

Silent Majority, Violent Majority: The Counter-Revolution in 70s Cinema

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Abstract

«There is one question, Inspector Callahan: Why do they call you ‘Dirty Harry’?» Harry, it is explained, «...Hates everybody: Limeys, Micks, Hebes, Fat Degos, Niggers, Honkies, Chinks...especially Spics». Don Siegel’s *Dirty Harry* (1971), famously labeled «fascist» by prominent film critic Pauline Kael, nonetheless represented something new and unique—the ‘Silent Majority’s’ entry into liberal New Hollywood, a veritable counter-reformation to the new social movements having sprung up in the late Sixties and early Seventies. Far from the traditional American Right, however, and distinctly un-Fascist (in as much as the term means more than a simple epithet), these films acted to unite traditional European philosophy and revolutionary thought with organic conservative American tendencies, resulting in hybrid films which challenged the new social movements, while working within the medium of liberal New American Cinema. The article will address three themes from the era: violence and race in the city, revenge against ‘liberated women’, and fear and loathing of homosexuality. In each instance, using primary evidence from films and critical reviews from the Seventies and the present era, in addition to American and European theorists, the article will show how the counter-revolution in Seventies cinema failed to expunge the ‘revolutionary spirit’ of the era. Rather, the Silent Majority’s visions of visual violence and reactionary values became part and parcel of the new liberated culture of the ‘Me Decade’, forever bounding the conservative celluloid revolt to the new cinematic culture.

Keywords

Ideology and artistic production, crisis of ideology, mutation of aesthetic form

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1. Introduction

President Bill Clinton’s note to the American public of receiving «two for the price of one», with the addition of Hillary at his side undoubtedly enraged both men and women on the Right in the early Nineties. Similarly, President Obama’s suggestion that struggling rural Americans in economically depressed parts of Pennsylvania «get bitter [and] cling to guns and religion» (Summers), didn’t help warm the hearts of conservatives two decades later. Finally, the latter commander-in-chief’s coming out as the first President in favor of gay marriage only further stoked the division between Red and Blue, proving that the culture wars of the late Sixties and Seventies had yet to lose steam.

And yet while gays, guns, and women’s rights continued to play in the world of politics, the issues found less resonance in popular culture, particularly film. A success like *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore’s take on firearms and violence in America, might still earn millions (largely on the reputation and persona of the director and not the mes-

sage), but film, particularly in the face of new media like YouTube or internet streaming, played less of a role in defining the culture in as much as reacting to it, particularly if the said production would likely pull a profit. The movie theater, once a denizen of the American avant-garde, is now transformed into Chrystal Cathedral megaplexes with their mass consumer gimmicks (IMAX, 3-D) and corporate tie-ins.

Yet, while the almighty dollar certainly resonated in corporate Hollywood forty years earlier, film served not only as one piece of the cultural pie but rather the visual arbiter and gauge of American political life. Thus, the success of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 marked one of the many shifts not only in movie culture but in American culture at large. At the same time, a young film critic named Pauline Kael's spirited defense of the film against the 'old guard', epitomized by Bosley Crowther, then writer and critic for more than twenty years at *The New York Times*, also seemed to signal the victory of this 'New Hollywood' against the backdrop of the nascent anti-war and student movements, both modeled to some extent on the victories of the Civil Rights era.¹

Less than three years later, though, the Vietnam War continuing to rage, the rise of Black Power, and the continuing marginalization of women in the workplace or gays in any space, for that matter, the New American Cinema would find itself in the Seventies less part and parcel of a liberal utopian revolution but rather the canvas upon which ideologies of all stripes might enter the American consciousness. Among these included elements of Nixon's 'silent majority', the bane of the then fragmenting New Left. Nonetheless, the entrance of conservatism into liberal Hollywood would prove ephemeral. Like the Yuan Mongols subsumed by the 'cultured' civilization of China, reactionary America found in the trappings of freewheeling Hollywood the only vehicle by which to articulate itself, becoming in turn a mutated breed of cinematic expression.

2. *Dirty Harry* and the Urban Revenge Film

Where one might initially cite that the times «were [again] a-changing» in Hollywood remains debatable. Don Siegel's nightmarish vision of early-Seventies urban life in *Dirty Harry*, however, with its renegade detective fighting an impotent bureaucracy in search of a killer rattled enough critics in the new liberal Hollywood culture to deem the film the ideological threat, par excellence (Kael, 418-21).² Unlike the aggressive *Bonnie and Clyde* or the self-examination of *The Graduate*, *Dirty Harry* could not carry the banner for a new generation of rebellious youth. Moreover, in contrast to *The Wild Bunch*, the film addressed neither the myths of American history nor, like *Midnight Cowboy*, offered the comfort of companionship in the face of the cruel city. Rather, the gritty drama seemed to borrow from the new limits offered by the aforementioned films—unrestrained violence, the generation gap, and America's growing urban problem and turned them on their heads. *Dirty Harry*, therefore, appeared an unwelcomed outcast in the New Hollywood, arriving on screen only a year after Nixon's bombing of Cambodia and the subsequent Kent State shootings.

