

Aleksander Cywiński
ORCID: 0000-0002-3945-9607
University of Szczecin

Growing Old with the Films: The Case of Clint Eastwood

Starzejąc się z filmami —
przypadek Clinta Eastwooda

ABSTRACT

Old age is one of the main themes in cultural discourse, which is present in literature, art and music. In this context, this article analyzes representations of old age in the works of Clint Eastwood, an outstanding American actor and director. Feature films significantly impact society by shaping people's thinking, decisions and behavior. They promote values, social norms, traditions and customs, but also portray current cultural, social, economic and political issues. Films can influence the perceptions of different social groups, inspire people to pursue their goals, change their lives or help others. Their analysis reveals the dark side of the aging process and "anti-aging" practices. Eastwood's work over the past 30 years as a director, producer and actor has contributed significantly to the fight against negative stereotypes associated with the aging process. Aging in public during his film career, Eastwood has become an informal spokesman for a positive image of old age, by portraying this stage of life as a period to which a person aspires throughout his life. An analysis of the stories in his films shows the monumentality of the aging process that is unprecedented in cinematic history. Eastwood's films are dominated

KEYWORDS

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by the theme of fighting against the injustice of the world, which seems to gain particular importance in the context of responsibility to one's loved ones.

ABSTRAKT

Starość jest jednym z głównych tematów w dyskursie dotyczącym kultury, obecnym w literaturze, sztuce i muzyce. W tym kontekście analizie poddane zostały przedstawienia starości w dziełach Clinta Eastwooda, wybitnego amerykańskiego aktora i reżysera. Filmy fabularne mają znaczący wpływ na społeczeństwo, kształtując myślenie, decyzje i zachowania ludzi. Służą promocji wartości, norm społecznych, tradycji i zwyczajów, ale także przedstawiają aktualne kwestie kulturowe, społeczne, ekonomiczne i polityczne. Filmy mogą wpływać na percepcję różnych grup społecznych, inspirować do dążenia do celów, zmiany życia lub pomocy innym. Poprzez ich analizę dostrzega się zarówno ciemne strony procesu starzenia, jak i praktyki „przeciwstarzeniowe”. Praca Eastwooda na przestrzeni ostatnich 30 lat w roli reżysera, producenta i aktora, znacznie przyczyniła się do walki z negatywnymi stereotypami związanymi z procesem starzenia. Eastwood, starzejąc się publicznie w trakcie swojej filmowej kariery, stał się nieformalnym rzecznikiem pozytywnego wizerunku starości, przedstawiając ten etap życia jako okres, do którego człowiek dąży przez całe swoje życie. Analiza opowieści zawartych w jego filmach ukazuje monumentalność procesu starzenia, niemającą odpowiednika w historii kinematografii. W filmach Eastwooda dominuje motyw walki z niesprawiedliwością świata, co zdaje się nabierać szczególnej wagi w kontekście odpowiedzialności wobec najbliższych.

Introduction

Old age, or the process of ageing, is one of the leading themes in culture, from the Bible to contemporary poetry, from Anchises being carried by Aeneas out of the burning Troy to Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones dancing and singing in front of a crowd of thousands. Representations of old age can be found in the paintings of Dutch masters as well as in the pages of Shakespeare's plays. Rembrandt's later self-portraits show a person lacking the twinkle in the eye that was present 30 years earlier. Also, *King Lear* is the story of an elderly man who longs for rest but, in the meantime, has to endure

humiliation from his children. In this context, addressing the topic of old age in its various dimensions therefore appears as a responsibility for those working in the social sciences. It is also an opportunity to provide insights into an important social sphere.

The object of analysis in this text is a selection of films directed, produced and starring Clint Eastwood as a leading actor. It is a reflection on how this great American actor portrays old age in his films, which are watched around the world. Referring to Henry A. Giroux, it can be said that Eastwood, through his pedagogy as a “public intellectual”, teaches people how to age using his own body, in front of millions of viewers, speaking to them in a communicative way, with a social concern (Giroux 2004; 2008).

