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Cop and Detective Films

We need a twenty-four-hour-a-day police officer. A cop who doesn't need to eat or sleep. A cop with superior fire power and the reflexes to use it.

—*RoboCop*

Trying to bring conceptual order to cop and detective movies is like trying to classify a proliferating form of life—one with hundreds of individual examples—using an obsolete taxonomy. Detective movies alone encompass half a dozen subtypes: amateur sleuth films; films about private eyes, private security agents, and plainclothes police detectives; victim-turned-hunter films; and movies more generally classified as noirs, neo-noirs, and whodunits or mysteries. Cop movies include even more subtypes: action films; aging cop films; the blaxploitation or black cop films of the early 1970s; films about buddy cops, corrupt cops, female cops, and rogue cops; cyborg or science-fiction cop films; serial killer cop films; cop comedies; postmodernist cop films; and what I call alternative cop films. All are concerned with detection—seeing, penetrating, interpreting, apprehending—but they differ considerably in characters, theme, and relationships to the broader society. The challenge is to bring order to this antic proliferation and discover how these mutating film types evolved, which species are dying out, and how others are adapting for survival.

Their evolution, which for decades closely paralleled developments in mystery fiction, began with whodunits and progressed through noirs until, around 1970, it reached the cop-film era. Early twentieth-century whodunits, echoing the stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the “cozy” mysteries of Agatha Christie, picture crime as a disruption of a safe world of settled routines. An eccentric amateur detective who is part of that world deciphers the clues and identifies the criminal, whose expulsion restores the world to snug familiarity. (This pattern of internal discovery, expulsion, and restoration contrasts with that of later detection films, in which criminality is woven into the fabric of daily life and therefore can be neither fully excised nor exorcised.) Most famous of the amateur sleuths was Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Victorian gentleman who, with his

buddy Dr. Watson, solves the mystery in dozens of silent films and early talkies. But such movies also feature female sleuths; in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), for example, high-spirited Iris Henderson initiates the search, investigates as an equal with her handsome traveling companion, foils a faux brain surgeon, and fights off Nazis before rescuing dodderly old Miss Froy, who herself turns out to be a foreign-office spy.¹

While amateur-sleuth mysteries were sidelined in the 1940s by noirs, top directors continued to be drawn to the genre. Hitchcock brought it back into play with *Rear Window* (1954), in which a photographer (James Stewart), immobilized by a broken leg, uses his camera to detect a murder in the opposite block of apartments. Francis Ford Coppola transformed the genre into a vehicle for ambiguity with *The Conversation* (1974), in which a surveillance specialist (Gene Hackman) tries to detect a crime but cannot quite manage to do so. David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) again reworked the genre with a droll parody in which the amateur sleuth, this time a snoopy young man (Kyle MacLachlan), uncovers a crime—and with it the whole dark underside of existence, including body parts, sadomasochism, and the earthworms of decay.

With noirs, crime became integral to daily (especially nocturnal) life and crime investigation a mere stopgap against corruption that threatened from all sides. Indeed, noir private eyes such as Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Philip Marlowe (Dick Powell) of *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), and Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) of *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) are themselves part of the problem: mercenary, snarling misogynists, low-life antitheses of the gentlemanly Victorian sleuth. These private eyes may catch their criminals, but they are incapable of restoring lawful order, partly because it bores them. Noir detectives embody tensions between good and evil, the attractive and the repellent, and the best they can do is to throw up temporary barriers against lawlessness.²

Noir detectives' legacies to later cop heroes include these ambiguities, ambivalences, and fallibilities as well as their contempt for aristocratic bad guys and disdain for women. Moreover, while few noir detectives are as flamboyantly attractive as later cop heroes, their films nonetheless inaugurate the tradition of eroticizing the detective's body and demonstrating its capacity for enduring (perhaps even desiring) terrific punishment. Noirs took a character—the detective—and began to turn him into spectacle. He became, not just a mystery-

solver but a body to stare at and be impressed by, the human equivalent of earlier films' crowd scenes and outsized stage sets, someone offered up for our delectation. The action-cop heroes of the 1980s and 1990s were direct descendants.

