

**GENRE, AUTEUR AND IDENTITY
IN CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD CINEMA:
CLINT EASTWOOD'S *WHITE HUNTER,*
*BLACK HEART*¹**

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In keeping with contemporary enthusiasm for popular culture products, recent US American film criticism has shown great interest in the study of clearly codified artistic forms, with special emphasis on generic conventions and their attendant ideologies. This interest seems to be based on a distinction between generic and personal films, the assumption being that the former are more appropriate objects of study because they show a consistency and predictability that the latter lack. Critical interest does not, however, run parallel with Hollywood's production, and the truth is that genre pieces do still coexist with a considerable number of more personal films, which show a relatively more realistic approach and pay more attention than the average Hollywood narrative to the construction of their characters. These films, presumably targeted at more mature audiences than the generic majority, seem to join forces with the independent cinema of the 80s and 90s, which has often exhibited a return to well-crafted stories and characters typical of classical cinema. In this paper I would like to concentrate on the study of Clint Eastwood's *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990) as a film with an interest in portraying the experience of the "self" through textual forms that fall outside Hollywood's generic codes. The mention of Clint Eastwood already indicates the relevance of his presence, both as actor and director, to the understanding of the film, illustrating the persistence of forms of auteurism in contemporary Hollywood. Despite the waning of auteurism as a critical concept in film studies,

it is undeniable that, perhaps as a vestige of the popularity of auteurs in the 1970s, the figure of the director is still associated with some Hollywood films.

British sociologist Anthony Giddens represents a fecund branch of social theory that focuses on the analysis of the changes experienced by the individual in the passage from traditional societies to contemporary ones and sees in the notion of reflexivity a major defining feature of such societies (1991, Gergen 1991, Lash and Urry 1994). His thesis is that modern societies have created a new kind of self built through self-reflexive life projects, in which individuals constantly reassess their position within the world and plan their future life accordingly. This reflexivity has led individuals to a life in which their own desires and appreciations become the only basis of their existence, contemporary societies thereby entering a constant conflict between those personal philosophies of life and the more traditional morality, which had reappeared in response to the demands of both social life and nature, implying concepts such as responsibility towards others that were basic to the survival of premodern societies (1991). In *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990) the notion of the self crystallises into an exploration of responsibility, a value which, as Eastwood and contemporary social critics have said, is frequently shunned in contemporary US American society. My aim is to use the discourse that emerges from this tension between reflexivity and responsibility as a basis from which to explore the film's implications for genre and the auteur: how does the auteur influence genre in the presentation of that conflict? The central thesis of the paper is to prove the relevance of a joint genre-auteur analysis which draws on the empirical evidence of the persistent figure of the auteur in contemporary cinema by tracing its impact on the dynamics of genre, rendering *White Hunter, Black Heart* amenable to cultural criticism. Analysis will progress from a consideration of the interplay of reflexivity and masculinity in the film to a discussion of reflexivity and genre inflected by the preceding study of masculinity.

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Before engaging in a more detailed discussion of the film, I would like to outline the contexts that provide the set of discourses at work in the film. These contexts are authorship, self-identity, and Clint Eastwood as actor and director. Authorship is, together with genres, one of the most useful structuring devices of the cinematic experience, since it helps audiences come to an understanding of film texts by creating expectations about them. The attention of film criticism to authorship has moved from an initial stage, in which auteurism and the so-called "auteur-structuralism" saw the cinema as the more or less covert expression of the directors' artistic personality, to a subsequent concentration on the author as expression of industrial, historical and social circumstances that seep through films.² As a director, Clint Eastwood illustrates both the industry's practice of attaching meanings to a personality for marketing purposes and the gradual

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construction of film icons as centres of potent ideological strategies. In Eastwood's case that ideological discourse revolves around the idea of truthfulness.³

Traditionally, auteur-oriented film analysis has perceived cinema as an expression of a personal worldview. Film directors have often been regarded as the most accessible entrances to cinema and its mysteries, and the attention received from critics and audiences has partly been related to a search for identity: the film's identity that critics want to penetrate through investigation of its director, the director's identity that emanates from his/her films, even the identity of critics and audiences, who look to the director as a cult figure that will help define their worldview by identification with or rejection of the director's discourse. Given the value placed on the individual as both creator and possessor of an identity, authorship and identity may be seen, then, as two sides of the same coin. *White Hunter, Black Heart* exhibits a set of discourses on identity that make reflexivity and its attendant notions the centre of the characters' conflicts. Contemporary societies characteristically show a dynamism caused by, among other elements, reflexivity, defined by Giddens as the "susceptibility of social activity to constant revision in the light of new information or knowledge" (1991: 10-34). This reflexivity is essential to the constitution of modern self-identity, which involves continual observation of oneself in order to create a life trajectory through the elaboration of a narrative of the self, a story of one's life that develops from past events to future projects. Life is seen as a series of stages that are consciously lived through as part of a project of continual actualisation. A moral dimension is usually attached to this process since improvement is regarded as being true to oneself, which places the moral value of authenticity at the centre of self-reflexivity. Authenticity becomes an asset in a world where certainties are suspect.⁴