As it is not Eastwood’s life, but his films (which he directed) and the roles he played in them that are under scrutiny, it is only by way of introduction that I include a brief biography. Born in San Francisco on 31 May 1930, Eastwood studied economics at Los Angeles City College. As a young man, he took on various jobs before gradually, with increasing dedication, tying his future to the film industry. Due to his physique, he was cast in roles of strong men, enjoying the most success in his early career in spaghetti westerns directed by Sergio Leone. Over time, Eastwood, as an actor, director, producer, film music composer and even politician, became a very active participant in the Hollywood art scene in many fields. He now boasts numerous awards: Oscars, Golden Globes, a César and a Golden Lion (Galafent 1994; Eliot 2009; Engel 2012; Vaux 2012; Eastwood et al. 2013; Friedman, Desser 2018; Frangioni, Schatz 2018).

Feature films and their social functions – a review of the literature

Feature films have a major impact on society, being a response to current social events. They are not only one of the most popular forms of entertainment, but they also shape the way people think, make choices and behave. They promote values and social norms, introducing new patterns that become widely accepted over time. Films provide a “mirror” that reflects important cultural, social, economic and political changes. Local traditions, customs, countries

or regions are promoted through film (Jarvie 1969; Ferro 1983; Płażewski 2001; Chapman 2003; Auster, Quart 2011; Brown 2011; Warmuz-Warmuzińska 2013; Mitchell 2015; Skorupa et al. 2018a, 2018b; Langdridge et al. 2019; Thangavelu 2020; Kubrak 2020; Jenkins 2022).

Practices such as product placement and idea placement, which aim to promote specific brands, products, services, ideas, values or beliefs, have been present in the film industry for years (La Ferle, Edwards 2006; Wyrwisz 2013; Sharma, Bumb 2020). A film can have a significant impact on consumer decisions, as was the case with the 1934 film *It Happened One Night*, in which a character played by Clark Gable did not wear a waistcoat, leading to a crisis among manufacturers (Troy 2008).

Films are a powerful medium that can influence our perception of different aspects of society. They are often used as tools to draw attention to important social issues such as education (Konieczna 2011; Cywiński 2020), obesity (Dąbrowska 2020) or disability (Mironiuk-Netrebka 2020; Wlazło 2021). By presenting such topics in a narrative context, films can help increase public awareness and empathy towards people struggling with various problems.

Old age is another important aspect of society that is often addressed in films. This theme is present in the academic literature in a variety of contexts that show many perspectives and shades of this phase of human life. Some studies focus on the darker sides of the ageing process (Serkowska 2018), whilst others focus on analysing films made by ageing filmmakers or films about old age (Cohen-Shalev 2012). Films show a stereotypical, often negative image of old age, especially with reference to women (Bazzini 1997; Cohen-Shalev, Marcus 2007; Robinson et al. 2009; Gatling 2013).

There is a wealth of research describing attempts to break down various stereotypes related to old age (Richardson 2019; Medina, Zecchi 2020). Some films feature idealised characters of older people to attract older audiences to cinemas (Shary, McVittie 2021). Other studies note the use of double standards for ageing female and male characters (Lauzen, Dozier 2005; Kaplan 2010; Dolan 2018), as well as “anti-ageing” practices employed by some characters, such as those played by Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone (King 2010; Boyd, Brayton 2012; Tracy, Schrage-Früh 2022).

Some studies highlight the positive impact of ageing actors on the health of seniors, as for example in Swedish films (Koskinen, 2019). Others focus on societal problems caused by the loss independent functioning, especially due to dementia (Kaplan, Chivers 2018; Deng 2023). Attention is also paid to the prevailing ageism in films (Gravagne 2013; Whelehan 2013) and to the need to raise awareness of this issue (Casado-Gual 2020; Hackett 2021).

The process of ageing in Eastwood's films

I intend to analyse images of the ageing process in films directed by Eastwood in which he himself has played leading roles. My starting point is the 1992 film *Unforgiven*, in which Eastwood is in his sixties; I conclude with an analysis of the 2021 film *Cry Macho*, in which the actor is over 90. This method allows us to see the 30-year period within which we can trace the trajectory of the ageing process of a great filmmaker playing various characters.

As Eastwood's films are narrative works and many of them include the theme of old age, the analysis refers to the content, leaving aside the technical dimension (for example, lighting, camera work or set design), whilst still understanding and appreciating its importance. The aim is to focus on the story that is contained in the film. By asking what the film talks about (themes), what it tells (plot) and what it says (theses) (Aumont, Marie 2013: 173–221), I reconstruct the portrayal of the ageing process in Eastwood's films, grounding my considerations in the interpretative paradigm (Kostera 1996).

