Absent Heroism: Reconsidering Clint Eastwood's Star Persona

Chris Durham, Newcastle University, UK

Once again the recipient of "Oscar" success for *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), Clint Eastwood occupies a privileged position in the cultural milieu of mainstream American film, as much identified as a highly respectable *auteur* as by his characteristic incarnations of the Man With No Name or Dirty Harry. Still working with vigour into his seventies, Eastwood is a true elder of Hollywood, fêted by his peers and the critical establishment, and still received well by audiences, his career in film has endured more than forty years. If it is considered a truism that "stardom works to maintain a coherent sense of the star," although this sense of coherence "becomes fraught with contradictions as the star ages or accepts a variety of roles," then Eastwood's long career as both actor and director merits consideration from this perspective (Bingham, 1994: 16). Eastwood's persona, conjoining the identities of super-efficient director (twenty-five films between 1971 and 2004) and the star actor of long standing, is marked by one central contradiction. The manner in which Eastwood is seen and conceived in the present is quite different from the manner in which Eastwood was seen and conceived in the past; the persona now seen as incontrovertibly American, coherent, and acceptable, was once seen as seemingly foreign, incoherent, and unacceptable, at least by critical consensus. In light of Dennis Bingham's point, while Eastwood has indeed aged, his roles have not, until very recently, been marked by a considerable sense of variety. What has changed, however, is the conception of Eastwood's persona, now identified with Oscars and attendant "respectability." Yet while Eastwood's entire career was built upon characterisations of emblematic figures of (American) authority -- the Westerner and the detective -- these characterisations were frequently rendered problematic. If Eastwood's first role, that of the Man With No Name in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966), was "foreign" in more senses than one, his subsequent roles in Westerns and non-Westerns, many of which he directed himself, can also be considered as "foreign" representations of the hero. Eastwood's representations of the Western hero, a truly iconic figure in American culture, emanate from a context defined by the stark decline of the Western as a genre at the heart of American cinema, and Eastwood's roles are symptomatic of this decline, portraying, as they incessantly do, a more problematic Western hero.

In this paper, I wish to trace the significance of Eastwood as a cultural phenomenon, by examining his screen identity across his films, and with a particular emphasis on the Westerns, since it is this genre that cemented his stardom and defined the type of character he would portray for much of his career. In the subsequent examination of Eastwood's roles between 1964 and 1992, I will analyse the corporeal detail of his performances, alongside other notable facets of characterisation, in the context of the narratives containing his performances. In so doing, I will argue that while Eastwood was central to the Western, he was not, in a sense, at the centre of the Western. Rather, he was at its edge, an aberrant figure marking the fundamental decline of the genre. This aberrant figure, representative of a heroic identity under considerable strain, lay at the heart of Eastwood's star persona. Whether portraying a Westerner, a soldier, or a policeman, Eastwood's performances problematised

these traditional embodiments of an authoritative American identity, redefining the heroic identity in the process, as characteristically alienated, anachronistic, and frequently incoherent.

The Foreign Hero: *A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More* and *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*

Eastwood's film stardom emanated from a trilogy of Italian Westerns that were foreign in more ways than one. With Whites and Native Americans replaced by Mexicans, and evocations of Protestantism replaced by those of Catholicism, the foreign narrative milieu of the films is complemented by the "foreign" hero at the forefront of the narrative. As The Man With No Name, Eastwood lacks a fully-defined identity in these films, his narcissism given further confirmation by his abdication of social attachments. Eastwood's presence in the trilogy is, ironically, predicated on a strong sense of absence, the indefinable and distant qualities of his presence (the lack of a definitive national and named identity) reinforced by his minimal use of language and facial expression. In dispensing with a firm sense of identity, Eastwood's character becomes something of a blank signifier; when Leone described Eastwood's often empty visage as fitting his requirement for "a mask more than an actor," he articulated the precisely ambiguous nature of No Name's characterisation (Leone, quoted in McGilligan, 2000: 131). With a face largely devoid of expression, a depersonalised, detached, and ironic form of characterisation comes to define Eastwood's role.

Appropriately, for a detached character, No Name wanders through the narrative milieu of these films as a largely self-interested protagonist; his actions revolve around playing rival groups against each other, seeking a positive outcome for himself. Unlike the typical Western hero, No Name does not make any sacrifices for the communities he lives in; instead, he cynically lives off the communities he happens upon. In *A Fistful of Dollars*, he facilitates a brutal tribal war between two opposing families, effectively revealing "the emptiness of his character and the egotism of his violence." (Smith, 1993: 15) In *For a Few Dollars More*, No Name unwittingly assists an older man in the pursuit of an "honourable" revenge killing, despite having no knowledge himself of the purpose behind the revenge. He leaves the scene at the end of the film as the driver of a wagon loaded with corpses, against the backdrop of an arid landscape and an empty sky, as ironic a riposte to the typical climactic leave-taking of the Western hero as could be imagined. In *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*, Eastwood's character allies himself, on an extremely tenuous basis, with a convicted rapist and murderer. Appositely, the film self-consciously labels Eastwood as "The Good" character at an early point, freezing the frame on his image and putting the above title over it. The hysterical, wailing music that accompanies this freeze-frame is suggestive of laughter, echoing the spectator's response to this moment of irony. In terms of his narrative role, Eastwood's character's heroism is largely nominal; an abstract, "foreign" impersonation of the American Western hero. His abdication of social commitment in the form of causes is thematically echoed in the absence of romantic relationships throughout the trilogy; No Name's only moment of physical contact with a woman occurs in *A Fistful of Dollars*, when he accidentally renders one unconscious with a mistakenly-delivered punch. Denying all manner of social commitments, Eastwood's character comes to be identified in terms of alienation and narcissism, traits that Eastwood's future screen characters came to embody with great regularity.