This contemporary identity is not free from tensions. Life actualisation is characterised by its reliance on values which are internally referential, that is, values which are not sanctioned by external social norms and customs but whose vigour is to be found in their own internal mechanisms. Giddens gives what he calls the "pure relationship" as an example: a personal relationship which is built on mutual trust and affection, is not necessarily sanctioned by the external social norm of marriage, and is subject to constant revision and actualisation of the participants' feelings and attitudes within the relationship. These mechanisms of self-actualisation tend to exclude fundamental existential issues which raise central moral dilemmas for human beings: death, madness, sexuality or the traditional bond with nature are systematically excluded. Most clearly, the internally referential project of the self tends to invest individuals with a seemingly complete power to decide about their own lives, so that decisions about their selves are

perceived as far more relevant than any external influence or social rule. This results in a concept of the self that justifies actions exclusively in terms of their impact on the person, independently of any external frame, of any morality that is not personally fabricated by the individual (Giddens 1991: 70-108). This account of the formation of self-identity in contemporary societies is faithfully reproduced by the narratives that circulate in the media. Capitalist societies commodify the project of the self by providing the illusion that self-definition can be achieved through possession of market-offered goods: lifestyle is invested with the power to create identity, and media narratives provide such lifestyles, offering identity models that audiences imitate in pursuit of their selves. By mixing uncertainty and security these narratives also allow individuals to achieve a feeling of reflexive control over their lives, as spectators are led to identify with characters, who are seen to gradually shape their identities through continual revision of themselves in the light of new events (Giddens 1991: 181-208). Film genres provide similar models for the elaboration of self-identity since, in their simulation of everyday life experiences, they mix predictability and contingency in formulaic narrative forms that are both destabilising and reassuring of audiences' expectations.

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It is these discourses, about the concern with the formation of the self and its vicissitudes, that are found in Eastwood's *White Hunter, Black Heart*, a film that departs from the most clearly generic output of the film industry by engaging in a close inspection of the processes at work in its main character's life trajectory. In this film, the protagonist's reflexive assessment of his life is given weight as he (Clint Eastwood) is seen to face situations that lead to a reconsideration of his past and future life. These vital turning points are negotiated through the character's exploration and discovery of his self, of what is most authentic in himself. The film exhibits an interest in the conflict between the character's personal morality and the more external, social morality in the shape of responsibility towards others. It shares the formulaic Hollywood concentration on the individual, but the extraordinary attention given to the creation and development of the main character's personality and internal life separates it from the more generic films, in which characters tend to become types with clearly defined functions within well-known narrative patterns. Its effort to faithfully represent real-life material and psychological states, and its avoidance of a direct exploitation of violence or sexuality also deviate from contemporary genres. This attempt at realism becomes an insight into the complexity of reality, its obstacles and rewards, that illustrates the function of media narratives as surrogate narratives of the self. Extra coherence stems from the fact that it is at the same time a film associated with its director by both industry and audiences, and a film whose protagonist is a director in the story: it would seem to take us back to an auteurism in which the films' interest in the intricacies of life is to be attributed to the personal concerns of the directors behind them.

Before discussing the film in detail, a few remarks on Eastwood and his work are necessary, since his presence provides another set of meanings employed by the film. Clint Eastwood has been classified within the category of the commercial auteur, which includes stars who have become directors, such as Eastwood himself or Kevin Costner, and directors whose celebrity has turned them into stars, for example Steven Spielberg or Woody Allen. What defines these auteurs is the fact that, by virtue of their popularity, their films are invested with a set of meanings which condition both their production and reception (Corrigan 1991: 107). Clint Eastwood has come to represent both an economical production method tied to his film company, Malpaso, and a set of meanings attached to him through the different films he has acted in.⁵ Among those meanings it is relevant to note the cultural debate over Eastwood as a father-figure that crystallised around his two 1990 films, *The Rookie* and *White Hunter, Black Heart*: the first showed how the rookie (Charlie Sheen) grew into the job that the older policeman, played by Eastwood, was about to leave, and the second dealt with the main character's gradual acceptance of responsibilities that seemed at first to be clearly incompatible with his way of life.⁶

