Vigilante Justice and the American Way:

Dirty Harry and Media Representation

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We can directly trace the way *Dirty Harry* responds to major social and cultural trends of the early 1970s, and how this is reflected in the promotional campaign for the film. There is a gross dichotomy between the intended mass reception, as interpreted through the posters and trailer, and the critical reception, as seen through the reviews. The posters are advertising for an audience that on the most part does not include critics, but rather is a small portion of the movie-going population. *Dirty Harry* is presented as both conventional (generic) and reactionary in reviews - critics see it alternately as a ‘typical’ action flick and something much more dangerous. We can consider *Dirty Harry* as Hollywood’s response to the changing look and morals of popular film; as an attempt to return in some sense to older styles and conventions, but in a new and reinterpreted context. An increasing tendency towards liberalism in film and in the culture at large is reacted to in the *Dirty Harry* series in a violent and reactionary manner, as can be seen in both promotional items and in the film’s reception by critics. The audience the film is appealing to is the same as the traditional intended audience for Classic Hollywood Cinema: the straight white male.

The posters released each portray the same image - one of an independent and powerful protagonist, a ‘loose cannon,’ but in slightly different ways. *Dirty Harry*, as it is presented in the mass media, is all about image. The protagonist has a mythical status, representing a figure often seen in conventional American narrative. The importance of the ‘idea’ of Dirty Harry is becomes clearer in its appearance in modern-day pop culture. But here the temporal shift to a 1970s setting also affects the presentation of that myth. Dirty Harry is a figure that rose out of the early 70s for a reason - reacting to several trends at once. The figure can primarily be seen as a reaction to 1960s liberalism and the quickly changing positioning of the straight white male in the 1970s. *Dirty Harry* is reacting to the shifting gender roles and sexuality of the 1970s and to popular understanding of the hippies of the 1960s. Anti-institutionalism plays a large role in the construction of Dirty Harry. Trust in American institutions was weakened somewhat both by the devastating accounts of
US military action in Vietnam, and scandals within the government and corporations. This in large part explains the vigilante aspect of Dirty Harry, who can neither trust and obey a liberal society nor the institutions now formed within it. The film is overtly targeting those straight white males at a moment in which they feel most emasculated and powerless in pop culture representations at large.

Clint Eastwood’s representation as a star is also interesting to consider in the context of Dirty Harry’s publicity. The film is obviously a star vehicle - in the trailer the only actor listed is Eastwood, and he has (as the film’s namesake) a unique power over the narrative as a whole. The emphasis is on Dirty Harry as an individual, and thus on Eastwood as a singular figure. Very few others are credited in the reviews - although one commends the villain’s acting skills. Otherwise they all focus on both Eastwood’s performance and on the presentation of Dirty Harry in the film. Interesting to consider in this light is the rumor that the title role was originally intended for Frank Sinatra, and offered to both John Wayne and Paul Newman before Eastwood.\(^1\) This supports the theory that a certain acting type is needed more than an actual name - a type played countless times by both Newman and Wayne. This is shifted somewhat after the film’s release and popularity - Dirty Harry as a household name is associated with Clint Eastwood. This explains, at least partially, the glut of sequels to the original Dirty Harry, all starring Eastwood in the same role.

Both posters A and B present a veritable assault on the viewer, aligning identification with Harry and attacking that identification simultaneously. In Poster B, a poster for both the films Dirty Harry and Magnum Force, the Dirty Harry character is represented in duplicate.\(^2\) A mirror image of the two splits the poster in half, and on each side stands a Harry yielding a Magnum .44. Harry points the gun directly at the camera, attacking the camera, and by association the audience/viewer. Through the use of

\(^1\) according to www.imdb.com
perspective the end of the gun is significantly larger than anything else in the image - the barrel itself appears as large as Harry’s head. In Poster A this assault is clearest. In the poster Harry fills the right half of the image, and is pointing his gun towards the camera. In breaking the fourth wall he assaults the viewer with his weapon/persona. He not only points the gun at the viewer, as he does in Poster B, he also breaks through this barrier, blasting a hole through the mode of his representation. By recognizing the camera and reacting violently (shooting his gun), Harry’s vigilante persona is reinforced. It is the appeal of this vigilante persona that is aimed at intended audiences of fed-up white men, feeling incapable and impotent in the changing world of the 70s.

