CLINT EASTWOOD’S AMERICA
America Through the Lens

Martin Scorsese’s America – Ellis Cashmore
Clint Eastwood’s America – Sam B. Girgus
Alfred Hitchcock’s America – Murray Pomerance
Spike Lee’s America – David Sterritt
Steven Spielberg’s America – Frederick Wasser
CLINT EASTWOOD’S AMERICA

SAM B. GIRGUS

polity
To Scottie
Katya, Meighan, and Jennifer
Jeff and Ali
Arielle Gianni, Zachary Isaac, Mia Victoria, and
Maxwell Scot-Smith

Sam B. Girgus, August 2013
Photo: Zachary Arrington
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ABBREVIATIONS


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The Making of an Artist

The transformation of Clint Eastwood into one of America’s most significant directors stands as an extraordinary achievement in film history. After decades of acting and directing that gained him success and fame but little recognition for his film art, Eastwood’s emergence as a major creative and artistic force in film came as a surprise with *Unforgiven* (1992). Film critics, scholars, and the public, as Edward Buscombe writes, have discussed the significance of *Unforgiven* as a work that changed film and cultural history with its unique revision of the Western genre.¹ What could not be known at its release was how much change *Unforgiven* would initiate by opening a series of major transformational films by Eastwood that engage the ethical and moral crises of our times. *Unforgiven* and the works that followed it constitute a vital and original addition to American and world film art from an
unexpected source to proffer new ways of looking at and thinking about modern experience.

*Unforgiven* reintroduced Eastwood to film culture and the world. The film instigated the change in the meaning of the name “Clint Eastwood” from being a label or brand for a popular American film hero and a marketable film commodity to signifying not just excellence in film-making but a film art and ethical consciousness that exceed and transcend simple definition and categorization.

*In the film that arguably revivified the modern Western while changing popular and critical perceptions of Clint Eastwood’s artistic sensibility and ethical consciousness, William Munny (Eastwood) in Unforgiven searches his soul and ponders his destiny. (Unforgiven, 1992, Warner Bros, Malpaso Productions, dir. Clint Eastwood.) (All images are screen captures produced by the author.)*
Building on his considerable film experience at the time, Eastwood in *Unforgiven* and then in the major works that follow it explores new territory for art and meaning. Like *Unforgiven*, subsequent films revise film genres. *Mystic River* (2003) turns a crime and detective story into a modern drama of vision and ethics. *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) revivifies and transforms the dormant sub-genre of the boxing film. The joint venture of *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) not only revolutionizes the concept of the war film; the films become a consciousness-altering cultural endeavor to suggest the fear and repulsion of the stranger and the other as a source of death and violence. The war films indicate that such fear requires new thinking about difference as a basis for a culture of strangers.

Accordingly, Eastwood should receive critical attention as a director for taking film as an art form to new horizons of meaning as part of a dedicated ethical and spiritual quest. Eastwood has found the means of mind, imagination, and artistic will to create films that provoke new thinking, especially regarding ethical relationships and responsibility. For more than a century of film, directors have told viewers what to think about life, sex, love, relationships, society, and the inexorable complexities of experience. Eastwood, however, has become part of that special group of directors who makes viewers think. His anti-violence Western ends in a massacre; his film of transformative love in which the word becomes flesh in the boxing ring ends with a form of human sacrifice in the name of a transcendent and redeeming care; his crime story of perversion, murder, and revenge insinuates a deific power of witnessing that propounds the promise of an ethical vision of transcendent responsibility to the other; his unprecedented venture of filming both sides of a horrible battle, the Battle of Iwo Jima, goes beyond the espousal of peace to make the stranger, the foreigner, the
outsider, and the history of the other the material and structure of film art. The intellectual courage and ethical imagination of the Iwo Jima films directly challenge the stereotype of Eastwood as a political reactionary that goes back to his early roles in film.

