dramatic historical film: a film whose purpose is the representation of historical events and/or individuals. Since the release of *Bird*, Eastwood has shown a heavy interest in historical representation, directing a range of dramatic historical films. However, to this date only four of these films sit comfortably within that most American of historical sub-genres, the Biopic: *Bird*, *White Hunter Black Heart* (1990), *J. Edgar* (2011)*, and American Sniper* (2014)*.*

Within this chapter, I will continue to argue that Eastwood's development as a director who tends to investigate and reconfigure cinematic modes of story-telling has led to a sophisticated approach to ideas of historical representation in the latter part of his career, an approach which is clearly present in the four Biopics that he has directed to date, three of which will be examined within this chapter. In doing so, this chapter will also provide an account of the beginning of Eastwood's transition from the Mythology Phase (1959-1992) of his career into the Metahistory Phase (1988-2014). The former being comprised of Eastwood's time directing Westerns which took as their project the deconstruction of the Western Historical Myth, and the latter being comprised of the period in which Eastwood seeks to make dramatic historical films that offer a metahistorical critique of the way in which history has been formerly understood, and proffer ambiguity where truth cannot be relied upon.

The chapter will be divided into four parts. The first of these will provide an account of the definitions and history of the Biopic genre, the conventions through which the Biopic is governed, and a look at how these conventions have the potential to render historical representation problematic, especially given that such representation is already problematic within the medium of film more generally.

The second part of this chapter provides an account of Eastwood's first dramatic historical film and Biopic, *Bird*, which explores the life and times of jazz musician

Charlie 'Bird' Parker. An argument is made that, in *Bird*, Eastwood seeks to represent his subject with such a fixation on historical accuracy, that he frequently avoids the creative responsibility of filling in the gaps between historical facts, resulting in a film that fails as entertainment whilst hinting at his future work as a director of metahistorical cinema. It is argued *Bird* that is a highly complex film whose disjointed narrative structure, ambiguous character representation and unwillingness to provide a definitive statement on its subject result in a text that questions the very potential of historical representation within the cinematic medium.

The third part provides an analysis of Eastwood's 2011 political Biopic, *J. Edgar*. A case is made for *J. Edgar* as a highly sophisticated attempt to combine the competing narratives in popular culture around the figure of J. Edgar Hoover, providing an account that places these narratives in juxtaposition with each other, whilst avoiding privileging any of these narratives in particular. At the same time, by creating a film dependent on Hoover's own subjective perspective which is fundamentally undermined during the film, Eastwood quite deliberately questions the film's own capacity to deliver any kind of definitive truth about its subject. As a result, the film becomes a metahistorical meditation on the problematic nature of historical representation.

Finally, the fourth part of this chapter examines Eastwood's 2014 film, *American Sniper*, an account of the wartime experiences of American Navy Seal, Chris Kyle. In exploring the film's innately problematic project of attempting to juxtapose the autobiographical perspective of its source material with a series of counter-narratives the seek to challenge the perspectives of its historical subject, an argument will be made that Eastwood once again opens up a metahistorical dialogue about the nature of historical representation within the film.

Through an in-depth examination of these three films, a case will be made to argue that Eastwood's work as a director of metahistorical cinema can be shown to evolve across three of his most substantial biographical projects, these works sharing the commonality of rejecting the expectations set about how to represent particular historical figures, as well as rejecting the very manner in which historical issues are traditionally explored within the cinematic medium.

The History of History in the Biopic

Before making any argument that Eastwood's work subverts the mechanics of the Contemporary Hollywood Biopic, it is first critical to define what the Biopic is, and

how it traditionally functions. At present there are two major studies of the Biopic, the first being George Custen's *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, a book dedicated to an account of the Biopic's evolution during the studio era. Custen defines the Biopic simply as a film that "depicts the life of a historical person, past or present."[178] And in the sense that it is a genre that has emerged from the written biographical form, this is true enough, but in *Whose Lives are they Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*, Dennis Bingham argues that "the Biopic is by no means a simple recounting of the facts of someone's life", but is actually "an attempt to discover biographical truth."[179] The distinction Bingham makes between facts and truth here is positioned in the spirit of Rosenstone's proposition that historical films are less about "constituting" facts than they are about "inventing" facts for the purposes of constructing a visceral experience of the past.[180] Rosenstone argues that:

> film summarizes vast amounts of data or symbolizes complexities that otherwise could not be shown. We must recognize that film will always include images that are at once invented and true; true in that they symbolize, condense, or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they impart an overall meaning of the past that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued.[181]

That is to say, the representation of history is inherently an act of fictionalising. But unlike other historical genres, Bingham proposes that part of the purpose of the Biopic is thus "to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology, one way or another, and to show why he or she belongs there."[182] For Bingham, the Biopic represents an opportunity to exhibit, celebrate and investigate a person of significance, even where anything that might be objectively referred to as "truth" is innately inaccessible. In this case, what is innately inaccessible is the lived experience of a historical figure. The core of the Biopic is the drive to "dramatize actuality and find in it the filmmaker's own version of truth," and the function of the Biopic's subject is "to live the spectator a story."[183]

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[178] George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 5.
[179] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?: The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 7.
[180] Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Educational Limited, 2006), 8.
[181] Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 71.
[182] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 10.
[183] Ibid., 10.

In delivering such a story, it's quite likely that the historical subject will come with a set of their own predefined myths or historical understandings that the viewer is seeking to see reaffirmed through the Biopic experience. For example, Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) is inevitably bound up with the expectation that Lincoln should be positioned as a great man, destined to bear the massive burden of the American Civil War in order to deliver African Americans from slavery. *The Iron Lady* (2011) must balance empathy with the controversial politics of its subject. And beyond the expectations specific to an individual, it is also true that the Biopic has evolved a suite of genre conventions that have formed a set of expectations in the minds of viewers that must be satisfied in order to deliver a commercial product.

Unfortunately, while this process provides a consistently pleasing generic product for viewers, further problems of historical representation can arise as a result. As Custen suggests, the Biopic "routinely integrates disparate historical episodes of selected individual lives into a nearly monochromatic "Hollywood view of history.""[184] In other words, the lives of historical individuals are inevitably altered to fit within the commercially driven conventions of the Biopic, even as the genre adapts to the lives of the individuals that they explore. This is hardly a surprise – the public is far less inclined to reject a film for historical inaccuracy than it is to reject it for failing to entertain. Hollywood is a place where experimentation can be seen as high risk, especially when tried-and-tested techniques are readily available. As Wheeler Winston Dixon notes in *Film Genre 2000*:

> What audiences today desire more than ever before is "more of the same," and studios, scared to death by rising production and distribution costs, are equally loathe to strike out in new generic directions. Keep audiences satisfied, strive to maintain narrative closure at all costs, and keep within the bounds of heterotopic romance, no matter what the genre one is ostensibly working on.[185]

However, for Bingham, the problems of formulaic repetition that Custen observes in studio era Biopics are a thing of the past, and over time he argues that the genre has quietly evolved to present far more sophisticated views of individuals than Custen previously implied.[186]

Here then, lies the tension between Custen and Bingham. While Custen argues that the industrial practices that have formed the contemporary Hollywood Biopic

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[184] George Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 3.
[185] Winston W. Dixon, ed., *Film Genre 2000* (New York: University of New York, 2000), 8.
[186] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 10.

fundamentally constrict and warp historical representation, Bingham suggests that there has been a long-standing tendency to focus on the worst output of the sub-genre, while disregarding the strengths of more dynamic entries like *Man on the Moon* (1999), *American Splendor* (2003) and *I'm Not There* (2007).

In the context of this thesis, it's worth adding an additional layer to this definition of the Biopic. In his essay, "Biophoty: The Biofilm in Biography Theory", Joanny Moulin makes a distinction between the Biopic and the biofilm, arguing that biofilm should be considered the more general term, and that the Biopic "is a Hollywood invention, steeped in American ideology" which argues for "the myth of the self-made man, uncritically positing individual accomplishment as a central tenet of its vision of the world.[187] For the purposes of this thesis, the Biopic will be considered as an inherently American genre that skews towards Moulin's definition whilst recognising that his broad indictment of the genre as "uncritical" is too sweeping a generalisation.

The History of the Biopic

As with any genre, finding the initial point from which the biographical film arose is problematic and, in some ways, arbitrary territory. In her essay, "The Hollywood Biopic of the Twentieth Century: A History" Deborah Cartmell identifies the Thomas Edison short *Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1895) as the first attempt to portray a historical figure on screen, and George Méliès *Joan of Arc* (1900) as the first work that might be considered a biographical film.[188] In any case, the term Biopic could only be imposed retrospectively here in the broadest sense, disregarding the large number of genre conventions formed over time by Hollywood's industrial practice of emulating previous commercial successes.

Rick Altman provides a helpful map of the process in *Film/Genre*, in which he positions the genre as being the result of endless examinations of the commercial reliability of various conventions that have slowly accumulated over time. In doing so he argues that whilst *Disraeli* (1929) has long been positioned as the first Biopic in the modern sense of the term, this label is once again retrofitted based upon contemporary definitions – a process he refers to as the *critic's game*.[189] Altman's preferred process for understanding genre production, which he refers to as the

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[187] Joanny Moulin, "Biophoty: The Biofilm in Biography Theory," *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* 16, No.2 (Mar 23, 2021), http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/8959 (accessed Mar 2021)
[188] Deborah Cartmell, "The Hollywood Biopic of the Twentieth Century: A History," *A Companion to the Biopic*, eds. Deborah Cartmell and Ashley D. Polasek (iBook : John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 211.
[189] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (Great Britain: BFI, 1999), 39.

producer's game, has already been outlined in the introduction of this thesis.[190] The producer's game showcases the more erratic and non-linear decision-making processes that producers make over time based on previous commercial successes. In other words, producers did not seek to invent the Biopic so much as it formed organically over time off the back of countless insights from previous films.

Utilising the example of Warner Bros film *Disraeli*, which was a significant commercial success and made actor George Arliss a star, Altman maps out the distinctions made between the critics and producers' games respectively. Following *Disraeli*, Arliss went on to star in two more Biopics, *Alexander Hamilton* (1931) and *Voltaire* (1933), also Warner Brothers films. The critic's game would innately suggest that there is a direct causal lineage between the three films. In other words, Warner Brothers, informed by the success of *Disraeli*, decided to continue making Biopics starring Arliss. But as Altman points out, the studio had absolutely no conception of the Biopic as a genre, instead identifying *Disraeli* "as a film whose success was due to its primary emphasis on British history, political intrigue and international strife."[191] As a consequence, Arliss was subsequently cast in *The Green Goddess* (1930), *Old English* (1930) and *The Millionaire*, which played up different elements of the possible appeal of Arliss' previous success. When Arliss finally appeared in *Alexander Hamilton*, an adaption of a play previously written by Arliss himself, the promotional campaign by Warner Brothers showed no awareness that the film might share generic traits with Arliss' original success. Thus, when assessing a genre within the context of the critic's game, which in many cases will be the only available lens, Altman invites us to reflect on the limitations this thought process.

Based on this formula, the way in which genres evolve can be directly related to the economic success of the previous films within that genre. Of course, whilst in early cinema Biopics may not have shared many stable genre conventions, over time a more definitive and restrictive approach has developed, maximising the potential for profits and minimising risky variations that may damage a film's marketability. In many ways this means that the gap between the critic and producer's games could be seen to shrink as the Biopic genre has evolved, in the sense that both audiences and producers are thinking within the context of a reified genre formation.

In *Whose Lives Are They Anyway*, Bingham outlines seven loose developmental stages in the history of the Biopic, which provide some context for the development of the genre, utilising the theoretical principal that all genres ultimately evolve "from

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[190] Ibid., 38.
[191] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, 40.

classicism to parody to contestation and critique."[192] These seven phases are the: classical; warts-and-all, shift to the auteur; critical investigation; parody; minority appropriation; and the neoclassical form.[193]

The classical Biopic which developed following the aforementioned *Disraeli*, was comprised of what renowned sociologist Leo Lowenthal, in a landmark study of print biographies from 1944, identified as *idols of production*, who are celebrated for their capacity to contribute something materially valuable to society, whether they be political figures, prominent businessmen or industrialists.[194] Lowenthal identified these figures as being the principle subjects of biographies for the first three decades of the twentieth century. These classical Biopics acted essentially as blueprints for a model life, detailing the ways in which America's finest citizens upheld the values that make the nation great. Examples include *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), *Alexander Hamilton*, *Clive of India* (1935), *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936) and *The White Angel* (1936), which covers the life of Florence Nightingale. Based on the data provided by Custen, roughly sixty percent of the Biopics produced between 1931 and 1940 focused on idols of production.[195]

The warts-and-all Biopic, Bingham argues, grew out of the shift towards a focus on Biopics centred on *idols of consumption* – films about those whose lives are in some way a commodity to be consumed by the viewer.[196] Such films might focus on artists, entertainers, athletes or any other figure whose personal creative output is the locus of their value. Custen's data reveals that whilst roughly 40% of the Biopics produced from 1931 to 1940 were focused on idols of consumption, almost 70% of Biopics produced from 1941 to 1950 were focused on this same group.[197] Summarising Lowenthal's conclusions regarding these idols, Custen makes the following point:

> In this change from idols of production to idols of consumption, he detected a shift in American values and a shift in the morality lessons–
> "lessons of history"–that readers might derive from these magazines. Power through the making of the world had been replaced by power through the ownership of its coveted items. Consumerism had replaced community as a way of life.[198]

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[192] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 18.
[193] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 17-18.
[194] Leo Lowenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines," *Radio Research: 1942-1943*, ed. Paul Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce)
[195] George Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 248-255.
[196] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 55.
[197] George Custen, *Bio/Pics*, 248-255.
[198] Ibid., 33.

The nation was changing, and whilst idols of production were frequently presented as living an almost unimpeachable life, the narcissistic potential of the idol of consumption ultimately led to the warts-and-all mode of the genre, which Bingham argues "mined drama and conflict," whilst "playing on oppositions between public and private realms," and "usually emphasis[ed] a central conflict or weakness."[199] In short, these were films in which the greatness of a famous figure was contrasted with the reality of their personal existence. Using the examples of *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), *The Joker is Wild* (1957) and *I Want to Live!* (1958), Bingham identifies this as the point at which the Biopic frequently started to depict lives in a "downward spiral."[200]

Interestingly, Bingham posits Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) as an early precursor to the critical investigation and parody modes of Biopic, even though it is a work of fiction. The critical investigation mode takes the form of a deconstruction of its subject and becomes more popular as the genre evolves, as does the parody mode in which the pretensions of the subject are mocked or challenged in some ways. Beginning with the death of its subject, Charles Foster Kane (played by Welles), the film follows the investigation of a reporter attempting to discover the meaning of Kane's last word: "Rosebud". Presented as a collection of faux news reports and the fractured recollections of those who had known or encountered Kane at some point in his life, the reporter struggles to find the essence of his subject. The film is clearly presented within the conventions of the Biopic, and Kane was constructed as an amalgam of real-life media moguls, most notably William Randolph Hearst. And unlike the films of the period, "[it] covers a downward trajectory, tracing an outline of obsolescence, self-indulgence, and eventual irrelevance" that "acts as the antithesis of the selfless subject of classical Biopics."[201]

Beyond this, Bingham argues, the film highlights the problematic singular narrative of the traditional Biopic via a narrative that is fundamentally fragmented, made up of the often-contradictory recollections of multiple sources. The Biopic, it seems to be saying, is counterfeit in its reductive depictions of the subject.[202] Bingham posits that *Kane* is "the film behind all films that demystify in some way their Biopic subjects or the worlds around them."[203]

Noting that the Biopic reduced in popularity during the 1970s, becoming a genre

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[199] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 220.
[200] Ibid., 19.
[201] Ibid., 55.
[202] Ibid., 56.
[203] Ibid., 66.

more popular on television than in cinemas, Bingham credits the genre's resurgence at least partially to a new generation of filmmaking talent, including Martin Scorsese with *Raging Bull* (1980) and Spike Lee with *Malcolm X* (1992). [204] Also, amongst the Biopics of this era is Clint Eastwood's Charlie Parker Biopic, *Bird* (1988), to be discussed in detail later in this chapter. *Bird*, I will argue, is unique in its attempts to exceed the parameters of the genre's form in its pursuit of something both closer to historical truth, and the truth that such an endeavour is innately problematic within the confines of the Biopic genre.

Finally, Bingham outlines the neoclassical form of the Biopic, which he argues arrives largely in the 2000s with films like *Man on the Moon* (1999) *Capote* (2005), *Ray* (2004), *Walk the Line* (2005) and *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (2004) that "synthesize, often quite smoothly, elements of the studio-era form, the warts-and-all film, and the deconstructive, investigative film."[205] It is within this context that Eastwood releases both *J. Edgar* and *American Sniper*, which I will argue both exceed the simple parameters of deconstructing their subjects, going so far as to deconstruct and question the very capacity of the Biopic to represent its subjects.

The Conventions of the Biopic

Like any genre, the Biopic comes with an array of generic conventions that have become an intrinsic part of audience expectations. However, these conventions also present an inherent risk to the representation of history in that they limit the means by which this history can be explored. These conventions can be broadly bucketed into six spheres: issues of narrative structure (the rise-and-fall narrative); time-compression and composite character techniques; the performance of the star; the perception of authorisation; the exploration of public and private lives; and the importance of verisimilitude. It should be noted that subgenres of the biopic, including those focused on the musical and political spheres, come with additional conventions that will be explored later in the chapter. In the later sections of this chapter, a case will be made to demonstrate the ways in which Eastwood utilises and/or subverts all these conventions within *Bird*, *J. Edgar* and *American Sniper* to highlight and challenge the genre's limitations as a tool for exploring history.

Firstly, the Biopic frequently relies on a rise-and-fall or rise-fall-rise narrative structure in which the subject moves from their position as an ordinary individual to the heights of ingenuity or fame, only to become undone, either by their own character flaws or

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[204] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 19.
[205] Ibid., 380.

societal problems. This structure is heavily invested in the myth of the troubled genius or martyr, giving most Biopics a kind of retrospective fatalism that impinges on their ability to explore historical context without an eye to future outcome. More than this, the tendency to retrofit an individual's life into this structure is inherently limiting, often resulting in the distortion of an individual's story in order to fit popular expectations. One might look to Oliver Stone's Jim Morrison film *The Doors* (1991), Alex Cox's Sid Vicious Biopic *Sid and Nancy* (1986), or Scott Cooper's *Black Mass* (2015) for an example of the rise-and-fall narrative. Or in the case of the rise-fall-rise narrative, examples can be found in Taylor Hackford's Ray Charles Biopic *Ray* (2004), James Mangold's Johnny Cash Biopic *Walk the Line* (2004) or Martin Scorsese's *Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

Secondly, time-compression techniques and composite characters are inevitably used within the Biopic in order to condense the complexities of a human life into the length of a feature film. This is inherent in all historical films of course, but the Biopic leans heavily on specific modes. In the case of time-compression, this is often through the use of scenes that offer singular moments in place of events that occur over longer periods of time, often through the device of montage, epiphany or simple distortion of events. This shorthand technique can be either helpful or distortive as a tool, depending on whether or not important historical nuances are lost as a result. In the case of composite characters, multiple individuals can be represented by a single person in order to produce a narrative that is not convoluted. Done well this can provide greater clarity within a narrative, but it also risks undermining the credibility of the narrative or not accurately representing key individuals within the protagonist's life.

Both *Ray* and *Walk the Line* provide typical examples of time-compression, offering montage sequences that demonstrate the growing popularity of their protagonists by showcasing their increasing popularity as they tour their acts to increasing crowds, whilst also including segments that suggest their developing drug use. Eastwood applies both time-compression and composite techniques in *American Sniper* in order to give narrative to his disconnected experiences on the front line over an extended period of time. This will be explored later in the chapter.

Thirdly, it is important to the viewer of a Biopic that they feel they are watching a true story in order to experience the appropriate satisfaction that come with watching a much-loved musical artist's life play out on the screen. As Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard note in "Representing Popular Music Stardom on Screen: The Popular Music Biopic", often such verification comes at the beginning of a film in some

iteration of "voiceovers or narrative introductory captions, to reinforce the message that 'what you are watching is a true story'." [206] In other instances, the film is likely to gain authority through the direct involvement either of the subject or the subject's estate. And whilst any historian would likely baulk at the idea that the approval of the subject of the biography should be a sign of validity rather than bias, in the context of the musical Biopic it is worth remembering that aligning with the subjective experience of the star is part of the thrill of the experience. Recent examples of this sense of authorisation can be found in *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), in which Queen band members Brian May and Roger Taylor were brought on as consultants, and *Rocketman* (2019), in which Elton John and his partner David Furnish acted as producers.

Fourthly, the distinction and relationship between public and private life is a theme prevalent in most Biopics, but it is of specific relevance within the musical form, in which the artist is generally presented as having to maintain their constructed star image whilst attempting to navigate the difficult terrain of separating that star image from their own ego in order to maintain a successful personal existence. Marshall and Kongsgaard argue that this can manifest in two ways, either through "the tension between domestic responsibilities and artistic ambitions" or "sexual temptation." [207] The former juxtaposes the substantial workload; time pressures and stresses of becoming a star – along with the huge elevation of ego – with the ongoing domestic responsibilities of maintain relationships and a family life. The latter corresponds directly with the elevation of the new star's ego, the time they spend away from home, and the constant sexual temptations to which they are exposed. Whether or not they ultimately succeed or fail in navigating these issues (they will almost certainly fail for a period) is likely to contribute to the narrative structure being either a rise-and-fall or rise-fall-rise narrative.

In "2008–2013 Political Biopics: Adapting Leaders for a Time of Crisis" Marta Frago and Eva Alfonso argue that a similar tension between public and private life exists within contemporary Biopics about political figures, but within the political context these films often portray their subject as an "ordinary human being, facing daily problems very similar to those of the audience" who must manage the inordinate stress their position holds in order to "pay a personal price to make good use of his or her skills to benefit the community. [208] Frago and Alfonso cite Margaret Thatcher

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[206] Lee Marshall & Isabel Kongsgaard, "Representing popular music stardom on screen: the popular music Biopic," *Celebrity Studies* 3, No.3 (2012), 354.

[207] Ibid., 352.

[208] Marta Frago & Eva Alfonso, "2008–2013 Political Biopics: Adapting Leaders for a Time of Crisis," *Javnost* 24, No.1 (2017), 6.

Biopic *The Iron Lady* (2011) as a key example, in which the protagonist frequently struggles to live up to her own expectations as a mother and wife at home whilst managing her political career. *Lincoln* (2012) and *Nixon* (1995) are both more extreme examples, in which the burdens of their respective roles are presented as essentially asphyxiating the personal sphere. The former as his struggles with the American Civil War are outweighed only by the tragic death of his son, and the latter as his perceptions of his increasing unpopularity drives him to paranoia and obsession. Eastwood's own *J. Edgar* (2011), which will be discussed at a later point in this chapter, goes so far as to subvert these concepts as Hoover's professional career is in some ways depicted as an answer to his self-perceived failures in his own personal life. Hoover's career is essentially a performance that addresses and fills the gaps in his own shortcomings, highlighting the way the Biopic almost always positions the professional life as both a symptom and cause of the personal life.

Fifthly, within the Biopic the presence of a star capable of successfully emulating the subject of the film frequently becomes key in subsequent discourse about the films' accuracy. If the star can successfully emulate the mannerisms and behavioural traits of the character, particularly within the context of the musical Biopic, then their performance is seen as a marked indicator of authenticity, and implicitly, truth. The inherent problem with this is that a film can be fundamentally historically inaccurate but still perceived as true based on the quality of the imitation provided by the star. Once again, one need only look at *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, both films upon which much praise was heaped for the star's emulation ability. At the time of release, A. O. Scott's comments about Ray Charles and Jamie Fox's performance were typical: "I'm not entirely sure I can tell them apart."[209] As were those of Roger Ebert about Joaquin Phoenix and Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line*: "The closing credits make it clear it's Joaquin Phoenix doing the singing, and I was gob-smacked."[210] Where the subject of a Biopic doesn't come with a high-level of public preconceptions around their physicality, the onus then becomes greater on the star to be seen as demonstrating a sense of psychological verisimilitude in their performance. Such is the case with *Bird*, *J. Edgar* and *American Sniper*.

More broadly, a strong focus on verisimilitude is one of the ways in which the Biopic maintains its credibility as a source of historical truth, even though its tendency towards a formulaic structure hints at its own substantial limitations in representing

[209] A. O. Scott, "Portrait of Genius, Painted in Music," *New York Times*, Oct 29, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/29/movies/portrait-of-genius-painted-in-music.html (accessed Sept 2016)

[210] Roger Ebert, "Walk the Line," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Nov 17, 2005, reproduced *RogerEbert.com*, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/walk-the-line-2005 (accessed Mar 2021)

the past. That is to say, the Biopic utilises narrative and aesthetic tools to provide the semblance of truth. As Marshall and Kongsgaard note: "the most important determinant of whether a show is deemed realistic is not historical accuracy but, rather, the formal elements that capture the 'feel' of the historical period."[211]

One key element lies in one of the genre's more clichéd conventions, in which an incident from the subject's youth becomes a defining incident in establishing their identity from that moment forward. Such a convention is entirely reductive, but by creating an internal psychology for the protagonist that explains both their genius and their flaws, the viewer is prompted to read this as realistic based on their own previous experiences with cinema. In Martin Scorsese's Howard Hughes Biopic, *The Aviator* (2004), Hughes receives germophobic advice from his mother that will result in his compulsive behaviour as an adult. And in both *Ray* and *Walk the Line* the ambitious, genius, and tortured characters of both protagonists are positioned primarily as the result of a deep sense of deep guilt over the accidental deaths of their respective brothers.

Another element lies in the sense of authenticity of the period detail within a film. However, once again it is important to note that authenticity does not mean historical accuracy. Rather it means that the film complies with the preconceived notions of the viewer about the period in question. As Marshall and Kongsgaard argue:

> The 'truth' that Biopics assert must conform to the audience's truth rather than the 'actual' truth. Film-makers must present history in a way that is consistent with the audience's understandings of that history (which, of course, are also structured by the conventions of cinematic realism). … Including too much detail, or information that contradicts the audience's understanding of the time/story, or breaking cinematic convention, risks alienating the audience and the film being deemed 'unrealistic'.[212]

Going further, they argue that in the particular context of the musical Biopic, the viewer has perceived notions about what a rock or pop star is that must be incorporated in order to provide a sense of realism, whether or not this actually aligns with the identity of the subject or not.

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[211] Marshall & Kongsgaard, "Representing popular music stardom on screen," 356.
[212] Ibid.

Conclusion

The popularity of the American Biopic has proven to be relatively consistent since it's inception in the early twentieth century, however the nature and content of its form has evolved and continues to evolve in response to the nation's ever shifting cultural context. This section has provided a brief history of this evolution, as well as a summation of some of the broad conventions that now define the genre. More than this, a case has been made for the way in which these conventions threaten to limit the capacity of the Biopic to effectively represent history.

In doing this, foundations have been established for an analysis of three key Eastwood directed biopics, through which it will be demonstrated that Eastwood has found means of subverting the conventions of the Biopic in order to engage more deeply with – and interrogate traditional representations of – history.

An Idol of Consumption: Charlie Parker and *Bird* (1988)

> He was known for his many acts of kindness and cruelty. A musical genius who struggled with mental health problems, he yearned for normalcy. A man of few words, he let his horn do the talking.[213]

While it's popular to trace the moment that Eastwood moved from action hero to popular auteur as being the release of *Unforgiven*, a film widely recognised as the first which "gave reviewers a convincing vehicle for asserting Eastwood's eminence as an artist"[214], the reality is that this perceptual shift began several years earlier with the release of Eastwood's *Bird* in 1988. It's no coincidence that this film was also Eastwood's first attempt at the production of a dramatic historical film – a Biopic on the life of Jazz musician, Charlie Parker. In this section I will argue that *Bird* represents a significant evolution for Eastwood as a filmmaker, allowing him to tackle issues of historical representation for the first time. A case will be made that in *Bird* Eastwood has attempted to create a Biopic that pushes against the reductive conventions of the genre, straining to create a narrative that never deviates from what is known to be historically true of its subject. The result is a flawed work that neglects the necessity of invention that comes with being a historian filmmaker, but one that shows the beginnings of the thought processes that would lead to Eastwood's direction of metahistorical films.

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[213] Chuck Haddix, *Bird: The Life and Music of Charlie Parker* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 3.
[214] Robert E. Kapsis, "Clint Eastwood's Politics of Reputation," *Society* 30, No. 6 (1993), 68.

The Musical Biopic

Before continuing with an analysis of *Bird*, it's worth noting some of the peculiarities of the musical Biopic subgenre, in which the life of a musical performer of note is explored. The slow rise of the musical Biopic as a subgenre throughout the course of the twentieth century is teased out by Marshall Kongsgaard, who note that "Custen's survey of Biopics from the first half of the twentieth century suggests entertainers accounted for just 10% of Biopics made in the 1930s, rising to 17% in the 1940s and 28% in the 1950s."[215] Beyond that, they suggest that the "increasing centrality of rock subjects reflects the dominance of a particular understanding of popular music stardom that took hold during the 1960s: the rock ideology." [216] This new way of thinking in popular culture saw perceptions shift around popular music, with what was formerly considered simple entertainment now being understood as "having social and aesthetic significance, stratifying popular music into the authentic and the inauthentic, the artistic and the commercial."[217] These understandings, they argue, had "their roots in the folk revival of the early 1960s, which emphasised not only the social significance of its lyrics but also the homological relationship between the music and the social group from which it emerges" and that these ideas "were absorbed into the mainstream by the revival's leading figures, and popular music began to be understood as an authentic expression of a particular social group – youth."[218] Consequently, popular music became understood as popular art:

> Two ideas in particular took hold: that popular music was not merely the expression of a collectivity (if at all) but was, rather, the expression of highly individual selves; and, secondly, that, whereas adherence to tradition was important in folk authenticity, originality – breaking with and challenging tradition – was the hallmark of great popular music. The lyrical sophistication of Bob Dylan and the advanced studio techniques of The Beatles were key to the emergence of these new ideas.[219]

Consequently, the new rock-star emerged, known for "defying conventions, excessively engaging with sex and drugs to open the 'doors of perception', demonstrating an unusual sensitivity and fragility, disdainful of those who 'sell out',

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[215] Marshall & Kongsgaard, "Representing popular music stardom on screen, 346-347.
[216] Ibid., 348.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.
[219] Ibid.

and so on." [220] Inevitably, these conventions found their way into the evolution of the musical Biopic. The fostering of this myth of the musical artist by studios is all the more understandable when one considers the commercial value that comes with the idol of consumption. As Ian Inglis notes in his essay "Popular Music History on Screen: The Pop/Rock Biopic":

> In March 2006, one month after *Walk the Line* had opened in the UK, the HMV chain reported that its sales of Johnny Cash records had risen by 676 per cent; 17 of its top 20 country albums were Cash records, four of its top 30 music DVDs and three of its top 20 books were about Cash. Amazon too reported similar increases: at one point in February he had eight of its top 25 albums.[221]

However, despite the commercial popularity of these rock/pop star figures, Inglis identifies several reasons for the relative lack of academic attention given to the rock/pop Biopic. Firstly, that they are relatively banal in content because their subjects, or the estates of their subjects are generally still capable of legal action, prompting studios to "steer clear of potentially sensitive and litigious scenarios."[222] Secondly, that "some of them at least have been seen as rather predictable, sanitized, low-budget films aimed at a relatively undiscerning cohort of consumers who will enthusiastically consume anything bearing the names of their idols."[223] Thirdly, that their nature inherently places them at the intersections of multiple genres and the conventions that come with these, including the musical, documentary and historical dramatic film.[224] Fourthly, Inglis suggests these films have been neglected by academia because of "perceived deficiencies of pop and rock as musical forms, and which betrays an elitist attitude that defines them as inferior to other forms of music."[225] For this reason, he notes, many films about artists within more respectable music forms are treated more seriously. [226] He cites Sidney J Furie's *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972) about Billie Holiday, Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* (1999) about Gilbert and Sullivan, and Clint Eastwood's *Bird* as examples of superior critical reception for films about musical arts that sit outside of mainstream popular music.

