

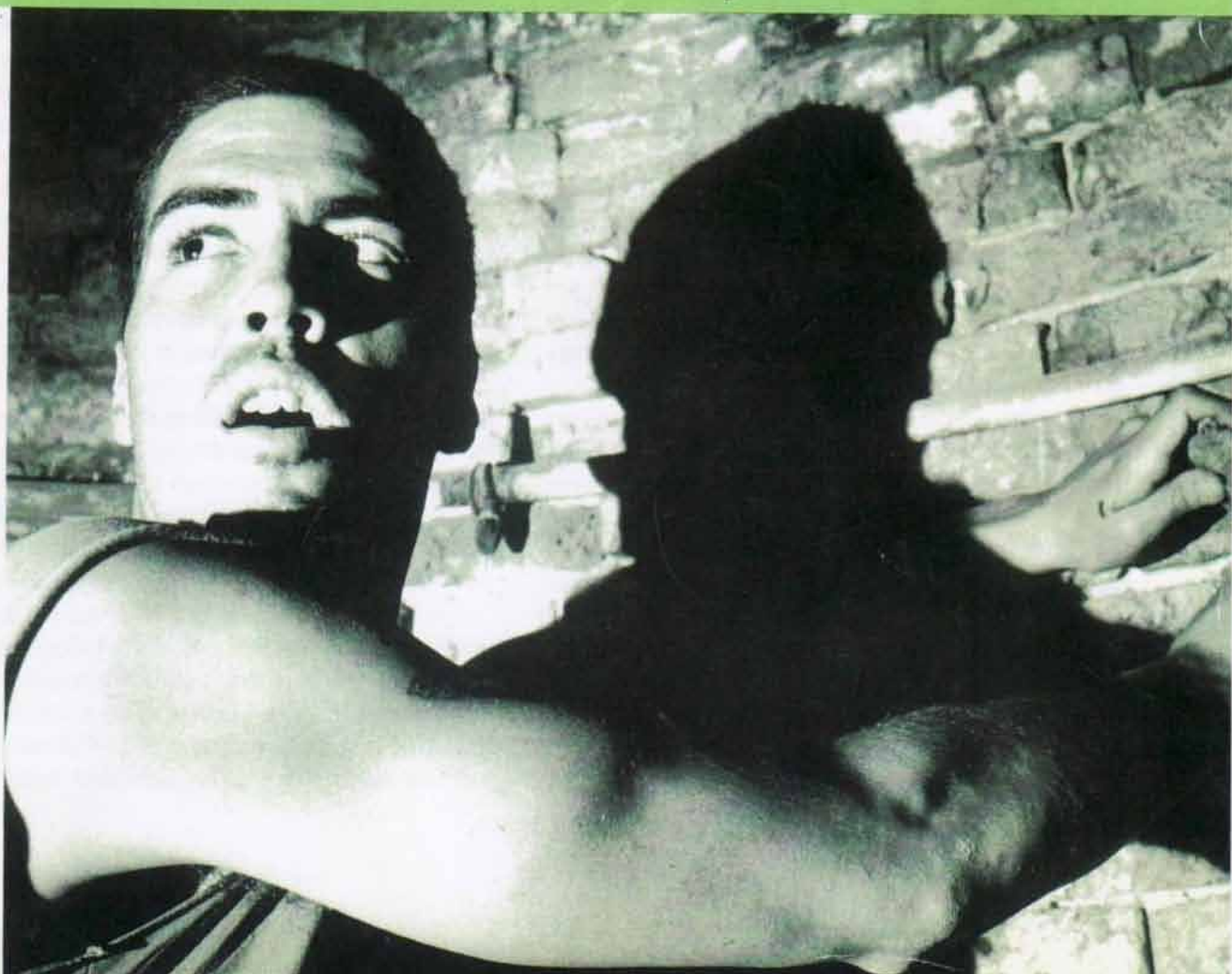
# Film Quarterly



Volume 46  
Number 3  
Spring 1993

Todd Haynes: Cinematic/Sexual Transgression  
Mirrors Without Memories—The New Documentary  
Little Cinema of Horrors • Pedro Almodóvar  
*Dream of Light* • *Fool's Fire* • *Unforgiven*

\$5.00



## Unforgiven

Director/Producer: Clint Eastwood. Executive Producer: David Valdes. Screenplay: David Webb Peoples. Cinematographer: Jack N. Green. Production Designer: Henry Bumstead. Music: Lennie Niehaus. Warner Bros.