The taglines used in the posters present Dirty Harry as both feral and effective, entirely in a positive, sympathetic light. Only two of the posters have taglines, and they are extremely similar. The third importantly uses the image alone to convey its message - one that is not altogether very complex. The tagline of one poster reads: “Detective Harry Callahan. He doesn’t break murder cases. He smashes them.” (Poster A) This evokes both the destructive force of Dirty Harry (especially since the type itself is framed within the hole left from Harry’s gunfire) and his efficacy. He not only does the job, but he does it better than would the police on their own (who would only break the case). The tagline of the other poster reads: “Detective Harry Callahan. You don’t assign him to murder cases... You just turn him loose.” (Poster C) This presents Harry as possessing an animalistic quality and as the ultimate vigilante.

All of the posters have very little color, but the color that is present is important to consider. In posters A and C, shades of red, orange, and yellow are used to highlight Dirty Harry in an otherwise black and white environment. This not only makes him stand out, but the hue of colors associates Dirty Harry with violence and rage. This sets up, early on,

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2 Poster B - http://posters.imdb.com/posters/d/dirtyharrymagforce1.jpg
3 Poster A - http://www.filmsite.org/posters/dirt2.gif
4 Poster C - http://www.filmsite.org/posters/dirt.gif
viewers assumptions about the protagonist and the film’s connection with extreme violence on the whole.

The trailer also emphasizes the violence of Dirty Harry’s character (and thus, the film, hoping to draw larger numbers to the box office). The opening line of the trailer is, “This is about a movie about a couple of killers: Harry Callahan and a homicidal maniac. The one with the badge is Harry.” Here the god-like narrator directly links the villain and Dirty Harry. This can be connected to the stereotype of Hollywood’s general assumption that violence sells, here proven accurate. The trailer continuously links the two main characters - Dirty Harry and Scorpio, the villain. The opening shots of the trailer are very dark, difficult to discern, but they are point of view shots, alternately of Scorpio’s point of view (when the screen is masked in a circle as if looking through his scope, and again when showing cross-hairs trained on a girl in a swimming pool) and of Dirty Harry’s (chasing after Scorpio, running in the night.).

The other aspect of Dirty Harry’s character - his hate for institutions and rules, is also presented in the trailer. Half of the trailer is a relatively static scene from the film in which Harry is congratulated for his work on a bank robbery. In the scene the boss thanks him for a job well done, and Harry replies that he would prefer a raise to words of acknowledgment, a sharp retort to his superior. Then the captain informs him he has to work with a partner he does not want. Harry protests, but is unable to change things. The boss replies “now that’s straight from the 5th floor, you understand me?” This scene is important to see in juxtaposition to the rapid cutting of the scenes that precede and follow it. Here Dirty Harry is powerless to a greater force - a liberal police force too caught up in rules to be effective.

The combination of these two styles in the sequence - a rapidly cut action montage and a frustrating and slow-paced interaction with “the Man,” are both directed at this ideal

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viewer. This viewer, as envisioned by marketers, is both attracted to hyper-violent action and frustrated about his inability to take action himself. This links inaction with impotency and violent action with virility in a way that is explored continuously in the film itself (but is hinted at in the presentation of the only woman in the film scantily clad and under the villain’s cross-hairs).

The reviews for Dirty Harry are all relatively similar in that they do not present the film in a positive light. But there is a significant difference between them - the review by Pauline Kael is more radically negative than the others, which present a more mainstream and ambiguous reading of the film.

Both Milne and Greenspun commend the film while remaining wary of its politics. Milne commends Eastwood’s acting and Siegel’s direction, calling it his “best in years.” Milne’s article is most remarkable for its inability to make any final conclusions about the film - it is as if he knows that its politics are questionable, yet is not quite ready to say so. Instead he just mentions the film’s endorsement of Dirty Harry’s actions, without really criticizing that endorsement. In many ways this review furthers the Dirty Harry persona and popularizes it, without commending the politics that lay beneath. Greenspun is significantly more critical than Milne - he deals less with the character of Dirty Harry and more with the film on the whole - and its anti-liberal politics. He marks it as a ‘failure’, noting it “fails...on so many levels that it cannot even succeed (as I think it wants to succeed) as a study in perversely complimentary, psychoses.” But for his criticism, he prefaces the article with his interpretation of the film as a parody - through which permitting himself to not take it seriously. The lack of reaction or controversy in these two articles lead me to believe that the authors were, in some ways, reacting to the same trends as the filmmakers themselves.