An official investigator occasionally played a major role even in silent films. Such was the case in *The Lodger* (1927), a Hitchcock film that, like many of his later works, focuses on a golden-haired beauty in danger of being hacked to pieces. Here the threat is experienced by Daisy, a blond showgirl, and emanates from the Avenger, an unidentified killer who claims a fair-haired victim each Tuesday. We worry about a police inspector who declares himself too fond of fair-haired girls and starts cozying up to Daisy. But we also worry about a mysterious stranger who, swathed in scarves, comes to Daisy's house (number 13) in search of lodging. The Lodger reacts badly to the pictures of blond women in his rented room and, despite his unexplained anguish, makes eyes at Daisy. The Inspector, declaring that he will put a rope around the Avenger's neck and a ring around Daisy's finger, breaks into the Lodger's locked bureau, where he discovers a map marked with the locations of the murders and a photo of the Avenger's first victim. But the Lodger, when he is arrested, reveals that he himself has been hunting the Avenger because that first victim was his sister. The Inspector saves the Lodger from a lynch mob; his men capture the real Avenger; and the Lodger marries Daisy. Here, then, an official investigator is a central character, and even though he doesn't get the girl, he does save her.

Evolution of the Cop Film

Despite this early availability of the cop-hero figure, the police drama did not emerge as a distinct generic form until 1971, when Dirty Harry strolled onto the scene. One factor retarding its development was a problem in characterization: Filmmakers found it difficult to make official good guys entertaining, and it was much easier to deliver adventure, illicit sex, and mayhem by concentrating on lawbreakers. Another hindrance was the popularity of Westerns and noirs, both of which featured a central, law-restoring character with a gun. There was little need for police heroes as long as cinema could rely on lonesome sheriffs and private eyes. Then, too, for more than a century police officers had low status in American society. To become a cop required little more than an eighth-grade education and male

anatomy, and the police worked long hours for low pay and minimal respect. Their standing began to rise, however, with the 1967 publication of a multivolume report by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, a work that sought to redefine policing as a profession requiring advanced education, technical skills, and scientific training.³ This report helped make the new genre possible.

Before *Dirty Harry* ushered in the cop film genre, most order-maintenance characters fit one of three stereotypes: dopey patrolman, tough federal agent, or cool private investigator. Silent movies often depict patrolmen as ludicrous oafs, men who can be counted on to slip on a banana peel and hold a letter upside down. Buster Keaton's *Cops* (1922) shows hordes of uniformed officers running first in one direction, then another, like a flock of birds, while Mack Sennett's Keystone cops became symbols of madcap ineptitude. Gangster films of the 1930s, elaborating this image, portrayed the patrolman as a stupid "flatfoot" or "gumshoe"—coarse, Irish, and corruptible. This stereotype (almost the opposite of what became the Dirty Harry ideal) continued to turn up in later decades, informing, for instance, the characterization of McCluskey, the crooked police lieutenant in *The Godfather* (1972). A sleazy Irishman who solicits payoffs and pummels helpless citizens, McCluskey (Sterling Hayden) is dining with a mobster when Michael Corleone, in his maiden kill, blows his brains out.

This unflattering image was upgraded by a new cop figure, the tough federal agent, who made his film debut in the 1930s. Professional and straightlaced, the federal officer was created to solve a dilemma posed by Hollywood's recent release of a string of gangster and prison films in which hoodlums were heroes. When Catholic bishops and other moralists condemned these films, Hollywood responded with a new series of movies—*Let 'Em Have It* (1935), *Show Them No Mercy* (1935), *You Can't Get Away with It* (1936)—in which the forces of law and order triumph. These mainly featured the G- or government-men of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose publicity-conscious director, J. Edgar Hoover, encouraged positive propaganda from Hollywood. A problem remained, however: While the movie feds were competent, most were still much less engaging than the bad guys. The problem was partially solved in "*G*" *Men* (1935), starring James Cagney as a crime fighter who began life on the wrong side of the tracks. Raised by a mobster who finances his education, Cagney becomes a lawyer; but when no clients knock on his door and a G-man

friend is killed, he joins the FBI. Thanks to his familiarity with mobsters' ways, he is able to outshine the other agents. Cagney's engaging, street-fighter character could have rescued "*G Men*" from the usual woodenness had the film not gone on to preach about the FBI's need for expanded enforcement powers.⁴