What these character traits inevitably suggest is a basic screen character type: that of the anti-hero. Richard Dyer has succinctly elaborated the basis of this type as one who "confuses the

boundaries between good and bad behaviour, [and] presses the anti-social into the service of the social and vice versa" (Dyer, 1998: 49). While the secondary point necessitates qualification with regard to Eastwood's roles -- inasmuch as his characters are rarely committed to providing a service, and if they do it is with little enthusiasm -- that Eastwood's characters confuse behavioural boundaries is without a doubt. As discussed above, No Name's status is that of a mercenary, an occupation that the Western typically holds in contempt. While the violence he employs is not particularly brutal -- at least when set against the violence of opposing characters -- it is employed largely with the intention of financial gain, rather than the facilitation of a more beneficial "moral" order. The violence is committed on a largely self-interested basis, reducing the heroic identity of No Name to the mere semblance of that identity, a figure whose principal *raison d'être* is his ability to employ violence successfully. In Eastwood's later films, his characters indulge in sadistic acts of violence that are unbecoming of a hero, notably in *Dirty Harry* (1971), *High Plains Drifter* (1973), and *Unforgiven* (1992). In all these examples, he commits such acts of violence -- ranging from rape to wanton murder -- because he is able to, by force of circumstances and his own position of strength, rather than because they are "obviously" justified. While No Name does not resort to these extremes, the amoral basis of his character lays the groundwork, as it were, for more aberrant characterisations to follow in his wake. Such future characters may lack No Name's acutely "foreign" identity, but they encompass a "foreignness" of their own, redefining the heroic identity in the manner of No Name's characteristic encapsulation of "the emptying out of the moral codes of the Western hero and their replacement by a simple powerful presence." (Smith, 1993: 13)

At the level of performance, Eastwood's estranged version of the Western hero becomes fully realised (if such a term is appropriate when describing a character that is to a large extent deliberately left unrealised). At the basic level of appearance, Eastwood cuts a mysterious, ill-defined figure. Wearing a poncho and a serape, Eastwood's appearance is at once fundamentally "un-American" in its denial of the traditional apparel of the Western hero, and suggestive of "a more mysterious and covered Westerner, unpredictable and inscrutable." (Gaines and Herzog, 1998: 176) Compounding this sense of inscrutableness is Eastwood's restrained bodily movement. Compared with the sturdy, steady and forceful walk of a Western actor like John Wayne, Eastwood walks with a more phantasmic gait, his tall and lean figure effectively gliding through the landscape he inhabits. Eastwood seems to be, as Vincent Canby suggests, "the perfect physical spectre haunting a world." (Canby, quoted in Smith, 1993: 209) His economy of movement underlines the understated nature of his presence, and by extension the understated nature of his performance, if one bears in mind Dyer's definition of performance as being "what the performer does," in terms of the totality of their body language (Dyer, 1998: 134). Eastwood, however, "does" very little; if star studies often focus on "how the body produces meaning precisely through doing," (McDonald, 1998: 182) it seems appropriate to look at Eastwood's performances as conveying meaning through *not*-doing . When Eastwood himself has spoken of his performance creed as one of "Don't just do something, stand there," it becomes clear that the basis of his performance is essentially one of stasis (Eastwood, quoted in Combs, 1992: 12). As such, Eastwood's subdued physicality provides a corporeal basis for a characterisation defined by a sense of lethargy, with little motivation for commitment, whether to social relationships or to a cause. Moreover, if one considers that the Western typically defines itself, generically, by movement -- of galloping horses, of large-scale brawls -- the relative lack of movement of any kind in Leone's films suggests a sense of stillness on the part of the milieu and a sense of tiredness on the part of the characters. As the leading man, if not the hero, of the trilogy, Eastwood's character is defined, by Leone's camera, less by his

movement than by the detail of his still presence -- by a close-up of his squinting face, or his lighting of a cigarillo. In just "stand[ing] there," Eastwood expresses all that needs to be expressed, principally that of the ambiguity of an emotionless face, and an otherwise silent, still presence.

Eastwood's screen presence is a minimalist one, one which de-emphasises notions of identity through the understated basis of physical and vocal expression, and has led Richard Combs to describe Eastwood's presence as one of "not being there." (Combs, 1992: 12) The sense of alienation suggested by Eastwood's understated movement is given additional expression in the precisely expressionless, mask-like face worn by Eastwood. With considerable irony, Leone films Eastwood's face in extreme close-up on many occasions in the trilogy, when close-ups are typically used to underline a character's specific emotional response. As Paul Smith argues, Leone's use of close-ups "subtract from the interiority of character," divorcing characters from the social world they inhabit and, more fundamentally, from their own "human" selves (Smith, 1993: 12). In place of marking an interior-defined character, such close-ups present "a mere exterior," an empty signifier deliberately negating the expectation of emotional impact (Smith, 1993: 12). In essence, the "absent" presence of The Man With No Name ensures a character foreign to the traditions of the American Western. In other words, a figure dead to the traditions of the American Western.

