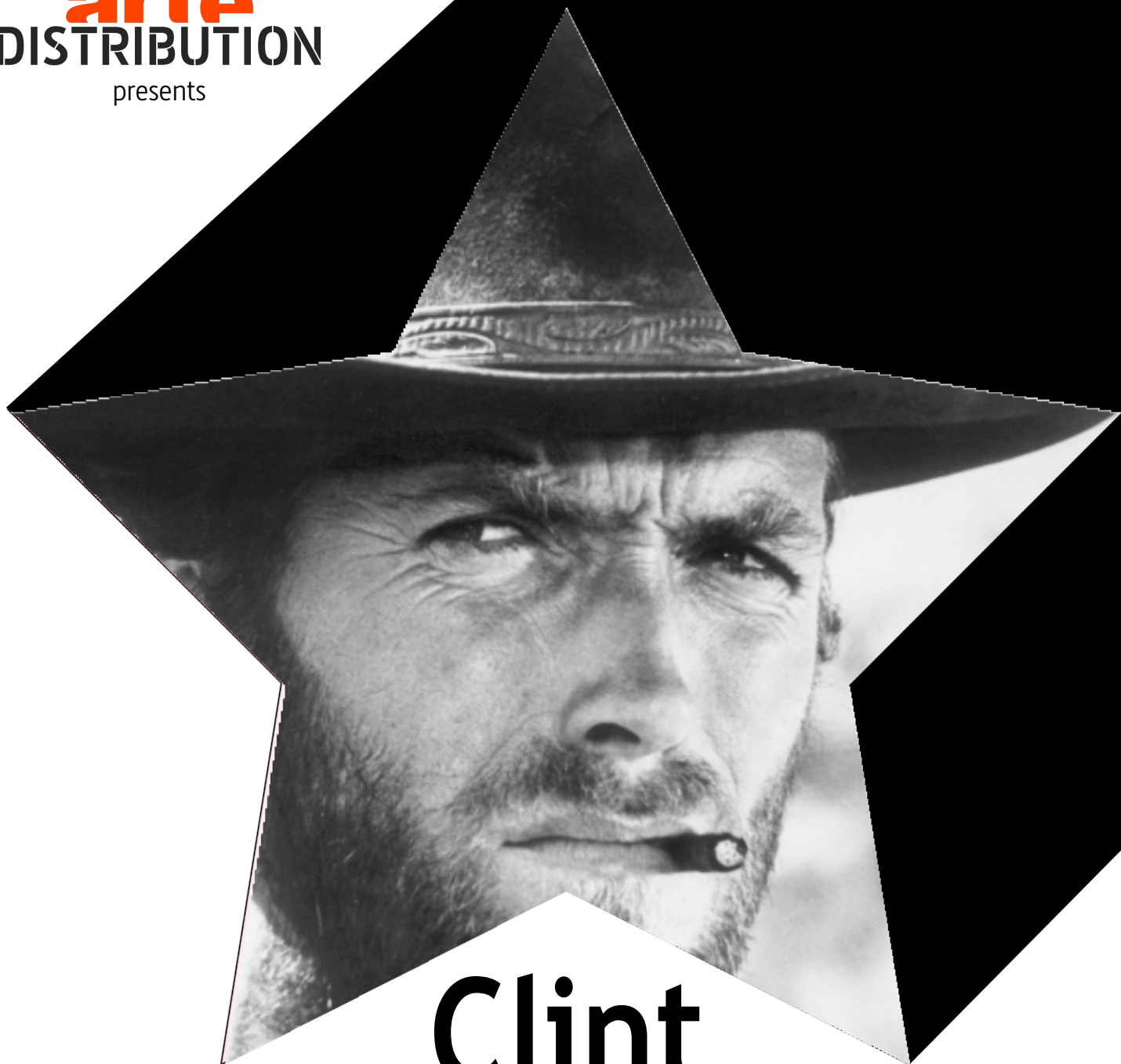


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Clint Eastwood the last legend

A film by **Clélia Cohen**
Produced by **Muriel Meynard**

On a wild West Coast beach, a long silhouette stands out from the distance. It is a runner jogging on the beach, making his way among the young people gathered on the sand, chatting in small groups, wearing vests to protect themselves from the wind. The voice-over with a British accent comments: "Nobody pays any attention to him, even though he is one of the biggest movie stars in the world". It is 1977, near Carmel, and Clint Eastwood is jogging near his ranch.

This small town in Northern California, jealously guarded authenticity far from the bling bling of the southern part of the state, is the stronghold he chose for himself, at a reasonable distance from the Hollywood hubbub - and he even became its mayor, for a two-year term, in the 1980s. If the actor was a star at the time, the filmmaker had only made a handful of films, and the British channel BBC came to devote an hour-long portrait to him. He is affable, and answers questions with humility, sitting on a rock in front of the Pacific Ocean, while caressing a small deer he recently took in. His calmness seems unalterable, his modesty constant, even if one feels that he knows perfectly well what he wants, and what he likes, in cinema.

What he doesn't know yet, however, is that he is going to make about fifty films, and that he is going to go from being a star to being a monument of American cinema. From the cynical and grimacing hero of Spaghetti Western films to Dirty Harry and his piercing and disillusioned gaze, from the popular hero to the actor despised by the elite, from the statue of the commander of the 7th Art to the respectable and workaholic old man: his career is so immense, and so long and full, that it is difficult to go around. Except if you keep one idea in mind, simple and strong: Eastwood was built on a regret, that of having arrived at the very moment when the flaming Hollywood of the golden age was dying. A regret that he would turn into an aesthetic, since his films would never stop pursuing this ghost, this chimera.

