



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

"...And avenge and forgive us our sins": negative theology and patriarchal feminism in the films of Clint Eastwood

Früchtl, J.

Published in:
Esthetica : Tijdschrift voor Kunst en Filosofie

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Früchtl, J. (2007). "...And avenge and forgive us our sins": negative theology and patriarchal feminism in the films of Clint Eastwood. *Esthetica : Tijdschrift voor Kunst en Filosofie*, 2007.
<http://esthetica.nge.nl/#/archieff/?am=menu1&yssel=1&yssel=0&y=2007&sel=8&id=43>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

'... AND AVENGE AND FORGIVE US OUR SINS'. NEGATIVE THEOLOGY AND PATRIARCHAL FEMINISM IN THE FILMS OF CLINT EASTWOOD

Josef Früchtl

... And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us'. The *Lord's Prayer* reminds Christians daily that they are truly guilty beings and that the way to redeem themselves is through forgiveness. However, Christianity recognises not just *one* God but rather, to put it slightly less provocatively, variations on or, even more mildly, different sides of the same God. In rough effective historical terms, it is familiar with the merciful and kind Heavenly Father of the New Testament, as well as the punitive and wrathful Jehovah of the Old. And it is aware of other variations, including the *deus absconditus*, a power managing matters purely arbitrarily. Taking the sociology of Max Weber as read, for Calvinists this concept of God enters into an indicative relationship with that found in the Old Testament. And in the cinema of Clint Eastwood, this God is updated and better defined (as more than a mere outline). Eastwood's films focus on the figure of the unredeemed avenger and the innocent-guilty, i.e. tragic, father, as related and described in the following.

For this I shall concentrate on the film *Million Dollar Baby*. At first sight it is a boxing film but, as it slowly unfolds, it gradually, astonishingly and certainly unconventionally enters the genre of the melodrama. With his film *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), in which he starred with Meryl Streep, Eastwood had already proved his talent within this latter genre, one which according to Stanley Cavell (cf. Cavell 1996) centres around the suffering of a woman and failure in love due to social and moral barriers. But it is his incorporation of this theme within the very male genre of the boxing film which truly reflects his full command over it.

I would like to precede my film analysis by digressing to another successful and unusual film by Eastwood, the western *Unforgiven* (1992). This film offers the clearest illustration of negative theology as an element within Eastwood's films. What sets *Unforgiven* apart from Eastwood's earlier westerns is an existential hopelessness, a refusal to accept redemption even during the redeeming act. Like John Ford, the universally acknowledged master of the western, Eastwood maintains the *tension* between *demythologisation* and *remythologisation*. Like Ford, he deprives the myth of its mystique by simultaneously exploiting it. The term currently used for this technique is 'deconstruction'. Eastwood deconstructs the myth by, on the one hand, describing the conditions pertaining to its origins and, on the other, employing them to perpetuate the myth. He neither destroys it nor restores it. Heroism is not reinstated with a vengeance, but neither does it dissolve in thin air as a mere figment of the imagination. And yet Eastwood's myth, even the deconstructed myth, has ceased to be the symbolic homeland it was for Ford. It is not melancholy which envelopes his work, but a refusal to accept redemption following violence. The 'hero returned' enters the world like a ghost emerging from an old picture, and the film portrays this final return rather like a ghost story for adults. From a technical point of view, its only requirements are a great deal of darkness and very little light. Its message is sufficiently obvious: violence has no redeeming qualities. Eastwood gives the dark Old Testament slant back to that myth of regeneration through violence, that collective desire to cleanse oneself through blood which westerns are so good at exemplifying (cf. Slotkin 1998), but he does so without offering anywhere to run to. '*Unforgiven* deals with the absence of God in that Paradise which human beings have made their living Hell. It is a penitential sermon set in grim times. And it is a snide attack on heroes' (Seesslen 1995, 229). *Unforgiven* is a film which would have pleased even a well-raised and sensitive philosopher like Theodor W. Adorno, had he not had so many prejudices against the cinema. For it is a film offering no less than a negative theology in the guise of a western, capable only of circling laconically and in eternal damnation around its dissolved absolute, the hero.

