

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Paul Cantor

Professor of English, University of Virginia

Taped March 15, 2019

Table of Contents

I. What Was the Old West (0:15 – 38:05)

II: On Classic Westerns (38:05 – 1:01:38)

III: Westerns Around the World (1:01:38 – 1:30:15)

I. What Was the Old West (0:15 – 38:05)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol and I'm joined today by Paul Cantor, as I've been several times before. We've discussed topics ranging from Shakespeare to popular culture in various forms. And today we're going to be talking about the Western, if that's okay with you.

CANTOR: That's fine. I'm glad to do it.

KRISTOL: I am too. I've always been a fan of the Western and it's generally considered a great American genre, I guess. And so we'll talk about its history and movies and maybe a little bit of other media as well. But what is the Western?

CANTOR: Okay, that's a very difficult question to answer, and I've been thinking about it for years and I think I've finally figured it out after writing three books on popular culture. Actually, in the course of writing my –

KRISTOL: This is going to hurt the sales of those three books if you've only just figured it out now.

CANTOR: Well, you learn while doing. I'm going to try to separate popular culture out into two broad categories. And it is: works that are set in the middle class world versus works that are set in alternatives to the middle class world.

It sounds overly simplistic, but let's see if it works. That is, I think a lot of works in popular culture are set in contemporary America in a world that's basically middle class in its values, a world that's a liberal democracy. I have in mind here things like situation comedies, romantic comedies, most shows about professional life – doctors and lawyers and so on. And what I'd say is in these works, the regime is invisible. It's just there. It's what we ourselves live in and people accept it. They don't notice its presence – it's like fish and water. They don't notice the water.

And that to me contrasts with works which deliberately seek out an alternative to that world and the Western will be my primary example of that. But I would include a lot of science fiction, a lot of horror stories, something like *Game of Thrones*, for example, these historical dramas. Now this contradicts –

KRISTOL: The gangster movie too, I believe.

CANTOR: Oh, the gangster movie, absolutely. How could I forget it?

KRISTOL: Warshow has those essays of the Western and the gangster movie which say these are both alternate –

CANTOR: Right, and that's where I began to understand this division. And by the way, the Warshow essay on the Western has this fantastic line: he says if you want to understand *The Iliad*, go look at Westerns. And I think that's really profound because what we're talking about here is returning to a kind of Homeric world where the values are aristocratic and heroic.

Now to talk about this a bit philosophically for a moment, we all know this view that's called historicism: that works always reflect the time in which they're set. And there's a certain truth to that. That even when contemporary authors try to portray a past period, they often are deeply anachronistic, in a sense.

But I think it's wrong to think that people can't escape the setting in which they are writing and indeed, I think one of the chief goals of some writing for the authors and for the audience is to escape the world.

So what I'd say is, using the Western as an example, it goes back to an earlier time before the middle class world was settled. And it therefore allows it to portray a set of values that are Homeric, heroic values. In the Western what matters is strength and skill with a gun and all these heroic qualities.

Now what's particularly interesting about the Western, that it often is portraying the emergence of the settled middle class world, we'll talk about this, I guess, in connection with John Ford. But very often these creators of Westerns choose a moment when the frontier is closing down, when the age of the heroic gunfighter is coming to the end. And many Westerns specifically deal with the later life of a gunfighter. Curiously correlated with the later life of the actors who play gunfighters, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood being good examples of that.

So you know, on the one hand we have this broad group of works, again, romantic comedies, situation comedies, professional dramas, that just operate within the middle class world, accept its values. You can see why these works have such an audience. People are generally middle class in this country.

KRISTOL: It's their world: *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, right? It's like watching people you might know.

CANTOR: It's like watching a mirror of yourself. And in a way it's like the world of gossip. What do people talk about? Who's having an affair at the office? How is this marriage going? People don't gossip like, "Did you see that guy that Bob murdered last week? It was really a cool hit job."

So generally audiences want to see that their world is well represented and it doesn't challenge their assumptions. It's very easy to consume. But on the other hand, there's a broad set of works in our popular culture that do offer an alternative.

Now again, you brought up gangster movies. They take place in a world where people probably do gossip about murders: "Did you see the guy that Vinny whacked last week?" So these works have a different attraction to them. They offer us an alternative to the world we live in and there's a kind of vicarious excitement in watching some works.

If there's nothing else you can say about the middle class world, it is boring. It's the world of compromise, of moderation. That's why generally this class of works are comic in spirit. There are problems, but they're always resolved at the end. The marriage gets put back together; the quarreling couples learn to adjust to each other. Middle class drama is all about adjustment, about settling things, and is in that sense, comic.

The other broad category is tragic. And it's often tragic precisely because it portrays a conflict between middle class values and something else, some kind of heroic ethic which, again, is always associated with the past, as indeed the middle class world did grow out of an aristocratic world historically.

And so there's a certain fascination just in seeing something different. I have to confess, I'm typically attracted to Westerns, to gangster movies, to horror movies, to sword and sandal epics because, really, I have enough to do with the middle class world. I've lived in it all my life. So you can see the attraction of seeing something different and seeing a kind of hero that you don't see in ordinary life.

But also there's a theoretical component to it that I find really interesting. That this broad class of works are making us rethink the middle class world precisely by seeing alternatives to it. And in particular, what I've seen is particularly with the Western, these are "state of nature" stories. They take us back to a period of anarchy, or at least to a period where middle class values are not totally imposed on everybody, and in particular, a world in which institutions are not as well developed as they are today.

And that raises very interesting questions. We are just surrounded by institutions in our lives. Everything has to be done by procedures and rules and regulations. And people are very frustrated by that. They want to escape from the world of the DMV. And to do that, you have to go to the Wild West where things are settled *mano a mano*. Where in fact, everything is much more personalized.

Now I think that's why *Game of Thrones* is so fascinating to people because it's not a world of procedural majorities and the Senate. You know, you just get to the point where you just kill them. Most of us have had moments when that's how you wanted to solve your problem. And again, we can't do that in our lives, so we enjoy seeing stories where it does happen. I think there's something cathartic about Westerns and in general these forms of popular culture that offer alternatives to our middle class world. So it is a world in which at best the institutional, settled world, the world of police, is emerging.

Again, we're fascinated by police dramas, but they're called 'procedurals,' by the way, in technical jargon in the TV business. And it's interesting that we have that name because indeed, it's all an issue of procedure. Did the police gather the evidence correctly? Is the judge following the law? We love, as an alternative, the gunfight.

KRISTOL: Well, and the police dramas, typically, I think restore the order in which we live. They reassure us at some level – most of them, not all of them, some are darker, they raise the question about the whole order – but most of them reassure us that that order can be restored with good policemen or good DAs or good private eyes.

CANTOR: It goes all the way back to Doyle and the Sherlock Holmes stories. That they were very reassuring to the Victorian audience which had all sorts of anxieties about things like immigration, for example. That Holmes could solve the problems and restore order. And we're attracted to that, but we're also attracted to shows that show what life was like without the order.

And there it gets really interesting in the Western, that they do show a world where people have to resolve their differences on their own. Vengeance is such an important subject of the Western. *The Searchers* is a great example of that, Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*.

Vengeance is such a great theme in the Western and illustrates what I'm talking about because we love poetic justice and we don't get it in the world. We're so sick of plea bargaining and reduced sentences and so on. We'd like to see the issues settled by one guy with a gun who just shoots the bad guy.

And the question that arises out of this, though, is what kind of community does it result in? And I'm going to broadly divide Westerns now into two categories, those that follow Hobbes and those that follow John Locke. And this works out pretty well.