Eastwood's status as a father was in fact a mere development of his cultural position as a paradigm of US American masculinity, a paradigm which had been in place since the 1970s.⁷ His masculinity was from the beginning associated with his performance, as critics invariably stressed his incapacity to act and argued that his masculine image relied on his mere presence.⁸ His impassive looks associated with his screen image have given rise to critical analyses of his masculinity as masochistic. For Paul Smith, Eastwood stands for the law of the father, for authority and control, and the masochistic moments in which he is so often involved in his films are not subversive of it but are in fact necessary for his final access to the role of patriarch: they are tests for the meanings to which males accede in patriarchy. However, Smith also sees traces of weakness that emerge through male hysteria and are expressed in moments of powerlessness, when Eastwood is seen to lack control. It is this ambivalent masculinity, the oscillation between potency and weakness suggested through both confident and troubled performances, that has become Eastwood's most recent staple image.⁹

White Hunter, Black Heart is a 1990 film set in the fifties whose subject is an expedition led by American film director John Wilson (Clint Eastwood) to Africa in order to shoot a film titled *The African Trader*, starring "Kay Gibson" (Marisa Berenson) and "Phil Duncan" (Richard Vanstone). The film is actually based on a novel of the same title written by Peter Viertel in 1953 which dealt with the events surrounding the shooting of *The African Queen* (1951) by John Huston, starring Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart: the real names are to be read

behind those used in the film. Peter Viertel actually took part in the elaboration of Huston's script and was present during the shooting(s).¹⁰ Eastwood's story is an account of Wilson's growing obsession with killing an elephant, as he gradually begins to devote all his time to hunting and neglects the film he is supposed to be directing. Wilson sees in hunting a way to show his courage and become a real man, and it is only at the end, after his reckless behaviour causes the death of his black tracker Kivu (Boy Mathais Chuma), that he returns to the safe haven of filmmaking. The film resorts to issues of masculinity and performance to organise its meanings: the definition of Eastwood's masculinity as the lonely westerner is again present in the Wilson character; however, he is far from silent here, and Wilson is described as an outspoken, talkative person who manages to draw his friends and crew along in his hunting craze. To some critics it is this expansive personality that draws attention towards Eastwood's performance (Smith 1993: 221). Thus the film has been explained as part of Eastwood's revisionist cinema, particularly in its treatment of masculinity: Dennis Bingham (1993: 48-49) has argued that the film emphasises the effort involved in the attempt to imitate Huston, an icon of masculine behaviour whose inadequacy is proved at the end.

26 On the other hand, the film's themes and motifs largely coincide with accounts of the men's movement and its ethos, a movement which was most operative around the early 1990s, precisely when *White Hunter* was made. The movement, led by figures like Robert Bly and Sam Keen, has been described as a response to the feeling that white American masculinity (usually of middle-class origins) was not working, that it was without substance, emotional sensitivity or depth, and that it needed to be healed by a return to the wilderness.¹¹ The film is, then, a response to that feeling of failed masculinity, which is to be healed by contact with nature and natural people, in a process of self-discovery and personal fulfilment that entails emotional growth. However, this process is qualified negatively: Wilson is seen to equate self-discovery with the violence of the elephant hunt and, when that violence turns against him by causing Kivu's death, the film shows the inappropriateness of Wilson's notion of masculinity, and therefore of his turning to nature for self-discovery. Wilson's masculinity is in fact portrayed as a copy of Hemingwayesque perceptions of Africa and suffering, which are in the end revealed to be childish rather than transcendent, reckless rather than courageous. The ending stands as a critique of such a search for spiritual renewal in what is wild in man.

Self-discovery is, however, not the only ingredient of Wilson's masculinity. As was said above, the character is very close to the tough loner of Eastwood's previous roles, but Wilson seems to realign those established meanings. Drawing on the previously mentioned description of Eastwood as a masochist on his way to the

law of the father, who cannot however avoid the occasional potentially disruptive hysterical moment of weakness, Wilson can be analysed from a double perspective. One would centre on Wilson as hysterical male, visible in the moments of lack of body control and weakness during the hunt, and in his performance itself that points at a masculinity in process. Wilson thus becomes a revisionist attempt to modify Eastwood's previous set of meanings as powerful male, a revisionism that contains a return to nature which is criticised. A second perspective would be that of Wilson as paradigmatic masochistic character: the moments of weakness during the hunt would not be traces of hysteria but steps towards the final blow represented by Kivu's death, all of them part of a masochistic process that leads Wilson to the position of father-figure.