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[220] Marshall & Kongsgaard, "Representing popular music stardom on screen," 348.
[221] Ian Inglis, "Popular Music History on Screen: The Pop/Rock Biopic," *Popular Music History* 2, No.1 (2007), 90.
[222] Ibid., 79.
[223] Ibid., 80.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid., 82.
[226] Ibid.

Charlie Parker and Bird

Charlie 'Bird' Parker holds an important place in Jazz history as a key innovator in 'bebop' during the 1940s, a form of jazz defined by its complex harmony and rhythms. A chronic drug addict for most of his life – an addiction that he put down to dealing with the pain of several medical ailments – when Parker died at the age of 34, the coroner cited a combination of pneumonia, a bleeding ulcer, cirrhosis and a severe heart attack as the cause of death. Parker had managed to punish his body so severely that the coroner incorrectly estimated his age to be 53. Parker's life has subsequently been understood within the context of the myth of self-destructive genius.

Clint Eastwood first encountered Charlie Parker as a teenager in Oakland in the early 1950s. He'd gone to see another significant Jazz musician play, Lester Young, where a saxophonist gave an impromptu performance on stage.[227] The saxophonist was Parker himself:

> He was extremely impressive. He could just do anything with that horn. Just technically he was brilliant and innovative, and yet there was emotion and great intensity. And when it was over, you knew you'd heard something very, very special. It just opened up a whole new world. [228]

Parker had enough of an impact on Eastwood that he chose to make him the subject of his first dramatic historical film as a director, which would also prove to be his most formally daring work thus far. Clint Eastwood's *Bird* sets aside countless narrative conventions of the Biopic in the pursuit of an accurate and authentic representation of its subject. Eastwood elects to utilise non-linear storytelling verging on the impenetrable that puts aside the rise-fall-rise structure of the Biopic, thereby also rejecting the genre's traditional notions of any imposed sense of a character arc. The film utilises innovative technology to overlay Parker's musical performances on to newly recorded tracks, challenging traditional ways that music has been integrated in to the musical Biopic. And Eastwood wilfully avoids providing clarity as to the nature of this character where historical record does not provide it. More than this, the film runs an almost unconscionable three hours in length.

The film's critical reception was hardly uniform, but whether the film was received positively or negatively, there was always an acknowledgement that Eastwood's

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[227] Ric Gentry, "Clint Eastwood: An Interview," *Film Quarterly* 42, No. 3 (Spring, 1989), 16.
[228] Ibid., 16.

ambitions had escalated significantly with this new project. Not all critics overtly connected Eastwood's film with any formal revision of the Biopic, but their critiques instinctively honed in on these differentiations. In a highly favourable review for the *Chicago Tribune*, Roger Ebert declared the film "a long, complex, ambitious movie" that "wisely does not attempt to "explain" Parker's music by connecting experiences with musical discoveries."[229] Hal Hinson of the *Washington Post* suggested that the film was flawed but impressive, agreeing that "Eastwood shows talents that were never even hinted at in his earlier pictures" and describes its ambiguous representation of Parker as "hauntingly definitive, yet somehow shadowy and enigmatic, like a figure drawn in smoke."[230] Desson Howe's less complimentary review, also in the Washington Post, suggests that viewers will leave the film "with new respect for Eastwood the Director" but that they will "also leave none the wiser about Parker the Man."[231] The reception of *Bird* would be mirrored repeatedly by that of most his dramatic historical works, with significantly varied perspectives on the success of Eastwood's attempts to represent his historical subjects with a sense of historical ambiguity that aligns with the natural challenges of historical representation.

The notion shared by many critics reviewing *Bird* of an entirely unexpected shift in Eastwood's approach to filmmaking was exaggerated, at least in the sense that the director's oeuvre showed a taste for experimentation. A series of revisionist Westerns that have been covered extensively in the previous chapter, the Hitchcock influenced thriller *Play Misty for Me,* and the radical love story *Breezy,* are testament enough to this fact. In fact, by taking the Biopic into new territory, Eastwood was simply pursuing his *modus operandi*, a natural tendency towards the re-examination of genre, and in the case of the Western, the myths that make up America's sense of identity. On this occasion however, Eastwood's fascination with Charlie Parker resulted in an unusual level of cautiousness in how he might approach his subject matter. This was not just about genre but also historical truth. Parker was an elusive figure and capturing his identity without misleading was an inevitably challenging task.

Non-Linear Interweaving of Public and Private Life

Eastwood's misgivings about pinning down, distilling or summarising the character of Charlie Parker are most clearly prevalent in the narrative structure of *Bird*. The film

[229] Roger Ebert, "Bird," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Oct 14, 1988, reproduced *RogerEbert.com*, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bird-1988 (accessed Mar 2021)
[230] Hal Hinson, "Bird," *Washington Post*, Oct 14, 1988, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/birdrhinson_a0c8c3.htm (accessed Mar 2021)
[231] Desson Howe, "Bird," *Washington Post*, Oct 14, 1988, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/birdrhowe_a0b1cc.htm (accessed Mar 20121)

deliberately utilises a sense of narrative discontinuity in its representation of events in the life of Parker to the point that tracking the period of any given scene becomes almost impossible. Oscillating almost randomly between Parker's youth, his courting of Chan Parker, the loss of their child, his time on the road, and ultimately culminating in his death, it is at times difficult for the viewer to understand exactly where they are. What year is it? Is Parker sober, on drugs or drunk? And where does each scene fit into the final overarching structure? This is not a film in which the development of the subject's career, genius or even downfall is presented with clarity. Indeed, the film's structure seems to be made of the kind of deliberate discordance that defines both Jazz, and the chaotic existence of the film's protagonist. As one publication put it, *Bird* "was structured like bebop - full of motifs, improvisations, and sensations."[232]

It seems that, in the spirit of Jazz, Eastwood is violently rejecting the formal limitations of the modern Musical Biopic, instead favouring a style that will leave the viewer with almost as little clarity about its subject as they were prior to viewing. The strength of this technique is that it deliberately eschews narrative coherence for a murkier and far more elusive look at the subject. History is not so easily understood, and singular moments are rarely as loaded as Hollywood might like to present them. The effort is particularly valiant, for as Jay Scott noted in his *Toronto Globe and Mail* review, the film is a:

> loosely constructed marvel that avoids every cliché of the self-destructive-celebrity biography, a particularly remarkable achievement in that Parker played out every cliché of the self-destructive celebrity life.[233]

Eastwood strives to avoid the rise-and-fall momentum found in many musical Biopics, instead attempting to capture a kind of greater truth about Parker, and the result is an almost literary meditation on character, without any sense of impatient forward momentum. However, the counter-effect is a sense of aimlessness and detachment. As one critic points out, with *Bird*, Eastwood "makes such a valiant effort at authenticity, at not being a bad movie, that what's left feels like virtually no movie at all."[234] In this sense, *Bird* is a problematic historical film, incidentally inviting a meditation on the elusive nature of representing any historical figure through the

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[232] "Piano Blues," *Musicians.AllAboutJazz.Com*, http://musicians.allaboutjazz.com/musician.php?id=16528#.Uoc079KnpGg (Accessed Mar 2021)
[233] Jay Scott, "Bird," *The Globe and Mail*, Oct 14, 1988.
[234] "Pushing Charlie Parker Into the Shadows," *ThisDistractedGlobe.Org*, May 15, 2015, http://thisdistractedglobe.com/2010/05/15/bird/ (accessed Jan 2019)

Biopic. It seems that in asking who Charlie Parker is, Eastwood concludes that the answer, as with any historical figure, is ultimately inaccessible.

Marshall and Kongsgaard detail a convention found within the musical Biopic worthy of inclusion here. It concerns the demonstration of originality or authenticity, through scenes in which the musician has been shown to have talent but to not yet have uncovered the unique value which they will give to the world.[235] Giving the examples of both *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, Marshall and Kongsgaard note that both contain a scene in which the respective artists are in their first recording sessions, only to deliver performances that underwhelm their respective label owners. They are imitating other artists rather than being the artists they were born to be. In both examples, a moment of inspiration sees them launch into a musical performance that is the beginning of their authentic musical careers. In *Bird*, Eastwood provides a scene that both adheres to the form of this convention, but renders ambiguous its implications. The scene involves a sixteen-year-old Parker getting the opportunity to play in the Reno Club in Kansas City, a moment that is especially exciting because a drummer for Count Basie's orchestra, Jo Jones, is playing as a guest in the rhythm section. It is to be Parker's first big break, but his performance is a failure when the early beginnings of his innovative new approach to jazz end in Jones ceasing to play, before a member of the band contemptuously throws his cymbal at the feet of the young Parker. The moment is never fully contextualised – why is this moment important; who is Jo Jones and are we to understand that Parker was not yet ready for this moment, or that he was already formally experimenting way beyond the limitations of the audience and band? In any event, the throwing of the cymbal becomes a motif throughout the film, signifying a sense of inadequacy and self-hate at the core of its protagonist.

Other similar scenes are provided without what would normally be deemed the necessary context in which to fully appreciate their historical relevance. Take one in which, as is not uncommon in the musical Biopic, Parker attempts to engage with one of his musical heroes. The scene involves a heavily inebriated Parker showing up at the front door of famed Russian classical composter, Igor Stravinsky, while on tour in Los Angeles. Parker rings the bell, the door, situated very far from the gate, opens and Stravinsky looks out. Seeing Parker, he shuts the door. Does Stravinsky recognise Parker while being appalled at his inebriated state? Is this a moment relating to race? The answer is entirely unclear, save for it becoming an additional moment that Parker can add to his limitless bank of self-loathing.

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[235] Marshall & Kongsgaard, "Representing popular music stardom on screen," 350.

Marshall and Kongsgaard also highlight the tendency for the musical Biopic to contains scene which inevitably demonstrate the authentic value of particular pieces of music by connecting them with real life incidents. In the case of *Walk the Line*, the song Folsom Prison Blues is presented as an expression of Johnny Cash's negative feelings about the air force. In the case of *Ray*, it is an argument between Charles and his partner Margie Hendricks that is shown to ferment into the song *Hit the Road Jack*. [236] Noticeably, Eastwood resists ever being drawn in to these contrived correlations in *Bird*.

All in all, Eastwood eschews the traditional rise-and-fall narrative structure of the Biopic in favour of a loose and non-sequential approach that avoids the clichés of the genre while it obscures insight into the film's subject. Claims to such insight, Eastwood seems to suggest, would ultimately ring false. For Eastwood, Parker is a mystery whose self-destructive behaviours seem to run counter to his artistic genius, and Eastwood's film is a kind of lamentation on this reality. Instead, the film becomes a problematic exercise in the dramatisation of history, in which any claims to knowing the truth about its subject are set aside in favour of a vague elusiveness.

Authenticity and Opacity of Character

The principal offering of the contemporary Hollywood Biopic has always been the promise of a greater understanding of its subject, and so the genre has generally produced films that provide cohesive and causally driven representations of character that leave minimal room for ambiguity.

However, in the case of *Bird* both Eastwood and Forest Whitaker refuse to be lulled into misleading generalisations about the character of Charlie Parker. Instead, both the narrative and performance are delivered with an enigmatic quality, in which the appearance of causality is removed from Parker's behaviour by the decision to present a non-linear and highly fragmented account of his life, along with a tendency towards dialogue and physical performance that is deliberately obstructive, as if the only thing that we know about Charlie Parker is that he does not wish to be known. Avoiding any attempts to overtly represent the internal workings of Parker's mind, the viewer is left to contemplate Parker's façade. As a result, the viewer is left with a protagonist who is seen purely in terms of his most basic motivations: the desire to create music; the never-ending need to end the agonising pain that accompanies his stomach ulcers; and the need to indulge in massive levels of drug abuse which he, partly disingenuously, claims to require to end his pain. Refusing to indulge in

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[236] Marshall & Kongsgaard, "Representing popular music stardom on screen," 350-351.

emotive language that ever reveals his true character, instead Parker expresses himself through constant word play and lyrical language, which obfuscates his deeper emotional state. Take one scene, in which he explains his substance abuse problem to Dizzy Gillespie:

> Ain't it a bitch? I go to a liver doctor and I pay him $50. And it don't help me. I go to an ulcer doctor... same thing, except I pay him $75. But I go to some little cat up in a house somewhere and pay him $10 for a bag of shit and a little peace... my ulcers don't hurt, liver don't hurt. My heart trouble is gone. And this is the man I'm supposed to stay away from? Mr. Gillespie, my comrade in arms, that is what I call... a paradox.

The consequences of such an approach on historical representation are two-fold. Firstly, there are no obvious missteps or excessive assumptions about Parker within the film, and there is a sense of psychological verisimilitude in the character's refusal to be pinned down. Unlike most Biopics, *Bird* does not mislead or assume wherever truths remain unknown. Secondly, Parker is ironically depicted as a far more enigmatic character than he probably was. It is unlikely that Parker spent his time behaving in such a way as to deliberately obscure his own identity. It's no surprise that many critics had trouble identifying with the character, even as they admired the perfectly measured execution of the production:

> "Bird" is less moving as a character study than it is as a tribute and as a labor of love. The portrait it offers, though hazy at times, is one Charlie Parker's admirers will recognize."[237]

Other critics, like Desson Howe, went so far as to declare the movie a failure, rendered entirely inert by its admirable attempt at infallible historical representation:

> ""Bird" plays on way past closing time (it runs two hours and 40 minutes). After you've met, and even gotten to like, Bird, he deteriorates -- and deteriorates -- by way of heroin, booze, fewer and fewer bookings in New York nightclubs, the death of his daughter, more booze and heroin and a trip to Bellevue, among many things. You may catch yourself wondering if he's ever going to die, if you'll

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[237] Janet Maslin, "Film Festival; Charlie Parker's Tempestuous Life and Music," *New York Times*, Sept 26, 1988,
http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=940DE0DA1E3BF935A1575AC0A96E948260
(accessed Mar 2021)

ever find out more about him, or why this "Bird" is like a great auk – fascinating in its own peculiar way but incapable of flight.[238]

It would be difficult to disagree with either of these statements. As mentioned previously, with *Bird* Eastwood moves so far in the direction of choosing not to portray his protagonist in a formulaic or misleading light, that he ultimately obscures that character, creating something that is less of a character study than it is a representation of Eastwood's own inability to understand the flaws of an artist he holds in high regard. The result is that as a piece of entertainment and an exploration of its subject, *Bird* fails. However, what can be seen in the film is Eastwood's ambition to find new means of exploring history that go to acknowledging and engaging with the problem of historical representation. As such, Bird hints at the metahistorical films that will follow.

Verisimilitude in the Music

Perhaps the most innovative technique Eastwood uses to maintain a sense of historical verisimilitude in *Bird* is that involved in producing the film's jazz sequences. Before examining Eastwood's approach however, it's worth reflecting on the way in which music has traditionally integrated into the musical Biopic.

There are essentially three ways to approach the issue of music in the musical Biopic. The first is to utilise the music of the artist, having the actor mime to the music. Doing this implicitly acknowledges the audience's desire to hear the original music of the artist they have come to revere, positioning it as the locus of authenticity and truth in the film. *Ray* in an example of this approach.

The second approach is to have the actor perform the music. Such an approach assists in driving conversations about the efficacy of the actor in authentically portraying the subject of the film. *Walk the Line* took such an approach, with some of the conversation around the film centring on his ability to musically emulate Johnny Cash. Similar conversations occurred around Kevin Spacey's portrayal of Bobby Darin in *Beyond the Sea*.

A third approach is to have all the music rerecorded by a musical artist with a similar style to the historical subject, allowing it to be altered and structured in such a way as to meet the needs of the film. This music is then dubbed over the actor in the film. Such an approach is entirely pragmatic, and rarely found in major musical Biopics. It

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[238] Desson Howe, "Bird," *Washington Post*, Oct 14, 1988, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/birdrhowe_a0b1cc.htm (accessed Mar 2021)

was notable used in the film *La Bamba*, in which Lou Diamond Phillips portrays 50s rock star Ritchie Valens with music rerecorded by the band Los Lobos.

A fourth approach, which has become more common in the contemporary Biopic is to introduce a complex combination of all the above, in which the lines of authenticity are blurred in order to integrate actor and musical artist into a seamless cinematic fusion. The result is to convey something that feels innately truer in its ability to conceal any artifice, thereby helping to present the actor at the film's centre as all the more brilliant in her or his ability to convey the essence of the historical subject. *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) employs a combination of actor Rami Malek's voice, the singing of historical subject Freddie Mercury, and the additional vocals of Marc Martel to effectively capture the performances of its subject.[239] In *The Doors* (1991), Val Kilmer emulated historical subject Jim Morrison enough that he could perform during concert scenes using original band recordings sans Morrison's musical track, whilst the rest of the soundtrack was comprised of original recordings. Eastwood's *Bird* could be seen as an early precursor to this approach, utilising Parker's original musical performances removed from their original recordings and placed into context against a new band.

In the early stages of *Bird*'s production, it was intended that all the performances in the film should be rerecorded because most of Parker's recording were in mono and not adequate for the needs of a feature film. However, Eastwood managed to obtain some recordings made by Parker's wife, Chan. Parker's solos were extracted from these recordings and contemporary musicians were then hired to play as backup to the Parker recording. The result is that the film features newly recorded jazz performances, but Parker's parts are his own, one of the elements of the film that most interested critics: "This is a film of music, not about it, and one of the most extraordinary things about it is that we are really, literally, hearing Parker on the soundtrack."[240] The very act of separating Parker's performance from a musical recording and reinstituting it into a new context introduces a metahistorical challenge to the responsibilities of historical representation, presenting viewers with a musical performance that can be read as an act of loyalty to the truth of Parker's work, at the same time that it might be read as a violation of its authenticity.

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[239] Andy Greene, "Freddie Goes to Hollywood: How 'Bohemian Rhapsody' Finally Got Made," *Rolling Stone*, Jul 10, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/bohemian-rhapsody-queen-Biopic-696188/ (accessed Mar 2021)
[240] Roger Ebert, "Bird," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Oct 14, 1988, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bird-1988 (accessed Mar 2021)

As Amy Duncan of the *Christian Science Reading Monitor* noted in 1988, the approach was quite controversial at the time with the fear being that "once begun, there could be no end to such tampering, and that the artists in question have no control over it."[241] Herb Pomeroy, a teacher at the Berklee College of Music told Duncan that "to take (Parker's solos) out of their real context is totally untruthful" and that "it's lacking in artistic integrity."[242] While Gary Giddins, jazz critic at the *Village Voice*, suggested that ""I think it's a brilliant touch in the movie, and it's the only way that (Eastwood) could use Parker's music instead of using a sound-alike."[243]

This attempt to restore and utilise the original performances of Charlie Parker goes far towards re-examining the problem of musical performance in the musical Biopic. Traditionally, the actor playing the historical subject would need to either mime a performance to a musical recording already clearly recognisable to fans, or they would need to perform music themselves as a substitute to the performances of the artist. Instead, *Bird* provides unique musical performances that are both real and confected, featuring actual performances by Parker that allow Eastwood to showcase the talent that lies at the film's core. Eastwood's approach, when aligned with the bebop-like narrative structure and the elusive approach to character, serves to make *Bird* an incredibly sophisticated attempt to capture and express the essence of Charlie Parker's impact and contribution to culture, while at the same time acknowledging the vacuum that exists where the real Parker stood.

Issues of race

Desson Howe's earlier mentioned comments on the dank and degenerative tone of the film reveal a not uncommon perception that the morbid nature of Eastwood's vision might be implicitly tied to issues of racial representation. Paul Smith goes so far as to describe the film as an example of the *racist gaze*.[244] Referring to Eastwood's own claims to have been obsessed with jazz as a young man, to the point that he perceived himself as being a black man in a white man's body, Smith notes how Eastwood portrays Parker as a man whose body is in a state of absolute physical disintegration, the very opposite of Eastwood's own. According to Smith, Parker is portrayed as corpulent, drug-addled and weak willed, and that such representations serve to establish "Parker's blackness as a matter of decadence and

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[241] Amy Duncan, "How Bird's solos were given new settings for film," *Christian Science Reading Monitor*, Oct 21, 1988, http://www.csmonitor.com/1988/1021/lpark.html (accessed Mar 2021)
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 240.

dissolution, and that those signs bear a significant relation to the way in which Eastwood's own body both represents and signifies whiteness" and that "*Bird* functions as a privileged moment of its own phobic expression."[245]

In a chapter defending representations of race within *Bird* Drucilla Cornell argues that Smith fails to recognise Eastwood's attempts to portray a musician who finds himself in a perpetual struggle, both within and without, "to perform at the best of his abilities night after night, proving himself still a better and more original artist than he was the day before."[246] Cornell's comments fail to directly refute Smith's claims, but it is also fair to point out Eastwood's aesthetic was just as likely an amalgamation of the low-lit aesthetic of jazz clubs combined with an attempt to showcase the bleak despair that crept up on Parker in his final years. It's also fair to suggest that Eastwood does tackle the issue of race repeatedly by showcasing the segregation present in the white only stores and southern clubs that Parkers plays in; through the representation of the deliberate persecution of jazz musicians by police looking to blackmail them over every indiscretion; through the depiction of the disapproval of white patrons when Parker dances with his white wife; through the rejection of Parker by Stravinsky, which may or may not be related to race; and quite overtly through this monologue by Dizzy Gillespie, chastising Parker on succumbing to the very stereotypes which society uses to suppress African Americans:

> What you're really asking me is, how come when I'm supposed to hit at nine-thirty I hit at nine-thirty? How come I can land on a cat I love almost as much as I love you and then fire his ass for showing up late or getting stoned? Why I can hold a group together? Why I'm a leader? Because they don't expect me to be. Because deep down they like it when the nigger turns out to be unreliable. Because that's the way they think it's supposed to be. Because I won't give them the satisfaction of being right.

However, referring to a public exchange between Spike Lee and Clint Eastwood, in which Lee suggested that a black director would have been more appropriate for such a project, and Eastwood replied by stating that race should not be an issue and that Lee was welcome to make a Beethoven Biopic, Smith notes that Eastwood's attitude is demonstrative of a broader cultural "willful ignorance about the meaning of

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[245] Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*, 241.
[246] Drucilla Cornell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 182.

race in the culture."[247] In other words, with a simple statement of the value of equality, it becomes easy to neutralise discussion and ignore such concerns. Smith's point is fair, highlighting the conservative willingness to ignore inequity in Eastwood's response, and it is possible that the issue of race plays an unconscious factor in Eastwood's depiction, creating an impenetrable gap between Eastwood and the subject of his film.

However, while such issues might obscure Eastwood's examination of Charlie Parker, it is in some ways this obscurity that makes the film less of a character study than a formal exercise in deliberately highlighting that inability to access the subject. In this sense, once again, *Bird* becomes a problematic historical work which seeks to highlight the distance between the director and the subject of the text, separated by time, and in this case race, leaving only the meditation on who Charlie Parker may have been, and how it is even possible to confidently represent the past through the medium of film.

Conclusion

Eastwood's Charlie Parker Biopic *Bird* is a problematic film, rendered so by the reverence with which Eastwood holds his subject. Unwilling to misstep in representation of the subject of the film, Eastwood has ultimately avoided making any kind of substantial representation at all, instead depicting Parker as a figure whose ambitions, motivations and actions are essentially lost to the passage of time. But out of this obscurity, Eastwood's meditation on the stuff of history has also resulted in a formal exercise that highlights the very inability to provide an accurate account of a historical subject from the past. In this sense, *Bird* is a substantial departure for Eastwood, a shift away from the mythic filmmaking of the first half of his career towards a far more cerebral approach to issues of historical representation – one that shows signs of the metahistorical films to come its rejection of the medium's very ability to represent the past, instead preferring to highlight the seeming impossibility of the task.

Jonathan Rosenbaum notes in his 1999 list of the top ten jazz films of all time: "For all the legitimate quibbles that must be made — about substituting new accompanists, short-thrifting the issues of racism, and muddling certain musical and biographical facts -– the man and his music almost get the canvas they deserve."[248]

[247] Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood*, 230.
[248] Jonathan Rosenbaum, "The Top Ten Best Jazz Films (1999 list),"
JonathanRosenbuam.com, May 7, 1999, https://jonathanrosenbaum.net/2019/03/the-ten-best-jazz-films-1999-list/ (accessed Mar 2021)

I'm not entirely sure that this is the case, but however the film might short-change Charlie 'Bird' Parker, it is certainly one that has earned its deserved place for the contribution of ideas to issues of historical representation.

An Idol of Production: J. Edgar Hoover and *J. Edgar* (2011)

> "Truth-telling, I have found, is the key to responsible citizenship. The thousands of criminals I have seen in 40 years of law enforcement have had one thing in common: Every single one was a liar." – J. Edgar Hoover

In 2011, Clint Eastwood released the political Biopic, *J. Edgar*, an examination of the life and times of J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and its predecessor, the Bureau of Investigation, from 1924 through to his death in 1972, forty-eight years later. Within the course of this section I will argue that, despite the mediocre critical reception that the film received, *J. Edgar* stands as an impressive metahistorical work of cinema, its narrative structure expertly absorbing the competing public narratives around its historical subject to open up a dialogue about the role Hoover played in history without privileging any particular ideological position. In doing so, Eastwood not only invites a re-examination of J. Edgar Hoover, but also a reflection on the way in which history is traditionally represented in linear form within the Biopic.

As with *Bird*, Eastwood has looked to his historical subject for guidance on the appropriate way in which to structure his narrative as a metahistorical re-examination. While *Bird's* discordant narrative and ambiguous representation of character mimicked both the music and inaccessibly of its subject, *J. Edgar* is structured so as to play with, but never fully indulge in, the competing narratives at play in popular culture around the character of Hoover, most significantly those around his sexuality and professional integrity. More than this, the film engages with Hoover's reputation for indulging in misleading public narratives by deliberately presenting several scenes as narrative truth, only to undermine their validity at a later stage.

Eastwood is clearly aware that the character of Hoover presents an incredible opportunity and challenge for historical representation given that a large portion of his life was dedicated to avoiding the kind of interrogation that Eastwood's film partakes in. Hoover was, after all, heavily focused on the construction and control of a very particular public image for both himself and the FBI throughout his career. Conversely, a large part of his career involved uncovering the hidden details of other

people's lives (or fabricating them) by often ethically dubious means and, allegedly, destroying the public image of others with this information. On top of this, Hoover was the subject of an array of rumours that have never been entirely substantiated or ruled out around his sexuality, cross-dressing, or mob involvement. Here is a historical figure who is not just wilfully inaccessible, but also one whose actions have involved the deliberate distortion of historical events where such deceit was deemed, by him, to be in the best interests of the FBI. More than this, as writer Dustin Lance Black noted in one interview:

> This was a tough one to research. I mean, if you read any of the biographies on J. Edgar Hoover, you find that they contradict each other more than they agree. Often times, they're told from a political perspective. They feel like they have an agenda. For me, it was always important to answer that question of 'Why?'

Here then, Eastwood is presented with the opportunity to direct a film whose subject can be represented in such a way as to interrogate Hoover and his attempts to control public perception (and therefore history). More than this, he is afforded the opportunity to ambiguously represent the subtle rumours about his private life, while also acknowledging and demonstrating the limitations of historical representation, most particularly within the medium of film.

The Political Biopic

Before continuing with an analysis of *J. Edgar*, it's worth looking at the history and particular context of the political Biopic subgenre. The early Biopic revealed a cultural propensity to focus on idols of production rather than those of consumption in the genre's early days, and a significant proportion of those early films were centred on political figures. The volume of Biopics being released has fluctuated ever since, and Frago and Alfonoso make a strong case that these shifts are often in response to moments "when historical circumstances make people close ranks around their leaders or, just the opposite, when a sense of rejection or criticism towards politicians and their institutions coalesces in society."[249] They present some interesting examples:

> [B]iopics of kings and rulers were more abundant in the years before World War II, as a result of the economic and political instability caused by the Great Depression and the pre-war atmosphere. … [D]uring the 1980s and 1990s, Biopics with a critical approach on US

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[249] Frago & Alfonso, "2008–2013 Political Biopics," 2.

presents emerged, as a result of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s and the subsequent controversial US interventions in Vietnam and Iraq. … [D]uring the resurgence of British monarchs Biopics in the 1990s and after 2000, scandals within the Windsor family and profound political changes in the United Kingdom were taking place, especially with the decentralisation programme introduced by New Labour.[250]

Particular to the political Biopic is the inevitable need to portray the subject in a leadership position, reacting to challenging circumstances. In *Darkest Hour*, Churchill is faced with the Nazi threat and subsequently the crisis at Dunkirk. In *Lincoln*, Abraham Lincoln must take on the immense burden of the American Civil War. And in *J. Edgar*, multiple challenges are presented over the course of Hoover's career, including the threat of communism and his misconception of the civil rights movement.

Depending on the nature of the subject, the leadership abilities of the subject will either be framed in a positive, negative or ambivalent light that either supports or challenges popular perceptions. Frago and Alfonso argue that in the contemporary Hollywood Biopic, there is a tendency for these films to be developed and framed as a direct response to their contemporary context. Focusing on political Biopics made between 2008 and 2013 (e.g. *Lincoln*, *The Iron Lady*, *The King's Speech*,), they note that:

> The personality traits presented in these Biopics (vision, intelligence, honesty, sobriety and austerity, among others) are contrary to what public opinion detected in institutional leaders during the difficult years of the economic recession. After the fall of Lehman Brothers and the following big bank bail out by both European and American governments, people fell under the impression that the financial crisis hid a long-time scheme of opportunistic and unethical private practices with the complicity of politicians.[251]

J. Edgar was also made during this period but presents its subject's leadership with a greater degree of criticism than most of these films. It's feasible to read the film as a reinforcement of the public discourse around the capacity for corruption amongst the nation's leadership.