That is, in many Westerns they do reveal a world of anarchy. And many Westerns are very dark in their vision of what the human race is like. The so-called spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone which I hope we

get to are maybe the best example of that. But they are a world in which people cannot order their lives on their own and they need the man on horseback with a gun to settle things. And that's Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Many Westerns portray a world that like Hobbes's state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." And it's amazing how Hobbesian the vision of many Westerns are and they lead to the conclusion that you need absolute sovereignty. You must yield all your freedom to someone who will bring order.

And again, there's a lot of Westerns like that, but there are a lot of Westerns that are just the opposite and take John Locke's view. And John Locke's view of the state of nature, at least in the obvious sense in his *Treatises on Government*, is that it's less harsh than Hobbes' view. And in particular for Locke, property was possible before government. That people could organize themselves and develop a system of property and Locke's principle was that the land is yours if you work it.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: Which as people have shown actually was translated very quickly into English common law and was the basis of the Homestead Acts in US history. And indeed, there's a wonderful book by Perry Anderson and Peter Hill called *The Not So Wild, Wild West: Property Rights on the Frontier*.

If you really want to learn about the West, I'd really recommend that book. And it shows the amazing degree to which various elements in the West could organize themselves. There were mine owners associations, there were cattle owners associations.

And in the absence of law, indeed, in the absence of legal authorities, they found ways to establish mine claims, land claims, water rights claims. The book is very interesting. For example, it shows the great paradox of the West was the English common law tradition developed out of England, where, for example, there's more water than you can do with – it's a rainy, rainy country. And English common law was not adaptable to the West which was so arid, and it shows how people organize themselves as associations to establish water rights.

This is very much Tocqueville's view of America, again. This is sort of Locke and Tocqueville's spirit of some Westerns. Tocqueville's great claim is Americans can form associations on their own and solve their problems. And that's what Anderson and Hill show about the West. It's really quite remarkable how they show that, for example, in California the miners established their own claims and then later the government came in and just legitimized that. It's very much in the spirit of Friedrich Hayek and the idea of spontaneous order, that people organize themselves and then at best the government ratifies it.

So, and again, a lot of the John Ford movies have this view. It's the famous scene of the barn burns down and the whole town says let's go help farmer Brown, let's raise that barn again. That would not happen in the spaghetti Western.

KRISTOL: Do you agree that, whether it's the Hobbesian West or the Lockean West, I mean, one of the attractions is it's an alternative to the, as you can call it, boring or bourgeois society that we live in. But it's also in the past and can't really be revived. That's sort of a lesson. And therefore you can both appreciate it and sort of yearn for it, but it's a kind of nostalgia. It's not a living alternative, so it's less threatening in a funny way, to the bourgeois –

CANTOR: Exactly –

KRISTOL: – consensus or whatever.

CANTOR: It shows the emergence of our order out of something that was very different and required heroism, indeed –

KRISTOL: And that we should admire, but we can't really go back to.

CANTOR: Yes. I'd say the Anderson and Hill book which is, again, not fiction, but history, can teach us some important lessons.

KRISTOL: No, and I think the Western too maybe also, that you should respect these traits more. But somehow it also is less dangerous than it might be – you know what I mean?

CANTOR: Yes, less threatening. But again, what I – as a professor what I like about them is they can make us think about – I wrote an essay on *Deadwood* in my *Invisible Hand in Popular Culture* book. And it really was “*Deadwood* and the State of Nature.” And I went through Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau – it's another aspect of it – to show how Westerns can illustrate these really important ways of political thinking.

So that's my intellectual interest in Westerns. And then as I've studied it, one aspect I've gotten fascinated with is the way in which the West created its own myths.

KRISTOL: So let's talk about that. People sometimes think it's sort of just emerged organically, so to speak. But that's not the case in either literature, or popular culture, or high literature, or popular culture.

CANTOR: The gunfight at the OK Corral was in 1881. The first Western was made in 1903 – [Western] movie, *The Great Train Robbery*. That's amazing. The Trojan War took place maybe 1150 B.C. The Homeric poems started coming into existence around 750 B.C. That's 400 years it took, [with the Western it was] less than – it took less than forty.

And now that's one nature of the modern media, there were movies being made about World War II during World War II. So now things have quickened up. But just think if Homer had met Achilles and if Achilles had told Homer the stories. Probably not, and that's why they're so fantastic in a way.

But I was quite surprised to see to what extent these Western heroes actually created their own legends. Let me, there's some dates involved here, so I'm going to refer to some notes I have on this. But these so-called dime novels were being written already by the middle of the 19th century creating stories about these legendary Western figures.

And the most important of them was Buffalo Bill Cody. And here I'll introduce the figure of Ned Buntline who lived from 1821 to 1886. His real name was Edward Zane Carol Judson, Sr. So even this name Ned Buntline, which I grew up with, Ned Buntline was a character in the Hugh O'Brian Wyatt Earp TV series. Now I learn that was a nom de plume there.

But he started writing stories of Western outlaws. And he was fascinated with Wild Bill Hickok and approached him. And he [Hickok] didn't want a story written about him. But he introduced Buntline to Bill Cody and actually Buntline figured out this guy is more interesting. And so the legend of Buffalo Bill Cody was basically created by Cody working with this guy Ned Buntline.

KRISTOL: And when is this happening, about?

CANTOR: 1869 is when they met.

KRISTOL: So this is right after the Civil War, which must be somehow important, too, that it's post-Civil War. A unifying story or something?

CANTOR: Well, actually in many cases, the outlaws are Johnny Rebs. They're Confederate soldiers. I mean, this is Ethan Edwards and John Ford's *The Searchers*. So a lot of the Western grows out of the time of post-Civil War when the nation is trying to unify and people are resisting it. And so the Western heroes are almost systematically divided into Republicans and Confederates.

But in 1869 Buntline wrote, *Buffalo Bill, King of the Border Men*, which was serialized in *The Chicago Tribune*. I love these details of this. And that was the first Buffalo Bill novel, very successful. And then

they decided to take it to the stage – not the stagecoach, but the theatrical stage. And again, this is so fascinating. What you learn in the 19th century is all these things we associate with the modern media were already being done in the 19th century.

So in 1872, *The Scouts of the Prairie* appeared in Chicago produced by Ned Buntline. And Cody was an extremely handsome and impressive man physically. He was not a great actor, but he was able to dominate a stage and this became very successful.

In 1873, Cody invited Wild Bill Hickok –

KRISTOL: And what are these stories about? Are they settling the West, are they fighting Indians or are they fighting each other?

CANTOR: *King of the Border Men, Scouts of the Prairie* – you can see, it's all the frontier, civilization meets barbarism. A lot of it is the Indian wars.

KRISTOL: Which were happening in real time.

CANTOR: Yes, and in which Cody was involved. So they recruit Hickok for *Scouts of the Prairie* – he only lasted a few months on stage. He shot out the spotlight during one performance because he didn't like all the light and that was pretty much the end of his theatrical career. So unfortunately for Wild Bill, he didn't do so well.

But crucially in 1883, Buffalo Bill founded Buffalo Bill's Wild West. And here I'm going to be spectacularly pedantic and point out it was not Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show – everybody calls it that, but I had a graduate student once correct me on this and I've never forgotten it. It was known as Buffalo Bill's Wild West and people just referred to it – well, that's Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, with a small s. If I've taught people nothing, I hope to have gotten that across.

KRISTOL: Key point.

CANTOR: But this is when the West got mythologized. The standard acts in this show became the archetypes well into the movie era. Now it was scrupulously accurate, or at least claimed to be, so much so that Sitting Bull actually appeared in it at one point. He definitely had members of Indian tribes appear as high as Sitting Bull himself. Calamity Jane appeared in it and Annie Oakley appeared in it. So again, these figures that we think –

KRISTOL: And this is a traveling show?

