



Dirty Harry

San Francisco in the Nixon Era

There are people who line themselves up with the political overtones of the film [*Dirty Harry*]. But there are none really. Those people are crazy.

Clint Eastwood, 1976

The people who call it a fascist film don't know what they're talking about. . . . [T]here's nothing like that in there. The guy was just a man who fought bureaucracy and a certain established kind of thing. Just because he did things a little unorthodox—that's the only way he knew how to handle it. He had so many hours to solve the case and as far as he was concerned, he was more interested in the victim than the law.

Clint Eastwood, 1976

I can't understand why, when a film is made purely for entertainment, it should be criticized on a political basis.

Don Siegel on *Dirty Harry*, 1993

Dirty Harry is entrenched in urban San Francisco. The film opens with a close-up of a memorial to dead San Francisco police officers that is embedded in the walls of the city's Hall of Justice, a shot that serves to confirm numerous aspects of the film's meaning. Most obviously, it sets the film's location. It also suggests that *Dirty Harry* holds a verisimilitude which sets it apart from many typical detective films. Viewers

are therefore encouraged to overlook the fictionality of the film and instead approach it as a realistic representation of San Francisco policing. As important, the appearance of the memorial during the introduction establishes the film's ideological stance. By reverently citing a tribute to fallen policemen, the opening shot indicates an acceptance that these public servants died as heroes, protecting the city from crime. It thus suggests that the film is dedicated to and thus a supporter of these same police officers, irrespective of their behavior.¹ The film's exposure of the violent, extralegal, and occasionally unconstitutional actions of a police officer must consequently be approached within this framing concept—the police officer is always right, even if he is wrong.

This chapter pays particular attention to the film's representation of numerous key themes. It focuses on aesthetics and a “social construction” reading of its text and subtexts. The film's impressionistic use of San Francisco's geography firmly locates the film in the city and begs consideration of the meaning of San Francisco within the context of the film's diegetic world. Its representation of the counterculture, race, gender, and sexuality must be approached within the context of recent San Francisco and national history, as outlined in chapter 2. The “real” San Francisco also intrudes on the film's depiction of the relationship between the city's liberal elite, Harry Callahan, and the villain, Scorpio. In particular, the film's suggestion that criminality is a consequence of the failures of 1960s liberalism, which becomes explicit in its exploration of the methods used by criminals to manipulate legislation designed to protect their rights as American citizens, demands serious consideration within the San Francisco context. Although much of this discussion points to the political conservatism of the film, its numerous ambiguous messages—including its representation of the relationship between means and ends, and the film's final image of Callahan tossing his police badge in an echo of Will Kane (Gary Cooper) in *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952)—suggest that *Dirty Harry* is far more complex than simple right-wing propaganda.

Following its opening tribute, *Dirty Harry* cuts to a close-up of Scorpio peering through the rangefinder of a silenced rifle. It is a clear blue day, and the wind ruffles Scorpio's long hair. He sits on the roof of the Bank of America Center, San Francisco's tallest skyscraper, methodically tracking a woman swimming in the rooftop pool of the nearby Holiday Inn. His

single shot hits its target in the back. This killing is only made possible by the city's Alioto-led regeneration: Scorpio's vantage point was completed in 1969 and was an opulent display of the Bank of America's power in the city and beyond; the slightly more modest Holiday Inn was completed soon after.² Immediately, then, the viewer's attention is drawn to the role of the city's architecture in facilitating criminality.

Harry Callahan first appears investigating the woman's death. After inspecting the body, he instinctively heads for the Bank of America rooftop. The camera tracks Callahan as he moves through the bowels of the skyscraper to reach the roof, the first of the film's ambiguous visual metaphors. The scene signals Callahan's willingness to enter the depths of a case, to engage with the inner workings of its underbelly in order to get the job done. It also suggests that Callahan is at once part of the city's architecture and subjected to its structures, rendering San Francisco an active agent in the film. This latter metaphor is continued as Callahan reaches the roof. Rather than heading straight for the point at which the Holiday Inn may be seen, Callahan prowls around the edge, surveying his domain. As the camera pans around the roof, San Francisco's urban sprawl is laid out below, from its southern tip toward San Francisco International Airport through the predominantly African American neighborhood of Hunters Point and the Central Waterfront on the eastern side of the city, the Bay Bridge, and finally the Kearney Street Holiday Inn in the city's financial district on San Francisco's northeast shoulder (see fig. 1). In direct contrast to the film's tightly framed first image of the murderer Scorpio, the camera places Callahan in the center of the city, suggesting by his height that he is the master of this territory, but also indicating by the geographic spread of the city that much of it escapes his control. This method also establishes Callahan's feeling of responsibility as he watches over "his" city, a recurring theme of the film, and introduces the city itself as a character in the film. The Golden Gate Bridge, arguably San Francisco's most iconic location, becomes visible only in the far distance, at the very end of Callahan's perambulation, encouraging the audience to move beyond the clichéd popular image of the city to appreciate the reality that Callahan faces. Until this point in the film, not a word has been spoken. Callahan's discovery of a ransom note attached to a television aerial on the roof breaks this verbal silence when the detective utters the single word: "Jesus."³ Callahan's appeal to a

higher authority reveals another of the film's themes: the role of religion in the modern city.

Dirty Harry's political stance is made clearest in Callahan's interaction with the local power structure. Callahan is forced to contend with an increasingly bureaucratized police force and a cowardly liberal elite. More concerned with protecting their own image and upholding liberal shibboleths such as nonviolence, good sportsmanship, trust, and reasonableness, the power brokers serve only to enable Scorpio to continue his murderous spree while frustrating and imprisoning Callahan at every turn. Yet when faced with the realities of policing on the street, the liberals are forced to defer to the logic of Callahan's stance. In many respects, Callahan echoes Ronald Reagan in working hard in service of the public while maintaining a highly skeptical public attitude toward, and often working to undermine, the public institutions that he represents. He meets with the mayor in the latter's salubrious wood-paneled office. Shot in the actual San Francisco mayor's office, this space stands in vivid contrast to the grimy streets Callahan patrols and the shabby offices that he and his colleagues occupy.⁴ Scorpio's ransom note has been copied and projected onto a screen, from which the mayor reads. Upon discovering that Scorpio threatens to kill a "nigger," the mayor blanches and refuses to utter the racist epithet before requesting a written report from Callahan: a needlessly bureaucratic imposition on Callahan's policing methods and limited time. Callahan's withering retort serves to encourage audience sympathy with his position while providing a glimpse into the film's underlying political sensibilities. That Callahan has spent the last forty-five minutes "sitting on [his] ass in [the] outer office" rather than compiling a suitable report reveals the gulf between him and the bureaucracy. After mildly chastising Callahan, his superior officers then play to the mayor's technocratic impulses by revealing that they are using computer files to target possible suspects born under the zodiac sign of Scorpio and have set up rooftop surveillance with the city's police helicopter unit, dismissing Callahan's traditional methods of analyzing ballistics and investigating known criminals (see fig. 2).

The mayor is convinced by the discussion that Scorpio's ransom should be paid, in order to obtain some breathing space for the city. Demonstrating his identity as a man of action, Callahan rejects this plan and offers instead to meet with the "son-of-a-bitch," but he is rebuffed