

The background of the cover features a light yellow-to-white gradient. Scattered across this background are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of two leaves on a short stem, arranged in a diagonal pattern from the top left towards the bottom right.

CLINT EASTWOOD

Evolution of a Filmmaker

John H. Foote

 *Greenwood*
PUBLISHING GROUP

Clint Eastwood

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Clint Eastwood

Evolution of a Filmmaker

JOHN H. FOOTE

Modern Filmmakers
Vincent LoBrutto, Series Editor

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For Sherri,

Your smile warms the day, your presence keeps me safe. And your love makes me want to be a better man. You once called film my heroin, but know that you are my only true addiction. This, and everything I have done, is for you.

Clint Eastwood is now sixty-two years old; there has never been a career to compare to his. Once reviled, and justifiably, as an actor with the warmth of a girder and the depth of a raindrop, he nonetheless became for years the world's most popular performer. Having acquired power, he exploited it to create artful but essentially non-commercial movies—*Honky Tonk Man*, *White Hunter Black Heart*, *Bird*. *Unforgiven* is about a man who cannot escape his past. Eastwood has. Who would have thought that the cheroot-smoking, poncho-wearing star of those surreal Spaghetti Westerns would turn into one of Hollywood's most daring filmmakers?

—The late, great Jay Scott,
writing in the *Globe and Mail*, 1992

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Series Foreword

The Modern Filmmakers series focuses on a diverse group of motion picture directors who collectively demonstrate how the filmmaking process has become *the* definitive art and craft of the twentieth century. As we advance into the twenty-first century we begin to examine the impact these artists have had on this influential medium.

What is a modern filmmaker? The phrase connotes a motion picture maker who is *au courant*—they make movies currently. The choices in this series are also varied to reflect the enormous potential of the cinema. Some of the directors make action movies, some entertain, some are on the cutting edge, some are political, some make us think, and some are fantasists. The motion picture directors in this collection will range from highly commercial, mega-budget blockbuster directors, to those who toil in the independent low-budget field.

Gus Van Sant, Tim Burton, Charlie Kaufman, and Terry Gilliam are here, and so are Clint Eastwood and Steven Spielberg—all for many and various reasons, but primarily because their directing skills have transitioned from the twentieth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Eastwood and Spielberg worked during the sixties and seventies and have grown and matured as the medium transitioned from mechanical to digital. The younger directors here may not have experienced all of those cinematic epochs themselves, but nonetheless they have remained concerned with the limits of filmmaking. Charlie Kaufman disintegrates personal and narrative boundaries in the course of his scripts, for example, while Tim Burton probes the limits of technology to find the most successful way of bringing his intensely visual fantasies and nightmares to life.

The Modern Filmmaker Series will celebrate modernity and post-modernism through each creator's vision, style of storytelling, and character presentation. The directors' personal beliefs and worldviews will be revealed through in-depth examinations of the art they have created, but brief

biographies will also be provided where they appear especially relevant. These books are intended to open up new ways of thinking about some of our favorite and most important artists and entertainers.

Vincent LoBrutto
Series Editor
Modern Filmmakers

Acknowledgments

It had never occurred to me that a book was such a group effort. This one began a long time ago on a couch in a village called Seagrave, where a father gathered his three sons to watch old monster movies.

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And to Sherri, the love of my life, my best friend . . . my everything.

Introduction

Ever the realist, had anyone told me in the late seventies that 30 years later Clint Eastwood would be among the finest directors working in modern cinema, I would have laughed at them as though they were utterly mad.

Though a top box office star in the seventies, Eastwood was an actor of limited ability; and realizing this, he chose his roles accordingly. Lacking the natural talents of Marlon Brando or Jack Nicholson, Eastwood needed to be cautious about which characters he portrayed on the screen. He was very much, on the surface at least, a movie star, and more than capable of portraying the steely eyed Harry Callahan of the *Dirty Harry* (1971) franchise and very able to send up his tough guy image opposite an ape in *Every Which Way But Loose* (1977), but for anyone to suggest Eastwood as any character in *The Godfather* (1972) would have been simply insane. Yet quietly behind the scenes, almost invisible to most moviegoers, Eastwood was forging a career as a director, making his directorial debut with the fine thriller *Play Misty for Me* (1971). The only way he could get the studio to back the film was by playing the male lead, but he generously allowed his costar to steal the film. This was a time when actors rarely stepped behind the camera, unlike today when actors are often directing. Eastwood is the only one to have emerged a great filmmaker, making many forget that he was ever an actor, even though his acting became much stronger in his later years.

Like fine California wine, Clint Eastwood has become a greater artist with age—stronger, much more complex, and fearless to attempt anything on screen that other actors and directors would balk at. In 2008, there are three major American directors looked to for masterpieces. They are Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and Clint Eastwood, who, since 1992, has put forth a body of work envied by every working director and virtually every actor who ever attempted to direct a film.

