



PROJECT MUSE®

Unforgiven: Fausse Reconnaissance

Peter Krapp

The South Atlantic Quarterly, Volume 101, Number 3, Summer 2002, pp.
589-607 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/30778>

Peter Krapp

Unforgiven: *Fausse Reconnaissance*

Gift and duel go unto death.

—Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*

Global mass media focus increasingly on the notion of witnessing an event from a distance, and thus on surviving it, be it a violent confrontation or a meteorological danger. These events are repeated relentlessly, always presented as news: whenever something happens—a gunfight, a thunderstorm—it simultaneously confirms and disturbs the experience of time. The technically enhanced surveillance of any fleeting, volatile, unrepeatability of occurrence in turn gives rise to general coverage: media thrive on the very unrepeatability of that which they strive to repeat. The event would simply disappear if subsumed under a general notion of “violence” or “weather,” and thus its singularity is only recognizable when it is split off from the impact or harm by distance. Media rely on disappearance as a negative function of repetition in their coverage.¹ Globally, events are covered up by screen memories, and this detachment represses all questions of judgment in favor of pure replay. The screening over of morality and justice

The *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:3, Summer 2002.

Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press.

produces a return of notions that evoke systems of belief—such as finitude of life, transcendence of time, the promise of a future under immemorial threats. On the one hand, ever more refined time axis manipulation is the technical pivot of modern media, and on the other hand, violence and weather have become two mainstays of media coverage—precisely as a result of their statistical recurrence and recuperation after the fact.

One may wonder whether repetition and novelty, the serial and the singular are mediated differently in art. It is possible to argue that here, news media diverge from cinema. While one accentuates the transience of the instant, the other stores its moving images for posterity; news loses most of its interest after a short while, movies are supposed to accumulate it—if only because they remain available for comparison and other modes of critical attention. However, both capture our attention by means of difference and repetition.² Both uses of the moving image serve our distraction economy by similar technical means, and if we were to insist on a fundamental difference, we might say that the artful use of the medium heightens the traits that characterize all of its forms.³ That classic among movie genres, the Western, stages the convergence of violence and weather, ending in a hailstorm of bullets. When this genre returns, like yesterday's news, in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), it repeats certain aspects that may have slipped our attention the first time around.

The myth of the American West, the promised land, has found one of its pioneering mediatic representations in the Western, a movie genre that has its roots in the dime novels of the nineteenth century, the paintings of Frederic Remington, and in countless retellings of legends about Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickock, Wyatt Earp, and “Billy the Kid” Bonney. Men on their horses, exploring the very edge of civilization, pioneering the way of life that was to become America: this is the formula of Western storytelling. In those outposts, any moral ambiguities had to be reluctantly settled by violence; the revolver is the symbol of the law as well as of the outlaw. Common to both is a code of honor that expressed itself not only in the idealized reluctance to use violence, but above all in the duel: the man-to-man, eye-to-eye combat in the tradition of divine judgment. The gun duel is the most hallowed and clichéd convention of the Western. The settling of accounts may turn into a suicidal last stand, but above all, it is the accepted code of the confrontation and resolution of conflict—even if it shows the hero as a killer. The gun is not only the symbol of manliness and justice, but also the only

means for reconciliation. And while the manly heroics of the lone rider are played out in the foreground, the landscape of the North American West is playing an equally important role in the background. From the beautiful but inhospitable Monument Valley to the endless barren landscapes of later Westerns, the forces of nature not only serve as the background to choreographed violence and lawlessness, but also act as a direct influence on the unlucky inhabitants, threatening their lives, restricting their movement, taking away their courage, driving them to drink and to duel.

Clint Eastwood's movie *Unforgiven*, however, is a Western without a duel, and it offers a radical reevaluation of economic and political justifications in the genre, set in the barren countryside somewhere in the Wyoming of 1880. The timing of its release made it a political film. By coincidence, it was first shown on the big screen the week of the Rodney King beating, which led to riots in Los Angeles. It not only addresses the brutal beating of an innocent black man, but also deals with such untypical Western material as the predicament of prostitutes, children growing up as virtual orphans, and the pain of dying. In the preceding decades, the genre had become unfashionable in the United States—owing to the growing public discussions regarding racial divisions, sexual tensions, Native American sovereignty, and a culture based on greed and violence. And so the unexpected return of the Western in the early nineties has offered an opportunity to examine the legends of how the West was won, and the history and morality of the trek to the coast.⁴ Only another Western could come to redeem the inherent racism of the tradition of the Western genre, looking ahead by looking back. In *Unforgiven*, the character of W. W. Beauchamp, scribe and witness, is always at hand to embody the revisionist mythmaker of the nineteenth century, and he is portrayed in the most unflattering light. He is a fabricator of opportunistic lies, a coward who wets himself at the sight of a gun pointed at him, and he changes allegiance without a second wasted on loyalty and heroism when he sees a chance to attach himself to another potential subject for his hack journalism. By the same token, as personification of the media he not only serves as a distorting witness, but also exemplifies a structural separation of morality and justice. This narrator is not the storyteller in whose character the just meets himself, as Walter Benjamin had it.⁵ When he meets the just, it is the one least suspected of being just or moral—and so he cannot recognize him. Under what conditions of memory and forgetting, vengeance and forgiveness can justice be recognized in the Western?

