Joe Street, *Dirty Harry’s America: Clint Eastwood, Harry Callahan, and the Conservative Backlash*

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4. Clint Eastwood occupies a strange place in American culture: an iconic film actor made famous for his portrayal of westerners and violent men; an acclaimed director whose films have received praise from around the world for their sensitive treatment of various issues; a vocal supporter of the Republican party in an industry that often leans to the left; a beloved Bill Hader impersonation. He is all that and much more. Nevertheless, what seems to stand out in his long career – and remarkable endurance - is his performance of Harry Callahan in the film series *Dirty Harry*. This violent anti-hero determined the trajectory of his career, and left a mark on popular culture. And this is very much the theme of this intriguing publication by Joe Street, *Dirty Harry’s America: Clint Eastwood, Harry Callahan, and the Conservative Backlash*. In his book, Street succeeds in producing a thorough study of the films not just as entertainment, but also as cultural texts with political significance. In his monograph he tackles a number of different topics, ranging from the origins of the film series, to the way the different installments communicated the rising conservative politics of their times, to how they defined Eastwood’s star persona, and their long reach in popular culture. Street’s study is remarkable in that it takes these B movies, their message and their impact, seriously as items of reflection; providing clear and informed explanations throughout. He accomplishes this by balancing between considerations about cinema itself, popular culture, American life, politics and ideologies, and the arc that seems to connect them all. This is a book that deserves to be read not just by Dirty Harry or Eastwood fans and scholars, but anyone interested in the ways in which films reflect and express the politics of their time, leaving a lasting influence on our collective psyche.
Of course, one may wonder what the point is of such a detailed exploration of Dirty Harry. After all these were generic films “not designed to be major contributions to American culture or great expressions of Eastwood’s creativity but as a simple means to generate profits for Warner Brothers” (201). Street’s argument is that the particular time the films emerged is important in understanding them: the first film of the series was made in 1972, a time when Hollywood was swiftly returning to genre filmmaking leaving behind the radical experimentation of the late 1960s – a decade that saw revolutionary films such as Bonnie and Clyde (1967), Point Blank (1967), Midnight Cowboy (1969), and MASH (1970). For Street, however, this return to genre is also exemplary of a certain conservative backlash that carried a longing for a return to traditional identities and “simpler” social times. And Harry Callahan became the poster boy of this backlash. This means for Street that the film is deeply ideological, expressing social fears and anxieties. And as the series continued in the 80s it became the paradigm of this rise of the New Right. In a way, this is the central tenant of the book: film shapes and is shaped by social and cultural reality, and a film can very much determine how people will decode values hence becoming a mass symbol. Cinema, Street argues, “encourages us to see the world through its own prism, creating a shared representation or simulacrum of the reality around us” (8). In his book, he consistently returns to this idea, effectively demonstrating it through his pertinent observations and insights.

The book is neatly divided in six chapters, each tackling the Dirty Harry series from a unique perspective. In the first chapter, Street takes us before the release of the first Dirty Harry film reviewing Eastwood’s career until then. Eastwood has indeed an interesting biography as he was signed by Universal Studios in 1954 due to his good looks, but proved a disappointment in most his auditions. Success finally came with the CBS western Rawhide where he played the character of “Rowdy” Yates. Although the character started as mere eye-candy, it grew in depth as the story progressed. This successful run led to his casting in Sergio Leone’s Italian western trilogy where Eastwood would shine as the infamous Man with no Name. A Fistful of Dollars (1964), For a Few Dollars More (1965) and The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966) became international hits, cementing Eastwood’s persona on the global stage as the quintessential westerner; an anti-hero standing up for justice in an amoral world. In many ways, Eastwood became John Wayne’s natural heir to this very particular throne. As Life magazine described him, “an old-fashioned man, basically, who holds to his own old-fashioned western ethic… Eastwood feels most comfortable in the all-male world of beers, admiring women and uncomplicated language” (26). The bridge between his on and off screen persona thus established.

As Eastwood’s career took off his most important collaboration seemed to be with Don Siegel. With Siegel, Eastwood made several films, such as Coogan’s Bluff (1968), Two Mules for Sister Sara (1970) and The Beguiled (1971). In these, his star persona would be successfully transported from the west to modern urban settings, while maintaining the same type of rough traits. So when Warner Brothers took Dirty Harry to Eastwood (after it was turned down by Frank Sinatra, Paul Newman, and John Wayne), Eastwood accepted with two conditions: Siegel would direct, and the action would take place in San Francisco – Eastwood’s birth place.

