

Although *Bird* was Clint Eastwood's chance to present Charlie Parker as more than the sum of the myths about him, some curious details in the film prevent the audience from getting too close to the musician. Cinematographic effects often literally hide the characters. Smoke curls atmospherically in clubs and homes, and several scenes at the Parkers' abode are too dark for viewers to discern either of their faces. Even the spotlight on the stage in Paris makes Bird untouchable, increasing his visibility but bathing him in an almost celestial aura as he savors his commercial triumph. Although these effects create many mysterious and alluring shots, they only increase the viewer's distance from the subject.

As the flashbacks before Parker's death make clear, another recurrence in the film is the laughter of black characters. Dizzy Gillespie's mugging to the audience after a Parker performance does reflect his hammy stage persona, but for Parker's milder colleague in Paris and the sour Buster Franklin, the chuckling seems unnaturally long and hearty. Disconcertingly, such scenes evoke the happy Negro stereotype, which becomes especially notable when one considers the frequently impassive visage of Chan, the main white character. When Parker arrives home mouthing opera music and greets his children, the contrast between his playfulness and Chan's gravity is striking, as if the couple embodies theater's comedy and tragedy masks. Other white females, including Chan's mother and the "jazz baroness," are equally serene in expression. It seems as if Eastwood wanted to reverse the dehumanization of blacks by making them seem vivacious next to pokerfaced whites. If this was the director's intention, then as Stanley Crouch suggests in his article, "Bird Land," Eastwood went too far in regard to the saxophone-playing Parker, who was more monolithic before an audience than portrayed in the film. Meanwhile, the very thing that distinguished Bird from his peers—his original, virtuoso playing—usually sounds more muffled than the rhythm section or other soloists. Despite its ambitious structure and entertaining twists, *Bird* fails to reach the essence of the man it tries to celebrate, whether in its visuals, narrative, direction, or soundtrack.