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Ageing Eastwood Between Films and Media^{*}

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This article aims at analysing the last years of Clint Eastwood's artistic production and, at the same time, the physical ageing processes of the film star, as witnessed by images and photos that circulated on the Internet between his 93rd and 94th birthdays. Thanks to this case study, we can identify more clearly some aspects hidden by media rumors: the ambivalent relationship between on-screen and off-screen; the differences that are now imposed between the third and fourth age in storytelling and media representation; the negotiation of Eastwood's masculinity and his role as a male star; the clear difference between the artistic longevity of film directors depending on whether they are men or women.

Keywords: Celebrity Culture, Star, Ageing, Masculinity, Clint Eastwood, Testament Film

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The longevity of filmmakers is a well-cultivated myth in discourses relating to cinephilia and the admiration for directors. From the most striking example (Manoel de Oliveira died in 2015 at the age of 107, after having shot his last film in 2012 at the age of 104, with an active career spanning 80 years) to the most popular ones (the over-80s who have made feature films since 2020, from Francis Ford Coppola to Ridley Scott, from Marco Bellocchio to Frederick Wiseman), even despite the lack of specific statistics, there is much empirical evidence of this long-lasting presence in the film industry. Actually, it is more likely a tangible example of the positive results brought about by the continuation of one's professional activity, by the passion linked to artistic production, by the proven well-being that constant planning generates even in years of physical frailty – in addition, of course, to the increase in average life expectancy in the Western world.

The testament paradox

Nowadays, the most admired actor in this sphere is certainly Clint Eastwood, who not only made *Juror #2* (2024) when he was 94, but has also made 5 other films since he was 85: *Sully* (2016), *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018), *The Mule* (2018), *Richard Jewell* (2019), *Cry Macho* (2021). In two cases – *The Mule* and *Cry Macho* – Eastwood also took the liberty of appearing in front of the camera as the leading actor, openly denouncing his age and coming to terms – through his characters – with physical difficulties (difficulty in walking on the set, stiffness of the actor's body, profound transformation of his somatic features).

So far, no paradoxes are involved. The theoretical interest of this matter comes from another, previous film, made when he was 78, *Gran Torino* (2008). With hindsight, we can consider that title as one of many in a filmography so dense and precise that ten other productions would follow. However, the meaning of the film was different when it came out, or at least the interpretations that were drawn from it. In particular, the main thesis that it was a so-called “testament film” became popular.

Testament film is a critical category that is used when an author decides to make a film that appears as a summa of their career, either because it touches on most of the themes that characterised it, or because it reflects on the passage of time, or because it openly cites their previous titles. This testament film also evokes a sense of anxiety and a loss of cinematic values, as well as the feeling of a disappearing world (Keller, 2020). Some examples of testament films are *Porto da minha infância* (2001) by Manoel de Oliveira, *Deconstructing Harry* (1997) by Woody Allen, *Il sol dell'avvenire* (2023) by Nanni Moretti, just to mention a few directors of different nationalities who are well known on the international market. As to the first film, de Oliveira, who was 93 years old at the time, recalls his childhood home in Oporto and reflects melancholically on the passage of time, on memories, on the generations that fade away and on the homes that somehow distinguished them:

Understanding the past is crucial to creating the present. In this way, the addition to the spectral image of the childhood home of a speech by the autodiegetic narrator (the filmmaker), extracting from the rubble of

memory their own experience of that place, produces the oneiric sense that the birthplace represents. (Barini Camargo, 2020, p. 96, tr. Valentina Cristiani)¹.

Similarly, *Deconstructing Harry* tells the parable of an intellectual with a personal life that is contradictory at the very least, travelling to his old university that wants to honour him as an *alumnus*, whilst dealing with memories, fantasies and reveries that generate small episodes and stories (some of which are taken from Allen's early literary works). The coexistence of quotes from Ingmar Bergman, references to his own filmography, inside jokes and meditations on his personal memory, led to talk of a testament film (Bocchi, 2010, pp. 123-141).

Nanni Moretti's case is even more obvious. In addition to the frequent self-references he makes, the last sequence is conceived as a march made up of many of the characters (and therefore actors) from his previous films, who all find themselves together, led by the same actor/director, and walking towards an indistinct destination (again a kind of *summa* of other endings of Moretti's films, in particular *Palombella rossa*) (Di Paolo, 2023, pp. 173-177).