CANTOR: A traveling show, and we'll get to that in a minute, it in a way was the invention of rodeo. That what it did was demonstrate all these skills associated with the Wild West. So sharpshooting was a big deal, and that was Calamity Jane and Annie Oakley. Roping calves, horsemanship. It was an outdoor show and drew upon all these skills.

But it also staged many of the things that we now associate with the Wild West. There'd be a Pony Express act demonstrating the exchange of horses in a row. There were Indian attacks on wagon trains. There was stagecoach robberies. In fact, the big climax event for many years was the Deadwood stage being attacked by robbers. And that's Deadwood, the goldmining camp and the stage was carrying the gold. And by the way, it was the authentic stage. Buffalo Bill bought it after it was no longer used in Deadwood, when the trains came in. And so he could claim "I've got the authentic Deadwood stagecoach here."

It's rumored that he staged Custer's Last Stand at one point, but that's not proven. There'd be train robberies. His big climax act for many years was the attack on the burning cabin. Indians would surround a cabin and fire flaming arrows at it and then just when it looked really bad for our cabin dwellers, Buffalo Bill would arrive with the cavalry. So that scene of the cavalry coming to people's rescue, that goes back

to Buffalo Bill. Now again, it probably goes back to some real life events, but he was the one who staged it.

Now to give you an idea of the scale of this operation, in 1887 he took the act to London. Now this is the 50th Jubilee year of Queen Victoria. Big time in England. He brought with him 200 performers, 180 horses, 18 buffalos and 10 elk in this act. And it was just a huge deal. It appeared in Earl's Court Exhibition which is still in London, at least the last time I looked. It was an outdoor event. The theater held 40,000 people. So it was a huge – in a couple of months, he sold \$2 million dollars in tickets which is a lot of money –

KRISTOL: Back then – that's when a million dollars really went, it was worth something.

CANTOR: And he spent \$40,000 dollars on the backdrops alone. And it was very cinematic. Most people don't realize there were many attempts at moving pictures in the 19th century that culminated with Edison inventing the motion picture camera. But these things called panoramas – people craved moving pictures in the 19th century. And the idea of the enormous, almost Albert Bierstadt-like backdrops of the mountains and the prairies. And it sounds silly to us, but it struck people as very realistic. They really thought they were seeing the Wild West.

He then went on in 1889 to Europe. Kaiser Wilhelm attended one of the shows. And I love this, in 1890 he met Pope Leo XIII. I mean, this is the biggest thing in Europe when he showed up. He turned down an offer to perform it in the Coliseum that's in Rome.

KRISTOL: That's something.

CANTOR: It would have been very Roman Coliseum-like, except they would have had people really have to die then.

But anyway, you can see from this the creation of everything we think of as movie clichés. And there's a direct line from Buffalo Bill's Wild West to the early Hollywood movies.

One other example I'll talk about briefly is Wyatt Earp, probably the most famous Western marshal. It turns out he has an absolutely fascinating life. For one thing, he was born in 1848, didn't die until 1929.

KRISTOL: yeah, that's amazing.

CANTOR: Since so much of what we consider the Wild West dates from the 1870s and '80s, you have to remember, these people lived into the 20th century. Earp had a fascinating and I'll say politely, checkered career. He wasn't a lawman for most of his life. In fact, he was largely a gambler and brothel keeper, as it turns out. And what is interesting, though, is he ended up in Hollywood and this is what is so surprising. Moved to Los Angeles and around 1915 he got hired as a consultant on Western movies.

Now part of it was that he intruded himself upon this world. He was very concerned with establishing and cleaning up his reputation. I was very surprised to discover this, at around 1915 he was most famous for having fixed a heavyweight championship bout.

KRISTOL: I had no idea.

CANTOR: I didn't either. And it's a famous, famous fight. Bob Fitzsimmons against Tom Sharkey, 1896. It was a heavyweight championship, it would have been the fight of the year. And although Fitzsimmons was winning, Earp was refereeing the bout and charged Fitzsimmons with a low blow and awarded the fight to Sharkey. And this was like the Sonny Liston, Ali fight. Became legend. And Earp was vilified for having taken a bribe to fix this fight, which he may have done, in fact. No one had heard of the OK Corral at this point.

And so Earp was determined to establish a good reputation for himself. He became friends with both Tom Mix and William Hart, who were the two most famous Western actors in Hollywood at the time. He became friends with John Ford at this time, Ford who was already working on silent Westerns. And he kept trying to tell people, "Make a movie about me."

Raoul Walsh was one of the guys who were talking about making a Gunfight at the OK Corral movie. The first Gunfight at the OK Corral film was called *Law and Order* and that's 1932, and starred Walter Huston. But it's Ford's *My Darling Clementine* that's the first really famous Gunfight at the OK Corral. By the way, the gunfight took place on Fremont Street; it did not take place in the OK Corral. It's sad to learn all these things as you study the matter.

Now, finally, he tried to get one guy I think named John Flood to write a biography of him, but it was so badly written no one would publish it. Finally a guy named Stuart Lake published a book called *Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshall*, in 1931 and that's what made him famous as a good guy.

KRISTOL: And that's just after his death?

CANTOR: Just after his death. Lake did interview him. And the interesting thing is that evidently Earp's wife was present at this interview and kept cutting out things like the brothel stories, possibly because she was a prostitute herself in earlier days.

Now, she was named Josephine Sarah Marcus, but known as Sadie and also known by many other names evidently. She was Jewish, she was Earp's third wife, though they were never married, but they lived together for 46 years. And so as a result of all this, Wyatt Earp is buried in a Jewish cemetery in Colma, California, just south of San Francisco in the Hills of Eternity Cemetery. Now, who would have guessed that?

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: That Wyatt Earp is buried in a Jewish cemetery? Josephine lived, I think, until the 1940s. So, here's a case where he basically worked very hard at creating the legends about himself.

Now, to put this in some perspective, Earp and his brothers were put on trial for murder after the gunfight at OK Corral. They were acquitted, but it was very highly contested. And by the way it was a partisan trial, Republicans versus Democrats in this town, with the Republicans defending Earp and the Democrats attacking him.

And there were very conflicting accounts. Some TV show restaged the event and took Earp's side. The question is whether they shot unarmed men and some people claim they did, and the Earps claim they didn't. The forensic evidence seems to show that Billy Clanton could not have been shot when he was down. Anyway, just to show there's controversy about it.

But here is a man who worked hard in Hollywood – in Hollywood – dealing with directors, actors. Mix and Hart were pallbearers at his funeral in 1929. So the fact that we think of Wyatt Earp as this great hero – now, I love Wyatt. I love this, it's one of my favorite shows on TV, Hugh O'Brian in Wyatt Earp. But it's painful for me to say therefore that it may be that this is all invented, but invented by Wyatt Earp – that's what I love about it.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: So that's what I mean when I say the Western was self-mythologized. These guys very much created their own image. And they didn't have press agents; they pretty much did it themselves.

KRISTOL: And my impression is, and I've taught this once ages ago, the novel *The Virginian* by Owen Wister, which I think is 1903 or something like that.

CANTOR: 1902, I checked that, yeah.

KRISTOL: 1902, yeah. And he was a Philadelphia aristocratic type I believe, a friend of Teddy Roosevelt. And I think it was pretty – and that was maybe the high culture invention of the Western, I think.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: Wister, he was a pretty serious novelist. And that was a very self – as I recall, self-conscious effort to create a myth for Americans as they entered the 20th century, and a life where you couldn't do this anymore. That it was sort of you had to have these virtues – you couldn't – *The Virginian* ends with civilization, with the West vanishing, the imminent end of the West.