His place in the landscape of cinema resembles this corner of California where he has always made his home: ragingly independent and wild, both impregnable and sovereign. It's as if he's been there forever, immemorial, and that he's crossed America's history as if it were a country. A country of which he would be the last legend.

A child of the Depression

Born in San Francisco, Clinton Eastwood Jr. is a true Northern Californian, and above all a child of the Depression, following the great crisis of 1929 which tore the country's economy apart. His parents Clinton and Ruth, both tall and athletic, from the middle class, married young. Ruth was just pregnant when the stock market crashed in October 1929. Clint was born on May 31, 1930, and he was already a star: at over 10 pounds, he was the biggest baby ever seen at St. Francis Hospital, the nurses carried him around to show him off, and the event even made it into the local newspaper!

Throughout his childhood, his family was forced to move constantly, depending on the job that the father managed to find: the situation was so bad, the supply was so meager, that the Eastwoods moved to a job as a night pump attendant in Pacific Palisades - at the Standard gas station on Sunset Boulevard, at the intersection with the Ocean... After that, they were forced to move almost every year, for the whole decade: Redding, Glenview East Bay, Piedmont, they traveled all over the West Coast and its lands. Clint remembers the little trailer in which, each time, they piled up their belongings in the direction of a new adventure... He also remembers the exiles who walked on the side of the roads, in search of a better life.

It is a period that strongly marked his personality as well as his imagination, and we would find many traces of it in his later works: for his film *HonkyTonk Man*, about a moving country singer, a bit of a loser, who travels the roads during the Great Depression, he dived into family photo albums to find inspiration.



HonkyTonk Man, 1982

And the road, the famous American road that inspired so many writers and filmmakers, this road that runs through the infinite landscapes of America, would also have a considerable importance in many of his films, as a director but also as an actor: in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *Bronco Billy*, *Every Which Way But Loose*, but also *The Gauntlet*, *A Perfect World...* America is not a place where one settles but that one surveys, tirelessly. His "Man from Nowhere" character, which would mark the beginning of his career in Western films, is that of an eternal wanderer: we know neither where he arrives nor where he leaves at the end of the story. The road is also to lead his boat off the beaten track, to enjoy a life without ties, like the hero of *Bronco Billy*, but also the photographer of *The Bridges of Madison County*, a citizen of the world... The desire not to settle down would also extend to his personal life, when once free from want he would enjoy traveling constantly between his home in Los Angeles, his home in Carmel, his ranch in Northern California, or his mountain chalet in Sun Valley.



Very much loved by his parents, never neglected because of his difficult situation, Clint never had time to make friends with other children: the eternal "new kid on the block" was rather introverted, regularly withdrawn into his daydreams, probably dyslexic even though at the time he was not diagnosed. At school, his tall stature (at the age of 13 he is 1.80m), this long silhouette that would serve him in his acting career, also isolated him from the others.

Fortunately, he discovered the cinema, and was won over by the high stature and clarity of Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York* by Howard Hawks (who would always remain one of his favorite directors), the first film he saw at the cinema; he was also very impressed by James Cagney's energy.

At first glance, there is nothing in common between the horny New Yorker and the gangly Westerner, but Cagney has an immediacy that appeals to Clint. The man who advises novice actors to " Put your feet on the ground and tell the truth " can only please Eastwood and his no-frills approach. He also likes the impassive and human Joel McCrea and, among women, is troubled by Linda Darnell and Rita Hayworth.

Soon enough, he also had another revelation that would be crucial in his life: in 1946, he discovered Charlie Parker in concert and was bewitched by this music, jazz. The cool attitude of the jazzmen, these feats accomplished without apparent effort and with a touch of disdain, even, for the audience, appealed to him to the highest degree. They were his idols, not Brando or Jimmy Dean like other kids his age. At the time, the fashion was Dixieland and the blues, which he consumed joyfully. He even took up the piano, learning alone, by ear, on the piano inherited from his great-grandmother, Grandma Andy, the only piece of furniture that followed the Eastwoods from move to move. Later, he even got a job as an occasional pianist in an Oakland bar, in exchange for a few beers and pizzas for himself and his friends.

This is how a whole generation of American boys grew up: jazz, girls, movies (most often smuggled in, you buy a ticket and bring 5-6 friends with you), nice cars (indispensable in the big cities of California), drive-ins: it's the Californian dream of an era, that of American Graffiti and pastel-colored ice cream.

He did not lose his sense of reality, however, and when his parents, whose situation began to stabilize in 1940 with a stable job for the father, moved to a wealthy neighborhood in Piedmont, Eastwood did not feel comfortable among the rich kids and switched to a technical high school with great ethnic and social diversity where he felt more at home...

From drifting to Hollywood, through the smallest door

When he left his teenage years, he was adrift, without any real diploma, not really knowing what he wanted to do; he did a series of odd jobs: lumberjack, clerk in a pulp mill, all around Oakland, Oregon, rainy and industrial country, future cradle of grunge... It is probably there that he forged a taste and a sincere closeness with this America of roadside bars, rednecks, bikers, guys in caps and checkered shirts, beer in hand, neon atmospheres and battered faces that we would often come across in his films, in *The Gauntlet*, or in the dyptic *Every Which Way But Loose* and its sequel *Any Which Way You Can*, the "white trash" summit of his filmography.

Even at the height of his fame, when he was the most famous star in the world, Eastwood never tired of going to eat steak and French fries at the modest little diner on the corner, the one that smells of grease and has his preference. And not one of the regulars would come up to him or bother him, so much so that he is intrinsically part of the "décor".