What follows is a chronological list of films directed and produced by Eastwood, featuring him as an actor in a leading role. This is not Eastwood's complete filmography from this period; nevertheless, given the research problem, it is reasonable to focus on these films, as it is in them that he was able to most fully express his view of the ageing process and the way it is portrayed.

1. *Unforgiven* (1992) – Eastwood was 62 at the time of its release. Depicting an old-time western, the film tells the story of a former assassin who decides to take up arms again. It marks the beginning of a series of stories about the ageing process. In this film, Eastwood balances middle age with old age. As he hits the road, driven by the promise of a reward for killing

evil cowboys who use violence against prostitutes, he demonstrates both his fitness and his gradual loss of strength. This continual change in levels of vigour creates dissonance in the protagonist. The challenge he has undertaken becomes a great unknown for him. Despite his difficulty in riding a horse, he regains his youthful bravado after consuming alcohol. The passage of time and the protagonist's shameful past make him fearful of death. Watching Eastwood, we can almost feel with him the pain that is inflicted on him and that he himself inflicts. What is important, however, is that he chooses this task not so much out of a desire for adventure, but out of a need to support his family. Another motive is the desire to inflict punishment on those who abuse prostitutes. This is the world of the Wild West, so there is a unique morality here. Nevertheless, this world (understood both geographically and ethically) is a space where justice is brutally served. The character played by Eastwood wants a part in this regardless of age—or perhaps precisely because of age.

2. *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995) – Eastwood was 65 when the film was released. Set in the 1960s, it tells the story of an ageing photographer who, whilst travelling across the USA, meets a woman in her forties. A romance is born, even though the woman is a wife and mother. We witness an explosion of love. The elder man, who is still attractive to this woman, awakens long-forgotten dreams and desires in her. In this context, old age is not synonymous with resignation or distance. Rather, it is a moment of truth: if you love someone, you should follow your heart. The main character, played by Eastwood, communicates this truth to a woman played by Meryl Streep. His attitude provokes a storm of feelings in her (the final scene is a parting in the rain), but he is neither violent nor possessive. The film's message is clear: a lover should be an experienced man, a wanderer with no permanent home who offers exciting stories and experiences, has spent a lifetime searching and now realises he has found the one. In the film, Eastwood's wrinkles and the experience they attest to are an aphrodisiac. It is an un-Hollywood way of portraying

romance, because it is not youth but old age that is in the centre here.

3. *Absolute Power* (1997) – When this film was made Eastwood was 67. The protagonist is a thief who, during a burglary, witnesses sexual violence by the US president and the subsequent murder of the victim of that violence. Fleeing the scene, he first lowers himself down a rope from the third floor and then runs to avoid being caught by Secret Service agents. Driven by his resentment of the cynicism and hypocrisy of politicians, he decides to contribute to justice by helping another elderly man, the husband of the murdered woman. He speaks to him from the position of an experienced man who is distant but desires justice. The theme of family is important: he is caring for his only daughter, in his own way. In the course of the film, we learn that, in hiding, he has been tracing the most important moments of her life and that he cares about his relationship with her. The main character, despite being a burglar, is guided by a certain code of ethics. He cannot bear to see an injustice which has not been avenged. For him, a situation in which there is no punishment for a crime is intolerable. It seems that it is old age that causes this mode of behaviour: the need to maintain a balance between good and evil. This cosmic, Manichean force seems to originate in the life experience that one acquires with age.
4. *True Crime* (1999) – Eastwood was 69 at the time of the film's release. The main plot is the story of a black man convicted of the murder of a young woman and about to be executed. A journalist, played by Eastwood, who is an ageing womaniser, is to interview him. As he prepares for the interview, he begins to think that the condemned man may be innocent after all. The plot of the film centres on finding convincing evidence to prove the innocence of the wrongly convicted man. Despite numerous adversities, as well as his own weaknesses, the main character consistently strives to make the truth come out. Even being an "old creep", as his employer calls him, an unfaithful husband and a father failing in his duty to his daughter, his moral compass invariably points in the direction of the truth. His womanising, set in the context

of old age, makes him a comic figure. Nevertheless, we see him as a servant of justice, sometimes even against his own will, reminiscent of the characters of the biblical prophets trying to avoid fulfilling a divine command. Here, old age is the main character's resource, because it limits his weaknesses so as to ultimately bring the film to a happy ending.

