

AUTHORSHIP AND IDENTITY IN THE CINEMA OF CLINT EASTWOOD

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This paper asserts the relevance of authorship for the study of mainstream cinema. While recent contributions have tended to focus on the agency of authors by analysing avant-garde or alternative cinema, this study argues, firstly, that attention to the cultural construction of authors is also necessary and, secondly, that it is the mainstream that offers examples of fragmented identities that are probably most in tune with contemporary culture. By looking at the work of Clint Eastwood in the last fifteen years, it concludes that the figure of the star-author encapsulates a variety of fantasies that point to current concerns about identity. Minority authors may become agents in the fight for survival against hegemony, but the films of these mainstream star-authors reflect how hegemonic culture contains identity struggles which, articulated through products like Eastwood, provide precise insight into the state of our societies.

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Almost forty years after Roland Barthes (1977) and Michel Foucault (1977) initiated the demolition of the concept of the author, by pointing out its inappropriateness as a source of meaning, film criticism is still wavering between devoted and cautious approaches to the matter. The former, as if suddenly liberated from the repression of their enthusiasm, wholeheartedly embrace the author as a heuristic practice and propose using it as a source of explicatory analysis (Naremore 1990: 21, 1999: 24; Gallagher 2001). The latter, often aligned with poststructuralist thought, try to outline ways in which authors influence the circulation of their work without falling into the trap of defending the bourgeois reification of their position. Among these there have been attempts to deal with the historical and institutional contexts of authors, which have often reduced their function to mere participants in the commercialisation of cinema (Corrigan 1991: 135-36, Wyatt 1994: 61), together with a revival of studies that still hold on to the ability of the author to mobilise aspects of identity by, for example, activating fantasies about the capacity of spectators to be in command of meaning and express themselves (Grant 2000: 107).

Related to this function of authors is their ability to represent a specific identity associated with a community, thus becoming mouthpieces for sexual, national or gender identity (Doty 1993: 47-50; Medhurst 1991: 206; Maule 1999: 133; Grant 2001: 124). According to this view, authors operate as representative icons for minorities that struggle to find their place within the cultural hegemony of a certain social group at a specific historical moment. Janet Staiger, a scholar who prominently adopts this perspective, has seen in this identification enough potential to qualify these authors as cultural agents who work through recurrent citations from recognisable cultural contexts. The consistency of these citations invests the author with an oppositional identity, since it is resistance to that cultural context that produces the visibility of authors and makes them agents, distinguishable from the statements made by other individuals: those who assert agency against the normative become authors with a consistent identity (Staiger 2003: 49-52). Staiger's view shares the concerns of many critics who, in their attempts to avoid humanist and capitalist pitfalls, see the potential agency of authors in contexts of oppression as the only tenable stance for authorship. However, this attention to films as the expression of a minority identity that claims its rights poses two problems: it threatens to take us back to a pre-Barthes and pre-Foucault notion of the author as the source of meaning, and it neglects analysis of the author's presence in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Are we to imply, following Staiger's argument, that authors who represent minority positions are themselves the only origin of meaning in their films, and that this meaning is more culturally visible than that of mainstream directors? For one thing, if films that deal with minority issues contain a specificity that emanates from their relationship to reality, the same can be said of mainstream cinema, which also points to a recognisable, although more culturally hegemonic, reality. Besides, the fact that an underlying statement of affection for the traditional role of the author still survives even in these cautious approaches to authorship proves the complexity of the uses to which the notion has been put by film criticism.

While much current research on authorship is concerned with discerning ways in which agency can be recuperated for cultural analysis without embarrassment, and in so doing tends to favour accounts of agency outside the mainstream, it seems to me that it is in this variety and complexity of perspectives on the issue, and in their delicate mixture, that we find a forceful argument to defend the viability of the author as a critical concept. Rather than argue for or against the legitimacy of agency in contemporary culture, I would like to defend the capacity of the concept of authorship, which reflects both commitment to and suspicion of the cult of the self, to facilitate analysis of contemporary tensions regarding individual and collective identity, for which purpose mainstream authors are as useful and informative as avant-garde or minority ones. It is the richness of identity fantasies suggested by such a paradigmatic mainstream author as Clint Eastwood that I shall attempt to explore in the following pages. In them I will thus implicitly defend an approach to the author as cultural construct that is produced by, rather than the origin of, viewers' readings, since I believe attention to the identity fantasies articulated by authors provides us with a more accurate analysis of their role in our culture than the study of their potential agency.