¹ Tino Balio gives a fine account of this war of the generations among film critics in *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens*

² *Dirty Harry*. Screenplay by Harry J. Fink, R. M. Fink, and Dean Riesner, Lalo Schiffrin. Dir. Don Siegel. Perf. Clint Eastwood, Harry Guardino, Reni Santoni, Andrew Robinson, and John Larch. Burbank, Calif.: Warner Home Video, 2001.

Siegel's film, however, along with the slew of urban renegade films that followed (including three more *Dirty Harry* sequels in the Seventies and the notorious *Death Wish*) proved less of a right-wing putsch in the face of a leftist celluloid assault, than a hodge-podge of traditional trans-Atlantic conservatism, nineteenth century European continental philosophy, and shifting liberal ideas in the late Sixties put through the ringer of the Hollywood genre film. Additionally, while its action sequences and the braggadocio of its main protagonist hinted at the exaggerated masculinity of Eighties actions stars, the film's thematic complexity and New Hollywood aesthetic placed it wholly among its countercultural partners on the big screen in the decade from whence it came. In this respect, *Dirty Harry* was the Seventies—a bouillabaisse of new ideas and images, both a product and response to the rapid changes then taking place in the American cultural landscape.

2.1 Flowers in Your Hair and a Gun in Your Holster

If the Twenties to Fifties epitomized the golden age of the American city, the Seventies certainly served as its nadir. «Ford to City: Drop Dead», famously read the cover of the *Daily News*, the federal government abandoning America's cultural metropolis to bankruptcy under the mayoralty of Abe Beame—one hidebound, powerless government executive passing the buck to another. And despite the complex reasons for the general urban unraveling having started more than two decades earlier, the New American Cinema often corroborated the view of the American urban jungle as degenerate, festering, and, corrupt. «Where are you from», asked Dennis Hopper to a hitchhiking hippy, in *Easy Rider*. «The city», he responds, «...doesn't matter what city. They're all alike». While the words rang true for many a viewer, however, one urban conglomeration shone like a counterculture beacon, a literal, modern-day «city on a hill», as the Sixties gave way to the Seventies. Here Don Siegel chose to unleash Inspector Callahan on an unsuspecting movie-going public and newly ascendant liberal Hollywood establishment, transforming the city by the bay into a maelstrom of darkness and danger where «the threat of violence could thorn the atmosphere...almost anywhere» (Wolcott, 194).

In many ways, the San Francisco of *Dirty Harry* fits in logically with the proto-Fascist European critics of American society in the early twentieth century. Georges Duhamel's anxieties over America and its cities as «insect societies» in which the individual disappeared into the «animal kingdom», fit neatly in with Siegel's aesthetics (Mathy, 56, 58). Despite the beautiful opening vistas at the beginning and towards the end of the film, much of the movie, in fact, takes place at night, where hoodlums, freaks, and sociopaths mix with the «oversexed masses» (Mathy, 59). Whether it the Chico and Callahan riding together in the car, eyeing with disdain the decadence on the sidewalk (a common New Hollywood trope used most artfully in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* among a slew of other Seventies films), the young gay man in the park—«My friends call me Alice...and I'll do anything for a dare»—or the slowly developing Seventies cliché of the requisite topless bar scene (no doubt inspired by films like *The Graduate* and *Point Blank*), Siegel bends San Francisco into the West Coast's version of New York, more Plato's Retreat than the paladium of free love.

With an eye towards American history, though, Siegel rightly focuses on the subtle transformation San Francisco underwent as the U.S. said goodbye to the Sixties, be it Manson's arrival in Haight-Ashbury during 1967's Summer of Love, the tragedy at Altamont in 1969, or the real Zodiac killer's reign of terror (upon which Siegel based the

film). Going farther back, in fact, one might even cite Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis as inspiration for shifting the gritty cop drama away from the dense alleys of the East to the cultural mecca of the West. Citing Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Turner writes, that «[they] reveal clearly his conception that democracy should have an agricultural basis [...] and that [...] city life [was] dangerous to the purity of the body politic. Simplicity and economy in government, the right of revolution, the freedom of the individual [...] these are all parts of the platform of political principles to which he gave his adhesion» (Turner, 250).

Placing the man of principle in the bastardized version of Jefferson's West, then, could only unleash a Harry Callahan, for no more West could the honorable pioneer go. In this manner San Francisco, and only San Francisco, could serve as the setting for *Dirty Harry*. New York might —and did— «drop dead» in the Seventies, but if the Bay Area fell, so would go America, too.