5. *Space Cowboys* (2000) – Eastwood was 70 when the film was made. The main character he plays is full of vigour. Despite hearing from others “you’re 70 years old”, he and three other members of his former team fly into space on a mission to repair a Russian communications satellite. Once there, it turns out that the satellite is actually a rocket launcher suspended in space. These people in their seventies—and not the young cosmonauts sent with them—save the country. The protagonist and his companions appear as eternal guardians, always ready to defend the country, even at the cost of their own lives. Old age, in this case, symbolises life experience and a sense of responsibility for others, whilst the loss of physical fitness is presented as a minor aspect of the cosmonaut's functioning, serving more of a humorous role.
6. *Blood Work* (2002) – Eastwood was 72 at the time of the film's release. It is the story of an experienced FBI agent who fails to solve a certain murder case. Whilst pursuing the criminal (the theme of chasing reappears), he suffers a heart attack, which prevents him from continuing to work. Two years later, he receives a heart transplant donated by a woman shot in a shop. The woman's sister asks him to help find the murderer. Eventually, we learn that an unsolved murder is linked to this woman's murder. This story serves as a backdrop to show the older man as a person who, despite his health problems, is fully committed to solving the crime. He is driven by the imperative to uncover the truth and bring the perpetrator to justice. The reward he receives is the love of a woman and a child: an unexpected blessing in the autumn of his life.
7. *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) – Eastwood was 74 at the time of its release. The film tells the story of an ageing boxing coach. Troubled by doubts about his faith and cut off from his daughter, he lives on the sidelines, trying to salvage the remnants of

his career. He meets a young woman who dreams of a career as a professional boxer, seeing it as a chance to succeed in life. The main character, played by Eastwood, initially takes a sceptical approach. He is conservative and does not train women. However, he breaks his rules after seeing her determination. Old age, in this case, has the face of a cynical, bitter man. However, he is given another chance—perhaps his last—to be guided by what his heart tells him. This is not a film about boxing, but about a man who, in his old age, takes responsibility for another person, treating her as his own child. In the end, the young woman suffers a serious injury in the ring that prevents her from functioning independently. She asks her boxing coach to help her undergo euthanasia. The protagonist, who feels responsible for her, is plagued by the fundamental question: What is the right thing to do in such a situation? Paradoxically, the protagonist's experiences strip his old age of its mask of cynicism, rediscovering his capacity to love. The moral of the story is that it is never too late to open your heart to another human being.

8. *Gran Torino* (2008) – Eastwood was 78 when the film was released. It opens with a funeral scene during which the main character says goodbye to his wife. From his old face we can read that life has lost its meaning for him. At the same time, he expresses his disapproval of his immediate family not living up to his expectations. In this film Eastwood plays a bitter, cynical retired motor company worker and Korean War veteran, who is unable to establish a relationship with his children. His new neighbours are a family of Asian descent. Their acquaintance begins with conflict, but over time a friendship is born between him and the young residents of the neighbouring house. The protagonist decides to help them when they become victims of a street gang. He sees this as a chance to redeem his wartime sins when he murdered young, defenceless opponents. Old age is presented here as a time of redemption, sacrifice and search for justice, even at the cost of one's own life. The protagonist's sacrifice is not diminished by the fact that he is terminally ill and aware that he is about to die. Rather, it is an excuse to do something for others. Behind the

shell of an old tough guy is a man who wants to help others and be needed and who strives to make his life meaningful.