Not completely removed from this, but nevertheless different, is the constellation in *Million Dollar Baby*. This film initially encompasses two levels: the sporting level of boxing and the private level of a family drama. Yet beyond these, two further levels open up: a social one and a metaphysical-religious one. The social level comes as no surprise since, within the American culture and more recently also within ours, boxing, and indeed sport in general, has repeatedly been used to model society. The film portrays the proverbial American dream from the point of view of the lower and even lowest social classes. A boxing film can illustrate better than any other kind of film what it means to fight one's way to the top. It is a morally cleaner, albeit no less brutal version of a gangster film. In both cases the protagonists stop at nothing; the gangster can live with corpses, the boxer with opponents prostrate on the floor. This genre belongs to society's underdogs. *Rocky* was a very characteristic example of it (but only Part I from 1976 – what followed was merely Hollywood in its truest colours: a licence to print money).

In *Million Dollar Baby* the metaphysical-religious level comes unexpectedly and therefore with full force. Films from the boxing genre demonstrate what has to be suffered and got through in order to be victorious. Their message, just like the message currently circulating Germany, is that anybody can manage to get to the top, to be something extraordinary and thus inspire a whole nation. (Of course this is not possible without an element of exclusion. The current campaign 'YOU are Germany' means you and not the others, not those who are always complaining; they are to be excluded from the community of optimists and performers.) The knockdown blow which the viewers receive in this film, however, is of another dimension altogether. Like the main character, we too are ultimately counted out. The film knocks us out and our recovery is slow.

Slowness and directness are two formal qualities central to this film. Simplicity is a third. We are gradually drawn into the story, guided by a terse, rough, off-screen, male voice. It is the voice of Morgan Freeman, whose character in the film has the nickname 'Scrap-Iron'. His voice sounds like dusty, reddish-brown rust on old iron. And he is old, ready for the scrap heap, as is his employer, Frankie Dunn, played by Clint Eastwood. Like in *Unforgiven*, here too vintage sets the tone (literally and atmospherically). The two men run a boxing studio, moving with due care and attention, their feet planted firmly on the ground, yet also somewhat stiffly, 'counting up the years' (Midding 2005), but not yet counted out. They are still capable of teaching young show-offs a straight right if required, flooring them at a moment's notice. Minimalism dominates this film, right down to the gestures it incorporates. A quick glance, a chewing movement, a raised eyebrow suffice as elements of communication, as sparse as the classical guitar music accompanying them, the sad and dreamy piano notes, as well as violins used trenchantly on a laconic foundation of blues and jazz rhythms. (Clint Eastwood himself composed the music with his son Kyle.) Classic Hollywood cinema, reduced to the basics. The way in which the narrator brings all the parts of the story together is linear. And the fact that the film has a narrator at all is not only a relic from days gone by, an auctorial position linking transparency, distance and omniscience; this feature also has a very definite and, beyond this, metaphysical significance, as becomes clear only at the end of the film or, more precisely, with its very last line.

'I hear your voice always, Boss'. So says Maggie, a boxer, to Frankie, her coach and manager. From the outset he lays down as a condition for their working relationship the rule that she always listens to his voice and does what he says without question. The voice opens up a direct relationship between a You and an I. Having a voice primarily facilitates speaking, and this in turn means the potential to voice one's own opinion, to 'cast' it, like in a democratic election. Stanley Cavell returns persistently to this interrelation (Cavell 2002, 70, 112). Jacques Derrida, on the other hand, has successfully enlightened us about the complexity of the voice and idealisation, about the high esteem bestowed on the spoken word as the result of metaphysical thought (Derrida 1979, 128). The voice encloses the presence of the object as a 'meant', to use the terminology of Husserl, as well as the presence of a 'meaning' consciousness. It is directed

at the object (and at the other person), hears itself and yet leaves no empirical trace. This renders it the ultimate expression of self-thinking thought, the Aristotelian *noēsis noēseos* and the Hegelian logic of self-reflection. If we consider that this reflective model of reason, clear at least for Hegel, which in its structure is a dividing and, by dividing, a self-realising and merging totality, follows the model of Christian religion (Schnädelbach 1999, 42), and if we ultimately remind ourselves, to take this point several steps further, that in Jewish-Christian ideology creation is rhetoric, literally an act of speaking, in which something is created by voicing it ('And God said: Let there be...') (Steiner 2001, 38), then we have basic elements to support the theory that speaking has an innate and elevated status for Jewish and Christian theology, as well as for classical metaphysics.