That's the sort of melancholy – happy but melancholy ending of – “justice prevails.” But justice prevails so there won't be a man like the Virginian in the future. And it seems to be to try to teach Americans that you need to have these virtues, even though you can't actually go shoot the bad guy anymore, you know. Even though we're going to be in a civilized, bourgeois world. It's interesting how nostalgic the Western is –

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: – in its origin almost. Which is sort of unusual or seems unusual. I mean –

CANTOR: Yes. And you can, in a way –

KRISTOL: And true of the popular version you're talking about, too.

CANTOR: Yeah. You see why people – Wyatt Earp was nostalgic in the 1950s, Buffalo Bill got nostalgic.

KRISTOL: Right. But even in the 1870s and '80s, they're mythologizing something. It's also still happening. I mean Custer's Last – you know.

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Sitting Bull is – you know.

CANTOR: Buffalo Bill has shot the last remaining buffalo, almost. And so, these people saw their way of life was disappearing and they wanted to leave a memorial of this. Another example would be Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay, “The Closing of the American Frontier.” Most people think he was lamenting the closing of the American –

KRISTOL: Which I think is 1890 or something.

CANTOR: It's something '90s. There are various versions of it. Most people think it was lamenting the closing – he wasn't. He was celebrating it.

KRISTOL: No, he was a progressive I think, yeah.

CANTOR: He was a Wilsonian progressive.

KRISTOL: Yeah. This is the past. Yeah, right.

CANTOR: And he was, “We need the administrative world. This was too lawless.”

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And so, that's why, again, I think the Western is fascinating because it allows us to think about American history, and this actual important turning point, and how it got mythologized. And I think you're right that Teddy Roosevelt types – and by the way, Teddy –

KRISTOL: And Roosevelt himself.

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: He came out West and wrote a lot about – volumes about it, right?

CANTOR: Yeah. And knew Saul Bullock – Seth Bullock, the character in *Deadwood*, the one that Timothy Olyphant played. So, the people like Roosevelt thought we were entering the 20th century and we can't have this lawlessness anymore.

KRISTOL: But we want some of those virtues.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: That kind of manliness –

CANTOR: Yes. And by the way that was very much the way the Western was perceived in Victorian England. They were very much afraid that they were losing their manliness. The imperial escapades had been an attempt to recapture.

But they got very worried that America was surpassing them and there were all these accounts. They'd look at Buffalo Bill and say, "A new specimen is evolving." And, "How are we going to fight guys like this?" So, it's why the Western is so interesting to study, to see this stuff worked out.

And so, the greatest example of the Western is John Ford.

II: On Classic Westerns (38:05 – 1:01:38)

KRISTOL: So let's get to the movies, which I suppose for post-1930 or so is the way in which the Western lives.

CANTOR: Yeah. And you know in some ways it's the best way for it to live, I will say this for the Western. That I confess I haven't read *The Virginian* and I will read it eventually but I think it works so much better on film.

I should say that the Western had usual wide success in the form of the novel.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And so much so that Europeans started imitating us. A German author, Karl May, was writing Westerns in German already in the 19th century and they were very popular.

KRISTOL: And he never – in the early 20th century, I think he was like the most popular author in Germany for some stretch there –

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: – at the beginning of the century, of the 20th century. And I think he had never set foot in the West.

CANTOR: Right, yeah.

KRISTOL: He had just read accounts and wrote them up in German.

CANTOR: Franz Kafka wrote a novel, *Amerika*, and he'd never – and it ends up in the Wild West in Oklahoma. So it's just amazing how this stuff captured the European imagination. And above all Ford again, 1939 in *Stagecoach*, which is generally considered –

KRISTOL: So Ford lives – I don't know when he was born, but I mean he's already a producer in the silent –

CANTOR: Oh, he was making films, yes –

KRISTOL: Director of the silent films.

CANTOR: Many of the films have been lost, but I think he did about 140 films all totaled up.

KRISTOL: So he's well into the prime of his career by the '30s and so forth.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: And already sort of famous?

CANTOR: Yes. And then the fact that he made *Stagecoach* in a way shocked people because at that point Westerns were thought of as B-movies. And he chose this B-movie star, some guy named John Wayne, to appear in *Stagecoach* and the rest is cinematic history. He made –

KRISTOL: So *Stagecoach* is the one that puts the Western movie on the map as a –

CANTOR: Yes. And it was a –

KRISTOL: – as more than just B-movies that they showed two at a time and for a nickel or something.

CANTOR: Right. Because it was very much a late Depression-era film, the stagecoach is a social microcosm. It brings together people from different social classes. And there's a kind of that nostalgic figure from the old South. There's a banker who represents all the evils of big business in the Depression. There's a prostitute. There's John Wayne who's a kind of outlaw.

And again it is all about the oppressiveness of the modern small town, the moral oppressiveness of it. The way this prostitute is treated with great contempt. And the dream is to escape to Mexico at the end, to a ranch in Mexico.

And so it's – you know, most people think of the Western as a conservative genre. I think that's completely wrong. It's a product of the fact that the two most famous Western stars, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, were conservative in their political beliefs.

But the films, the better ones are usually critical of America in one way or another and really lament the way the world is going. Ford made, in 1946, made *My Darling Clementine*, which is the first really good movie about the gunfight at OK Corral and where I think it picks up that name in popular culture.

He made his famous Cavalry trilogy, that's *Fort Apache*, 1948; *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon*, 1949; and *Rio Grande*, 1950 – all with John Wayne. And for example, *Fort Apache* is a deconstruction of the Custer legend. Right there already in '48, Henry Fonda plays a very thinly-veiled Custer and he's presented as vain, narcissistic, irresponsible – Henry Fonda. People say he played his first villain in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time in the West*. No, he's the villain in that film. And John Wayne plays this guy named York, who represents the right way to deal with the Indians. And Fonda treats them with contempt, and lets himself be drawn into this battle where he and all his soldiers were wiped out.

Now it's an interesting touch, Fonda's character is named Owen Thursday, and John Wayne is York, is asked to speak at his funeral, and he lies about him. He lies about what a great man Owen Thursday was. So although John Ford is deconstructing the Custer legend, he won't allow it to occur during the film. And so this is the theme that's famous –

KRISTOL: But the film is self-conscious about the lying.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: About the legend, so to speak.

CANTOR: Yeah, no, it's amazing how self-conscious this film is. That's 1948. That isn't post-modernism.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And of course it's – maybe we'll get to talk about *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, but you know the famous line in that film, 'when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.' And it's really interesting how many films about the West recognize the mythologizing of the West. Eastwood's *Unforgiven* is another example of that.

But here it is as early as 1948. And it's Custer – I think there's an Errol Flynn Custer's Last Stand movie around the same time, and it's the whole legend and how wonderful Custer was. And so, Ford was a very intelligent man, and very aware of legends. *They Were Expendable*--there's a World War II film that debunks the MacArthur myth in an extraordinary way. They were expendable. All these guys who were saving MacArthur, getting around in the Pacific. But they were expendable.

Anyway, but let's talk about *The Searchers*, his greatest film, and I think one of twenty films that I would call the ten greatest films of all time. It's 1954 [correct date: 1956], it's Wayne's greatest performance, it has all the extraordinary characters of Ford's films. Above all, the use of landscape, the terrific visions of Monument Valley in it. And Ford was so great at revealing the setting of the Western on that frontier line between civilization and barbarism. It shows you a world that is hostile to human nature, and where people are literally scraping out a living on these farms.