A central aspect of Eastwood's characterisation in the "dollars" trilogy is precisely a "dead" sense of his characterisation. A number of critics have described Eastwood's character in these terms, as alternately a "living dead man," an "almost spectral presence," and a man "somehow beyond." (Mitchell, 1996: 231; Smith, 1993: 12; Knapp, 1996: 31) Eastwood's role is symbolically expressive of the death of the American model of the Western hero, and he is associated with mortality simply on the basis of the amount of corpses he leaves behind him, the nihilism of the trilogy being especially pronounced in comparison with the American Westerns of the same period. In terms of performance, the already-discussed features of Eastwood's screen characterisation in the "dollars" films lend themselves perfectly to a reading of the Eastwood character as death-like. His restrained sense of movement, variously described by Leone as being "like a sleepwalker" and attesting to "a style of nonchalance, apparent fatigue, drowsiness," coupled with his frequently expressionless face, and minimal use of speech, forms this absent presence, suggesting a character without a character, a protagonist who at the very least seems less definable, less alive, and less vital than his counterparts in the American Western (Eastwood, quoted in Knapp, 1996: 29, 31). The Man With No Name does not just lack a name, but a number of additional signifiers of identity, including speech and a defined sense of "home." (Significantly, the subsequent Westerns in Eastwood's career in which his character is unnamed -- *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider* (1985) -- underline the fact that he is a ghost, suggesting the deathly connotations surrounding an identity-less figure). Not a Western Everyman, but rather a Nowhere Man, Eastwood's character in the "dollars" trilogy is the first of a series of "bastardised" Western heroes that define one of the actor's central contributions to the history of the genre, one of deliberate problematisation from within. In his subsequent Westerns, which for the most part he directed himself, Eastwood would bring to the genre characterisations that were more American, by virtue of their place in a domestically-produced film, but no less aberrant as a result.

The (Un)Dead Western Hero: *High Plains Drifter*

If the "dollars" trilogy underlined the death of the Western hero in symbolic terms, suggesting the death of the archetype, in *High Plains Drifter* the death of the Western hero is a double-reality: Eastwood's hero is dead, and the classical model of heroism is dead. As Eastwood's first Western as director, *High Plains Drifter* affords Eastwood the opportunity to interrogate his own screen persona, and simultaneously offer a commentary on the state of the Western in 1973, then a genre in terminal decline. Considerably fewer Westerns were being produced; of those that still were, many brought an atmosphere of resolute finality into focus, dwelling on the last days of a protagonist condemned to an ignominious end, alternately obscurity or death. In emphasising a dramatic loss of control on the part of the hero, the Western expressed a loss of full belief in its own mythology, at the forefront of which was the prototypical figure of the hero, in control of his world and successful in it.

As a gesture of finality, the significance of *High Plains Drifter* centres on the fact that Eastwood's character in the film is dead, or rather undead. This (narrative) fact lies at the centre of the character's problematic representation, and yet has proved a problem for critics who seek to read Eastwood's persona as generally reactionary. Significantly, Paul Smith's account of the film singularly fails to mention this crucial detail of character (Smith, 1993: 36-42). The evidence in the film speaks for itself. At first emerging like a phantom out of the ethereally hazy landscape in the opening credits (complete with a "ghostly" choir on the soundtrack), Eastwood's "drifter" moves through the narrative as a vengeful wraith, destroying much of the town he enters (and a number of its inhabitants), before passing through a cemetery at the end of the film, at which his own headstone is being marked. The film leads the spectator to understand that Eastwood's character, whom I will subsequently call the Stranger, is in fact the ghost of a marshal previously murdered at the behest of a town conspiracy; having achieved his revenge on the town, he is free to return to the world of the undead. From this account, the impression might be created of a film which offers a conservative account of the Western hero, suggesting that he is effectively invulnerable, and able, once dead, to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of his demise. However, *High Plains Drifter* offers a somewhat different conclusion. Inasmuch as the film emphasises the Stranger's invulnerability to an extraordinary degree -- alternately surviving a point-blank shooting, and a later attack which is thwarted only by the Stranger's amazing foresight -- the point is emphasised that the "natural" and assumed invulnerability of the traditional Western hero is something unreal, a fiction. This hero can only be invulnerable because he is already dead; his heroic status in the film is derived from his being dead. Furthermore, the film's absolute emphasis on the aberrance of Eastwood's character -- inscribed from beginning to end -- underlines the point that this dead Western hero is representative of the death of the Western hero as a symbolic tradition, and the entire generic tradition underpinned by this resonant archetype.

In terms of his appearance and performance, Eastwood's role in *High Plains Drifter* shares something of the "foreign" qualities defining his previous roles in the Leone films. While his apparel is quite conventional, Eastwood sports a beard in this film, in contrast to his clean-shaven appearances in all but one of his previous post-Leone American films. As something of a "masking" facial feature, the beard serves to further deaden an already emotionless face, which is why for much of its generic life the Western associated facial hair with a villainous personality. Eastwood's first appearance in the film is a familiar scene of many Westerns, with Eastwood's Stranger riding through the town in which the film is set. However, the film disrupts this sense of generic familiarity by emphasising the disturbingly impassive ride of the Stranger, staring straight ahead while failing to return the anxious gaze of the townspeople who observe his entrance. That the Stranger is starkly underlit further underlines

a sense of aberrance on the part of the character, rendering his presence as one that cannot be fully defined. In addition, as Dennis Bingham has pointed out, the sound effects of the Stranger's horse and spurs are amplified, suggesting a presence that is threatening as well as other-worldly (Bingham, 1994: 164).

That the Stranger's first appearance in the film suggests his potential villainy rather more than his potential heroism is appropriate, for the Stranger's characterisation throughout the film is at best anti-heroic, blurring the conventional lines set between the typical characterisation of a hero and a villain. These lines had already been blurred in the "dollars" trilogy, as in other Westerns of the later period. In *High Plains Drifter*, however, the spectator is confronted by a protagonist who commits a rape within the first few minutes of the film, and subsequently embarks upon a vengeful destruction of the community he finds himself in, leaving it as an apocalyptic ruin at the end of the film. The deconstruction, for want of a better word, of the heroic identity in *High Plains Drifter* is primarily evidenced in two areas of character representation, firstly in the interrogation of the status of the hero as a seemingly invulnerable being, and secondly in the representation of Eastwood as a "hero" whose aberrance borders on the verge of evil.