After enduring a child's cruel death, the composer/hero of Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* is moved to write a piece which will subvert the ebullient optimism of the "Ode To Joy" and "take back" Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Mann's oddly potent phrase springs to mind after viewing Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, the sixteenth film of an uneven but never uninteresting directorial career.

A number of "against-the-grain" Westerns have questioned the near-sacred conventions of this most American of mythical movielands. Earlier pictures in the vein include Henry King's *The Gunfighter* and John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*; later examples, crafted during the fertile period of genre interrogation that flourished in the climate of 1960s and 1970s anti-authoritarianism, are Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*.

These impressive pictures, and Eastwood's own previous revisionist explorations (as actor in Leone's films and *Hang 'Em High*; as director, notably of the blistering *High Plains Drifter*), stand as apt preludes to his definitive "taking back" of every sagebrush shibboleth in *Unforgiven*. Its deconstructive task is accomplished with such fierce intelligence, mordant wit, and formal beauty as to place it within the pantheon of the genre's finest achievements.

*Unforgiven* is set in classic Ford and Peckinpah territory: Big Whiskey, Montana, a speck of 1880s town pressed under a vast sweep of sky and mountain, whose wilder days are grudgingly giving way to the encroachments of civilization. A few ramshackle stores crowd muddy streets—real axle-busting muck in Eastwood's unadorned take, not Leone's artfully dappled filth. But the railroad stops here, and the telegraph fitfully connects the town with the wider world. A honky-tonk saloon features rotgut and "billiards"—the appellation part in-joke, part sop to local bluenoses. The pool tables are long

gone; a harem of complacent trollops service cowboys from the nearby ranches in for a toot.

No church is seen in Big Whiskey, nor God mentioned. The daunting milieu presented by David Peoples' script exists in a kind of moral pre-history, where raw aggression is regularly answered by talion vengeance. *Macbeth* and *Lear* are not far from the conception.

The presiding arbiter of justice in this dusty outpost is Little Bill Daggett, sheriff in the Wyatt Earp mold: not the inhumanly upright lawman of Ford's *My Darling Clementine* but the real-time amoralist who congenially allied himself with both business and criminal elements, keeping the peace and his pockets lined at the same time. Shrewdly played by Gene Hackman, Daggett enjoys summary power over his tumbleweed fief more than profit. His façade of deceptive bonhomie conceals a bullying brutality which explodes whenever his notion of benevolent despotism is thwarted.

In the vivid establishing sequence, the unerotic humping of a young wrangler and a brothel escort is interrupted by screams. An older drunken buddy, enraged by his girl's friendly gibes about his small penis, has set about slashing her face.

Daggett is summoned; to the women's dismay, he proposes letting the cowboys off with a whipping. According to his unthinking (and all too familiar) bias, they're not hard cases—just working men out for a good time who went wild under the influence. A hard thrashing, he argues, is no mean punishment. The pimp/proprietor protests: a disfigured whore is of little value. He's paid to have her shipped West, and deserves fair recompense for a ruined investment. Daggett smoothly shifts gears and assesses the cowboys nearly all their precious stock of horses, proceeds of sale to the pimp.

The sheriff's situational ethics, valuing property over person, seem eminently fair—to the men. But the girls, enraged at being so publicly rated as mere goods, damaged or otherwise (it's likely their easy compliance and enforced gaiety have usually softened this issue for buyer and seller), secretly put up a thousand dollars for any hired gun willing to kill the cowboys. (According to the most primitive construction of guilt by contiguity, both men are deemed equally criminal, although the younger tried to restrain the older.)

Their defiance and Daggett's equable sexism together wind up a fatal mainspring. Retribution,

*Unforgiven:*  
Clint Eastwood as  
retired gunfighter  
William Munny



slow of foot, yet grimmer than anyone could imagine, has been set in motion. *Unforgiven* will turn to its own subversive purposes Leone's typical trope of righteous retribution doubly devastating for its twisting deferral. Feminine wrongs fuel the vengeance machine, as is often the case in Leone's cinema. (Eastwood's movies often portray woman as perennial disturber of the status quo, whether predator—*Play Misty for Me*—or victim—*Sudden Impact*. Here, his sympathy is poignantly unambivalent.)