Two different readings of the film are possible, according to the weight given to Wilson's return to filmmaking as director. If we consider that the final scene lacks the potency to dissipate the vividness of Kivu's death, the film must be seen as being about Wilson's irresponsible nature and about the lesson he learns: the fact that, unlike the fantasies of his films or the fantasy of authenticity, the hardships of life are real. It would mean the return of a moral issue, responsibility towards others, which Wilson's life trajectory, the aim of which is the search for authenticity, has tried to repress. If we consider the final scene, his becoming a director, as the proper end, then the film would imply that Kivu's death was a natural step in the process of Wilson's access to patriarchy. It would mean the climax of a masochism that had already surfaced in a previous fight with a racist hotel manager: you have to fight when you think you have to, even if you know you are going to be defeated. The return to shoot a film would not be a return: his becoming a director would be his moment of access to patriarchy, to the position of the auteur-father. In fact, performance seems to support this view since it is at the closing of the film that Eastwood adopts the taciturnity he has long been associated with: he stops being Wilson to become Eastwood. The film seems to occupy a very ambivalent position, oscillating as it does between revisionism and embracing the values traditionally associated with the Eastwood persona.

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The previous account of masculinity and performance has brought to the surface the film's reliance on self-referentiality: to the figure of Huston behind Wilson, to *The African Queen* behind *The African Trader*, to the actors and to Eastwood's previous roles. In fact, critics have often used Eastwood's films as filters through which to view his previous work retrospectively, and Eastwood himself has admitted to a degree of reflexivity in his films, for example in his identification with Wilson's ethos of independence in filmmaking.¹² Several elements of *White Hunter* centre on the reflexivity surrounding the Wilson character: masculinity appears as the real thing, to be achieved by whether they are true to oneself and

facing the dangers of hunting, and consequently Wilson guides his actions by their being true to his personality. In this his character echoes a self-identity that depends on reflexivity, on self-evaluation and change in the light of new information and events. In the film, this reflexivity is articulated around authenticity, the notion of being true to oneself, as for example in the scene in which Wilson argues with the producers about the use of black and white stock for the film: the real thing is personality and independence. The most apparent effect of reflexivity is therefore the film's reliance on the ethos of authenticity. Moreover, the film uses this search for authenticity as justification for Wilson's self-destructive and self-contradictory nature, which in turn is made to justify his rude behaviour. He is allowed to be rude and self-contradictory, and he will accordingly not be punished with a shift of audience identification, because through contact with the black natives, he is seen to be engaged in a search for the authenticity that cannot be found in Europe or the US. This is particularly noticeable in the scene between Wilson and Pete Verrill (Jeff Fahey), the Viertel character, in which Wilson says killing an elephant is a sin: the scene ends as he walks away from Verrill towards a group of black natives gathered around a fire. The contradiction, his wanting to kill an elephant and at the same time considering it a sin, is condoned through the search for authenticity suggested by his comradeship with the black natives. The condonation of self-contradiction extends to the whole film, since the contradictory nature of a film that exalts authenticity by means of Eastwood's Hollywood-created meanings is resolved by invoking the film's claim to be an auteur piece in search of an authentic meaning.

Another expression of masculinity in *White Hunter, Black Heart* is independence. Here, too, the film borrows from the discourse on reflexivity and depends on a self-directed look for moral principles, a reflexivity that blocks itself off from the external world and its morality. What matters in the film is Wilson's own personal wishes, which dictate his moral code. He acts according to a view of the modern world in which morality is replaced by authenticity: what makes an action good is that it is true to the individual's desires. The end of the film is a return to external moral values, a moral lesson that shows Wilson that other people also exist in themselves and morality is not a personal affair. The film is therefore a film about responsibility too: it represents Eastwood's concern about the state of a current society in which, as he complained to *Psychology Today*,

[...] whether it's the old deal of saying, Jeez, my mother whipped me when I was little or my father yelled at me or something. Everybody is looking for a reason not to take responsibility for their own actions in hand, anyway. [...] we are in a sort of fall-guy generation. We are always looking for someone else's fault as to why everything is. Everybody is looking to blame everybody (Fischhoff 1993: 76-77).

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This idea seemed very potent in the early 1990s, as the popularity of Robert Hughes' *Culture of Complaint* was to prove.¹³ Thus, while for most of the film violence is condoned by invoking authenticity, at the end Wilson's internally referential moral code is criticised because it results in Kivu's death. At this point, as was said above, the film oscillates between the power of the last scene, a condonation of the consequences of Wilson's search for authenticity, and the vividness of the previous events, a critique of Wilson's irresponsible behaviour.