In chapters two and three, perhaps the most challenging and intriguing parts of this book, Street turns his attention both to the context of the first film and the film itself. Specifically, Street studies the film by noting both the cinematic but also socio-political context within which it emerged. In terms of film history, the early 70s constitute an
important moment as the Hays Code is freshly concluded and replaced by the modernized Motion Picture Production Code marking a noticeable relaxation of depictions of sex and violence. Street’s discussion here is historically rich as he details the major shifts and issues surrounding this code. More importantly, he connects this to the specific genre of the Police Film that Dirty Harry rightly belongs in, and how the representations of the detective were allowed to shift, giving us seminal films such as Bullitt (1968). The more difficult part of this discussion, however, is in the way Street places Dirty Harry firmly within the political context of the time. He notes in this the 1960s urban crisis of civil unrest and violent crime. It was within that climate that Ronald Reagan would begin his conservative run, criticizing big government and student protests. As Street notes, Reagan’s rhetoric heavily emphasized the collapse of law and order and the decay of morality, a sentiment that would be echoed in the narrative of Dirty Harry. In many ways Callahan is the cinematic manifestation of a large part of society’s concern and pessimism with the turbulence of the time and the need for someone “to do something about it.”

Adding to this, Street highlights the importance of the setting, explaining how San Francisco became the centre of a political struggle between liberals and conservatives. San Francisco was a liberal hub of civil rights and youth and gay movements, and of course hippy culture. What the locals saw was “this orgy of long hair, sex, drugs, anger, violence, rock and roll, and general misbehaviour to be an apocalyptic threat that was fully enmeshed in the urban crisis” (59). It was this sense exactly that would make Callahan such a necessary hero. Even more, any story about San Francisco of the time would be incomplete without reference to the infamous Zodiac Killer whose murder spree remains notorious and unsolved. It seemed natural that the main villain of the film (Scorpio) would be an expression of this fear: “Scorpio is thus not merely a fictional construct but a reflection of the SFPD’s failure to apprehend a serial murderer and an articulation of very real fears about criminals in the San Francisco region” (63-4). In this line of thinking, Street’s argument is reinforced. The film is not simply a generic text of mass entertainment; in its encoding it holds the main anxieties of a changing society and a raging cultural war. It is unsurprising then that it can, and should, be read as a reflection of its time; a cultural text born out of ideology.

The film analysis that Street conducts notes both narrative and visual details that help him establish this line of thinking. He notes how the narrative sets up Callahan as a traditionally white, male, heterosexual, anti-hero, who belongs to the working class and has a particular distaste for authority. He has little disposable income, is overworked, grumpy, and irritable. But still, he seems much more endearing than those surrounding him: corrupt officials, bureaucrats and elites, college boys and criminals, who lack his common sense attitude towards life and crime. For Street this is a good summary of how Reagan voters saw themselves, especially as contrasted to the liberal counterculture. Indeed, in the film we see Callahan on the streets, how he responds to crime and criminals, the nature of the law, his bravery in the midst of action, his racial and gender politics, but mostly how he is dead set on righting the wrongs that the liberal administration is responsible for. For Street, all these mean that “Callahan...[is]...a metaphor for a form of traditional American conservatism which was gaining traction in the 1970s” (106). The film certainly lives up to the political and historical reality of its time placing it firmly in the conservative side, the audience prompted to sympathize with Callahan’s common sense attitude and distaste for counterculture. It is unsurprising that it was a huge hit with San Francisco police officers.
The antagonist of the film is also ideologically significant as Scorpio brings together homosexuality, criminality and mental issues rendering this representation highly problematic. Although Street acknowledges this, he understands Scorpio somewhat differently as he argues that the film suggests a troubled backstory in which Scorpio seems to be one of the dislocated men who fell victim to intense urbanization and San Francisco liberal city politics. Irrespectively of this, as the film progresses, the relationship between protagonist and antagonist will deteriorate into western anomy, as in the final confrontation Callahan removes his badge, thus becoming “a true vigilante, bound by no rule of law and free to defend San Francisco using any means he sees fit” (87). Again, Street seems to be right in his thinking; the film articulates the perceived malaise of its time, becoming popular because it resonated.

Although the four sequels grossed more than the original they are largely dismissed both critically and creatively. But they are a continuation of the narrative, offering grounds for fruitful analysis. Street analyses the sequels carefully, noting their narrative patterns and how each deals with racial, political, and gender issues in a superficial manner always subject to genre conventions. Street’s analysis of gender politics is especially interesting, as he explores Callahan’s sexuality and masculinity, and how he relates to female characters. In *The Enforcer* (1976), for example, Callahan gets an “affirmative-action” partner who presents herself as a strong woman but the film will frame her gender negatively. Callahan himself doubts her abilities: she gets sick during an autopsy; she displays ignorance about weapons; and her major skill seems to be paperwork and research. At the end, she will of course die so that Callahan can avenge her death. Her last words being “Get him,” a symbol of her full submission to Callahan’s value system.

