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Every Which Way But Left

Books reviewed:

Paul Smith.
*Clint Eastwood: A
Cultural Production.*
Minneapolis:
University of
Minnesota Press,
1993.

In recent years there has been a reaction in film criticism against the perceived excesses of structuralist and psychoanalytic film theories, which argue that Hollywood film functions primarily as an ideological apparatus to legitimate dominant institutions and values such as individualism, capitalism, patriarchy and racism. Some recent criticism tends, as Paul Smith puts it, to "celebrate an almost limitless freedom of interpretation, use, and pleasure on the part of audiences when faced with a text" (p. xv). Smith's book resists this sort of "ludic" postmodernism. In this respect, it can be grouped with other ideology critiques, such as Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's *Seeing Films Politically*, Michael Ryan's and Douglas Kellner's *Camera Politica*, and Susan Jeffords' *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, all of which treat recent Hollywood cinema as a relatively determinate ideological apparatus functioning in the specific historical context of the Reagan-Bush era.

Jeffords and Smith each focus on particular public figures—Reagan and Eastwood—not as individual agents, but as cultural icons around which a conservative reaction to the liberal social gains of the 1960s has been articulated and mobilized. "For me," Jeffords explains,

the roles Reagan played—as president, as national spokesperson, as military commander-in-chief, as father figure, as hero as emblem of a "national fantasy"—and the narratives in which they figure are what is important. For it is how those roles were understood by the millions of people who elected him president and "most admired man of the year" that matters, particularly to the extent that many of those people were the same who con-

tributed their dollars to making the *Rambo* and *Lethal Weapon* sequences, *Batman ...* and *Top Gun ...* among the top-grossing films of the decade. (p. 15)

Similarly, Paul Smith is concerned not with Eastwood as an individual agent, but with

Eastwood and his films as they are constantly taken up in television, magazines, newspapers, everyday conversation, even in classrooms, and thence constitute part of what we might call the ongoing conversations that our cultures hold with themselves. Those conversations help construct the meanings by which and in which people—"we" as the multifarious agents in those cultures—actually live. (p. xli)

One thing that sets Smith's effort apart from other similarly oriented criticism is the range of discourses that he attempts to connect around the "meaning" of Clint Eastwood. In addition to analyzing the formal qualities and critiquing the ideological effects of Eastwood's films, Smith looks at the geopolitical implications of the off-shore production of spaghetti westerns, the "small-business" values vaunted in Eastwood's film production company, the ways in which womens' magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* reacted to his break-up with long-time companion Sondra Locke and the palimony suit that followed, journalistic treatment of his political career as mayor of Carmel, California, etc. In these multiple contexts, Smith maps a trajectory of ideological possibilities between those activated by the figure of Eastwood as the "no name" bounty hunter of Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns and those associated with the Hollywood "auteur" that he has subsequently become.

During the 1960s, as the unconventional protagonist of Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns, Clint Eastwood helped to redefine an entire Hollywood genre. Smith reads Eastwood's subsequent career as a process of ongoing negotiation between the terms of this intervention and a gradual recuperation of the Hollywood traditions that the spaghetti westerns challenged. Leone's trilogy—*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966)—showed Americans a West unlike anything they had seen before. In Leone's films, Mexican characters and Hispanic culture are prominently represented in towns with adobe buildings in stark desert landscapes. Traditional westerns, by contrast, featured mainly Anglo-American characters in towns with wood frame buildings and wide main streets on the prairies and Great Plains. The underlying dramatic conflict in traditional westerns is framed as a battle between good and evil forces in Anglo-American society (e.g. the interests of small homesteaders as opposed to wealthy ranchers), or, occasionally, as a battle between "civilized" Anglo-American culture and "savage" Native American culture. Leone's inclusion of Hispanic culture focused the movie-going public's attention on an aspect of the West that had been completely ignored by Hollywood.