Traditionally, the Western portrayed a hero whose narrative survival was almost guaranteed, a hero who seemed almost invulnerable. As the genre came of age, the hero became less idealised and more humanised, incorporating a greater sense of vulnerability. The extreme way of expressing the hero's vulnerability in the latter period of generic production was to have the hero killed. In *High Plains Drifter*, the "hero," uniquely, is invulnerable in the sense that he has overcome death itself, but as such the film expresses the critical state of the Western in the 1970s -- the invulnerable "hero" can be brought into play, but only as a protagonist who is, in fact, dead. The Stranger's place in the narrative is not secure, but fleeting; in materialising, ghost-like, from the wilderness, and disappearing back into the hazy milieu at the respective beginning and ending of the film. The Stranger does not, like the typical hero, ride back into the wilderness, but into an unknown place, which might well be hell. What was deemed a "natural" assumption of the hero -- his invulnerability -- is exposed as something of a fiction. Explicitly, *High Plains Drifter* attests to the death of the Western hero; the only way in which it can posit the Stranger as invulnerable is by marking him as already dead.

As *High Plains Drifter* develops, the Stranger is seen to assume a dominant position in the community, his strength seen as a virtue. When he comes to exploit his dominance by ordering the town to be painted entirely in red and re-named "Hell," his character undergoes the transition from a mysterious avenger to something much darker. The Stranger is very sparsely lit at key moments of the film, suggestively hinting his devil-like status. When he first enters the town, his face is tightly framed and yet almost unidentifiable, as the town's inhabitants nervously watch him. Moments later, when he rapes a woman, the scene ends with a low-angle shot of the Stranger's whole body, extensively shadowed. In the climax of the film, when the Stranger kills the three men who previously killed him, he is seen against a background of fire (he has set several buildings alight in order to draw the attention of the killers), which casts the Stranger's body in darkness, though illuminating him from behind. This ostensible visual underlining of the town's new identity as "Hell" thus also suggests the Stranger's ambiguous position in the town he has re-named, a position alluded to in an earlier piece of dialogue delivered by an outraged citizen: "It couldn't be worse if the devil himself had ridden into Lago!" That *High Plains Drifter* imbues Eastwood's "ghost" with vaguely satanic connotations serves to underline the film's effective statement that the Western hero --

as early 1970s audiences knew him -- is truly dead. In his apparently "living" form, the Stranger is unrecognisable as a hero, but does at times seem like a devil.

High Plains Drifter ends with the Stranger leaving the town in a state of ruin, its buildings shattered and smouldering; the town is left for dead, and the Stranger returns to the world of the undead, his identity now established, but only to confirm his deadness. Clearly, the film represents a stark inversion of generic expectations: villains, not heroes, are supposed to lay waste to towns. Furthermore, whereas the typical Western featuring a stranger arriving in a town finally "reveals" him to be a hero, this Western similarly features an unrecognised protagonist, who is initially mistakenly recognised by the townspeople as a hero of sorts, before being revealed to them as someone (or more precisely some*thing*) more akin to a villain. To further problematise the issue, the spectator is confronted with an unrecognisable image at the start of the film, and it is only when that image is "recognised," in the realm of fiction, that the spectator appreciates that this character is a dead man. The recognised image, in other words, is palpably unrecognisable, and can only be conceived in terms of Otherness, being dislocated from the concrete actuality of the "real world," and the generic expectations of the Western hero. If Eastwood's "speciality," according to Richard Combs, "is not being there," in *High Plains Drifter*, we find Eastwood at his most "distant." (Combs, 1992: 12) The Stranger has no physical place in the narrative milieu. Indeed, he has no possibility of belonging. If other bleak Westerns of the 1970s killed their heroes off, in an expression of generic finality, Eastwood's film kills off the *ideal* of the Western hero, by making him a quasi-satanic dead man, who does not come to save the town, but to destroy it.

The Detective and The Soldier: *Dirty Harry* and *The Beguiled*

Eastwood's first Western as director allowed him the opportunity to effectively destroy the stereotypical archetype of one of America's great narrative forms. While the crime drama and gothic melodrama arguably lack the national specificity and sheer ideological weight of the Western, they share the same potential to offer ideologically rich narratives and characterisations. *Dirty Harry* and *The Beguiled* (1971) both pose questions about their protagonists, respectively exploring his alienated place in the world, and his troubled masculine identity. Both films underline the fact that however far Eastwood's characters strayed from the nineteenth-century wilderness, the aberrant Westerner he portrayed forever haunted his subsequent characterisations. This thematic continuum is expressed in the figure of the ambiguous "hero," defined by his amorality, narcissism, alienation, and ultimately subject to a form of defeat. As such, *Dirty Harry* and *The Beguiled* exemplify the problematic characterisations that Eastwood embodied in a great many of his films, irrespective of genre.

Like his Western counterparts, the eponymous Harry is a quintessential loner; domesticity, in the shape of woman or home, are respectively absent and never seen. He regards his work partner with casual indifference, and the institutional authorities that govern his conduct with contempt. In an ironic confirmation of Harry's antithesis towards social authority, he shares a kinship with the serial killer villain he seeks. As Leo Braudy points out, Harry is more like the killer than he is like anyone else in the film (Braudy, 1977: 173). Both are loners who, in their own way, work outside legal parameters; both are driven by anger and violence. These are not uncommon themes in the action film, or its generic relative, the Western, but they are a consistent feature of Eastwood's screen roles, and regularly an extremely problematic feature of characterisation. The mercenary No Name is one expression of this, as is, in an extreme version, the Stranger of *High Plains Drifter*. Later films such as *Tightrope* (1984) and *Unforgiven*, emphasise a kinship with villainy in a particularly direct manner (the former

having a fantasy sequence showing Eastwood's character acting out the role of the murderer he seeks, while the latter, as I will delineate below, has Eastwood's character regressing to the brutish behaviour of a villainous past). The fundamental point of this kinship is to problematise the heroic identity, yet it is also significant for its confirmation of the hero's lack of belonging to a secure social world, one in which a heroic identity can be confidently maintained, because it can be beneficial to that social world.