The issue of authenticity is to a certain extent always relative in this film, since the freedom of the film artist is conveyed through an Eastwood presence that at the same time invokes his star status, his belonging to a market-oriented art. However, the strength of the film's recreation of a search for authenticity is not invalidated by this. What is most relevant in the film is not the final definition of Wilson's personality, which, given Eastwood's meanings behind the character, we already knew, but the trope of the search for authenticity and its attendant metaphors: hunting, Africa, contact with the racially different, courage tests, and the Hemingwayesque ethos of suffering. It is these motifs of authenticity that, despite the intertextual presence of Eastwood, assert the artistic, auteurist quality of the film. The auteur status is also a consequence of the connotations of revisionism accreting to the film, of the aura of commentary on Eastwood and his previous career contained in it. The fact that the film departs from previous Eastwood works, while at the same time resembling them, makes it revisionist, a self-conscious commentary on itself, disclosing an auteur who has a conscious concern with the meanings he represents. This combination of similarity and difference is close to the ingredients of genre: both auteur and genre offer structures to guide audience expectations, and changes are brought in to maintain their interest. This is the way the star-auteur film works.

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I would now like to link the previous account of reflexivity and masculinity to a discussion of genre. The aim of this next step in the analysis will be to argue, first, that genre works as a mechanism of self-reflexivity; second, that this function is reflected in the film's generic configuration, which is traversed by the tension between self-reflexivity and moral issues, and, third, that this tension is articulated through the meanings of a masculinity that is reflexively considered. The first impression about *White Hunter* is that it is a less generic film than the average Hollywood piece. There are several ingredients that bring it close to a few genres, although this hybridity in fact contributes to the seeming lack of a clear generic affiliation. The film resembles the biopic: it fits the category of post World War II biopics, which were dominated by figures from the world of entertainment, and Wilson embodies the tension between the innovative individual and established institutions and traditions which is usually found in the films of the genre. On the

other hand, the whole narrative shares essential features of the adventure film, which tends to reflect imperialist views and a traditional masculinity since the ideology of adventure developed alongside the spread of empires in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Finally, *White Hunter* bears similarities to the subgenre of films about filmmaking, such as King Vidor's *Show People* (1928), Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), Vincente Minnelli's *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), François Truffaut's *La nuit américaine* (1973), or Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992).

The film's hybridity is even enhanced by its focus on the main character's personality. The search for the self becomes another set of generic formulae: recurrent motifs and patterns that mix predictability and contingency in order to provide an experience that mimics real life's combination of disturbance and reassurance. Through the function of the star-auteur and the presence of a personal narrative, *White Hunter* offers a heightened form which foregrounds the reflexivity provided by Eastwood: as an actor, the meanings attached to him are invoked as source material to be reworked; and, as a director, the film deals with his auteur status and his similarity to Huston. The film emerges as a paradigm of contemporary identity: the mixture of the highly charged intertextual references and the echoes of the authentic experience that may take unexpected turns lies at the base of the set of defining features of such identity. This combination of irony and sincerity recalls Jim Collins' formulation of the ironic and the sincere film as standing in tension: *White Hunter* draws on both generic possibilities at once, shaping a compound of generic connotations that constitute the film's appeal.¹⁵ The new auteurism of the star-auteur kind represented by Eastwood brings together the ironic and the new sincerity moods: it mixes intertextual connotations that shape Eastwood's meaning in the film with the promise of a search for authenticity and a moving away from the insincerity of culture. The previously mentioned ambivalence of the film, its oscillation between criticism and praise of Wilson, is facilitated by the complexity of the stance maintained by Wilson-Eastwood-auteur at the end, which is an extension of this mixture of irony and sincerity: the stance and the film itself are both authentic and ironic.

The film's association of masculinity with genre provides two interesting perspectives which echo the tension between the concentration of reflexivity on the self and the attention to the external world that is demanded by morality. This tension is present in the film's ambivalence between the action/buddy film and the "sensitive guy" film: both are sustained by the story and reinforced by the complexity of Eastwood's meanings. First, it is surprising how many of the features of the action and the buddy films are at first sight shared by *White Hunter*. They may not appear in their purest versions, but they are nevertheless present and seem particularly centred around a revisionist reading of the film

which engages with Wilson's independence, and with his view of violence as an expression of masculinity, in order to rework them into a critique. Considering the action films' use of violence as catalyst of ambiguities about masculinity through their emphasis on the muscular body's performance, the relevance given by *White Hunter* to violent action deserves some attention.¹⁶ The film deprives violence of its potential for male display by channelling it through the hunt, which replaces the action-film chase and is presented as a civilised affair because of its broader aim: a transcendental search for the hunter's self. Wilson's body is not spectacular but weak, preventing the potential feminisation of the action film, while his anti-institutional and misogynous attitude is associated with his masculine way of life, which is seen to clash with the world of filmmaking. The equation between feminisation and filmmaking is very clear in the case of Landers, the producer (George Dzundza), or the Englishman Lockhart (Alum Armstrong), and it also extends to Pete Verrill.