Hailed as masterpieces, Eastwood’s mature works comprise a cinema of thought. They incite the ethical imagination to seek alternative possibilities in relationships, while stirring the artistic sensibility to appreciate new forms for examining and expressing experience. In these films, Eastwood’s film art and his persistent drama of the ethical cohere. His art becomes more than a vehicle for ideas. Artistic tensions and ethical relations engage in an ongoing exchange between form and meaning.

In his films of artistic, intellectual, and ethical maturity, Eastwood fulfills what had been incipient in his early work as a director, namely, a search for meaning in human relationships in which ethics entails a transcendent responsibility to the other greater than the self and more than a negotiation or discourse on values, interests, and power. Anti-institutional and rebellious to his core, Eastwood conveys in the later films a form of religious consciousness regarding radical moral and ethical responsibility.

In inchoate form in his early Westerns – especially in *High Plains Drifter* (1972) and *Pale Rider* (1985) – the redemptive impulse calls for “regeneration through violence.” In these and other early films, Eastwood tended to embody the regenerative in a transcendent, superheroic figure.

In contrast, Eastwood’s mature films suggest the infinite in the human that exceeds knowledge and certainty but still demands absolute responsibility in intersubjective relations. The films look toward Emmanuel Levinas’s anarchic ethical time before synchronic time, “to a past that was never present,” a time of “a deference of the immemorial to the
unforeseeable,” a paradox that “inscribes the glory of the Infinite.”

Moreover, Eastwood’s focus as a director on reconsidering masculinity and male responsibility in relation to the feminine originates in his first film, *Play Misty for Me* (1971). This project develops concomitantly with the maturation of Eastwood’s ethical vision and his art into a sophisticated sensitivity to the work of the body in the construction of subjectivity, social identity, and moral and ethical relationships. In Eastwood’s films, the organization of the drives of the body and the psyche into social and cultural structures and relationships parallels the violence associated with the denial, disavowal, and fear of feminine sexual space, and sustains the countermovement to fill the void of being with family-centered love.

Thus, starting with *Play Misty for Me*, gender and sexuality in Eastwood’s films have been the focus of debate by scholars such as Dennis Bingham, Drucilla Cornell, Adam Knee, Christine Holmlund, and Tania Modleski, among others. In many of his films, Eastwood confronts the violence and fear related to the feminine and maternal for the purpose of transforming the naked energy of internal drives into a source for love and parental care and responsibility. Interestingly, acclaimed actress Meryl Streep recently asserted in Richard Schickel’s *Eastwood Directs: The Untold Story* (2012) that Eastwood has “a female sensibility in many ways.”

As Eastwood’s film-making progressed, he contrived his own directing style of building narrative tension to climactic scenes of tightly compressed emotion and meaning in carefully constructed frame spaces and images that dramatize his ethical vision. Eastwood’s mature directing style of cuts, montage, parallel editing, dynamic composition and framing, and fast filming present a cinema of ethical and moral complexity in a context of psychological uncertainty and social instability.
Eastwood’s cinema of thought compares to feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s “culture of revolt,” becoming artistically, philosophically, and socially a film aesthetic of questioning and intellectual unrest. For Eastwood, the cinema of thought and revolt constitutes neither a structured philosophic system nor a totalizing ideology but a cinema of oppositional images and impulses that counters what Kristeva terms the society of the “total spectacle” of social, intellectual, and political conformity.¹

Accordingly, with *Unforgiven*, the beginnings could be discerned of the changes that would become Clint Eastwood over the next decades. Of significance, Richard Schickel notes of Eastwood and *Unforgiven* that “critical recognition of his achievement was unhesitating.” He says, “It was almost as if that ‘revisionist’ tag they hung on the film was their way of saying that Clint was obviously a new man, some sort of born-again filmmaker.” Schickel observes that “implicit in the film’s critical reception” resides a “forgetting that Clint had been working his way toward this apotheosis almost since the beginning of his career.”²

As the culminating, triumphant works of more than four decades of directing, the films of the “new man” and the “born-again film-maker” that Schickel describes compel further study for Eastwood’s artistic originality, intelligent exploration of the complexities of modern experience, and passionate ethical vision.