Traditional western heroes were rugged individualists who would ride into a town, bravely and violently rescue distressed settlers by fighting against outlaws or "Indians," and then ride off into the sunset. The "no-

name" anti-hero Eastwood plays in the spaghetti westerns violates some of these conventions while simultaneously pushing others to their logical extremes. Like traditional western heroes, No Name uses violence to establish authority. But he is amoral, using violence solely for personal gain. His character is "individualistic" to the point of being radically antisocial. Leone exaggerates the individualism, violence and stoic courage commonly found in western heroes in ways that implicitly reveal the superficial moralism and underlying immorality of the West as depicted by Hollywood.

Though Leone's spaghetti westerns are not overtly political films, his inclusion of Hispanic culture in the spaghetti westerns can be seen as a radical gesture. And the films implicitly acknowledge tensions of race, ethnicity and class that were usually avoided by Hollywood before the 1960s; for instance, in *A Fistful of Dollars*, the plot depicts the injustice of the oppressive quasifeudalistic social hierarchy of the southwestern frontier. The anti-hero character played by Eastwood has a definite populist appeal. A loner, always outnumbered, he usually outsmarts his adversaries. Eastwood's bounty hunter succeeds by virtue of his wit and skill (e.g., his clever use of explosives to confuse and distract his enemies, his calculated psychological manipulation of other characters, and his spectacular shooting accuracy) rather than through simple physical courage and moral integrity.

On another level, Leone's trilogy is marked by the political tensions of post-World War II American cultural neocolonialism. Both the generic changes worked on the western by Leone and the cold reception for his films by American critics were to some extent the result of the movies having been produced outside of Hollywood, shot on location in Spain, by an Italian director and with a mainly Italian production staff. In view of this geographical and economic displacement, Smith suggests,

the particular kinds of operation done on the American western by the spaghetti might best be grasped as the response—or, more strongly, the riposte—to colonizing models on the part of what can effectively be called a subaltern culture (that is, a culture whose structures and formations on many important levels are provoked by and forged in the shadow of a more dominant culture). ... simply as non-American products that garner worldwide audiences and make radical adjustments to a crucial American genre, they already thereby stand as a kind of challenge to the American film industry. (p. 4)

While Leone stops short of an overtly political message in his films, Smith argues that "by cracking the generic codes that had hitherto existed almost unquestioned in Hollywood products," Leone paved the way for other directors of spaghetti westerns to develop an explicit critique of U.S. imperialism. In the later spaghetti westerns, Smith notes, directors use the "peon/gringo" conflict of the Hispanic Southwest as an allegorical framework to comment on the relationship between the U.S. and the "Third World" (p. 14).

Smith analyzes Eastwood's extensions and transformations of his spaghetti western experience at the level of his work as a producer and director of films as well as his work as an actor. There are at least three interrelated areas in which Leone's "subaltern" resistance to Hollywood conventions

have shaped Eastwood's subsequent career: production values and strategies, the cultural diageitic of the western, and the cinematic representation of masculinity. Smith argues that the domination of the Italian film industry by American concerns after World War II, combined with a faltering Hollywood studio system in the early 1960s, set up a situation in which the relative economy and efficiency of the Italian film industry had a quasipolitical importance—at least at the level of cultural politics. Leone, like other Italian film-makers, had worked on many American-style films produced in Italy for European and "Third-World" markets. Often the Italian film crew members saw their work credited to Americans or under English pseudonyms, as distributors tried to give the films more "authenticity." Hence, as a result of the geopolitical dominance of the American film industry, Leone and his colleagues were thoroughly knowledgeable about American films and capable of producing films more economically than their American counterparts, though they were accorded much lower prestige and status within the industry.