Nemesis rides by the name of William Munny, a notorious desperado who found redemption in the arms of a young woman of good family. The opening titles indicate that she died several years ago, leaving him with two children and a failing pig farm. Eastwood plays Munny as his Man With No Name or Outlaw Josey Wales, dwindled down to a bereft, unhinged wreck with a queer masochistic streak. He's visited by a young bravo barely past his growth who styles himself the Schofield Kid. The Kid has heard of Munny's murderous reputation and wants *him as a partner in killing the whore's persecutors* and sharing the reward.

Munny demurs; he seems content on his dung-hill, obscurely savoring his condition as another signet of atonement for his foul past. In Eastwood's

finely tuned interpretation, Munny has the knack of some reformed ex-sinners for inspiring boredom, irritation, and eventual mistrust. One doesn't doubt the intensity of his grief, but his monotonous recounting of his wife's goodness gradually acquires a faintly spurious edge, just as the repeated insistence that he's "just like anyone else" begins to ring as hollow reassurance. He's clearly papered a socialized veneer over an antisocial morass.

After the Kid departs, Munny talks himself into tracking down the cowboys, the decision spurred by his children's neediness and the Kid's macabre tall tale of the whore's horrible disfigurement, which encrusts a truth terrible enough in its own right. *Unforgiven* (unlike Eastwood's other Westerns) persistently asks us to ponder the danger of mythifying reality to justify questionable acts—including the act of watching such entertainments.

Munny enlists a former partner in crime, sharpshooter Ned Logan (the estimable Morgan Freeman), in the hunt. Logan is not wild to go, joining his friend not so much for gain but rather out of loyalty and nostalgia for the bad old days. After several hard nights on the trail (another demystified myth: sound sleep under a blanket of stars), Munny sickens; he begins to hallucinate the blasted faces of men he's shot. In this appalling state, he wanders into Big



The injured prostitute (Anna Thomson) tends her defender

Whiskey and onto Daggett's saloon turf. The sheriff administers a catastrophic beating, while sententiously denouncing "assassins and men of low character" who've invaded the town for the reward. Munny submits to grinding humiliation with the usual—for him—masochistic passivity.

His abasement is imbued with the quality of ritualized, Christ-like suffering seen in other Eastwood movies. However, a radically different epiphany occurs than the usual rise from the dust to punish unregenerate wickedness in triumphant combat. After the disfigured prostitute nurses him back to health, Munny pragmatically contrives to kill the hapless cowboys by stealth, with a dogged purposefulness that intensifies as his companions' resolve falters.

Logan first wounds the innocent youngster, firing from a distant ridge, then can't bring himself to finish the job. Munny takes the rifle and—going for the fast kill—drills the boy through the gut. Sickened by this agonizing death, Logan decides to return home.

Cued by Munny, the agitated Kid (a marvelous turn by newcomer Jaimz Woolvett) guns the older cowboy down while he squats in a privy. At first the Kid exults out of pure blood lust, then awakens to anguished remorse as Munny muses laconically that "When you kill a man, you take away all he's got, all

he'll ever get." In the cowboys' dispatch, Eastwood confronts us with death in the fullness of its pain, absurdity, and squalor—again giving the lie to the legend of quick death in six-gun glory which the director himself so extravagantly helped to create.

His illusions blasted, the shaken Kid departs, refusing his share of the reward. Logan meanwhile is caught, and dies under Daggett's merciless interrogation. Munny had said the vile deeds of his past were perpetrated in a maddened haze of booze. Marriage taught him sobriety. Hearing about Logan's murder, he reaches again for the bottle.

Rather than debilitating him, alcohol seems almost to accentuate the steely clarity of his recovery after Daggett's punishment has brought him to abject debasement. The artificial constraints imposed by his wife's "goodness" are swept away. He awakens to his own innate destructiveness—a perverse cure indeed, reminding one of Lucifer's affirmation that it's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

Amidst ominous roiling of thunder, Munny rides back into Big Whiskey. One almost smells the whiff of brimstone as he trots by the upright casket in which Logan's grisly corpse is exhibited; it seems to float eerily out of focus in the frame's periphery. The scene plays as a gallows-humor reversal of *Shane's* climax, Jack Palance returning to town to

face down Alan Ladd. Munny steps into the saloon, tersely acknowledges Daggett's accusation that he's a heartless slayer of men, women, and children—he declares he's always had good luck with killing—then blows away pimp, sheriff, and deputies with one ghastly fusillade.

