



Clint On Clint

BY Clint Burnham

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

When the new Clint vehicle, *In the Line of Fire*, appeared this past summer, John Harkness's capsule blurb in Toronto's *NOW* magazine said that the movie "allows Eastwood to deconstruct his own steely persona." Just what is it about Eastwood's films, or his actorly signification, that everyone thinks he's suddenly "deconstructing" himself; or, rather, isn't that precisely what he does in almost every film: last year's *Unforgiven*, his s/m flick *Tightrope*, the sensitive-guy-goes-to-war *Heartbreak Ridge*, all the way back to (chop off his leg! chop off his leg!) *The Beguiled*?

I almost wrote *The Beguiling* there for a minute, and Toronto's pre-eminent 'zine and comicbook store should indicate my level of critical taste, so before I turn to Paul Smith's new book (which explains precisely why the above paragraph is the case), I should just mention

that the best guide to Clint's newest flick (which of course is not covered in Smith's book) is the 'zine *Open Mouth, Insert Gun*. *OM,IG* deals expertly with homoeroticism in action flix, including the celebrated (well, I'm celebrating it, anyway) gunblowjob scene in *In the Line of Fire*. (There's an even more explicit scene like this in the new Canadian movie *I Love a Man in a Uniform*, but in this case it's a woman's gun that gets sucked!)

But Paul Smith's book on Eastwood does nothing if not move film theory to a new, materialist level that I've seldom seen before in academic criticism. The book ranges widely over Eastwood's filmic career, both as actor and director (not including TV stuff), and even into such "extra-textual" arenas as his term as mayor of Carmel, California. By examining films in terms of cultural materialism, Smith makes us see movies as "material" significations in ways the *Screen* chappies could only dream of. (The Seventies may be back, but surely Laura Mulvey, Colin MacCabe and their bizarre theories of fetishism and floating signifiers have gone the way of the dinosaur.) This is signalled in the first chapter, "Subaltern Spaghetti," which argues that Leone's spaghetti westerns were in effect subversions of 1950's and 60's U.S. cinematic imperialism. Leone's "No Name" trilogy dealt with the unsaid of U.S. westerns: Mexican-Spanish constituents, bounty hunters, a grittier and more violent action, etc.

Smith argues convincingly that while Eastwood's persona as a Sergio Leone "spaghetti" cowboy was in fact very critical of U.S. myths and hegemony, Eastwood essentially tried to make his Western heroes since then fit more squarely into the filmic mainstream. This "restitution," Smith shows, was conducted everywhere from plot and characterization down to the level of the shot and lighting. Thus, *High Plains Drifter*

takes on the full brunt of the task of integrating the No Name character ... into the Hollywood plot. The stranger's role here is to act once more as the agent and instigator of responsible community action and ideology

— a far cry from the role of No Name in the Leone trilogy The repeated long takes of [Eastwood's] slowly moving body and the close-ups of the formality of his behavioural rituals and of the almost total impassivity of his squinting face compose by far the bulk of the film's shots, and their overall effect is to offer the Eastwood body as an object of contemplation and objectification in a way that Leone does only sporadically. In other words, this is a highly formalized representation of Eastwood's body, which is itself a gesture of restitution, literally putting the white male demigod back into the center of the screen Eastwood attempts to exploit the power of the image that Leone has bequeathed him, while melding it back into the traditional array of devices in which Hollywood cinema has been constituted. (38-39)

Smith is equally uncanny in his assessment of Eastwood's play with masculinity. He takes as his cue an Annie Leibowitz photo of Eastwood all tied up and seeming to enjoy it (I always knew Clint was a bottom! He's pretty cute, ya know ...). So, in most Eastwood westerns or cop movies the hero is first offered as spectacle, whom we enjoy seeing move and be eroticized; this is then followed

by the destruction of [the] body. That is, the heroic man is always physically beaten, injured, and brought to breaking point [followed by] the obvious third stage, in which the hero is permitted to emerge triumphant within the movie's narrative line. This third stage obviously provides the security and comfort of closure and is a crucial element in the production of spectatorial pleasure, but [Paul] Willemen proposes that both of the first stages of representation are also in their way pleasurable for the spectator. The first 'pleasure'—that of voyeuristic admiration of the hero's body and presence—is followed diegetically and graphically by the 'unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated ... and restored through violent brutality.'" (156) But while Eastwood's military or

police movies are conservative in their harnessing of viewers' identificatory pleasure into the service of patriarchal power, Smith argues that there is always a hysterical residue or underside to the filmic text. Thus the way in which Eastwood's characters will flirt with identification with women or gays/lesbians, or male impotence, are "an unresolved or uncontained representation of the body of the male as it exceeds the narrative processes." So it's not the tired old dichotomy of whether Clint meant it or not (and thus is apparently deconstructing himself at every turn): even as the narrative tries out its strategies of containment, it's still pleasurable. Smith talks about his own titillation when he sees Clint in handcuffs; he too, threatens to exceed certain critico-narrative processes.

Smith is equally critical of Eastwood's recent status as 'auteur'; he shows, for example, how auteurship is constructed by a complicit media and the extent to which Hollywood depends on the myth of "fiercely" independent filmmakers. (Eastwood's Malpaso production company thus fashions itself "against" the major studios, for instance.) Discussing the close of *White Hunter, Black Heart*, Smith writes: "The auteur-father makes his movie. He mutters the word 'Action' and announces the closure of all the hysterical dramas, all the obsessions, all the self-doubting stories of the patriarch turning in upon himself, and all the narrative tests that he has therefore gone through, and he becomes a director." (262)

Smith's critique of the Eastwood phenomenon is as impressive as his practical theorizing; at the level of jargon, that is, he displays both a love for bizarre or eccentric turns of phrase and a light hand for innovative and novel lexical meanings. Thus, on the one hand, words like "risible," "subverting," "insipissated," "enocratic," and "lugubrious" are likely to send you reaching for the OED. On the other hand, "intendment" (a legalistic term Smith uses to mean the intent of a text—as opposed to that of its author), and "tributary media" (a pun on tributes and tributary rivers: the various magazines, TV shows, and newspaper journalists who construct Hollywood on an edifice of gilt-edged shit) are also useful terms that will most likely spread beyond the province of their author.

Everyone's talking about masculinity now: what's important about Smith is that he concentrates on a large body of work, organized around one "character," Clint Eastwood. So there's ample opportunity to test arguments, take account of current work, and provide sheer volume of articulation. Paul Smith's work here is impressive; no one can write on Eastwood now without referring to it, but the book will also influence how we think about masculinity in film, the western, and the cinematic apparatus in general.

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