Under such neocolonial conditions, production efficiency can perhaps be understood as having culturally subversive effects. But Eastwood brought his experience of working in the Italian film industry back to Hollywood. In the late 1960s Eastwood formed his own production company—Malpaso. Since the early 1970s he has appeared almost exclusively in Malpaso productions, and he also often directs his own films. Malpaso achieves a high degree of efficiency, Smith suggests, partly by maintaining continuity of staff, employing many of the same, tightly-knit core of professionals on each film (pp. 63–66). The company's economizing techniques (such as shooting on location whenever possible, shooting films in sequence, and editing on location) also have aesthetic and political dimensions, though the recurrent stylistic effects that mark Malpaso's films are not as distinctively different from other Hollywood films as those in Leone's films.

With their low budgets, high profits, and unorthodox production strategies, Malpaso films represent an implicit populist critique of the dominant Hollywood industry. Yet, as Smith argues, the net result of Malpaso's alternative and potentially subversive production values is cancelled out by its dependence upon the Hollywood system:

[Malpaso] is, in a sense, a sophisticated cottage industry. But what is perhaps most interesting about it is the way that its material place and its own imaginary of itself are constructed as both subservient to and yet superior to the larger industry. The subservience ... is in fact a dependence: in the current situation of the American film industry, Malpaso's products could not be widely distributed and exhibited without the power of a Warner Brothers or a Universal. The superiority, on the other hand, derives from the imaginary sense of being able to produce a commodity that maintains a ratio of quality to profitability that the larger corporation cannot match. To note such a dialectic of dependence and superiority is, of course, to suggest an analogous dialectic of complicity with and resistance to the corporate structures of Hollywood. (p. 66)

Smith analyzes the relationship of Malpaso to the larger Hollywood corporate structures in a chapter entitled "Homesteaders"—signalling a sym-

bolic parallel between Malpaso's "resistance" to the Hollywood studio system and the resistance of independent homesteaders to big land barons in many traditional Hollywood westerns. From the very beginning of his return to Hollywood, Eastwood's western films have been involved in a recuperation of the western hero and of the genre at large from the "damage" they suffered at Leone's hands. The Hispanic influence and the prominent Mexican characters quickly disappear (they are present in some of the early Malpaso films, such as *Two Mules for Sister Sara* in 1970 and *Joe Kidd* in 1972), though films such as *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1973), *The Unforgiven* (1992), and the post-western *Bronco Billy* (1980) feature Native American and African American characters prominently. The hero's recuperation begins in *Hang'em High* (1968), the first Malpaso film. In this film the setting has changed from the Hispanic southwest to the Nebraska territory. Eastwood plays a character who, having survived an aborted lynching, takes a job as a marshal in order to track down his enemies. Here there is a retreat from the subversive violence-for-money motivation of Leone's protagonists, although the revenge motive that taints Eastwood's character's decision to "do the right thing" is fairly explicitly acknowledged in the film.

But perhaps the most interesting of Eastwood's post-spaghetti westerns is *High Plains Drifter* (1973). Again the "no name" character has been displaced from the Hispanic diageitic to an Anglo-American one. The film combines a revenge plot (a sheriff who has been murdered was apparently No Name's brother) with a familiar ensemble of plot elements of the sort epitomized in *High Noon* (No Name waits for a showdown as the townspeople cringe in fear) and *Shane* (the drifter-gunfighter rides into town, frees the settlers from a local tyrant, then rides off into the sunset). Here there is an interesting twist, however. The townspeople offer No Name (in a sort of intertextual nod to the spaghetti, townspeople keep asking the drifter his name, but he never gives it) *anything* he wants for his services. With a perverse and carnivalesque sense of humor reminiscent of the spaghetti, No Name humiliates the townspeople with a series of capricious demands even as he prepares for his showdown with the gunmen who have killed the sheriff. While this film flirts with the radically amoral stance of the spaghetti, Smith reads the plot as finally coming to rest in a conservative polemic for community self-determination:

... while he becomes their champion against their enemies, the requisite personal motives for his action involve punishing the townsfolk, whose crime is that they apparently allowed the criminal gang to kill his brother who had been sheriff. In other words, the showdown with the gang is a prerequisite for his revenge on the townsfolk. Yet even this twist is in the service of the movie's attempt to reinstate the classic moral messages of the genre, since it is effectively a lesson in civics that he teaches them, demonstrating to them the need for communities to stand up for themselves against evil and the turpitude of being complicit in wrongdoing by standing by and simply watching it. (p. 36)

Smith argues, persuasively, that the populist self-determination message proffered in this and other Eastwood movies, and modeled in the organiza-

tion and production practices of Malpaso, is a key element of Eastwood's political agenda.