The obstacle of the boring good guy was finally overcome by noirs, which devised a third image for the crime-buster, that of the cool private investigator: sexy, debonair, and a whole lot smarter than everyone else. Humphrey Bogart became the archetypal private detective, living dangerously in the borderland between criminality and lawfulness. Even David Bannion, the cop hero of the noir *The Big Heat* (1953), becomes admirable when his wife is blown up by a car bomb meant for him, undergoing a transformation from devoted family man into hell-bent vigilante. When Bannion (Glenn Ford) refuses to bow to mob pressure, his crooked boss demands his badge, thus furthering Bannion's transformation into a marginal figure with whom we can identify. Moving into the underworld, the former police officer befriends a gun moll whose face has been scalded and scarred by the ultimate bad guy (Lee Marvin). Neither sinner nor saint, the noir hero was a bit of both.⁵

Dirty Harry

Several factors worked together in the 1950s and 1960s to release the cop film genre from its chrysalis. The precursor genres featuring men with guns—the Western and the noir—were running out of gas. "There was a need," writes Richard Schickel, "to find a contemporary place for hard loners—traditional males, if you will—to live plausibly. And the most readily available wilderness, the concrete wilderness, suddenly seemed more interesting and dangerous than ever" due to rising rates of urban disorder and street crime.⁶ The new medium of television had introduced the police series, with *Dragnet* (1951 to 1959) and *Hawaii Five-O* (1968 to 1980) demonstrating the enormous drawing power of police action episodes. And even though the 1967 President's Commission report brought new respectability to policing, police overreactions to student protests and urban riots forced both the public and police to rethink the role of law enforcement.

A key transitional event occurred when veteran director Don Siegel paired up with actor Clint Eastwood to make *Coogan's Bluff* (1968).⁷ Picking up on the Western's heroic lawman, *Coogan's Bluff* follows

not a police officer but something close: a sheriff. Moreover, this sheriff tracks a killer from Arizona to New York City, thus anticipating the union of the Western with the city-centered noir that was about to produce a new genre. *Coogan's Bluff* itself is an embarrassing film, awkward and offensive, but it is significant as a forerunner. The cop film was taking shape.

Dirty Harry appeared in the wake of tumultuous events. The assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and Malcolm X made people wonder whether the police were in control. When police officers killed peaceful demonstrators at Kent State University, fought with protesters during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, and struggled for five days with gay men outside New York's Stonewall Inn, many people wondered whether they were *out* of control. Critics across the nation reproached the police, who had indeed accumulated a sorry record of brutality. About 1970, however, public opinion began swinging back toward law-and-order positions. Clint Eastwood himself was conservative, as was his *Dirty Harry* character.⁸ With perfect timing, the movie caught public attitudes toward the police just as they began reversing themselves.

The film portrays Harry ("Well, I'm all broken up about that man's rights") Callahan as the ideal cop. Brave and uncomplaining, he is willing to sacrifice his life in the line of duty. But if Harry does die, the film informs us, it will be because bleeding-heart liberals have tied cops' hands, making it impossible for them to keep criminals off the streets. Unwilling to let obvious offenders escape, Harry sometimes has to play *dirty*, breaking the rules to keep the peace. *Dirty Harry's* adulation of the police and its liberal-bashing contributed to the movie's success, as did Eastwood's sardonic manner and tough-guy talk. But the movie's apparent enthusiasm for vigilante justice enraged the critics.⁹

The second film in the series, *Magnum Force* (1973), addresses the critics' objections in two ways. First, it presents a group of *really* bad cops to contrast with Harry and demonstrate that he is in fact a model of restraint. These are neofascist traffic cops who speed around on motorcycles shooting scantily dressed white girls and black men. Second, *Magnum Force* cleans up Harry's own act. Now he follows the rules even when he despises them, managing nonetheless to vanquish the vigilante traffic cops as well as the usual criminals.¹⁰

Crucial to the *Dirty Harry* films' success was the ease with which they shifted the familiar character of the gunslinger to an urban po-