The study of Eastwood has already produced relevant research from the perspectives of both cultural analysis and the more traditional celebration of directors' artistic personalities, but no work has so far attempted to apply cultural analysis to the consideration of Eastwood's authorial presence in the contexts of Hollywood cinema and US American society. The closest attempt was Paul Smith's acclaimed book (1993), which covered Eastwood's films up to 1990. The last fifteen years have thus not received much attention, despite being the most interesting period from the point of view of authorship. Edward Gallaent's study of 1993 promised to remedy that lack in part, but in the end tended to concentrate on close readings of the films, while Laurence F. Knapp's 1996 volume returned to the strategy of searching the films for thematic and stylistic coherence, showing too much of an admiring attitude towards the classical notion of the author. William Beard's *Persistence of Double Vision* (2000) went to the opposite extreme, adopting a predominantly cultural approach that failed to discuss the connection between cultural meanings and the, also cultural, construction of Eastwood's authorial voice. This essay is an attempt to fill the existing gap in academic work on Eastwood by combining a cultural reading of his films with a discussion of the ways in which their meanings and fantasies have established him as a film author in the last two decades.

The attitudes towards the relevance of authorship mentioned above run parallel to a widespread anxiety in contemporary culture caused by the tension between the desire to find coherent identity models to guide our identification, and the realisation that postmodern societies do not offer much in that line, i.e. the conflict between a socially demanded adaptability to change (Giddens 1993: 71-79) and the need, also originating in society, for a stable, strong personal identity which can survive that same change without dissolving into it (Eagleton 1996: 125-28). This conflict can be viewed, in short, as the tension created by the social call for identities that are at the same time weak and strong, a conflict visible in the discourses created by US American cinema and which I would say is most visible in those films that are associated with authors with a powerful cultural presence, gained through a long directorial career or through their simultaneous condition as star actors. Clint Eastwood, one of the most prominent authors of this kind in contemporary Hollywood cinema, stands as a cultural product symptomatic of that tension, since the meanings that he has accrued over his long career include fantasies about both the self-sufficiency and the flexibility of the contemporary subject. This is certainly a hegemonic fantasy at bottom, because it is masculinity that appears as the realm where those possibilities open up to the individual and thus qualify it as male, but this hegemonic meaning does not invalidate Eastwood's authorial influence: on the contrary, it is the more powerful because it fits the predominant cultural atmosphere so well.

In the early nineties, Eastwood was labelled a *commercial auteur*, which implicitly acknowledged his celebrity status and described him as one of the directors who brought to films connotations that conditioned both their production and reception (Corrigan 1991: 107). These connotations had been gradually created by his participation in the *spaghetti Westerns* directed by Sergio Leone during the sixties (1964, 1965, 1966), which turned him into an icon of the taciturn male typically associated with the genre, by the fascistic ethos of the *Dirty Harry* films (1971, 1973, 1976, 1983 and

1988), and by the questioning of his macho persona in films like *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974) or *Honkytonk Man* (1982) (Smith 1993: 143-49 and 178-79; Bingham 1994: 163-245). These fantasies of expression based on Eastwood's presence as an actor are perhaps the most forceful source of meaning in his films, but they are not the only ones. There are other less prominent but equally expressive ways in which Eastwood articulates identity in contemporary cinema, ways illustrated by the films he has made as director in the last twenty five years, when his artistic production has become more varied and complex, more self-conscious about the possibilities opened up by his cultural presence. They are the fantasy of Eastwood as a director of action fare, as an independent author, as an actor-director engaged in the revision of his cultural image, and as an author with a distinguishable and consistent personal discourse. These are usually created by the interaction of his performances with his presence as director, and to various degrees are activated by all the films of the period. There are, however, texts that exhibit each fantasy most forcefully, which helps classify them into several groups.¹