The same paradox applies to all the aforementioned examples: the authors who publicly made their "artistic testament" have then – happily and successfully – continued their career with many other productions, downgrading what appeared to be mournful and definitive to "ongoing evaluations". Upon closer inspection, we can therefore confirm that this cinematic longevity is a result of the biological longevity achievements. The authors' ageing process was so well known to them that they wanted to dedicate – ahead of their time (as we only understood *afterwards*, however) – a summary work on their career and poetics.

Clint Eastwood: a case study

But let's go back to Eastwood and his *Gran Torino*. The film tells the story of the redemption of Walt Kowalski, a grumpy old man full of prejudice, recently widowed and with a terrible relationship with his sons. Isolated and aloof, Walt is frustrated by the multicultural transformation of his neighbourhood and hates his neighbours, in particular some Hmong families, with whom Walt has a conflictual relationship, fuelled by his obvious racism. The only thing he seems to care about is the car that gives the name to the feature film, a 1972 Ford that he looks after as if it were a living being. But the car is nearly stolen by Thao, a young neighbour, who is forced by a local gang to try and steal the *Gran Torino* as a rite of passage. Walt figures out the situation, slowly comes to understand his neighbours' rites and customs, faces his inner demons (the Korean War, not surprisingly) and ends up protecting Thao and his sister from the criminals threatening them. With the usual distrust of the authorities and the rules of ordinary justice that is typical of Eastwood's films, the protagonist Walt avoids involving the police and acts on his own. Old and frail, he can't challenge the criminals on a physical level, so he devises a clever but self-sacrificing plan: he provokes the gang and gets himself killed, thus ensuring that the criminals are arrested by the police.

This is the plot, which alone seems to deal with the long debate on Clint Eastwood's conservative ideology – actually recently questioned by critical reception (Ciotta, Silvestri, 2023) – to which are added narrative aspects that emphasise the transformation of the typical character of the actor/director (generally a tough man, uncompromising, contemptuous of danger, intolerant of injustice, sensitive to private and personal justice, bound to the traditional values of the American nation) (Engel, 2007). All recognisable features that can be found in Walt, with the difference that he is too old to be able to assert his personality by physical force and who is going through a process of historical and civil "re-education" – although still based on direct knowledge of others, as real people and not social or ethnic categories.

The key sequence, the one in which Walt openly confronts the gang, was considered highly symbolic. The man, ready for the ultimate sacrifice, pretends to draw a gun (perhaps the Magnum 44 made mythical by the *Dirty Harry* saga) but in the end he only uses his index finger and thumb to mime the presence of the weapon. Once shot down by enemy fire, Walt falls and his body lies down like a cross, in the Christological sense. A complete reversal: just as the characters created by Eastwood were known for their dexterity in the use of guns and for the indifference with which they killed the "bad guys", Walt gets himself killed unarmed because he knows that the only way to defend his young Korean friends is to sacrifice himself.

According to Giulia Carluccio:

the Eastwood/Kowalski character moves all the time like a zombie, as do the others, especially and significantly the antagonists [...] are caricatures, images, spectres of a theatre that sometimes has the lateral features of the stage, as in the final sequence, of Walt's sacrificial death, witnessed by neighbours from their windows, through gestures and actions that are reduced to simulacra, to ghosts of gestures and actions, and have nothing real or realistic about them. (Carluccio, 2009, pp. 18-19, tr. Valentina Cristiani)².

And again: "The return of Eastwood himself as he plays and re-plays his character, bringing his own real aged, vulnerable (and irresistible) physicality into play, encourages the spectator to identify with him" (p. 21, tr. Valentina Cristiani)³. And even French film critics emphasise the self-reflexive nature of the text and Eastwood's ability "to articulate its classical power [...] with the creation of an extraordinarily complex mental space" (Malauza, 2009, p. 20, tr. Valentina Cristiani)⁴.

These critical-interpretative sources are elaborated a few days or a few months after the film's release, and precisely because they are expressed within an ongoing process of film ageing of which they cannot predict the outcome or possible consequences (not only regarding the health and longevity of the director but also in terms of a possible retirement from the scene, at least as an actor), they are even more useful to us than others.

Eastwood's Performance

To broaden the discussion on Eastwood, however, we should go beyond the symbolic meanings of the plot, the intertextual play with characters from the past, or the frankness with which he portrays the vulnerability of the “great old man” (the great old men being, according to gerontology, people over 85 years of age, although recently the categories have been easily delayed, so that old age now begins at 75 rather than 65, the fourth age at 85, and the great old over 90). The representation also passes through directing the actor (and therefore himself as a figure who works in front of and behind the camera) and the acting performance, with body, posture and gestures.