**Film Art and Ethical Vision**

Over the years, Clint Eastwood’s America usually has meant just that, America through the psyche, vision, voice, and imagination of Eastwood, often as represented on the screen by an Eastwood performance under Eastwood’s direction.
For several decades, when you looked through Eastwood’s lens to see America, you probably saw Eastwood. Eastwood’s face and body in close-ups, closer close-ups, medium shots, and long shots often have been the focus of his version of the story of America. Ordinarily, such narcissism might seem somewhat strange in a grown man.

In retrospect, however, it can be seen that Eastwood the director has endeavored to put his films and himself as an actor in challenging and meaningful social and cultural contexts. It also can be understood with hindsight that a serious search for ethical and moral meaning provides much of the impetus for Eastwood’s film-making enterprise. Eastwood, as John Belton says, enacts “a unique moral vision” in his films. In a similar vein, Drucilla Cornell writes of Eastwood, “He grapples with all of the most significant ethical issues of our time: war, vengeance, the role of law, relations between the sexes, the meaning of friendship, and indeed with what it means to lead an ethical life as a good man in late modernity.” Sara Anson Vaux also persuasively insists that Eastwood’s films exhibit a powerful “ethical vision.” As such comments suggest, in his extended body of work as a director, Eastwood has developed his ability to relate his story through film as a quest for individual redemption in the context of the struggle for social redemption.

Eastwood’s work as a director has gone through three fairly obvious overlapping narrative modes and artistic styles. In the first stage that starts with Eastwood’s inaugural film as a director, *Play Misty for Me*, he learned to direct in part by directing himself. In this largely narcissistic period, Eastwood usually focuses on the self. Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* begins his second stage as a director in which he continues to star and direct himself in his films but evidences a growing maturity in terms of both his art and ethical consciousness, including the development of relations to others. Eastwood
opens yet a third creative mode with *Mystic River*. In this mode of his directing, Eastwood departs as an actor from his own work. A continuing movement away from the self toward the other as an ethical and philosophical proposal characterizes this phase.

In the films of his first 20 years of directing, Eastwood solidified marginalization and border identity as a defining theme. He directs himself as the liminal man with a threshold existence, entrenching his character’s lone identity on the border between rigid resistance to and anticipation of radical social change. With roots in the era of assassinations, Vietnam, and Nixon, Eastwood’s marginalized hero in the films of this first stage resonates with the fragmentation and chaos of that time. In his films and in the country, it was a time of basic changes regarding sexuality and gender as well as in other areas of values, beliefs, and behavior. In the films of this mode, Eastwood tends to rely on filming himself for narrative continuity, dramatic development, and psychological intensity. Noteworthy films in this mode include *Play Misty for Me, High Plains Drifter, The Outlaw Josey Wales, Bronco Billy* (1980), *Honkytonk Man* (1982), *Sudden Impact* (1983), *Pale Rider* (1985), and *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990), a provocative and compelling effort by Eastwood about director John Huston. Anticipating some later films, Eastwood does not act during this period, in *Breezy* (1973), a winter–summer love story starring William Holden, and *Bird* (1988), an excellent film about jazz great, Charlie Parker, with Forest Whitaker. *Bird* also illustrates Eastwood’s passion for jazz and the blues and his inclusion of African-American actors and issues in his films.

In the films of the first decades of directing, Eastwood steadily acquired and developed expertise and confidence as a director. He exercised his creative imagination and his powers of film construction. From his first films to his most
recent work, Eastwood has never stopped working, learning, and growing.

Eastwood emerged from this extended early stage of directing to make his revisionist Western, *Unforgiven*, the film that establishes a new stage of maturity in his filmmaking. Following *Unforgiven*, films in which he also stars include another celebrated masterpiece, *Million Dollar Baby*, and other works of considerable artistic merit and strength, including *A Perfect World* (1993), *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), *True Crime* (1999), *Gran Torino* (2008), and some less notable efforts. In this period, he directs but does not act in *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997) with Kevin Spacey, John Cusack, Jude Law, Lady Chablis, and Alison Eastwood.