As an action director, Eastwood has proved his fondness for high-concept cinema, directing films where production values, the overall visual design and a recognisable style predominate over story and characters. His action films include *The Rookie* (1990), *Absolute Power* (1997), *Space Cowboys* (2000) and *Blood Work* (2002), narratives built on set pieces while offering a distinctly personal style characterised by elegance and calmness in the middle of mayhem. The representation of masculinity in these four action films is a reformulation of the omnipotent character impersonated by Eastwood in the *Dirty Harry* films, which nevertheless does not prevent masculinity from appearing as an incontestable value and guarantee of the physical and moral survival of the protagonist. This depiction is partly the result of the films' integration in the narrative mode of the action-spectacle which, while placing the male hero in a generic system that may potentially deconstruct his masculinity, in fact defines him through the intrinsic tendency of the mode towards the exaltation of man and his power in contemporary society. The films revel in homoeroticism, masochism and the spectacle of weakness and age, but the outcome is inevitably a return to fantasies of power that are delineated in increasingly more subtle ways in the four films. While in *The Rookie* the male fantasy is very close to the *Dirty Harry* paradigm, the other three adopt a more self-controlled, relaxed tone, building up an equivalence between serenity and power. *The Rookie* is a transition piece that illustrates the growing anachronistic nature of the male model until then represented by Eastwood in the action-spectacle mode, a lack of validity that would prompt the appearance of a more sensitive masculine image in the Hollywood cinema of the nineties (Jeffords 1993: 196-208). The poor box-office and critical appeal of the film proved that the society of the time was no longer ready to accept a tough guy look from an Eastwood whose body was very different from those of Bruce Willis or Mel Gibson, the action film stars of the time. Reviewers made this clear when they considered *The Rookie* a failed attempt to compete with the *Die Hards* and *Lethal Weapons* which were so successful in the early nineties: Eastwood's film was a

¹ For a more detailed account of the following discussion of Eastwood's cultural presence, see García Mainar (2006).

poor version of the spectacle to be found in those blockbusters (Schickel 1996: 450-51, *Variety* 1990: 84-85).

In the other three films the calm tone is the result of a greater focus on narrative development than is usually found in action genres. Accordingly, *Absolute Power* had a more enthusiastic response than *The Rookie*, as critics pointed out the classical elegance of a relaxed thriller which reinforced the aura of authority emanating from Eastwood (Tunney 1997: 44), an association between classical narrative and authority also mentioned with regard to *Space Cowboys*, which represented a breath of fresh air in the action-spectacle genre. The underlying equation was one between control and spontaneity, which both contributed to the formation of the male ideal and pointed to its internal contradiction, illustrated by the blend of impetuosity and mastery of body and machine found in the characters of *Space Cowboys*. In the context of the male crisis of the nineties, attributed to the loss of a sense of belonging to a community of men, to the absence of parents as moral models and to the gradual male surrender to the cult of the image and physical appearance (Faludi 2000: 595-99), Eastwood's action films offer a nostalgic masculinity that evokes a past in which men still felt part of the group, had the support of the guiding example of father figures and felt comfortable with their bodies. This reassuring representation was embodied by an Eastwood that came to typify the ultimate father, a cultural meaning that was increasingly associated with his condition as *auteur*, which continued to gain prominence during the nineties. Part of that meaning, as *Blood Work* made perfectly clear, was that age served to recover the values of the past, represented there by physical and moral strength in the face of difficulty, and claim their applicability to contemporary society, since the origin of Eastwood's charisma in the film was to be found in the image created by his cultural presence in previous decades.

However, these are not the only connotations attached to Eastwood's cinema in the last twenty-five years. His independent films show the existence of a more malleable identity than the one promised by the Dirty Harry figure, an identity amenable to change that adapts to social transformations and the demands imposed on its cultural circulation. The meanings provided by the actor and by his aura of independent creator accompany this change, introducing, along with Eastwood's powerful demeanour, self-aware narratives and a character complexity rarely found in the mainstream.

