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Saint Clint's *Hereafter* Meets Timothy Carey's *Greatest Sinner*

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Don't answer it, Matt! It's God!

Details:

Hereafter

Directed by Clint Eastwood

Warner Bros.

Opens October 15

Agog: The World of Timothy Carey

October 15 through 25

Anthology Film Archives

Is America's last cowboy icon prospecting for more Oscar gold? Taking for his map an original

screenplay by British docu-dramatist Peter Morgan (*The Queen*, *Frost/Nixon*), Eastwood rides a sleepy burro deep into Iñárritu territory. Multiple story lines cross international borders to mix personal tragedy with post-9/11 existential terror: *Hereafter* is a mawkish *mondo mistico*, obvious, schematic, and sometimes subtitled.

As a movie, *Hereafter* peaks five minutes in as a frugally staged tsunami arrives on a bright blue morning to trash some paradisiacal Pacific island beach. What follows is a lugubrious tale of wonderment: An attractive French telejournalist (Cécile de France) parses her near-death experience in Hawaii, while a painfully cute 12-year-old British schoolboy (George McLaren) with a substance-abusing mum suffers a terrible loss, and a depressed, Dickens-loving psychic named George (Matt Damon, always game) wrestles with his occult power to

read minds and channel the dead.

"It's not a gift, it's a curse!" cries bashful George, around the time he fails to predict his layoff from the anonymous job he's taken in a Bay Area factory. That his mercenary big brother keeps insisting that George's ESP is more like a meal ticket is a hilarious, inadvertent comment on the folks hoping that grief and loss will sell tickets to a supernatural heartwarmer like *Hereafter*. Among them, executive producer Steven Spielberg who, according to the press notes, read Morgan's script and exclaimed, "I know exactly who should direct this—it's Clint." (The good news furnished by the notes is that Eastwood's follow-up project is more congenial—namely, a biopic of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover.)

Hereafter is not just a stretch for Eastwood, it's a contortion. The irrationality of the premise is exceeded only by the strategic irrationalities of the plot. Clumsily self-inoculating against the charge of spiritual baloney-ism, the movie introduces a formerly atheist scientist (Marthe Keller) amassing anecdotal proof of life after death. "The evidence is irrefutable," she assures the telejournalist while



hinting darkly that an ill-defined religious conspiracy is preventing the happy news from reaching the rest of the planet. Meanwhile, the telejournalist's snooty French publisher (a product of the Enlightenment, presumably) wants nothing to do with the potentially bestselling memoir she's written about her personal glimpse of eternity. He imperiously tells her to send the manuscript to America (and I know exactly who should direct . . .).

Eastwood may have gone over to the dim side, but, when it comes to the bottom line, no amount of bogus hocus-pocus is going to entirely cloud his mind. *Hereafter* ascetically eschews the expensive f/x that made *The Lovely Bones* so appalling. Heaven is presented as a bit of murky shadow play, George's visions are momentary montage zaps, angels are signified by a simple, if portentous, pan upward into the sky. *Hereafter* may be New Age bushwa, but it's also old-fashioned movie-making. Indeed, despite the plot's dependence on someone Googling "what happens when you die," Eastwood revels in anachronism by staging the dramatic climax at the London Book Fair.

Action bathed in soothing, solemnly banal music (composed by the director), *Hereafter* dawdles along for 129 minutes, stopping frequently to smell the roses and wonder, where do all the lonely people come from? Midway through, George enrolls in an Italian cooking course where he's partnered with the class's prettiest member (Bryce Dallas Howard). He may not get lucky, but we do. Howard's desperate flirtation with the camera provides a welcome distraction. Her giggling, eye-batting, bracingly terrible performance breathes life into an otherwise moribund film.

"A bad actor is rich, unique, idiosyncratic, revealing of himself," Jack Smith once wrote. Timothy Agolia Carey (1929–1994), subject of a 10-day retrospective at Anthology Film Archives, was surely all of those things, but he was not exactly a bad actor—this Brooklyn-born, apparently self-taught Method man was more like a way of life.

A scary presence onscreen, Carey was an imposing palooka prone to upstaging fellow cast members by artfully flinging his body around the set. He had a shambling, sleepy-eyed stance and the grinning volatility of a barroom brawler, playing tough guys, lunatics, and chortling combinations of the two—although his career role was as a whimpering coward. As a performer, Carey was unafraid to make a spectacle of himself. His earliest claim to fame was as a member of Lee Marvin's motorcycle gang in *The Wild One* (1953), spontaneously opening a beer bottle and surprising Marlon Brando, the grand master of on-camera improvisation, with a shower of suds.

However pissed, Brando did employ Carey again in his sole directorial effort, *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961)—or maybe it was Stanley Kubrick, the project's original director. Kubrick had used Carey twice before to tremendous effect—as the racetrack hit man in *The Killing* (1956), enthusiastically primed to assassinate a horse and, even more memorably, as one of the condemned soldiers in *Paths of Glory* (1957). Unfairly sentenced to death, Carey steals the movie with his smirky drawl, inappropriate giggles, cud-chewing line reading, and sobbing cri de coeur: "I don't wanna die!!!!!!" This embodiment of pure, hysterical fear made Carey an underground hero and, seven years later, inspired Esquire to run his picture opposite John Wayne's as a paradigm of the so-called New Sentimentality: "A minor character actor who manages to excite us in a personal way is a real celebrity."

Carey's subsequent movie career was spotty but choice—a sadistic Union sergeant in Phil Karlson's *A Time for Killing* (1967), a version of himself in Bob Rafelson's Monkees musical *Head* (1968), and a fastidious, Marx-quoting mobster in John Cassavetes's *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976). Anthology is showing these, as well as Carey's two most alarming vehicles, the indie cheapster *Bayou* (1957), re-released five years later as *Poor White Trash* with an added rape scene (starring guess-who),

and *The World's Greatest Sinner* (1962), a movie that Carey wrote, directed, and produced over a three-year period—while appearing in nearly every shot.

The high point of *Poor White Trash* is Carey's Cajun love dance, knees knocking and mouth agape. This agonized mambo is reprised in *The World's Greatest Sinner*, in which Carey's bored insurance salesman becomes first a leather-lunged, immortality-promising street preacher, then a frantic rock-'n'-roller who bills himself as God, and, finally, dignified with a paste-on goatee and campaigning against death, the presidential candidate of the Eternal Man Party. Blasphemy aside, his sins include sex with female followers from 14 to 83, gratuitously smacking his little daughter and stabbing a sacramental wafer to see if it bleeds.

Fabulously scored by then unknown 20-year-old Frank Zappa, *The World's Greatest Sinner* is far from incompetent filmmaking—it's as idiotic, crafty, and unpredictable as Carey's performance. Placing his satire at the intersection of politics, celebrity, and the media, *Sinner* is thematically the missing link between *A Face in the Crowd* and *Wild in the Streets*. It's also a skid-row psychodrama to double-bill with Ed Wood's plea for transvestite acceptance *Glen or Glenda* or Spencer Williams's stark morality play *The Blood of Jesus*. Perhaps someday, someone will do Clint Eastwood a favor and show *Sinner* with *Hereafter*.