Every Which Way But Loose, 1978

In 1951, he thought of going back to school but the Korean War meant he had to be drafted. He tried to get out of it by all means, without success: he had to do his two years of classes at Fort Ord, on the Monterey peninsula, in California, still. Hating military life at all costs, he messed with a superior and managed to get himself appointed as a swimming instructor for the duration of his military service, soon enough freed from the obligation to wear the uniform. The Fort Ord swimming pool proved to be an exciting place to meet and "networking" enthralling: a number of aspiring actors and young novices entrust to him their dreams of glory or their first adventures in Hollywood.

During a leave, he decided to visit Carmel, 20km away, and it was love at first sight: if one day he had some money he would like to have a house there... But in the meantime, after the army, he settled in Los Angeles and started to take some acting classes in addition to his studies at the Los Angeles City College: he studied "business management, what you choose when you don't know what else to do". At the same time, he was a janitor in a small building in LA, and also worked in a gas station!

Through friends, he met Maggie Johnson, tall, blond, with a solid sense of humor, with whom he got married in 1953, not daring to oppose this very 50's decorum, even though he thought they were much too young for that. They loved nature and surfing together in Huntington Beach or San Onofre, while it was not yet fashionable, and had two children during a singular marriage that lasted 25 years, punctuated by the many infidelities of Clint.

Eastwood gradually began to develop a taste for acting, especially since several people told him that with his physique, it would be wrong not to try his luck. He took classes with George Shadnoff, a teacher not really versed in the precepts of the famous "Method", then very fashionable. Shadnoff rather advocated the idea of opening up to other partners, leaving room for improvisation, believing in ensembles and working groups; in short, he cultivated a distrust of overly intellectual approaches, a taste for the spontaneous and a raw reading without affectation. All these principles left a vivid trace in Eastwood's mind for a long time, if not forever.

Through acquaintances, he began to "infiltrate" Universal Studios, observing, meeting people and talking. Finally, one thing leading to another, in 1954, Universal signed him a contract: for 75 dollars a week, and for a few years, he was going to be part of this "factory for starlets and little stallions", learning to act, sing, dance, ride horses, take diction lessons, make a few small appearances in various films, dubbing, photo shoots for advertisements, in short, feeding the dream machine while waiting for his chance. At home, nobody believed in it, including Maggie, his wife; his father advised him against "walking in these gummed-up dreams", especially since he was not favored by his tall and clear physique, which reminded more of those of the 30s and 40s, like Gary Cooper, the tall slim American of the golden age of Hollywood, than of the rising stars of the early 50s: at that time, people were looking for handsome men like Rock Hudson, or feverish men like Marlon Brando. And it is true that in his younger years, it was difficult to label him: very tall (1.95m), athletic and muscular (he did a lot of sports), he also emanated a softness (his famous velvety voice) that contradicted and disturbed the first impression, and which the casting directors, then, did not know what to do.

The trigger for the next step was slow in coming. Eastwood cheated his boredom by prowling around the sets, observing the shootings in progress (he particularly liked the back lot where the exteriors were shot), and by taking advantage of the camaraderie of his actor buddies, and the seduction games with their female counterparts. Even though some predict a bright future for him, like screenwriter DeWitt Boden who said that "with his tall stature you couldn't miss him. This guy is going to be a star, because he doesn't have the usual look of a handsome guy", when he got his first role at the end of 54 in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, it was to play an assistant laboratory technician who is a bit of an idiot, and when he chose superb glasses from the accessories section to give himself importance in *Never Say Goodbye* in front of Rock Hudson, this last one leered at them and claimed them for himself, arguing the fact that the doctor he was playing had to have glasses...



Creature from the Black Lagoon, 1954

At the end of 1955, Universal announced that the studio would not renew its option on him and that October 25 would be the last day of employment for the "new talent." The young couple was living largely on Maggie's salary, while Clint was most often between two jobs (cleaning a furniture factory in South Los Angeles, digging swimming pools for the United Pool Service), or between two castings that led to nothing.

Hope was revived when William Wellman (a great director whose work he admired, especially *The Ox-Bow Incident*, which he often cited as his favorite western film) wanted to hire him for Lafayette Escadrille, and considered him for the second male role. But a last-minute casting change meant that his looks no longer matched the chosen lead, and the young actor found himself demoted to an anecdotal job... Eastwood seemed hopelessly stuck in the "aspiring actor" box.

Television, the new eldorado

Ce n'est pas du cinéma que viendra le salut, mais de la télévision, en cette fin des années 50 où elle prend de plus en plus de place dans la vie des Américains. Les programmes familiaux sont à l'honneur, et avec eux les séries western, qui ont le don de rassembler petits et grands devant les écrans publicitaires. À partir de 1956, on assiste à une montée en puissance des séries western : *Maverick*, *Have Gun, Will Travel*... Ces programmes ont besoin de garçons grands, minces, énergiques, pour assumer des rôles de jeunes adultes. Des garçons comme Clint Eastwood.

Lui est alors en pleine crise existentielle : il a 28 ans et songe sérieusement à abandonner, quand il décroche un des rôles principaux d'une de ces séries western, *Rawhide*, qui sera diffusée à partir de 1959, sur un groupe de vachers chargés de convoier du bétail à travers les Etats-Unis. Le lisse et gentil Rowdy Yates, son personnage, est l'un de ces cowboys, et leur voyage durera 7 ans, 8 saisons et 217 épisodes. Au fil des saisons, sa côte grimpe, on commence à le reconnaître, exactement comme Steve McQueen qui se fait lui aussi connaître grâce à la série *Au nom de la loi* au même moment : tous deux sont les premières vedettes de la nouvelle ère. En 1959, le genre connaît son apogée et les chaînes programment pas moins de 23 séries western par semaine ! C'est l'époque de *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, *Le Virginien*, etc.