Between 2008, the year *Gran Torino* was released, and *Juror #2*, 16 years passed in which Eastwood repeatedly returned to the passage of time and the age of the protagonists. He does this mainly in the feature films in which he appears as an actor, as well as a director, such as *The Mule* and *Cry Macho*, respectively shot at the age of 88 and 91. In the former, he plays a very old flower grower, forced by the decline of his business to accept an offer to transport drugs for some traffickers – using his old and unsuspecting pick-up – in exchange for the money he desperately needs. In the latter, he plays a broken-down former rodeo champion who, despite being full of the aches and pains of old age, goes looking for the thirteen-year-old son of a colleague who has got mixed up in shady dealings in Mexico. In both films, not only is Eastwood's physical ageing shown and filmed on screen with no frills or euphemisms, but the stories themselves are marked by the walking and physiological difficulties of both characters (Canadè, 2021).

A brief analysis of two sequences will be useful. In *The Mule*, at one point the elderly protagonist comes across a group of motorcyclists who have parked their bikes and are trying to figure out what is wrong with one of them, which has broken down. Leo is attracted by the gathering and the noise of the engines, and immediately engages them in conversation. The camera observes him in full shot as he walks slowly towards the bikers, hunched over and holding a container in his hand. His baseball cap, short-sleeved shirt and slow gait immediately identify him as an elderly time-waster, eager for social interaction (the film actually tells the story of how this elderly man unexpectedly becomes a drug courier involved in daring adventures, with an obvious reversal of expectations). Leo calls the person bent over “son” but soon realises that they are all women. At that point, he calls them “gals”, a dismissive and paternalistic term. The motorcyclists rebuke him for the term and introduce themselves as “Dykes on Bikes”. As we know, for a long time, “dyke” was considered a derogatory term for lesbian women who looked masculine because they did not conform to gender stereotypes. Its reappropriation (as with queer and other insulting terms) is the result of an ironic but powerful claim to the political value linked to identity, to the point of overturning the symbolic violence that surrounded the word. Leo walks away, surprised and amused, looking like someone who feels cut off from modernity, but he does not give up – stepping away with a smile – and helps them by giving advice on the technical problem with the motorbike, which he seems to know well.

The sequence is very sophisticated. We have an elderly white man, apparently traditionalist and conservative (who actually takes on the role of outlaw in the rest of the story), who is mistaken for an elderly male stereotype by the lesbian motorcyclists. At the same time, however, Leo perpetuates the image he has been assimilated into through the most classic mansplaining about engines, by using a vocabulary that is unsuitable for the times. Although the communicative imbalance seems to confirm these symbolic social structures, the humanity of both Leo and the women (who are, all things considered, well-disposed and not aggressive towards him) establishes fertile ground for an albeit rapid confrontation.

In *Cry Macho*, on the other hand, filmed even more recently and with even more evident ravages of age, Eastwood operates in the opposite way. His character is, even in his clothing, close to the icon through which we have come to know him. The cowboy hat, jeans, boots and Texan shirt accompany Mike – a battered and weary former rodeo star – for most of the film. In this way, by bringing the star back within the Tex/Mex border and Western iconography, the contrast between the physical and cynical strength of the classic Clint and his equally contemptuous but vulnerable version is emphasised. Eastwood, as director, decides to maintain the stylistic codes of the past, framing himself in medium shots, close-ups or sometimes extreme close-ups (where his physical decay is most apparent). On the other hand, however, it is once again the story that claims a symbolic space for the old hero, tasked with a rescue operation that is anything but simple – helping a young boy in a geographical area dominated by gangs and crime – and offering the protagonist even a fistfight and a romantic seduction. *Cry Macho* thematises Mike's de-escalation from machismo, right from the title. The road movie between the elderly saviour and the young man rescued from his destiny in petty crime is also, allegorically, a journey around masculinity and its most harmful expressions. In this sense, the journey that began with *Gran Torino* reaches a complete revision of the concept in *Cry Macho*, almost a retrospective commentary on the actor's filmography, without this leading to repentance or renunciation, but rather to a lucid examination of what ageing brings, in terms of artistic wisdom and strategies for representing the performing body.

Ageing Eastwood in the media

But if in this way we can reconstruct the artistic choices of the American author, and therefore the filmic methods through which he personally manages his cultural capital and his appearance (especially taking into account the fact that he directs himself and therefore is not obliged to negotiate with other subjects behind the camera), we must now explore some episodes in which Eastwood's star persona was not managed directly by the director or the film medium.