2.2 *Race, Nihilism, and the Neoconservative*

J. Hoberman has rightly pointed out the connection between Vietnam and the aforementioned streets of San Francisco in *Dirty Harry* (the television series of the same name not accidentally following the release of the film that very year) and the brutal violence coexisting simultaneously against African-Americans in Southeast Asia and in the urban ghettos back home (Hoberman, 318-20). And certainly, one need not overlook the often cruel, stereotypical depictions of blacks in the film, most notably the infamous robbery scene in which the intelligent 'white' fools and humiliates the 'archetypical Coon', the latter grinning that his «gun» proved bigger and stronger than that of the would-be robber. On a deeper level, though, Siegel's vision, rather than depicting the coming of Helter Skelter, reveals the complex ideologies swirling about in the Seventies. «Race matters» in *Dirty Harry*, but often in interesting and unsuspected ways.³

Given San Francisco's complex melting pot (particularly the presence of one of the largest Asian-American communities in the United States), *Dirty Harry* can never work simply as a battle of black vs. white. Rather, Harry Callahan appears more nihilist than racist—Harry, it is explained, «[h]ates everybody: Limeys, Micks, Hebes, Fat Degos, Niggers, Honkies, Chinks...especially Spics». In this sense, like Simmel's «stranger» Callahan, having experienced personal tragedy—not at the hands any particular race, but rather a drunk driver—walks the streets «as an organic member of the group», while «being outside it and confronting it» (Simmel, 402-3). And like Sartre's existentialist who looks to the object as a substitute for the burden of absolute freedom, Callahan's .44 Magnum revolver becomes more than his tool of justice, but his very «being».⁴

Thus, Callahan's views on race remain secondary to his own existential sense of *Dasein*.⁵ Ironically, when blacks and other minorities do appear on screen, they work to fill Harry's empty soul with his will to exist. These include police comradery (the black medic who fixes Harry's leg— «We patrol boys, we gotta stick together») or the African-American mother of one of Scorpio's victims whose lamentation, «His name was Charlie Russell...he was only 10 years old», clearly pushes Callahan to pursue the victim come hell or high-water. While some might disregard these 'positive images' as an indication of

³ See West.

⁴ See Sartre.

⁵ See Heidegger.

deeper racism in *Dirty Harry* (the former character, as an example, being more ‘blue’ than ‘black’), one cannot indict Callahan as a fascist (if by fascism, Siegel’s critics included the racially motivated ideological component, though one senses it directed at the film more as a generic epithet).⁶

Dirty Harry, in fact, cheered on by many a minority audience, invoked more the ire of New Hollywood whites, primarily in pointing out the failures at the heart of the Johnson’s Great Society. The damning effects of the Moynihan Report, in revealing the continued struggles of the Black family despite the Sixties’ ‘War on Poverty’ or the failure of urban renewal in ameliorating such deprivations seemed to indicate the grand white liberal tent with regard to race in the late Sixties had splintered.⁷ Hence, the rise of the neoconservatives, who challenged both the failed policies of late Sixties idealists in addition to the disruption and violence by predominately white revolutionaries who appeared more often than not to speak for blacks rather than act as a partner in their struggles for equality.

Callahan, while explicitly apolitical and clearly no cheerleader of the ‘consensus rather than conflict’ approach, evokes, at least in spirit, the common sense and ideological flexibility of the early neoconservative theorists. While the policemen in the beginning crowd around the pool where Scorpio has murdered his first victim, taking interviews and gathering other useless minutia for the case, only Callahan has the intuition to scope out other roof-tops, leading him to the notorious note and shell casings. More visceral, however, involves the classic scene when the paleoliberal District Attorney deridingly asks how Callahan knows Scorpio will kill again (the system having now protected the psychopath), for which Eastwood, after a brief pause, responds with existential detachment, «...Cause he likes it». A collective «duh» by the audience, but more importantly, a symbolic buckshot to the whole Caucasian establishment and their crumbling liberal morals based more on ideology than reality.

Hence, while feigning a hatred of minorities, *Dirty Harry* and its protagonist speaks most against the ‘white system’ which seeks to nominally protect blacks and other minorities, but leaves them poor, invisible, and at the whim of any thug, pimp, or—in the case of Scorpio—serial killer. From the top down, in fact, the whole white establishment appears hidebound, useless, a relic of the post-New Deal orders desperately in need of «professionalization of reform».⁸ From the timid Mayor, who can’t even say the word ‘nigger’ when reading the serial killer’s letter, to the police chief, an impotent, good-for-nothing who dresses the part while hunkered down in headquarters like Gamelin at Vincennes, the top brass contrasts with Harry, the ‘grunt’, shipped off time and again to protect America, like so many Blacks and Puerto Ricans fighting in Vietnam.