And Wayne plays Ethan Edwards, who is a Civil War veteran. You see his gray coat, for example. And he is the perfect Western hero in the sense that he's tough, he's unrelenting, he's implacable, he's good with a gun, he's a scout, he knows how to track, he knows the ways of the Indians and he is what is defending these frontier communities.

There are these perfectly decent and ordinary people, trying to eke out a living on these prairie farms, and barely surviving. And then they had these Indians attacking them. And the film was based on the fact that the family of Wayne's character is wiped out by the Indian raid and one of the daughters is kidnapped and adopted by the tribe.

And Wayne has to set out to avenge these deaths and to bring back the daughter. Although we soon figure out he wants to kill her because she's turned, she's now an Indian and not a white woman.

Now this has made the movie exceedingly politically incorrect today. And it's not quite in the category of *Birth of a Nation*, but you can see that critics today have a hard time calling it a great film, because of what they perceive to be Ethan's racism in the film. And it is amazing the degree to which he's called a villain now in film criticism. I mean it's John Wayne, come on.

And here's the point where I feel my background in Shakespeare and so-called serious literature is an advantage. I think many critics of popular culture, not to be offensive, are lacking in certain critical skills that you develop in talking about Shakespeare. And above all, I lament the absence of the concept of tragic hero in much of the criticism of popular culture.

It's a point I discovered when I was writing on *The Searchers*. That is, for many critics the only alternative to hero is villain. And if you can show that a certain character is not nice, then he's a villain.

And I invoke the example of Macbeth. Macbeth is the hero of *Macbeth*. And I'm sorry, it's not called *Macduff*, it's not called *Malcolm*. It's called *Macbeth*. He's a very nasty man, he kills a lot of people, he kills children. Don't do these things at home. It's only a play. But he's the hero of the play, and he's a tragic hero. And Shakespeare generally speaking shows heroes who do terrible things. Othello murders his wife on the most absurd evidence of her having committed adultery. Hamlet kills half the characters in the play.

And this is what Shakespeare understood by a tragic hero. The hero is tragic because there's something heroic about him. He's an extraordinary human being, does things that ordinary people can't do. But for one reason or another, and that's the core of the play, he ends up doing terrible things.

This goes back to Homer. Achilles did terrible, terrible things. He was a nasty, nasty man. A guy crawls in front of him and asks him not to be killed, and Achilles kills him and drags him around Troy behind his chariot for three days. He talks about wanting to eat his flesh. A nasty man, Achilles, but a great hero.

And that's John Wayne in *The Searchers*. And I just, you know, again you read these people, yes, there's some terrible things about Ethan Edwards. He's a very cruel man, but you need this guy. There are times when you need him. When the Indians are circling, they're just about to attack the cabin the little boy says, they're getting nervous, "if only Uncle Ethan were here." And the answer is if Uncle Ethan were there, these Indians would be dead.

And so this is the terrible fact about living on the frontier. That there aren't police you can call. There's no 911 number you can call up. There's no institution there to save you. And so what saves you is this very heroic and skillfully heroic man. And of course the – it is a modern movie, he does not kill little Debbie when he has the opportunity.

KRISTOL: No.

CANTOR: There's this moment where you can see in his eyes as he's about to do it, and then he looks at her, and that's little Debbie, and he can't kill her. And you know that's the difference between *The Iliad* and even Shakespearean tragedy, but I think *The Searchers* comes as close to tragedy as a modern film can come.

And at the end of the film, Wayne brings little Debbie back home, but he cannot enter the house anymore. And this is this great John Ford shot where he's framed by the doorway and retreats into the distance. And this is the tragedy of the Western hero. He cannot become part of the community which he saved and which he was necessary to save.

And so that's what's so interesting to me about the Western, that it does raise this whole world of Homeric-style heroism which is, as you say, is perceived as part of the past or receding into the past. But it gives you a tremendous appreciation of what it stood for and what a heroic figure this guy was. And there's this feeling: they were giants in those days.

KRISTOL: And I suppose, *sotto voce* so to speak, the movie suggests maybe that these virtues might still be necessary, because maybe our bourgeois world isn't quite as secure as you think, and there are still threats and there's this sort of subtle –

CANTOR: Right. And the background is, you know, Ford was making World War II movies around this time. And of course in *Rio Grande* it's the Korean War that is in the background of that film. It's all about crossing the border into Mexico to eliminate some outlaws. And it was a whole question of the Korean War, do we cross the parallel?

And so, yes, I think it's very much Ford is a great admirer of military heroism. And he was brokenhearted that he couldn't serve in World War II, but he became a cameraman and made these wonderful films of Midway, for example. So yes there's this whole Cold War atmosphere in the '50s films, that we can't afford to lose these heroic types like John Wayne. Of course John Wayne felt strongly that way, too.

KRISTOL: So, *The Searchers* is '54. [Actually: '56]

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And then *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is –

CANTOR: Is '62.

KRISTOL: That late. Okay, so that's considered the end of the –

CANTOR: Yes. And that's self-consciously so. The whole film was retrospective. You know, this is a kind of argument I don't like to make myself, but the film looks awfully cheesy. It is obviously made on a Hollywood set and there are no great scenes in Monument Valley. And critics say that was deliberate, that Ford wanted to evoke the mythic quality of all of this.

KRISTOL: Which is explicitly the topic of the movie.

CANTOR: Yes. So –

KRISTOL: So that's kind of interesting, yeah.

CANTOR: I don't like this kind of argument because I wonder, was the budget just low? And this is where you're trying to make an argument, really in a sense make a virtue out of necessity. But you know there's some truth to that, that you can see that this is a movie set. You can actually recognize it from like TV Westerns. And so that tells you a lot about the film.

And you know the whole movie is Jimmy Stewart versus John Wayne. Jimmy Stewart plays, I think his name is Ransome Stoddard. He's come to this little Western town and he's an Easterner. He's brought his law books with him, he's going to practice law. And then this outlaw, Liberty Valance, who's played by –

KRISTOL: Jack Palance? [Actually: Lee Marvin]

CANTOR: Yeah, Jack Palance. And he beats – he robs a stage and beats up the Jimmy Stewart character. And Stewart goes ahead and tries to practice law. And the town's called Shinbone. He gets involved in state politics. Anyway, he ends up having to have a gunfight with the Lee Marvin character and he appears to shoot him and kill him.

It turns out in a flashback that it was the John Wayne character, Tom Doniphon, who shot him with a rifle from afar. But on the basis of being the man who shot Liberty Valance, the Jimmy Stewart character has this wonderful political career, culminating in becoming Senator.

And in the film, it begins with him coming back to Shinbone with his wife to just revisit his roots. And the whole story emerges in flashback, which is perfect because of the idea, the Western is in the past. The story is in the past.

And again, Wayne plays the typical Western hero: aggressive, good with a gun, willing to stand up for people's rights. Jimmy Stewart's character, frankly, appears effeminate in the film. There's one scene where he appears with an apron, he's working in a restaurant. It's very self-conscious on Ford's part. And he's showing that, yeah, it's the Jimmy Stewart types who won.

You know, the film begins with a shot of a railroad pulling into town, and that's the symbol of civilization, the railroad leading it. And we learn that Tom Doniphon was in love with the woman Jimmy Stewart eventually married and she fell in love with Jimmy Stewart's character. And it is all about how the heroic, Homeric, aristocratic world of the West was replaced by this modern, middle class world, where the lawyer dominates. I mean again it couldn't be more symbolic that his law books triumph over John Wayne's guns.

KRISTOL: But only because of John Wayne's guns.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: Triumph over the bad guys because of John Wayne, which John Wayne keeps – which everyone keeps secret.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: I mean, Wayne never says that he –

CANTOR: Yes. He will not ruin this guy's career. And of course at the end –

KRISTOL: And does Stewart know that it was Wayne who shot Valance?