While Eastwood's characters often affect beneficial results in this sense, they do so without any sense of attachment to that world. In comparison with the many Western heroes who "deliver" for the community and then walk away, Eastwood's characters regularly register a sense of total indifference to the beneficial results they affect, accentuated by a performance style at the centre of which is a largely impassive face. At the end of *Dirty Harry*, after the killer has been shot dead, Harry throws his police badge into a reservoir. The gesture consciously evokes a similar gesture at the end of *High Noon* (1952), although that film suggested the rejection of a "cowardly" small community rather than, as in the point established here, the rejection of everything the badge stood for. The representational elements of the scene determine an overwhelming sense of desolation. The setting is deserted and in a state of decay, the action is shot from a very high angle (emphasising Harry's isolation in this desolate space), Lalo Schifrin scores the scene with minimalist music that is both ambiguous and mournful, and Eastwood's expression, in close-up, alternates between one of contempt and impassive indifference. Eastwood's/Harry's final gesture is to walk away, but, as Edward Gallafent points out, "the narrative offers no indication of where he might be going," or, for that matter, whether he might ever find a sense of belonging (Gallafent, 1994: 36).

In *The Beguiled*, the social world in which Eastwood finds himself ultimately brings about his death, or, more precisely, his murder. His character, McBurney, an injured union soldier in enemy territory in the American civil war, is taken into a plantation house serving as a school for girls. There, he finds himself drawn towards the romantic affections of both teachers and pupils, and, as a consequence of a jealous assault, he develops a leg injury that apparently necessitates amputation. Thereafter symbolically castrated, he unsuccessfully attempts to regain his authority, and is ultimately poisoned by his would-be carers. Writing in 1977, Leo Braudy discusses the idea of "the decline of the star," arguing that "it occurs because the audience no longer identifies with the sexual and psychic energy of the figure on the screen." (Braudy, 1977: 177) In *The Beguiled*, if the audience is to identify with anything, it is with the star as an embodiment of failure, rather than the star himself. Eastwood/McBurney begins the film as a wounded soldier, becomes a subject of symbolic castration, and ends the film as a corpse. No other Eastwood film presents such a trajectory of corporeal damage, further problematised by that damage being inflicted by women, in domestic surroundings, and with domestic items. The place of his symbolic castration and his ultimate death is the dining room; his leg is cut with a kitchen knife, and being fed with poisonous mushrooms kills him. Even after he is dead, his body is used for the purpose of a sewing lesson for the girls of the school, in which they fasten together his shroud. The feminised world McBurney finds himself in is thereby directly implicated in his demise, at every point of potential emphasis the film can make. If Don Siegel, the director, was making something of a misogynist statement regarding the "castrating" potential of women, then what kind of statement can the film be said to make concerning the Eastwood figure, as a largely passive victim of these women? An answer to this might be found in the commercial failure of the film, which has been "explained" by Siegel -- "Maybe a lot of people didn't want to see Clint Eastwood's leg cut off" -- and Eastwood himself -- "Dustin Hoffman and Al

Pacino play losers very well. But my audience likes to be in there vicariously with a winner." (Siegel, quoted in Smith, 1993: 162; Eastwood, quoted in Bingham, 1994: 199) As a "castrated" loser, Eastwood's embodiment of corporeal failure would not sit well with audiences unwilling to break with the typical assurance of "the possibility of transcendence" that Hollywood films usually retain in narratives of potential corporeal failure (Smith, 1993: 162). In this film, there is no such transcendence; once McBurney is "castrated", there is no point of return to a more affirmative representation of masculinity. *The Beguiled* encapsulates a thematic motif found in many Eastwood films, that of the problematic existence his characters face in a social world. More fundamentally, the film underlines the problematic nature of the heroic identity, highlighting its narrative and corporeal defeat.

The Resurrection of the "Hero": *Unforgiven*

When *Unforgiven* was released in 1992, it was perceived as part of a generic revival; its winning of Academy Awards echoed the success of *Dances with Wolves* two years previously. A superficial reading of the film -- bearing in mind Eastwood's portrayal of an ageing ex-gunfighter who reverts to his former role with great effect -- might suggest that it is an exercise in nostalgia, a return to a strong model of determinate heroism. However, *Unforgiven* is neither a revivalist Western, nor is it "simply" nostalgic. The "revival" of the Western was in fact fragmented and ephemeral, while nostalgia is thematically introduced in the film only to be deconstructed. Indeed, the film serves to deconstruct a number of generic tenets, principal among them being the negotiation of violence, and Eastwood, as the leading character, embodies this deconstruction to the fullest extent.