Another related element of Eastwood's political agenda involves a revival of the patriarchal authority of the white male in the face of the post-sixties gains in women's and minority rights. This takes a variety of forms, and is the subject of an ongoing interplay among Eastwood, his critics, and socio-political pressures arising from changes in the public imagination. Early on, in post-spaghetti westerns like *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970) and *Joe Kidd* (1972) the project involves the white male hero in conflicts between Hispanic and Anglo cultures. While Eastwood's character is sympathetic to the plight of Mexican characters in each of these movies, he is also portrayed as the authoritative "gringo" coming to the rescue of the Mexicans (in *Two Mules*) or intervening to establish order between the Americans and the Mexicans (in *Joe Kidd*). In other westerns, as I noted earlier, Eastwood departs from standard Hollywood practice by including Native American and African American characters, but these characters have no agency other than that authorized by the Eastwood character. Even at its best, the representation of minority cultures in Eastwood's films can be criticized as what Smith terms a "spurious white assumption and assertion of equality" that willfully ignores the existing racist conditions of American society (p. 231). Smith discusses this in relation to Eastwood's published response to a remark, by Spike Lee, that Eastwood's film biography of Charlie Parker, *Bird* (1988), would have been better left to a black director. Responding to Lee's remark, Eastwood said that "my being white and doing a story about black people (or vice versa) has no bearing. Mr. Lee is certainly welcome to do a story on Beethoven, and it might be brilliant" (*People Weekly*, 1 Oct. 1990, p. 114 [quoted in *Clint Eastwood*, p. 230]). But, as Smith points out,

however much white America may or may not will it to be the case, Lee would probably not be "welcome" to make a film about Beethoven—"brilliant" or otherwise, it would most likely be subjected to the most demanding cultural interrogation—any more than Louis Farakan could become president or Anita Hill be believed by white senators. (p. 230)

"The liberal assumption that Eastwood replicates here," Smith writes,

simply elides the power relations that white Northern culture has set up and reproduced, and at the same time has the advantage for him of demonstrating his own magnanimity. ...what Eastwood's propositions amount to is what we might call the unauthored racism of liberalism. (p. 231)

Eastwood's relationship to feminism is more complicated. In conventional westerns, women are the locus of civic responsibility and they function to sanction the violence of the heroes. The good guys may be as violent as the bad guys, but the good guys are represented as fighting to protect the women. By eschewing civic responsibility as a motivating force in the spaghetti westerns, Leone produces a protagonist who is distinctively, if offhandedly, misogynistic. But, perhaps more significant than this shift toward greater misogyny at the level of plot, Smith suggests, is the way that Leone's directing style effects a shift in the terms of masculinity in the

American imaginary. The films, Smith asserts, produce "a particular kind of masculinity, which Eastwood as actor lives with for the rest of his career" (p. 10). "Effectively," Smith writes,

what Leone does to the standard hero of the western is to turn his self-sufficient and calm toughness into a kind of ritualized, stylized, and heavily gestured masculinity. ... The formality of Leone's work underscores this ritualism: Leone peppers his work with portentous close-ups of faces, costumes, and gestures that do not so much signify the internal qualities of the classic cowboy, the "real man" of the Hollywood imaginary, as construct instead a mere exterior, a purely physical demeanor that stands in for masculinity itself. (pp. 10-11)

Eastwood carries this image of masculinity, along with many of Leone's stylistic trademarks, into his action films, beginning with films like *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) and *Dirty Harry* (1971). Through a combination of stylistic minimalism and a thematic return to the traditional Hollywood ethos of patriarchal authority and violent masculinity as sanctioned by invocations of female domesticity and community, Eastwood's characters are represented as misunderstood and unfairly maligned heroes. Eastwood's characters are arrogant, undisciplined, antisocial, antibureaucratic, and politically incorrect, but they are usually redeemed by women who see through the rough "exterior" to the sensitive man "inside."

