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The Western Genre and Its Contrasting Symptomatic Meanings

John Ford's The Searchers (1956) and Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven (1992), from the western's classic period and decline respectively, are both about characters who go out on a trek to take an extreme form of vengeance for an injustice. In The Searchers, when Ethan Edwards family is killed in an Indian raid and his niece is taken captive by the Indians, he searches for her and out of his racist belief that she was defiled by their culture, he sets out to kill her. In Unforgiven, William Munny searches for the cowboys who cut up a prostitute to retrieve a ransom. While the prototypical western, set in the frontier lands of 1800s America, is known for the heroic character who tries to tame the lawless frontier, both of these films subvert the genre's essential elements in different ways for contrasting ideological projects. Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven, made at a time when westerns had become more liberal, subverts the classic western iconography to portray a libertarian ideological project for gun rights. John Ford's The Searchers, made at a time when western were more conservative, keeps the classic western iconography but subverts narrative elements to portray a liberal ideological project that addresses frontier racism which revolutionized the genre.

In The Searchers, John Ford uses many iconographic elements of the classic western that were typical for a Western genre film at the time. The conventional iconography of landscapes, horses, family homesteads, Indian tribes, cowboy and Indian

garb is present. Nonetheless, even though John Ford keeps the classic western iconography he uses them to portray the conflicts and emotions of the characters that make up the unconventional narrative and the larger ideological project of addressing frontier racism. Filmed in the Grand Canyon and in the saturated colors of Technicolor, John Ford uses vast scenic landscapes as a background to the action. When Ethan Edwards and the other male members of the family go out to find the Jorgensen's cattle, John Ford dramatizes the physical and emotional separation and alienation of the women and children from the men in an important shot. The Edwards mother and children on the far right of the frame and in the foreground watch Ethan Edwards ride off in the distant background on the far left of the frame. By having the background sky encompass the top two thirds of the frame and a dramatic physical distance between characters, John Ford uses the vast openness and changing nature of the sky to depict how the uncertainty and power of the landscape create an emotional yearning and fear within Martha Edwards that she may lose Ethan again. The familial dissolution and alienation that the landscape both reflects and causes directly leads to the Edwards home being decimated by Scar and Debbie being stolen while the men are away. The dissolution of family in turn brings out an intense racism in Ethan that is the subject of the film's ideological project.

By contrast the iconography, stylistic, and formal elements of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* reflects the evolution of the Western genre, in that it subverts the classic Western iconography of civilization fighting lawlessness and the awe-inspiring landscapes by depicting a gritty, chaotic, and completely barbaric society where civilization is nonexistent. The convention of the hero rescuing the beautiful maiden is replaced by the anti-hero doling out revenge for a prostitute that was cut up by a cowboy.

Eastwood uses darkly lit interiors, mud, dust, and dirtied costumes. The main character Will Munny, who is an elderly outlaw, accidentally falls in the mud of his pigpen and falls off his horse twice. Indians, glamorous landscapes, and bright costumes are absent from this film and the white civilization that is presented is barbaric and depraved.

Eastwood often juxtaposes the mythmaking of the time with the gritty reality, particularly through the character of the writer Beauchamp. As the traveling biographer for the outlaw English Bob, Beauchamp initially believes the myths he writes. Eastwood juxtaposes a scene of English Bob glorifying English royalty and justifying president Garfield's assassination with the following scene in which the Sheriff Little Bill confiscates his gun and violently beats him while his previously pompous companion Beauchamp pees in his pants. In a subsequent jail scene, Little Bill reads Beauchamp's biography and reveals the true story behind the myth of one of Bob's gun-slinging victories, revealing that he actually shot his foe unarmed when his pistol exploded. Thus Eastwood uses Beauchamp's mythmaking as an ironic foil to the gritty reality.

John Ford subverts the narrative of the Searchers by creating one of the most purely anti-heroic characters in Ethan Edwards and subverts the conventional search-and-rescue plot with a revenge plot that is not only ruthless but also entrenched in racism. In addition John Ford subverts the convention of civilization fighting lawlessness by portraying the barbarism of both the white frontiersman and the Indians with equal measure. At every plot point, Ethan Edwards forgoes family and religion in his ruthless plot to avenge the death of his family. After the Edwards have buried the dead from an Indian raid, a family friend (the mother of Lucy's boyfriend, Brad) advises Ethan, "don't let the boys waste their lives in vengeance". Ethan merely replies, "Well are you coming

with us or ain't you". The elements of mise-en-scene in this exchange exemplify Ethan's distanced relationship with his family in his absolutist plot for revenge. Throughout this shot, Ethan's back is turned toward the family friend as he prepares his horse to ride off. The horse on the left side of the frame and the family friend on the right side of the frame create dramatic tension as to whether Ethan will ride his horse and pursue revenge or listen to the family friend. This shot cuts to another shot where the priest is also on the right side of the frame watching Ethan ride off with a pained expression on his face, indicating that he also sides with the family friend.

This distanced relationship between Ethan and the Reverend, the symbol of religion, comes to a head when the Reverend prevents Ethan from taking another shot at retreating Indians. Ethan's retort, "That tears it!", defines Ethan's further alienation from any boundaries of civilization and leads to the movie's second act in which Ethan tries to search for Debbie alone with the help of Martin. Eventually Ethan's distance from family and religious values leads him to write a will in which he denies that Debbie is "blood kin" for having been raised by the Comanches and even tries to kill her. Ethan finally has a change of heart when he decides to bring Debbie home instead of killing her in a bookend shot of a silhouetted doorframe against the western landscape reaffirming compassionate family values.

Even though Clint Eastwood upends conventional Western genre iconography, he essentially presents the decrepit reality of the West as a justification for gun violence, anarchy, and the legendary Clint Eastwood character. The villain, the sheriff Little Bill Daggett, is the embodiment of government and social order, preventing citizens from possessing weapons. Clint Eastwood's Bill Munny becomes the glorification of

vigilantism and the mythic western hero. Despite often settling disputes between his partners and being portrayed as a responsible, heroic character who intends to retrieve the award to provide for his family, Bill Munny becomes the legend who, in a sudden departure from realism, guns down a whole roomful of enemies including Daggett in a matter of seconds. Instead of facing the consequences of his vigilantism, he retrieves the reward and settles down in San Francisco with his family. This narrative becomes an allusion to issues of gun rights in the 1990s when the election of a new Democratic administration created fears of gun rights being taken away. The film's narrative of a government authority preventing a heroic and just character from possessing weapons indicates a pro-gun rights stance and very libertarian stance in which the individual is glorified and set in opposition to all forms of government intervention and civilization.