In *Rawhide*, Clint was a nice cowboy, the only one to whom a love story happened from time to time, proof that he was there to attract the few young girls lost in front of the series. It didn't fail: Soon enough, Eastwood's fans called him "the most handsome cowboy in the world", while he himself called his character "the idiot of the Plains" ... He understood that he would not be given the opportunity to deepen his character, but that he would have to be a cowboy... In *Rawhide*, Clint was a nice cowboy, the only one to whom a love story happened from time to time, proof that he was there to attract the few young girls lost in front of the TV series. It didn't fail: Soon enough, Eastwood's fans called him "the most handsome cowboy in the world", while he himself called his character "the idiot of the Plains" ... He understood that he would not be given the opportunity to deepen his character, hopelessly nice, considered himself lucky to have a salary every week that began to take shape, and went to slumming in *Maverick* where, while appearing in a single episode, he had time to show a darker side, more dangerous of himself. "I have always considered myself as a composition actor," he said later, "never as a young novice."

Even if his character as a Plains idiot bored him, Eastwood did not intend to waste his time during the seven years of the TV series: he has always claimed that he learned everything, or almost everything, about his profession there, on both in front of the camera and behind it. How, as an actor, to get out of a bad script when one comes along, how to watch the directors work relentlessly, with the constant concern for economy and efficiency that television dictated. He would learn from the bad ones as well as the good ones about the mistakes not to make and the little tricks to remember. Many of them were veterans of that "golden age" that fascinated him, and that was in the process of fading away.

Most of them come to finish their career in TV, as well as many actors at the end of their career, exactly as Tarantino would show with DiCaprio's character in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*.

Rawhide was truly his film school. "After 250 hours of television, you learn what makes one prop master good, another average, and a third bad, and what makes one cameraman better than another. You learn how to direct, how one week the crew can move very fast and drag the next. Most of the time, it's the director's fault." With the growing frustration over the seasons of not seeing the series renew itself enough, a desire to direct was born in him that did not yet say his name.

When he was not cheating his boredom by observing others on the set, well, he was cheating "something else": even if he was and will always remain very secret about his private life, and no scandal ever broke out, it was no secret that Clint was far from being faithful to Maggie. He would be throughout their marriage extra-marital relationships, which would grow with his fame - an anecdote tells that he sometimes took out of his pockets 3 keys slipped there by admirers during the same dinner ... We don't know if Maggie was naive, in denial or on the contrary in a certain acceptance of this state of things, but all this didn't prevent the Eastwoods from acquiring their first pleasant house in Beverly Glen in the early 60's, then from buying a piece of land in Carmel to build what would become their main residence. On the set of *Rawhide*, an affair with Roxanne Tunis, a stuntwoman, gave him his first child, a girl named Kimber, whose existence he would not discover until several months after her birth.



Rawhide, 1959

TV series and Spaghetti Western films: the one who comes "after"

In the spring of 1964, while *Rawhide* was on hiatus for three months (a break between the shooting of two seasons), his agent sent him the script of an obscure low-budget western, directed by an Italian, shot in Spain, with German funds... Dubitative, the young actor would as much like to take advantage of his vacation, but his agent insisted: he promised that Clint would read it. From the very first pages, Eastwood recognized the plot of *Yojimbo*, Kurosawa's masterpiece that he adored, readapted in Western style. This was enough to convince him: at worst it would be a fiasco, but at least it would have little chance of crossing borders... A few weeks later, he flew to Cinecittà to meet director Sergio Leone and shoot a film with him that was still called *Il Magnifico Straniero* (The Magnificent Stranger), and which would be released under the title *A Fistful of Dollars*, changing the history of the Western and Eastwood's career forever.

"I went to Mattson's, a sporting goods store on Hollywood Boulevard, bought black Levi's and soaked them in bleach. The boots, spurs, revolvers and belt came from *Rawhide*. I got the hat in Santa Monica and bought the little black cigarillos in Beverly Hills! As for the poncho, I bought it in Spain." Leone was delighted with Eastwood's initiatives: between the actor who didn't speak a word of Italian and the filmmaker who didn't speak English, the understanding and comprehension were nevertheless quickly perfect... And yet Leone wasn't really excited at first: he would have preferred James Coburn or Charles Bronson, but they were too expensive. Eastwood was the only one to accept the poor 15,000 dollars offered for the role. Leone had watched an episode of *Rawhide* before deciding, and he would later tell: "I didn't think he gave off much, he was just pretty to look at. But I was struck by the slow way he moved, a certain indolence. Like a cat". A signature that will last a long time.



A Fistful of Dollars, 1964

During a chaotic shooting (the different European co-producers regularly passed the buck when it came to paying the crew at the end of the week), resolutely broke ("We had no electricity, no toilets in the caravans: we had to go behind the rocks) but joyful, Eastwood gave it his all, delighted to compose a character at the absolute antipodes of Rowdy Yates: nihilistic, dirty, dangerous, anything but "nice". Not content with having designed his costume himself, Eastwood offered to cut out large passages of dialogue: he considered that this was the best solution to preserve the character's mystery, not to explain his past, nor his motivations. Leone followed him in this direction.

This eternal stranger, who speaks little, most often between his teeth, and who would follow him for a long time, is therefore largely a creation of his own. With Leone, they would deconstruct the traditional western, which was dead in its country of origin, and reinvent its "hero".

A few months after the shooting, when he did not even know that the film was released because of its new title, Eastwood began to see more and more of his name in the newspapers: Leone's film made the buzz, first in Italy, then in Europe and finally in America. The public was crazy about this sarcastic retelling of a specifically American genre. Very quickly, the producer and Leone arrived in Los Angeles to convince him to shoot a sequel, *And For a Few Dollars More* (1965). There would finally be, with *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), three films in all, known by cinephiles around the world as the "dollar trilogy".