The bond between Wilson and Pete is pointed out at moments such as when Wilson remarks that they will grow old together looking for gold and telling each other stories about their lives, but the film reworks the structures of the buddy film regarding this homosocial bond.¹⁷ Here we have two buddies for Wilson: the son-figure represented by Pete, and the symbol of the wild and of virility represented by Kivu. This separation helps the film define Wilson as both father (responsibility, authority) and man (violence, irresponsibility) and to punish him by killing Kivu without damaging his still potent aura of authority. The buddy film also surfaces in the function given to masquerade: Eastwood mimics Wilson while Wilson mimics Hemingwayesque models of masculinity. Such a quest for virility actually discloses anxieties about masculinity and its constructedness, since it is to be achieved through physical and courage tests, in a move that matches the concerns of both the buddy and the action film. However, the film departs from the buddy formula in the absence of action-film tropes, displays of male bodies, and of an unambiguous final victory. It remains close to the ethos of the men's movement and their recuperation of the wild in man as essence of their masculinity, and conflates such celebration of the masculine return to nature with the buddy film. *White Hunter* has transformed the buddy film's violence into a presumably more socially acceptable form by associating it with a return to nature, and by coupling violence with the contemporary concerns of the men's movement. It shows the motifs of both the action and the buddy film but deprives them of their potential disruptive power. The constructed, provisional nature of masculinity is openly acknowledged but this does not prevent the film from reinforcing the masculine paradigm associated with the Eastwood persona.¹⁸ As a partial conclusion, the film's articulation of autonomy and violent masculinity draws on the motifs of the action/buddy films and results in a picture of Wilson

as highly irresponsible, matching the exclusive concentration on the self attributed to the modern individual. At the same time, those action/buddy film motifs are sanitised, and their potential denunciation of masculinity as a construct is opposed by its association with the ethos of the men's movement.

The combination of masculinity and genre still suggests a second perspective, which resembles another strand of contemporary cinema. I am referring to what Fred Pfeil has called the "sensitive-guy" films, and to the action films of the 1990s as defined by Susan Jeffords. To take up the issue of the film's ambivalence again, this Hollywood strand matches the second of the possible readings of the film: the film as a final sanction of Wilson's violence and masculinity, as we see him accede to the position of auteur-father. Pfeil centres on a group of films from 1991 (*Regarding Henry*, *City Slickers*, *The Fisher King*) which characteristically present a man who undergoes a process of suffering and trial that leads to the acknowledgement of his former insensitivity. That return to sensitivity is qualified as a return to his true self, but in fact these films sustain the fantasy that men may recover their lost sensitivity without actually having to renounce their privileged position as patriarchal figures, echoing one of Sam Keen's arguments.¹⁹ Susan Jeffords (1993b: 245-262) describes the action films of the 1990s, such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), as narratives that enact both men's rejection of violence, which is blamed on the circumstances they had to endure at the time, and their adoption of paternal roles. These fathers guarantee a better future for their children by exploiting individualism, which is revalued in an increasingly anonymous technological world. Jeffords criticises a tendency which she also finds in other Hollywood genres: these men, once they reform themselves, are not forced to take responsibility for the consequences of their former lives, but are seen to retreat from conflict and concentrate on their personal lives.

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In *White Hunter* we see Wilson fail to live up to the role of hunter he has created for himself and return to the position of filmmaker, which is the only thing he is good at; he concentrates on his art and not, for example, on fighting the concept of masculinity that has caused Kivu's death. The final scene means a rejection of violence, as he manifestly becomes the father figure he had actually been throughout, and the extension of which he will seek in the future through the individual action here represented by filmmaking. Although the film does not offer a return to family life as a conclusion, both the rejection of action and the final embracing of a personal life are clear enough to associate this film with Pfeil's and Jeffords' categories. The process of trial and suffering towards a final moment of recognition of his former insensitivity is clear too, although this is not viewed as a return to the true self, which remains an unattainable fantasy of virility, but as a failure to achieve it, as an impossible masquerade. Nevertheless, Wilson is

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reempowered as he accedes to the position of father-auteur. As a second partial conclusion, the motifs of the “sensitive-guy” film articulate Wilson’s final acceptance of responsibility, a return of the moral issue of responsibility towards others that stands in tension with the previously mentioned exclusive concentration on the self. At the same time, this return to responsibility is also suspect of merely concealing a final attention to the self that is, through the final, even empowered.