Unforgiven introduces Eastwood's character, William Munny, in the (uncharacteristic) role of a farmer. While the opening of the film expresses a sense of nostalgia in its panoramic long-shot of Munny digging a grave (his wife's), silhouetted by the setting sun, it is immediately followed by a sequence in which Munny tries to shepherd his pigs in their pen, leading to him slipping in the mud. This at once expresses his incompetence and his downgraded status. Munny is given an opportunity to rise above his lowly status when he hears of a bounty being offered for the killing of two cowboys who assaulted a prostitute -- but in taking this opportunity to return to his past life as a gunfighter, Munny is beset by doubts and insecurities, centred around the fact that his previous incarnation as a gunfighter was markedly more criminal than virtuous. Joining two other men in pursuit of the bounty, Munny compensates for his insecurities by repeatedly making statements suggesting a state of security. In repeated assertions of his transformed character, Munny seems to be principally trying to convince himself, more than anyone else, that he has changed (Grist, 1996: 298). The linguistic patterns of Munny's statements betray his lack of conviction. When Munny says, "I ain't like that no more," a long contemplative pause separates the two clauses, suggesting his introspection; he both desires to be "like that" again, and simultaneously fears the man he might become again. This comment, made by a farmer disclaiming his past life as a gunfighter, can also be read as a reference to Eastwood's previous characterisations, as Dennis Bingham has suggested (Bingham, 1994: 234). Certainly, spectators are not accustomed to seeing Eastwood as an indistinguishable "fellow" in his films, so the film deliberately sets up an expectation that Eastwood's character will distinguish himself in due course in the narrative, that we will see the Eastwood of old again. The spectator waits, as Christine Gledhill writes, "for the frisson of the character *becoming* Eastwood." (Gledhill, 1991: 212, my emphasis) And yet in *Unforgiven*, when Eastwood seems to "become" Eastwood, the character of William Munny is revealed to be fundamentally aberrant, a horrifying realisation of a violent Westerner, rather than a Western hero.

That Eastwood seems to "become" Eastwood underlines the fractured nature of his screen identity in *Unforgiven*. He begins the film as an incompetent farmer, eventually becoming a bounty hunter haunted by his own conscience, before ending the film as a vengeful and almost indiscriminate murderer. Munny's protestations concerning the violent past he has left behind reveal a split between the lives he seeks, that of the domestic security he knows now, and the relatively more vigorous life he used to live, one that was violent, but tinged with excitement. As a way of trying to keep his dark past in check, Munny discusses that past with his fellow bounty hunter (Ned/Morgan Freeman), with a vivid emphasis on detail. Catharsis is the intended consequence of these conversations, and in the later acts of killing in fulfilment of the bounty contract, Munny seems genuinely troubled by his actions. The transformation takes place when Munny hears news of Ned's death, following his arrest and beating by a belligerent sheriff, Little Bill (Gene Hackman). His face and voice expressing indignation, Munny ventures off towards town to seek "justice" of some sort, which, by generic logic and character expectation, the spectator can readily imagine. What *Unforgiven* portrays, however, is "justice" of a quite different sort.

Confronting Little Bill and others in the town saloon, Munny succeeds in killing the sheriff and a number of other men, despite his numerical disadvantage, and walks away from the carnage unscathed. At the level of purely physical efficiency, Eastwood's character is seen to assume the familiar gunfighter role, but such is the problematised image of heroism on offer here that, by the end of the film, "It is no longer clear [...] what a hero is." (Thumim, [1993] 1998: 347) Similarly, as Bingham points out, the film lacks a coherently realised villain (Bingham, 1994: 238). The saloon's owner is shot down despite being unarmed, and one of Little Bill's deputies is shot in the back. When Little Bill realises Munny's identity, Munny responds in the affirmative, coldly admitting that he is the same William Munny who, in Little Bill's words, was "the killer of women and children." Indeed, Munny admits that he "killed just about anything that walked or crawled at one time or another," suggesting the indiscriminate nature of his killings, and conveying the idea that he executed wounded men in cold blood. A slow zoom into Munny's emotionless face emphasises his admission, the cruelty of which undermines any sense of heroism, which a slow zoom might dramatically solidify. In terms of Eastwood's persona, what is witnessed here is an "ideologically potent deconstruction," a character transformation that "foregrounds unequivocally what has always been implicit -- that Eastwood's popular persona is that of a vicious, implacable, fascistic killing machine." (Grist, 1996: 301) That the spectator has been waiting for the "popular persona" to be revealed makes the revelation all the more problematic; the viciousness displayed is beyond that of Eastwood's previous characterisations.

The violence concludes with Munny's execution of the wounded Little Bill, an uncomfortably prolonged affair that encapsulates the coldness of Eastwood's character. With Munny's rifle pointed at his head, Little Bill entreats, "I don't deserve this. To die like this." Although his death may be "deserved" according to the tenets of the genre, he would not seem to deserve evisceration; in any case, Munny suggests no thought of such motivation -- "Deserve's got nothing to do with it." (In an earlier confession to Ned regarding the killing of a man in the past, Munny ruefully comments, "he didn't do anything to deserve that," suggesting the amoral basis of his violence then and in the present.) When the sheriff tells Munny that he will see him in hell, Eastwood cuts to a darkly lit low close-up of Munny, emphasising his scarred features but also suggestively casting half of his face in shadow, underlining his fragmented and disturbed identity. Munny slowly and deliberately aims his rifle and cocks it, and eerily replies to Little Bill's assertion in the affirmative, as thunder crashes in the distance. Like the Stranger of *High Plains Drifter*, Munny is thus explicitly associated with

hell. Indeed, the mise-en-scène strongly underlines this point as Munny rides out of the town. The rain pours down, the thunder continues, small torch fires light up the propped-up body of Ned, and low register strings dominate the score. In effect, Munny assumes the status of a figure of horror in a horrific milieu. Such is the excessiveness of his actions that any remaining vestiges of heroism have been largely forgotten; even motivation becomes undermined by Munny's own admission. Significantly, as he rides out of town, Munny shouts that he wants Ned to be buried properly and the town's prostitutes to be treated decently. Briefly, the spectator hears the echo of heroic motivation, before Munny threatens to "come back and kill every one of you sons of bitches," a proclamation which highlights Munny's new-found malevolence, and hints at the potentially indiscriminate slaughter he might inflict on returning to the town.