No one else will dare face the resurrected outlaw. The devastated citizens spill into the stormswept streets, amongst them W. W. Beauchamp, a dime novelist obviously modeled after Ned Buntline, the hack who glorified Earp, Bat Masterson, and other nasties of the day for legions of adoring fans back East. Beauchamp first appears as a chronicler of the infamous English Bob (Richard Harris, in a role that makes hilarious use of Harris's penchant for scenery-chewing). He switches allegiance to Daggett after the latter rides the erstwhile "Duke of Death" out of town.

Beauchamp supposed the Sheriff to be the authentic rawhide item, his accounts of gunslinging

more "truthful" (Daggett's tales were a shade less fanciful than Bob's blather, but no less self-serving). Now the scribbler quails before the very thing itself: the saloon charnel house has served up a truth more awful than his overblown fiction could bear. Beauchamp's appearance is obviously citified, and he speaks contemporary English rather than the script's prevailing old West idiom. Eastwood punishes us with him for our yen for the show of gratuitous violence, echoing Hitchcock's punishment of the "irresponsible audience"'s vicarious voyeurism in *Psycho*.

Vowing he'll return to slaughter young and old unless his friend receives a decent burial, Munny vanishes, not into sunset but darkness, his proper habitation. *Unforgiven's* apocalyptic conclusion constitutes an insanely logical outcome—and send-up—of the bellicose John Wayne machismo so frequently celebrated by the genre. Since the whore's joke about the cowboy's limited endowment made

#### Retribution



him engrave a masculine protest upon her features, braggarts like the Schofield Kid, English Bob, and Daggett have been contending with guns or fists to prove who owns the biggest prick in town.

Savaged by the loss of wife and friend, shriven of guilt by his recuperation into withering, socio-pathic nihilism, Munny no longer needs any such paltry proof—if he ever needed it at all. Scorning the phallic carnival, particularly detesting Daggett for his windy hubris, he administers the final castration. As he towers over the dying sheriff, Daggett groans: “I don’t deserve this—I was building a house. . . .” Munny replies: “Deserve’s got nothing to do with it,” and finishes him off. Here Eastwood himself has passed beyond critiquing empty phallic narcissism into more elemental territory. By expunging Daggett—who despite his faults held things together—and the deputies, Munny destroys the barely civilized town’s minimal ability to enforce its social contract.

There is, however, a quiet footnote to *Unforgiven*’s unrelenting and finalizing violence. The film ends with a long shot of Munny, silhouetted by his wife’s grave, as a crawl states his subsequent fate was obscure. Rumor had it that he moved further west with his children, set up a store; his wife’s mother eventually visited the territory to discover why her daughter had married him, and failed.

One spin on this problematic coda would be that Munny managed to wend his way back from the catastrophe he wrought upon Big Whiskey to resume some sort of domesticated life again. However, it seems more consistent with Eastwood’s subversive intentions that the coda should expose the mythmaking apparatus already busily at work, softening into more “acceptable” obscurity the baleful spectacle of Munny’s frightening rehabilitation which mocks the optimistic dream of the American frontier, indeed any dream of inevitable progress.

*Unforgiven* underscores how fragile a reed is civilization, with no omnipotent hero on a white horse or in a cop car to redeem the threat of humanity’s supreme undefendedness. The indomitable thrust to push back the frontier, tame the wilderness, “build houses,” seems pitiable or risible against this recognition. Eastwood here starkly foregrounds a profoundly conservative vision elsewhere embedded in his work (notably the *Dirty Harry* series). It informs the Freud of *Civilization and its Discontents*; has been adumbrated on screen by Kubrick in *2001: A*

*Space Odyssey*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Full Metal Jacket*; by Kurosawa in *Ran* and *Kagemusha* (Eastwood does not balk at viewing the work of other directors; it would be no surprise if *Unforgiven* reflects his take on Kurosawa’s recent grandly pessimistic canvases).

With terrible rigor, *Unforgiven* asserts that our attempts to wrestle existence into a semblance of order will inevitably be undone by the savage instincts lurking within our natures, as well as by the coolness of Nature at large to our small purposes. Viewed against this harsh premise, William Munny appears galactically remote indeed from John Wayne triumphalist pieties. His character actualizes the revolt against social stricture latent in many earlier Eastwood protagonists. His bloody toppling of Big Whiskey’s rule far exceeds the justified thirst for revenge of the Western’s standard-issue rugged individualist. It seems rather compelled by the pure savor of misrule for its own sake.

HARVEY R. GREENBERG

■ Harvey R. Greenberg is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and author of *Movies on Your Mind*.