As a conclusion, *White Hunter* can be located at the intersection of the action/buddy films of the 1980s and the new representations of masculinity of the early 1990s. It provides an interest in performance and the masquerade, apparently laying bare the constructed nature of masculinity but also looking towards the recuperation of a masculinity that has been forced to undergo suffering. The film seems to be both celebration and critique: highly contradictory, it shows the transition from the representation of masculinity of the 1980s to that of the early 1990s, an ambivalent position created through the possibilities offered by the star-auteur, non-generic film. *White Hunter* can thereby criticise Wilson’s individualism and violence, and consequently revise Eastwood’s persona, while at the same time celebrating that independence and spontaneity, his anti-bureaucratic stance, which he is seen to embrace at the end by becoming a director. This final move echoes Eastwood’s alleged independence as a filmmaker, now even cynically enhanced by the film’s aura of revisionism.

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We can now attempt to provide an answer to the question posed at the beginning of the paper: what does the auteur’s presence do to genre in the presentation of the tension between personal and external morality? It first reveals the role of genre as a mechanism of self-reflexivity, which is illustrated by the film’s ambivalence between two genres of the 1980s and early 1990s that mirrors the tension between self-reflexivity and moral matters in the contemporary individual: the anti-responsibility “buddy film” and the pro-responsibility “sensitive guy” film. Responsibility is articulated as both celebration and critique of male social responsibility, which, on a different front, is offered by the film as both a sanction and a revision of Eastwood’s traditional set of meanings as an independent, violent, irresponsible man. This ambivalence is presented as the result of the complexity of the artist, a Romantic notion that in fact conceals the potential of the film to arrest cultural change, since both the sanitising of the “buddy film” effected by *White Hunter*, *Black Heart* and its partial adoption of the “sensitive guy” film are repressive tendencies: they act against the male display and homosociality of the buddy film, and in favour of a sensitivity that in fact conceals empowerment. Such ambiguity is a sign of the film’s reactionary politics facilitated

by the auteur's function as both director and star, a function that provides a less generic film than the usual Hollywood output, more ambivalence about the meanings he stands for and more complex connotations suggested by the star-auteur's cultural presence.

Notes

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². John Caughie's *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (1981/1999) probably provides the best historical overview of authorship. Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1968) and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969) are reproduced in it, together with seminal contributions by Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Brian Henderson and others. Foucault's idea that it was the function performed by the author, its role within the circulation of the text, that mattered has proved very useful for ideological analysis. For two discussions on the implications of this idea, see Stephen Crofts (1998: 310-326) and James Naremore (1990: 14-23).

³. For studies on the auteur as a commercial or ideological presence in contemporary cinema, see Corrigan (1991: 101-134) and Crofts (1998).

⁴. For an account of authenticity as a value in times of crisis, see Marina (2000: 104-107).

⁵. For a complete account of Eastwood's position within the film industry, see Smith (1993: 59-67). His first appearances, in the "spaghetti" westerns of Sergio Leone, provided him with a star image as a calm, quiet, wild man. His Dirty Harry films lent that initial image added connotations of fascism, vigilantism and anti-bureaucracy (Smith 1993: 85-99). Although critics have shown how the several

films in the Dirty Harry series moved in the direction of gradually accommodating to the social climate of the time, even promoting the rights of women and minorities (Smith 1993: 101-107), or how the last films (*Sudden Impact*, 1983, and *The Dead Pool*, 1988) adopted an increasingly parodic tone (Gallafent 1993: 54-61), the fact remains that Eastwood continued to be identified with the fascistic Harry Callahan. The critical reworking of the Eastwood persona has led to assessments of his work as increasingly more self-conscious about the meanings set by earlier films, to the point where Eastwood's revisionism has become a critical commonplace. This was so especially after the release of *Unforgiven* (1992). That film confirmed Eastwood's conscious reformulation of his previous image as the western's loner or the fascistic cop, a reformulation which to some critics had always been part of the Eastwood persona, in the ironic western heroes and in the recreations of masculinity that, in his 1980s films, were in fact reactions against the restrictive masculine ideal of the time (Combs 1992: 12-16; Bingham 1993: 40-53). Not all critics support this view, though: Paul Smith (1993: 263-268) disagrees with the reading of Eastwood's cinema as revisionist, pointing out how films like *Unforgiven* are in fact very much in tune with the realism and authenticity promoted by the Hollywood tradition.