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[250] Frago & Alfonso, "2008–2013 Political Biopics," 2.
[251] Ibid., 10-11.

Frago and Alfonso argue that the films of this period share four key formal elements worthy of mention. The first is that they represent the characteristics of the neoclassical Biopic as defined by Bingham in that they "tend to revisit forms and narrative conventions of the past, although revised, mutated and hybridised."

> Specifically, scholars distinguish mixed traits of the three great periods in the Biopic: the classic, Hollywood phase of the mid-1930s to mid-1940s, which tends to portray the characters as role models; the phase of the warts-and-all Biopics until the 1960s, with a more realistic depiction that often shows a dichotomy between public and private life; and the phase of investigative Biopics in the 1990s, which are formally innovative and heirs to *Citizen Kane*'s film narrative modes. … [I]n Spielberg's *Lincoln* its reverence for the character somewhat recalls the film versions produced in the 1930s. But it also contains certain aspects of warts-and-all Biopics, inasmuch as the film depicts questionable actions in the public arena … and a certain degree of failure in Lincoln's private life…"[252]

The second element Frago and Alfonso identify is the suite of formal genre conventions that comprise the political Biopic, all of which will have been covered earlier in this chapter.[253] The third characteristic is that these films generally focus on contemporary historical figures, as is the case of *The Iron Lady* and *Invictus* (2009), with the oldest obvious example being that of *Lincoln*, which still only covers a period roughly 150 years prior to the time of production.[254] The result of this is that audiences can connect these historical subjects either indirectly or directly with current context, drawing parallels with contemporary leaders or situations and judging either the past or present against this comparison.[255] Finally, Frago and Alfonso suggest that these political Biopics also generally but not always set aside the classical convention of covering the entirety of the historical subject's life, instead focusing on a key moment in their story that acts as a summation of their place in popular imagination. *J. Edgar* is distinct in that the immense time scale of his leadership of the FBI is a core point of the film, and thus the film covers a larger time frame.

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[252] Frago & Alfonso, "2008–2013 Political Biopics," 4.
[253] Ibid., 5.
[254] Ibid., 4.
[255] Ibid.

Critical Reception Revealing Historical Ambiguity

As with many of Eastwood's metahistorical works, the ambiguity with which he chooses to address his subjects invited a wide range of perspectives at the time of release. David Denby of *The New Yorker* praised the film as "a nuanced account of J. Edgar Hoover as a sympathetic monster, a compound of intelligence, repression, and misery—a man whose inner turmoil, tamed and sharpened, irrupts in authoritarian fervour."[256] Marjorie Baumgarten recognised that the deliberately unreliable narrative structure of the film "serves the purpose of letting us know that this is the portrait of the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation as he wanted himself to be seen."[257] In his positive review for *Slant*, Jaime N. Christley wryly notes the misconceptions people will have about a film that does not provide a fixed position:

> Lots of critics and viewers (historian, history-curious, or otherwise) will want to try and read the tea leaves of *J. Edgar* to figure out what Eastwood thinks of the legendary G-man, what kind of guy he thinks Hoover was, whether he was good or bad, why he did the things he did, and so on.[258]

Conversely, Peter Bradshaw saw in the film's attempts to introduce but not privilege particular perspectives:

> a weird, muffled neutrality to all this, a lot of pulled punches and fudged issues, as if screenwriter and director have made an uneasy alliance to create a Hoover they admire from different angles: the fictional love child of Harvey Milk and *Dirty Harry*.[259]

Focusing on a sense of where the film's sympathies lie, Mike Giuliano noted that the film "does not present a flattering portrait of him, but it's basically sympathetic to a man facing both external criminal threats and internal demons."[260] Going further,

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[256] David Denby, "The Man in Charge," *The New Yorker*, Nov 6, 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/11/14/the-man-in-charge (accessed Apr 2021)
[257] Marjorie Baumgarten, "J. Edgar," *Austin Chronicle*, Nov 11, 2011, https://www.austinchronicle.com/events/film/2011-11-11/j-edgar/ (accessed Apr 2021)
[258] Jaime N. Christley, "Review: J. Edgar," *Slant*, Nov 9, 2011, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/j-edgar/ (accessed Apr 2021)
[259] Peter Bradshaw, "J. Edgar – review," *The Guardian*, Jan 20, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/jan/19/j-edgar-review (accessed Apr 2021)
[260] Mike Giuliano, "Writer of 'Milk' questions the psyche of 'J. Edgar'," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov 14, 2011, https://www.baltimoresun.com/ph-ho-movie-rev-j-edgar-20111114-story.html (accessed Apr 2021)

Andrew Pulver, writing for *The Guardian* went so far as to question the morality of the film's neutrality, referring to it as a "morally questionable portrait of the would-be power broker" that "reads like Eastwood's film was conceived and greenlit as a studious attempt to gauge the personal sacrifices needed to maintain the American polity, the kind of post-9/11 superpatriotism that has been invoked in the fight against al-Qaida."[261] The fact that Eastwood's film can be interpreted as anything from a sympathetic condemnation of an authoritarian monster to an apology for fascism speaks to the way in which critics find themselves disoriented by texts that do not take a singular moralising position.

Narrative as Public Discourse

In *J. Edgar*, Eastwood seeks a sense of psychological verisimilitude for his historical subject by attempting to combine the competing public narratives around the character of Hoover into a single, convincing individual with a singular psychology. He presents Hoover as an almost insanely fastidious and highly repressed man, whose deep seeded inadequacies – seemingly born out of an early childhood stutter, a disturbing relationship with his mother, and a profound sense of shame concerning his own sexuality – drive him manically forward in the pursuit of his career. These insecurities push him to contribute major advances in crime-fighting technology and process whilst also urging him to do everything within his power, ethically or unethically, to avoid and control the attentions of his fellow human beings.

More than this, Hoover is represented as a man obsessed with historical standing. In an early scene he tells his biographer about the undeserved condemnation of political figure Alexander Mitchell Palmer: "Believe what you will from historians, most write from the present perspective, forgetting context. Mitchell Palmer was a hero." In this moment, *J. Edgar* creates a dialogue between the intersecting interests of Hoover, historians, and the nature of historical representation of history itself. Hoover is a man attempting to correct his historical image in the face of the public contempt he faces in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the same time, we are being cautioned not to use a retrospective perspective to condemn based upon the knowledge we have now. It is important, it is hinted at, not to judge Hoover without the proper historical context for his actions. And finally, the film is stating its own intentions and the problematic nature of those intentions – to represent its subject within his historical context, neither condemning nor condoning so much as analysing.

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[261] Andrew Pulver, "J Edgar – review," *The Guardian*, Dec 1, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/nov/30/j-edgar-film-review (accessed Apr 2021)

A look at the representation of Hoover in popular culture up the point of this film, makes such a position compelling. The portrayal of Hoover in popular culture has long centred on reductive depictions of either a sociopathic bully, or a ridiculous hypocrite, without significant focus on contextualising him within his historical context. To take just a few examples, in *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* (Larry Cohen, 1977) he appears as a gruff, sexually disinterested prude, with increasingly questionable ethics. As portrayed by Vincent Gardenia in the television miniseries *Kennedy* (1983), he exists as something of an ominous force who "stalks episodes like an image of death from his shadow-filled office."[262] In the movie *Chaplin* (1992) Hoover is depicted as a "repressed neurotic" who is shown to despise and go after Chaplin as a communist because of an "imaginary snub at a dinner party."[263] In Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) he is given little screen time other than appearing "in a fluffy white bathrobe eating fruit out of the mouth of a hunky poolboy."[264] He is portrayed ridiculously in Mario Van Peebles' *Panther* (1995), plotting "an alliance between the FBI and the Mafia to flood the ghetto with cheap drugs."[265] When Ernest Borgnine portrayed him in *Hoover* (2000) *Variety* argued that in "attempting to counter the prevailing image of J. Edgar Hoover as a repressed, hypocritical bully, this oddity of a film succeeds only in portraying him as a humorless, well-meaning bully."[266] And Billy Crudup plays him in Michael's Mann's *Public Enemies* (2009) as "a romantic, dreaming of an FBI of clean-cut young accountants in suits and ties who would be a credit to their mothers."[267] In *J. Edgar*, Eastwood attempts to do his subject the service of investigating his character, juxtaposing his contributions with his flaws, and providing a fictionalised history that might account for the rumours and innuendo that pursue Hoover as well as the nature of his character.

Towards the conclusion of *J. Edgar* it has become clear that Hoover is a fundamentally flawed character, frequently capable of projecting onto others the flaws he fears in himself. His obsession with surveillance and revealing the inner secrets of senior politicians is conveyed in a manner that seems to demonstrate Hoover's own manic fear that his sexuality may be uncovered. And his capacity to

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[262] Len Sousa, "Kennedy: The Complete Series," *Slant Magazine*, Mar 9, 2009, http://www.slantmagazine.com/dvd/review/kennedy-the-complete-series (accessed Mar 2021)
[263] Roger Ebert, "Chaplin," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jan 8, 1993, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/chaplin-1993 (accessed Mar 2021)
[264] Alex von Tunzelmann, "Nixon: Oliver Stone's Tricky Dicky flick is far from unimpeachable," *The Guardian*, Jun 3, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jun/03/nixon-oliver-stone-reel-history (accessed Mar 2021)
[265] Roger Ebert, "Panther," *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 3, 1995, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/panther-1995 (accessed Mar 2021)
[266] Sheri Linden, "Hoover," *Variety*, Dec 27, 2000, http://variety.com/2000/film/reviews/hoover-1200465742/ (accessed Mar 2021)
[267] Roger Ebert, "Public Enemies," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Jun 29, 2009, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/public-enemies-2009 (accessed Mar 2021)

accuse others of lying, betrayal and corruption is positioned as an overly aggressive response to similar accusations towards him. In one late scene, all the above is succinctly demonstrated in one key moment of dialogue from Hoover, relating to the ominous threat of Nixon, who seems to be positioned as the only man more corrupt than Hoover:

> He won't be controlled, Clyde. He's a menace. He'll do anything to hold on to power. I never played his game, that's the problem. And if some of what I did seemed like rule bending then perhaps they need to look into their own souls, and figure out what it is that they did that made them feel blackmailed.

This flagrant hypocrisy is explained in ambiguous fashion through three key relationships Hoover has in the film. His relationship with his mother, the one figure in Hoover's life to whom he is ultimately subservient, provides a sense of Hoover as the result of a deeply controlled upbringing, in which personal weaknesses like his childhood stutter and his mother's unspoken suspicion about his sexuality are stamped as unacceptable. Hoover's relationship with his secretary, Helen Gandy is shown early on to have started out with a single date, in the library, in which Gandy shuts down Hoover's stilted and cold marriage proposal almost immediately, resulting in his hiring her as his personal secretary for the remainder of his life. This is a relationship that is shown to have never grown any less formal over the subsequent decades.

And perhaps most importantly, it is his relationship with Clyde Tolson, with whom he has a lifelong relationship that is positioned as most-likely unconsummated. The film is quite overt in its suggestion that the two men are in love with each other, the pivotal moment coming years into their friendship when an outraged Tolson is informed of Hoover's interest in marrying a major celebrity. When Tolson hears that Hoover has been intimate with the woman, he attacks him, resulting in a sexualised physical fight that culminates with a kiss. "Never do that again," Hoover says to him, and as far as what is shown throughout the remainder of the film, he never does. The film, then, assumes Hoover's sexual leanings are bisexual at the very least, without fully indulging in the surrounding culture myths about his flagrant homosexuality.

In another scene, after the death of his mother, Hoover is shown dressing up in her clothes and studying himself in the mirror as he weeps at his loss. There is less of a suggestion here that Hoover is a cross-dresser, a popular myth, than that he is attempting to revive his mother momentarily through this act of interpretation.

However, as with the aforementioned scene, Eastwood is here playing with popular ideas in the public imagination whilst refusing to fully indulge or privilege them.

In this sense, *J. Edgar* plays heavily with the competing myths around its subject, acknowledging the public discourse relating to his sexuality; highlighting his significant achievements as a director of the FBI; and accepting the deep personality flaws which lead to significant corruption.

All of this is covered without privileging any of these myths in a manner that will contradict the other. The text thus avoids any reading that might be seen as either celebrating or condemning the subject, whilst also inviting the viewer to mistrust the narrative being presented to the, in order to invite reflection on the fallibility of historical representation. In this sense, *J. Edgar* becomes a metahistorical film, rejecting any notion of its own historical truth, positioning itself as an exercise in combining the competitive narratives around Hoover to create a text that attempts to assimilate them into a theoretical subject, at the same time that the film encourages the viewer to reject the notion that Hoover, historians, or even the film provide any definitive kind of historical truth.

Public and Private Lives Within the Narrative Structure of J. Edgar

At first glance, *J. Edgar* appears to take a relatively traditional approach to narrative structure in its depiction of the public and private life of its historical subject, contrasting Hoover's professional career with the personal challenges that come with repressing his sexual identity. An obvious reading of the film might see the narrative as a clear-cut interpretation of Hoover as a man driven to fastidiousness and obsessive-compulsive behaviour in order to assert control over his own sexuality. This need to control his world and hide his true identity leads him to build his own protective empire in the form of the FBI. Beyond this however, the structure through which the film presents Hoover's public and private life offers a metahistorical reading that asks us to question not just what we have seen with our own eyes, but also to question the film and medium's capacity to represent the past.

The public life of Hoover is framed a scene in which an elderly Hoover dictates the story of his life to an FBI scribe, reflecting on his life and times from the year 1917 while in the Justice Department through to the 1960s. This framing provides the context for Hoover's narration throughout much of the film, leading us to believe that the text can be interpreted as the subjective interpretation of Hoover. This allows for the film's disjointed and non-linear reflection on various moments in Hoover's career, including: his rise to becoming Director of the FBI; his work in developing

sophisticated forensic procedures that revolutionised the investigation of crime; his work fighting what was perceived to be the domestic communist threat during this period; the rise of gangsters during the prohibition era and the investigation of the Charles Augustus Lindbergh Jr. kidnapping. These scenes are implicitly understood to be based on the verbatim accounts of Hoover, thus undermining the notion of any objective representation of history within the film, and subtly highlighting the innate bias inherent in all forms of historical representation.

This becomes all the more obvious in scenes that take place contemporaneously with the time from which he is narrating, covering his growing interest in illegally wiretapping senior political figures towards the end of his career, and his growing irrelevancy as he misinterprets the Black Rights movement as a communist conspiracy. Additionally, these scenes of public life are intercut seamlessly with those that provide an account of Hoover's private life. We can safely assume that these private moments are not being narrated to a scribe by Hoover, but the structure wilfully avoids any delineation, making it all the more difficult to interpret the source, nature or truth of any particular moment.

Going further, in one of the film's final scenes, in which Tolson can no longer bear Hoover's ever increasing self-righteous condemnation of everybody around him, Tolson reminds him that he himself has deliberately lied and misled the public throughout his past, often claiming that such deliberate deceptions were in the interest of the public even when they were blatantly in defence of his own ego. In a sequence of flashbacks, it is revealed that many of the moments the viewer has observed throughout the film were Hoover's fictional imaginings. This is a structural manifestation of Hoover's unreliability and an acknowledgement that the medium itself cannot be entirely trusted:

> I read your manuscript, Edgar. You didn't arrest Karpis. And you know as well I do, there was no white horse in the street. No gun in the back seat. And you didn't kill Dillinger. Agent Purvis did. But you kept all the glory for yourself. And Machine Gun Kelly never said "Don't shoot, G-Men!" You made that up to sell comic books, Edgar. And when we went to the scene of the greatest crime of the century, Mr. Lindburgh didn't come out and shake your hand and express his faith in the FBI. He called you a fussy little man, and he refused to even meet you. And you didn't arrest Hauptmann, Agent Cisco did. You weren't even at the scene, Edgar. Only the photo-op. Most of what you wrote is

> exaggeration. Some of it is blatant lies, and I don't even know if you realise it anymore.

The viewer's position is thus entirely destabilised. It is impossible to know how much of what has been presented throughout the film can be trusted. Hoover has proven that he is an unreliable source, but Eastwood has likewise deliberately undermined the faith the audience has in the history he presents. Instead, *J. Edgar* becomes an enigmatic reflection of the dishonesty of its historical subject. Both Hoover's public and private life is now entirely in question as the audience find themselves as manipulated by Hoover's constructed history as the contemporary public were.

This point is further emphasised by the fact that *J. Edgar* makes much of Hoover's attempts to control the popular imagination by shifting the course of public entertainment. He works to curb the popularity of the gangster film by overseeing 'G-man' or FBI film and television productions, as well as being involved with the *G-men* radio serial, which misleadingly claimed to be based on real FBI cases. By framing a significant portion of the film as yet another work of Hoover propaganda, *J. Edgar* cleverly undermines its own capacity to be viewed as truth while also providing a more valid and authentic view of historical representation.

The result is that *J. Edgar* is not so much an attempt to take a position on the rights and wrongs of Hoover's career as it is a meditation on the ambiguity of history, one that uses its protagonists' own ambiguities to do so. For some critics, however, the focus on the man rather than the consequences of his work, and the refusal to take a moral position on his actions, made this a "bad domestic melodrama" which "refuses to take any clear position on one of American history's most controversial figures".[268] Such a position demonstrates a misunderstanding of the responsibilities involved in the representation of history in that the refusal to acknowledge the subtleties and ambiguities of the past pushes towards a mythological rather than investigative view of history. Eastwood instead utilises the narrative structure of J. Edgar to metahistorical effect, inviting a dialogue rather than offering a position.

Self-reflexivity and Anti-Verisimilitude

There is key point of intertextual self-reflexivity within *J. Edgar* which serves to deliberately highlight the problematic nature of historical representation in cinema. This lies in the film's quite deliberate attempts, noticed but not deeply interrogated by

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[268] Andrew O'Hehir, ""J. Edgar": Clint Eastwood's lame and insulting Hoover Biopic," *Salon.com*, Nov 9, 2011, http://www.salon.com/2011/11/09/j_edgar_clint_eastwoods_lame_and_insulting_hoover_Biopic (accessed Mar 2021)

numerous critics, to both emulate the structure and themes of *Citizen Kane*, a film mentioned earlier in this chapter having been singled out by Dennis Bingham as a subversive attempt to reject the values of the 1930s Biopics and argue "that the Great Man Biopic is about nothing more than the vindication of the ego."[269]

Like *Kane*, *J. Edgar* is a layered investigation of its protagonist. Its structure presents viewers with an unreliable subjective account of Hoover's life that attempts to permeate the impenetrable exterior of the figure who stands at the heart of the film. Both films feature very similar makeup to age their subjects in their later years, although in the latter the makeup seems out-dated and verging on a parody of the former that forcibly breaks and challenges any sense of verisimilitude. Both films make their focus difficult men, raised by strong mothers (overbearing in the case of *J. Edgar*), who have minimal capacity for introspection. Both films attempt to undermine the mythic scale of their protagonists, presenting them as petty figures, yet with substantial cultural impact. And whilst in *Citizen Kane* the narrative is powered by Kane's last words, "Rosebud", revealed in the final moments to be a sleigh he used to play with in the snow, for J. Edgar Hoover the proposed equivalent is ultimately the sense that his entire life might be a response to his unresolved issues concerning his own sexuality. And whilst the object that rested in the hands of a dying Kane is a snow globe, for Hoover his concealed sexuality is represented by a document found on his desk by Clyde Tolson. Picking it up, it is a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from a lover, which earlier in the film Hoover had considered using for the purposes of blackmail. Now, however, the scene is narrated by Hoover's voice reading an extract from the letter:

> Funny how even the dearest face will fade away in time. But most clearly I remember your eyes with a sort of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just northeast of the corner of your mouth.

Are we to understand this moment as an attempt to parallel the experiences of Tolson and Hoover with those of Roosevelt and her lover? Did the words in this document come to mean something exceptional to Hoover, exposing a deeper sense of self-reflexivity is his final days? Or, alternatively, is the document simply there by happenstance? The answer is less important to Eastwood than the questions, with the scene reiterating one final time that the mind of the historical subject at the centre of the narrative is ultimately inaccessible, and that the most that can be achieved within a Biopic is to invite a metahistorical reflection on both the historical subject and the nature of historical representation itself.

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[269] Dennis Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, 66.

What is perhaps most compelling about Eastwood's attempt to draw parallels with *Citizen Kane* is the way in which, combined with the film's narrative drive to undermine its own relationship with historical truth, this approach breaks any sense of verisimilitude in the film. Di Caprio looks like a man wearing out-dated make-up. The film being referenced is a work of fiction, not a Biopic. The accounts provided by the protagonist are often lies. The representations of Hoover's personal life are speculative. And the cinematography of the film feels frequently stiff and out-dated in its attempts to replicate those of *Kane*. All of this might result in a negative experience for some viewers, but this very sense of artificiality only serves to further highlight that the work is a constructed narrative, highlighting the innate requirement to fictionalise within any dramatic historical film.

Conclusion

J. Edgar marks a significant and largely unrecognised evolution for Eastwood since the release of Bird in 1988. While the earlier film was more formally and conceptually bold in its representation of its subject, choosing to forego any representation of Charlie Parker that might prove false, *J. Edgar* more confidently explores and invites a dialogue around the competing narratives in public discourse relating to the film's subject, incorporating Hoover's own impulse to create and control the public imagination into the film's narrative structure. As a result, *J. Edgar* becomes a metahistorical film, exploring the various potentialities of multiple historical perspectives without any moral positioning, and highlighting the problematic nature of all attempts at historical representation.

An Idol of Destruction: Chris Kyle and *American Sniper* (2014)

> "If you think that this war isn't changing you you're wrong. You can only circle the flames so long." – *American Sniper*

In 2014, Eastwood released his adaptation of *American Sniper*, an autobiographical account of the life of Chris Kyle, a Navy Seal sniper who proudly and unapologetically claimed to have shot and killed more than 250 people during four tours of the Iraq War. While *Bird* and *J. Edgar* are notable in their attempts to navigate the problem of historical truth through metahistorical approaches that overtly highlight the impossibility of capturing the past, the autobiographical nature of *American Sniper* introduced Eastwood to a broader array of complexities concerning historical adaptation. In such an instance, in which the director seeks to be loyal to a text provided by the historical subject, there is immediately a tension between the need to maintain loyalty to the historical subject and the need to represent history without bias. In this section, a case will be presented that Eastwood's *American Sniper* is a compelling work of history that balances the complexities of autobiographical adaptation with Eastwood's own metahistorical project.

An argument will be made that Eastwood finds a means of presenting the ideological position of his historical subject, as has been represented in Kyle's book, whilst introducing a series of subtle juxtapositions that distinguish Kyle's perspective from that of the film, thereby introducing ambiguity and inviting multiple interpretations. Where Kyle is shown to present his ideology and mental state to be fixed and flat, in the film he is played by Bradley Cooper, whose performance invites nuance and multiple readings. In this sense, a case will be made that Eastwood fundamentally subverts the conventions of the Biopic which seek to bring the perspective of the subject into alignment with the viewer, instead opening up a distance between viewer and subject that allows for reflection on the nature of the subject whilst still maintaining loyalty to the fixed mental states presented within the original autobiographical work.

Contrary to the oft-presented idea in popular reviews that *American Sniper* divorces itself from the morality of war, the film invites a meditation on this subject, in part by divorcing itself from the morality of any *specific* war. Instead, by presenting Kyle as an unquestioning advocate for his role in military conflict and placing this perspective in contrast to the competing views of those around him, whilst also repeatedly demonstrating the cost of war to those who fight it and are subjected to it, the film acts as a profound yet ambivalent reflection on the very purpose of war. Additionally,

by presenting Kyle as both an unflinching advocate and victim of war trauma, Eastwood opens an ambiguous space for Kyle to be seen as anything from a heroic martyr to a misguided monster. In doing so, Eastwood pushes the Biopic well beyond its normal viable parameters for historical representation, with Kyle becoming the locus for reflection on the nature of what war is; what it costs; what beliefs make it possible for people to willingly engage in it; and what is both owed to and by those who fight. It is worth noting that American Sniper's themes intersect with those of the next chapter on the War Film, where it might comfortably have sat were it not for the specific conventions of the Biopic that govern its form.

Finally, an argument will be made that *American Sniper* reveals a degree of self-reflexivity in its representations of violence, with repeated allusions to Eastwood's earlier works inviting a reflection on the nature of violence and masculine bravado within the history of American cinema and more broadly within the American psyche. In doing so, Eastwood continues his on-going tendency to re-examine, but not apologise for, his role in the long-standing relationship that Americans have with violence, particularly in the context of weaponry.

The Source Text

By the time he was honourably discharged in 2009, Chris Kyle's career was part of Navy Seal lore. Kyle had fought in four tours of Iraq as a sniper, in which he had received numerous medals and claimed to have shot and killed more than 250 people in the line of duty, 160 of which have been confirmed by the Pentagon. The latter figure alone makes him the single most deadly American Sniper in military history.

Kyle published an account of his military career in 2012, entitled *American Sniper*. The book captured the attention of the American public and sold over a million copies. It is a highly patriotic work, charged with masculine aggression and an undercurrent of frustration that frequently demonstrates a comfort with death, killing and violence that many are likely to find deeply confronting:

> Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy "savages." There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there.

> People ask me all the time, "How many people have you killed." …
> The number is not important to me. I only wish I had killed more.[270]

Juxtaposed with the absolutism and certitude present throughout the work are brief sections by Taya Kyle, Chris Kyle's wife, that provide a softer and more nuanced take on Kyle's life and relationship with his family. The result is a work that is both discordant and fascinating, hinting at the reality that the most interesting parts of Kyle are those which neither he nor his wife reveal. Fascinated by the book, screenwriter Jason Hall approached Kyle, and ultimately wrote and sold a script for a film adaptation to Warner Brothers with the help of Bradley Cooper, submitting a draft in late January of 2013.

In the meantime, Kyle's experiences with readjusting to home life had led him to work with a non-profit organisation offering life-coaching to disabled and traumatised veterans. On February 2, 2013, Kyle along with a colleague, Chad Littlefield, accompanied Eddie Ray Routh, a PTSD afflicted Marine Corp veteran, to a shooting range – apparently as part of his therapy. It was here that Routh shot and killed Kyle and Littlefield. Hall was appropriately stunned. He approached the grieving Taya Kyle with his condolences, and the two entered into a series of conversations that saw the concept for the film fundamentally change, with Hall's script exceeding the boundaries of the autobiography itself:

> I gained insights from her that I couldn't have gotten from him. People can't see themselves the way others do, and Taya naturally had great perspective as well as love for him. She filled in a lot of blanks. My original script had ended with him coming back from Iraq for the last time. Now I got insight into his struggle–and the family's–to readjust. The movie became not just the story of Iraq and war's toll on him and his family; it grew into a story of what it took for him to get home spiritually.[271]

Whether or not Hall perceived it, or whether it was even a concern it him, Taya's perspective opened up an opportunity to circumvent the greatest limitations of the use of an autobiography as source material in representing history. By moving from the potentially polemical position of Chris Kyle and his reductionist linear

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[270] Chris Kyle, Scott McEwan and Jim DeFelice, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 4.
[271] Jason Hall, "From the depth of Grief, a Legend: How Tragedy Shaped the American Sniper Script," in *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. History*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 11 (postscript).

perspectives on his own motivations, ideals and actions, towards an approach that opened up a dialogue between Kyle's perspectives and the nuanced observations of his wife, Hall was able to introduce a level of complexity to his historical subject that would have otherwise inevitably been missing.

Taya Kyle's involvement had given Hall license to introduce elements that might have run contrary or sat uncomfortably with the perspectives of Chris Kyle. For example, far more focus could be given to the increasing presence of signs of trauma in Kyle's domestic life throughout the four tours. There was more opportunity to juxtapose Kyle's overtly stated definitive ideals with more nuanced and complex behaviours that betrayed a sense of doubt and a fear of self-examination. Kyle might have claimed he was entirely comfortable with the killings he committed on a regular basis throughout his career, but now there was opportunity to question whether he was naturally inclined to understate their impact. That said, Taya Kyle still stood as a gatekeeper of approval for the film, however informal her authority might be.

The following May Steven Spielberg took an interest in the film, but the cost required to fulfil his vision was considered excessive. Eastwood ultimately signed on as director in August 2013, and the film *American Sniper* was released the following year. Eastwood found a way to utilise the space between Chris and Taya Kyle's perspectives which Hall had explored and introduce a broader historical dialogue that made space for those with ideological perspectives that run contrary to those of the Kyles. Eastwood at least partially successfully navigates a near-impossible set of complex terrain in *American Sniper*, attempting to produce a Biopic that would satisfy the authorised perspective of the Kyles, whilst exploring the moral, personal, and ideological complexities of the historical subject at its core.

Beginning primarily with an account of Kyle's formative years and early romantic relationship with his wife, the narrative is largely divided between Kyle's time in Iraq and his time at home with his family between military tours. The Iraq section is largely held together by a fictional story about Kyle's role in tracking down and killing 'The Butcher' an affiliate of al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as well as in killing a former Olympic sniper posited as his arch nemesis, Mustafa – also a fictional character. These scenes are juxtaposed with those of Kyle's home-life and his deteriorating ability to deal with the realities of domestic existence back in the United States, the trauma of war and loss creeping up on him. The film culminates with Kyle's acknowledgement of his difficulties, and his work to overcome them before his unfortunate early death.