The town of Big Whiskey has neither courthouse nor church; all interaction converges in Greely's saloon, the bar and brothel that serves as Big Whiskey's social hub.⁶ Two patrons of Greely's cause a stir when one attacks a prostitute with his knife in retribution for her naive and careless laughter at the diminutive size of his penis. The cowboy badly scars her face before his companion can intervene. The ugly spectacle of impotent rage is surpassed only by the legal adjudication that follows it. Judging the incident to be little more than a case of damaged property, the corrupt sheriff of Big Whiskey orders the perpetrator to deliver a string of ponies to the owner of the brothel. The outraged prostitutes decide to pool their savings and set a prize of one thousand dollars on the heads of the two cowboys. Their leader voices their cause: "Just because we let them smelly fools ride us like horses don't mean we got to let them brand us like horses." And so they scorn the young cowboy when he offers a special horse directly to the biblically named Delilah, in excess of the fine imposed, which will only benefit the owner of the brothel; they refuse to even consider his apology, as well as his attempt at recompense. Although it seems for a moment as if the scarred Delilah would be prepared to accept the gift, the gesture is scorned by the crowd, and then turned down by the women.

Why would the cowboy offer a horse in excess of the fine imposed, and why is his offer turned down? He seeks to compensate in a way that would not inscribe his guilt, as money does, but transform it, as a gift might. One never gives or takes without regard to forgetting and memory, be it by way of distributing and parceling out, rewarding or repaying, or finally in the form of taking interest. Here Eastwood stages a labor theory of value: the man who lives by the horse should give a horse. This distinguishes it from the money the women put on the cowboys' heads. But these categories are already confounded: the prostitutes sell something that is otherwise only given, or exchanged for like attention; money already contaminates their relationship, so the gift of a horse offered is not seen as qualitatively different from an economic reparation. What the prostitutes want at this point—looking the gift horse in the mouth, as it were—is something above and beyond repayment, since that would only denigrate Delilah again by branding her a commodity. They call for revenge, since in this inverted situation money is the only way they can get what is beyond commerce, what transcends the bond that makes them prostitutes.

In opposing a system of exchange, responsibility, and accountability to an

economy of sacrifice, substitution, and debt—lastly, of money—we separate a mode of calculation from what could be subsumed as a monotheistic religious tradition.⁷ Some commentators tried to read the film as an allegory of redemption, while others presented it as a Calvinist portrait of innate depravity.⁸ Unforgiving Nature takes the role of condemning, or saving, the people on the frontier: it is the landscape that reminds them of their finitude, the weather announces portentous scenes, and whether they are coming from the mud of a pig farm or falling, shot, into the dirt outside a saloon, their relation to the land is one of antagonism. In Eastwood's film the protagonists of *Unforgiven* are either shown in wide shots as part of endless scenery or in close-up, typically at night, so that in either case, the open land does not represent freedom but imminent danger. Eastwood does not merely point to this in *Unforgiven*, he has it spelled out by English Bob, the first contract killer to arrive in Big Whiskey to collect the reward, who remarks to his fellow travelers on the train across the plains that it was the vastness of America and the unforgiving climate of the West that had bad effects on its inhabitants. The gunfighter is driven out of town after a brutal beating by the sheriff, but Beauchamp the scribe stays on, abandoning his hagiography of English Bob as the "Duke of Death" whose gun kept Chinese railway workers at bay.⁹ The dangers of exaggerated rumor—and the consequences of overreaction—come to the fore when his boastful attitude earns him scars and scorn. English Bob brings a colonialist view of the settlement in the West to bear on the scene; what gets him kicked out of town is his ridicule of democracy: when the head of state is a royal, he claims, a sense of respect and awe will stay the hands of any potential assassin, but with a president, why not kill him? For blaming violence on democracy, the sheriff decides, he deserves to be on the receiving end of that very violence. Whether as divine mercy or as human capacity, forgiveness is impossible in this old new Western.

Eastwood stages the abyssal division not only of forgiving versus a calculation of debt, but also versus forgetting, or versus the civilized speech acts of excuse, ruefulness, or reparation—what is denied here is not only the *fait social total* sociologists recognize in the structure of the gift and its reception or return, but also the analogous structure of *for-giving*. The three leading men, gunfighters played by Clint Eastwood (William Munny), Gene Hackman (Sheriff Daggett), and Richard Harris (English Bob), slide down the slippery slope to an excess of violence that must cost lives. There is no

life on William Munny's farm of dying pigs, dry land, and abandoned children; there are no children to be seen at all in the town of Big Whiskey, just single men and prostitutes. Only violence and death are given in generous quantities.