He had been directing for 17 years when he directed the biographical work *Bird* (1988), a study of jazz great Charlie Parker, in which Eastwood gave remarkable insight into a world inhabited largely by blacks. Oddly enough, this

box office failure would attract a great deal of attention for Eastwood, earning rave reviews in Europe and winning awards at Cannes. Though the critical reception was lukewarm in the United States, Eastwood had broken through into the ranks of top filmmakers . . . audiences, critics, and most importantly, other directors had noticed. Upon announcing the nominees for the Directors Guild of America Award for best director, Steven Spielberg observed sadly, “I was really hoping that Clint Eastwood would be nominated this year for *Bird*,” echoing the sentiments of many other directors and critics in North America. He would win the Golden Globe Award for best director, which is given out by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, but was denied an Academy Award nomination. Having earned the right to make a film that he did not have to appear in to secure financing, Eastwood boldly told the story of Parker, who was brilliantly portrayed by Forest Whitaker. Whitaker would win the Academy Award for best actor for his riveting performance as Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland* (2006). There seemed to be genuine shock in the industry when *Bird* (1988) failed to find an audience, as early screenings had indicated this was Eastwood’s ticket to the Academy Awards.

Four years later he not only was nominated for the Directors Guild of America Award, he won it for his dark Western masterpiece *Unforgiven* (1992). Released in the late summer of ’92, by year’s end the film began winning awards from various critics’ groups, including the Los Angeles Film Critics who stunned the film community by honoring *Unforgiven* with best film, best director, best actor (Eastwood), and best supporting actor (Gene Hackman). A few weeks later the National Society of Film Critics followed suit, giving the film everything the L.A. scribes had except best actor. Come Oscar time, the film was nominated for nine Academy Awards, including best picture, best director, and Eastwood’s first nomination for best actor. There was no stopping either Eastwood or *Unforgiven*. On Oscar night as the film coasted to four awards, including best film, best supporting actor, and for Eastwood, his first Academy Award for best director, it seemed to solidify the fact he was a filmmaker first and foremost.

In the years since that first Academy Award, he has never been one to sit on his laurels contently, but rather chose as a director to grow and expand, challenging himself with films that sometimes worked and sometimes did not. The drama *A Perfect World* (1993) never quite caught on with audiences despite rave reviews for actor Kevin Costner who gives what many, including Eastwood, believe is the finest performance of his career as psychotic killer Butch. Eastwood’s direction of the adult love story *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995) earned high praise from critics and no less than for his costar Meryl Streep, but what astonished many was Eastwood’s own sensitive, fine performance in which he managed to capture something on screen he had never before shown: vulnerability.

The years spanning 1996–2002 seemed to be a time of personal growth for Eastwood as a director when he attempted many different stories, some

successfully, such as the over-the-hill drama *Space Cowboys* (2000), and some not, such as the adaptation of the best seller *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997).

In 2003 he returned with a vengeance with the film adaptation of Dennis Lehane's massive crime novel *Mystic River* (2003) in which he guided Sean Penn and Tim Robbins to Academy Award-winning performances. Beyond that he made a searing film about the choices we make in life, and how we are never completely free of those choices. Penn gave the finest performance of his career as a father tormented by the murder of his daughter, capturing raw, primal grief with such stunning power that audiences were speechless and numb after seeing the film. Nominated for six Academy Awards, Eastwood again found himself in the running for best director, only to lose to the Peter Jackson juggernaut that was the final *The Lord of the Rings* (2003) film.

One year later he would not be denied.

Released late in the year *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) was the Cinderella film that stunned critics and audiences with its startling twist that sent the film off in a direction totally unseen and unexpected, becoming in the process a radically different film than we initially anticipate. It is a sports film, but also a deep love story, and finally a film about the ultimate sacrifice for the one you love. Hilary Swank and Morgan Freeman won Oscars for their performances, and Eastwood received his second Academy Award nomination for best actor for his work, which Swank declared "the finest performance of his career." He won his second Academy Award for best director, besting no less than the great Martin Scorsese for his Howard Hughes drama *The Aviator* (2004).

He then entered into the busiest two years of his life, directing two films about the battle on Iwo Jima during the Second World War. The first, *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), was the biggest film of his career—a 90 million dollar epic about the impact of the war on three of the young men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima and then were shipped home to help raise money for the war bond drive, their hearts and minds still on the battlefield. Though beautifully filmed and powerful in every way, and despite strong reviews, the film struggled out of the gate and never caught on with audiences, thus dashing its Oscar chances. In hopes that a second film created on the heels of the first would bring more interest to the first, *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), a much smaller and more personal film, went into theaters in late December, a full three months ahead of schedule, and found itself basking in some of the best reviews of Eastwood's career.

Becoming increasingly bothered that he was not telling the whole story, Eastwood decided to tell the Japanese side of the story while making the first film. Commissioning a screenplay and filming on a shoestring budget entirely in Japanese, the film was created quietly and became one of the best films of the year. The Los Angeles Film Critics voted it film of the year, and

Letters from Iwo Jima was nominated for four Academy Awards, including best director and best picture.