Eastwood's production company itself, Malpaso, illustrates his films' ambiguous relationship with the mainstream: its office has been located within the grounds of Warner Bros. since 1976, testifying to Eastwood's relation of complicity with and opposition to Hollywood that is central to understanding his work and its cultural significance (Smith 1993: 66). A similar ambiguity has defined the connection of independent productions to the majors during the last twenty years, to the extent that the appearance within the major studios of divisions specialised in independent-looking projects has forced film studies to rethink the meaning of independent cinema. Once economic independence has become a utopia, the independent label has become one more commercial niche for the industry, designating now a different style characterised by attention to the construction of character, the subversion of narrative structure and a point of view that questions the moral attitudes displayed in mainstream films (Deleyto 2000: 39-47). *Bird* (1988), *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990) and *Midnight in the*

Garden of Good and Evil (1997) are stories about characters that do not match the usual stereotypes of commercial cinema, whose narratives subvert classical structure through enhanced subjectivity or startling endings, and whose points of view do not amount to an unthinking defence of ideological positions but suggest a complex reality.

The three films exhibit a concern with the notion of identity and the ways in which it can be achieved, reinforced or dissolved: in the case of Charlie Parker (Forest Whitaker) it is to be found in artistic originality, Wilson (Eastwood) looks for it in the authentic African experience, while Kelso (John Cusack), Williams (Kevin Spacey) and Lady Chablis, the main characters of *Midnight*, prove how appearances and performance can fabricate identity. Neither *Bird* nor *Midnight* feature Eastwood as an actor, which frees them of the predetermined meanings of his persona, allowing them to chart unknown territory by constructing personalities that would seem alien to him. His absence reflects the pressure placed in the last decades on the traditional models of personal identity so effortlessly embodied by Eastwood, models which have been deeply revised at the hands of the civil rights, feminist, homosexual and ecological movements. The fact that Eastwood's independent films include openly reflexive considerations about masculinity, race, homosexuality and ecology attests to the influence of the social climate on his cinema, as well as to the friction between those new identities and his cultural image. The critical response reflected the prominence of these changes, as did the chilly reception of audiences at the time of the films' release. The attempts to vary the cultural perception of Eastwood did not seem very appealing to viewers who had probably learnt to expect a very different kind of cinema from the actor-director.

The three independent Eastwood films work within a realm of representations of masculinity common to the Hollywood cinema of the last two decades. They show the influence of the *sensitive guy* film, which Susan Jeffords explained as a response to feminist demands, of the search for the authentic masculinity advocated by the *Men's Movement* in the early nineties, and the impact of the masquerade of masculinity that tried to expose the constructed nature of gender in the wake of Judith Butler's theory (Bly 1990: 6, Holmlund 1995: 219-29). The independent style would apparently promise more explicit films, but their revision of Eastwood's image at times causes them paradoxically to embrace the same established discourse, leading to a dialectical dynamic between the two. Placed at this crossroads of revisionism and continuity, *White Hunter, Black Heart* exhibits the strain of these independent films most clearly, as it hints at the masquerade and the imitative core of gender in Eastwood's impersonation of Wilson, himself an imitation of John Huston, to apparently denounce its artificiality while at the same time proposing the restitution of the privileges associated with that masculinity, now improved after much suffering. A contradictory film in its mixture of celebration and critique, it illustrates the conflicting nature of film representations of US American masculinity during the last two decades: it vilifies Wilson-Eastwood's individualism and violence, consequently revising his image, and at the same time celebrates the independence and spontaneity suggested by his return to the directorial job at the end of the film. This conclusion even strengthens the artistic aspirations of an Eastwood whose underlying image of self-sufficiency has traditionally been associated with genre films, and who here claims for himself the status of independent author by means of a self-critique that at bottom allows him to still hold

on to that image of autonomy. His absence in *Bird* and *Midnight* increases their revision of masculinity: separated by almost ten years, they prove the vigour of pre-nineties representations of masculinity as well as of those that developed with the decade, entering a game of mimicry and rejection of the discourses that accompanied those motifs. Both thus stand back from the recovery of male privilege implicit in the sensitive guy discourse, and approach the revisionism implicit in the notion of masquerade. In *Bird*, an earlier film, this masquerade, present in the construction of an artistic personality on stage, is very subtle, while in *Midnight* it is as highly visible as the memorable Williams and Lady Chablis, who conspicuously imitate specific forms of masculinity and femininity, confirming the cultural relevance of performative gender that had already circulated in Hollywood cinema for a decade.