In these more mature films, Eastwood continues to cast himself and others on the threshold as the outsider but with a new emphasis on the search of the self or subject for meaningful relationships. Still on the margin socially and on a psychological threshold existentially and temporally, a mature Eastwood demonstrates greater awareness of the ethical, moral, and social meaning of separation. In these films, Eastwood works within a *mise en scène* of intense relationships in social and cultural contexts of increasing ethical complexity. Inevitably the subject of attention as the star, Eastwood nevertheless shares a broader, deeper, and darker scene of moral and ethical action with others. Dramatic tension, story coherence, psychological intensity, and ethical conflict tend to be shared with others for sustaining action and thematic development.

As Eastwood continues to direct, he renews himself and his career once more in his third artistic phase of directing films without acting in them, including several masterpieces, *Mystic River* and *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Again in *The Changeling* (2008), *Invictus* (2010),
Hereafter (2010), and J. Edgar (2011), he makes powerful and provocative films that add substantially to his years of dramatizing issues of children, women, and family along with race, death, and American character.

The Self-Made Man: A Hero of Revolt

From the very beginning of his acting career, Eastwood proved brilliant in creating and re-creating himself, starting literally from nowhere with little more than his own innate resources. Eastwood epitomizes the struggles of the self-made man, although for many years of his youth and early manhood, he clearly was unsure of what to make of himself. He came from Oakland, California, a place that Gertrude Stein famously described with the phrase, “There is no there, there!” His parents were loving and stable but struggling in his youth with the family’s serious economic troubles during the Depression. He worked hard at various jobs, including in the timber industry of the forests of the Northwest, but as an enlisted man in the army he was assigned duty that enabled him to meet several actors and to get a notion of a possible acting career for himself. At times he tried community college on the GI Bill as he also aspired to get acting roles. Ironically, in spite of his obvious good looks and charisma, Eastwood struggled to create his own presence, stature, and identity. He eventually managed some minor parts in small movies until he got his role as ramrod Rowdy Yates in Rawhide, the 1960s hit CBS television series, which marked the beginning of his fame.

As an actor from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, Eastwood achieved superstar status based on his image first as “The Stranger” – “Il Magnifico Straniero” – or “The Man With No Name” in Sergio Leone’s “spaghetti Westerns” and
then as “Dirty Harry” Callahan in Don Siegel’s films. In films such as *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966/1968) and *Dirty Harry* (1971), he was at once very visible and out of place standing in a dusty poncho, smoking a cigarillo, and killing everyone in sight under a burning Spanish sun or hovering over San Francisco’s worst criminals with a beautiful California sky behind him. In these roles, he looked extreme, perhaps sometimes silly and eccentric, especially to some eastern establishment critics such as Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker*. At that point in his career, he did not have serious exposure to art or the life of the mind. He also did not have extended rigorous training for acting like Marlon Brando or Montgomery Clift in the Actor’s Studio. A developing actor, he was learning to direct on his own in bits and pieces. But he kept pushing on like the cattle driver in *Rawhide*. For years no one noticed the strength of his commitment to directing. Ultimately, Eastwood snuck in under the radar into the realm of greatness as a director.

Accordingly, in the first decades of his career as both a director and actor, Eastwood could be described as something of a peculiar phenomenon of American film and popular culture. Given his background and image, many at the time failed to foresee that the initial phase of Eastwood’s directing would serve as a period of artistic incubation. Critics such as Kael thought that noting the superficial when looking at Eastwood and his films meant everything to understanding him. In fact, Eastwood was nurturing his apparent and his hidden strengths and abilities of mind, imagination, and character. Born on May 31, 1930, Eastwood was already in his early forties when he directed *Play Misty for Me* and could have continued with relative ease with his directing career by staying in familiar film-making territory.