Reviews of the film have shown radically varying interpretations of the film as either a morally reductive apology for violence, or a sophisticated analysis of the experience of the soldier at war. In *Variety*, Justin Chang argued that the film was a compelling continuation of Eastwood's project "to acknowledge both the pointlessness and the necessity of violence while searching for more honest, ambiguous definitions of heroism than those to which we're accustomed."[272] Championing Cooper's performance he notes that "many of the drama's unspoken implications" can "be read plainly in the actor's increasingly war-ravaged face."[273] Noting that "[v]iolence and its relation to both American history and the American character is one of Eastwood's great themes", Glenn Kenny of RogerEbert.com argued that Eastwood's film was "one of the more tough-minded and effective war pictures of post-American-Century American cinema."[274]

Marjorie Baumgarten of the *Austin Chronicle* disregarded the moral complexity of the film entirely, misunderstanding Kyle's perspective as that of the film and suggesting that "the film exists in a black-and-white world in which only good and evil abide."[275] Similarly, Peter Bradshaw suggested the film was a "worryingly dull celebration of a killer" and should be referred to as "Clean Harry".[276] Chris Nashawaty of *Entertainment Weekly* argued that the film lacked moral ambiguity.[277]

A.O. Scott was positive about many aspects of the film but ultimately saw it as "an expression of nostalgia for" George W. Bush's "Manichaean approach to foreign policy … upholding the Hollywood western tradition of turning complicated historical events and characters into fables and heroes."[278] Conversely, in the same publication in which Pauline Kael declared *Dirty Harry* a fascist work, *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody saw the film as "righteously angry at politicians who sent Chris into Iraq—not least for feeding him a false story about the national interest, which Chris swallows completely and which ratchets up his furious sense of protecting the American

[272] Justin Chang, "Film Review: 'American Sniper'," *Variety*, Nov 11, 2014, https://variety.com/2014/film/reviews/film-review-american-sniper-1201354123/ (accessed Apr 2021)
[273] Ibid.
[274] Glenn Kenny, "American Sniper," *RogerEbert.com*, Dec 25, 2014, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/american-sniper-2014 (accessed Apr 2021)
[275] Marjorie Baumgarten, "American Sniper," *Austin Chronicle*, Jan 16, 2015, https://www.austinchronicle.com/events/film/2015-01-16/american-sniper/ (accessed Apr 2021)
[276] Peter Bradshaw, "American Sniper review – worryingly dull celebration of a killer," *The Guardian*, Jan 16, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/15/american-sniper-review-clint-eastwood-bradley-cooper (accessed Apr 2021)
[277] Chris Nashawaty, "American Sniper," *Entertainment Weekly*, Dec 25, 2014, https://ew.com/article/2014/12/25/american-sniper/ (accessed Apr 2021)
[278] A. O. Scott, "Review: 'American Sniper,' a Clint Eastwood Film With Bradley Cooper," *New York Times*, Dec 24, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/movies/american-sniper-a-clint-eastwood-film-starring-bradley-cooper.html (accessed Apr 2021)

homeland from threats originating in Iraq."[279] The critical pattern that has pursued Eastwood's historical works from the beginning continues here, with critics attempting to impose a fixed ideological reading on to the film, rather than considering it as a space for reflection on the subject. In other words, they are failing to identify American Sniper as a metahistorical film that invites a meditation on the nature of the way we examine the past, rather than a declaration of some particular truth.

Public and Private Lives

With *American Sniper*, as in all his Biopics, Eastwood embraces the genre's tendency towards exploring the space between the historical subject's public and private life. In this case, the dichotomy between the two is structurally reinforced by the film's back and forwards movement between Kyle's domestic life and his four deployments during the Iraq War. Interestingly, whilst the narrative of war as a point of trauma that increasingly impacts on a soldier's ability to deal with domestic existence will be familiar to many viewers, Eastwood adds an additional layer to this relationship, with Kyle's military actions repeatedly intersecting violently with the lives of Iraqi families and children much like his own. In doing so, Eastwood opens up an ambiguous metahistorical space, in which the viewer is forced to juxtapose and reflect upon Kyle's stated belief that he is fighting to protect his family, with the impact of war on the families we have seen within Iraq.

In the context of his military life, Kyle's increasing levels of emotional damage are demonstrated through a series of scenes that give measure to his capacity to deal with extreme levels of stress. Early on we are shown Kyle's first two kills as a sniper: a mother and her young son attempting to kill American U.S. Marines with a grenade. The viewer is left with no questions relating to the necessity of the kill, and Kyle is shown to approach the situation with an appropriate level of solemnity. In the following scene, as a fellow soldier reminds Kyle that the boy could have killed ten marines, he responds sadly: "Yeah, but I killed him. … It's just not how I envisioned that first one to go down." Nevertheless, Kyle is shown to have completed the unfortunate task in a manner revealing a disciplined, clear-headed and capable mind.

A similar scene takes place several years later on Kyle's fourth and final tour, in which Kyle watches as a young Iraqi boy considers picking up a rocket launcher and firing it at U.S. soldiers. At this point, he has witnessed and engaged in innumerable acts of violence and has lost two close friends. Kyle observes the boy through his

[279] Richard Brody, ""American Sniper" takes apart the myth of the American warrior," *The New Yorker*, Dec 24, 2014, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/american-sniper-takes-apart-myth-american-warrior (accessed Apr 2021)

rifle sight, all the way to the stage of pointing the loaded rocket launcher at his intended target, until the boy has a change of heart at the last moment, putting down the weapon and running away. Unlike the earlier scene, here Kyle has lost much of the focus and certitude that he began with. His breathing is shaky, he whispers repeated requests to the oblivious boy that he not pick up the weapon. It is no longer certain that Kyle is capable of killing his target. If the aforementioned scene acted as the marker for Kyle's initiation into the stresses of combat life, this scene acts as a marker for the conclusion his Kyle's military career.

Following this encounter with the boy, Kyle is shown deciding to take the opportunity and kill Mustafa from an almost unprecedented distance of 1920 metres, a feat which he did achieve but within a different context. Here, in taking his shot, Kyle knowingly compromises the position of himself and numerous fellow soldiers, resulting in an extended battle sequence in which he barely escapes, and it is not entirely clear if some Americans have died. Amid this combat, Kyle calls his wife and declares, "I'm ready to come home."

Here the film has been structured in such a way as to invite multiple readings. Kyle could be interpreted as a hero who has completed his contribution to the war effort and can now give himself permission to leave the war. Or alternatively, having revealed an impulse towards recklessness and martyrdom in his decision to needlessly risk lives in pursuit of Mufasa, Kyle might be understood to have revealed to himself the distinction between his stated ideals, and the primal drivers that underpin his identity. Apart from making for a richer and more complex text, the space between these two readings invites a reflection not just on the character of Kyle but also on the distinction between the patriotic narratives and real human impulses that have and continue to lead humans to war.

The four sequences involving Kyle's return from a tour of Iraq tell a story that demonstrates an increasing sense of trauma and disconnect pervading Kyle's personality. After the end of the first tour, it is revealed in a conversation with a GP that he has not left his house in some time, and is suffering from very high blood pressure, and based on his nervous disposition, increasing levels of anxiety. Here we see his first exchange about his changing behaviour with Taya, in which he reveals that he is outraged at the way in which day-to-day life continues in the United States whilst his fellow soldiers fight on unrecognised. Each subsequent sequence covering Kyle's post-tour time at home contains iterations on these scenes, in which Kyle is shown to suffer from increasingly levels of anxiety; poor impulse control; increasing alcohol abuse and a general disconnect from the world around him. Each sequence

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also contains a scene with his wife in whom she laments the trajectory of his behaviour and his compulsion to continue serving. His low point is represented after his final tour, through a scene in which he goes to violently beat a dog at a children's birthday party, stopped only by his wife's interjection. Kyle subsequently visits a therapist, who suggests he might find comfort in providing support to help save the lives of returned soldiers struggling to adapt. Kyle takes him up on the offer, and subsequent scenes reveal this to be a positive turning point for Kyle and his family.

Viewed on its own, this narrative is relatively clear and linear. However, there is another approach to private life represented within *American Sniper* worth noting: that of families in Iraq. As mentioned earlier, the film begins with a scene in which Kyle, out of necessity kills a mother and son. Later, having placed an Iraqi man in the compromising position of being seen with American soldiers, Kyle witnesses the man's young son being tortured and killed by The Butcher, along with the man himself, all in front of the man's begging wife. That this incident interrupts a phone call between Kyle and his wife, in which he has just learned that his pregnant wife having a boy, creates a direct juxtaposition between the two families. Later, Kyle and his soldiers dine as guests in the house of an Iraqi man with his family, only to discover weapons in the house revealing that the man is an enemy collaborator. Kyle and his fellow soldiers force the Iraqi man to take them to an enemy hideout, where they are forced to kill him when he obtains a weapon and fires on the Americans. Following all these scenes is the same episode explored earlier, in which Kyle is unable to shoot a young boy, finally having reached the outer boundaries of his own emotional tolerance.

That Kyle should be shown to be directly or indirectly involved in the destruction of three Iraqi families throughout the course of *American Sniper* is significant. Each incident could be read as a point of trauma for Kyle, reinforcing his perception that his work in Iraq prevents his own family from similar horrors. Equally, these moments could be read as points where Kyle's hypocrisy is highlighted, in which his stated beliefs run contrary to the fact that in some ways he might be seen as partially complicit in the violent consequences that war has on the families exposed to it. Perhaps most richly, there is a plausible reading in which Kyle is traumatised by both the sight of trauma committed upon families like his own, as well as by the unstated reality that he has played a role in the destruction of families, whether his actions were warranted or not. Whichever reading one might take, Eastwood's ambiguous approach to the issue once again reinforces the metahistorical project of the film.

Verisimilitude

As has been discussed earlier in the chapter, demonstrating authenticity through a sense of verisimilitude is absolutely critical to the Biopic's credibility with audiences. With *American Sniper*, Eastwood uses this verisimilitude as a means of integrating an opportunity for metahistorical ambiguity in to the text, relying on Bradley Cooper's complex psychological portrayal of Chris Kyle, within an aesthetically convincing representation of the Iraq War.

Eastwood makes an interesting decision in his portrayal of Kyle's time at war. In one sense, the war sequences play out as a series of disconnected vignettes in which Kyle is portrayed playing his role in a series of military missions whose purpose or outcome is not entirely clear. At times he is looking through his sniper rifle, providing ground cover. At others, he is at ground level actively playing a role in missions. And on occasion, he finds himself watching powerlessly as events proceed around him. This approach, which Eastwood also utilises in *Flags of our Fathers*, serves to remove the illusion, often presented in War Films, that the experience of soldiers can be presented as a series of structured battles rather than as a series of disorienting incidents. Conversely, these sequences are all broadly tied into an overarching narrative that involves seeking out and killing 'The Butcher'. And perhaps more significantly, Kyle is given a vague nemesis in the shadowy figure of rival sniper Mustafa. The combination of disconnected vignettes and broad narrative has the effect of giving shape to Kyle's war time experiences through time-compression and character fusion, relieving the viewer of any need to track narrative plot points leading to narrative outcomes. Instead, the viewer's attentions are drawn primarily to the character of Kyle himself, as the visceral experience of war is revealed in the juxtaposition between the man he wishes to portray himself as, and the more complex realities hinted at in Cooper's performance.

Early in the film, there are several of scenes covering Kyle's early life that hint at the complexity of his character, fulfilling the genre's tendency to provide a sense of verisimilitude by demonstrating that the historical subject has a convincing psychological progression. In one scene a young Kyle hunts with his stern father, who tells him that he will grow up to be a "fine hunter." In another, Kyle reveals a deeply ironic character trait, stealing a bible from his local church. And in another scene, Kyle's father delivers he and his brother a speech worth sharing in its entirety, as it stands as the marker for Kyle's ideology throughout his life:

There are three types of people in this world: sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs. Some people prefer to believe that evil doesn't exist in the world, and if it ever darkened their doorstep, they wouldn't know how to protect themselves. Those are the sheep. Then you've got predators who use violence to prey on the weak. They're the wolves. And then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression, an overpowering need to protect the flock. These men are the rare breed who live to confront the wolf. They are the sheepdog.

This speech is intercut with footage of Kyle beating a boy at this school in retaliation for an attack on his younger brother. In three short sequences the audience is invited to understand Kyle as a character with a predilection for violence, raised in a stern household in which this appetite for violence is encouraged within the context of it being utilised in the service of others. The scene relating to the bible is perhaps the key moment however, with audiences, depending on their perspective, being invited to read it as a minor indiscretion in pursuit of religious ideals, or a demonstration of Kyle's hypocritical ability to absolve himself from, or disregard, moral issues that stand as obstacles to his own ideological agenda.

Later in the film, Kyle crosses paths with his brother in Iraq, who has followed him into military service. Whilst Kyle appears to thrive in this environment, his brother is emotionally shattered by the experiences of war. Kyle assures his brother that both he and their father are proud of him. Rather than reacting positively, his brother responds with "Fuck this place." Kyle is clearly mortified, his expression presenting a sense of betrayal at his brother's lack of faith in the purpose of their role. Here then, we are invited to reflect on two radically different experiences of war by two people raised within the same context.

One of the most important generic components in presenting the historical subject of a Biopic with a sense of verisimilitude lies in the performance of the star. In the case of *American Sniper*, much like in *Bird* and *J. Edgar*, Cooper was not burdened by the presence of a strong image of Chris Kyle in the public imagination. The result is that Cooper did not need to imitate his subject, instead having to deliver authenticity through the portrayal of a convincing and well-rounded psychological subject. In this sense Eastwood and Cooper are adhering to the genre's tendency to provide a psychological through-line that provides this verisimilitude. However, within this convention they are able to incorporate a subtle complexity into Cooper's character that both communicates and challenges Kyle's autobiographical reading of himself. Cooper's performance of Kyle can be seen as a combination of the exterior self that

the real Chris Kyle wished to convey through his autobiography, and characteristics and behaviours that challenge that reading. For the purposes of simplicity, I'll refer to these as exterior and interior performance traits.

From an exterior perspective, at a superficial level, Cooper has worked to achieve a similar physicality to the Navy Seal he is playing, an incredibly important part of attaining the buy-in of Biopic audiences. However, more importantly, Cooper's exterior performance, no doubt in keeping with the script, imitates the tonality of Kyle's autobiography, his ideological and emotional positions on all things being stated with absolute certitude. He fights in Iraq to ensure that the war doesn't come home to his family. He has no doubts about the morality of his cause. He has no guilt about anybody he has killed, nor does he suffer from any trauma due to the things that he has seen at war. When questioned by his wife or doctor about his skyrocketing blood pressure or apparent anxiety, he is completely fine.

Such absolutism is not in keeping with the reality of the human condition of course, and if Eastwood's film were the direct translation of Kyle's book, it would make for an unconvincing work of bravado. Which is why the interior performance of Cooper is critical in the film. Cooper finds means of inviting irony, doubt and ambiguity to the character of Chris Kyle throughout the film, whilst managing to make him opaque enough to invite multiple interpretations. When Kyle makes his absolutist ideological statements, Cooper ensures that tonally they can be read as slightly rehearsed, inviting the possibility that they are just as much a defence mechanism as they are deeply held beliefs. When Kyle is confronted multiple times by fellow soldiers who doubt the value of the Iraq War, Cooper ensures that Kyle freezes up, potentially paralysed with either frustration at the lack of faith in his fellow soldiers, or through an inability to articulate a convincing counterargument. When Kyle is questioned about the state of his mental health, Cooper enacts his inability to acknowledge his own suffering through that same physical demonstration of quiet paralysing anxiety. And when Kyle finally tells a doctor that he is not at all disturbed by his actions during war, but only by his inability to keep fighting to save American lives, Cooper has raised enough doubt about the self-reflexivity of his own character that we question whether Kyle is actually equipped to understand the locus of his own trauma. Indeed, when Taya asks Kyle if there is some part of him that wants to die, and he answers firmly in the negative, many viewers will doubt whether he could possibly know the answer to that question.

It is the broad ambiguity of Cooper's performance that provides the deepest opportunity for a metahistorical reading of the film. Eastwood expertly aligns this

performance with a narrative structure and methodology that continuously invites the viewer to question the nature of the film's historical subject, Chris Kyle, and therefore invite reflections not just on an individual, but also on the consequences of war for those who are engaged in it, even where this engagement is enthusiastically undertaken. More than this, Cooper's performance acts as a kind of answer to more traditional performances within the Biopic, in which the performer enacts their subject with a level of psychological certitude that does not reflect the impossibility of the historical project being undertaken; to become a historical figure.

The film's final scene and credit sequence, which utilises actual footage of thousands of people as they line the streets to watch Chris Kyle's funeral procession, as well as photographs of Kyle and his wife, is a scene which implicitly reinforces both the film's authority as an endorsed biography, but also adds a layer of verisimilitude in its implicit suggestion that the film is to be read as 'true'.

Ideological Ambiguity and Self-Reflexivity

As has been mentioned, Just as *J. Edgar* sought to explore multiple competing narratives around its protagonist, *American Sniper* manages the ideological expectations of multiple positions by representing but not privileging any of these perspectives. However, in *American Sniper* Eastwood makes this approach implicit rather than explicit, attempting to protect the text from accusations of either betrayal or misguided loyalty to its subject. One of the ways in which he achieves this is through subtle self-reflexive moments that might easily be read as endorsements or critiques of the historical subject.

Eastwood makes two particularly interesting decisions in the film to reference his own film career within, with both instances seeming quite provocative given their placement and the works they are referencing. The first scene involves Kyle being investigated over whether he mistakenly shot a man carrying a Koran, thinking it was a weapon. When asked Kyle responds by saying he has never seen a Koran but suggests that this one looked a lot like an AK-47. The scene knowingly riffs on a similar one in *Dirty Harry*, in which Harry Callahan responds similarly when questioned about a recent kill: "When a naked man is chasing a woman through a dark alley with a butcher knife and a hard on, I figure he isn't out collecting for the Red Cross."

The scene is anomalous in that no further mention is made of anybody questioning Kyle's competency or ethics in the film until his final decision to shoot Mufasa. Given the metahistorical ambiguity with which the film operates, it is easy to read the scene

as an open-ended question about Kyle as a character. One could read the scene as a condemnation of a bureaucracy that acts more as an obstacle than a support to soldiers, or one could see a question raised over Kyle's ethics or judgment. The allusion to Eastwood's most notorious but much-loved film renders the moment all the more complex. Are parallels being drawn that position Kyle as a no-nonsense hero, or is Eastwood continuing his trajectory of continually moving away further from the use of violence as an entertainment by highlighting the way in which Kyle's emotionally disconnected exterior seems more like the posturing of a two-dimensional action hero? The answer is quite possibly both and neither, in that the ambiguity and the invitation for reflection on the nature of the historical subject and what he represents is the scene's primary purpose.

However, the more striking allusion to Eastwood's role in cinematic history comes towards the film's conclusion. The scene begins with a close-up of Kyle's pistol, held and pointed at waist level as if he were a cowboy. He walks through his house, his children seeing him as he goes, before arriving in front of his wife in the kitchen, points the weapon at her and tells her "Hand in the air, little lady." He is imitating a Western gunslinger, and the shot composition, focused fetishistically on this weapon, implies a direct parallel. She laughs and they have an extended casual conversation in which he continues to point the gun at her, remaining in Western character. Eventually he puts it down and they have an exchange about how much more positive and happy he's become, having worked through his issues with war related trauma. He leaves the house to continue his work for a program supporting returned veterans, and subtitles soon reveal to us that he was shot and killed later that day.

The sight of a man pointing a genuine pistol at his wife, in front of his children, is likely to be confronting to many audiences, particularly due to the concept of a man pointing a gun at a woman in a domestic situation. It's very plausible to read this as Eastwood making a direct correlation here between America's long-standing relationship with guns and violence as symbolised within the Western Historical Myth; the nation's relationship with war as represented by Kyle; and the violent and unnecessary death which Kyle is to face soon after this scene. Alternatively, given the title of Chris Kyle's posthumously published second book, *American Gun: A History of the US in Ten Firearms*, we can assume neither Chris nor Taya Kyle would endorse such a reading. Once again, it seems, Eastwood expertly skirts the ambiguities between multiple very different readings through an ambiguity that makes for a metahistorical work that fundamentally challenges the way history is traditionally represented, turning his work into a locus of debate rather than definitive conclusions. Interestingly, in the final sequence containing footage of Kyle's actual

funeral, Eastwood as chosen to play Ennio Morricone's The Funeral over the scene, a song written for the spaghetti Western, *The Return of Ringo* (1965). This could easily be read as yet another allusion to an association between Kyle's life and/or fate and the role of cinema in forging American identity.

It is also worth mentioning the multiple scenes in which Kyle encounters opponents of the Iraq War. In each instance he is represented as almost paralysed by people's capacity to doubt the validity of America's presence in Iraq. He shuts down these conversations by reverting to paranoid assertions that not fighting in Iraq would bring the war to America. When one of Kyle's closest friends dies, the man's mother reads aloud a letter he wrote to her at his funeral, in which he is deeply sceptical about the purpose war. Later, Kyle tells his wife: "That letter killed Marc. … He let go, and he paid the price for it." Eastwood offers us no reason to debate the nature of the war itself – there is no debate about the geopolitical context that has led to the conflict – but he does invite a meditation on the ideological position and logic of his historical subject, who can be read equally as a war hero incapable of inviting self-doubt to interfere with his capacity to inform, or as a wilfully ignorant participant. Once again, the onus is on the viewer to reflect on the historical subject at the film's centre and overlay this thinking with a broader reflection on the nature of war throughout history.

Conclusion

Eastwood's approach to the direction of *American Sniper* is a master class in metahistorical ambiguity, in which he balances the historically problematic responsibilities of adapting an autobiography with his deeper ambitions to use cinema as a means of opening up a metahistorical dialogue on the nature of history, rather than providing a closed and definitive account of the past. Unlike *Bird*, in which Eastwood undertook a similar project that ultimately resulted in him privileging historical ambiguity over entertainment, with *American Sniper* Eastwood delivers a work that is also commercially viable. The inevitable problem with the subtlety of such an approach is that, like an optical illusion containing two images that cannot both be seen at the same time, many viewers and critics read a particular ideological narrative into Eastwood's work, rather than observing the text's multiple possibilities. In any event, *American Sniper* may well be one of Eastwood's most sophisticated metahistorical works.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter an argument has been made for Eastwood as a director with a deep understanding of the potential and limitations for historical representation within the dramatic historical film, particularly within the context of the American Biopic. Through an interrogation of *Bird* (1988), *J. Edgar* (2011) and *American Sniper*, it has been argued that Eastwood's work within the space of the historical film has been focused on creating works of metahistorical cinema, whose purpose has been to challenge traditional representations of history and highlight the limitations of cinema, or indeed history, in representing the past, opening up a discourse about the very nature of how America understands its history.

In examining *Bird*, a case has been made to suggest that this film represents a significant turning point for Eastwood as he moves from the indirect examination of American history through the Western Historical Myth that occurred in his Mythology Phase towards a direct examination and deconstruction of issues of historical representation in his Metahistory Phase. *Bird*, it is argued, is a film so focused on avoiding the pitfalls of misrepresentation of its subject by discarding the Biopics clichés and conventions that in many ways it fails as a piece of entertainment. In so doing this however, Eastwood has created a thoughtful and innovative work that deeply interrogates the nature of biographical representation and its boundaries. By refusing to indulge in speculation about its protagonist, *Bird* becomes a deeply metahistorical film, its very structure showcasing the limitations of film to invoke history without misleading.

With *J. Edgar*, Eastwood took the mistrust of cinema's ability to convey history in any definitive way as showcased in *Bird* but inversed the methodology entirely. By creating a narrative which absorbs the competing cultural narratives at play around the figure of J. Edgar Hoover, Eastwood creates a meditative text which does not privilege any perspective, instead producing an ambiguous figure that the film refuses to celebrate or condemn. By taking the further step of placing Hoover in the position of narrator, and then subsequently undermining Hoover's account of his past, the film deliberately renders its own text problematic. Eastwood's film is powerful in its willingness to undercut its own sense of truth in pursuit of a higher statement – that the historical figure of Hoover has been essentially lost in time and can now only be approached through the speculation of various competing narratives. In this sense, once again, *J. Edgar* becomes a metahistorical work, focused on exploring its subject while acknowledging the problematic nature of that very task.

Through *American Sniper*, Eastwood attempts to interrogate the figure of Chris Kyle, a sniper made famous for his high kill-count, biography, and untimely death. The film is innately problematic in that it is partly based upon Kyle's autobiography and the testimony of his widow, and as such the film might seem, at least on its surface, to be a celebration of his career and military service. However, in this chapter a case has been made to suggest that Eastwood finds means of introducing competing readings into the text of American Sniper which fundamentally challenge the narrative that appears to have been formally privileged.

Eastwood's work within the Biopic provides clear evidence of a desire to reject the conventional approach to historical representation prevalent within the genre. Instead, Eastwood chooses to highlight the problematic nature of such representations, acknowledging that he as a filmmaker and/or historian may only interpret based upon the information available, and must necessarily fictionalise to fill the gaps. This is achieved by creating self-reflexive works that acknowledge their own fallibility as any source of truth. In this sense, Eastwood has been presented as a director of metahistorical cinema.

CHAPTER THREE

Clint Eastwood and the Metahistorical War Film

"All your friends dying, it's hard enough to be called a hero for saving somebody's life. But for putting up a pole?" – *Flags of our Fathers*

It was in 2006 that Eastwood completed his metahistorical diptych of War Films, *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, achieving what may well be the peak of his directorial career. Eastwood created two works that fundamentally challenged the way in which war and most particularly WWII were represented in cinema. Fundamentally separating his work from the propaganda led myths that had defined the genre to that point, Eastwood forced viewers to reflect on their understanding of the moral absolutism with which WWII had traditionally been represented. Instead, Eastwood moved the genre from propaganda led myth making towards metahistorical thinking, introducing moral and historical ambiguity, and challenging traditionally reductionist depictions of heroism and the enemy. In this chapter, I provide an account of these two War Films within the context of the genre's broader history of historical representation, making an argument for each as a major contribution to Eastwood's metahistorical oeuvre.

The first part of this chapter will provide an account of the history of the War Film with particular focus on American films representing WWII. Framed by the long-standing relationship between the War Film and nationalist propaganda, this section will look at traditional depictions of both the hero and the enemy within the genre for the purposes of juxtaposing with Eastwood's work in later sections. Definitions will be provided for three distinct forms of War Film in order to help structure an understanding of the genre throughout the chapter: the prototypical War Film, the anti-War Film and the metahistorical War Film. This section will conclude with a brief history of Eastwood's involvement with the genre preceding his direction of *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

The second part will examine *Flags of our Fathers*, Eastwood's cinematic account of the experiences of the surviving soldiers who appeared in the photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, and were subsequently sent on a bond tour around the United States to spruik the war effort. Focusing on the distinction between the myth constructed around the photo by the American government and the reality of its production, whilst contrasting all of this with the human experience of war, its ongoing

traumatic consequences and the apparent disposable nature of the individual soldier within the American war machine, a case will be made that Eastwood presents a series of oppositional historical meanings that result in an exceptional work of metahistorical cinema that refuses to endorse a reductionist representation of the past.

The third part provides an account of Eastwood's anti-War Film *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which covers the experiences of several Japanese soldiers awaiting the Allied invasion at the Battle of Iwo Jima. Arguing that *Letters* represents a unique attempt in American cinema history to humanise and capture the experiences of Japanese soldiers whilst reflecting on the nature of the enemy Other within the war time context, a case will be made to understand the film as an ironically metahistorical work whose traditional structure is rendered subversive by its choice of subject. Going further, the film will be positioned as existing within an intertextual relationship with *Flags of our Fathers*, its alternate representation of heroism and sacrifice working in parallel with its sister film to invite a metahistorical reflection on these concepts and their relationship to nationalism.

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to present *Flags* and *Letters* as the two works which sit at the apex of Eastwood's achievements as a director of metahistorical cinema, each functioning as an exceptional piece of work separately, but augmenting each other's complexities when viewed as a single work.

The History of History in the War Film

Whilst any attempt to define the War Film might seem superfluous – it is a film about war – it is critically important before continuing that we clearly articulate what is meant by the term, and what kind of conventions and values the term is loaded with before pursuing an investigation into the metahistorical approach of Eastwood within the context of the War Film.

The concept of using images to provide an account of battle is almost as old as civilisation itself, with cave paintings depicting death by arrow and spear being produced as far back as 30,000 years ago.[280] In the nineteenth century, it was common in many countries for battle panoramas depicting recent victories to be produced and displayed in publicly accessible spaces. As Alison Griffiths notes:

> The ability to re-experience an event of enormous national significance, to step inside history, which was metaphorically enacted

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[280] Keith F. Otterbein, *How War Began* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 71.

via the spectators' physical location and locomotion around the central viewing platform, were doubtless intended to trigger feelings of nationalistic fervour for early nineteenth-century spectators.[281]

From the beginning, journalists who critiqued these works had similar concerns relating to accuracy and verisimilitude as film critics do today. Reviewing *The Siege of Acre* in 1801, a panorama by Robert Ker Porter depicting the liberation of British troops from Napoleon in Egypt, one critic noted that "[t]o the extent that it is possible to re-create events on canvas, this picture succeeds in the opinion of knowledgeable visitors."[282]

Identifying the first War Film is arbitrary territory, but *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag* (1898), directed by Stuart Blackman and Albert E. Smith, is a very early example. The film depicts nothing more than the lowering of a Spanish flag and the raising of an American flag against the backdrop of a Cuban castle. The film, made soon after the announcement of the Spanish-American War, was clearly about rallying nationalist sentiment. This was a significant impetus for the genre in even its earliest stages, something that was clear in works like *Capture of a Boer Battery by the British* (1900), *Battle of the Yalu* (1904) and *Attack on a Chinese Mission Station, Bluejackets to the Rescue* (1901). As Guy Westwell notes in *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line*, these attempts to reconstruct significant recent battles:

> also attempted to capture some of the sense of the general reportage of events found in popular newspapers and broadsheets. Nicknamed 'yellow journalism', this sensationalist reportage often consisted of a blend of patriotic propaganda and more objective factual reporting, and articles that would often be punctuated with lurid illustrations (the illustrations themselves often based on photographs). In emulating this popular cultural form early war movies muddied the distinction between reality and drama, and thrived on the contradictory impulses of naturalism and high spectacle. Early on, war movies had welded together what Christine Gledhill calls 'photographic realism' and 'pictorial sensationalism' in a powerful symbiotic relationship that would give shape to the emerging genre.[283]

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[281] Alison Griffiths, "Shivers Down Your Spine: Panoramas and the Origins of the Cinematic Reenactment," *Screen* 44, No.1 (Spring 2003): 1-37.

[282] Stephen Oetterman, *The Panorama History of a Mass Medium*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 117.

[283] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 11-12.

In other words, these films made their focus, much like early Westerns, an attempt to capture the authentic experience and aesthetics of war, even as their narratives were reductionist and nationalistic. It is also interesting to note the intersection between the early formation of the Western and the War Film, as early filmmakers sought to bring to life conflicts from earlier periods, most notably the American Civil War. D. W. Griffith was the most significant contributor to the American Civil War genre, with landmark short films like *The House With Closed Shutters* (1910), *His Trust* (1910), and *In the Border States* (1910) providing accounts of the war from both perspectives, and always with a melodramatic focus on self-sacrifice and nobility. He would continue down this path with the American Civil War film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a work still discussed by critics to this date for being "disgustingly racist yet titanically original."[284]

Given the nature of war – that it is a violent conflict between two groups with clashing ideologies or purposes – it is unsurprising that an account of the War Film's history reveals a strong correlation with nationalism. As Gopal Balkrishnan notes in "The National Imagination", this makes sense given that "[i]t is during war that the nation is imagined as a community embodying ultimate values."[285] Building on Balkrishnan's point, Brent M. Smith-Casanueva's highlights that:

> Wars are also inseparable from the national historical imagination as they become one of the central rhetorical figures in narration of nation. Past conflicts become part of a mythical history that the nation returns to in times of struggle and insecurity to re-imagine the nation's present.[286]

One need only look back at the long history of War Films, particularly American films that offer a reductive and patriotic account of conflict, to see this reinforcement of national mythology. *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Glory* (1989), *The Longest Day* (1962), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016), and *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) are just some of the more prominent examples. And as Glen Jeansonne and David Luhrssen note in *War on the Silver Screen*, whilst historical literature is largely focused on an attempt to account for the facts of history, cinema is more inclined to

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[284] Richard Brody, "The Worst Thing About "Birth of a Nation" Is How Good It Is," *The New Yorker*, Feb 1, 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-worst-thing-about-birth-of-a-nation-is-how-good-it-is (accessed Apr 2021)
[285] Gopal Balakrishnan, "The National Imagination," in *Mapping the Nation*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996), 198-213.
[286] Brent M. Smith-Casanueva, "Nation in Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front and Eastwood's Flags of Our Fathers," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14, No. 1 (2012): 3.