CANTOR: Yes, he eventually finds out because Wayne has to convince Stewart to stay in politics and he tells him his story. And of course towards the very end of the film, the local newspaperman has been interviewing the Jimmy Stewart character and he admits all these things.

And Stewart says, okay, you've got your story now. And he says, I'm not going to print it. And that's when he says, 'when the legend becomes the fact, print the legend.' And again it shows you how self-conscious Ford was about the myth of the West and why it – you know, in a way it's ideal. It has to be preserved, but you also have to reveal the extent to which it is a myth.

So, I mean again I think this is why Ford is the greatest maker of Westerns. Again, I think *The Searchers* is the greatest of them, but *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is not far behind.

It's really interesting, there's a lot about politics in it. There's this incredible – there's a school and the local African American wants to go to school and get learned. And Jimmy Stewart is teaching about US politics, he says, do any of you know a line from the US Constitution? And Pompey the black man says, "all men are created equal." It's a great Harry Jaffa moment.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

CANTOR: Yes. The Declaration underlies the Constitution. Okay. It's just amazing how intelligent some of these films become in that way.

KRISTOL: You know what strikes me also is, a little bit, is so I guess in '39 let's say, the – which is *The Stagecoach* was considered sort of the height of the – the un-ironic Western I guess you could say.

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: It's only less than a quarter century later that one has *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. And before that I guess *Shane*, which is also self-consciously nostalgic and not ironic, but I mean with the end. And also *High Noon*, which is also – So I mean it's like both – it's so quick that they went from apparently un-ironic to the not – ironic is not quite the right word, but what would you say – the myth and the unmasking of the myth are almost contemporaneous, right?

CANTOR: Genres move very fast. This is something people do not understand. If you see 1590 as the beginning of the Elizabethan Theater, let's say Renaissance theater. By 1615 it's almost over, by 1630 it's gone. Now of course it's become Jacobean and Caroline and so forth – but genres establish clichés, and people start making fun of the clichés very quickly.

Romeo and Juliet is about 1596. John Ford – the other John Ford, the Renaissance playwright John Ford, wrote a play called *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*, I think around 1630. It's the *Romeo and Juliet* story, except they're brother and sister.

And you see, people are bored with the *Romeo and Juliet* story, the two youngsters rebelling against the parents and *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*, it has a nurse in it, it has a friar. There's all the things from *Romeo and Juliet* except the hero and heroine are brother and sister and that gives it a new charge. It's an amazing play about incest written in 1630 or so, but that's the logic of a genre. How many times can you retell the *Romeo and Juliet* story?

And indeed the notion of the revisionist Western, that somehow Westerns were fundamentally transformed in the 1960s and '70s, no, there are revisionist Westerns being written almost from the beginning.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And again, *High Noon* would be another example of that, *The Oxbow Incident* in the '40s. It's a popular genre. It attracts talented people, that's my point about popular culture. And also that it moves very fast. To go on from here, I'd like to take a trip around the world.

III: Westerns Around the World (1:01:38 – 1:30:15)

KRISTOL: Okay. To what – to where? Clint Eastwood?

CANTOR: I'm going to get to Clint Eastwood, but I've got to go to Japan and then to Italy.

KRISTOL: Okay.

CANTOR: And this to me is a fascinating point about the Western, that it became an international form. And again, you see it in people like Karl May that when the Western was popular as a literary form, it was picked up in Europe and adapted from there. And similarly there's this strange journey of the Western from John Ford to Akira Kurosawa, to Sergio Leone, and then back to Clint Eastwood.

And again, I offer this as kind of a case study in popular culture, how it's globalized, and again how fast it works. Now, Akira Kurosawa – one of the ten five greatest directors of all time, and certainly a master of the Samurai film, but he very much developed out of John Ford.

Now part of it is just cinematic. He learned how to do these incredible wide shots from Ford. If you Google John Ford and Akira Kurosawa, this semi-pedantic guy comes up, shows you a scene from *Drums Along the Mohawk*, and from *The Hidden Fortress* by Kurosawa. *Drums Along the Mohawk*, of course, by John Ford. And it's guys raising a flag. It's the same scene. It's just amazing to see it.

And in general Kurosawa admitted how much he'd learned in terms of cinematography from watching Ford's films. And he merged the American Western with the Samurai film. And it's very interesting to see how he was able to do it, because the underlying situations were so much the same.

You know, I'm thinking most famously of *Seven Samurai*, and let's see, the date on that is 1954. So actually the same time as *The Searchers*, but Kurosawa had been watching earlier Ford movies.

The Samurai movies – well, Samurai, they're these aristocratic warriors in the Japanese tradition. And these films are generally set during the Tokugawa Shogunate. It starts I think in the 16th century and

ends in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration. This is a period in which Japan was in a kind of prolonged civil war, where these great *daimyo*, these feudal lords we'd call them –

KRISTOL: Feudalism was maybe the closest analogy in our –

CANTOR: Yeah. And it's very interesting to see Kurosawa was obsessed with feudalism. It didn't end in some ways until 1868. Up until that point for hundreds of years the Shogun was effectively ruling Japan, and the Emperor was a figurehead, a kind of religious figure. The Emperor was in Edo which is now Tokyo, and the Shogun was in Kyoto.

And the Shogun was a warlord, a kind of generalissimo. He was the most powerful, militarily, of feudal lords. And this begins with Ieyasu Tokugawa. By the way this is one of the reasons why Kurosawa made the best Shakespeare films in the 20th century. *Throne of Blood*, which is based on *Macbeth*, and *Ran* which is based on *King Lear*. As Shakespeare was dealing in his history plays with the emergence of modern, centralized kingship out of the feudal era in medieval England and it maps perfectly onto feudal Japan.

And feudalism in Japan was a lot like the Wild West, as Kurosawa saw it. And he particularly liked dealing with the figure of the *ronin*, who is a master-less samurai. Because this was the situation: you would have these feudal clans battling it out; in many cases one of the feudal lords was killed and then his samurai were released from their loyalty, and indeed had no one to serve. So the *ronin* becomes the great figure in Kurosawa's films.

The Seven Samurai is based on a situation where these unemployed samurai go to work for a little village to protect them from another feudal lord. And in general these Kurosawa films deal with an unemployed samurai who serves for pay some master. And so it's like the hired gun in the American West, it's like the Johnny Ringo figure. Of course these figures, they were portrayed by Toshiro Mifune, the John Wayne of the Samurai film.

And *Seven Samurai* is about these great warriors who were trying to protect these villages against rampaging other warriors, and who have to train them. And they can't individually stand up to a samurai because a samurai, like Coriolanus, can kill forty ordinary people with no problem. But when they band together and learn trickery they're able to track these outlaws in various ways. And then they have people like Toshiro Mifune standing up for them. And so they end up defeating the bad guys.

But what we see is the villagers have their village, and they've won their village, but the samurai are still unemployed at the end. And at the end, one of them says, "They won, we lost." And it's the same vision of these heroic men who've lost the core of their existence, which was the feudal system, and are now fighting for pay and for no long-term purpose.

Now, of course it's fascinating that *Seven Samurai* was then remade into a Western, *The Magnificent Seven* by John Sturges. And let me put in a plug for John Sturges. I think he's terribly underrated. He did *Bad Day at Black Rock*, *The Magnificent Seven*, and *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, which I think is the best Gunfight at the OK Corral movie. It stars Burt Lancaster as Wyatt Earp and Kirk Douglas in a career-making performance as Doc Holliday and Jack Elam I think is Johnny Ringo. But anyway it's a great film. People say it's a derivative of Ford, but I think it's better than that. But anyway, just to put in a plug. That was my favorite Western as a kid. When I saw *My Darling Clementine*, my reaction was, it's pretty good, but it's no *Gunfight at the OK Corral*.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: But anyway. But it's fascinating that this Japanese film, *Seven Samurai*, based on John Ford's movies, gets remade as an American Western. And has been remade since. There's this international circulation of this Western form, which I find fascinating.