The three leading actors acquired reputations for portraying explosive violence on-screen, and this reputation catches up with them in *Unforgiven*.¹⁰ If Eastwood had become typecast as the self-reliant, brutal, cool, effortlessly superior hero of so many films—Westerns or not—here he spends most of the 132 minutes trying not to become that character. The irony of a self-referential Clint Eastwood playing a decrepit Western legend coming back from retirement led commentators to claim that *Unforgiven* is “a film that deconstructs and then reincarnates Eastwood's thirty-year-old persona into a mythic, yet malefic, archangel-antihero.”¹¹ Indeed in this film, the return of the violent persona turns into a moral defeat for the protagonist—but it is a defeat that has, in a sense, always already happened, and Munny has been carrying it around with him, hatching it. It is not only the return of what was believed to be superseded; it is not merely the recall of an old man. Like the unexpected return of the Western genre in the past decade, the return of the superheroic characters Eastwood played in prior roles, ranging from the sardonically brutal to the protofascist, is symptomatic. If this is a film about the inability to forgive, about retribution and revenge, its concept of justice is sharply separated from our time-honored moral conventions established in the institutions that administer judgment. Indeed in its portrayal of retribution, it calls to mind the Old Testament and the fact that retribution as such relieves time, or seems supremely indifferent to time: the deadline of the last judgment whose instrument Clint Eastwood's protagonist once again plays is that very due date when all deferrals cease and all debts come due.

The traditional Western is a mythical, metaphorical play of morals; codes of honor prevail, crime does not pay in the end, and the fair-haired hero rides off into the sunset of the frontier landscape, the plains, the desert, the valley—sure of having righted the wrong once more. Most reviews of *Unforgiven* have tended to insist on reading William Munny as the hand of an Old Testament God, and the film as “a morality tale with a strong sense of puritanic gloom.”¹² However, it can just as well be construed as an anti-Western in that it shows the complete absence of morality in the lives of the settlers. Moreover, the movie sharply separates justice from morality. As Walter Benjamin and other media theorists have suggested, film is as

much about halting, capturing the moment, as it is about animation—and that is how the film is “shot.”¹³ From the opening scene, Eastwood highlights this by consistent parallel cutting: while the aging protagonist, ex-killer and inept pig farmer William Munny, is in the mud fighting his feverish pigs, the insecure young cowboy is knifing a whore who dared to giggle at his diminutive penis. The dry and barren landscape of the infertile farm is contrasted with the heavy rain that pours down on Big Whiskey. The dovetailed narrative narrows the gap slowly, advancing to the point where Munny reverts to drinking, and to killing, and is eventually in the same room with the remaining cast, blasting them away. The split beginning—the cut from town to country and back, from the sins of the bar and brothel to the attempt at a decent life of hard work and living on the fruit of one’s own labor—boils down, very deliberately and menacingly, to a showdown that is also a meltdown of almost every moral or just impulse.

William Munny used to consider himself in it only for the money—and at first sight, money is what lures him out of retirement. His opponent is Little Bill, as in the dollar bill; his own daughter, Penny, and his competitor, English Bob, also have names that have a ring of currency. When the rumor reaches Munny, delivered through an aspiring gunslinger, the Schofield Kid, that a violated prostitute in the shantytown of Big Whiskey has been treated like damaged property, this also betrays the mercantilism of the “Western” system of justice. Munny is not interested in avenging the crime committed against the prostitute, nor in any brand of justice; he only wants to save his pigs and kids from illness and starvation by collecting the reward for a double murder contract: Munny needs that money, even if it carries the risks of killing on credit, for the prostitutes do not have that kind of money saved up. He has tried to leave his violent past behind, however; his late wife had helped reform him from a murderous, uncontrollable alcoholic into a temperate pig farmer before she passed away, and his mercenary mind has been repressed. Having stopped drinking, he can hardly mount his horse, but when temptation comes in the shape of the Schofield Kid, a short-sighted boy aspiring to become a feared gunfighter, who brings the greatly exaggerated rumor of the slashing of a woman’s whole body, and of the reward to be collected by an assassin, Munny cannot hold his old ways in abeyance for long. He abandons his feverish pigs and his small children, seeks out his former partner, Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), and under portentous dark clouds rides toward Big Whiskey.

By the time Munny reaches the town in heavy rain, he is ill and feverish. Confronted by the sheriff in the saloon where his companions contact the whores to negotiate a contract, he does not defend himself against the vicious beating he receives at the hand of the law. He crawls out of Greely's onto the muddy street, an innocent man in the dirt. Lapsing into unconsciousness, he sees the face of his deceased wife. Munny had tried to revisit his past with his old partner, and to take responsibility for his evil deeds, but the Schofield Kid kept interrupting them, demanding graphic details of their numerous killings. When Munny succumbs to his fever, he sees the faces of his deceased wife and of the angel of death, but this dream sequence does not bring on a scene of forgiveness. Having killed in a stupor, Munny can only seek redemption in a repetition of his drunken behavior. Delilah's face is the first thing the delirious Munny, persecuted by hallucinations of his past victims, sees when he wakes up from his fever—and he takes her for an angel. Coming alive, he identifies with her scarred appearance and even makes an attempt to console her: "I must look kinda like you now." The exaggerated accounts of her mutilation are in stark contrast to the visual evidence of her beauty, yet the bleeding wounds and scars on both their faces are symbolic of castration, which explains why the prostitute is no longer marketable. As marginal character on the thresholds and in the arcades, the prostitute is the commodity become human, as Benjamin explained. When commodities want to see their own faces, they are personified as whores. They express in displaced and defaced ways the unity of social content and form, seller and commodity at once.¹⁴ Only once, when Delilah is not wearing makeup, can she be recognized as anything other than wares for sale.