With this blow in the tradition of the Western, Clint Eastwood became a star. But he attained this status on a double disappearance, which would be of great importance for his later work: the disappearance of cinema as an all-powerful medium with the appearance of television, and the disappearance of the Western as the king genre of Hollywood's golden age. The great American myths (the cinema, the West) are in the process of wavering, and Eastwood built his legend on their ashes. If this mutation served him and he himself used it, it was not without a certain melancholy that would soon color his entire work: that of the one who came after.



The Man With No Name and Dirty Harry: two new "heroes" for America

Leone's films thus revolutionize the Western film, the American genre par excellence. One of the main aspects of this reworking is to blur the lines between the "good guys" and the "bad guys". Eastwood's character, for example, was not the type to wait for the enemy to draw his gun before shooting him. Eastwood tells a very funny anecdote about John Wayne, who had a terrible tantrum with a director who suggested that he shoot an opponent in the back, arguing that the young Eastwood did that all the time in his films. Welcome to a world where the old moral codes of the West no longer applied. Nor those of the Western film genre, the Hollywood genre par excellence. As Eastwood himself described it: "You don't even know he's the hero until halfway through the film", and that's exactly the metaphor of his career, as he didn't become a star until he was almost 40 years old - and directed his first film at the age of 40.

With his character of a man without a name, mute, dirty and smart, a devilish individualist and unshaven, Eastwood found a job that not only broke completely with his clean role in *Rawhide*, and finally gave him personality as an actor, but dictated his cinema persona for the years to come and in several roles, not only in Leone's films but also in *High Plains Drifter*, *Hang 'Em High*, *Two Mules for Sister Sara* or *Pale Rider*, to name only the most obvious.



Pale Rider, 1985

Another role would drive this nail definitively: it was that of the grumpy Dirty Harry of course, armed with his Magnum 44,

"the most powerful on the planet", made disproportionately large by the iconic long lenses of director Don Siegel, Clint Eastwood's second father in cinema after Sergio Leone. Three films with Leone, five with Siegel, he would dedicate to both of them *Unforgiven* in 1993, his dark elegy of the lost West. It was even Siegel, as a good conscientious father, who guided the first steps of baby Eastwood out of the Western and into the city, in *Coogan's Bluff* (1968), their first film together, where the actor played a redneck sheriff in a cowboy hat who goes to New York for the needs of an investigation. It's really the movie that took him from Leone to Harry, from cowboy to cop, from the desert to the city. With already a good ounce of defiance towards his superiors who openly despise him and take him for a peasant.

"Dirty" Harry and his chronic dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy, his damned determination to track down evil by all means, his soon-to-be cult-like repartee, were a hit in theaters (there were five installments of the adventures of America's angriest cop between 1971 and 1988), but not to everyone's taste...



Dirty Harry, 1971

He has been forgotten today, so much so that at more than 90 years of age his stature is immutable and commands respect, but there was a time when Eastwood was certainly adored by the public, but also despised, even vilified by critics and a certain American intelligentsia who saw in him the archetype of the right-wing, lowbrow hero. Revealed by TV and the Spaghetti Western, propelled star in a "severely burned" detective story like *Dirty Harry*: not the most prestigious of pedigrees for the right-thinking people.

The respected movie critic Pauline Kael even wrote an article in the *New Yorker* in January 1972, which was to follow him for a long time, in which she defended the thesis that *Dirty Harry* was an apology for the expeditious methods of an overzealous policeman, and was a fascist film. Clint Eastwood "fascist" is a label that would stick to him.

Harry, this creation of Eastwood the assertive Republican and Siegel the disillusioned Democrat destabilized, and maintained a tenacious misunderstanding in the career of the actor. It was two years after the *Summer of Love*, and just before the Watergate scandal: Harry embodied an America in full mutation, and in the middle of the debate on the rights of the accused. In 1971, (the year *Dirty Harry* was released), Clint Eastwood, 41 years old, was on the cover of the prestigious *Life* magazine with this headline in big letters, near his beautiful smiling face: "The world's favorite movie star is - no kidding - Clint Eastwood". The world's biggest star was Clint Eastwood. No kidding. For some it was an absolute aberration.

Anyway, with the nameless man of the dollar trilogy and the angry cop of the Harry series, Eastwood invented a new American hero, far from the valiant codes that were attached to him until then.

The American par excellence

Following the drastic reduction of dialogue in Spaghetti Western films, he applied the same recipe to all his characters: cut, reduce to the essential, impressing even Richard Burton during a shooting who said: "He summarized 4 lines of text in 4 words, and it was much more effective that way." Faced with those who believed that this posture was mainly a way to camouflage his limitations in acting, Don Siegel was his greatest defender: "He was completely underestimated as an actor, but it's the hardest thing in the world to do nothing. And he does it very well. Next to him, everyone else looks like they're overacting." In this, Eastwood actor completely fractured with the previous generation of stars, intense and tourmented, influenced by the famous "Method", like James Dean, Monty Clift or Marlon Brando. Here is the secret of the Eastwoodian character. He may not speak much, he may not be expansive, but he "embodies" a lot. And what does he embody, exactly? A kind of absolute Americanity.

This is what, very quickly and despite the critics, Eastwood found himself personifying: something like "the American par excellence, or at least what is best in him," as Michael Cimino said of him when he directed *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* in 1974. The one of the 70's at the time, but the one of every decade since then. "He is the best that America can produce," Siegel also said. He gradually becomes a representation of America and American cinema, in all its grandiose and unworthy, grotesque and admirable aspects. His recent films like *The Mule* (2018) or *Richard Jewell* (2019) are all about that.