In sum, *Dirty Harry* never directs its antipathy at blacks or minorities in particular, but at people and society at large, particularly those who buckle under the pressure of absurdity in the concrete jungle. These include the ‘jumper’, (note the Peter Fonda shades from *Easy Rider*) the whole wave-the-white-flag bureaucracy, or the killer himself. Only Harry, alone, unfeeling, and mostly ‘pissed’, carries the weight of the decade of doubt on

⁶ As Robert Stam and Louise Spence write, «The insistence on ‘positive images’, finally obscures the fact that ‘nice’ images might at times be as pernicious as overtly degrading one» (Spence and Stam, 752). Note Roger Ebert’s blunt insistence that, «The movie’s moral position is fascist. No doubt about it» (Ebert).

⁷ See Jacobs.

⁸ See Moynihan.

his shoulders, imbued with new the hybrid social and political ideologies which in the Seventies, in contrast to a decade later, remained fluid and yet to take the hard-Right, often unapologetically racist form found in the Reagan years.

2.3 *Inspector Callahan: Overman, Everyman*

One finds a third, most important element to *Dirty Harry's* political and moral self-contradictions, one which clearly unhinges the film from a strict adherence to 'Silent Majority' principles, rather tying it into the greater social and moral spectrum that characterized the New American Cinema. It is the strange amalgam of 'don't tread on me' but tread on those who dare to obstruct one's will—the desire and comfort for «traditional values» with the complete rejection of the Judeo-Christian moral compass—the need to bring one's «actions under constant self-control» while «[reviving] the cruel wild beast» (Weber, 176). In essence, *Dirty Harry* is a both the American everyman and Nietzsche's Overman, a Frankenstein creature that only the liberal culture of New Hollywood in the Seventies could have created.

While not explicit, many features of *Dirty Harry* do tap into a United States of the past, full of «hard-working, church-going people, farmers, shopkeepers, people with an inbred respect for authority, and an unyielding belief in the American dream».⁹ Nostalgia for the 'good old days' and the omnipresence of Americana in the film further indicate a reactionary bent in the movie and a need to 'turn back the clock'. On the other hand, the scenes which invoke this pre-'68 netherworld unleash profoundly discomfiting moments in which the symbols of the past and the American common man become stages for demonstrations of «severity, violence, slavery, danger in the street [...] everything terrible, tyrannical, predatory, and serpentine in man» (Nietzsche, 59). Callahan, for instance, sits down for a hot dog, that most American of foods while the robbery scene unfolds, chewing nonchalantly as he lays waste to a whole intersection in addition to human beings. Similarly, Callahan's torturing of Scorpio takes place in a football field where local American teams traditionally battle each other as equals in front of adoring fans, albeit under the strict adherence to a complex code of rules. Here, however, Siegel presents the twisted inverse as Callahan, in full control, shoots his target and proceeds to step on his wound as the serial killer's plaintive cries echo as the camera pulls back to reveal the eerie image of an empty stadium. With the field lights ablaze, however, the 'game' continues into an indefinite overtime, namely, Callahan's time, where rules mean nothing more than an expression of the individual will.

If *Dirty Harry's* use of food and football illustrate the ambiguities of the American Overman's relationship to his own country's pillars of popular culture, the movie presents an even more complex portrayal of the very foundation of traditional American society—the family. Callahan's sexual peccadillos contrast sharply with the «homeward bound» male of the immediate postwar decades.¹⁰ Harry, his libido most likely satiated before the death of his wife, now resorts to peeping through windows at the unfolding sexual revolution which, like many men of his era, most likely induced mixed feelings (one again thinks of *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle both repulsed and attracted to the new public and private displays of sexuality, found on the street and in the porno theater, re-

⁹ *Nixon*. Dir. Elizabeth Deane, David Espar, and Marilyn H. Mellowes. Alexandria, Va: PBS Video, 1990.

¹⁰ See May.

spectively). Hence, his voyeurism, which on the second occasion, puts him in the ironic position of a ‘creep’ he would likely bust or even Scorpio, himself, gazing through the target of his silencer at the bikini-clad beauty targeted for death at the beginning of the film. But here stands Harry, the closest the viewer sees him to the common American male, not participating, but merely ‘taking a peek’. On the other hand, of course, stands the obvious *Übermensch*, in whom «The degree and nature of [...] man’s sensuality extends to the highest altitudes of his spirit» (Nietzsche, 75), and in Callahan, as the adage goes, the *force is strong*. Aside from his gun, the obvious star of the film, Harry’s other *phalli*—the knife he tapes around his ankle or even his leg, itself—become forces of the extreme male sexual instinct, instruments of war against Scorpio in the very «struggle to the death for pure prestige» (Fukuyama, 152).