It becomes increasingly clear that the entire web of relations in the film is based on exaggerated rumor. The men invent their own nicknames to build fake reputations; the women lie about the money they can pay as reward for a hired killer; the Schofield Kid lies and brags about the many men he supposedly killed; and everyone exaggerates the harm done to the young prostitute. Only Munny resists this general urge to brag. Whenever the Kid tries to elicit more information about who Munny had killed, how, and when, Munny's answer is invariably the same: "It ain't like that anymore, Kid. Whiskey done it as much as anything else. I ain't had a drop in ten years. My wife, she cured me of that. Cured me of drink and wickedness." But soon enough, Munny's resolve weakens.

When the three men hoping to collect the reward, Munny, Logan and the

Kid, arrive at the camp of the cowboys, it turns out that the Kid has such bad eyesight that he cannot shoot either perpetrator from the distance. Ned Logan aims his rifle, but finds himself unable to overcome his scruples. In the end, Munny has to wrest the gun from him and shoot. His conscience makes this killing, unlike most such scenes of retribution in a conventional Western, a torture for him. As he peers through the aim, however, he realizes that the cowboy is hit in the stomach and still alive. He allows a companion hidden nearby to bring the suffering victim a drink, but eventually has to shoot a second time to put him out of his misery. Killing has never been this hard in a Western. Ned decides to give up the bounty hunt and rides back, leaving his rifle with Munny. The Kid and Munny follow the group of cowboys to a ranch, where they wait for night to fall. When the second target brazenly goes to the outhouse, the Kid sneaks up on him, opens the door to the toilet, and shoots him point blank. This direct association of the criminal with excrement and money might serve to justify the murder of a defenseless man. The Kid is wracked with guilt afterward, however, and confesses that contrary to his wild claims, he had never killed before. "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man," Munny admits, haltingly, "you take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have." The Kid snuffles in denial, "Yeah well, I guess he had it coming . . ."—to which Munny replies laconically: "We all have it coming, Kid." In this certitude, Munny seems to find solace, but the Kid abandons his hopes of becoming a man of the gun and leaves Munny, just as a representative from the brothel arrives to deliver their reward. The prostitutes recoil when they learn about Munny's past and keep their distance; from here on, he is completely on his own.

Psychoanalytic accounts of the film assert that it represents "the epic struggle between the Id (violence) and the superego," the latter personified in Munny's late wife, Claudia, who is responsible for his attempts to sober up and eke out a farmer's life. Yet, this does not allow for an interpretation of the subtle character development over the course of the film, nor does it resonate with the context of the Western as an Eastwood vehicle. Religious interpretations tend toward the view that "to be saved, Munny must become the ultimate sinner," and that his "eschatological control of violence, and his pathological ability not to feel any fear or remorse" are what makes him God's instrument of wrath.¹⁵ However, this interpretation does not account for the many instances where Munny insists on his newly won virtue, chiding his married partner for considering the services of prostitutes and later

turning down a free offer from Delilah, the one whose violation sets off the whole plot. “It ain’t right buying flesh,” he tells Ned. Long after his wife’s death, he keeps his promises to her, the only woman in the movie who is not a prostitute. All other female characters, whatever their differences, are presented as commodities, with crumbling makeup on their harsh, deteriorating faces, their reproductive powers gradually destroyed since only by selling sex do they get money, clothes, food, and so on.¹⁶ Munny’s asceticism is in stark contrast to the driven nature of most men around him. He not only refrains from sex and alcohol, but also refuses to be drawn into a brawl by the sheriff—who beats him up anyway, to make up for the gun duel that could have ensued. Little Bill Daggett uses his “Ordinance no. 14—no firearms in Big Whiskey” as an excuse to bully any outsiders, but he does not enforce it with the townspeople—Skinny Dubois, for one, has a pistol.

The symbolism of America’s pervasive gun culture stems largely from the conventions of the Western; the anachronistic continuation has its cause not in the dangers of the frontier life, but in the screen attitude that carries over into the urban sphere.¹⁷ How much the gun equals the phallus in *Unforgiven* becomes even more explicit in the story of how “Two-Gun” Corcoran lost in the duel against English Bob: he only had one pistol, but his penis was rumored to be gun-sized. When Beauchamp takes the nickname literally and produces a florid description of a duel, Little Bill has to disabuse him by telling how Corcoran first shot his own foot and then, after his pistol had exploded on the second shot, was killed in cold blood by a drunken English Bob—not at all in the course of a duel, but in the middle of a saloon. In turn, before chasing him out of town in shame, Sheriff Daggett bends the barrel of English Bob’s gun, another symbolic insult denoting impotence and self-destruction. The confrontation between the two men who wish to become legends in their own lifetimes is not a standoff between the law and the criminal, but a media event, a battle of egos where both are motivated by the same seedy aspirations. Little Bill not only chases the competition out of town, he also robs English Bob of his “biographer,” thus consigning him to obscurity while securing his own inscription in the myth of the American West. And indeed the film may be seen to oscillate between opposing poles of memory and forgetting, only to converge, finally, on their fold.