In *Million Dollar Baby* these dimensions of the voice are present. 'I hear your voice, Boss. I hear you; you are the Boss. I am (almost) in your power.' So speaks the obedient pupil. But also: 'My place is with you. I (almost) belong to you.' So speaks the daughter. And so speaks the believer to his chosen God. Frankie Dunn is a believer. He prays to God at night that his (biological) daughter will be protected. And for twenty-three years, ever since his daughter left him, he has been going to church nearly every morning. But Frankie's faith has cracks. He has doubts about the mysteries of Catholicism and bothers the Priest with questions about the Holy Trinity and the immaculate conception. When Maggie says 'Boss' to her coach in a soft and overt manner, she chuckles with both mischief and confidence. She knows exactly what she wants. The Boss is officially in charge. But gradually and purposefully Maggie asserts herself, right up until the bitter end. She is the 'strong one' in all respects. Ultimately she is the life-blood for this man who might be a master of his trade, namely boxing, but who is also old, lonely and broken. She puts a stop to his inertia and brings him back to life.

'Tough ain't enough.' This is the first lesson her boss imparts to her when he refuses to coach her. A man like him does not coach girls. When she cheekily retorts that she is quite tough, hard, even very hard, he puts her in her place with the aforementioned comment, one which could serve as a general motto for all of Eastwood's later films. Not even being tough and male is enough. There has to be something else. It (boxing, life) requires one to be hard, but that alone is not sufficient. What is also needed could be termed 'respect'. 'Boxing is about respect'. This is the first thing we hear. Boxing is about gaining respect, but also and primarily about respecting *oneself*. This old school of life is all about self-esteem. Beyond the toughness is what could also be termed wisdom, a characteristic usually ascribed to the elderly; for in old age, looking back on our lives, we can compare and relativise and are far more immune to absolutes. This is precisely what German Idealism terms as 'self-reflection', an insight into one's own absolutes and thus a balancing out of the individual positions within a whole. And adopting this stance by no means has to involve metaphysical Hegelian consequences.

Million Dollar Baby tells the story of a woman who goes out into the world to learn fighting, real fighting, something which for a long time was strictly for men, and not only in sport. In a social sense she has always had to fight. Her father, whom she loved, is dead. Her mother, an overweight harridan, is on welfare, her brother is repeatedly in prison and her sister has an illegitimate child. *White trash* in its purest form: coarse, aggressive, grabbing, unhappy. She has been working as a waitress since she was 12. She wraps up a left-over piece of meat for herself and gives an embarrassed smile when she realises she is being watched: 'It's for my dog', she lies. In reality she is the dog, and she needs the meat to grow strong.

Million Dollar Baby also tells the story of a woman who goes out into the world to fight for recognition by a man, boxing coach Frankie Dunn, using fighting to do so, a behavioural pattern cultivated by men. It is not difficult to see her father behind this chosen male figure, someone she loved and lost early. It has made her stubborn and she will not allow Frankie to put her off easily. On her 32nd birthday, which she spends training until late into the night, she finally

manages to persuade him. If he takes away her big dream, her dream of becoming champion and rising above the trash, then she will be left with nothing. This attitude convinces the American in Frankie. The handshake which seals their new relationship is the first step towards mutual respect. And the way in which Maggie's arm shoots forward to shake Frankie's hand portrays touchingly and clumsily her childlike joy and pride.

It will come as no surprise that Maggie, a person with talent and an untamed will, becomes a 'strong', technically adept and physically explosive boxer. She repeatedly knocks out her opponents in the first round. And her coach observes this with a mixture of pride and patriarchal sullenness. The relationship between him and Maggie has long been a trusting, a *familiar* one. When she asks him after her first victory whether he will now cease to be her coach and leave her, he answers with just a single word: "Never". From now on their working relationship becomes a loving one, albeit platonic. Platonic love is a pedagogical ideal. It describes the caring and guiding relationship which teachers have to their pupils, philosophers (scientists) to their students (Socrates to Alkibiades), parents to their children, and vice versa. A paternalistic ideal. And a love which can be more touching than one concentrating on the physical, the sexual. *Million Dollar Baby* demonstrates this afresh.