Richard Jewell, 2019

But this super embodiment could not be satisfied with the simple status of actor, and Eastwood decided to move on to directing: this happened at the same time as *Dirty Harry*, with *Play Misty for Me* (1971), his first film, an indolent thriller shot in Monterey - we can see, by the way, as a wink from Siegel to his disciple, in a shot of *Dirty Harry*, a movie theater showing *Play Misty for Me*.

Eastwood face B: the permanent countershot

Very quickly, with his own films, opposing forces complexified the "Eastwood = fascist" dialectic as his own achievements appeared, such as the sensitive and magnificent love film *Breezy*, the humanist Western film *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, his first masterpiece, or the delicate ode to country music *HonkyTonk Man*. Subtle and gentle films. It was as if he was going to spend his time contradicting, nuancing his image, of which he seemed very aware, offering a path inside his work more secret, in a "minor" mode, he who loves so much and is so sensitive to music. The whole world knows him as an irascible cop with a big gun? His second film was a luminous love story, *Breezy* (1973), in which he didn't play a role, hiding behind William Holden's quiet and tired frame, facing one of the most beautiful female characters ever: the young *Breezy* (Kay Lenz), who decided to be part of the picture at all costs, even if 25 years separated them, even if she was a hippie and he was a disillusioned executive. An optimistic, simple, moving love film.

To the delight of the general public and the displeasure of some critics, he played a macho virilist? In *Play Misty for me*, his first film, he played a casual seducer harassed by one of his conquests in a sort of pre-*Fatal Attraction*, coolly set in the landscapes of Northern California. In *The Beguiled*, the most singular film of the Siegel/Eastwood duo, he played a soldier taken in by an orphanage entirely occupied by women during the Civil War, and it turns out very badly for his character of manipulative and concupiscent male: he would be amputated by the women who took him in, a thinly veiled parable of castration.



Breezy, 1973

This very strong masculinity, which no one can deny, he loves to abuse it (he gets regularly beaten up and is never afraid to appear as a suffering body) and to model it like a clay sculpture, giving it various forms: he adorned it with gentleness in Cimino's beautiful film *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, where not only did Cimino challenge himself to direct *The Man With No Name* laugh as if it was *Garbo*, but where he had a very strong and almost tender friendship with a Jeff Bridges disguised as a woman at the end of the film.

In *The Enforcer*, he saw himself with a female cop partner with whom, after the obvious distrust, he formed a protective and appreciative relationship - without sex.

And even later, in *Heartbreak Ridge*, in which he played a stern, ultra-muscular Marine instructor, who is seen reading women's magazines on the sly to try to better understand the other sex and to try to win back his ex-wife through dialogue and mutual understanding.

The climax of this attempt to counter his macho image took, during the 70s and until the mid-80s, the face of Sondra Locke, an actress with a strange face who became his companion: they played together in six films, and developed a film relationship that mimicked the war of the sexes, made of bickering, equality and reconciliation. In *Sudden Impact*, the fourth installment of the Harry saga, their relationship took a truly complex turn, as she played a vengeful killer who staggered Dirty Harry to his feet, and held up a distorted mirror to him, almost more radical and desperate than himself.

In short, an exciting relationship, and ambivalent too, as we notice that Locke almost gets raped in almost all their films together; a relationship that would end sadly, when years after their separation she would accuse Eastwood of sabotaging her career after their breakup and preventing her from directing the films she wanted to direct- she wanted to be a director.



All this complexity in the relationship with women and masculinity did not prevent Eastwood from making films like *The Eiger Sanction*, muscular roles full of testosterone where he chained fights and female conquests ... But in *Every Which Way But Loose*, which seems to belong to the same category of these "redneck" films that punctuate his filmography of the 70s, and in which he shared the spotlight, basically, with his truck and an orangutan, he proved to be particularly clumsy and submissive in love, and was literally swept off his feet, and humiliated, by a woman - look, it was Sondra Locke, again...

On a more political level, he was seen as a paragon of American imperialism? He delivered *Josey Wales*, and what begins as a "classic" revenge Western film ends up as a magnificent treaty of peace and equality between an American broken by violence and an Indian chief, as well as a parable on the utopia of a reunited community: Josey Wales goes headlong into death, wishing for it as a deliverance, and is caught up by life and by these outcasts (Indians, an old woman, a disturbed young girl...) who gather around him. And in the mid-80s, in the midst of "rambomania", he directed *Heartbreak Ridge*, which the Marine Corps finally gave up supporting when it was released, realizing that the image given of the army and of war was not as glowing as their expectations. Almost every aspect of his legend could be deconstructed like that, and that was until *Gran Torino*, in which he once again played with the prejudices that may have dogged him.

Confusing the issue indefinitely seems to be his auteurist way of dealing with the complexity of the world.



Finally, by dint of following the road he chose without worrying about the rest, after years of dissension between the public and the elite, the misunderstanding would finally dissipate, thanks to, among other things, the intervention of the great Orson Welles: "Eastwood is the most underestimated filmmaker today. His aura as the heroic heir to John Wayne prevents people from taking him seriously as a director. But somebody has to say it. And when I saw *The Outlaw Josey Wales* for the fourth time, I realized that he belongs in the line of great Westerns... and I have to take my hat off to him."