As Clint Eastwood says, his approach to *Unforgiven* “was to forget that we’re shooting in color. It’s as if we’re shooting in black and white and getting the kind of look you saw in something like John Ford’s *My Darling*

Clementine" (1947).¹⁸ This covert operation of shooting in grayscale is also a symptom of the stricture *Unforgiven* must find itself in. Pretending to be in the black-and-white past while nevertheless using muted colors, it screens over the fact that it is informed by, and thus partly detached from and partly indebted to, the films of the past.¹⁹ The screen memory shows itself here as that which leads to a shift in perception: if the spacing out is barred, it yields to a time inversion, to a folding in of past and future: "In remembering the neglected Western, Eastwood presents one that has been deconstructed and reconstituted, dismembered then rebuilt, to express a contemporary understanding of what the west and the Western now mean (and have done) to America."²⁰ Much the same goes for his character, William Munny, who cannot forget what he will have become once more; he does not come to himself of necessity. But beneath this deflection of his memory, the unavoidable injunction, oscillating between repression and relentless recall, is not to let the forgetting take place, not to let it take hold—and whether by means of censure or erasure, what remains is but a screen memory.

A scrupulous analysis, says Freud, can develop everything that is "forgotten" from screen memories; they represent that which is no longer available as such, "no longer to be had." These previously unconscious imprints would not even have to be true; but on the other hand, they are no mere fantasies either: some memories, as Freud has it, are encountered "in a first phase of repression, so to speak"—a little later, the doubt they produce will have been replaced by forgetting or false memory, and these are the necessary correlatives of the symptoms.²¹ This necessity corresponds with an embarrassment, for the manifold manifestations of memory are not just countered by one, monolithic forgetting, which cannot be pluralized. The curse of repetition corrupts it, so that media discourse eventually observes itself as the stuttering repetition of oblivion, a machinery of forgetting; the art of the cover-up on-screen follows suit. Moreover, amnesia and memory pathologies are complementary to one another, according to Freud: where we have great gaps of memory, we will find few instances of *fausse memoire*, and inversely, the latter can cover up the presence of amnesia at first sight.²² The victorious series of mnemotechnical innovations brought on not only a nearly complete conservation of recent cultural history, but also the concomitant screen memories. The omnipresent reduplication of nearly everything has given rise to a kind of cultural paramnesia, and Eastwood himself, both in the film and in interviews, leaves open the question of whether

William Munny has changed or merely reverted to his old wicked ways.²³ Either way, Munny's repressed past sets him up for a dangerous rendezvous with what he cannot entirely forget.

When the townsmen arrest the innocent Ned on his way home, he becomes another victim to the arbitrary "justice" wielded in town. While interrogating Ned about Munny and the Kid, they beat him to death and leave his corpse in a coffin outside the saloon. Munny starts drinking again when he learns of this incident. After finishing a bottle of whiskey, he begins to revert to his old, mean, cold-blooded self. In a rage, he rides back through the bad weather—this time for revenge. By now, he fully remembers what he is. His entry to the saloon is preceded by ominous thunderclaps, and followed by a portentous silence. First, he asks for the owner of the saloon and then shoots him without asking any further questions. Then, confronting the sheriff and his henchmen, he admits, "I've killed women and children, killed just about anything that walks or crawls at one time or another. And I'm here to kill you, Little Bill, for what you did to Ned." Yet, when he takes aim—last denouement—his rifle misfires. Swiftly, Munny throws the gun at Sheriff Daggett and draws his pistols, shooting most of the men present without getting hit himself. Here, he is the avenging angel of death, quasi-immortal in his just rage. Neither the hired gun William Munny nor the lawless sheriff Bill Daggett are expecting or even considering reconciliation. This movie foils any expectation for the sinner-protagonist to be forgiven. No biblically connotated evocation of judgment and atonement through sacrifice intervenes on the scene of rage that ends their opposition. When Munny finally prepares to shoot and execute the wounded, pleading sheriff at close range, he shows none of the scruples he had when taking aim at the cowboy earlier. Little Bill swears at him and protests: "I don't deserve this!" But Munny calmly disabuses him of the reference to justice: "Deserve's got nothing to do with it." And with that, he pulls the trigger.

Why would Munny and his associates have gone after other men to take their lives? What economy motivates their transgression of the norms of society and commerce? Surely it is not merely the sum promised, since it is neither guaranteed nor, split among three hired guns, exorbitant. As Freud reports in linking bungled actions and economic problems, an initially insoluble symptom can become accessible to analysis once the immediate interest in repression has subsided.²⁴ Munny helps the prostitutes but turns down their offers of free sex in order to preserve the memory of his wife.²⁵