In particular, it is worth focusing on the issue of Eastwood's ageing outside the set. With some preliminary remarks.

As a film star, Eastwood has capitalised on a conservative, binary, virile masculinity linked to patriarchal schemes (Cornell, 2009), also emphasised in various interviews and in his political commitment to the Republican Party. In a famous interview given to Esquire in 2016, Eastwood declared that he wasn't too close to Trump's ideas but certainly less distant to those than to the Democrats, who he felt were too politically correct. And, to demonstrate how politically incorrect he was, he explained the state of US culture at that time:

Secretly everybody's getting tired of political correctness, kissing up. That's the kiss-ass generation we're in right now. We're really in a pussy generation. Everybody's walking on eggshells. We see people accusing people of being racist and all kinds of stuff. When I grew up, those things weren't called racist (Michael Heaney, 2016).

In fact, the films played and directed by an older Eastwood wouldn't be that different from the others:

He continues to play violent vigilantes reinstituting order, even when his characters begin to creak and crave a quieter life. Enormous effort is made to shore up each male star's increasingly fragile sense of virility at the expense of others, usually women dismissively treated as potential or rejected sexual objects and racialized men easily killed off. While I am far from arguing that white patriarchy is losing its grasp on hegemony, these films reveal a social concern about that possibility and worry that the aging of society will clinch its demise (Chivers, 2011, p. 102).

Compared to this pattern of reception of the Eastwood figure, images of the ultra-nonagenarian Eastwood taken from his family, by the paparazzi or in other public situations show a much greater fragility than those in the films, even if they too deal with the issue of ageing. In fact, if the titles we mentioned above can be considered strategic negotiations between the actor and the coherence of his typical character, or between the symbolic dimension of the aged Eastwood star figure (Cohen-Shalev, 2009) and the story of the effects that time has on his image, the feeling is different when looking at shots where apparently there is no symbolic or narrative balance.



Figs. 1 e 2 - Clint Eastwood in public events in 2024, published on LinkedIn

The photos taken in April 2024, initially posted on LinkedIn by a bystander, show a public event in Carmel, California (the city where Eastwood lives and where he was mayor), where the 90-year-old anthropologist Jane Goodall made an appearance for the Sunset Cultural Center. To put it bluntly, in this case Eastwood seems to be dressed in a casual and careless way, with thick and wild hair and beard, with a mix of untidiness and neglect that reminds us of the guests of retirement homes.

Perhaps to rebalance the “stolen” image, Eastwood's daughter (Alison, also an actress) then posted a series of photos of her father celebrating his 94th birthday that May, on social media.



Figs. 3 4 - Clint Eastwood in photos taken by the daughter Alison in 2024 on Instagram

In particular, in the photo on the left, Alison Eastwood writes on Instagram: “I'm not sure what we were laughing about, but I always laugh with this guy #dad May” (2024).

While the photo on the left shows Eastwood wearing the same casual clothes, the one on the furthest right shows him wearing a jacket and tie for the celebration, presumably in a restaurant or some other public place.

Another type of photo in which Eastwood has appeared recently (and which he has authorised for distribution and sharing) is linked to more recognisable and decidedly more popular coolness effects, as they involve the meeting of old glories (one more famous, while the other more niche, but both iconographically striking). Here are the two pictures of Eastwood published by the legendary bass player Leland Sklar (long-time collaborator of James Taylor and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young).



Figs. 5 e 6 - Pictures of Clint Eastwood in private life

In the one on the right, the star's ironic and unsettling attitude stands out, as if to show (it is 7 July 2024) a completely different vitality from that glimpsed on previous occasions, where the overly domestic traits of the great icon had somewhat disappointed fans. The thousands of likes under the photo of Eastwood giving the finger on Sklar's Facebook page, and the enthusiasm aroused by the actor's arrogant gesture, show that his closeness to the world of rock and his message of "maverick" irreverence towards the system revitalise the star's image and restore him to the role of proud individualist that he has always been known for.

Moreover, there is no evidence to confirm the difference between "stolen" and authorised photos, given the fragmented and confusing flow of images on the Internet. Everything could be reconsidered in light of Eastwood's conscious and extremely lucid self-narrative, which – although he is clearly not very familiar with digital marketing or self-promotion strategies – is nonetheless likely interested in confusing his audience's expectations, consciously playing with his fandom, and creating further connections with fictional films, always in the context of ageing and its various stages.