In conclusion, after decades of pillory for its supposed political messages by film critics and academics alike (Clint Eastwood’s, performance, albeit blustering, at the 2012 Republican Convention only fueling the notion that the man and his roles have fused into one), *Dirty Harry* remains in the eyes of most a ‘Silent Majority’ expression happily indulging in an orgy of violence, no questions asked. As previously noted, however, Siegel’s masterpiece is full of ideological, social, and political contradictions—in other words, a film in constant motion full of bold expressionism in addition to doubt, pessimism, and even brief moments of Stoic self-examination (one thinks of Callahan watching the extraction of Mary Anne Deacon’s corpse from a hole as a symbol of America’s failed, frustrated, and twisted path which it would endure throughout the decade). Such aesthetic expressions would end, however, with the twilight of American auteurism, sealing *Dirty Harry* into a time capsule from which the film historian, allowed a critical distance and unhinged from the ossified ideological positions of 1971, might offer new critical analysis.

3. Liberation and *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*

A young American woman gazes longingly at her television set on New Year’s Eve, her expression torn between the desire for the traditional Irish-Catholic lifestyle into which she was born and the blossoming sexual revolution. The voice on the tube, while delivered in typical monotone fashion, nonetheless hints at the failure of the latter choice—«1975 has just become history. It was only five years ago that 10,000 women marched for liberation. They carried books, signs, and babies. They called for free abortion, equal education, equal job and pay opportunities, and sexual freedom...this was to be the decade of the dames».

Though subtle, the anonymous male newscaster has indicated to the viewer a sense of failure with regard to the women’s moment, for «this was» belies what could have been. Moreover, proclaiming the death of women’s rights at the beginning of the bicentennial year (foreshadowing the other death that will take place at the end of the film) carries symbolic weight, for America, represented in concrete form in Theresa, Diane Keaton’s character in 1977’s *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, has gone astray.¹¹ If only she could be coaxed back into the fold, the world of Phyllis Schlafly, apple pie, and motherhood. Yes, Viet-

¹¹ *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. Screenplay by Richard Brooks, based on the novel by Judith Rossner. Dir. Richard Brooks. Perf. Diane Keaton, Tuesday Weld, William Atherton. Hollywood, Calif: Paramount Pictures, 1997. VHS.

nam had been lost and the leader of the Silent Majority disgraced, but need the 'liberal establishment' take the down the family, too?

Surely audiences and critics came away from such a celluloid downer pondering this very question, no matter what their political bent. In its depiction of a 'fallen woman' from a good home to prostitution, drugs, and an early death, Richard Brooks' film seemed to signal a clarion call to America, its women in particular, to avoid the pitfalls of the «culture of narcissism». ¹² And yet *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* never quite feels wholly conservative. With its graphic sex and violence and New Hollywood aesthetic, Brooks' movie appears more indicative of 'Me Decade' malaise and ideological malleability than a right-wing counter-reformation piece against the 'liberated woman'.

3.1 *Dick and Jane*

Film critic John Simon of *The National Review*, hardly a bastion of liberal culture, captured the feeling that something was amiss in this movie's 'conservative' morality tale, writing, «What the film could have taken over from the novel and developed further is the quiet sordidness of a grey, pretty-bourgeois, sin- and sickness-haunted childhood falling prey, as it grows into womanhood, to megalopolitan amorality». Instead, he continues, «the film is manipulative and finally, exploitative, in short, ugly» (Simon, 1443-4). On the other end of the political spectrum, Joan Mellen found in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* something similarly repulsive that confirmed New Hollywood's misogyny and hostility towards the women's movement. ¹³ Both critics, in turn, took umbrage at the film's failure to deliver their respective piece of the political pie, but also at the depiction on the screen of the titular character. Film theorist Laura Mulvey's influential essay «Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema», of course, aptly defines the essence of their discomfort, namely the film's use and abuse of «scopophilia»—«taking other people as objects [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze» (Mulvey, 713).

Mulvey's notion of the «active male» viewer and the «passive female» finds definitive expression in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. Like the anonymous stranger next to Theresa on the subway reading a copy of *Hustler* in the opening sequence, the film's protagonist actively invites the viewer to watch her sexual dalliances. Whereas one might dismiss this simply as the natural psychological progression of the character's stunted Freudian unconscious («They put me on a bed in a living room where everyone could watch for one whole year and two days»), the scenes themselves play out like any of the soft-core porn films showing at the decadent street theaters Theresa walks by on her way to the bar. There is hackneyed pornographic dialogue («confession might be good for the soul, but bad for sex») and even cliché 'porno music' while she makes it with the Prof, but most importantly, one sees the XXX-aesthetic: the close-up of Theresa's face during orgasm and the omnipresence of the man's point of view as he, like the viewer, gazes upon the protagonist writhing in ecstasy (by the end of the film, a troubling mix of pain and pleasure). How to focus on morality during these scenes remains the crux of the issue as the film slips from 'conservative' to its own brand of 'porno-chic'. ¹⁴

¹² See Lasch.

¹³ See Mellen.