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6 The use of the masculine pronoun is intentional here.
They saw a place for a violent, reactionary cinema, and recognized its necessity, if not its worth, in a society with rapidly changing ideas about class, gender, and race.

In considering the contrast between intended popular consumption of the film and critical reception, Pauline Kael’s article draws this dichotomy quite well. She considers the role the Dirty Harry persona comically - calling him “six feet four of lean, tough saint, blue-eyed and shaggy-haired, with a rugged, creased, careworn face that occasionally breaks into a mischief-filled Shirley MacLaine grin.”\(^9\) She describes the film with similar sarcasm - She sets up the film’s presentation of the story and character - taking into account its intended audience and political positioning. But she reacts to this political positioning strongly, unlike the authors of the other articles. She reacts most strongly because she sees the film as effective portraying its ideas. “If you go along with the movie - and it’s hard to resist, because the most skillful suspense techniques are used on very primitive emotional levels - you have but one desire: to see the maniac get it so it hurts...it is an almost perfect piece of propaganda for para-legal police power.”\(^10\) But she concludes the film is not only effective, it is dangerous and immoral. “Dirty Harry is obviously just a genre movie, but this action genre has always had a fascist potential, and it has finally surfaced.”\(^11\) Kael’s review is aligned with the newer discourses on culture, gender and race coming out of the 1970s. In many ways it is this voice against which the film is fighting.

Interesting to consider as well is the role the city plays in Dirty Harry, as considered in Greenspun’s review of the film. This can be seen in the trailer and the posters as well. The city is a necessary part of Dirty Harry’s persona - without urban decay, he would have little to fight. In the trailer this is seen in the presentation of the city as a space of surveillance. Most of the shots are from rooftops, looking down into an urban space.

Greenspun commends director Don Siegel for his sense of the city in the film, and its use as

\(^10\) Kael 387.
\(^11\) Kael 388.
a "theater for action."\textsuperscript{12} The city is also present in posters A and C, and is presented as the active force affecting Dirty Harry. In each of the posters, there is a smaller, black and white image near the bottom of the frame. The image is of Dirty Harry standing in attack mode with the city and a recognizable San Francisco in the background. In both posters the image of Dirty Harry is pointing his gun almost precisely on the spot on the poster with the image of San Francisco - it becomes obvious that he is going to fight uniquely urban crimes. The use of San Francisco in particular is also important - as a city associated with the changes of the 1960s more fundamentally than any other. Kael points out the importance of the fact that an expert from Berkeley is used to restrain Dirty Harry from taking action - "...Berkeley has push-button appeal as the red center of bleeding-heart liberalism: it has replaced Harvard as the joke butt and unifying hatred of reactionaries."\textsuperscript{13} Here again liberal rules are presented as having an effect on Dirty Harry, keeping him from performing, from defending his version of America.

The mainstream representations of the film \textit{Dirty Harry} are quite different from the critical reception - although both note the power and efficacy of a vigilante character like Dirty Harry. In the posters and the trailer, this character is emblematized and revered - a new hero for the 1970s, reacting to the rise of liberalism and perceived weakening of laws and government institutions. The positioning of the character in the reviews is quite a bit more complicated and negative, although most popular criticisms fall one step short of calling the film powerful propaganda. Kael's much stronger reaction to the film can be seen as part of a greater reaction to these reactionary action films of the 1970s, connected directly to the rise of film journals and critical writing on film in general in the US. Although some reviews are stronger than others, all of them, as well as the publicity for \textit{Dirty Harry} at the time of its release, present blatantly the film's positioning as directed towards the straight white male suffering a new form of alienation from his culture at large.

\textsuperscript{12} Greenspun, 20.