His old associate rides with him out of friendship, despite the protests of his Indian wife. *Unforgiven* intimates the stakes of forgiveness and altruism without making them explicit. Forgiveness and altruism delimit the economy of circulation by going above and beyond reciprocity and exchange. Arguably, the monetary system of capitalist societies invests in a representation of the short-term present that indicates little about future and past and is rarely observed in terms of future or past. By the same token, media entertainment is to transfer loss into the living memory of sequential, ordered recognition that allows one to process the event—that is, to mourn, and to bestow posterity onto the dead instead of anonymous forgetting. While other defensive mechanisms like displacement, denial, or inversion into the opposite affect the dynamics of the drive itself, repression and projection only affect the perception of the drive. Repression sends the unwelcome representation back to the id, but projection sends it to the outside world.²⁶ In this way, even infants are able to deal with aggressions and desires that threaten to become uncomfortable: they are relegated to the surrounding world and projected onto someone else. Whether or not the gain from social interaction can be said to outweigh the drawbacks of neglecting the pure expedience of self-interest, the question is whether it could ever be rational to act in purely self-regarding ways. The irony of a typecast Eastwood character playing against stereotype and self-reflectively trying not to become the violent avenger that he usually represents on-screen introduces another twist: Munny's motivation is indeed not simply cash, nor the remains of his infamy, nor that he has no alternative. Like his old associate, he exhibits impulses that invite interpretation. One aspect comes out in their attitude toward women, which is a major theme of the movie. The other theme is the difficulty of memory—specifically, throughout the movie, Munny's self-reflection, fraught with notions of a repressed older past and the injunction of a more recent past.

While rationalist interpretations grapple with the possibility of motivated irrationality, for self-helpings of symptom relief, psychoanalysis is already marketed as a user's manual to media effects, as Laurence Rickels proposes.²⁷ The epoch of psychoanalysis promised to redevelop all that is forgotten through thorough analysis—from screen memories representing what is no longer available as such. The corollary of this theory is that unconscious "memories" do not even have to be true—although they cannot be dismissed as pure fantasies either, as exemplified by the vile reputation of

the gun-slinging young Munny that in his old age he can neither verify nor falsify while sober. Instead, certain memories are encountered only in a first state of repression, as it were—in the mode of a doubt, only to be replaced a little later by forgetting or false memory. As Eastwood shows, to reduce the effect to one cause denies the structure of the effect itself in its relation to causal thinking. The screen memory eludes premature identifications of Munny's past and present motivations. What Rickels has called the "tragic dimension or blind date of modern neurotic thought: the couplification with an other who keeps always to another time zone" will turn out to be a scene older than memory.²⁸ For it was always already possible that someone may give too much too soon and then either have to resort to theft or count on the altruism of the other.

Putting someone to death seems to preclude any forgiveness; by the same token, its necessity grows to infinity in the irreparable taking of a human life. Having spared only those who flee or are unarmed, Munny proceeds to scare the greedy, slimy scribe Beauchamp away, who of course immediately sought an interview with his new hero of the moment. Munny preempts any attempt at mythologizing the multiple murders by dismissing it as chance: "I guess I was lucky; but I have always been lucky when it comes to killing folks." Standing alone between the rubble of the saloon and the heavy storm that blows outside, Eastwood's avenging, lucky killer appears to join Walter Benjamin's luckless angel. And here we arrive at an interpretation of the storm that incessantly drives the angel into the future behind his back, while he faces the ruins of the present and the past growing before his eyes—an interpretation that we can corroborate with a note by Benjamin on time in the moral world. In leaving, Munny shouts out into the empty street that he would return to avenge any further harm done to the prostitutes, and that he would not only seek retribution against any perpetrators, but also kill their wives and children. His Old-Testamentary wrath is addressed to the invisible townsfolk, a voice of authority in the storm that howls over Big Whiskey, to be interiorized as the law to replace the regime of corruption. His amnesty of a few witnesses can be seen as a quasi-legal form of the religious principle of forgiveness, but true forgiveness itself would not only suspend any law, but also supersede it, for it is not of the order of the law. And while the experience of time, that the past is not erased, is pivotal for the scene of forgiveness, the element of retribution is the return of the past in the moment. It suspends the law, and the law of time along with it; for despite the irre-

versible and irreducible dimension of the crime to be forgiven, any delay of judgment, which would temper justice with mercy, is precisely denied in retribution—significantly, the last judgment suspends all time.

This is not the stereotypical quiet before the storm, but rather the cleansing storm that precedes fatal flashes of lightning and claps of thunder. Before we jump to the conclusion that Eastwood, like Benjamin, shows us the medium of cinema itself in those flashes of lightning and claps of thunder, let us dwell on the fact that the entire movie takes place in what precedes and leads up to that final scene. Walter Benjamin's vision of the Last Judgment in a timeless, suspended "world of justice" is not the lonely stillness of fear, but the "loud storm of forgiveness preceding the ever approaching Judgment against which there is no resistance."²⁹ The true meaning of the day of the Last Judgment, Benjamin argues, can only be disclosed when forgiveness joins retribution. The "storm" of forgiveness that must necessarily recall the past in which a misdeed occurred finds its powerful articulation precisely *in time*. Insofar as, according to Benjamin, this storm is not only the "voice" in which the anxious cry of the criminal is drowned, but also the hand that erases the traces of his misdeed, this is "God's wrath in the storm of forgiveness." Preceding the ever-deferred day of judgment that "flees from the hour of the misdeed relentlessly into the future," the cleansing hurricane of forgiveness comes before the fatal lightning of "divine weather" that would have to annihilate what is left, whatever had not been forgiven. This, according to Benjamin, is the importance of time in the moral world, where it not only erases the traces of the misdeeds, but also offers to attain forgiveness—"beyond all remembering or forgetting"—for their impact: forgiveness, but not atonement.