Having built up the expectation of a heroic "comeback," the seemingly "spent" hero returning to his old ways with gusto being a cliché of many Westerns, *Unforgiven* throws that clichéd expectation back at the spectator, and compounds the confusion surrounding the specifically moral identity of Eastwood's character at the very end of the film. In an incongruous coda, Munny once again appears to be domesticated, tending the grave of his wife; the composition is identical to that of the prologue. A titled note relates that Munny has since moved to San Francisco, "where it was rumoured he prospered in dry goods." In having Munny move away from the "savage" West and into the city to make an honest living, the coda would seem to suggest his redemption. Yet the film has just so devastatingly established that Munny's professions of his reformed character were in reality a sham. It is difficult to place the same self-admitted killer of women and children, the same voice of rage which threatened to "kill every one of you sons of bitches," as a "civilised" man of business. Either as a farmer, a dry goods salesman, or a heroic gunfighter, it is difficult to "believe" in the Eastwood character in this film. In whatever guise, Eastwood occupies a role defined by a sense of incoherence, his disparate identities being characterised by instability and confusion. Whereas more traditional Westerns established a world in which "conflict was not within characters, but between the hero and others, or between the hero and external forces," in *Unforgiven* conflict is definitively within the protagonist (Bignell, 1996: 99). And yet the concluding image of the film seems, at face value, to give Eastwood's character an elegiac send-off. With an "Americana" score and a setting sun underpinning a sense of nostalgia, a dissolve fades Munny out of the picture of his Kansas homestead. Ironically, this rhetorical device cements Munny's "legendary" status, when the film's project has been to precisely deny the validity of such legends, to suggest that forgotten "heroes" might perhaps be best forgotten. Ending on an ultimately incoherent amalgamation of reality and myth, *Unforgiven* interrogates both the Western and the Eastwood persona, and arguably lays waste to both.

Eastwood's filmic stardom emanated from films which took a literally foreign, deconstructive stance on the Western hero. He went on to play heroes who were consistently problematised, lacked defining moral qualities, were consistently alienated, subject to parody, and -- in the cases of *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider* -- already dead. Compared to past stars of the Western (such as John Wayne), Eastwood never *coherently* "belonged" to the Western, despite his association with it, in the sense that he always maintained an ironic distance from the genre, refusing to follow its established rules. Corporeally, Eastwood personified a "foreign body" in many of his Westerns, his lack of dialogue, monotone delivery, and largely expressionless face serving to undermine his very presence. This lack of presence -- a body which does not seem to be fully "there" -- ultimately suggests death itself, and it remains significant that the issue of mortality regularly imprints itself in Eastwood's characters. In an almost logical development, Eastwood moves, from the "dollars" trilogy to *High Plains*

Drifter to *Unforgiven*, from a state of symbolic deadness to a state of literal deadness, and finally returns to a state of symbolic deadness. The traditional Western hero is shown to be an absent figure, an unrealisable "type." Rather, the films present protagonists who have a sense of finality about them. In Leone's "dollars" trilogy, *High Plains Drifter*, and *Unforgiven*, Eastwood's narrative presence is marked by incoherence and fragmentation. As the last Western star, the last representative of a genre in fundamental decline, Eastwood's characters are ultimately haunted by a sense of unsustainability. The films testify to a genre that is no longer secure, but fundamentally decentred, and Eastwood's characters, informed by a screen persona defined by the Western, betray this sense of incoherence.

If it seems ironic that a star whose career longevity marks out his eminent sustainability is a star whose screen career was cemented with characterisations which were defined by a marked lack of sustainability, then it makes sense to ask why Eastwood was and is such a popular star. Star images must "make sense" to audiences, and they often do this by embodying a sense of contemporary resonance, in a variety of ways. If John Wayne "made sense" because he embodied an image of a resilient, authoritative, and ever-dominant American which audiences could readily understand (and perhaps further read as a metaphor for the nation itself), then what can be made of the potential readability of Eastwood's embodiment of a far more problematic sense of Americanness? Specifically, how did audiences "make sense" of Eastwood's characterisations, notably of what I have termed a sense of absent heroism?

To begin exploring this question, I want to consider the idea of absence as it impacts upon the narratives of Eastwood's films in a wider sense. On looking at Eastwood's characterisations, one is regularly struck by images of men who do not, because they cannot, belong. When Richard Combs described Eastwood's "speciality" as "not being there," he encapsulated one of the principal signifying elements of the actor's characterisations (Combs, 1992: 12). The Man With No Name, the Stranger, Callahan, McBurney and Munny are united in their lack of belonging, primarily because of their alienation, whether in life, or, in the case of *High Plains Drifter*, in death. If these men cannot belong, it is because they have few measures of belonging available to them, whether in the form of nation, community, or social relationships. Eastwood's performance style -- emphasising impassivity and a laconic manner of speech -- provides the perfect mould for characters that elude an obvious sense of belonging, who are alternately defined by their "foreignness," their deadness, their alienation, their symbolic castration, and their dark anachronism.

If a conventional sense of heroism is thus rendered absent, and yet Eastwood's films were consistently popular, it seems prudent to consider why this might be so. One of the most obvious areas of absence in Eastwood's films, beside a conventional sense of heroism, is a sense of "home," by which I mean a place the protagonist can take refuge in, being representative of "ideological *security*" (Wood, 1986: 228, original emphasis). If Eastwood's characters do not belong, an absence of "home" is both a reason for and a symptom of this lack. No Name wanders through a world more "foreign" than himself; the Stranger wanders through a world he cannot physically belong to; Callahan walks away from the world he knows; McBurney is killed by being placed in a strange world; Munny wanders through a world he violently rejects, but in so doing his anachronism is confirmed. Simply put, Eastwood's characters lack spaces they can readily exist in, an ultimate expression of their lack of belonging.