¹⁴ 1977 falling in between the release of Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* (1973) and Jim Clark's *Debbie Does Dallas* (1978).

Similarly, the scenes of Theresa's 'other life' as a teacher of deaf children, while meant to emphasize her inner benevolence, likewise reek of sexuality. After reaching the heights of sensual pleasure with Tony after their second bar encounter, the camera quickly cuts to Theresa-by-day, blowing on two large balloons, ostensibly a lesson to teach her students to mouth difficult words but clearly a reference what the viewer had not seen though may have wished he had, further engendering the male viewer's scopophilic fantasies. Following this, one finds Theresa recounting a story from the class in the teacher's lounge («...and then there's this perfect little gentleman who comes out with the word 'fuck'!...»). The frank discussion of sex amongst these guardians of handicapped youth, while exposing standard water-cooler talk, certainly breaks the mold of how traditionalists would have envisioned the young, female teacher—essentially, a «silly...big [child]» (Shopenhauer, 57). Theresa, though, even bespectacled, becomes a curious creature of sexual complexity on whom the male viewer, like post-coital Tony («A teacher! I don't believe it! I don't believe it!»), can project his own sordid schoolboy dreams.

3.2 *The Aesthetics of 'Malaise'*

Fantasy, in fact, moves beyond the domain of the viewer's relationship in watching the film, but also into the very construction of the movie, itself. With its use of popular music, jump-cutting, short takes, and imaginary sequences, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* offers a stark reevaluation of women's liberation while borrowing from the filmic language of liberal New Hollywood. The movie's message, in turn, becomes subsumed by a more powerful aesthetic, rendering much of the conservative moral positioning completely mute.

From its very opening when the camera quickly zooms in on a taxi's headlights, Brooks presents the viewer with a still collection of black and white shots in the vein of Chris Marker's *La jetée* to convey the tone of the film—bleak, dark, and dreary. In effect, the transition from a brightness that blinds the eyes to the crisp, overdeveloped shots conveys the sensation of a 'hit' from a powerful drug. Just what type of substance, however, remains purposely ambiguous, as the music in the background shifts from 'uppers' like Donna Summer's «Try Me, I Know We Can Make It» and Thelma Houston's «Don't Leave Me This Way», to more somber fare including Bill Withers' «She's Lonely; She Wants To» and Marlena Shaw's «Don't Ask Until Tomorrow». Nonetheless, the fluctuations leave the viewer in complete harmony with both sight and sound—namely, disoriented and 'strung out'. Like the empty feeling invoked by Benjamin Braddock listlessly moving along to «The Sounds of Silence» ten years before, Brooks uses the music of the counterculture (the gay disco subculture as anathema to the silent majority as the folk-rock of the hippies) to express «the crisis of confidence [...] the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of unity of purpose for [America]» (Carter).

The crisis of confidence, of course, finds literal aesthetic expression in Brooks' use, (particularly in the first half-hour) of jump-cuts and dream sequences which render the plot on initial viewing intentionally confusing and vague. One first sees Theresa, for example, dutifully sitting in Professor Engle's English Composition class as he reads aloud her very personal essay. After the other students exit, the two embrace with romantic lust, before the camera cuts back to Theresa—a dream. Or is it? In fact, the two have been making love, confirmed in the following scene, when for the first time, we enter her subconscious, revealing sharp black and white stills of childhood illness and suffe-

ring. On three occasions in particular, Brooks actually allows the viewer a glimpse into Theresa's unconscious, as she figure-skates her way to true love and an Olympic gold medal, and following Engle's severing their relationship, Theresa's imagined suicide attempt. Later in the film Theresa even imagines cops raiding her apartment for illicit drugs, her double-life splashed across the evening news. Like Joe Buck's disturbing flashbacks in *Midnight Cowboy*, the harrowing Russian roulette scenes in *The Deer Hunter*, or even the satanic rape sequence from *Rosemary's Baby*, the audience receives no warning of these «special modes of reality» (Kracauer, 262-272). They merely arrive, leaving the viewer to piece them together before awaking from the dream.

With its combination of conservative moral positioning filtered through the post-code era, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* offers up contradictory messages. On one hand, the film laments «the pursuit of sexual pleasure as an end to itself» yet entices the male viewer, in particular, to such a strong visual spectacle of sex that we feel compelled to mime the words of Theresa's sister in the movie—«Last night I woke up in a room full of naked asses» (Lasch, 189). Similarly, the depiction of illicit substances as a vehicle to numb oneself and hurt others (in both the emotional and physical sense) finds ironic expression in the very aesthetics of the film which mimic drug-induced highs and lows. In this regard, Brooks' visual adaptation mirrors other films of the New Hollywood era, despite depicting the social revolution gone wrong.