Figure 4.1. One of the first cop movies, *Dirty Harry* (1971) can also be considered a law film due to its central theme: the conflict between the aims of crime control on the one hand and the observance of due process on the other. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

lice setting. Without missing a beat, the Siegel-Eastwood team rescued the superannuated but still compelling hero of Westerns from genre decay by transferring him laterally, character intact, into the cop flick. In an essay on the Western hero, Robert Warshaw speaks of the gunslinger's melancholy, seriousness, and "moral clarity," of his "personal nobility," modesty, and reluctance to impose himself.¹¹ These traits are equally characteristic of Eastwood's cop hero, with his sense of limitation and constrained diffidence. Warshaw's West-

erner "appears to be unemployed," a "man of leisure"; although Harry Callahan works for a living, his civilian clothing and scorn for superior officers indicate that he, too, is a freelancer. Much as the Westerner's horse signifies physical freedom, Callahan's car signifies his freedom to roam the city, which turns out to offer as many spectacles as the wide-open spaces. With little more than a change of outfit, then, the Westerner migrated to the cop film, enabling viewers to switch genre allegiances without bidding farewell to the gunslinger's essential character. Eastwood, who had starred in a number of Westerns, was the ideal actor for making this transition.

The ease of this character migration illuminates not only the success of the *Dirty Harry* films but also the nature of cop films more generally. "One of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre," writes film theorist Robin Wood, "has been the tendency to treat the genres as discrete. . . . At best, they represent different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions."¹² When it first appeared, the cop film was less a unique new form than a new "strategy" for analyzing the nature of heroism and the hero's relationship to society. Like the Westerner, Harry Callahan patrols a border between barbarity and society, abandon and self-control, what John Cawelti in another context calls the "frontier between savagery and civilization."¹³ That frontier is both geographical and psychological, a line that must be drawn within the city and within the hero himself.

After Dirty Harry

A flood of cop films followed immediately on *Dirty Harry's* release. *The French Connection* (also 1971) starred Gene Hackman as Popeye Doyle, another half-wild police officer, and set a new standard for the urban car chase with its scene of high-speed pursuit under New York's Third Avenue "el." *Serpico* (1973) featured Al Pacino, fresh from his triumph in *The Godfather*, in the true story of a New York City cop who ratted on crooked officers and suffered grim consequences. By portraying Serpico as an eccentric who, by virtue of being a good guy in an evil department, is himself a bit of an outlaw, Pacino manages the difficult feat of making an official hero appealing. With additions such as *Fuzz* (1972), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), and *The Black Marble* (1979), the new genre was off and running. Sometimes it stumbled, as with *The Onion Field* (1979), a movie that begins dramatically with the kidnapping and shooting of two police officers

but then loses its way by following the story into the courts and prison. The blaxploitation detective films (*Shaft* [1971], *Shaft's Big Score* [1972], and *Shaft in Africa* [1973]) probed in a direction that eventually proved to be a dead end.¹⁴ Even the missteps, however, were part of the process through which the new genre figured out what it could and could not do well.

Boldest of the new cop movies was *Cruising* (1980), the story of an undercover officer investigating a series of slasher murders of gay men. Starring Al Pacino as the New York City cop who learns about not only homosexuality but also his own attitude toward it, the movie precipitated furious protests against its lurid views of life in a gay subculture.¹⁵ However, Pacino's cruiser is both plausible and attractive; and at the end, with his girlfriend cross-dressing in the next room and the movie hinting that he himself may have become a slasher, the cop searches his reflection in the mirror as if questioning his sexual identity.

Also innovative is *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1997), the fifth in director Sidney Lumet's cycle of films about the inescapable moral dilemmas of policing. (The earlier four were *Serpico*, *The Offence* [1973], *Prince of the City* [1981], and *Q & A* [1990].) Lumet traces his interest in police corruption to childhood: "When I was a kid we'd be pitching pennies and the cops would come along, break us up and keep the pennies."¹⁶ In *Night Falls* the lead figure (played by Andy Garcia) is a former cop turned prosecutor who must choose between protecting a criminal and safeguarding his own father, a detective whose corruption he has uncovered. Like *Cruising*, *Night Falls* finds a creative solution to the old problem of how to focus on an official hero without boring the audience. It gives him a moral dilemma to struggle with while he cleans up the department.