Robert B. Ray has analysed the notion of ideologically-configured space in relation to America's view of itself, referring to the resonance of Frederick Jackson Turner's polemical theorisation of the ideology of the frontier, which emphasised the importance of maintaining the *idea* of the seemingly unlimited American space offered by the historical West: "The existence of an area of free land…explain[s] American development". (Ray, 1985: 381*n*) Clearly, one can view America's generally expansionist impulses as relevant in this regard, but Ray elaborates the ways in which this ideology of uncontested space was problematised during the late 1960s, being eroded without (by the failing war in Vietnam) and within (by the fragmentation of the political consensus), faith in "America" being replaced by widespread dissent (Ray, 1985: 253). In light of this thesis, the lack of space in Eastwood's films becomes more resonant, especially when analysed in the context of his problematic characterisations of men who do not belong in a more general sense. If it is a truism that a given star image must necessarily be intelligible in the mindset of the society from which audiences emerge to appreciate that star image, Eastwood's image can be read as a star who embodies a sense of America, but one which expresses a sense of disillusionment with the unlimited capacity of the American imagination. The Westerner can only appear invulnerable if he is already dead. The policeman cannot find a sense of belonging. The soldier's corporeal authority is emphatically denied. The ageing gunfighter shows himself to be an aberrant part of the past. If a conventional sense of heroism is absent from these characterisations, it is because heroism, as a signifying resource, is less "available" to the American imaginary of this era -- *Unforgiven*'s screenplay significantly dates from the mid-1970s (Combs 1992: 14). Yet why should Eastwood embody this lack of heroism, while other stars of the period, such as John Wayne, continued to portray heroes as they always had? The answer surely rests in the fact that Eastwood's "heroes" were, from the very beginning of his stardom, intensely problematic, and in their domestic incarnations these problematic features of characterisation achieved a greater resonance, when contemporary audiences, in the shadow of the ideological fragmentation of the era, identified heroism as something of an elusive quality. If, as Richard Dyer suggests, stars cannot readily "exist outside" the realm of the texts that form their star persona, Eastwood's legacy is not just that of the anti-heroic protagonist, but of a star whose performance style consistently reinforced a sense of absent heroism (Dyer, 1998: 1). His economy of movement, his laconicism, and his starkly impassive visage embodied a star image that merely alluded to "heroism" as both a performative construct and a distant ideal. That identity, like Eastwood himself in many of his films, was never really "there" in the first place.

References

Bignell, Jonathan (1996) Method Westerns: *The Left-Handed Gun* and *One-Eyed Jacks*, in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*. London: Studio Vista, pp.99-110.

Bingham, Dennis (1994) *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Braudy, Leo (1977) *The World in a Frame: What We See in Films.* Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Combs, Richard (1992) Shadowing the Hero, *Sight and Sound* 2 (6), (October), pp.12-16.

Dyer, Richard (1998) *Stars.* Second Edition. London: British Film Institute.

Gaines, Jane Marie and Herzog, Charlotte Cornelia (1998) The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume, in Ed Buscombe and Roberta Pearson (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western.* London: BFI, pp.172-181.

Gallafent, Edward (1994) *Clint Eastwood: Actor and Director.* London: Studio Vista.

Gledhill, Christine (1991) *Stardom: Industry of Desire.* London: Routledge.

Grist, Leighton (1996) Unforgiven, in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western.* London: Studio Vista, pp.294-301.

Knapp, Laurence (1996) *Directed by Clint Eastwood.* Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland and Company.

McDonald, Paul (1998) Reconceptualising Stardom, in Richard Dyer, *Stars.* Second Edition. London: British Film Institute, pp.175-211.

McGilligan, Patrick (2000) *Clint: The Life and Legend.* London: HarperCollins.

Mitchell, Lee Clark (1996) *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ray, Robert B. (1985) *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Smith, Paul (1993) *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production.* London: UCL Press.

Thumim, Janet ([1993] 1998) "Maybe he's tough but he sure ain't no carpenter": Masculinity and In/competence in *Unforgiven*, in Jim Kitses and Greg Rickman (eds.), *The Western Reader.* New York: Limelight, pp.341-354.

Wood, Robin (1986) *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Filmography

The Beguiled. 1971. Dir. Don Siegel. Jennings Lang/The Malpaso Company.

Dances with Wolves. 1990. Dir. Kevin Costner. Tig Productions/Majestic Films International.

Dirty Harry. 1971. Dir. Don Siegel. The Malpaso Company/Warner Bros.

A Fistful of Dollars. 1964. Dir. Sergio Leone. Constantin Films Produktion GmbH/Jolly Film/Ocean Films.

For a Few Dollars More. 1965. Dir. Sergio Leone. Arturo González Producciones Cinematográficas S.A./Constantin Film Produktion GmbH/Produzioni Europee Associati.

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly. 1966. Dir. Sergio Leone. Arturo González Producciones Cinematográficas S.A./Constantin Film Produktion GmbH/Produzioni Europee Associati.

High Noon. 1952. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. Stanley Kramer Productions.

High Plains Drifter. 1973. Dir. Clint Eastwood. The Malpaso Company.

Million Dollar Baby. 2004. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Warner Bros./Lakeshore Entertainment/Malpaso Productions/Albert S. Ruddy Productions/Epsilon Motion Pictures.

Pale Rider. 1985. Dir. Clint Eastwood. The Malpaso Company.

Unforgiven. 1992. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Malpaso Productions/Warner Bros.