Now, to continue the story, I'd love to talk about Kurosawa for an hour. But he then goes on to make a film called *Yojimbo*, and a sequel to it called *Sanjuro*. *Yojimbo* means 'bodyguard'. And it's about a samurai who walks into a – again, an unemployed Samurai walks into a town where he realizes there's a feud going on and he gradually offers himself to both sides and plays them off against each other. Which is a marvelous symbol of the chaos and anarchy that occurs during this Tokugawa Shogunate. It's why the Meiji Restoration was necessary to restore the Emperor to his central position.

But again it's fascinating to see how in the '40s and '50s Kurosawa was trying to come to terms with World War II, and the true end of the feudal spirit in Japan; because so much of it survived in the Bushido code of the Japanese military. It's what really had to be brought to an end. So he basically projects what was a real problem in his own time, back into these earlier periods. And again, showing that these aristocratic forms can't survive in a democratic world.

By the way, this is the great theme of Katsuo Ishiguro's novels. He writes in English but he's Japanese. *Remains of the Day* is all about this, that great novel about pre-World War II England, and the aspects of fascism in pre-World War II England. That's a projection on Ishiguro's part, of the Japanese situation onto a European model.

So all these things circulate in so many complex ways. And then *Yojimbo* becomes *Fistful of Dollars*, an Italian Western with Clint Eastwood playing the Toshiro Mifune part. So we've gone from John Wayne to Toshiro Mifune to Clint Eastwood. That's how we get there.

And Sergio Leone makes this so-called *Man With No Name* trilogy. Let's see if I've got the dates on that. *Fistful Of Dollars*, 1964. *For A Few Dollars More*, is 1965. And *The Good, The Bad, And the Ugly* – which by the way in the Italian is *The Good, The Ugly, And the Bad* – 1966.

And here's a whole new genre, we call it the spaghetti Western, in which the Western is transposed to an Italian director. The films were shot in Spain. There are areas of Spain that look a lot like Arizona, which is why the conquistadors liked Arizona when they got there. They were from Extremadura and it looked like home to them. Like the Swedes went to Minnesota, the Spanish went to Arizona and New Mexico. So it's extraordinary how much those films look like they're in the American West.

And now I find it particularly interesting, in Leone's case he's an Italian – he now merges it with the Mafia. That is, these are, in a way, crime dramas. They are really about outlaws, about kidnapers, about rapists, about extortionists. I mean the level of crime in these spaghetti Westerns escalates to a whole new level of violence and malevolence and I can't help thinking this is from a guy who knows the Mafia.

And indeed, perhaps his two greatest films are *Once Upon A Time In The West*, which was 1968; and then *Once Upon A Time In America*, which is about gangsters in America. And so here is where the Western and the gangster movie merge in a fascinating way in Leone.

Now, I'm not a big fan of these Westerns, I have to say. They were not well-reviewed when they were brought to the US. They were regarded as trashy films. Then, as often happens, the people who go to cinema, not to movies, discovered these films and thought they were great. This is like Europe's revenge for Jerry Lewis. Jerry Lewis's movies were received as brilliant works of art in France and now eventually Sergio Leone's movies have been received as brilliant works of art in America.

I recognize the cinematography; the Morricone musical scores are excellent; I can never get over the fact that the films are dubbed, and badly dubbed. And more than half the actors are Italians, so they're not even speaking the language. But even – you know, Eastwood does a great job, but it's noticeably dubbed.

There was no shooting on location in the films and it's just so obviously dubbed, like a bad Hercules movie. And you know, Eli Wallach in *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, is playing this Mexican bandit. It's kind of like Al Pacino in *Scarface* – it's this phony Spanish accent. Anyway, so I'll get in a lot of

trouble if I don't proclaim these are the greatest movies. They show up on lists of greatest movies all the time.

KRISTOL: Is that right? But originally they were regarded as sort of schlocky, right?

CANTOR: Absolute trash. Yeah. They were, you know, we were getting all these sword and sandals movies from Dino De Laurentiis, Kirk Douglas again as Ulysses. But you know it was – I don't know, I think they paid Eastwood \$15,000 dollars for the first film. He was their third choice. I think they wanted Charles Bronson actually. And then they went for Richard Harris, and he recommended Eastwood.

And Eastwood is great in them. And he has proven to be a great actor, you know. I mean he has one of the great careers in Hollywood history both as an actor and as a director. And this taught him everything he needed to know, he learned from Sergio Leone and then from Don Siegel as a director. But still, the movies themselves are kind of tacky and cheesy, in my view.

But these are the Hobbesian Westerns. These are the films in which there's absolutely nothing redeeming in human nature. And in which it is 'a war of all against all' and life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.' Again, there are memorable shots in them, but the landscape is entirely barren. It's as if the town is set in Monument Valley.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: There's no greenery. The town doesn't belong there. And indeed it doesn't survive; it's just blown away eventually by these villains. And it's very hard to tell the heroes from the villains. So again, I'm not a big fan of these films, but they do play an important part.

And again this amazing story, the Western migrating west to Japan, then to Italy, and then Eastwood bringing it back to the United States. He appeared in a film called *Hang 'Em High* in 1968, which he did not direct. But then *High Plains Drifter*, in 1973, which is my favorite of his Westerns, up until *Unforgiven*, essentially playing the same character.

But this is, he comes into this town, it's entirely corrupt. They're having an outlaw problem, he offers himself to solve it. Again, he's Yojimbo, he's the master-less samurai. And it turns out he just wants to see the town destroyed. It's not clear – he may be a supernatural figure. He may have been killed and this is his ghost coming back to get revenge. But it's pure revenge and pure violence. It's highly stylized, and I think done well. And he's – he acts very well.

And again, the point of the film is to expose that everybody's corrupt: the mayor, the police chief. John Wayne actually criticized Eastwood publicly for this view of the West. John Wayne wanted to find something heroic in it.

And all of this culminates in *Unforgiven*. Let's see, that's 1992 and that I'd rank it up there with *The Searchers*. And again, I feel some of these films, they're not just the greatest Westerns, but they're among the greatest films of all time. And *Unforgiven*, again has this strongly nostalgic aspect to it.

And again, Eastwood is well into his career. I think he's feeling too old to play Western parts anymore; they are physically demanding. It's so similar to what happened to John Wayne towards the end of his career. That Wayne started playing aging gunfighters at the end of his career, in one last heroic undertaking.

By the way, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is a film like this. And you start to get these last hurrah movies. The last hurrah of the Alamo. *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* would be another example.

And *Unforgiven* is about this guy named William Munny, long retired from his gun fighting days, just living a bare existence on a farm with his two kids. And some prostitutes in a town, I think in Wyoming, one of

them was killed and they put out a bounty on the killer. They're willing to offer a lot of money, and maybe it's \$5,000 dollars, a lot of money back then, for someone to kill them.

And this young kid who calls himself the Schofield Kid, approaches Billy Munny to come help him win the bounty. And Munny doesn't want to do it, but he needs the money – perhaps something symbolic in his name. And he agrees to go to this town which is presided over by Gene Hackman, Little Bob [should be: Little Bill], and he's running a tough town. A guy named English Bob, played by Richard Harris, shows up and the Gene Hackman character beats him silly because he doesn't want gunfighters coming to his town.