However, rather than in these independent films, it is in the films that consistently embrace melodrama that revisionism has played a most relevant role by articulating a reconsideration of the cultural meanings attached to Eastwood the actor through specific references to his increasing presence as director. This tendency, which was already intimated by the slightly melodramatic *White Hunter* in 1990 and has become a subtext in all his action films, has been reinvigorated since the early nineties by texts that have situated the Eastwood characters in openly melodramatic contexts: *Unforgiven* (1992), *A Perfect World* (1993), *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), *True Crime* (1999) and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) provide weak, defenceless male characters in accordance with the dictates of melodrama. Linda Williams' contention that melodrama is more of a narrative mode than a genre helps recognise its presence in the four films. A predominant mode in US American cinema, rather than an exception defined by excess, melodrama borrows from realism in order to trace the recognition of the hero's virtue through a dialectic of pathos and action, of a sense of loss together with the promise that what has been lost can be regained through action (2001: 26-42). In the guise of Butch Haynes' (Kevin Costner) desperate search for the lost father, of Everett's (Eastwood) for his lost dignity, of Munny's (Eastwood) for a non-violent future or of Francesca's (Meryl Streep) and Robert's (Eastwood) search for the chance of a lifetime, the films receive a melodramatic impulse that combines with the motifs of action genres. The thriller informs *A Perfect World* and *True Crime* while the Western provides the foundation for *Unforgiven* and, less explicitly, for the adventurous quality of romance and the male lead in *Bridges*. Melodrama functions in them as a step towards the hero's victimisation, while at the same time it manages to shore up an evidently powerful identity paradoxically erected on self-analysis and change, which end up coexisting with the object of their critique. Thus, the censure of Garnett-Eastwood's unethical use of the law is quickly followed by his recognition that he does not "know nothing", a moment filled with transcendence that forgives both character and actor-director: Eastwood is revising himself, something to be admired rather than criticised, while this reflexive identity paradoxically supports a resolute, autonomous personality. Similarly, in *True Crime* Everett starts as a victim but gradually takes on the heroic role so typical of Eastwood's thrillers, ending up as a lonesome but righteous Santa Claus that evokes the final ride into the sunset of so many Western characters. Munny's rejection of violence in *Unforgiven* is made equivocal by the last section's return of the killer in him, and *Bridges* qualifies Robert Kincaid as a new man but also

as a powerful presence whose solid masculinity echoes the rugged individualism of the lone adventurer. Through generic hybridity, the effectiveness of Eastwood's cultural image as both actor and author is kept alive in these ambivalent forms.

Million Dollar Baby, his latest film, also follows this line of ambiguity in the representation of his masculinity. Inflected by both the boxing and the buddy film, the narrative emerges as a melodrama about the difficult responsibility of guiding others, about Frankie's (Eastwood) incapacity to gain the affection of his daughter, and about Maggie (Hilary Swank), the aspiring boxer who manages to persuade world-weary Frankie to become her manager and who represents his one last chance to reconcile care and love. The boxing film develops the relationship between Frankie and Maggie, although the search both are engaged in, for respectively a surrogate daughter and a father, leads the film in the direction of melodrama. The final section, which critics qualified as realistic and sincere in its depiction of suffering (Scott 2004, Ebert 2005), describes actor-director Eastwood as repository of authenticity and dignity in defeat. The melodramatic male paradigms of these films pave the way for self-critique while at the same time allow the actor-director to preserve the force of his cultural significance. The ultimate consequence of the use of melodrama is precisely the appearance of an air of indefiniteness about the nature of the individual, who is rendered both fragile and powerful, has both a flexible and a fixed identity. If Eastwood's action-spectacle films provided strong identity models and the independent movies a fluid, provisional male identity, in these melodramas we find a subtle combination of fragile and strong identity, of self-critique and forceful assertion of the self.