⁶. Between 1988 and 1990 Eastwood released five films which alternated between the openly commercial —*The Dead Pool* (1988), *Pink Cadillac* (1989), and *The Rookie* (1990)— and the more personal —*Bird*

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(1988), and *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990), following a production pattern he has since adhered to. All of them bombed at the box office, which has been explained as the consequence of discrepancies between Eastwood's image as an auteur-father and his real life. Eastwood's image started to change with the release of *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986) and the critical reputation he gained in Europe. It was then that the American media started to consider him as a serious filmmaker. In 1990, at the Walker Art Center retrospective in Minneapolis, Eastwood was hailed as an auteur by Richard Schikel. This position of authority contrasted with the media coverage of his private life, in which he was presented as the authoritarian mayor of Carmel, his hometown in California, and as an unsuitable father: he was accused by his exgirlfriend Sondra Locke of forcing her to have two abortions (Smith 1993: 243-262). Smith notes how the father-like role of the Eastwood character in *The Rookie* was even reinforced by a documentary on the making of the film in which Eastwood was presented as a real father to Charlie Sheen, who played the rookie, at a time in which Sheen was going through difficult times because of his addiction to drugs and alcohol. Smith (1993: 259-261) also draws attention to the fact that *White Hunter, Black Heart* revealed Eastwood's desire to assert himself as an auteur by drawing on the image of John Huston, on whose life the film was based, as a creative artist.

7. Joan Mellen (1977: 294-301) described him as a silent loner who distrusted red tape. In the 1990s Christine Gledhill (1995: 73-93) still saw Eastwood as example of a purified, intense masculinity that emerged as a reaction to the contemporary atmosphere of contested gender roles.

8. See Smith for Eastwood's presence and his debt to the heroes of Siegel's cinema (1993: 209, 214).

9. See Smith (1993: 151-172); this combination of patriarchal authority and underlying vulnerability is also pointed

out by Taubin (1993) and Bingham (1993: 42-43).

10. See Gallafent on the details of the real events borrowed by the film (1993: 207-209).

11. Such a return to nature was necessary for men to mature. Another possible way of healing masculinity was to go back to a state of immaturity in which men could enjoy the sensitivity they had before they were socialised (Pfeil 1995: 167-232).

12. David Breskin (1992: 102-110) mentions the retrospective assessment of Eastwood's films as the way in which they affect our consciousness, and *Unforgiven* as the film that changed how we view his previous films. Eastwood has admitted that his roles, especially the anti-bureaucratic stance of *Dirty Harry*, have affected the way he thinks (Fischoff 1993).

13. Hugues' (1993: 1-70) jeremiad against both conservatives and progressives explains how, to him, both have managed to end at the same point after their apparently different "cultural" politics: both the old ideology of order and the new creed of political correctness have finally coincided in their desire to deny the basic freedom of speech. In the process, a culture of victimisation has appeared, in which complaint has become an argument to curtail other people's freedom, masking what is actually a tactic towards empowerment. See "Culture and the Broken Polity".

14. See Neale's use of Custen's ideas and Neale's comments on the biopic and the adventure film (2000: 60-65).

15. Jim Collins (1993) has defined ironic films as those that contain intertextual references to other films or genres, and sincerity films as those that reject the ironic manipulation of contemporary genres and look in such avoidance for a primaeva authenticity.

16. To Yvonne Tasker (1993: 231-233, 236-238), the action film presents the

muscular body of the male action hero as self-conscious performance that stands out as unmanly decoration, thereby creating anxieties over sexuality which are alleviated through images of physical torture or through comedy. See also Pfeil (1995: 1-36).

¹⁷. The motif of the male couple has been discussed by Cynthia Fuchs (1993: 194-195, 205), who defines what she calls the "buddy film" as narratives that both fulfil and deny male homosocial desire: they work to both represent and conceal the differences that threaten the buddy alliance by providing an all-male unit as answer to sexual difference. However, the all-male unit

actually foregrounds the tensions between the two men and within society at large regarding masculinity: the male unit reveals the underlying homosocial desire that sustains it.

¹⁸. The fact that masculinity is a masquerade does not mean it is not a powerful and effective fantasy. See Holmlund (1993: 225-226).

¹⁹. They are actually expected to show enough initiative to retain their roles as husbands and fathers (Pfeil, 1995: 37-709). Susan Jeffords (1993a: 196-208) had already noted this contradiction.

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