The temporal fold of the scene of forgiveness and judgment is at once the paradoxical representation of a past misdeed, a hallucination that serves as a screen memory, and the suspension of historicity. *Unforgiven* is framed by a prologue and epilogue, which display a few lines referring to Munny's wife; at the beginning and the end, on the identical background of Munny kneeling before a grave under a tree, it tells of a reformed man of a notoriously vicious temper. It is indicated at the end that in his quest for himself and for money, Munny eventually goes to the California coast and starts a new life there—in business. To do justice to the tensions with which Eastwood charges his movie, both the psychoanalytic approach and a reading informed by the Western religious heritage have to be woven together in

a mediation that tries to redeem the Western, tries to preserve the condemned fabrication and mythmaking that are part and saddlebag of the genre. *Unforgiven* takes rigorous stock of the romanticism of the legendary Old West in which it also indulges. The revisionist force and traditional inheritance of Clint Eastwood's old-new Western reside in this fold, and thus Munny becomes the full embodiment of the tensions Nietzsche expressed so pithily: "He forgets most everything in order to do one thing, he is unjust against what is behind him, and knows only one right—the right of that which is to come."³⁰

To do justice, moreover, to the possibility of redemption that Eastwood stages within the medium and for the medium is to recognize the irreducible fold of his simultaneous faithfulness to and forgetting of a genre, a fold that is difficult to indicate without reducing it in turn to a simple editing trick, the effect of a film cut. While it is integral to the logic of the industry and the market of the screen, this fold also exemplifies the logic of cultural paramnesia that will dissimulate and envelop screen memories. *Unforgiven* was only the third Western since 1931 to be nominated and chosen for Best Picture at the Academy Awards; for six decades, there had been no such award for a Western until Kevin Costner's film *Dances with Wolves* won the year before *Unforgiven*. When *Unforgiven* received four Oscars in 1993, there was a general sense that Hollywood was recompensating one of its own for his long-running career and box office success. At long last, the industry had decided to forgive Eastwood's "spaghetti-Western" past and his infamously violent films under the direction of Sergio Leone and Don Siegel. To award both Best Director and Best Picture to the actor-director whose movie, apart from winning another two Academy Awards (for Gene Hackman as Best Supporting Actor and for Best Editing), was nominated in no less than nine categories (including Best Actor, Screenplay, Cinematography, Sound, and Art Direction) amounted to a very belated recognition of his screen appeal—and the income generated by it.³¹ Arguably, the regime of judgment the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences wields year by year is repressing the fact that film is the genre of violence, and trying to rise above that is Hollywood's perennial bad faith. Unlike the sentimental *Dances with Wolves*, which offers no critique of the genre and is replete with idealized cultural correctness, in *Unforgiven* Eastwood addresses the weighty heritage of Hollywood's business with the promised land rather directly, and consequently, it appears that what Eastwood had become on the big screen then had to be

dissected repeatedly before it could be forgiven by the industry. *Unforgiven* achieves this self-reflection by a complicated folding in on itself, indulging as well as exposing the tall tales that Hollywood sells.

Notes

The motto “Le duel et le don vont a la mort” is taken from Jacques Derrida, for whose seminar “Pardon/Parjure” this text was originally written. Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 14–15.

- 1 “Where, however, what is ‘brought closer’ is itself already a reproduction—and as such, separated from itself—the closer it comes, the more distant it is” (Samuel Weber, “Mass Mediauras, or: Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin,” *Mass Mediauras* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996], 76–107; quotation from 88).
- 2 Although the difference of repetition and novelty constitutes a condition of possibility for any kind of attention, one might argue that the truly new will only appear as such in repetition. Likewise, the dialectical image of distraction and attention pivots on habit and its interruption: “All attention must end up in habit, if it does not tear one apart; all habit must be disturbed by attention if it is not to hem one in” (Walter Benjamin, “Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, pt. 1 [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991], 407–8).
- 3 “Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control,” Walter Benjamin wrote, “of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception” (Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], 217–51; quotation from 240).
- 4 The original script by David Webb Peoples was written in the 1970s, and *Unforgiven* shows traces of the political criticism of the genre that became important at that time.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations*, 83–109; quotation from 109.
- 6 An allusion to Horace Greeley, to whom the exhortation “Go west, young man” is attributed. (In fact it was John Babson Soule who first coined the phrase, in an article for the *Terre Haute Express* in 1851. It became the motto of Manifest Destiny when Horace Greeley reprinted the piece in the *New Yorker*. Although he gave Soule full credit, the expression has since been attributed to Greeley—a clear example for parapraxis of memory even under the condition of media archives. Or as Yogi Berra protested, “I really didn’t say everything I said.”)
- 7 Stuart Klawans even claims that while John Ford made Hellenic Westerns, Clint Eastwood makes “Hebraic” ones: dark, murky, barren, flat. Stuart Klawans, “Unforgiven,” *The Nation*, September 14, 1992, 258–60.
- 8 Michael Sragow, “Outlaws,” *New Yorker*, August 10, 1992, 70–73.
- 9 This is another repressed narrative of exploitation; rumor of how wealth is to be won in the West keeps the settlers coming, but also attracts the contract killers who keep workers in check.
- 10 John C. Tibbetts, “Clint Eastwood and the Machinery of Violence,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21.1 (1993): 11–17.