4. *Cruising* and the Coda for an Era

In Ronald Reagan's infamous 1984 television commercial for his reelection campaign, a soft-spoken narrator proclaims «It's Morning in America Again», as a fishing boat moves serenely across the waters before the backdrop of a city at dawn, the sky bathed in purple hues. He continues, «This afternoon, 6,500 young men and women will be married», as the frame captures the bride's face, full of glowing heterosexual optimism.¹⁵ Four years previously, New Hollywood wunderkind William Friedkin released *Cruising*, which ironically opened up with the same image, albeit dawn looking far more depressing, a pallid blue, the color of death (foreshadowing the discovery of a human arm in the Hudson River in the same scene).¹⁶ As for what follows in the film, 'normative' sexual imagery would be an understatement, the director pummeling the viewer's eyes with homosexual licking, sucking, nipple-biting, and fist-fucking.

«Are you better off than you were four years ago?» the Teflon President asked once again to the nation's millions. A resounding «yes», responded a majority of Americans (Reagan having amassed the highest total of electoral votes ever received by a Presidential candidate).¹⁷ Many in the film industry would have concurred. With the age of the auteur having come to an ignominious end (think *Heaven's Gate*) and the rise of the blockbuster in full force, Friedkin's 'genre-stretching' detective story seemed a celluloid fos-

¹⁵ «Ronald Reagan It's Morning in America 1984». *YouTube*. 2012. Web. Nov. 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fa8Qupc4PnQ>.

¹⁶ *Cruising*. Dir. Friedkin. Perf. Al Pacino, Paul Sorvino, Karen Allen. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.

¹⁷ «Electoral College Vote, 1984». Office of the Federal Register: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. NARA. <http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/scores.html#1984>. Web. Nov. 2013.

sil best left to the dustbin of film history.¹⁸ With thirty-two years hindsight, however, one can perceive *Cruising* as more than just a box-office failure or the cause of controversy. Instead the movie serves as one of the final films in which latent silent majority values continued to interact and mix with liberal Hollywood aesthetics and themes in strange and curious ways.

4.1 *The Ambiguous Body*

Throughout the Seventies, the American *corpus* was a site of conflict, be it the 'body count' in Vietnam, the belief in 'my body, my choice', officially codified in *Roe vs. Wade*, or even the simple idea of bodies in unison, marching together for a common cause. But as with both Richard Nixon during Watergate and Gerald Ford following Nixon's pardon, the Executive body in the form of Jimmy Carter seemed hopelessly ineffectual, not only in the face of domestic stagflation, but with the Iranian hostage crisis, where the very bodies of American diplomats and servicemen remained pawns in the hands of Islamic revolutionaries. *Cruising*, not surprisingly, released the same year of embassy takeover, projected American frustration during the 'age of limits' on to the one body for which the law had yet to guarantee protection—the homosexual. Yet, William Friedkin's work, while appearing critical, even fearful of a particular segment of the pre-AIDS gay community, never completely squares with the views of the unabashed opponents of homosexuality.

Lest one forgot, after all, such opposition and hatred was tangible and real. In light of their earlier defeats on Civil Rights and women's liberation conservatives of the silent majority ilk in the late-Seventies were not unabashed in carrying the mantle of homophobia. Anita Bryant, most notoriously, went so far as to accuse gays of recruiting children to the homosexual lifestyle. At the heart of the matter though was the belief that being gay represented the body out of control, directed only towards self-gratification rather than Biblically-mandated procreation. *Cruising*, even with its original disclaimer, did little to ease this stigma in the mind of the neutral viewer. D. A. Miller, for example, writes of the dance scenes in particular, «Where bodies, helpfully chloroformed with bandanas soaked in ethyl chloride anticipate all manner of exposure, touching, grouping» (Miller, 71). Driving this writing and grinding, of course, in one particular club hangs Old Glory, colored black and white, while Iranians a world away burned the red, white and blue.

Without a doubt, though, the inversion of American symbols and the American body in tandem moved beyond the more lurid scenes in the film. The very story of *Cruising* involves Al Pacino literally disrobing his body of the uniform of American 'law and order' (slacks, shirt, and badge)—the mantra of the right wing in the Seventies—for what Susan Sontag appropriately identified as certain elements of «fascist aesthetics» (Sontag, 73-105). Yet the sadomasochistic gear of the homosexual in *Cruising* cannot wholly belong to the Seventies trans-Atlantic fad for Nazi regalia. Both Skip Lee, the initial suspect, and the killer, himself, for example, sport SS caps with the American eagle and

¹⁸ Peter Biskind gives a splendid account of the waning years of New Hollywood in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock-'n'-Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998. Print.; Ibarra, Peter R. «Dislocating Moral Order and Social Identity in Cinematic Space: The Inverted Detective Figure in 'Tightrope' and 'Cruising'». *The Sociological Quarterly* 39.3 (1998): 409-433. Print.

shield while conversely Sonny, the unidentified black man who nominally works for law enforcement during the interrogation scene, wears nothing but a cowboy hat and jockstrap. Moreover, one of the homosexual covens which Al Pacino enters even requires the attendee to dress the part of a cop. When it comes to American symbols, Friedkin clearly toys with the viewer, leaving him confused in identifying who and what is 'hetero' and 'homo'.