What's interesting is, English Bob shows up with a reporter named Beauchamp who's writing stories about English Bob. And so the film again gets very self-conscious. You see the creation of the legend within the film itself. And again, how phony it is, how much English Bob is promoting himself.

And then Eastwood shows up, again gets into fights with everybody. He's there with Morgan Freeman, is playing one of his friends named Logan and the town kills Logan. And that's when Munny goes out for his revenge. And it culminates in a gunfight in the saloon. Which I find very interesting because it's entirely premised on how difficult it is to kill another human being.

Now, the unspoken premise of most Westerns is, it's the easiest thing in the world to kill another human being, which I don't think is true. I often wonder if there's any circumstances in which I would be able to do it. And not because I consider myself a particularly moral person, but I just don't think I'd have the courage to do it.

And of course in the Army you have to learn to do it in combat, but you're usually very far away. I guess there is hand-to-hand combat, but that's the point about the Western, particularly as the Western gunfight is typically staged. That you kind of walk up to someone and shoot him.

And the Gene Hackman character at one point is explaining this to the journalist, that it's not the fast draw. That's not what matters. And that's what shows up in this fight. Munny is not even the first person to draw in the fight. He just draws, points the weapon with an unshaking hand, and kills one person after the other. And they're all shooting at him, but they're missing him. And it isn't the absurdity of these *Star Wars* storm troopers; it's just that it's not that easy to point a gun at someone and shoot him.

And what it comes down to is that the Eastwood figure is cold-blooded. And he has experience – he's done this before. And just one by one he kills them and they're just helpless in the face of this. And I find that very interesting. Because I'm sure that was closer to the truth. Evidently this drawing in a gunfight was very rare in the West.

Something I saw, Wyatt Earp had killed only one man before the gunfight at OK Corral, and Virgil Earp did most of the shooting at it because he'd had experience in the Civil War, Virgil Earp, and Wyatt didn't. He was younger.

And it is again a last hurrah. He clearly has a sense of having outlived his time. And indeed we've been seeing this from the beginning, the Western way was self-conscious about its being dated from the beginning. But it's a great film, and Eastwood is just fabulous in it.

KRISTOL: And is it now over – I mean, the Western – is that sort of the end?

CANTOR: No, no, not at all. I mean, you know –

KRISTOL: But *Deadwood* –

CANTOR: *Deadwood* was – and there's a *Deadwood* movie, it's in production and maybe in post-production by now and I hope it's as good as the show.

So there are Westerns, there have been many Westerns on television. A very good show was *Hell on Wheels*, which was about the making of the Transcontinental Railroad, and what an act of crony capitalism it was. A wonderful show. And what I would say is this though: the Western has migrated to other genres.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And that goes back to my original classification, that – and actually these genres are not as fixed as people think. Here, the American Western becomes the Japanese samurai movie, which then becomes the Italian spaghetti Western. In other words, it's easily adaptable. If you take my original formulation, you set anything in an alternate world and it can be a Western.

KRISTOL: *Star Wars*, obviously.

CANTOR: Yeah, *Star Wars* which, by the way, [was] based on *Hidden Fortress* by Kurosawa, but there was a science fiction movie made of *High Noon*. I show in my latest book that the zombie story in *The Walking Dead* is a Western. The zombies are the Indians; the heroes and heroines are a wagon train moving through a frontier landscape with marauding inhuman beings and with other outlaws and criminals.

It's so funny, somebody called Carl, the little son on the show, Wyatt Twerp. And that's when I realized this. And I was comparing the relationship – Carl thinks his father is dead, he's raised by another man who teaches him how to use a gun. That man is named Shane. And I mean I just fell over when I saw that. These guys on the show were miles ahead of me, that they were working within Western genres.

So, the death of the Western is much exaggerated and we will see it reproduced again and again. You know, for that matter, David Milch walked into HBO proposing a show on Rome. That's what he wanted to do. And they said, oh, we've got one in production already. And they said, why don't you do it as a Western? Gene Roddenberry pitched *Star Trek* to NBC as *Wagon Train to the Stars*.

So, again, part of it is, if you take my notion that there's this whole category of shows that look at alternate worlds, where an heroic ethic is possible, where everything isn't middle class, or the middle class world is only in the process of developing, then you can see – gangster stories, science fiction stories, horror stories like zombie movies. They are just transposed Westerns. You've got the Urban Western, Charles Bronson in those *Death Wish* movies, or, *Dirty Harry* with Clint Eastwood. They had the same notion of the Western – to hell with procedure.

KRISTOL: Right. The authorities won't protect you.

CANTOR: Go out and shoot them yourself. So, in that sense, the spirit of the Western is a very important spirit of popular culture, which is not fully embracing middle class culture, as we put it. William Blake has this wonderful line, "I care not whether a man be good or evil, I care if he be a wise man or a fool." In the Western it would be, "I care not if a man is good or evil, I care if he was a strong man or a weak." And that ethic when you see that, even if it's an urban drama, if it's in a mafia movie, that's the spirit of the Western.

And again, I feel this is my discovery that there's this divide in popular culture that either simply accepts the middle class world as a given, or offers an alternative to it, which often reminds us why we need a middle class world.

KRISTOL: And I suppose some of the more subtle popular culture movies or TV shows or whatever that quote 'accept the middle class world as a given', subtly also suggests its limitations or its insufficiencies.

CANTOR: Yes. *Seinfeld* was a great example of that. America fell in love with Jerry, George, Elaine and Kramer. We now know that Larry David hated them. That he was trying to expose the emptiness of their lives. And the final episodes made that so clear – the audience hated the final episodes.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And if that wasn't enough, he went on to make *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. It's really interesting. At one point the characters within the show propose their own show, and it's a show about nothing.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And that's the way Larry David conceived *Seinfeld* – that it was a contemporary *Waiting for Godot*. He was trying to show how meaningless these people's lives are, in their lack of attachment, and their narcissism. And so, yes, it was deeply critical of that world, but the people who were watching it were from that world. I never watched *Friends*, but I suspect it was even worse, though not self-consciously so.

KRISTOL: Right. So, final word on the Western? I'm sure that this conversation is going to produce a huge number of rentals for Netflix and Amazon and others and we should get some cut of that. I feel like you should be reimbursed for this reinvigorating the tradition of the Western.

CANTOR: If people find this interesting, my book [The Invisible Hand in Pop Culture](#), has a whole section on the Western. I discuss *The Searchers*. I discuss the marvelous TV show, *Have Gun, Will Travel*, and show how it was related to *Star Trek*, because Gene Roddenberry wrote episodes for both and it shows how Gene Roddenberry's vision of *Star Trek* grew out of *Have Gun, Will Travel*.

And finally there's an essay I'm really proud of, "Order Out Of The Mud – *Deadwood* and the State of Nature," where I work out this whole Hobbes-Locke thing in connection with *Deadwood*, and show how important property rights are in *Deadwood*.

There's this marvelous moment towards the beginning of *Deadwood* when Wild Bill Hickok is excited, "We're about to become a state. We'll have the right to vote." And Timothy Olyphant says, "I'll settle for property rights." It's an amazing Lockean moment. And indeed *Deadwood* is this great defense of property rights and spontaneous order. So, rent all the movies you want, but buy my book.

KRISTOL: Right. And read some Locke and Hayek as well, right?

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Paul Cantor, thank you very much for a genuinely both fun and stimulating conversation about the Western, and we'll come back and do other aspects of popular culture and high culture soon as well.

CANTOR: Okay – maybe some Shakespeare too.

KRISTOL: We should go back to Shakespeare at some point, right.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]