As a key plot element repeated in film after film, this tends to wear pretty thin. But, in a series of interesting close readings, Smith analyzes subtle shifts in the treatment of this theme that constitute a sort of ongoing dialogue between Eastwood and feminism. The macho image is interrogated, to some extent, in comedies like *Every Which Way But Loose* (1978) and *Pink Cadillac* (1988). And even in the police action films, there are attempts to address feminist critiques from one film to the next. In the early cop films, for instance, the ideal or "true" masculinity of the hero is straightforwardly opposed to the perverted sexuality of his criminal antagonists. The "Dirty Harry" scenario is typical: a scene in which a woman is murdered is presented in an eroticized manner that offers a voyeuristic thrill to the (presumably heterosexual male) audience who then can feel nonetheless self-righteous as they watch Dirty Harry capture the criminal. "The fact that these murders are committed by the people upon whom [Harry] Callahan is then turned loose in search of the community's revenge," Smith points out,

is little mitigation of the fact that the movies offer them as titillating moments. Indeed, this contradictory construction can only be described as cynical. That is, the erotic impulse of the murderers and of the *mise-en-scène* itself—even while demanding a correction and inducing a process in the films that is concerned with the righting of sexuality—bespeaks a recognition that this urge to erotic murder is at least of interest to and probably essential to the heterosexual male subject. (p. 121)

Yet, as Smith demonstrates, this recognition becomes an increasingly self-reflective preoccupation in cop movies such as *Tightrope* (1984). Admittedly, this does not lead to an "expulsion or a negation of the demonizing dramas of pathology and punishment, of an ideal masculinity and its projected 'others'." Still, Smith suggests, in these films "there is at least the

rather uncanny spectacle of a populist, right-wing masculinity interrogating itself" (p. 124).

Though, as Smith notes, various critics have argued that certain of Eastwood's films offer oppositional political messages, it will come as no surprise that Eastwood's films are engaged in the production and transmission of conservative and populist ideologies. Yet, the crucial issue is not whether the films are involved in the production of conservative political ideology; that is too obvious to sustain much discussion. Much more important are the questions of how the films are involved in the production of ideology, where and how lapses and fissures in that process occur, and how the Hollywood system reacts to such lapses and fissures. This is not by any means a reductive agenda. As a teacher of literature I am acutely conscious of the inadequacy of conventional literary analysis—including aestheticist post-structural theory—for preparing students to transform the cultural discourses that they encounter in their daily lives. One of the most welcome features of Cultural Studies is that it gives us a framework in which to address this problem, and Smith's book is in many ways an exemplary model of the Cultural Studies approach. As an antidote to the general imbalance of academic attention to high culture—in this case "art" films—Smith brings an impressive array of sophisticated theoretical tools to bear on "commercial" films. Instead of analyzing or interpreting films as isolated aesthetic texts, he connects films to related discourses in which social relations are constructed and maintained. More boldly than any other critic I can think of, Smith attempts to merge such disparate modes as political and economic analysis of the film industry, ideology critique, and close formal analysis of films. The different modes of analysis are unevenly represented, and sometimes the transitions are rough. But this is the kind of analysis that we need to develop in response to the ever-increasing sophistication of ideological apparatuses in late capitalism, and these transdisciplinary analytical strategies need to be brought into the classroom. This is relatively uncharted territory, and there's a lot of work to be done. Paul Smith has made a good start.

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