Instead of being complacent about his success, Eastwood renewed and transformed his work as a director in part by
assimilating the volatile energies of violence and destruction in his first-phase films with what he learned during this stage about film-making and about life. In the films of his artistic maturity, Eastwood maintains the focus of his earlier films on mental crisis and ethical challenge. The later films, however, incorporate the violence, disjuncture, and death of the earlier films into broader and deeper contexts of ethics, values, and human relationships. As Cornell emphasizes, the trauma of the tension between psychological impulse and ethical demand constitutes a major force throughout Eastwood’s work, beginning with his early films.8

As a superstar and celebrity, Eastwood’s life and career have been documented in close detail in many books, most importantly, thoroughly, and lastingly by Richard Schickel. What comes through in all of the books about Eastwood centers around the deep sense of him as the rebel and outsider. This drive for independence manifests itself in his decision relatively early in his successful movie career to create his own production company, Malpaso, named after a creek by his home and property in Carmel, California. This entrepreneurial move toward financial and artistic independence and control occurred with the production of Hang ’Em High (1968).

Emphasizing the prominence of rebellious independence in Eastwood, Schickel repeats an Eastwood statement about himself. Eastwood said in an interview, “‘There’s a rebel lying deep in my soul.’” Similarly, Schickel quotes Eastwood’s first wife Maggie Johnson Eastwood as saying to Playboy in 1974, “‘He had this thing about being a loner, like I kind of didn’t exist sometimes. He’s a very complex person.’”9

It can be argued that Eastwood’s penchant for rebellion and independence in his films goes beyond the ordinary understanding of the idea of the rebel. The rebel usually
engages in anti-social activity as a challenge to authority and conventional rules of behavior. The rebel disdains conformity to develop an independent style and attitude.

While Eastwood and his movie characters certainly typify such nonconformist rebellion, he exceeds this model of behavior and thought to engage in a form of existential revolt involving the ethical and social relationship to others. Eastwood becomes what in the light of Kristeva’s work could be called a hero of revolt. Eastwood in his films occupies the position of the artist of modern revolt, becoming a voice for challenging the ethical and moral order of existing ways of thinking and living.

As further indication of Eastwood’s awareness of the importance of the ethical and moral dimension to his work, Schickel reports and paraphrases another important comment by Eastwood that “the body of his work adds up not to a politics but a morality.” In this moral sense, Eastwood as a serious director and as an American artist injects a moral and ethical sensibility into his work, a sensibility imbued with the dilemmas and challenges of modernity and the American imagination.

**Eastwood and Eastwood**

In the special director–actor dynamic that informs many of Eastwood’s films, the actor becomes the embodiment of the director’s intent and purpose. Actor Eastwood functions in these films as the exterior representation and the performing self for the director. The actor Eastwood fulfills the role of director Eastwood’s alter ego. The actor provides a narrative through performance that structures, expresses, and unifies Eastwood’s meaning. In many Eastwood films, the screen presence of the actor externalizes and articulates an internal
journey of engagement with violent psychological forces, often regarding sexuality, women, manhood, and guilt.

It would be a mistake, however, to confuse the Eastwood character on the screen with the Eastwood behind the camera or, for that matter, the Eastwood producing and helping to manage his overall film-making enterprise. Eastwood the director and the actor operate in something like a dialectic relationship of difference and sameness. In spite of their different functions, they remain dependent upon each other. The dynamic of director Eastwood and actor Eastwood in the same film entails an inherent tension between distancing and intimacy. The duality of director and actor in one person imposes a sense of self-enclosure. The cohesion of director and actor as the same suggests the possibility of intellectual and artistic narcissism. The fusion of the two functions in one person can limit diversity, difference, and dissidence.

At the same time, this duality of director and actor in one person also creates a divided subjectivity, a double vision and consciousness that can engender complexity, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Such double consciousness can create the means for escape, for breaking out beyond barriers of rigid identity. The dual vision of director and actor, therefore, provides a structure for both revivifying change and stultifying repetition. The tensions of a self divided between acting and directing find expression in a kind of master–slave relationship.

In fact, it could be argued that especially in his early films as a director, the rigid, hard, reactive masculinity of the on-screen Eastwood face and persona may tyrannize over the director. Not considered the most nuanced of screen performers, especially at the beginning of his career, Eastwood’s face, body, and overall performance to a certain extent define the psychology and personality of his characters on the screen, sometimes reducing complexity of meaning.