"operate at the visceral, emotional level".[287] As a result, the emotive nature of War Films leaves a more significant impact on the cultural memory than their literary equivalent:

> Much of what Americans remember about the nation's wars, even those within living memory, rely less on factual data than on fictional accounts, whose appeals to emotion are grist for box office success. The emotion evoked might be grim, shocking, romantic, heroic, or simply dramatic, but the strength of the emotion is great in the movies we remember best.[288]

The concept of history in the War Film then, rather than being centred around the facts of what is being represented, lies predominantly in the overarching ideology being conveyed. The prototypical War Film is about the sacrifice that has been by citizens on behalf of the nation, in defence of its position of moral authority. That almost all War Films focus to a greater or lesser extent on the horror of war and the suffering of those forced to endure it is usually presented not as an admonition of the nation, but as a proof of the value of that nation and what it represents to its people. As Guy Westwell notes in *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line*:

> War movies lend shape and structure to war, identifying enemies, establishing objectives and allowing audiences to vicariously experience the danger and excitement of the front line. For America, the war movie was central to the global propaganda campaigns waged during World War I and World War II, it provided therapeutic aid in the aftermath of the divisive and traumatising experience of losing the war in Vietnam, and, more recently, a significant cycle of big-budget productions (of which *Saving Private Ryan* (1999) is probably the best known) has made an Americanised version of WWII a key touchstone for American national identity.[289]

It is also worth noting that this inclination towards forging an American national identity finds partial expression in the idea of realism as a means of closing the gap between historical reality and the cinematic universe, particularly within the context of War Films centred on WWII. In her essay "Care or Glory: Picturing a New War Hero", Anne Gjelsvik suggests that:

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[287] Glen Jeansonne and David Luhrssen, *War on the Silver Screen: Shaping America's Perception of History* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), xi.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema*, 1

Hollywood's depiction of WWII has come to constitute a cultural framework for understanding war, to an extent that soldiers during the Vietnam War were said to suffer from a 'John Wayne Wet Dream Syndrome', imagining that going to war would be like serving beside John Wayne (as illustrated by Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, or by Colonel Mike Kirby in the *Green Berets*, 1968).[290]

Spielberg has perhaps led the charge in the literal embodiment of this with *Saving Private Ryan*, a film of unyielding patriotism and gung-ho bravado that attempts to find a moral nuance in its depiction of violence. The shaky camera work, exceptional set design, desaturated imagery and unflinching brutality, particularly in the film's earliest scenes set during the D-Day invasion, were as convincing as anything previously seen in war cinema. But, whilst all of this succeeds in fulfilling the film's objectives of becoming a viscerally immersive experience, the aesthetic impact ultimately turns war into a thrilling spectacle. The challenge of capturing the experience of war without turning it into an exciting entertainment is one all filmmakers approaching the genre face, especially when balancing this with the desire to present a particular conflict, such as World War II, as a horrible but morally righteous act.

However, there are War films that do not argue for the righteousness of the conflict they depict. Just as the classical Western and its idealised version of the past almost immediately invited opportunities for subversion, the War Film genre has since its earliest days been subject to a process of deconstruction and revisionism. As a result, I will argue that over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the genre has gone through periods of significant shifts, based on the cultural climate of any given period. It is through this process that I argue for three broad subdivisions of the War Film: the prototypical War Film, the anti-War Film and the metahistorical War Film.

The, first of these, the prototypical War Film is about the horrific sacrifice that has been, or is being made, by citizens on behalf of the nation in defence of its position of absolute moral authority. Examples of the *prototypical War Film* abound, particularly in war time and often at the behest of the governments of the time. This will be explored later in this chapter. Following WWII, movies like *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *The Longest Day*, *Hell is for Heroes* (1962), *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor* and *Hacksaw Ridge* may well lament the horrors of war, but they find their central locus of

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[290] Anne Gjelsvik, "Care or Glory: Picturing a New War Hero," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 103.

meaning in a reverence for the purposeful and righteous sacrifice that soldiers make in the service of their nation.

The second type, the anti-War Film, must fundamentally disregard – but not necessarily overtly reject – the nationalist narrative, focusing instead on the waste of human life and horror that comes from war. These films come in two distinct varieties: those that refuse to engage with the value of a war's purpose, and those that explicitly critique a war's purpose. The earliest notable examples are probably the Abel Gance directed French WWI film *J'Accuse* (1919) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). The former is an acidic condemnation of war and its horrors, featuring a cast borrowed from the front, most of whom were dead before the war was over. The latter is a brutal attack on institutions that willingly send their men to violent oblivion, cleverly concealed from criticism by its focus on the German experience.

Overtly critical anti-War Films were less common during and directly following WWII. During the war censors would not have approved such films. And after they were unlikely because despite its status as the worst of all conflicts, WWII was largely accepted as a just war, particularly given the extent of the Nazi horrors that became apparent after the fact. More than this, the cultural context had changed, and the greater threat was not direct combat but nuclear annihilation, as explored in films like *On the Beach* (1959) and *Dr Strangelove* (1964).

It was only with the arrival of the Vietnam War, and the strong cultural resistance to it, that the anti-war subgenre seemed to reach maturity and popular acceptance. The cinematic beginnings of this upsurge in anti-War films could be tracked to 1970, with the arrival of the scathing war satires *Catch-22* and *M*A*S*H*. Both films sought to invite a meditation on the oft unacknowledged absurdity of war by mocking the pretensions of nationalism and the military establishment, forcing viewers to rethink their understanding of the way in war has been represented on the screen. And so, whilst these films might have marked the beginning of an upsurge in anti-War films, they can more properly be understood to be early examples of the metahistorical War Film.

The metahistorical War Film, the rarest form of the genre, is one in which our traditional understanding of history in relation to war or a specific war event is brought into question. This might be about challenging the traditional narratives of a particular event. It might be about questioning the limitations of the traditional War Film in representing the past. It may even be about inviting a reflection on the role

that ideas of nationalism or heroism play in the context of the War Film, and how these might influence the genre's interpretation of history. This is not necessarily a rejection of the nationalist ideology, but is necessarily a rejection of the accepted nationalist narrative, and the way that it is traditionally presented within the War Film genre.

Catch-22, a Mike Nichols helmed film based on the Joseph Heller book of the same name, was an irreverent black-comedy about a soldier's desperate attempts to escape combat in WWII through claims of insanity, only to continually prove his sanity by way of his impulse to leave. By essentially repositioning war as a form of collective insanity, Nichols invites the viewer to reflect on WWII, the contemporary conflict in Vietnam and the human impulse to violence. *M*A*S*H**, which captured the popular imagination enough to subsequently become a popular television series, was an anarchic comedy about the doctors and nurses of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War positioned as a thinly veiled analogy for the Vietnam War.

There is also a case for *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as a metahistorical War Film of sorts. Its overlaying of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness* and the setting of the Vietnam War to challenge the viewer's conception of the conflict and war in general, can be understood as a kind of moral black hole into which America-humanity has found itself sucked, enveloped in a guilt and trauma that cannot be easily left behind.

In the years that followed, Hollywood released an array of anti-War Films that were centred far more on highlighting the purposelessness of the Vietnam War, reflecting the sentiment surrounding the conflict both during and afterwards, as well as the broader countercultural moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some of the canonical works are *Coming Home* (1978), *Casualties of War* (1989) and *Born on the 4th of July* (1989). Many films during this period also focused on the horrors of the holocaust, such as Spielberg's Thomas Keneally adaptation, *Schindler's List* (1993). In Europe, the horrors of war were surfacing in the likes of Russian masterpiece *Come and See* (1985) and the German U-boat film, *Das Boot* (1980).

Interestingly, as later American conflicts like the two wars in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan proved increasing divisive, War Films reflecting these conflicts reflected this divisiveness. *Jarhead* (2005) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) are good examples. However, at the same time, prototypical War Films about the role of the United States in World War II have become increasingly popular, the moral certitude of the

nation's role in this conflict enabling a level of nationalist confidence not available elsewhere. Films like *Pearl Harbor*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Windtalkers* (2002) are perfect examples.

It is against this context that Eastwood's metahistorical War Films, *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters From Iwo Jima* were released, both of which will be interrogated within this chapter.

The Enemy in the War Film

Throughout the course of the American War Film's history, there has been a tendency for the genre to reflect public – and often propaganda led – perceptions of the enemy. Governments wishing to encourage civilians to fight and their populace to support conflict have little to gain from complex and nuanced depictions of the enemy. Rather, people are rallied through depictions of the enemy as a collective and unredeemable mass whose threat to civilisation can only be prevented by violent conflict. In *Letters from Iwo Jima*, Eastwood explores and challenges the way in which the enemy, particularly the Japanese during WWII, have traditionally been represented within the War Film. It is also worth noting that Eastwood would have been directly exposed to these representations, having been nine years old at the beginning of WWII. For this reason, it is worth looking back at the history of Japanese representation within the WWII film, from its earliest beginnings to the present.

In the context of WWII, the principal enemies were the Germans and Japanese, and their depictions were heavily regulated by the Office of War Information (OWI). By mid-1942 the OWI had developed into a watchdog for the film industry, regulating the way in which the war was being presented in cinema.[291] Westwell notes the OWI's position:

> OWI chief Nelson Poynter argued that 'properly directed hatred is of vital importance to the war effort', but the OWI wanted filmmakers to stress that the repellent ideology of the ruling elite of Japan and Germany should be the focus of hatred and not the people themselves.[292]

The OWI's intentions aside, "the widespread support for the government's policy of internment for Japanese-Americans even though similar treatment was not deemed

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[291] Robert Fyne, *The Hollywood Propaganda of World War II* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group Inc, 1997), 9.
[292] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema*, 38.

necessary for German-Americans", points to the racism that lay under the nation's surface when dealing with a non-white enemy.[293]

As Wang Xiaofei notes in "Movies Without Mercy: Race, War, and Images of Japanese People in American Films, 1942-1945," prior to the attack at Pearl Harbor, the general perception was that the Japanese were fundamentally inferior to the west. General Douglas MacArthur initially attributed the Pearl Harbor attack to "white mercenaries" because the alternative was simply too farfetched.[294] And whilst Americans were broadly aware of the atrocities being committed by the Japanese against the Chinese, after Pearl Harbor the media and government focus on emphasising the cruelty of Japanese war crimes increased, and not entirely without reason.[295] As Xiaofei notes:

> Ninety percent of American POWs who survived in the Pacific reported being beaten, and 41.6 percent of the POWs lost their lives (in contrast, 99 percent of American POWs in German hands survived). The U.S. government at first kept mum about the mistreatment of their POWs so that Americans might not be reluctant to serve in the Pacific. After April 1943, the successive press release of three incidents to the American public - the execution in Japan of the pilots from the Doolittle raid, the diary of a Japanese soldier delighting in the torture of American POWs, and the mistreatment and murder of American and Philippine POWs on the Bataan Death March after their surrender in the Philippines - reflected the shift in the government policy toward propaganda against Japan, and exacerbated images of the Japanese in American minds.[296]

The situation grew so extreme that *Life* magazine was comfortable posting a photo of "an attractive blonde posing with a Japanese skull she had been sent by her fiancé in the Pacific". Further examples – such as those of soldiers who "collected the ears of Japanese soldiers", "made a Japanese soldier's bone into a blade" or casually murdered Japanese POWs – were not uncommon.[297]

It is perhaps no surprise then that in Hollywood movies during this period, whilst the Germans "were shown as enemies, the Japanese were depicted as something even

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[293] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema*, 39.
[294] Wang Xiaofei, "Movies Without Mercy: Race, War, and Images of Japanese People in American Films, 1942-1945," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 18, No. 1 (2011), 14.
[295] Ibid.,16.
[296] Ibid., 16-17.
[297] Ibid., 17.

worse."[298] Xiaofei quotes one woman who worked in a Kentucky defence plant worker during WWII, talking about her memories of the enemy in films:

> "There'd be one meanie, a little short dumpy bad Nazi. But the main characters were good-lookin' and they looked like us." In contrast, "with the Japanese, that was a whole different thing. We were just ready to wipe them out. They sure as heck didn't look like us. They were yellow little creatures that smiled when they bombed our boys."[299]

Xiaofei usefully breaks down the categories of racism depicted in the depiction of Japanese in movies of the period: verbal racism, "which included using derogating words like 'Jap'"; physical racism, which dramatized and ridiculed physical characteristics of Japanese people; and psychological racism, which saw all Japanese as mentally deformed. By depicting all Japanese people as cruel and treacherous, psychological racism created a "Japanese-solidarity myth," which was simply not true. The diversity of Japanese people was too often ignored."[300]

Whilst the first two categorisations are relatively obvious, it is worth expanding on the third. Psychological racism was about demonising "every aspect of Japanese culture", and "conflated being Japanese with being militarist and conflated modern Japanese militarism with Japanese tradition."[301] The Japanese were also portrayed as being incapable of individual thought, often appearing as a "nameless and faceless" force of "indistinguishable masses to be killed by American heroes", often not even being presented in the flesh so much as through the consequence of their presence - explosions and aircraft bombings.[302] In *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War, 1941-1945* John Dower notes the reductive depiction of the Japanese in Hollywood films, describing the:

> Japanese superman, possessed of uncanny discipline and fighting skills. Subhuman, inhuman, latter human, superhuman - all that was lacking in the perception of the Japanese enemy was a human like oneself.[303]

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[298] Wang Xiaofei, "Movies Without Mercy," 14.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid., 20.
[301] Ibid., 22.
[302] Ibd., 22-23.
[303] John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 9.

Noting that nine of the eighty-two most commercially successful Hollywood films from 1942 to 1945 featured portrayals of the Japanese, Xiaofei highlights some key examples:

> On American screens, Japanese soldiers were repeatedly shown torturing POWs, killing civilians, and raping Chinese women. Japanese soldiers laughed when they were killing (*Gung Ho!*, Universal, 1943), when they were raping Chinese women (*China*, Paramount, 1943; *Dragon Seed*, MGM, 1944), or when they knew other soldiers won a bloody battle (*The Purple Heart*, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1944). They smiled when they tried to "persuade" American prisoners to speak (*The Purple Heart*, *Behind the Rising Sun*, RKO, 1943).[304]

Moving beyond WWII, the portrayal – or lack of portrayal – of the Japanese has proved to be consistent in War Films. As the true ramifications of the Nazi holocaust became clear, the popular imagination of WWII was largely consumed by the idea that the Nazi's were essentially the embodiment of evil. As a result, depictions of the Japanese in Hollywood WWII cinema became increasingly rare, and generally two-dimensional.

The first major Hollywood film about the attack on Iwo Jima, *Sands of Iwo Jima* barely featured a depiction of the Japanese at all. Their presence is felt largely through disorienting explosions and machine-gunning from cave trenches. On the few occasions when they are depicted, it is as silent assassins sneaking up on American soldiers. The most ominous incident includes a handful of Japanese sneaking up to a trench, silently stabbing an American soldier, then collectively sliding out of frame on their bellies in an almost serpentine like formation.

In *From Here to Eternity* (1953), still the most lauded portrayal of the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese once again exist only as an ominous force arriving from the ether to enact destruction. The Michael Bay film *Pearl Harbor* showed little interest in its portrayal of the Japanese, with critic Roger Ebert noting at the time that "Japanese audiences will find little to complain about apart from the fact that they play such a small role in their own raid."[305] And the Mel Gibson movie, *Hacksaw Ridge* oscillated between highly stylised and frenetic killing sequences that reduced the Japanese to bloodied cannon fodder. David Lean's much lauded British/American co-production, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1958) – an account of the allied POWs forced to build

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[304] Wang Xiaofei, "Movies Without Mercy," 19.
[305] Roger Ebert, "Pearl Harbor," *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 25, 2001, reproduced *RogerEbert.com* https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/pearl-harbor-2001 (accessed Feb 2021)

a bridge for the Japanese in Burma and the British soldiers charged with blowing it up – is noteworthy for its rare nuanced portrayal of its Japanese characters.

More recently, Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), its art-film style contrasting the absurdity of war with the majesty of the universe that surrounds it, showed a new level of sensitivity in its depictions of Japanese soldiers. Focusing on the Guadalcanal Campaign, following the Allied victory the viewer is exposed to images of Japanese soldiers, who are hungry, traumatised, and brutalised by the similarly frayed American troops. We are offered a rare neutral glance at a singular humanity in conflict with itself. But even here, the Japanese are essentially anonymous figures, and the breakthrough is less to do with a nuanced depiction of the Japanese than it is to do with an appeal to common humanity.

It is also finally worth noting that there have been numerous attempts at a kind of reconciliation between America and the Japanese through cinema. *None but the Brave* (1965) is an anti-War Film in which a group of American and Japanese troops are marooned on an island and come to a truce resulting in a much closer understanding for both sides. *Hell in the Pacific* (1968) saw a stranded Lee Marvin and Toshiro Mifune trapped together on an island and forced into a peaceable situation. And *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) was a forensic exercise in depicting the lead-up and consequences of the Pearl Harbor attack. The American and Japanese perspectives were filmed by a cast and crew from each nation, respectively, and then cut together into a rather detailed, inoffensive and tepid whole.

These rare examples aside, representations of the Japanese in WWII cinema over the last eighty-years have been consistently reductive and racist, presenting the wartime enemy as an unknowable and inhuman Other. In this sense, such depictions, even where they are more modern, can find their genesis in the government guided positioning of the Japanese in the wartime cinema of WWII.

Heroism in the War Film

Given that the concept of heroism is in many ways the subject of both of the Eastwood films interrogated within this chapter, it is worth looking explicitly at the way these concepts normally operate within the War Film. There is an undeniable link with the way in which soldiers are represented in War Films and the propensity of said films to implicitly or explicitly take a position advocating for the moral authority of a war. That is to say, the more a film positions its protagonists as willing heroes in the fight for a noble cause, the closer to a prototypical War Film the movie becomes. As movies move further from a kind of advocacy for the value or worth of war, towards

an anti-war position, the more they are likely to reposition or reject the traditional conception of heroism, whether it be more to do with comradery or pure victimisation.

In "Following the Flag in American film," Robert Eberwein observed that in the lead-up to WWII, "Warner Bros. played an active role in developing and promoting films with a strong patriotic thrust".[306] Eberwein highlights the example of *Sergeant York* (1941), a film about "the most famous American soldier in World War I, noted for single-handedly capturing a large number of Germans", in which York is depicted as an amoral drunken brawler of sorts, who is prevented from killing a man when lightning strikes the rifle in his hands.[307] This incident leads him to religion, then to becoming a conscientious objector, before finally aligning his religious ideals with the need to fight. He joins the army and becomes a war hero. The film's advocacy for righteous war is made clear from the first moment, as the "film's titles are presented in letters made out of stars and stripes."[308]

Heroism was also frequently emphasised through contrast with the enemy during WWII. A notable case is the example of the major script changes made to *Objective Burma!*, a film about an American assault on a Japanese radio station in Burma. Xiaofei highlights the distinction between the original scripted version and release version of a scene in which an "American military correspondent was furious after he saw the mutilated body of a dying American soldier".[309] The scripted version includes the following exchange:

> Correspondent: I have thought I'd seen or read about everything one man can do to another, from the torture chambers of the middle ages to the gang wars and lynchings of today. But this - this was done in cold blood by people who claim to be civilized. Civilized! They're degenerate, immoral idiots. Stinking little savages. Wipe them out, I say. Wipe them off the face of the earth. Wipe them off the face of the earth.
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> Officer Nelson: There's nothing especially Japanese about this. You'll find it wherever you find fascists. There are even people who call themselves American who'd do it, too.[310]

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[306] Robert Eberwein, "Following the flag in American film," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 84-85.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Wang Xiaofei, "Movies Without Mercy," 26-27.
[310] Ibid., 27.

In the final version, Nelson's line was cut, removing any nuance that may complicate the moral authority of the United States. Xiaofei notes that these WWII movies operated by romanticising American servicemen and women who were depicted almost universally as "ordinary people who fought for their country out of patriotism, not hatred" and who were fundamentally "more moral than their Japanese counterparts".[311] He cites examples such as *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), in which a nurse fantasises about killing Japanese prisoners after the killing of her boyfriend, but finds herself morally incapable of doing so."[312]

As has been outlined in the previous section on depictions of the enemy in war cinema, the United States government has demonstrated itself to be acutely aware of the power of Hollywood propaganda in driving popular sentiment throughout cinematic history. Westwell makes this point very clear:

> In fact, it is common for a tacit agreement to be made not to criticise the state during times of significant foreign policy commitment (a process referred to as 'rallying around the flag') and studies have shown that in every war since WWII (including the conflict in Vietnam) the media, including the film industry, has provided both implicit and explicit support for the war.[313]

Westwell highlights a key recent example in which the Senior Advisor to George W. Bush, Karl Rove, met with Hollywood executives following the attacks of September 11 "to discuss how the film industry might contribute to the 'war on terror'."[314] The result was the early release of the prototypical War Films *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002), and the delay of the anti-War Film *Buffalo Soldiers* (2003) which portrayed military life in a negative light.[315] In both of the former examples, soldiers are depicted as essentially noble figures fighting a righteous war. In *Buffalo Soldiers*, which depicted idle soldiers stationed in West Germany during the Cold War, the morality of American soldiers was clearly in question. This dialogue from the film captures the tone:

> You want to hear the secret of Vietnam? The secret of Vietnam is simple, I loved it. Goddamn turkey shoot. Whole damn thing was nothing but fun. I'm just being honest, I fucking well loved it. Everyone else would too if we had won.

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[311] Wang Xiaofei, "Movies Without Mercy," 24.
[312] Ibid.
[313] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema*, 2.
[314] Ibid., 1-2.
[315] Ibid.

That Hollywood should so willingly comply with a request to delay this film speaks volumes about the industry's willingness to submit to, and reflect the ideological perspective of, the government during times of conflict. It is this relationship between nationalism and the War Film that lies at the heart of both of the War Films interrogated later in this chapter.

Conclusion

Even before the birth of cinema, the idea of capturing war through visual means was a prominent part of human culture, helping to create collective identities through past conflicts and victories. In doing so, cultures have demonstrated a consistent need to define themselves in opposition to a distinct Other. It's no surprise then that the War Film should have originally been borne out of a nationalist impulse to champion those who fight on behalf of a nation against the nation's enemies.

Of course, this approach to the War Film is akin to propaganda rather than, and the result is a long history of cinema that simplifies the moral complexities of past conflicts, reduces the individuals of enemy cultures to one-dimensional monsters and presents a nation's soldiers as innately heroic without moral complication.

However, in this section a case has been made to showcase the increasing sophistication of the War Film genre over the last hundred years, as film artists have increasingly used the medium to privilege a perspective of war that highlights its horrors rather than any nationalist purpose. Rarer than these anti-War Films, however, are metahistorical War Films which seek to challenge the viewer's fundamental perceptions about how they understand history within the context of War. As will be argued later in this chapter, Eastwood is responsible for two such examples: *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Both films invite a fundamental re-examination of the genre and its role in historical representation, challenging the way in which the War Film has historically represented the enemy; exposed a propaganda led concept of heroism; and reductively represented the moral complexities of war.

Flags of our Fathers (2006)

While Eastwood's career has veered towards challenging linear and closed representations of the past since at least the late 1980s, *Flags of Our Fathers* presents as perhaps the most complex and compelling work of metahistorical cinema in his oeuvre. The film details the experiences of the three soldiers who appeared in the famous *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* photograph before surviving long enough to

be pulled from the front line to be championed as heroes in the famous Seventh War Loan Drive, which raised a $26.3 billion for the war effort.[316] As the film concedes, the outcome of the Drive was staggeringly strong, but by juxtaposing that outcome with the cynical political machinations that drove it, and then by juxtaposing all of this with experiences of the traumatised soldiers battered by the realities of war and the absurdity of their new status as heroes, Eastwood creates a series of oppositional historical meanings that neither smoothly correlate or discount each other. The result is a metahistorical work that forces the viewer to confront the idea that history is always an ideological construction, and always a reductionist narrative distillation of a much greater reality.

James Bradley's Flags of our Fathers

In 2000 James Bradley released his book *Flags of our Fathers*, along with co-writer Ron Powers. The book is centred around Bradley's father, John Bradley, and his experiences in WWII as one of the flag-raisers in the famous *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* photograph. Pharmacist's Mate Second Class John Bradley – along with the two other surviving men who appeared in the photo, Private Rene Gagnon and Private Ira Hayes – was pulled off the front-line after the photograph became a national sensation in the Seventh War Loan Drive.

By March 1945, Bradley notes, the war had cost about $88 billion dollars in the last fiscal year, from a total annual national budget of $99 billion, and "government revenue receipts totalled only $46 billion."[317] Requiring a huge cash injection, the government encouraged citizens to purchase war bonds – essentially guaranteed loans to the government in order to raise funds throughout the war. The best way to do this had been through bond drives, essentially "elaborate coast-to-coast touring shows – organized by the Treasury Department" that crowds would attend "in stadiums and in roped-off city centres to hear bands play and to watch Hollywood movie stars and war heroes make pitches for the purchase of bonds."**[318]**

The Seventh War Bond Drive tour, thanks in large part to the massive popularity of the Iwo Jima flag-raising photograph and three flag-raisers who toured with it, became the most successful in history. Aiming to raise the as yet never achieved

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[316] Mette Mortensen, "The Making and Remakings of An American Icon," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 18.
[317] James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags Of Our Fathers* (USA: Bantam Books, 2000), Kindle.
[318] Ibid.

target of $14 billion, Treasury were no doubt delighted to see its citizens raised a significant $26.3 billion.[319]

James Bradley provides a patriotic account of this period in his father's life, as well as going into great detail on the lives of all the other flag-raisers and alleged flag raisers, both those who made it home for the bond tour and those that didn't. Indeed, if Eastwood had chosen to adapt the work more literally, then it would likely have resembled a Biopic in its structure more than the ensemble approach presented within the film. Bradley doesn't shy away from the motivations and failings of each of his characters, and the result feels like a balanced account that doesn't so much challenge the traditional conception of the soldier as hero as it emphasises the tragedy of their sacrifice. He reserves all of his bile for descriptions of the atrocities committed by the Japanese, whilst arguing that the Japanese nation had been temporarily swayed by an ultra-nationalist agenda that used a newly-distorted vision of the Bushido code to force men to commit atrocities and pointlessly sacrifice their lives for the Japanese cause. In general, Bradley's book is a sound history of the period, limited by a patriotic agenda and a reductionist approach to historical causality. Bradley's book is quite sprawling in scope, providing an account of each soldier's early life, war experience prior to Iwo Jima, training for Iwo Jima, experience on Iwo Jima, the bond tour, and their lives in the subsequent decades.

Whilst Bradley's book was essentially a linear history, Eastwood's *Flags of our Fathers* instead took on a non-linear structure, oscillating between a multiplicity of periods and perspectives that quite deliberately confuse past and present. *Flags* intercuts six distinct time periods: the near-present, covering John Bradley's death and James Bradley's interviews with participants involved in the battle or bond drive, its content forming the narration and framing the rest of the film as memory; the lead up to the Battle of Iwo Jima, in which we are introduced to all of the key characters; the battle itself, which is revisited in the form of individual's fractured memories or tortured flashbacks; the moments of the two flag-raisings and the incidents that led to the photograph at the centre of the film; the experiences of Bradley, Hayes, and Gagnon as they are pulled back to the United States for the Bond Drive; and flashes of the later years of the lives of the same three men. The film's structure positions history as a two way-street, in which history is constructed through the prism of traumatic memory, whilst its impacts are still felt within the present moment.

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[319] James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags Of Our Fathers*, Kindle.

Narrative Non-Linear Structure

Robert Burgoyne addresses the concept of traumatic memory in his essay 'Haunting the War Film: F*lags of our Fathers*', in which he suggests that the notion of the present being haunted by the past is a common trait within the War Film genre. Burgoyne argues that "the recurring motifs of disembodied voices, premonitions, uncanny encounters, and traumatic memories suggest that the defining and distinguishing feature of the genre is the haunting of the present by the past, the past trying to possess the present."[320] Burgoyne highlights the way in which "sonic and visual realism has been celebrated as the War Film's particular contribution to the history of the cinema and a key to its historical legitimacy", whilst noting that this emphasis on realism "camouflages the deeper source of these films' affect, their way of conveying the spectral presence of the past, the reality of a past 'that hurts'."[321]

Flags of our Fathers would seem to be the literal manifestation of Burgoyne's thesis, bringing the spectral presence of the past into the present moment more literally than is typical of the genre through its complex interweaving chronologies. As Brent M. Smith-Casanueva highlights in "Nation in Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front and Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers*", Eastwood positions the past in almost parallel existence with the present:

> The past of pain and suffering on the battlefield refuses to be instrumentalized as an origin for the present, instead remaining alive for the characters who are unable to escape it and are thus refused the sensory-motor continuity of the hero in the movement-image who is able, through their actions, to propel him or herself through time.[322]

The past is revealed not necessarily as fact in *Flags of our Fathers* so much as existing entirely through the prism of lived experience and memory, forcing viewers into a metahistorical reconsideration of the very nature of history and its limitations in understanding the past as something lived and continually experienced by human beings. For example, several scenes in *Flags* appear to be the recollections of those people James Bradley is interviewing, their interviews beginning as monologues that transition into narration as we slide back in time, heavily implying we are not retreating into the past but into memory. Similarly, there are two flashback sequences

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[320] Robert Burgoyne, "Haunting the War Film: Flags of our Fathers," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 160.
[321] Ibid., 160.
[322] Brent M. Smith-Casanueva, "Nation in Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front and Eastwood's Flags of Our Fathers," 8.

involving the elderly John Bradley, both singular moments of memory or trauma. The first is an abstract nightmare of Iwo Jima's rocky discombobulating surface, coupled with the screams of friends towards the film's beginning. The second comes at the film's conclusion, as John Bradley recalls, on his deathbed, the memory he wishes to hold on to: this depicts Bradley and his friends alive on the beaches of Iwo Jima, swimming and joyful. In each of these cases the past becomes a present and lived experience, its contents not entirely trustworthy except as a representation of the trauma that the events of the past have brought about.