As we all know, the family is a central theme within American cinema. Social families crystallise accordingly within the films of Clint Eastwood. In *Million Dollar Baby*, Scrap almost becomes a male housewife, one of the two sparring partners within an old, somewhat surly-seeming, but nevertheless loyal married couple. (This is also a popular constellation in the male world of the western.) And Maggie becomes the adopted daughter. Frankie also has a natural daughter, but she left him more than twenty years ago. Maggie in turn misses her dead father above all else. This makes the two of them predestined for one another. During a night-time car journey, on the way back from Maggie's residual family of social misfits, she tells Frankie about her father and his German Shepherd dog (called 'Axel'), and about how one morning he left the house with him and came back in the evening without him, not saying a word about it. 'I've got nobody but you, Frankie', she then says. 'And you got me', is his direct answer (albeit followed by an indirect, ironical one). This scene, which frames the two main characters against the night sky, with the soft noise of the engine and some equally soft guitar music, as if they were shining dots in a dark universe, will-o'-the-wisps, their faces appearing and disappearing, human beings in a soft, floating and dimmed spotlight, as if they cannot bear too much brightness because it infringes upon their hard-worked souls and makes plain speaking impossible – this scene represents the climax of the intimacy which has grown between these two people. And it paves the way for the lighting effects Eastwood uses in his later films, reminiscent of the *film noir*, yet fading out its sharp contours into paler, weaker colours. Critics, especially those familiar with Heidegger and Levinas, will be tempted to rave about these photographed faces which, both literally and figuratively, "never completely come out of the shadows" and thus represent that which "simultaneously gives and takes", reveals and conceals (Boeuf 2004).

It is said that people who shy away from the (clear, non-dubious) light have got something to hide. In Frankie's case it is guilt. The letters which he writes to his daughter every week come back unread. He collects them in a shoebox. He has obviously done something wrong, something he is guilty of, something for which he is to *blame*, something he cannot make alright again. We do not find out any of the details, but this merely increases the blame we feel him to be shouldering. And there is another, not quite as hopeless, yet still ever-present cause for guilt. Scrap lost one eye during a boxing match, and Frankie, his manager at the time, believes himself to be to blame. At least this is one instance of blame which Frankie can alleviate slightly, giving Scrap a job in the boxing studio and allowing a friendship to develop between them, one which might be of few words, but which is firm and 'typically male', even a substitute for marriage.

The drama in *Million Dollar Baby* unfolds when Maggie is incorrectly knocked down from behind in the crucial fight for the World Championship. Her opponent is a dark-skinned former prostitute from Berlin who is fighting with all the unfair means available to her. Eastwood presents her as a negative cliché, as the incarnation of a man's worst nightmare. Maggie falls so awkwardly that she is paralysed from the waist down. For a split-second she forgot the rule which Frankie was forever drumming into her: 'Always protect yourself!' At the hospital, where her legs have to be amputated, she decides she does not wish to continue living in this state. Lying immobile in bed, she asks Frankie to do her one last favour. Just as Maggie's father presumably put his dog out of its misery, now she wants Frankie to do the same for her. He sits at her bedside and they joke a little about the name he had embroidered on her boxing robe: 'Mo Cuishle', which means something along the lines of 'my darling, my blood'. She remembers how the fans called out this name during fights and how her face was to be found in the pages of magazines. She had everything, she says in a weak voice, and nothing can take that away from her. When she was born, her family had told her, she had to fight her way into life. Now she wants to fight her way out.

Frankie rejects her request, at least at first. He can no longer avoid a terrible moral dilemma. If he kills her, he will be committing a murder, and as a Christian that means a deadly sin. But if he refuses, he will be murdering her in another sense. And this sin, the Priest warns him, would be worst of all. If he committed it, he would be lost forever. He would never be able to forgive himself and would never be able to find himself again.

And this is exactly what happens in the end. Frankie releases his socially adopted daughter. After she has bitten off her own tongue – and what a metaphor that is – in order to start the onset of fatal internal bleeding, to inflict upon herself a wound which will be incapable of healing, in other words after she has taken the law into her own hands and acted autonomously, Frankie relents and administers a lethal injection. And then he disappears. He is never seen again, has apparently vanished into thin air. This is the punishment that the film holds in store for *him*. The *woman*, representing a virile physique, loses her physicality. It is amputated from her both literally and symbolically. At this point the patriarchal feminism below the surface of the paternalism comes blatantly to the fore. Caring is not only implemented with violence, but also turns out to be an act of violence towards the object of the caring. The *patriarchal feminism* is an avenging paternalistic feminism. In *Unforgiven* a man avenges the lost innocence of a woman, following the classic patterns of heroes and knights. *Million Dollar Baby* does not do this. Here fate appears as an avenging power, this time attacking the male dream of a young woman, turning her physically into a defenceless piece of meat, an invalid. Thanks to Nietzsche the genealogist and Freud the psychoanalyst, we are in a position to comprehend fate as the anonymisation of our own knotted lives, as the projection of our own unsolved fundamental conflicts. The blame which Frankie shoulders is, seen in this way, an unperceived expression of unadmitted aggression. Indirectly it is he himself once again taking revenge, albeit this time upon the object under his protection, upon the woman herself.