This is not to suggest, however, counterpoints which clearly delineate the 'homosexual body-as sick' and the 'heterosexual body-as healthy' message which find a platform in the movie. In the second scene with the coroner, the doctor reports the killer is «shooting blanks...his semen tested positively but it doesn't have any sperm in it...maybe he had some physical aberration or malfunction, could be his testes were infected, or maybe he had a vasectomy». Al Pacino's character meanwhile—his heterosexuality in question throughout the film—similarly fits the profile of a body incapable of 'normal' performance with a woman. In the first scene lying naked in bed with his wife, their hands touch but their eyes never make contact. Freud, of course, would characterize Steve Burns as fearful of Nancy's genitalia, reminding him of his own castration complex and potential turn towards homosexuality (Freud, 708-13). Such fears are corroborated in a second interaction following his journey into the 'heavy leather' scene where one finds an empty, even fearful expression on Pacino's face as his wife slides down his body to perform fellatio. One cannot escape the sense, therefore, that *Cruising* equates to some extent the homosexual body with a psychosomatic illness, rectified only by projected violence as spoken by the words of the killer after he murders—«you made me do that».

4.2 *Straightening It All Out*

While Al Pacino spends a large portion of the film in the darkened dungeons of homosexual neuroticism, the ending indicates on one hand a 'moral ambiguity' so indicative of Seventies American cinema.¹⁹ In his final stare at the camera, Pacino leaves the viewer unsure of both his sexual leanings and his complicity in the murder of his former neighbor, Ted Bailey. On the other hand, through the process of shaving, the viewer takes some comfort that Pacino has symbolically returned to the comforts of heterosexuality and will stay that way.

On a much larger level, however, *Cruising's* ending serves as the coda for the end of New Hollywood, itself. In the film industry, the auteur was out and the blockbuster was in. As for gay culture, the devastating effects of AIDS would sweep away not only the more extreme sexually promiscuous homosexual S & M leather scene (as portrayed in a real or exaggerated manner in the film) but the age of sexual promiscuity in general of both gay and straight individuals. Similarly, the cultural shift from the remnants of the silent majority struggling in the age of liberal self-questioning to the Moral Majority helping sweep Reagan and the conservative revolution into office helped guarantee homosexuality was off the table as an issue of importance. The chasm, in turn, between gay and straight grew wider, symbolized by the impotent Carter trudging back to the peanut farm while a man ten years his age 'freed the hostages', only to take a bullet one year later—*and survive*.

In this way, Reagan imbued the strength and swagger of Pacino—no, not the Steve Burns variety, encapsulated as the character was into the former decade, but Tony Mon-

¹⁹ See Kirshner.

tana, himself. In three single years the actor had gone from a role of considerable complexity in a film epitomizing the mélange of conservatism through a liberal lens into an over-the-top caricature of a Cuban gangster, embodying the values of the new ruthless, Right-wing—«In this country you gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money you get the power». One quote of lesser note, though, ‘straightens out’ much of the transformation between *Cruising* and *Scarface*:

Immigration Officer #1: What about homosexuality, Tony? You like men, huh? You like to dress up like a woman?

Tony Montana: What the fuck is wrong with this guy, man? He kidding me or what?

Immigration Officer #2: Just answer the questions, Tony!

Tony Montana: Okay. No. Okay? Fuck no!

5. Conclusion

In his essay «On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life», Nietzsche writes, «...Existence is only an uninterrupted having-been, thing which lives by denying itself, consuming itself and contradicting itself» (*Advantage*, 8) Film, «The idea and wish for the world re-created in its own image» (Cavell, 39) thus only functions when planets collide, opposites attract, and ideologies cross-contaminate in the petri dish of living cultures. The silent majority, an unwelcome host to the liberal cinematic body of the Seventies dreamt only of nostalgia, but «mediated by a decade-long war in Vietnam» (Killen, 164), instead arrived on screen guns blazing, a hodgepodge of philosophies combining ‘traditional’ American conservatism with counter-Enlightenment ideas of varying purpose and utility. ‘Coming home’ to the culture of the New American Cinema, however, involved accommodating right-wing ideals to the realities of the new aesthetics and the freedom that ironically allowed for such messages in the first place. The result was a golden age of cinema, filled with incongruity and ambiguity. With the end of the Seventies though came shifts in film and political culture as aesthetic elasticity gave way to messages of unabashed simplicity. American film would never again attain the heights reached during a decade when no social or cultural ideology monopolized the filmic discourse.

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