To the fantasies of expression mentioned so far—the director of action-spectacle, the author of independent films and the actor who revises himself through his directorial work—Eastwood's films have consistently added the fantasy of the author with a personal discourse. The fantasy that films reflect the mind of a creator capable of shaping what we see on the screen as part of a personal discourse pervades most of the films of this period with different intensity, but it is perhaps *Mystic River* (2003) that delivers it in its purest form. The austere visual style, its calm pace, or the attention paid to the construction of character already remind us of his presence (Ebert 2003), but it is the very personal worldview of the film that is most clearly associated with Eastwood, especially its reflection on violence and the consequences of a vigilantism that he once embodied in the Dirty Harry figure, and that relate this film to *A Perfect World* and *Unforgiven*. His absence as actor makes possible the final ambiguity in which there is no hope for the restitution associated with his persona.

If the actor-director films provided a mixture of revision and worship of the individual, *Mystic River* traces this contradiction to its origins, suggesting the power of the author to create such ambivalence. The film introduces this discourse through its consideration of the social value of violence, a central topic in the formation of Eastwood's persona since his first Westerns and cop thrillers. The social function of the *vigilante*, which was presented in a positive light in those films, is here pervaded with ambiguity and doubt as we see Jimmy (Sean Penn) kill innocent Dave (Tim Robbins), but this depiction rests on the strength of an authorial substance that suggests the relevance of the issue. The film also points to the national specificity of the representations created by Eastwood's cinema by yielding a discourse about the origin

of national identity in the United States through the connotations brought in by Boston and the final Columbus Day parade. The film exemplifies the capacity of Eastwood's cinema to take part in the cultural debate about the foundations of the country that has followed the events of 9/11, a move made possible by the penetration of his authorial aura and reinforced by the internal contradiction on which it is based: a revisionist intention that nevertheless results in endorsement of the author finds a correlate in the contradiction between violence and democracy that lies at the genesis of the country. At bottom, Eastwood represents this set of contradictions, through which emerges not a fragmented, troubled individual, but a solid, recognisable one. The film makes a point of not judging, not giving an answer to the contradiction on which the United States was built, and it is precisely this attitude that will certainly make American culture award him the status of mature author. In its blend of revisionist impulse and assertion of a strong directorial identity, *Mystic River* sums up Eastwood's career.

The different fantasies tendered by Eastwood's cinema range from the determined to the ductile male self and combine with one another in various ways, attesting to the tensions that traverse contemporary societies regarding the formation and circulation of identity. They show the ways in which US American culture reflects male anxiety caused by the pressure to adapt to a new social sphere in which malleability and identity as lifestyle are more in demand than the traditional masculine ethos of labour and efficiency. That tension is articulated by the films through recourse to the cultural status of Eastwood as both author and representative of the US American male. His circulation as an authorial voice shows the impact of that need to adapt to changing times, resulting in fantasies of expression that suggest to the spectator a variety of authorial interventions. Although Eastwood's films are pervaded by the meanings carried by his powerful presence as an actor, they also function by producing fantasies about him as author of action-spectacle cinema, of independent movies, of attempts at revision through melodrama, and in general about him as author with a very personal worldview. These fantasies do not appear in pure form in any of his films, but coexist in different degrees and forms throughout his cinema, and it is this intricate web of combinations that proves both the complexity of the cultural function of authorship in contemporary mainstream cinema and its ideological penetration. Instead of reflecting on the capacity of authors for cultural agency in alternative cinema, we should perhaps look into the cultural construction of authors through the fantasies about identity they help articulate in our society; and to do that, we need to pay attention to the function of authors in mainstream film, where ideologies are more subtly disseminated.²

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