The gloomy images which have accompanied the film from its outset now assume their definitive tragic stigma. For Frankie there is no way of escaping the collision of moral norms. Whatever he does, it will (always also) be wrong. The tale also has a tragic end because his failure to achieve good relationships with his daughters pursues him like a (not to be forgotten: self-induced) curse. By disappearing he becomes a nobody. For the last time, and this time forever, he 'takes cover'. As an individual he will never again come out into the open. He becomes one of the many nameless and invisible men portrayed in literature by the likes of Beckett and Ralph Ellison and who, according to the philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno, date back as far as Homer's Odysseus. In the context of the Modern Age, Frankie thus reminds us in reverse of that western figure created by Clint Eastwood himself in *High Plains Drifter* (1972) and *Pale Rider* (1985), the 'man without a name' – who one day suddenly appears to bring

about justice, using not the law, a civilisatory and later civil and state institution, but violence, and who then disappears again.

In *Million Dollar Baby* openly avenging violence is nowhere to be seen. 'Redemption for the (violent) redeemer!' Using the words of Richard Wagner, who represents a desire to die as a result of diffuse feelings of guilt, one would very much like to shout out after Frankie Dunn, that aged boxing coach and failed father. He himself sought redemption in words, by writing letters to his daughter. And yet taking this course meant they evaded him, both redemption and his daughter. In turn, his undertaking had certain violent characteristics. Addressing a person who repeatedly rejects you week after week can certainly be termed obtrusive towards that person, as well as torture towards oneself. However, it also involves subjecting oneself to a rigid discipline. As in *Unforgiven*, the only possibly redeeming feature is the narration. In *Unforgiven* the narrator relates the way in which tales about the Wild West and its magnificent heroes arose in order to make them transparent; here the narration is also conciliatory. As becomes clear only at the end, the story narrated by Morgan Freeman is directed at a single person, Frankie's daughter. She is to discover what kind of person her father was. Whether she will actually read or hear this story is unknown to us. But as the tale has now entered the public domain in the form of a film, we all know it. And we can retell it in all its existential porosity. And that is the only comfort remaining to us when the film ends. We, the listeners and viewers, are ultimately left behind as a channel of redemption. *Million Dollar Baby* continues what Rousseau began with his *Confessions* in the middle of the 18th century, namely to redesign self-awareness according to the model of divine identity and to expose himself or entrust himself not to the Day of Judgement, but to the public, that community of equals (Jauss 1977, 200; Habermas 1988, 204). And once again we are forced to learn that in moral matters it is not easy to be the judge. It is significantly easier in this case to enjoy the art. Because *Million Dollar Baby* is an extremely good film.

Email: j.fruchtl[at]uva.nl

Bibliografie

Boeuf, Stephane (2004). 'Clint Eastwood: Million Dollar Baby (USA 2004)', in [Jump Cut](#) (accessed 5 January 2008).

Cavell, Stanley (1996). *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Cavell, Stanley (2002). *Die andere Stimme. Philosophie und Autobiographie*. Berlin: Diaphanes. Translation of *ibid.*, *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

Derrida, Jacques (1979). *Die Stimme und das Phänomen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Habermas, Jürgen (1988). 'Individuierung durch Vergesellschaftung. Zu G. H. Meads Theorie der Subjektivität', in *ibid.*, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken. Philosophische Aufsätze*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Jauss, Hans Robert (1977). *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*. München: Fink.

Midding, Gerhard (2005). 'Hartgesottene Fürsorge', in *Freitag 12* (25 March 2005) (accessed 5 January 2008).

Schnädelbach, Herbert (1999). *Hegel zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius.

Seesslen, Georg (1995). *Western. Geschichte und Mythologie des Westernfilms*. Marburg: Schueren.

Slotkin, Richard (1998). *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Steiner, George (2001). *Grammatik der Schöpfung*. München/Wien: Hanser.