9. *The Mule* (2018) – Eastwood was 88 years old at the time of its release. In the opening sequences of the film, we are in 2005 and we see an elderly man passionately growing flowers. Then we move to 2017. The same man, played by Eastwood, gets into financial trouble and goes bankrupt. In addition, his already difficult relationship with his family deteriorates. Under these circumstances, he receives an offer to smuggle drugs from a Mexican cartel. He takes on this risky task. Due to his age and his lack of a criminal record, he becomes an excellent smuggler. Old age is not presented here as a time of tranquillity or rest. The main character seems to say that a rolling stone does not grow moss. He dances, celebrates, buys his family and friends gifts and, of course, smuggles drugs. And we, surprisingly, are on his side. We don't want him to get caught. The evil he does allows him to reconnect with his family, who become the most important thing for him. In doing so, he changes his attitude. In the past, he had prioritised work over relationships with his loved ones. In his old age, he finally realises that he was wrong, and drug trafficking becomes an opportunity for him to change.
10. *Cry Macho* (2021) – Eastwood was 91 years old when the film was made. The story opens with a scene in which the main character is driving an old pickup truck. The year is 1979 and Mike, once a rodeo star who broke his back in an accident, is now treated as a burden in the workplace (a stable). Nevertheless, the character played by Eastwood receives an unusual assignment from his boss: he is to find the boss' son, who is staying with his mother in Mexico. Once again, we are invited to watch a road movie. Eastwood, who directs, produces and plays the lead, has no mercy for himself. In the previous films, as a 60- and 70-year-old, he was still running; in this movie he is riding a horse, repairing a car, taking care of animals and lying on the ground. This is because he is playing a real cowboy who, if he is on the prairie, must sleep under the open sky, as custom dictates. Eastwood is replaced by a double only twice: while riding a horse and in a car accident scene. In the film's

other scenes, the protagonist is played by Eastwood, a 90-year-old actor at the time. Thus, we are watching an old age that knows no limits. The protagonist not only fulfils his assigned task, but also strikes up an affair with a Mexican woman he meets. It is in her arms, dancing, that we see him in the last scenes of the film. Old age, then, does not have to mean giving up the joys of life, expressed in this case by abandoning solitude in favour of being with another person and her family.

Discussion, conclusions and suggestions

Eastwood's film work over the past 30 years, whether as a director, producer or actor, has largely served to combat negative stereotypes of the ageing process. Whilst ageing in his films in front of us, Eastwood has become an informal spokesman for the image of the elderly, portraying the final stage of human existence as a time towards which one matures all their life. One might even venture to say that his multifaceted contribution to the rehabilitation of old age is unmatched by any other filmmaker.

Old age is the period when a person's lifelong experience, including that resulting from numerous mistakes and errors, tends to pay off. This is when a person has the chance to better understand what is right and how to act righteously, honourably and—most importantly—justly. In the stories that Eastwood weaves in these films, it is this ethical problem, how to fight the injustice of the world, that seems the most important. What the ageing man on screen can give to the world is the guarantee that he will make an effort to do justice in various dimensions.

Of course, this is not about justice in formal or legal terms. It is old age that justifies this approach, in which what is important is not what is written in the law, but what hides in the deeper layers of culture. If the main characters played by Eastwood break the law, they have reasons for doing so, like Antigone in Sophocles' play. Eastwood's films and the characters he creates in them speak of something more primordial than the state or its institutions. The *topos* of the family, the escape from it due to not understanding its imponderables and the return to it, the fight for it, even at the cost of deconstructing the macho myth, are strongly connected with this.

During the period in question, Eastwood was also involved in the production of other films: *In the Line of Fire* (1993), *A Perfect World* (1993), *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997), *Mystic River* (2003), *Budd Boetticher: An American Original* (2005), *The Stars Fell on Henrietta* (2005), *Flags of Our Fathers: Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), *Grace is Gone* (2007), *Changeling* (2008), *Invictus* (2009), *Johnny Mercer: The Dream's on Me* (2009), *Hereafter* (2010), *J. Edgar* (2011), *Trouble with the Curve* (2012), *American Sniper* (2014), *Jersey Boys* (2014), *Sully* (2016), *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018) and *Richard Jewell* (2019).

However, I have chosen to cite and briefly analyse the ten films mentioned above on the assumption that through them Eastwood, as director, producer and leading male actor, was able to make the fullest statement about the ageing process. I believe that these films give us a unique insight into the lives, moral dilemmas or broader spirituality of ageing people, whom we are used to seeing in everyday life as wrinkled, shuffling and increasingly hunched figures.

Eastwood's work is also a testament to the importance of culture and its right to tackle important subjects. Eastwood teaches us that a filmmaker does so because they have a mission which is not just pure amusement, but also to present an epic morality play about a life that is passing but can still be valuable. Relating the above considerations to pedagogy, it is important to note that, concerning andragogy, Eastwood demonstrates the old man's ability to function independently and efficiently, also making him sensitive to the needs of the constantly changing world.

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:

Aleksander Cywiński
University of Szczecin
Institute of Pedagogy
e-mail: aleksander.cywiński@usz.edu.pl