The Outlaw Josey Wales, 1976

That's it: Eastwood's DNA is to be "in the line" of the greats of the golden age, he who arrived just as this period was disappearing. In his work, he will never stop trying to reconcile the modernity of his time and the great Hollywood classicism. It is this constant tension between the two forces that makes the mark of his cinema, and its intrinsic melancholy. His favorite film, *Bronco Billy*, is a graphic illustration of this dichotomy, as he played the ringleader of a Wild West show lost in today's America, as cheesy to some as it is necessary to those who actually watch it, because it carries a real sincerity.

In the slow process of recognition and understanding of his work, French movie critics, especially magazines such as *Cahiers du cinéma* or *Positif*, did their part. In 1985, the Cinémathèque française devoted a retrospective to him and *Pale Rider* was presented at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1988, Eastwood's films entered the MoMA collection. The recognition is well and truly there. He was nearly 60 years old at the end of the 1980s.

The "Eastwood method", king of cool

Very early on, Eastwood developed what was to be the key, the secret of his independence: a production structure of his own, backed by a major studio (Warner). It's Malpasco, which means "bad luck" in Spanish - "I'm not superstitious," he laughs. It was especially the name of a piece of land that he owns in Northern California, and that would bring him luck. He founded it in 1967, after returning from Italy, following the path of other stars such as Burt Lancaster or Kirk Douglas. It still exists today, a small hacienda-style pavilion hidden in one of the streets of the Warner backlot, in Burbank. Malpasco has produced all of Eastwood's films since then.

At Malpasco, he also perfected his method, which has remained unchanged over the years: to surround himself with loyal collaborators who follow him for years, even decades. When his chief cameraman retired, it was his former assistant who became chief electrician who took over. Completely in line with his films such as *The Outlaw Josey Wales* or *Bronco Billy*, which brought together a disparate community around the hero, and which is, far from the reactionary excesses, at the heart of a certain idea of America, Eastwood chose a family at heart. In *Bronco Billy*, the very idea of a "troupe" is at the heart of the story, and the film really functions as a parable of Eastwood's relationship with his teams.



This "Eastwood method" obviously extends to the set, since the entire team knows each other by heart and, above all, knows the preferences of its conductor. It is said in Hollywood that these are the quietest sets in the industry, no one shouts, and especially not Eastwood himself who refuses to shout "Action!" and "Cut!" like his colleagues. A simple "Let's go" is enough, and everyone knows what to do. Especially when it's said in that soft, almost whispered voice that is unique and has become famous around the world.

Technically, it's the same thing: no marks on the floor to hinder the actors' gestures, if they are not in full light, it doesn't matter, Eastwood is very fond of shadowy areas, of natural light, of the minimum of rehearsals to keep the most spontaneity possible. He is a great adept of the first take. Even the virtuoso of the game, the ultimate actress Meryl Streep, was forced to follow these rules during the shooting of *The Bridges of Madison County*, and was delighted: "You kept my mistakes, it looks good. There is a cinema verité side to Eastwood, inherited from the great hours of the French New Wave or Jean Rouch.

This method is totally in line with the legendary casualness of the character, his fluid, slow, gangly gait, which has become over time his trademark, this immemorial cool.



The Bridges of Madison County, 1995

The 1990's : the state of grace

Was it that famous method, was it experience, was it maturity? Whatever it was, at some point, Eastwood's work literally took off.

"There are no second acts in American lives": this quote from F.S. Fitzgerald opens his film *Bird*, in 1988, which marked an important milestone and gave Eastwood a new aura, with this deconstructed biopic of the tragic and magical life of his idol Charlie Parker.

Eastwood intended to make a lie of this great American writer because for him, yes, there would be a second act. And what an act. The filmmaker would experience in the 90s a period of absolute grace, chaining masterpieces and obvious: *Unforgiven* in 1992, with which he said goodbye to the Western genre and delivered an immense, personal and universal work, for which he won a flurry of Oscars; *A Perfect World* in 1993, with the world star of the time, Kevin Costner, in his most moving role; and then *The Bridges of Madison County* in 1995, in which he reinvented the melodrama alongside Meryl Streep, making generations of viewers weep with tears.

This second act of his life, of his career, at the age of 60, the filmmaker inscribed it in the very image in the last shots of *Unforgiven*, in a fade that makes him disappear from the image, literally: his tired carcass of an old cowboy who has seen too much vanishes at the end of this film that theorizes both his contribution to the genre and the end of the genre, and makes an existential fate to his relationship to violence. The following year, he agreed for the last time to act in a film that he did not direct (*In the Line of Fire*, 1992). The last part of his career until today, he would be fully the Author, in front of and behind the camera. It has been almost 30 years since he was directed by someone other than himself.



Unforgiven, 1992

Clint is dead, make way for Eastwood.

The Eastwoodian nineties continued with films such as *Absolute Power* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, both of which were more minor films, but which were the opportunity for intimate confessions: his character as a thief in the first one, who tries to strengthen his distended ties with his daughter, probably a reflection of the relationships Eastwood has with some of his children, for whom he feels he has not been sufficiently present - to this day, he is known to have had eight children with several successive wives, and he himself refuses to "officially" confirm a figure. If he has made Kyle and Alison, the two children he had with Maggie, appear regularly in small roles with him, and that Kyle, who became a musician, often collaborated to the music of his films, we know little about his other children (except that they are all more or less actors!), and in particular about Kimber, the illegitimate daughter he had with the stuntwoman of *Rawhide*. Bad conscience or confession, the characters of sagging fathers, or those who have difficulty communicating with their children, are scattered throughout his work, up to *Gran Torino* or *The Mule*.



The Mule, 2018

On a more "political" register but in a sovereignly relaxed mode, laid back as we say in English, *Midnight* is the humanistic painting of a very singular American community in a small town in the South of the United States, where the most beautiful and most striking character is a black transgender, the fascinating Lady Chablis. Not bad for a "fascist"...