- 11 Laurence F. Knapp, *Directed by Eastwood* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), 162. Eastwood kept revisiting the characters he portrayed on-screen in sequels, and he still displays the pot-bellied stove used in *Unforgiven* as part of the decoration of his restaurant, Mission Ranch in Carmel, where he was mayor for a number of years. See Richard Combs, "Shadowing the Hero," *Sight and Sound* 2.6 (October 1992): 15.
- 12 Len Engel, "Rewriting Western Myths in Clint Eastwood's New 'Old Western,'" *Western American Literature* 29.3 (November 1994): 261–69; Philip J. Skerry, "Apocalyptic, Postrevisionist Westerns," in *Beyond the Stars 5: Themes and Ideologies in American Popular Film*, ed. Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1996), 281–91. In an earlier article, Skerry had already pronounced the genre dead: "The Western Film: A Sense of an Ending," *New Orleans Review* 17.3 (1989): 13–17.
- 13 Weber, "Mass Mediauras," 91.
- 14 Walter Benjamin, "Zentralpark," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, pt. 2, 671; See also vol. 2, pt. 1: "Überall, wo ein Handeln selber das Bild aus sich herausstellt und ist, in sich hineinreißt und frißt, wo die Nähe sich selbst aus den Augen sieht, tut dieser gesuchte Bildraum sich auf, die Welt allseitiger und integraler Aktualität" (309).
- 15 Knapp, *Directed by Eastwood*, 164.
- 16 See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, [1949] 1989), 599.
- 17 Leighton Grist, "Unforgiven," in *The Book of Westerns*, ed. Ian Cameron, Douglas Pye (New York: Continuum, 1996), 294–301; Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: BFI, 1988), 132.
- 18 John C. Tibbetts, "Clint Eastwood and the Machinery of Violence," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21.1 (1993): 15.
- 19 There is an eponymous, older film by John Huston. His *Unforgiven* (1960) is about almost everything Eastwood's is not: family, inheritance, bringing up children. A girl is raised by a white settler family, but turns out to be a lost American Indian girl, abducted in a raid. Eventually, she chooses sides and kills one of her Kiawa brothers. (This scenario is the inverse of a late John Ford film, *The Searchers* [1956], in which Natalie Wood plays a white girl adopted by Indians. Her uncle, played by John Wayne, goes after her, either to rescue her, or if she is assimilated, to kill her. See the documentary by Nick Redman and Brian Jamieson, *A Turning of the Earth: John Ford, John Wayne and the Searchers* [1999].) Unlikely as it seems, none of the secondary sources I found compare or contrast the eponymous films. It is just possible that here is another screen memory.
- 20 Maurice Yacowar, "Re-Membering the Western: Eastwood's *Unforgiven*," *Queens Quarterly* 100.1 (Spring 1993): 247–57; quotation from 247.
- 21 Sigmund Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Works*, vol. 15 (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 15; "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *Standard Edition*, vol. 17, 3.
- 22 Sigmund Freud, "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria," *Standard Edition*, vol. 9, 116.
- 23 David Breskin, *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 376–403; Knapp, *Directed by Eastwood*, 162–78.

- 24 Sigmund Freud, "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life," in *Standard Edition*, vol. 6, xii (as well as the footnote devoted to Tausk).
- 25 This sums up the inversion that is prostitution—once again, there are no living women in the movie who are not whores.
- 26 Anna Freud, "Eine Form von Altruismus," in *Die Schriften der Anna Freud*, vol. 1: 1922–1936 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), 305–15.
- 27 Laurence Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 253.
- 28 Laurence Rickels, *The Case of California* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 133.
- 29 "Nicht die einsame Windstille der Angst, sondern der vorm immer nahenden Gericht daherbrausende laute Sturm der Vergebung, gegen den sie nicht ankann" (Walter Benjamin: "Die Bedeutung der Zeit in der moralischen Welt," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, pt. 1, 97–98). See Gershom Scholem, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), 258.
- 30 "Er vergißt das Meiste, um Eins zu thun, er ist ungerecht gegen das, was hinter ihm liegt, und kennt nur ein Recht, das Recht dessen, was jetzt werden soll" (Friedrich Nietzsche, "Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen, Zweites Stück: Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. Giorgio Colli, Mazzino Montinari (Munich: DTV, 1988), 254.
- 31 *Unforgiven*, dedicated to "Sergio and Don," grossed more than \$100 million in the United States alone, and it won Golden Globes for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actor in 1993. Clint Eastwood had directed fifteen films before it, and acted in many more. In 1931, *Cimarron* by Wesley Ruggles won the Oscar for Best Picture. Of course, movies such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) or *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), to name but two that were more interesting than *Dances with Wolves*, have successfully continued and transvalued the Western tradition, but were not recognized at the Oscars.