Perhaps the most overt and visceral example of this phenomenon takes place during a critical scene in the 7th Bond Drive portion of the film. Already a representation of the past in of itself, this portion of the film portrays the three flag-raisers as haunted by trauma and riddled with feelings of guilt about their own survival, escape from combat and their new status as national heroes. Each character experiences flashbacks during the scene in which they take part in a public re-enactment of the flag raising. Showing clear discomfort with the task they have been set, the film develops a rhythm of closing in on the gaze of each flag-raiser, flashing back to a traumatic memory, then flashing back to the re-enactment. This occurs five times during the scene, revealing the violent deaths of Mike Strank, Hank Hansen, Harlon Block, Franklin Sousley, and finally the discovery of Ralph 'Iggy' Ignatowski's mutilated corpse by John Bradley. This last scene answers the film's opening riddle in which the elderly Bradley has a stroke and screams: "Where's Iggy?"

Further emphasising the film's challenge to representations of the past as historical fact is the way in which it seeks to remove any clear sense of visual or temporal space in its depictions of combat, suggesting that our glances at the Battle of Iwo Jima are not a look into the past but into the fractured memories of those who experienced it. In his review of *Flags*, Stephen Hunter of the *Washington Post* captures this well when he notes that whilst *Saving Private Ryan* offered "battle as narrative", Eastwood's film offers up the notion of "battle as weather" in which "there's no coherence or satisfying wind-up", and that "his set-piece battle starts and then it stops; there's no "climax" where a gallant major leads troops up a draw and flanks the enemy."[323]

At other moments, competing memories and reflections are visualised into impossible historical certainties, such as the scene in which Keyes Beech, who had

[323] Stephen Hunter, "'Flags of Our Fathers' Salutes The Men Behind The Moment," *Washington Post*, Oct 20, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/19/AR2006101901968.html (accessed Mar 2021)

been the chaperone to the flag raisers during the Seventh Bond Drive, recalls thinking he might have driven past Hayes hitchhiking on a desert road once, but didn't stop because he was in a rush and the man "was an Indian". Subsequently, we are shown a scene suggesting it was Hayes hitchhiking to go see the family of Harlon Block at the time. But the structure of the film has by now made it clear this is not an assertion of fact, simply an attempt to tie memories together into history, inviting a reflection on the speculative nature of historiography as a tool for inventing facts to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of the past.

Flags of our Fathers is structured as a multilayered collection of memories within memories rather than as a direct depiction of the past, and as such invites the viewer to question the film's capacity to reflect the past. That is to say, the film highlights the problematic nature of human testimony in articulating a true depiction of the past. Conversely, it invites a larger meditation on the importance of not divorcing the human condition from our understanding of history, even as the very idea of capturing the scale of trauma that war brings about as impossible. As such, the non-linear structure of *Flags of our Fathers* is pivotal in its metahistorical project of interrogating the ways in which history, particularly within the context of war, is understood.

Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima

In *Flags*, Eastwood places the flag image at the centre of his metahistorical navigation of the War Film and the nature of war itself, deconstructing the complex debates around the image's contestable role as a kind of truth, the deliberate misrepresentation of this truth as a tool for mythmaking propaganda, and the way in which the flag raisers placed at the centre of this mythmaking found themselves challenged by the incomprehensible suggestion that their appearance in a photo could see them positioned as heroes.

The first raising of the US flag on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima, was on February 23rd, after Lieutenant Colonel Chandler Johnson had ordered a platoon to take the mountain.[324] This initial raising was photographed by Marine Staff Sergeant Louis Lowery for *Leatherneck Magazine*. When the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, came ashore to observe the taking of Mount Suribachi, he expressed his interest in obtaining the raised flag. Not wanting to lose a historically significant object that he felt belonged to the battalion, Johnson ordered a replacement flag to be

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[324] James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags Of Our Fathers*, Kindle.

raised, so that he could keep the original.[325] Runner Rene Gangon was sent up the mountain with the replacement flag.[326] Photographers Joe Rosenthal, Bill Genaust and Bob Campbell had missed the original flag raising, but soon spotted several men dragging a pole in preparation for the second and sought out positions to take the photo. As Bradley describes it, Harlon Block, Mike Strank, Ira Hayes and John Doc Bradley found themselves momentarily in the right place at the right time to assist, and Rosenthal took a lucky photo at the perfect moment.

> Rosenthal spotted the movement and grabbed his camera. Genaust, about three feet from Rosenthal, asked: "I'm not in your way, am I, Joe?"
>
> "Oh, no," Rosenthal answered. As he later remembered, "I turned from him and out of the corner of my eye I said, 'Hey, Bill, there it goes!'"
>
> He swung his camera and clicked off a frame. In that same instant the flagpole rose upward in a quick arc. The banner, released from Mike's grip, fluttered out in the strong wind.
>
> Rosenthal remembers: "By being polite to each other we both damn near missed the scene. I swung my camera around and held it until I could guess that this was the peak of the action, and shot."
>
> And then it was over. The flag was up.[327]

Eastwood captures this moment, in which a chance accident brought about an aesthetically pleasing image that was essentially a re-enactment of a previous one – the raising of the flag. As the film progresses, one of the soldiers in the photograph is misidentified in propaganda as another, with one having appeared in the original photo and another in the second. Both soldiers being deceased, the mistake is never rectified. More than this, however, we soon realise that the image does not capture a moment of victory at all but only the minor milestone of reaching the peak of Mount Suribachi which held some strategic value to the campaign.[328] Having been informed of this by Hayes, Bradley and Gagnon, Bud Gerber of the Treasury Department dryly notes: "Well, what'd you do, raise a goddamn flag every time you stopped for lunch?"

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[325] James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags Of Our Fathers*, Kindle.
[326] Ibid.
[327] Ibid.
[328] Mette Mortensen, "The Making and Remakings of An American Icon," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 18.

As these revelations all surface throughout the film, the value of the photograph as an authentic object begins to dissipate. As Burgoyne notes, the photograph itself "haunts" Eastwood's film and the men who appeared in it: "far from recording a searing moment of surpassing heroism, the photograph itself is a kind of double, almost an afterimage or an afterthought, a 'second take.'"[329] Burgoyne continues:

> The strange doubleness that issues from the photograph - two flags, two images, two different teams of flag raisers - pushes the phantasmic quality of photography to the surface of the text. The photograph of the second flag raising, apparently grounded in the real and taken under combat conditions, is nevertheless riddled with uncertainty and doubt; it immediately takes on the unreal aspect of the replica: rather than a recording of a punctual moment in time, it becomes a kind of hollow monument.[330]

Eastwood presents the politicians and public relations teams in charge of raising funds for the war effort as disinterested in the authenticity of the *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* image when compared to its symbolic power to drive unity amongst the American people. As Mette Mortensen notes in "The Making and Remakings of An American Icon" photographs are a way of telling "people what they know already or what they would like to be told." These photographs assist in creating "an emotional response in confirming and strengthening the predominant beliefs, hopes, and sentiments about the war" at the same time as they are less likely to "offer a visual entrance to a more profound understanding of war" than "block that very same entrance with one-dimensional and schematic depictions."[331]

This observation points to a core truth at the centre of Eastwood's *Flags of our Fathers*, highlighting the gap between the mythic and ultimately meaningless nature of the photograph itself, and the unspeakable trauma of those who appeared in it. Their experiences are rendered entirely irrelevant by the elevation of the image to mythic status. Their pain is ultimately rendered miniscule when juxtaposed with the benefit of misleading the public in order to raise funds for a war whose moral purpose is unquestionable. What has been done to these men by the cynical propagandists of WWII is repugnant, Eastwood seems to suggest, but that does not make it any less necessary. In "Beyond Mimesis: War, Memory and History in Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers*", Holger Potzsch notes that:

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[329] Robert Burgoyne, "Haunting the War Film: Flags of our Fathers," 162.
[330] Ibid., 163.
[331] Mette Mortensen, "The Making and Remakings of An American Icon," 19-20.

> *Flags* exemplifies processes of translation and negotiation where the flag raisers' individual and communicative memories are transferred into inherently foundational cultural memory serving the political purpose of raising funds for a continued war effort. In the process of storing, remediating, and circulating the photograph, historical facts as well as individually varying accounts of what actually happened became of minor significance.[332]

However, it would be wrong to see the film as a judgment of those who would seek to prioritise the mythologising of this symbol over the wellbeing of troops. Eastwood acknowledges that the decision to appropriate the image for propaganda purposes had a significant positive effect. At one point early in the film, James Bradley interviews Joe Rosenthal who notes that "There were plenty of other photos taken that day but none anybody wanted to see. Now the right picture can win or lose a war… I took a lot of pictures that day; none of them made a difference." His voice seems to take on the force of a narrator at this moment, positioning the film as acknowledging that the mythologising of the photo was absurd and reductionist, but also incredibly powerful as a tool to influence millions of Americans.

Eastwood uses his final credits to reveal a multitude of photographs taken during the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945, which in the context of Rosenthal's comment seeks to highlight the historical truth hidden by the singular image of the raising of the flag. The viewer is encouraged to interrogate each image, and all other representations of the past, looking beyond their mythic value, acknowledging that any image or text is necessarily constructed and interpreted with an agenda, as are all artefacts of the past, Eastwood's film included. In this sense, the photograph that lies at the centre of *Flags of our Fathers* becomes a metahistorical tent pole around which all other elements of the film gather; its constructed truth is used to encourage a more critical engagement with history. One film critic framed this as the film's critique of the "Liberty-Valance-ism of warfare, the industrial production of myths and memories to sell war to the civilian population on the home front", and noted that such myths are "not exactly a lie, but something that is a million miles from the meaningless chaos and butchery of war."[333]

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[332] Holger Potzsch, "Beyond Mimesis: War, Memory and History in Eastwood's Flags of Our Fathers," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 129.

[333] Peter Bradshaw, "Flags of our Fathers," *The Guardian*, Dec 22, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/dec/22/drama.actionandadventure (accessed Mar 2021)

The value of the metahistorical nature of *Flags of our Fathers* is only further accentuated by James Bradley's revelation in 2016 that he now believed that his father was not in the *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*.[334] The Marines confirmed this to be the case several months later, announcing the individual mistaken for John Bradley to be Harold Schultz.[335] New evidence now suggests that John Bradley was almost certainly one of the raisers of the original flag.[336] But if we are to accept the thesis of the film – that the photograph captured an arbitrary act, committed by a few soldiers lucky enough to be caught on camera and nonsensically championed as heroes while their compatriots stayed behind to fight on the front line – then this matters very little.

The *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* photograph is, Eastwood reveals to us, comprised of countless layers of inauthenticity. And yet, the visceral quality of the image within its cultural context superseded historical facts, resulting in its elevation to mythic status. Myth, unlike history, is fundamentally reductionist, and as such the flag raising image flattens historical context, providing an aesthetically grandiose image that inspires nationalistic fervour and reduces the soldier to a one-dimensional figure, blocking the public imagination from processing the traumatic reality of the soldier's experience. At the same time, it is an image that drove the public to invest in American efforts at a point in WWII where this was necessary. Eastwood is unwilling to forego the ambiguous reality of these competing truths with any kind of reductionist moralising confusion. Instead, *Flags* is a metahistorical work, in which we are invited to reflect on the complexity of historical reality and the way in which it is portrayed on the screen.

Rethinking Heroism: Loyalty, Sacrifice and the Sacrificed

Flags functions as a call to question traditional national myths about the nature, purpose and meaning of war, and this is never clearer than in its metahistorical deconstruction of the myth of the hero. From beginning to end, Eastwood challenges us to reconsider the concept of the hero and ask whether those Americans who fought in WWII had violence and death imposed on them by circumstances, rather

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[334] Michael S. Schmidt, "'Flags of Our Fathers' Author Now Doubts His Father Was in Iwo Jima Photo," *New York Times*, May 3, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/04/us/iwo-jima-marines-bradley.html (accessed Mar 2021)
[335] Alexandra Genova, "Marines say John Bradley was NOT in iconic WWII flag-raising photo and have identified another corpsman who had kept his role secret," *Daily Mail*, Jun 24, 2016, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3656286/Marines-say-John-Bradley-NOT-iconic-WWII-flag-raising-photo-identified-corpsman-kept-role-secret.html (acessed Mar 2021)
[336] John Ferak, "Photos show Bradley raised first flag at Iwo Jima," *Post Crescent*, May 8, 2016, https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2016/05/08/photos-show-bradley-raised-first-flag-iwo-jima/83979172/ (accessed Apr 2021)

than being enthusiastic heroes who willingly sacrificed their lives for their country. In other words, did they make sacrifices or were they sacrificed?

In 'Clint Eastwood's Postclassical Multiple Narratives of Iwo Jima', Glenn Manm argues that Eastwood is attempting to undercut "the myth of patriotism as the basis for the fighting men's esprit de corps" and "the myth of glorified heroism" that conceals "the men's primary motivation in battle and out of it – to look out for one another, to survive, and to credit their comrades for their sacrifice lest they be forgotten."[337] Manm's contention is certainly supported by the film's opening and closing monologues, one from platoon leader Captain Dave Severance being interviewed by Bradley, the other from James Bradley himself:

Opening monologue

Severance: Every Jackass thinks he knows what war is. Especially those who've never been in one. We like things nice and simple. Good and evil. Heroes and villains. And there's always plenty of both. Most of the time they are not who we think they are. … Most guys I know would never talk about what happened over there. Probably because they're still trying to forget about it. They certainly didn't think of themselves as heroes. … I'd tell their folks they died for their country. I'm not sure that was it.

Closing monologue

James Bradley: I now know why they were uncomfortable being called heroes. Heroes are something we create. It's a way for us to understand what is incomprehensible… how people could sacrifice so much for us. But for my dad and these men… the risks they took… the wounds they suffered. They did that for their buddies. They may have fought for their country but they died for their friends.

If Bradley's conclusion seems trite, then we understand it by the film's end to be his attempt to bring meaning to that which cannot be given meaning: namely, the senseless slaughter of men and the enduring trauma the survivors must suffer. Indeed, two thirds of the way through the film, Severance makes a point that would seem to fundamentally undercut and complicate James Bradley's conclusion:

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[337] Glenn Manm, "Clint Eastwood's Postclassical Multiple Narratives of Iwo Jima," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 143-145.

> Vets will tell you about being hit but not wanting to leave their buddies. Usually they're lying. You'll take any excuse to get out of there. But it happens. You get the feeling you're letting them down.

What's interesting about Severance's statement is that it acknowledges a sense of guilt at leaving the battlefield wounded, but rejects a common myth propagated in War Film mythology. Whilst it is common for veterans to deny their own heroism, Hollywood has tended to portray this as a consequence of trauma and misplaced modesty, but Eastwood's metahistorical rejection of these traditional notions leaves us with a far more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the soldier, one that corresponds with our own understanding of the human condition. It is also an insight emphasised throughout the film in numerous scenes in which the protagonists show a genuine discomfort with the label of "hero."

Early in the film, as Gagnon is sent home on a plane to join the bond tour, another soldier is kicked off the flight so Gagnon can have his seat. The soldier angrily says to Gagnon, "If I'm gonna get kicked off my seat for a hero, he better have a damn good story to tell." Gagnon can only answer in the negative. In their speeches on the tour, Gagnon and Bradley both feel compelled to point out that the real heroes are those who will never return home. And Ira Hayes, tormented by memories of lost friends and a profound guilt over his own participation in the horrors of war, breaks down as he explains "I can't take them calling me a hero. All I did was try not to get shot." If the notion of being called a hero is hard for any soldier who just tried to stay alive, then this idea is only further accentuated for the flag raisers themselves. As Severance notes: "All your friends dying, it's hard enough to be called a hero for saving somebody's life. But for putting up a pole?" Even in the context of actual combat, Eastwood suggests that the notion of heroism is flawed by depicting combat as an environment in which men are constantly shown to be running, hiding and dying at the hands of unseen forces in the indecipherable chaos of war. The absence of a visible enemy removes even the opportunity for heroism.

The unique position of the flag-raisers allows Eastwood to make a significant point. By highlighting the manner in which these three men are held captive by a disingenuous PR machine that seeks to propagate a misleading narrative of heroism, Eastwood places an emphasis on the way in which human lives are ultimately swallowed up and consumed by the patriotic myths pushed by government and its machinations. As Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg notes in 'East of Eastwood: Iwo Jima and the Japanese Context', the film works to highlight the "contrast between the regular and authentic soldiers and the cynical politicians", with the former being

"primarily concerned with survival and comradeship among themselves" but finding themselves "trapped in a narrative of the primacy of patriotism, honour, and fate."[338] Eastwood is questioning the myth of the hero, framing it as a propaganda tool used to manage public sentiment, and fuel the war machine with fresh recruits. In this sense, Eastwood's heroes are not those who have made great sacrifices, but rather those who have been sacrificed.

This notion of sacrifice might at first recall the lives of those lost in combat, but as Eastwood further emphasises, the term can just as easily apply to those who have survived. Consider the descent of Ira Hayes, who is championed as a hero while trauma sees him slide into chronic alcohol abuse. When his public drunkenness sees him arrested, one of the present police officers notes: "Another fucking hero". The officer has by now experienced countless incidents of damaged men, returned from the war, engaging in self-destructive behaviour. And already these "heroes" and their traumas are becoming tiresome and inconvenient.

Later, not long before Hayes' death, we see him toiling in a field. A car pulls up and a family jumps out, running over to Hayes. The father asks "You're him aren't you? You're the hero, right?" They take a quick snapshot with Hayes, offer him a few coins, and then drive away. In exchange for his service, Hayes has been left a traumatised wreck and sideshow attraction. Something similar could easily be said of Rene Gagnon, who enjoyed the spotlight more than his colleagues and is made numerous job offers by members of the elite. By the time the film closes, all those offers have dried up, and Severance's narration informs us that he is now "yesterday's hero". Eastwood here invites a reflection on the idea that heroism has a shelf-life in the cultural imagination, one that in this case corresponds closely to the usefulness of that sacrifice to the government's propaganda machine.

By arguing that the traditional myth of the hero has no real correlation with reality, and by demonstrating how that myth is used to stoke the fires of patriotism in times of war, Eastwood offers a fundamentally metahistorical re-reading of a specific historical event (the utilisation of the hero myth in the propaganda campaign following the flag-raising), the depiction of the hero in the War Film, and the historical truth of the individual soldier's experience of combat.

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[338] Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg, "East of Eastwood: Iwo Jima and the Japanese Context," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 219.

Ira Hayes and the Other

Whilst *Letters from Iwo Jima* is Eastwood's project of demystifying the enemy as Other in war, as will be explored in the next section, it is via the character of Ira Hayes that Eastwood finds a thematic tent-pole for a consideration of the Other in *Flags of Our Fathers*. In *Clint Eastwood's America*, Sam B. Girgus suggests that Hayes' presence provides a direct link between the two films that "initially shocks, with their meaning together [providing] a counter-intuitive rejection of conventional one-sided views of war, especially WWII, the 'good war' that produced 'the greatest generation.'"[339] In this sense, *Flags* works independently, and with the intertextual reinforcements of *Letters*, to offer a metahistorical interrogation of how we understand the Other within the context of the War Film.

In the character of Hayes, Eastwood finds an opportunity to utilise Hayes' cultural significance as a folk hero, the tragedy of his life and death having been mythologised by several movies and songs. Most famously, Hayes appears briefly as himself in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), is played by Tony Curtis in *The Outsider* (1961) and was the subject of the song *The Ballad of Ira Hayes*, made famous by Johnny Cash. In both *The Ballad of Ira Hayes* and *The Outsider* emphasis is placed on the persecution of Hayes as a Native American throughout his life, and his willingness to overlook this persecution in his quest for equal standing. In *Flags*, there is a similar emphasis, with persecution and post-traumatic stress disorder leading to Hayes' self-destructive alcoholism. Eastwood utilises the Hayes character to hold the United States to account for the sacrifices made by soldiers during WWII, juxtaposing these sacrifices with the nation's own failure to live up to the ideals those soldiers are fighting for. Girgus makes an effective case:

> The film assumes the sacrifice of so many in the war compels making the country a home for everyone. Eastwood makes Ira's place as the stranger a fundamental ethical imperative for *Flags of Our Fathers*. As the stranger whose foreignness becomes so important to many, Ira compares to the foreignness and strangeness that many Americans felt about the Japanese enemy.[340]

Hayes' experiences of racism are depicted explicitly in two key phases of the film: the lead-up to the Battle of Iwo Jima and the return home to the United States for the Bond Tour. In the lead-up, Hayes is shown to be the subject of casual racism during military preparations, his fellow soldiers referring to him as "Chief", and at one point

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[339] Sam B. Girgus, *Clint Eastwood's America* (Cornwall: Polity Press, 2014), 278.
[340] Ibid., 237.

asking if he has a "squaw." In another scene, Hayes is winning a poker game when another player suggests he's getting revenge for Sitting Bull. Hayes amusedly informs him that the Pima Native Americans fought on the side of the white man, challenging the audience's own ignorance of the complexity of Native American history. That the ribbing Hayes receives is not dissimilar to that received by his colleagues in these scenes is worth noting. Here Hayes is subject to racism, but still feels himself to be treated as an equal. Conversely, when Hayes arrives back in the United States, he faces numerous instances of institutional racism that have an impact on his sense of identity which he struggles to correlate with the sacrifice he has made for his country. At one point Hayes is asked by a senator whether he used a tomahawk to kill the Japanese. Another senator attempts to speak to him in his native language, before noting that it "[t]ook forever to memorise the damn gibberish." Another moment sees Hayes rejected at a bar, in full military uniform, on the basis of his race.

If Hayes is the only surviving member of the flag-raisers not welcome within his own country, he is also the member most proud to have served. This is never clearer than in two scenes in which Hayes' pride in his achievements and love for his country is most apparent. The first moment is one in which Hayes meets President Truman with the other flag-raisers. Truman shows disproportionate attention to Hayes, revealing his apparent knowledge of Hayes' people and calling out his special status: ""Being an Indian, you are a truer American than any of us. … Bet your people are proud to see you wear that uniform." Hayes answers in the affirmative and is clearly overwhelmed by the moment.

The second moment comes when Hayes goes to the family home of the deceased Harlon Block – one of the flag-raisers incorrectly identified as the also deceased Hank Hansen – to let Block's mother know that she was right in recognising her son in the *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* photo. Hayes, despite all he has been through, both for and at the hands of the United States, is the one person unwilling to let this wrong stand.

In Eastwood's hands, Hayes' experience becomes a criticism of the deep hypocrisy in the space between America's ideals of equality and the practical reality lived out by a Native American who gave much for his nation. Hayes' experiences as a man who finds equality amongst his fellow marines in the horrors of war contrast distinctly with the inequality he faces upon his return to the United States, which can be interpreted as ultimately leading him to his death. When combined with the metahistorical elements of the film, most particularly the way in which the film deconstructs the myth

of the hero traditionally emphasised in the War Film, the experiences of the Hayes character only further emphasise that fact that history often avoids the inconvenient and complex realities of the past in favour of reductionist patriotic narratives that align to national agendas.

Rejecting Reductionism

As has been argued throughout this thesis, Eastwood's work as a historical filmmaker has consistently encountered radically different interpretations from critics attempting to reduce each of his films to a definitive perspective or statement of some particular truth. In the context of *Flags of our Fathers* there has been much commentary suggesting that the film's portrayal of the Seventh Bond Drive might be read either as a piece of nationalist apologist cinema, or as a leftist attack on the cynical corporatisation, war-hungry amorality and commercialism of modern America. That such radically different readings are possible comes down to the fact that mainstream film critics are uncomfortable with historical cinema that does not take an overt ideological position. But as Manohla Dargis notes in her positive *New York Times* review, the "ambivalence and ambiguity" of his approach in *Flags* is "constituent of a worldview, not an aftereffect."[341]

In "Humanism Versus Patriotism?: Eastwood Trapped in the Bi-polar Logic of Warfare'', Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg makes the argument that Eastwood is "discreetly sceptical" of the idea that "the fighting taking place on Iwo Jima was purposeful,"[342] and that the film's "central implication is that warfare is futile and gruesome" and primarily "the product of cynical, unintelligent or downright mean political leaders."[343] For Zangenberg, Eastwood's primary purpose is to distinguish between humanism and patriotism. The former is represented by the soldiers that populate the film, showing a capacity to get along, befriend and love each other, and integrate across cultural boundaries. The latter is represented by the government machine cynically raising money and sending men off to war to die. While there is something to this binary, I would argue that at no point does the film provide a clear-cut suggestion that the government is in any way wrongheaded in its fundamental cause.

One need only turn to the film's most overtly ideological moment to see that Eastwood is broadly appreciative of the purpose of the 7th Bond Drive, even if he is

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[341] Manohla Dargis, "A Ghastly Conflagration, a Tormented Aftermath," *New York Times*, Oct 20, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/20/movies/20flag.html (accessed Mar 2021)
[342] Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg, "East of Eastwood," 222.
[343] Ibid., 219.

cynical about the execution. In this scene Gerber is confronted by the three-surviving flag-raisers with their ethical concerns about the campaign. Gerber responds:

> You know what they're calling this bond drive? The Mighty Seventh. They might've called it the "We're Flat Fucking Broke And Can't Even Afford Bullets So We're Begging For Your Pennies" bond drive, but it didn't have quite the ring. They could've called it that, though, because the last four bond drives came up so short we just printed money instead. … Ships aren't being built, tanks aren't being built, machine guns, bazookas, hand grenades, zip. You think this is a farce? You want to go back to your buddies? Well stuff some rocks in your pockets before you get on the plane, because that's all we got left to throw at the Japanese. … If we don't raise $14 billion, and that's million with a "B," this war is over by the end of the month.

Gerber's case proves to be acceptable, even if he is portrayed as a shady character willing to push the boundaries of decency to achieve his goal. And there is little doubt that this monologue marks a pivotal point in the film, in which the fundamental scale of the problem being addressed is raised to counter our misgivings as viewers. But as Girgus states, the film ultimately "dramatizes a tour through an American consciousness of self-serving avarice and self-centred politics. Incidents abound of commercialism, materialism, exploitation, opportunism, all under the guise of involvement in a national war effort."[344]

It has become popular for critics and academics to compare *Flags of Our Fathers* with *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), and the latter's final message: "When the legend becomes the fact, print the legend."[345] [346] This comparison is not without basis, and as Vibeke Schou Tjalve notes in 'To Sell a War: Flags, Lies and Tragedy", "Telling the story of how three American soldiers were turned into instruments of a marketing machine designed to push American war bonds, *Flags* ultimately portrays political propaganda as an evil, but a necessary evil."[347] At one point in the film, Severance hints at this drive to reductionism:

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[344] Sam B. Girgus, *Clint Eastwood's America*, 268.
[345] Robert Eberwein, "Following the flag in American film," 94-95.
[346] Todd McCarthy, "Flags of Our Fathers," *Daily Variety*, Oct 10, 2006, https://variety.com/2006/film/awards/flags-of-our-fathers-2-1200512794/ (accessed Mar 2021)
[347] Vibeke Schou Tjalve, "To Sell a War: Flags, Lies and Tragedy," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 248.

> What we see and do in war… the cruelty is unbelievable. But somehow we gotta make sense of it. To do that, we need an easy to understand truth.... And damn few words.

It would be easy to assume then, that the film is "ultimately an embrace of the modern distrust of the public capacity to deal with less than simple things."[348] But the film's very existence, which shines a cynical light on the disrupted and forgotten lives of the men swept up and used as tools in the American propaganda machine, would seem to contradict this very reading, opening up a meditation on the space between the truth that these soldiers experienced, the propaganda myth, and the ugly reality of war. The film itself, with its complex narrative structure, murky morality, and rejection of traditional notions of heroism, sets as its objective the communication of the very complexity Severance argues against.

Eastwood has positioned the film as a multi-layered metahistorical deconstruction of the past, designed to interrogate and open up questions around these issues rather than resolve them. That Eastwood should accept the fact that victory in WWII was an overarchingly positive objective, and that propaganda has historically proven to be an effective way of driving positive sentiment from large populations of people, especially in this instance, is not a suggestion that there is not a better way. Eastwood is merely highlighting the tangled web of history.

Ultimately, *Flags* is propelled by a complex non-linear structure that renders problematic the notion that the film itself can act as any kind of reliable historical document, by heavily implying that its multiple temporal layers are ultimately closer to a fractured accumulation of traumatic and biased memories, rather than any kind of truth. As a result, the film not only challenges the very idea of history as a reliable construct, but also rejects the capacity of the War Film to account for a past through the mere conveying of narrative: that is, war is so inconceivably traumatic that documenting it is an innate disservice.

At the centre of this complex structure is the *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* photograph, whose existence as a reliable and valuable document is interrogated heavily. Through its portrayal as an inaccurate and essentially meaningless facsimile, the image is presented as a scathing symbol of myth making propaganda, and the flawed nature of historical representation, at the same time that it is highlighted as a powerful and valuable emotive device to drive social cohesion, and open up a metahistorical discourse about the nature of the past.

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[348] Vibeke Schou Tjalve, "To Sell a War," 251-252.

As the film burrows into the patriotic understanding of heroism that the photo explicitly supports, *Flags* challenges the traditional framing of heroism as seen in the prototypical War Film and war propaganda. The viewer is asked to consider the possibility that the soldiers on the front line of war, particularly within the context of WWII as a period of conscription, did not willingly sacrifice their lives for their nation so much as that they did not retreat from being sacrificed by and for their nation. *Flags* asks us, even within the framing of America's most easily justifiable war, to reflect on the disparity of power between those who frame the definition of heroism as sacrifice, and those who are compelled towards heroism by circumstances beyond their control.

And finally, through the character of Ira Hayes, who is portrayed as a PTSD afflicted war hero, proud and willing to fight for his country, only to return to find that the nation he has fought for still sees him as an inferior Other, a profound contradiction is highlighted. That the United States should ask human beings to risk and sacrifice their lives to uphold a set of values, only to completely fail to uphold those values, is presented as a great moral crime. All the more so in the case of Hayes, who is both the soldier fighting for the nation, and the victim of its indifference. His experiences force the viewer to interrogate the absolute moral authority with which the United States presents itself.

Through its exploration of the gaps between historical experience and historical fact; between historical myth and historical truth; between heroism as sacrifice and heroism as being sacrificed; and between America's ideals and its real values, *Flags of our Father* opens up a metahistorical deconstruction of WWII that functions as a broader reflection on the very nature of how we conceive of the past, both within the context of war, the War Film and more broadly.