Eastwood now sits as one of the three finest directors working in modern American film, with Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese alongside him. While they may represent the old guard and the remnants of the great cinema of the seventies, there can be no question that their films are indeed among the elite of the last 30 years, surpassing the work of any single new generation director. This book is a study of how Eastwood managed to quietly get to this level, and in explaining such, I hope this book also is a celebration of his gifts as an artist.

Everybody changes all the time. I certainly hope I have. If I made Play Misty for Me now I'd probably ruin it because that was a different mind, with less experience, that made it back then. I've always been intrigued that people like Wilder and Capra stopped directing as early as they did. I think these can be your best years . . . as long as you keep changing. The world keeps changing, so you've got to change with it.

—Clint Eastwood, speaking with *Sight and Sound* magazine, 2008

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THE SEVENTIES

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Play Misty for Me (1971)

To have an actor directing a film was certainly not new to the film business in 1971.

Charlie Chaplin directed all of his major work after 1917, creating some of the greatest comedy classics of all time in *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936). More so than any other could have, Chaplin understood his strengths and weaknesses, and directed his films to exploit his great strength as a physical actor. American boy wonder Orson Welles would direct himself as Charles Foster Kane in the stunning *Citizen Kane* (1941), forging a career through the years as both actor and director. British actor Laurence Olivier almost single handedly saved the British film industry with his Shakespearean films *Henry V* (1945) and *Hamlet* (1948), which would become the first non-American film to win the Academy Award for best film. Though nominated for best director, Olivier lost but made a stunning impact on the business. Charles Laughton would helm the thriller *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), which was probably the greatest film ever made by a man who directed a single film and easily the best film of 1955. John Wayne, however, directed *The Alamo* (1960) with little success. Not having learned his lesson, Wayne would tackle *The Green Berets* (1968), the first American film to deal with the conflict in Vietnam and still among the worst.

When Paul Newman stepped behind the camera to direct his wife Joanne Woodward in *Rachel, Rachel* (1968), there seemed to be a watch on whether he did a good job, as though this was the turning point for actors seeking to direct. Newman did better than a good job; he did a brilliant job, earning the New York Film Critics Award for best director and a nomination from the Directors Guild of America for best director. The film was nominated for an Oscar for best picture, but in one of those bizarre nomination incidents, Newman was ignored for best director by the Academy.

It really didn't matter because the die had been cast; actors could indeed direct and direct well. Woody Allen would forge a long career of directing himself in a series of wonderful comedies in the early seventies before becoming

one of the most important and vital American directors with *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979), splitting his career between meaningful comedy and still, Bergman-esque drama.

There seems to be a general, though perplexing, rule within the Academy of Arts and Sciences that if an actor directs a film, and it is remotely good, he or she deserves an Oscar for best director. Eastwood is among the few exceptions for actually deserving the Oscar he won, along with perhaps Warren Beatty for *Reds* (1981).

Robert Redford won an Oscar for directing *Ordinary People* (1980) over Martin Scorsese and his masterpiece *Raging Bull* (1980), a move obviously based on the popularity of Redford's film rather than sheer artistry. The very next year British character actor Richard Attenborough won the Oscar for his direction of *Gandhi* (1982), a paint-by-number, conservative biography of the Indian leader—the sort of film the Academy loves—defeating none other than Steven Spielberg for his brilliant *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), which within a year was being condemned for its idiocy. Beatty took home the best director award in 1981 for his massive Bolshevik epic *Reds* (1981), one of the most deserving awards given in the last 35 years. Scorsese fell victim to an actor directing again when Kevin Costner won the Oscar for *Dances with Wolves* (1990) over Scorsese and *Goodfellas* (1990). And just five years later Mel Gibson won the award for *Braveheart* (1995), a film that had not even earned its director a nomination from the prestigious Directors Guild of America. Did Gibson and several of these other men win because they pulled it off? Because they managed to create an average film rather than a disaster? Gibson directed a better film a few years later with *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), but there was no chance the Academy was going to nominate him for that. Too dark, too bloody, and too controversial despite the fact that it was brilliant and a greater achievement than *Braveheart*. Even his Mayan epic *Apocalypto* (2006) surpasses what he accomplished with *Braveheart* and also went virtually unnoticed.

Of all the actors who have tried their hand at directing, Clint Eastwood and Warren Beatty appear to be the finest, each taking substantial risks in their work that many established directors will not take. The major difference between them is that Eastwood likes to work and does so consistently, whereas Beatty often takes years between films—nine between *Reds* and *Dick Tracy* (1990) and another eight between the comic book crime film and *Bulworth* (1998), his vicious black comedy about L.A. politics.

Scorsese has lost an Oscar to Eastwood as well, in 2004, watching his Howard Hughes epic *The Aviator* (2004) cruise to five early awards before the juggernaut that was Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) took over and won the top awards. Though he had previously lost to two actors, Scorsese certainly would not complain about losing to Eastwood, who by that time was thought of as one of America's finest filmmakers. The road to that status began with a little thriller titled *Play Misty for Me* (1971), a Hitchcockian