Street is also very interested in how the sequels deal with Callahan himself. He notices that, “[t]he sequels tend to deemphasize Callahan’s physical vulnerability, instead amplifying the first film’s suggestion that he is a superhero (or, more specifically, an Übermensch)” (127). He continues to be this lone hero bound by duty to protect his city, driven by his triumphant white heterosexual dominance, always with a joke or a quip to offer at the expense of the criminal or the bureaucrat. His conservative ideology will remain intact through all his adventures, only recognizing his own conception of law and justice. His greater strength remains his “common sense” in how to deal with crime and criminals. He stands as a conservative hero in the midst of liberalism, a seemingly oppressed minority despite the ideological domination of conservative ideology by the conclusion of the series in 1988. The status of his minority is further demonstrated in what seems to be employment discrimination. As Street comments, Callahan in all these films fails to rise in the department beyond the status of detective. This allows for the film to suggest that while liberals sit behind desks giving orders and adding paperwork, conservatives are out in the streets doing the real work. Callahan’s effectiveness will never be recognized by the liberal elites although they will certainly reap the benefits.

Street argues that with the conclusion of the Dirty Harry series Eastwood’s subsequent film career can be split in two. On the one hand, the anti-authoritarian action hero (*Gauntlet* (1977), *The Rookie* (1990)), and on the other, the aging man with a tale of redemption (*In the Line of Fire* (1993), *Unforgiven* (1992)). The latter strand softened his image considerably, as for example in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *Gran Torino* (2008), and *The Mule* (2018), although in all these one can recognize traces of the grumpy, growling, antagonistic, sexist, racist, misanthropic Callahan. But his film career is not the only thing that interests Street, as he carefully examines his political career as well. This
manifests itself in two different ways in Street’s analysis. First, Eastwood’s own political run as the mayor of Cornel, California in 1986 where he used various Callahan references in his campaign (and “Go Ahead, Make me Mayor” bumper stickers) gaining 72% of the vote. And his 2012 appearance in the Republican National Convention where the audience chanted “Make my day” as he proceeded to have a bizarre conversation with an empty chair that was meant to stand in for Barack Obama – brilliantly satirized by Bill Hader in SNL.

Second, Street turns the discussion to the political influence the Dirty Harry series had. Most importantly, he finds echoes of Callahan’s persona in the way Reagan positioned himself, “Like Callahan, Reagan might tread the same floors as the bureaucrats in the same institution, but his aims, methods, and beliefs are inimical to those of the insiders” (158) as he stands for liberty, justice, individualism, straight forward answers, and a never ending fight with the democrat’s bureaucracy. Reagan’s approach to crime is also important here as to him the problem was a moral one that called for a moral solution and a sense of Truth. The law was seen as an extension of this seemingly axiomatic moral code, which included a gendered notion: the men were there to protect the women and the elderly. Street, however, is not arguing that Callahan was actually an influence or that Reagan was just a political copy of a film character; what he sees, rather, is this expression of a common ethos. Which again, for him, is significant as it showcases how the Dirty Harry films were expressive of a social and political reality and as such their ideological nature needs to be explicated.

In concluding his book Street turns to popular culture itself noting Callahan’s afterlife there: “Callahan has become a mythological character a vital feature of the American popular culture landscape” (200). After all, there are video games like the 1990 Nintendo Dirty Harry, and twelve novels that continue the story although away from San Francisco, and spoofs like the television series Sledge Hammer! and The Simpsons character McGarnagle, and some on line fan fiction mostly of Callahan taking on one more job. Of all these instances, the one that stands out as most culturally important is Frank Miller’s Sin City series of neo-noir comics. Miller, profoundly disappointed by the conclusion of the Dirty Harry series in The Dead Pool, decided to tell his own version. Especially the character of Detective John Hartigan seems to be a stand-in for Callahan: incorruptible, tough and tall, ravaged by years of hard work, vulnerable and scarred, sexually charismatic, wearing a trench coat and carrying a .44 Magnum. For Street he is Dirty Harry made of granite.

As the action genre took off in the 1970s coupled with the decline in popularity of the western, it was inevitable that some of the westerner’s traits would carry on to the action hero. The westerner and the action hero are seemingly made of the same stuff, heroes meant to fight for justice that represent this axiomatic morality that seems tied to American individualism and heroism. In many ways Eastwood was there at the right time in the right place, his persona capable of carrying all these signifiers and allowing him to make this move successfully: from the west to modern cities. In this part of film history, the place of the Dirty Harry series, and especially of the character of Callahan, is indisputable. But what Street manages to show is that this role and these films should be considered as more than that. For him “Callahan represents American strength, honor, chivalry, and righteousness while also revealing its bloodlust, lack of respect for the rule book, and fondness for guns. Harry Callahan is thus as much an American archetype as George Washington, Uncle Sam, Rosie the Riveter, and apple pie” (201). An emblem of
Republican conservatism as this emerged in the 1960s claiming to defend American values. Its study is thus seminal if one wishes to understand the politics of the time and the rising conservative ideology, traces of which can be found even in contemporary politics, let alone filmic representations.

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