We are therefore faced with a continuous swing, where the on-screen and off-screen discourse continues seamlessly, depending on the context. After all, the instability of the star figure and his physical suffering are aspects that bounce back and forth between the screen and the news, in a complex terrain of symbolic exchange that involves stardom and masculinity (Scandola, 2017, pp. 7-20).

Open issues

As Deborah Jermyn pointed out, these public or mediatised ageing processes cannot hide gender disparity. Clint Eastwood is a man who, through his white masculinity and adherence to the conservative values of a white, traditionalist America, has developed a cultural and symbolic approach that has often transcended such values with intelligence, yet without ever eliminating or renouncing them. The processes of female ageing are way different: "Ours is

a culture where the representation of ageing and ‘older’ female celebrities is by turns seemingly hopeful and newly affirming one moment and destructive and retrograde the next” (Jermyn, 2012, p. 22).

In Eastwood's case, according to Philippa Gates, there isn't too much contradiction between on-screen and off-screen: “The star's aged face and body have been presented as a spectacle for the audience to behold; in doing so, his body's physical vulnerability is offered to, and read by, audiences as an emotional one” (P. Gates, 2012, pp. 169).

If anything, given that the process of ageing up negotiated with his fans and audience goes back to the nineties and *The Unforgiven* (1992), we should perhaps distinguish two stages of old age for the star: the third and the fourth age. If *Gran Torino* assumes the role of a testament film for a longer period that began in the previous decade – where we collectively face a new phase of the representation of the hero – we can define it no longer as a conclusive work that only a good set of chromosomes has been able to extend to the present day, but rather as an explicit turning point from the third to the fourth age (Dolan, 2018). The fourth age is the result of a technical society: medical and technological progress, social inclusion, cosmetic development, processes dedicated to the psycho-physical well-being, widespread awareness of nutrition and nutraceuticals (Higgs, Gilleard, 2015). These processes began in the 1970s and have been apparently unstoppable for advanced Western societies up to now.

Obviously, in the case of male celebrities, this long passage is different from that of female celebrities (Bruzzi, 2013; De Rosa, Mandelli & Re, 2021). Let's imagine if the same neglect (observed in some of Eastwood's shots) had been noticed in a female star of the same age. It is likely that the comments would not have simply swung between affectionate support and embarrassed silence, but they would have criticised the appearance of the subject photographed - perhaps even arguing for the very need not to publish the picture. And this brings us back to where we started, namely the legendary longevity of cinema professionals, both in terms of age and artistic career. In this case too, the gender inequality in cinema hits women hard. The planning skills that are so beneficial for male directors can very rarely be extended to female directors, as very few have been able to establish themselves in the years when Eastwood was making a name for himself and therefore continue their career after their 80s or 90s. It is no coincidence that, in debates on the subject, only Agnès Varda is ever mentioned. She died in 2019 aged 91 and was the director of four feature films between 2008 and 2019.

In conclusion, it is only by starting from the features of his masculinity and without ignoring a widespread privilege that the male film star (and his forms of celebrity translated into digital media) has been able to enjoy, that it is possible to understand Clint Eastwood's public relationship with old age and the way he has chosen to include it in the themes and storytelling of his films.

Biographical note

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Notes

¹ “A compreensão do passado é crucial para a criação do presente. Desse modo, o acréscimo à imagem espectral da casa da infância de um discurso do narrador autodiegético (o cineasta), extraíndo dos escombros da memória a própria experiência vivida naquele lugar, produz o sentido onírico que a morada natal representa” (Barini Camargo, 2020, p. 96).

² “il personaggio di Eastwood/Kowalski si muove per tutto il tempo come uno *zombie*, così come anche gli altri, soprattutto e significativamente gli antagonisti [...] sono caricature, immagini, spettri di un teatro che talvolta ha in effetti le caratteristiche laterali del palcoscenico, come nella sequenza finale, della morte sacrificio di Walt, vista dai vicini dalle finestre, attraverso gesti e azioni che sono ridotti a simulacri, a fantasmi di gesti e azioni, e non hanno nulla di reale o di realistico” (Carluccio, 2009, pp. 18-19).

³ “Il ritorno dello stesso Eastwood a interpretare e reinterpretare il suo personaggio, mettendo in gioco la propria e reale fisicità invecchiata, vulnerabile (e irresistibile), spinge l'identificazione dello spettatore” (p. 21).

⁴ “articuler sa puissance classique [...] à la mise en place d'un espace mental d'une extraordinaire complexité” (Malausa, 2009, p. 20).