Everyday hero vs. eternal hero

The filmmaker returned to the Madison vein, delivering a true melo, sentimental and dry at the same time, without fat but with torrents of tears. He himself admits that he was seduced by the "father-daughter love story" that underlies the story, more than by the fact of making a boxing film. A way for him to continue exploring this theme, already approached several times in his filmography. The film also seemed to be a distant echo of *Breezy*: this time the love story is no longer sexual, but the resemblance between the two actresses, their square jaws, their stubbornness to enter at all costs into the field of vision of the man they have chosen for themselves (whether he is a lover or an adopted father) bring the two films together. But the time of the seventies utopia was far away and the outcome could only be tragic. If Eastwood's cinema were a day, we could say that *Breezy* would be the morning and *Million Dollar Baby* the evening...

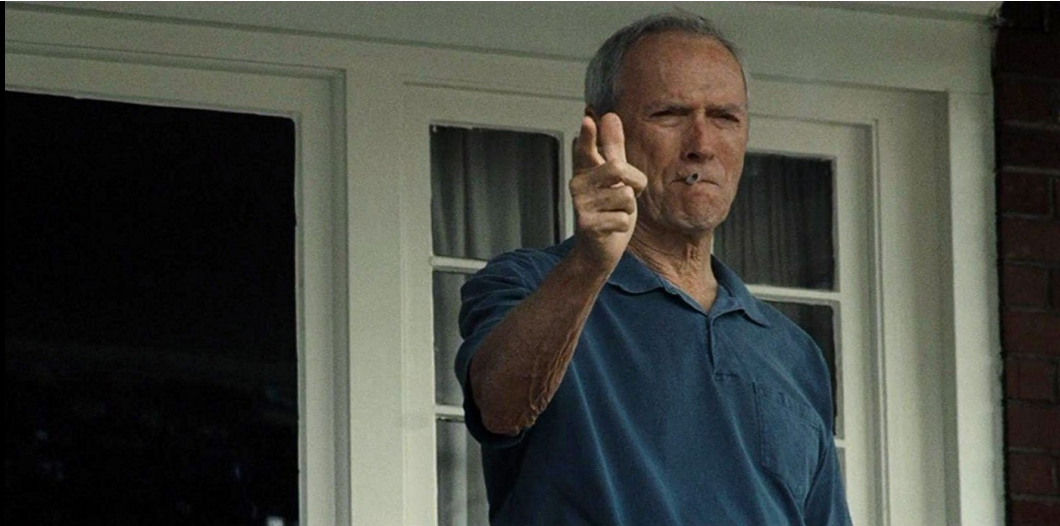


Million Dollar Baby, 2004

Clint Eastwood was then 75 years old: this new flurry of Oscars seemed to be the ideal opportunity to withdraw to the cheers of the crowd, to start a well-deserved retirement after nearly fifty years in the business.

Well... it won't be! Once again, the filmmaker has put the reset button on and completely reinvented his career, accelerating the pace, chaining films together with a bulimia that we have never seen before: since this new consecration, 15 new films signed by Eastwood have been released at the time of writing these lines. That's more than the entire body of work of Maurice Pialat.

The films in which he does not appear as an actor are increasing in number, but he allows himself the luxury of directing when he really has something to say, and it is usually about his cinema character, his persona, his so-called legend: *Gran Torino*, *The Mule*, or *Cry Macho*, his latest film, which title is in itself a whole program. All of these films are at once complex and clear reflections on what he was, what he embodied, and a way, always, of turning the tables and playing with the myth: the grumpy old man in *Gran Torino* subtly plays with the prejudices that have pursued him since the "fascist" *Dirty Harry*. Right down to the imaginary gun that he likes to point ironically at those who annoy him.



Gran Torino, 2009

The other films of this last period are divided into two groups, the biopics (*Invictus*, *J. Edgar*) and the adaptations of real events that always question American heroism, but from the point of view of ordinary men whose lives suddenly take an extraordinary turn. Eastwood seems to have concentrated his research on a painting of the American hero, but in the most everyday way, with his imperfections, a side that is as pathetic as it is fascinating: *American Sniper*, *Sully*, *Richard Jewell*, *The 15:17 to Paris*, all these films are about that. Involuntary heroes, in a way. This reflection also refers of course to the heroes that he was able to embody in the cinema, often bigger than life. What is the difference between a film hero and a hero in life? This is the question that his films seem to ask today.

Far from the simplifications that plagued him in the 1970s, there is always this ambivalence in him, and that he scrutinizes in his films, between what fascinates and what shames America. An old-school Republican, he has never officially supported Donald Trump, contrary to what has been said, but he is capable of harshly condemning "the wicked generation" in an interview, while at the same time making a subtle but absolutely anti-racist film like *Gran Torino*. Nothing is simple with Eastwood. In this respect, *American Sniper* is a textbook case: how do you interweave an anti-war plea into the portrait of an Iraqi war sniper who has all the makings of a national hero? Well, by showing that it drives him crazy, that it has the effect of a drug, of an intoxication with which he ends up not being, and above all by having him eliminated by one of his own, who has become as crazy as he is.



Clint Eastwood on the set of *Cry Macho*, 2021

What is simple, on the other hand, is his constant search for limpidity to tell things as complex as his country. A search for absolute classicism. The search of the man who came after and never gave up pursuing this dream, even if it is a ghostly one (ghostly characters haunt his films, starting with the pale rider of *Pale Rider*), of bringing back from the dead the great classic form of Hollywood's golden age. Adding a totally unexpected third act to an already considerable body of work, he manages, film after film, to stave off death, pushing it further and further away, at 90 years old. Not bad for a ghost...

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