Letters from Iwo Jima (2006)

If *Flags of our Fathers* took an atypical approach to the narrative structure found in most War Films, using its formal complexity as a metahistorical means to call into question how we view war through cinema, then *Letters from Iwo Jima* takes the opposite route. In my interrogation of *Letters* in this section, I will explore the way in which the film instead delivers a traditional anti-War Film structure, calling on the viewer to empathise with the experiences of a group of soldiers who find themselves caught in the maelstrom of war. The distinction is that in this instance the story is told from the perspective not of any allied forces, but of the Japanese who have long been depicted in American cinema as two-dimensional caricatures fixated on

violence and brutality. This traditional anti-War Film approach becomes ironically metahistorical by nature of the context, demanding that viewers recalibrate their conception of war to conceive of the unexplored reality that the distinction between the allied forces and enemy's experiences are not entirely dissimilar.

A significant impact of the narrative structure is the way in which it encourages a reinterpretation of heroism, which I will also seek to explore in this section. By forcing a reconsideration of heroism not as an act of good done on behalf of a good cause, but as the outcome of a supreme sacrifice made rightly or wrongly in defence of one's family, friends, or people, Eastwood continues the project of *Flags* by asking the viewer to question the very nature of how heroism has been packaged as an element of propaganda in most war movies, even those films that might be fundamentally anti-war in their approach. In *Letters*, Japanese practices of ritual suicide and self-sacrifice through banzai attack add an additional level of pathos and complexity to the notion of sacrifice depicted in the film, with its bleak emphasis on the soldiers' ingrained expectation that they will have to die for their country. What both films have in common is the fundamental distinction they make between the political institutions that force people to die heroes, and the individuals who are unwittingly coerced into making these sacrifices.

Finally, this section will highlight the metahistorical commentary provided in *Letters* on the way in which we characterise enemies both in war and in the War Film. Investigating the problematic preconceptions Japanese soldiers had about their American attackers, which were largely the result of Japanese military propaganda, Eastwood's film invites parallels with the representation of the enemy in traditional prototypical war or anti-War Films. In both *Flags* and *Letters* each side of the conflict is capable of humanity and depravity in equal measures, but this is more heavily emphasised in *Letters* as we are forced into a direct examination of the brutality on both sides.

And finally, I will seek to highlight the metatextual way in which *Letters* and *Flags* function as a kind of dual text, enriching the metahistorical truths of each other through their contrasts and similarities.

The Source Text

Whilst in pre-production for *Flags of our Fathers*, Clint Eastwood stated that he became increasingly interested in the impressive strategic defence of Iwo Jima, and subsequently the man who headed up this defence, General Tadamichi

Kuribayashi.[349] He sought out Japanese books on Kuribayashi, and was most struck by one comprised of Kuribayashi's letters home to his wife and two children whilst serving as an envoy in the United States in 1928, *Picture Letters from the Commander in Chief*. Paul Haggis recommended that Eastwood work with Japanese American aspiring screenwriter Iris Yamashita on how to tell the Kuribayashi story. Yamashita pulled together a concept that combined Kuribayashi's experiences with those of the soldiers who fought on the front line. Once the script was complete, it was put through a process of historical validation in Japan, where its accuracy was assessed by experts in the field before being approved by the ancestors of both General Kuribayashi and Baron Nishi, the two historical figures who feature in the film.[350]

The film provides an account of four key characters as they prepare for, engage in, and succumb to the Allied invasion of the Japanese island of Iwo Jima, a critical final step in bringing about the end of WWII by forcing the Japanese to either surrender or face mainland invasion. Through this ensemble of human beings, each one of whom is responding to the demands and stresses of their situation in unique ways, we are invited to understand a multiplicity of subjective positions that quickly shatter the singular reductionist depictions of the Japanese found in much cinematic, propaganda and pop-cultural imagery relating to WWII. Further emphasising this point is the grim understanding amongst these men that they are facing inevitable defeat and annihilation, which will be rendered pointless by the almost inevitable collapse of the Empire of Japan following their defeat.

Overseeing the defence of Iwo Jima is the aforementioned Lieutenant General Tadamichi Kuribayashi whose experiences as a diplomat in the United States have provided him with a unique perspective so that his loyalty to Japan tempered by his respect for the United States. Under Kuribayashi's kind leadership, we see a pragmatic man whose dedication to his country is balanced by a humanist tendency that conflicts with the state's more extreme positions.

At the most junior level is Private Saigo, a soldier more interested in surviving the war and returning to his family than in Japanese victory. Through Saigo we are invited to understand the perspective of disenfranchised individuals pulled into conflict. By contrast, Superior Private Shimizu is a steadfast nationalist whose zeal is seen as

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[349] "Letters from Iwo Jima: Clint Eastwood Interview," *Indie London*, http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/letters-from-iwo-jima-clint-eastwood-interview (accessed Apr 2020)
[350] Emanuel Levy, "Eastwood: Letters from Iwo Jima," *Emanuel Levi: Cinema 24/7*, Dec 6, 2006, http://emanuellevy.com/interviews/eastwoods-letters-from-iwo-jima-3/ (accessed Mar 2021)

threatening by his fellow soldiers. Through Shimizu we see a character attempting to fulfil the role of fanatic that informs the shallow, clichéd depiction of the Japanese in American war movies in the past, only to observe his bravado disintegrate when confronted with the humanity of the enemy.

Finally, there is Lieutenant Colonel Baron Takeichi Nishi, the film's second historical figure, who won an Olympic Gold Medal at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics for equestrian show jumping, where he became a momentary celebrity. Like Kuribayashi, he is loyal to his country whilst demonstrating hints of cynicism about the regime. And also like Kuribayashi, his experiences in the United States have resulted in his resistance to the reductive depiction of Americans outlined in Japanese military propaganda.

Apart from these core characters, the ensemble cast includes minor players whose perspectives and actions are presented as representative of the rigid and problematic nationalist regime under which the action takes place. Several are members of Kuribayashi's senior leadership team, whose need to maintain honour through a sense of self-sacrifice propels them towards fundamentally illogical conclusions, most of which involve selecting suicide or suicidal full-frontal assaults over strategically minded decision making.

Whilst *Flags of our Fathers* was nonlinear and complex in its narrative structure, *Letters from Iwo Jima* is relatively straightforward. Detailing the events of Iwo Jima from the perspective of these men, the film is bookended by scenes of the 21st century discovery of soldier's letters in the caves of Iwo Jima, a fictional conceit. With the exception of a few very brief flashbacks as Kuribayashi, Shimizu and Saigo recall experiences they had prior to finding themselves at Iwo Jima, the bulk of the film follows the events of Iwo Jima chronologically, although strategic context is avoided, ensuring that the film reflects the chaotic nature of the ground troop's experience of war.

Critical Reception Across International Boundaries

In order to understand the way in which the film can be understood as both as a traditional anti-war film and as a metahistorical War film, it is worth looking at the way in which it was critically received both within a Japanese and American context.

Letters from Iwo Jima was widely praised by American critics who noted its unusual attempts to reject the reductionist depictions of Japanese soldiers seen in most WWII films. Mick LaSalle of the *San Francisco Chronicle* suggested that in its willingness to

explore the motivations and humanity of the enemy, *Letters* was the belated equivalent of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which sought to explore the experiences of German troops in the World War I.[351] Stephen Hunter of the *Washington Post* acknowledged its value in humanising the Japanese and depicting war's horrible reality: "prisoners are shot, heroes looking to die gloriously are captured in their sleep, moments of savage cruelty follow or precede moments of stunning tenderness."[352]

Stephanie Zacharek of *Salon* argued that Eastwood's impulse to portray the Japanese in a more balanced light was commendable, but that the film went too far into apologist territory, pointing out that the WWII reputation of "the Japanese as ruthless warriors isn't just a Western prejudice, as the Chinese who survived the Rape of Nanking would tell you."[353] For Zacharek "the film is ultimately "a reduction that absolves humans of responsibility rather than challenging them to accept it."[354] Contrasting with Zacharek's position was that of A. O. Scott in the *New York Times* who noted that the film does not depict "the bloody roster of Japanese atrocities elsewhere in Asia and the South Pacific", but that "this omission in no way compromises the moral gravity of what takes place before our eyes. Nor does it diminish the power of the film's moving and meticulous vindication of the humanity of the enemy.[355]

In Japan, the film arrived during a very specific cultural moment. In 2007, a year after *Letters* was released, huge protests were triggered in Okinawa by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's attempt to remove references to school text books relating to the Battle of Okinawa.[356] Despite significant evidence, the government did not want students taught that the Japanese military forced many civilians to commit suicide rather than surrender to the Americans.[357] This and countless other debates relating to the rewriting and denying of history – including the habit in the Japanese military in WWII of kidnapping foreign

[351] Mick LaSalle, "Once more into the breach -- seen, this time, from the other side," *SFGate.com*, Dec 20, 2016, https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Once-more-into-the-breach-seen-this-time-2542457.php (accessed Mar 2021)

[352] Stephen Hunter, "Under the Sands of Iwo Jima," *Washington Post*, Jan 12, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/11/AR2007011102203.html?noredirect=on (accessed Mar 2021)

[353] Stephanie Zacharek, "Letters from Iwo Jima," *Salon*, Dec 20, 2006, https://www.salon.com/2006/12/20/iwo_jima (accessed Mar 2021)

[354] Ibid.

[355] A. O. Scott, "Blurring the Line in the Bleak Sands of Iwo Jima," *New York Times*, Dec 20, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/20/movies/20lett.html (accessed Mar 2021)

[356] Lars Martin-Sorenson, "East of Eastwood," 196.

[357] Linda Sieg, "Historians battle over Okinawa WW2 mass suicides," *Reuters*, Apr 6, 2007, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-history-okinawa/historians-battle-over-okinawa-ww2-mass-suicides-idUST29175620070406 (accessed Mar 2021)

women for use as sex slaves,[358] and the use of slave labour in mining operations[359] – were part of a tense national dialogue.

Eastwood's decisions to present audiences with a cross-section of differentiated and humanised soldiers, to acknowledge the potential for atrocities on both the Allied and Japanese sides, and to subtly question the morality of the Empire of Japan, creates an ambiguous text that could be interpreted and navigated in many ways. As a result, Martin-Sorenson notes that in Japan "professed leftists repeatedly categorise the film as 'anti-war', whereas their rightist counterparts consider it 'neutral' – which, given the context and their normal use of the term, is laudatory and practically speaking means 'nationalist'."[360] *Letters from Iwo Jima* made $42.9 million USD in Japan, more than triple what it made it in the United States, and was greeted with widespread critical praise from major publications like the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the *Mainichi* newspaper for its personal and sympathetic depiction of Japanese soldiers.[361]

What comes through in all this commentary is that the film is structured largely as a traditional anti-war narrative that sympathetically distinguishes its soldiers from the institution for which they fight, and as a result has been received positively within the Japanese context. At the same time, *Letters* functions in an ironically metahistorical way within a western context. Through the process of an American making an anti-War Film about the Japanese experience of Iwo Jima, directly after making a film about the American experience of Iwo Jima, a metahistorical space has been opened up that invites viewers to reflect on the similarity between the Japanese and American experiences.

Rethinking Heroism: Loyalty, Sacrifice and Suicide

At the centre of *Letters from Iwo Jima* is an exploration of loyalty through sacrifice and suicide and the role that these concepts play in Japanese culture. By juxtaposing a depiction of the admirable yet misguided sacrifices made by countless Japanese soldiers with similar concepts of heroism and loyalty found in *Flags of our Fathers*, Eastwood opens up a metahistorical intertext that invites us to acknowledge the sacrifices that have been made in wartime, but question the political agendas that have brought about the need for these sacrifices, and the way in which they are subsequently used for the purposes of propaganda.

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[358] Linda Sieg, "Historians battle over Okinawa WW2 mass suicides"
[359] William Underwood, "Aso Mining's POW labor: the evidence," *The Japan Times*, May 29, 2007, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2007/05/29/issues/aso-minings-pow-labor-the-evidence/#.XDHS3c8zZTY (accessed Ma 2021)
[360] Lars Martin-Sorensen, "East of Eastwood," 196.
[361] Jason Miks, "Japan reads into 'Letters From Iwo Jima," *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec 22, 2006, https://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1222/p11s02-almo.html (accessed Mar 2021)

Whilst some Western audiences may have been exposed to depictions of Japanese ritual suicide in the Japanese cinema, in American cinematic depictions of WWII the practice is generally depicted as an act of fanatical inhuman madness through kamikaze attacks and acts of banzai. In *Letters*, an implicit critique is offered of this tendency through multiple sympathetic but intentionally problematic depictions of Japanese ritual suicide. As a result, a western audience is familiarised with the concepts involved thus reducing the barrier that traditionally enabled them to think of the Japanese enemy as a distant Other.

It is helpful to understand that implicitly infused into the fabric of the film are the philosophies of Shintoism and Bushido, Japan's national religion and the code of the samurai respectively. In Inazo Nitobe's much respected 1899 text on the nature of the samurai code, *Bushido*, he notes that Shintoism is a religion that "believes in the innate goodness and Godlike purity of the human soul, adoring it as the adytum from which diving oracles are claimed."[362] Nitobe also notes that the fundamental "tenets of Shintoism cover the two predominating features of the emotional life of our race – Patriotism and Loyalty" which hugely informs the Bushido code's notions of "loyalty to the sovereign and love of country."[363]

It is within this context that sacrifice and ritual suicide can be understood to play a pivotal role in Japanese culture and history. Nitobe notes the importance that seppuku or harakiri – "self-immolation by disembowelment" – has long played in the nation's culture.[364] He gives this summary of its fundamental purpose:

> An invention of the middle-ages, it [seppuku] was a process by which warriors could expiate their crimes, apologize for errors, escape from disgrace, redeem their friends, or prove their sincerity. When enforced as a legal punishment, it was practiced with due ceremony. It was a refinement of self-destruction, and none could perform it without the utmost coolness of temper and composure of demeanour, and for these reasons it was particularly befitting the profession of bushi.[365]

As Burgoyne notes in "Suicide in Letters from Iwo jima", in Imperial Japan "the ethic of self-sacrifice was aggressively promoted by the military government, but it was rooted in traditions and distinctive symbolic codes that were intrinsic to Japanese cultural identity and community." He writes that the empire was actively involved in a

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[362] Inazo Nitobe, *Bushido* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 1969), 8.
[363] Ibid., 9.
[364] Ibid., 77.
[365] Ibid., 80.

process of "converting long-standing cultural practices and social rituals to the expression of a militaristic ideology, channelling them into Emperor worship and a particularly lethal form of loyalty to the 'ultimate family', the nation-state."[366]

Consequently, for many Americans during and after WWII, Japanese culture has been viewed as synonymous with the concept of suicide, particularly due to the use of Kamikaze squadrons and banzai attacks in the latter part of the war. The former, translated as "divine wind," were units of pilots trained to fly planes converted into missiles into their targets, a poor strategic response to dwindling numbers of well-trained pilots and fuel shortages. The latter were full frontal assaults or suicide bombings by Japanese ground troops with no hopes of victory and an unwillingness to surrender.

In *Letters*, the concept of sacrifice through ritual suicide is a constant theme, the narrative highlighting the reality that the soldiers defending Iwo Jima perceive that they must inevitably be sacrificed, willingly or unwillingly, for the nation's cause. Zangenberg similarly suggests that both films consistently present the viewer with a view that soldiers "are primarily concerned with survival and comradeship" but also ultimately "trapped in a narrative of the primacy of patriotism, honour, and fate."[367] So deeply infused into the culture are these precepts that most of the film's characters find themselves genuinely tortured by the competing desires to continue living or to uphold their obligations to Imperial Japan. The film's depiction of a nationalist push towards a brave death acts as a kind of metahistorical analogical match to the depiction of sacrifice and bravery in *Flags of our Fathers*. In both instances, soldiers are being forced, without right of refusal, to place their lives on the line to live out a patriotic myth of heroism and self-sacrifice to which many of them are unlikely to subscribe. In this sense, the depiction of suicide in *Letters* acts both independently and in coordination with *Flags* as a metahistorical challenge to the traditional depictions of Japanese in American WWII cinema, and the way in which that cinema deals with the concept of heroism.

Whilst both *Letters* and *Flags* function independently as films, as a cohesive whole they create an exponentially more powerful exploration of the notion of heroism across cultures within a war time context, highlighting a consistency in the way which cultures impose unlikely ideas of heroism and honour on ordinary citizens as a myth making exercise for the purposes of propaganda.

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[366] Robert Burgoyne, "Suicide in Letters from Iwo jima," *Eastwood's Iwo Jima: Critical Engagements with Flags of Our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima*, ed. Rikke Schubart and Anna Gjelsvik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 233-234.
[367] Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg, "East of Eastwood," 219.

The scene in which the toxicity of the fanatical Japanese imperial regime of WWII is made most clear lies towards the centre of the film, its layer of competing perspectives making it the very nexus of meaning in *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Having failed to hold the critical territory of Mount Suribachi, Colonel Adachi chooses to ignore General Kuribayashi's order to retreat to a fall-back position. Instead, he places the narcissistic urge to retain honour over strategic thinking and delivers the order to commit mass-seppuku.

As one commanding officer delivers a speech to his half-dozen "honourable soldiers of the emperor", the camera cuts to close-ups of their terrified faces. One of them holds a photo of his family. The officer gives the order of "Banzai!" and one-by-one the terrified soldiers each retrieve a grenade, pull its ring, knock its pressure trigger against their head, hold it to their chest, and explode in a brutal mass of tissue and blood. The man with the photo delays his actions, finally working up the courage at the sight of his dead compatriots. Having observed the horrific consequences of his order, the traumatised commanding officer shoots himself in the head. Only Shimizu, whose courage has failed him, and Saigo, whose only goal is to get home, are left alive. One is ashamed; the other is horrified.

For the western viewer, this is a confronting moment that might be better understood emotionally rather than intellectually. The viewer can identify with the terrified faces of men forced into oblivion by an authority they have no power to resist, an extreme analogical equivalent to the experience of American soldiers being compelled towards an image of "heroism" that they do not necessarily endorse. It is also easy to see in Shimizu the jarring realisation that there is a gap between the myth of heroism and honour and the purposeless reality from which he ultimately retreats. And in the appalled face of Saigo, whose values are closest to those of western and contemporary Japanese audiences, we find the representative of our own perspective. Earlier in the film, referencing the recent death of a friend in a conversation about honourable death through sacrifice, his views are made contemptuously clear: "Kashiwara died of honourable dysentery."

The scene works in a metahistorical binary with the aforementioned flag raising re-enactment sequence of *Flags of our Fathers*, with each film fundamentally challenging the concept of heroism both in history and in its representation in war cinema, as a term of propaganda that implies a level of human agency that isn't there, and conceals a level of national coercion and willingness to sacrifice real human lives. The fact that this coercion is presented as a demand for death, rather than as a call to fight as in the American example, only makes the nature of this

commentary more explicit. In both films, the burden placed on the subjects of this process of hero-isation – the soldiers who must fight – is the great tragedy.

While Saigo and eventually Shimizu are ultimately liberated from a sense of indoctrination, the character of Lieutenant Ito reveals the internal trauma imposed on an individual when their drive to live conflicts with an inescapable ingrained belief in the honour and patriotic duty of self-sacrifice. One of the film's least sympathetic characters, Ito is shown to be sadistic in his dealings with subordinates, punishing them severely for minor acts that he perceives as a failure of duty. Later, having failed to maintain control of Mount Suribachi, Ito straps himself to a landmine and lies down in an open field, a humiliatingly half-hearted attempt to blow up any passing American tanks. After unconvincingly wailing, "Where are you, American tanks? Come and get me," Ito later removes the landmine, stumbles away, and is found sleeping in a cave by Americans and duly surrenders.

On a superficial level Ito is the ultimate hypocrite, but within the context of the film's metahistorical challenge to traditional depictions of war, his character is the most transparent reflection on one-dimensional depictions of Japanese soldiers in American cinema, as well as a chastisement of the brutal violence, both psychic and physical, imposed on the soldier in the service of war. Ito's attempts to internalise the values and expectations imposed on him by Imperial Japan are a complete failure, his lack of authenticity reflected in his need to impose those same values on others. His narrative journey contributes to the film's metahistorical project to articulate and reflect on the unique context of the Japanese soldier's experience of war, whilst highlighting the innately shallow nature of the propaganda image of heroism that Ito is attempting and failing to emulate.

Conversely, General Kuribayashi, as portrayed in *Letters*, is a descendent of samurai and functions as a representative of Japan's highest ideals filtered through a modern pragmatism that contrasts with the extremes of the Imperial regime. His character is framed by his strategic thinking, the moral treatment of his troops, his yearning for his family, and his determination "to serve and give my life for my country." His purpose within the film is perhaps best articulated at the moment in which he is challenged by a reporting officer on the value of digging tunnels when a Japanese loss is a forgone conclusion:

> The tunnel digging may be futile. Maybe the stand on Iwo will be futile.
> Maybe the whole war is futile. But will you give up then? We will
> defend this island until we are dead. Until the very last soldier is dead.

> If our children can live safely for one more day, it would be worth the
> one more day that we defend this island.

Kuribayashi's sacrifice is thus primarily driven by the pragmatic protection of the Japanese people, and only secondarily driven by Japanese notions of honour. Later, Saigo mentions to Kuribayashi that he has a young child he has never met. Kuribayashi solemnly notes: ""It's strange. I promised myself to fight until death for my family… but the thought of my family makes it difficult to keep that promise." The conversation is interrupted by a song on the radio, performed by the children of Nagano, Kuribayashi's hometown, as a gift to the general and his troops. It is a tribute to the men of Iwo Jima and their sacrifice: a sombre reminder of the inevitable, and a blatant piece of propaganda. However, it helps Kuribayashi in his resolve to make the call to sacrifice his remaining men in a banzai attack. He tells them:

> Although Japan has lost, one day our people will praise your
> dedication. A day will come when they will weep and pray for your
> souls. Be proud to die for your country. I will always be in front of you.

For Kuribayashi and his remaining troops, sacrifice and death is apparently still the only possible outcome, even if it contributes no value to the outcome of the battle. Thus, the metahistorical project of *Letters* is reinforced through the seeming nihilism of the sacrifice, forcing the viewer to empathise with Kuribayashi and his men whilst confronting them with its ultimate meaninglessness.

Embodying similar values to Kuribayashi, the character of Baron Nishi in many ways fits the mould of the quintessential American war hero due to his pragmatic balance of patriotism and confident leadership; his sensible but not traitorous contempt for Japan's military leadership; and his humanity and military practicality. Comparing Nishi's death to other acts of suicide we see during the film, his is most clearly a point of accessibility for western audiences.

Bound up in a cave with his malnourished troops towards the film's conclusion, Nishi is acutely aware that the enemy will soon arrive. In an earlier explosion he has been blinded, a bandage covering his scarred eyes. He makes the logical decision to hand over command to his subordinate, Lieutenant Okubo. His troops retreat further back from the front line leaving him behind. The audience, having been drawn into an affectionate view of Nishi, is now granted an unsullied view of a Japanese soldier facing death, having exhausted all foreseeable options for survival. In his final moments the action slows down to take in the ritualistic steps of the blind Nishi. He removes his boots, wraps his feet around the trigger and removes his blindfold. He

stares blankly with blinded eyes into a close-up of his face. The camera pans upwards until Nishi's face is out of view. We cut to Okubo and his troops walking across the mountain, the sound of a single gunshot bringing an expression of deep sadness to Okubo's face.

Through Nishi's ritualistic suicide we are offered a window into a Japanese experience of sacrifice that, having been committed by a sympathetic and pragmatic character, closes the gap for western audiences, enabling a deeper empathy with the Japanese understanding of sacrifice. Juxtaposed with the scenes of forced seppuku, this moment highlights a fundamental distinction between the warped values of Imperial Japan and the Bushido code that is co-opted for its own purposes.

Throughout the course of *Letters*, Eastwood uses Japanese concepts of loyalty, sacrifice and ritualistic suicide to draw distinctions between Japanese cultural practices and the corruption of said practices by Imperial Japan, whilst also opening up a juxtaposition between representations of heroism within *Flags of our Fathers* and the War Film more generally. In doing so, a metahistorical commentary is opened up that challenges the notion of heroism in war as an act of self-sacrifice, instead positing the idea that such notions are simply the result of propaganda. Instead, Eastwood invites a reflection on the possibility that heroism is an act imposed on individuals by nation states in order to deliver on their war time objectives.

Depicting the Enemy

In *Letters from Iwo Jima*, an interesting metahistorical commentary is opened up around the depiction of the enemy within the American war movie. As has been mentioned previously, the traditional narrative structure of *Letters* immediately invites comparison between it and films about WWII focused on the experiences of American soldiers. One of the most compelling outcomes of this approach is the way in which parallels are drawn between the reductive views of the enemy by both sides, and the way in which the behaviours of one's enemy can challenge or reinforce those preconceptions which have been encouraged by nationalist or military propaganda.

As Manm notes, *Letters* "transforms the faceless anonymity of Japanese soldiers in American War Films into individuals with distinct personalities for an American audience weaned on a one-dimensional view of the Japanese."[368] But it also attempts to deconstruct this one dimensional thinking through the perspective that the Japanese bring to their view of the Americans.

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[368] Glenn Manm, "Clint Eastwood's Postclassical Multiple Narratives of Iwo Jima," 149.

In *Letters*, the firsthand experiences of General Kuribayashi and Baron Nishi as a diplomat and Olympic Athlete in the United States break down conceptions of the Other, as each character challenges the preconceptions of their fellow Japanese soldiers about the enemy they are fighting. Mirroring the unchallenged preconceptions the Americans demonstrate in *Flags*, as well as those that lie embedded within representations of the Japanese throughout the history of American cinema, both characters invite a reflection on the broader nature of reductive depictions of the enemy in cinema, culture and wartime propaganda.

In several flashbacks that take place during the film, we're shown footage of Kuribayashi enjoying his time in America in the 1920s and writing illustrated letters home to his daughter. In the most pivotal of Kuribayashi's flashback sequences, he is shown dining at an official function in the United States. He is questioned by the wife of an American military friend about how he we would feel if the USA and Japan went to war. He answers that he would support his country because he must follow his convictions. When his friend asks, "You mean you'd have to follow your convictions or your country's convictions?" Kuribayashi responds: "Are they not the same?"

It is a pivotal moment for many reasons. Firstly, it invites a reflection on Imperial Japan's use of the values embedded within Shintoism and Bushido to create a nationalist mindset to galvanise intelligent individuals who would otherwise oppose brutality. As Sam Girgus notes of Kuribayashi: "Such loyalty to totalitarian regimes and systems of belief by sophisticated and ethically mature people remains troubling." [369]

Beyond this however, it's worth noting that Kuribayashi's American equivalent provides tacit agreement: "Spoken like a true soldier." Any attempt to view Kuribayashi's unquestioning loyalty to his country as a Japanese aberration from which western audiences might distinguish themselves is thus undercut, inviting a reflection on the way in which individuals are inclined to unquestioningly accept the narrative's provided by their nation and rally to the cause of war.

An example of this can be seen in the character of Shimizu, whose narrative journey is a direct challenge to the othering of the enemy. Early in the film we witness a briefing session in which soldiers are asked why they have a fundamental advantage over the Americans. Shimizu's answer is met with approval: "The Americans are weak-willed and inferior to Japanese soldiers" because "they are not as disciplined, and they let their emotions interfere with their duty." Shimizu's views will be radically

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[369] Sam B. Girgus, *Clint Eastwood's America*, 257-258.

challenged during the film, perhaps most jarringly when he witnesses the brutal killing of an American soldier as he begs for mercy. But the pivotal moment in which he is forced to reflect on the humanity of the enemy comes later.

Shimizu and Saigo witness as an American prisoner of war is pulled into the tunnels. Baron Nishi orders his men to give him treatment. Shimizu argues that the Americans would not do the same, to which Nishi replies "Son, have you ever met one?" In a later scene the American soldier has died, and Nishi finds a letter on his person, which he reads aloud. It is a simple letter from the young man's mother, updating him on events at home. It ends with a request that he "always do what is right, because it is right," and a prayer for "a speedy end to the war and your safe return." Shimzu finds his entire world view undercut by the experience:

> I don't know anything about the enemy. I believed that the Americans were cowards… but they weren't. I was taught that they were savages, but that American soldier… his mother's words… were the same as my mother's. I want to fulfil my duty for the general and our country… but I don't want to die for nothing.

His ideals having been fundamentally shattered, Shimizu surrenders. But in a bleakly ironic scene, his two American captors conclude that guarding him leaves them exposed, and both Shimizu and a fellow soldier are casually executed. The cold-blooded nature of this execution is symptomatic of the very thinking that initially framed Shimizu's mindset – that the enemy are less than human. This point is reinforced in the minds of the Japanese as a devastated Saigo and his fellow soldiers come across the surrendered corpse of Shimizu: "Let this be a lesson to anyone else who wants to surrender." And thus, Eastwood once again challenges the simplistic reductionist depictions of the enemy ingrained in wartime propaganda and most prototypical and anti-War Films throughout the 20th century, by showcasing the universal capacity for brutality and compassion that comprise the human condition.

This project of dissolving the space between oneself and the other is never more overtly articulated than in a scene in which Nishi's perspective is overlaid with that of the audience. Soon after Nishi's aforementioned encounter with the American soldier he is blinded in combat and dragged back into a cave. Here, the camera takes the first-person perspective of Nishi as his soldiers stand over him in horror, and as he ties a scarf around his eyes, covering up the camera lens. As Burgoyne notes:

> Abolishing the spatial distance between the character and the spectator – a distance that in most films is preserved even in the most

subjective moments – Eastwood draws the spectator directly into the frame of the film, placing us literally in the eyes of the Other, a deeply unsettling moment in which the boundary between self and Other, between witness and actor, between re-enactment and event, seems to be definitively crossed.[370]

Here then, the film's metahistorical project finds its central moment, in which the gap between ally and enemy is dissolved, fundamentally undermining the possibility of reducing the enemy to an Other. With *Letters from Iwo Jima*, Eastwood invites a metahistorical challenge to way in which the enemy has been depicted throughout cinema, both by humanising an enemy traditionally dehumanised within the genre, but also by demonstrating the way in which this othering took place within the context of the Japanese experience.

With *Letters from Iwo Jima*, Clint Eastwood is ultimately making an attempt to interrogate and invite reflection on the way in which we perceive the enemy in a war context, as well as the way in which the enemy is presented to us through propaganda and popular culture. By making what is ostensibly a traditional anti-War Film populated by nuanced and sympathetic human beings, but reframed as a look at the Japanese experience, audiences are invited to understand the film as a recognisable cinematic experience, thereby making a case for the relative lack of difference in humanity between cultures, concealed by the propaganda that reframes our perceptions.

Conclusion

During the course of this chapter I have made an argument that with *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* Clint Eastwood has delivered a diptych of metahistorical War Films that invite audiences to reflect on way in which the history of WWII has been framed and communicated through cinema, nationalist propaganda and broader culture. In order to do so I have provided an account of the history of the War Film that highlights its long-standing relationship with nationalist impulses that lead to mythologised representations of the experiences of those on the front line that depend on heightened notions of heroism, and reductive depictions of the enemy that tend to frame them as a dehumanised Other.

I have argued that Flags has become a substantial metahistorical War Film through the construction of a narrative that fundamentally undermines the mythic qualities

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[370] Robert Burgoyne, "Suicide in Letters from Iwo jima," 236.

surrounding the *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* photograph, exposing its inauthenticity and the way in which its mythic status was wilfully constructed through government propaganda for the purposes of raising funds for the war. By juxtaposing the empty yet grandiose aesthetics of this image of supposed heroism with the experiences of the soldiers who fought and died at Iwo Jima, and demonstrating the way in which governments wilfully use such images to mischaracterise the experiences of these troops, *Flags* forces the viewer to reassess the simple moral clarity with which they view a conflict like World War II, reflecting on the ambiguity and complexity of history, versus the clean and simple messaging of myth.

Despite its relative straightforward narrative, I have argued that *Letters* is rendered ironically metahistorical by making its focus the Japanese experience of war, rather than that of an Allied nation. By taking an enemy that has long been represented through a reductive and racist lens in western WWII cinema, and focusing exclusively on their experiences, Eastwood challenges audiences to reflect on the nature of the enemy Other and the way in which this issue is approached in war cinema and governmental propaganda.

More than this, I have proposed that by interrogating the way in which the Japanese conception of their American enemy was itself framed by propaganda, and by playing out a series of shifting perceptions of the enemy throughout the film, informed by greater direct contact with said enemy, the film creates a parallel between the nationalist led prejudices of the Japanese and those fostered by American propaganda. Considered alongside *Flags* and its depiction of a largely unseen enemy, as well as its deep focus on the machinations of propaganda within the United States, as well as its portrayal of the experiences of the other-ed soldier, Ira Hayes, the two films engage in a metahistorical dialogue on the distinction between myth making propaganda and the nature of history.

Finally, coupled with *Flags of our Fathers*, I have argued that the two films engage in an unusual dialogue on the experiences of the average soldier in both regimes, essentially making a case that those placed at the front lines of war are the least to blame for its consequences. In *Letters from Iwo Jima*, beyond mere depictions of the horrors of war, this plays out through its depictions of suicide as a kind of distortion of Bushido ideal, converted into an ethos of imposed sacrifice set as an expectation by Imperial Japan. This becomes a kind of extreme analogical parallel with the subtle implications of imposed sacrifice in *Flags of our Fathers*, inviting a reconsideration of the way in which war is depicted within the War Film.

CONCLUSION

The observation that led to the arguments made in this dissertation occurred whilst re-watching *Flags of our Fathers* a couple of years after initially seeing it during its cinematic release. I had not been impressed by the film on first viewing, but the second time found that I had initially missed many of its complexities. The film not only offered a new perspective on a previously mythologised event, but it also interrogated fundamental issues of historical representation, and highlighted the insurmountable gap between the past and the histories that seek to rediscover it. It was difficult to understand how this film had come from Clint Eastwood, who I had always understood to be a competent, occasionally inspired, but often perfunctory director of Westerns and other genre films.

The experience led me to explore Eastwood's complete body of work as both an actor and director in an attempt to understand if there was more to the work than I'd initially understood. I soon came to the conclusion that not only had I missed something, but that the academic world had overlooked something significant as well: namely that Eastwood is, first and foremost, a diligent cinematic historian. Eastwood has directed 38 films, 18 of which seek to represent the past in one way or another, and in every one of those films I discovered an attempt to interrogate and/or subvert the representation of historical periods, events or individuals, either through a questioning of the way in which a particular slice of history had been explored or through the way in the cinematic medium and/or genres had been traditionally used to explore the past. More than this, I discovered that throughout his historical work Eastwood reveals an unwillingness to distil the complex moral ambiguities of the universe into a reductionist absolutist narrative. In my subsequent exploration of the literature, I soon discovered that films of this nature, which contained "embedded or explicit critiques of the way history is conventionally represented" had already been identified and broadly defined by Robert Burgoyne as *metahistorical films*.[371]

Opening up this idea of the metahistorical film has proved to be the crux of my thesis. Moving beyond Burgoyne's original intent to assign the metahistorical label to specific films, I identified it as a term that could be used more broadly to account for

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[371] Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (Malden MA: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 46.

Eastwood's mind-set in his approach to historical representation through cinema. Eastwood, I sought to propose, was a metahistorical filmmaker.

As I have worked through this thesis, this proposition has proved to be true of Eastwood, within a specific temporal context. Whilst I was developing this thesis, I had divided Eastwood's involvement with the historical film into two distinct periods, the Mythology phase (19759–1992) and the Metahistory phase (1988–2014). Each of these two covered a stage of Eastwood's development into a metahistorical filmmaker. However, as this thesis has developed, a third phase has come about which I refer to as the Unforgotten phase (2016–present). This phase has resulted in a new set of films that do not contradict my thesis, but do seem to demonstrate that the metahistorical focus I have highlighted appears to have come to a conclusion following the release of *American Sniper* (2014). As such, I have briefly accounted for these films in this conclusion, highlighting the further opportunity to study them within the context of Eastwood's broader historiographic oeuvre.

That aside, during the course of this thesis, I have made the case for Eastwood as a director of *metahistorical* films, meaning not only that he is a prolific director of films that engage with American history, but also that he consistently makes these films with the purpose not of conventionally representing the past for commercial gain, but to challenge the historical narratives that have been traditionally accepted, and the cinematic forms in which these narratives have been delivered. More than this, I have demonstrated – at least implicitly – a universally applicable methodology for assessing the historiographic works of a filmmaker, not in the context of historical accuracy (that is, whether the events depicted are true) but in the context of how the medium can embrace or disregard the complexities of historical representation.

Research Findings

Throughout the course of this thesis, in arguing that Eastwood is a metahistorical filmmaker, consistent themes have arisen across each chapter regarding the broad characteristics that make this true. Clint Eastwood is a director whose work consistently: subverts genre conventions; challenges popular understandings of historical events, people or periods; uses ambiguity to represent the limitations of historical discourse; and offers a self-reflexive meditation on the challenges of historiography in cinema. In summarising these characteristics it becomes apparent that they can be categorised under the headings of Genre, Ambiguity, Interpretation and Self Reflexivity, and that these categories lend themselves to universal application as a means of contemplating a filmmaker's approach to historiography.

Genre Subversion as a Metahistorical Tool

A filmmaker is presented with a conundrum when working within the conventions of a historical genre, be it a Western, War Film, Biopic or even a Hollywood epic. Each and every genre comes with a suite of conventions that can have a limiting effect on the ways in which a filmmaker may go about representing the past. Conventions can limit not just the way in which a film is structured, but can also come with discretely integrated ideological positions that fundamentally shape the meaning of a film. A conventional filmmaker is more inclined to adhere to the conventions of the genre, favouring their tendency to improve commerciality over historiographic concerns. *Ray* (2004) and *Walk the Line* (2005) are both good examples of this, both being Biopics released in consecutive years. Both adhere to the narrative rise-fall-rise conventions of the Hollywood biopic, resulting in both cases in a film about a young musician tormented with guilt over the accidental death of his brother, consequently channelling his pain in to a massive musical career that results in major drug addiction, only to be rescued from the abyss by the woman in his life. However, one is about Ray Charles and the other is about Johnny Cash, two men whose lives and experiences were in reality radically different.

The overarching structure of my thesis highlights the importance of genre in the work of Eastwood, dividing his contributions to the Western, Biopic and War film into respective chapters. Doing so is partially due to chronology, with Eastwood's first forays into representations of historical periods occurring via the Western, his first dramatic historical film as director being the Biopic *Bird*, and his most substantial contributions to the War Film coming much later in *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. But far more important than this is the fact that one of Eastwood's most substantial tools for the critique of historical representation is the deconstruction and subversion of the conventions set by the genres within which he operates, inviting the audience to meditate on the gap between their expectations of a genre and what has been presented to them.

Within this thesis I have demonstrated that Eastwood's achievements as a director of Westerns were the result of his rich understanding of the Western Historical Myth and the genre conventions that serve to bring that myth to life. I have demonstrated that over the twenty year period that Eastwood directed Westerns, he showed an ever evolving understanding of the genre's role in representing a set of ideas about America's past. And most significantly, I have demonstrated how *Unforgiven*, Eastwood's most substantial contribution to the genre, takes many of the traditional conventions of the Western only to subvert and showcase these conventions as

fallacies in the service of its broader project of historical revisionism. Similarly, I have presented a case that within both the Biopic and War Film genres, Eastwood has shown a consistent impulse to engage with and subvert genre conventions and tropes in order to challenge or highlight the limitations of these genres in representing the past.

I propose that Eastwood's work provides the critic, academic or filmmaker with a rich lesson on the role that the subversion of genre conventions can play in reconfiguring the way audiences look at history. When filmmakers adhere to genre conventions within historical genres they are implicitly accepting the limitations that these conventions place upon the representation of history. When they choose to undermine these conventions by challenging the formal expectations of audiences, they are explicitly jarring the viewer in the service of inviting a deeper reflection on either the events being represented, or on the way in which history is normally explored within the cinematic medium.

Re-Interpretation as a Metahistorical Tool

Film is most commonly a medium that exists for the purposes of entertainment, even when the project is historiographic. Such films are rarely inclined to fundamentally undermine traditional conceptions of the past. As such, I have suggested throughout this thesis that conventional historian filmmakers tend to offer representations of events or individuals aligned to mainstream perceptions, whilst metahistorical filmmakers frequently offer representations of events or individuals that challenge mainstream perceptions. The purpose of this is to invite a dialogue on the way in which a particular event has been understood by a culture.

A perfect example of the conventional historical film can be found in the recent *Darkest Hour* (2017), an account of the life of Winston Churchill in the brief period leading up and including the events of Dunkirk. An undoubtedly entertaining and inspiring film featuring an incredible performance from Gary Oldman as Churchill, the film is presented as a linear and patriotic account of Churchill's actions in this period, highlighting and reinforcing the mythology of the juxtaposition between his genius and alcoholism, whilst featuring scenes that directly and quickly negate criticisms of his performance during the First World War. His predecessor as Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, is presented in line with popular discourse as a coward, set on making morally inexcusable peace with Hitler.

Alternatively, throughout this thesis I have argued that Eastwood has consistently attempted to reinvestigate, reinterpret or challenge the popular understanding of

historical events, individuals or time periods. This is most exceptionally true of *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which I've argued fundamentally challenge the way in which America has represented issues of heroism; depictions of the enemy; and the morality of War within both the War Film genre and more broadly in public discourse.

I propose that Eastwood's work provides a suite of compelling examples of the way in which a filmmaker might go about challenging traditional interpretations of the past, both in relation to specific events and/or specific ideas about how the past operates. Filmmakers who adhere to traditional interpretations serve primarily to augment already established public narratives. Those who challenge these interpretations introduce new perspectives, deeper reflection and new opportunities for public discourse.

Ambiguity as a Metahistorical Tool

During the course of this thesis I have consistently highlighted the fundamental problematic gap between history and the past, and the inescapable limitation that this presents. In written history, this is ideally overcome by stating things with certainty only where there is indisputable evidence that they are true, and highlighting areas of ambiguity or unknowns overtly. In the dramatic historical film, creative fictionalisation must necessarily be introduced. Every costume, line and set is a calculated lie based on probabilities, but presented, in its aesthetic reality, as an absolute truth. I've argued that, in order to manage the problematic nature of cinema's seemingly visceral reality, the metahistorical filmmaker solves for this with the tool of ambiguity.

A Beautiful Mind (2001) is an excellent example of a historical dramatic film that vies for the presentation of historical truth rather than ambiguity. An account of the life of schizophrenic mathematician John Nash, Howard elects to showcase Nash's interior state as a narrative plot twist, presenting us with characters in the first half of the film revealed to be Nash's delusional creations in the second half. The approach is not indicative of the schizophrenic experience of Nash or anybody else, but is a clunky attempt to convey a manufactured character interiority as truth that ultimately results in counterfeit history.

Alternatively, throughout the course of this thesis an argument has been made that Eastwood's historical works consistently demonstrate an unwillingness to impose a definitive set of conclusions in relation to the individuals or events they represent. Eastwood instead proffers ambiguity in historical representation as a means of demonstrating and respecting the fundamental gap between history and the past

itself. I've argued that for Eastwood, the idea of a cinematic work that implicitly suggests itself as a representation of truth about a historical event or individual presents an ethical problem, in that it is a fundamental deceit. Going beyond this, I have argued extensively that for Eastwood moral ambiguity in historical representation is also imperative not just because of the gap between the past and the present, but because without it a film inevitably gravitates towards a reductionist moral or ideological statement regarding its subject matter. As his works demonstrate, Eastwood feels a moral imperative to formally integrate ambiguity about the past into his texts. To take the examples of *Bird* and *American Sniper*, in both films Eastwood uses an ambiguous narrative and impermeable representation of character to acknowledge the unbridgeable gap between the audience and individuals whose subjective positions have been lost to time.

I propose that whilst the conventional filmmaker tends to present a clear-cut and generally linear narrative as truth, the metahistorical filmmaker has an opportunity to favour ambiguity over definitive representations of the past where definitive conclusions cannot be supported by historical facts. I'd argue that whilst conventional filmmakers frequently offer pseudo-insights into the inner-workings of historical figures as truth, the metahistorical filmmaker might avoid reductive interpretations of character offer an impossible view of their internal thought processes or motivations. And while conventional historical filmmakers tend to favour the embedding of a clear cut and popular ideological agenda, moral conclusion, or simplistic summation of past events, metahistorical filmmakers could look to offer the past as an open text, refusing to provide fixed moral, ideological or reductive summations.

Self-Reflexivity as a Metahistorical Tool

I've suggested through this thesis that filmmakers creating historiographic works are generally content to present their material in straightforward fashion, with a strong focus on telling the story of a particular event, period or historical individual. They present the past within a traditional dramatic form, without reference to the innate fallibility or limitations of historical representation. The metahistorical filmmaker, I propose, is generally more inclined to a self-reflexive text in which they may find ways of integrating the fallibility of historical representation, inviting a reflection on the insurmountable gap between the past and any historiographic exercise.

An interesting example of dramatic history that lacks this self-reflexivity and has thereby caused much consternation is the television series *The Crown* (2016 -) , which over four seasons thus far has provided an account of the British Royal Family

after the Second World War. Presented quite earnestly and without irony, the show, which presents the lives of many characters still living, is frequently discussed in public discourse as if it were an accurate work of history. The creator, Peter Morgan, refuses to take any responsibility for his creation, pointing out that it is a fiction based on loose fact, whilst Oliver Dowden has called for Netflix to add a disclaimer to the show stating that it is a work of fiction which they have not done at the time of writing.[372] It's hard not to see Morgan and Netflix as being disingenuous in their resistance... the show's popularity lies in the dialogue that it both feeds upon and generates through its earnest and direct accounts of historic events, both real and invented.

Alternatively, I've argued that throughout Eastwood's contributions to historical cinema there is a consistent self-reflexive attempt to highlight the limitations of cinema's ability to represent the past. For Eastwood, I've argued that there is a clear desire to demonstrate integrity by acknowledging that his works are ultimately, fabrications constructed from limited knowledge and creative interpretation of the past. An example can be found in *Unforgiven*, in which the narrative includes a side story involving a self-aggrandising gunslinger out to create a counterfeit identity for himself, supported by a dime store novelist seeking to mythologise the West for his own commercial purposes. *J. Edgar*, provides another, with the late revelation that much of the film, narrated by Hoover, has actually been a self-serving fabrication that calls into question everything that the audience has seen, reminding the audience that all history is comprised of biases and subjectivities.

I propose that the metahistorical filmmaker has an opportunity to enrich a text by inviting a self-reflexive lens to their work that seeks to highlight what is already inevitably true – the capacity for any film to truly represent the past is inevitably limited.

Further Applications of this Research

It is my hope that this thesis should not be considered solely an examination of the work of Clint Eastwood as a director of metahistorical films, but also as a transferable methodology for examining the historiographic approach of any filmmaker. During the course of this thesis, I have made the juxtaposition between Eastwood as a metahistorical filmmaker and conventional historical filmmaking. As such, I invite

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[372] Charlotte Higgins, "As his warning on The Crown shows, Oliver Dowden needs to catch up with reality," *The Guardian*, Dec 20, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/01/the-crown-oliver-dowden-reality-culture-secretary-fiction (accessed April 2021)

others to use this methodology as a means of examining filmmakers and films in the context of the spectrum between these two points: the *conventional historical filmmaker* and the *metahistorical filmmaker*. I shall refer to this methodology as *the metahistorical spectrum*.

At a period in history when the complexities of understanding the distinction between the truth and fake news is receiving a huge amount of attention, the purpose in making these distinctions between conventional and metahistorical representations of the past is to highlight and champion those filmmakers and films – such as Andrew Dominik and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007), Alex Cox and *Walker* (1987), Damien Chazelle and *First Man* (2018), and David Fincher and *Zodiac* (2007) – who show serious concern for historiographic practices within the cinematic medium. Early in this thesis I highlighted Robert Rosenstone's assertion that the distinction between historiography in written versus cinematic form lies in the distinction between constituting facts and inventing them.[373] In inventing the facts cinema offers the opportunity for something close to a visceral experience of the past, and an opportunity to engage in a kind of metaphoric shorthand that offers "a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse."[374] There is no doubt that this is the ideal outcome, but more often than not Rosenstone's hope for cinema's power to offer a metaphoric challenge to traditional representations of the past seems incredibly optimistic when placed against the output of Hollywood. The metahistorical filmmaker is the answer to Rosenstone's hopes, a creator of self-reflexive works that highlight the fallibility of their own form, challenge traditional understandings of the past, subvert the generic formulas to which they are bound and open the gap that invariably lies between past and present.

Conventional historical filmmaking will also be the norm, its linear forms offering a simpler, more direct approach to subject matter more likely to satisfy a broader audience less inclined towards being reminded of the fictitious elements of their history-based entertainment. However, the more frequently and consistently filmmakers seek out new ways to challenge and incorporate the complexities of history, then the greater the opportunity to enrich the cultural understanding of the past, both in terms of its details and the innate nature of its inaccessibility.

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[373] Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Edinburgh Gate: Pearson Educational Limited, 2006), 8.
[374] Ibid., 8-9.

Applying the Metahistorical Spectrum to Eastwood's Unforgotten Phase

Any thesis is inevitably bound by the limitations of length, subject, and of course time. In the case of this particular thesis, Eastwood has directed a series of four films during the course of writing that, I would argue, constitute a new phase in his career as a director of historical cinema. I have chosen to identify this period as Eastwood's Unforgotten Phase. There is a good deal of extensive investigation to be done in understanding how these films tie into Eastwood's fifty year directorial exploration of history through cinema, however in order to demonstrate the manner in which the *Metahistorical Spectrum* explored in this thesis might be applied to other filmmakers, there is an opportunity to provide a brief analysis of these four films in the context of this spectrum here.

There's been a substantial shift in the historical films of Eastwood since 2016. There is an artistic impatience that increasingly looks like a cinematic shorthand, as if Eastwood is aware of the limited time left to him as an artist, and has become aware of the ever increasing frustrations of working class America. The Unforgotten Phase consists of a more direct and earnest focus on white working and middle class men in some state of being forgotten or neglected, either by their government, history or by themselves. Additionally, Eastwood's focus has moved towards the recent past in all of these examples. These films are *Sully* (2016), *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018), *The Mule* (2018) and *Richard Jewell* (2020).

The Unforgotten Phase and Interpretation

Whilst the historical films that Eastwood directed during his Mythology and Metahistory Phases were at least partly defined by their attempts to open up a dialogue challenging popular conceptions of the past, the films of the Unforgotten Phase can be viewed as a series of monologic polemical works collectively seeking to bring attention to the lives of working class American men with limited agency. As such, each film is an account of the experiences of an individual or individuals that might have gone untold without Eastwood's intervention.

It is possible to read *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* as a point of haemorrhage, in which the gap that Eastwood uncovers between history and individuals that are subjected to the past rather than having forged it has been so starkly rendered as to send Eastwood on a path towards highlighting their plight. It is tempting to view these films as a series of pre-emptive codas for Eastwood as a man now in his nineties, their quiet and romantic focus on the plight and dedication of the working man within the very recent past is suitable for a director stepping away from

the grandiosity of history as war and glorious achievement towards history as the lived, unrewarded and underappreciated experience of human beings.

It is worth noting that these films coincide with Donald Trump's election as president. Trump's rise to power off the back of his focus on white working class Americans in key swing states is by now generally understood, as is the divisive political rhetoric of the US President has contributed to a widening ideological schism in the nation. But within the context of the moment, it is quite feasible to propose that Eastwood's work might be reflecting the frustrations of a segment of working class white men in America whose lack of agency at a time of great social change has left them feeling unheard by their government, and quite possibly by society at large. In this sense, these films are framed less as history than as reportage of recent events.

In the case of *Sully*, this plays out in its account of the incidents that led up to and followed Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger making an emergency landing of his passenger airplane on the Hudson River in 2009, saving every single passenger on board after a flock of birds flew into its engines. Emphasising the quiet dignity of a man who has spent his entire life mastering his craft without recognition, this lifelong dedication bears fruit in the form of this incredible achievement. The subtext is that without such a moment Sully's dedication to his craft would go unrecognised, and that America is made up of millions of Sully's administering to their respective tasks.

In *Richard Jewell*, Eastwood provides an account of the experiences of security guard Richard Jewell who saved countless lives during the infamous bombing incident at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. Like Sully, Jewell is obsessed with perfecting his craft, in this case law enforcement, and engages in his job with incredible passion. Unlike Sully, Jewell's poor social skills and obesity generally make him a poor fit for the role. And yet, when a moment of crisis arises, Jewell's passion for his work sees him rise above his station and achieve something extraordinary.

However in *Sully*, after saving the lives of his passengers and crew, Eastwood depicts Sully as being accused of incompetence and investigated by the government's National Transportation Safety Board. Likewise, at the centre of *Richard Jewell* is the account of Jewell's being falsely accused by both the media and FBI of committing the very act of terrorism which he acted to thwart. In both instances, the powerless and simple heroes at the centre of the narrative are put through significant torment by their government before being absolved, not because the government is malign but because it is ultimately indifferent.

Also worth noting is the critique of the media in *Richard Jewell*, in which it is journalists who haphazardly seek to persecute Jewell without any evidence, creating a wave of what would today be considered "fake news" that comes very close to driving him to suicide. The parallels with contemporary news practices by Eastwood are indisputable, as is the fundamental shift in his approach, choosing to present a direct ideological interpretation of events rather than multiple competing perspectives.

In the *Mule*, the tone is more muted, its protagonist not being a forgotten hero but an unlikely villain. Eastwood plays Earl Stone, a character based on Leo Sharp, a WWII veteran, horticulturalist and octogenarian who found himself falling into drug running after the collapse of his horticultural business due to online competition. Presented as a man who has spent much of his life as a neglectful husband and absent father, Sharp continues his life long trajectory of bad decision making in order to pay for his daughter's wedding and make up for his absence in her life. But whilst the ultimate responsibility for the protagonist's crimes clearly lies with the protagonist themselves, the causal trigger for his poor decision making lies in his experiences as a battling small business owner outpaced by the rate of technological change as his way of life is disrupted by competitors on the internet.

In *The 15:17 to Paris*, Eastwood details the events that led up to the 2015 Thalys train attack, utilising many of the real individuals involved in the event to create a work that sits uncomfortably between re-enactment and dramatic film. A greater focus will be given to this film in the section on self-reflexivity but it is worth highlighting that using the heroes of the original incident offers Eastwood the unique opportunity to champion his historical heroes directly, rather than through representation via an actor. Unlike the lost souls swallowed up by a myth making propaganda machine in *Flags of our Fathers*, Eastwood seeks to showcase the raw truth of what these heroes have contributed through an un-glamorised and mundane look at the incident as it occurred.

It is in the nature of their interpretation of the past that the crux of Eastwood's Unforgotten Phase of historical representation can be found. Unlike the metahistorical films that have been explored throughout this thesis, these films are simple polemic works with a cohesive and direct ideological agenda. And whilst they may have the virtue of highlighting stories that might otherwise have gone untold, for Eastwood the project of historical representation at this point is apparently no longer one of unpacking history for further interrogation. Instead, they are earnest but reductive works that champion and lament the lot of the working class.

The Unforgotten Phase and Genre

Up until 2016, Eastwood's forays into historical cinema had been almost exclusively within the context of traditional genres. Most significantly: the western, the war film and the biopic. During this most recent phase, Eastwood has moved away from overtly historical genres, instead loosely utilising the broader conventions of the drama or thriller, frequently relying on the trope of the little man taking on the larger powers-that-be frequently found in Hollywood filmmaking. In all four examples, then, the metahistorical technique of subverting historical genre conventions to highlight their limitations is irrelevant.

The Unforgotten Phase and Self-Reflexivity

In *Sully*, *The Mule* and *Richard Jewell*, it would be very challenging to put forward a legitimate case for a sense of historical self-reflexivity in their structure. Each is presented as a straightforward and factual account of the events represented within each film. Nothing is introduced formally to challenge their telling of events. The nature of the content in *Sully* and *Richard Jewell* implicitly positions each film as a source of authority, with each narrative communicating to audiences that there are institutions that can misrepresent reality and challenge the rights of individuals. Each film is presented as unquestionably true.

However, going beyond the passive lack of self-reflexivity in those three films, *The 15:17 to Paris* demonstrates an attempt to remove the gap between past and history that makes self-reflexivity critical in the first place. The film is an account of the events that led up to the 2015 Thalys train attack, in which a terrorist was immobilised and prevented from killing everybody by three off-duty American soldiers and several other passengers. Taking a unique approach, Eastwood chose not to use actors wherever possible, hiring the three American soldiers actually present for the event along with several other people actually involved in the incident to act out the events leading up to the train ride and incident. Eastwood also employed an unscripted method, taking a cinema verite approach to the film's structure. As entertainment, *The 15:17 to Paris* is not a particularly engaging film, but the audacity revealed in the attempt showcases a strong desire to capture something true, real or authentic in this account of the incident as it played out.

On one level, Eastwood is attempting to live out a proposition that has been woven through much of his career to this point; to remove the myth making barrier that historical cinema inevitably places between the past and the audience in the present. By attempting to replicate the past as accurately as possible, right down to locations

and the individuals involved rather than fictionalising it through performance and dramatic historical reconstruction, Eastwood is attempting to shrink the unbridgeable gap between the past and the present. In short, it's an impossible attempt to bring the audience the past rather than history. It is the very antithesis of the metahistorical approach he'd employed for decades previously.

The Unforgotten Phase and Ambiguity

In none of the four films that currently comprise the Unforgotten Phase does Eastwood attempt to utilise narrative or moral ambiguity in the manner seen in his previous historical works. The positions taken in *Sully* and *Richard Jewell* are absolute. The former is a quiet hero at risk of being undermined and misrepresented by a powerful government body. The film is a clear and unambiguous a celebration of the average American who quietly toils unnoticed by his or her nation for a lifetime, and an admonition of a political system that does not pay them the appropriate level of respect. At no point are we invited to challenge the text or reflect upon its limitations.

The latter is a quiet hero vilified by the media and at risk of being incarcerated and possibly executed by the FBI due to the false accusation that he committed an act of terrorism. Once again, the message juxtaposes a working class individual proud and diligent in his work, who is ultimately the victim of larger powers. In this case, the news media and their preference for sensationalism over accuracy and the rights of the individual, and the ineptitude of law enforcement in their race to find and convict a suspect, with or without the appropriate level of evidence. Once again, we are not invited to challenge or reflect on the events that have been presented, the text presenting itself as truth.

In *The Mule*, apart from the level of guilt that must accompany the decision making processes that lead the protagonist to his life of crime, the narrative is linear and its representation of events is clear-cut. We are not invited to question the text, or suppose that there are questions to be asked.

Finally, in *The 15:17 to Paris*, Eastwood even attempts to forgo the inevitable ambiguity that must lie between the past event and the history that represents it, attempting to merge the two through the aforementioned use of real participants to restage the event.

In none of these films is there any ambiguity in the moral conclusion or historical accuracy of the text.

The Unforgotten Phase Summarised

The Unforgotten phase of Eastwood's filmmaking career clearly sits at the opposite end of the *Metahistorical Spectrum*, demonstrating an impulse to utilise the recent past to communicate a clear cut ideological interpretation of events relating to the role and treatment of middle and working class white American men in the current day. Gone is any sense of ideological or narrative ambiguity in the treatment of history in these films, as is any notion of textual self-reflexivity. By briefly applying the Metahistorical Spectrum as a tool for historical analysis, this exercise has revealed a fundamental shift in Eastwood's approach to history over the last four years. The reasons for this, however, are worthy of extensive investigation best left for further analysis at another time.

The subject of *this* thesis has been Eastwood's evolution from his work as a director of Westerns within the Mythology Phase (1973 – 1992) of his filmmaking career, through to his evolution into a director in his Metahistory Phase (1988 – 2014). And in doing so, the development of the Metahistorical Spectrum has proved to be a useful model for thinking about the nature of a filmmaker's representation of the past through cinema.

This thesis began with a quote from renowned historian Edward Hallett Carr, warning that a person should "Study the historian before you begin to study the facts."[375] During the course of this thesis, it is my hope that the truth and value of this statement has been made abundantly clear. Not only have I sought to demonstrate the impact that the historiographic decisions made by a filmmaker have a direct impact on the way in which their work might represent the past, but that there is likely to be a level of consistency in those decisions made by a filmmaker across their oeuvre.

More specifically, I hope that I have made a convincing case for Eastwood as a filmmaker whose works, for more than forty years, have demonstrated a consistent drive towards a metahistorical reading of history. In other words, Eastwood has sought to interrogate history through both the form and content of his work. In this sense, I would argue that Eastwood and Carr are in a strange sort of alignment. After all, if there is a central consistent message in the metahistorical works of Clint Eastwood, it is that one should appreciate that history and the past are entirely distinct, and that the quality of the former governs our ability to understand the latter.

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[375] Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 23.

Finally, it is my hope that this thesis should provide others with both a methodology and the inspiration to interrogate historiography in cinema, challenging filmmakers to think about how they might find more sophisticated and richer ways to integrate historiographic concerns in to the fabric of the creative process, putting aside the impulse towards reductive story telling in favour of authentic attempts to deal with the mysteries of the past. The result, surely, would be both richer art and history.

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APPENDIX A

Description
A graph based on the list of all Western films between 1931 and 1972 that earned over $4 million USD, found in Will Wright's *Six Guns and Society.* These have been mapped based on subgenre categories defined by Wright.

Graph