The cop film genre began subdividing into types. One variety is the rogue cop movie, in which the lead officer will do anything to destroy his or her opponent. Direct descendants of *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection*, with *The Big Heat* a distant ancestor, rogue cop movies include *Ten to Midnight* (1983), *Cop* (1988), *One Good Cop* (1991), *Insomnia* (both the 1997 Norwegian version and the 2002 Al Pacino remake), and *The Negotiator* (1998). A second type is the corrupt cop movie, in which the lead officer misuses his or her position for personal gain. This category includes *An Innocent Man* (1989); *Internal Affairs* (1990); *Romeo Is Bleeding* (1993); the high-spirited *Unlawful Entry* (1992), in which Ray Liotta plays the bad guy with Cagney-

esque gusto; and *L. A. Confidential*. The corrupt cop category also includes *Cop Land* (1997), in which a pack of venal officers is eventually done in by an internal affairs investigator (Robert De Niro) and a lumpish local cop (Sylvester Stallone, transformed from action hero into a character so thick in mind and body that, as reviewer Anthony Lane put it, "he's like a brick wall walking into himself").¹⁷

Other types that appeared with some frequency were the cop comedy, the honest cop film, and the woman cop picture. Cop comedies such as the *Police Academy* series (1984 and following), the *Beverly Hills Cop* series (1984, 1987, 1994), the *Naked Gun* series (1988, 1991, 1994), and *The Hard Way* (1991) make themselves acceptable by parodying not police officers but other cop films. The honest cop movie, which has seldom improved on *Serpico*, includes such variations as *Prince of the City*, *Witness* (1985), and *The Untouchables* (1987). *Deep Cover* (1992), starring Laurence Fishburn as an undercover agent who embraces his drug dealer role a bit too enthusiastically, blends the honest cop with the corrupt cop film. Hollywood started including women cops in police movies in the 1970s, but for a long time these women ended up in bed with their partners (as in *The Black Marble*), or had to take orders from other cops and even civilians (*Above the Law* [1988]), or got shot for their efforts to enter male territory (*The Enforcer*).¹⁸ With the exception of *Black Widow* (1987), it was not until the 1990s that films such as *Blue Steel* (1990), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Point of No Return* (1993), *Copycat* (1995), and *Fargo* (1996) began featuring women cops as heroes in their own right.

Most successful of all were the cop action films that dominated the screen in the 1980s and 1990s, especially the *Lethal Weapon* (1987, 1989, 1992, 1998) and *Die Hard* (1988, 1990, 1995) series. These overlap with buddy-cop films, another high-voltage type that tends to feature odd-couple partnerships (*48 Hrs.* [1982], *Colors* [1988], *New Jack City* [1991]).¹⁹ Most cop action revolves around a white male police officer who can get along with neither his significant other, his boss, nor his partner and whose problem-solving skills are limited to throwing punches and firing guns. In *Heroes in Hard Times*, Neal King argues that these are essentially political films, expressions of rage and righteousness by white guys who feel themselves losing ground through affirmative action and national economic decline.

Working-class community protectors—cops, for short—blow through racial guilt, sexual hostility, and class resentment with a wise-cracking

defiance and a lot of firepower. By pitting themselves against the rich, racist, and woman-hating criminal class, cops stand tall at the centers of their stories. Hard times give them opportunities to retake the center stage they feel they've lost. While on that stage, with all eyes fixed upon them, heroes . . . stake out a white guy turf on which they can star as the most qualified, while they punish the evil around and within them.²⁰

That almost anyone can identify with the action heroes' sense of hard times helps explain the phenomenal appeal of their pictures.

Cop Films and Masculinities

Cop films serve as a medium for the definition of masculinity, participating in the construction and reconstruction of gender on the national and even international level, influencing how we react to men and how we ourselves "do" gender when we dress, walk, and talk. Since the early 1970s, cop films have repeatedly raised the gender-related question: "What makes a good police officer?" Sometimes they do this explicitly, as when, in *RoboCop* (1987), the bad guy, having captured the good cop, sneers, "You a good cop? Hot shot? Sure you are. Why you got to be some kind of a *great* cop to come in here by yourself." More often, cop films raise the question of what makes a good police officer indirectly, through character and plot. Specific responses to the question vary, but their general definitions tend to be the same: The good police officer is an ideal man. To identify one, cop films tell us, look for the other.

Earlier films, too, had raised this issue about the nature of the ideal crime investigator, and they, too, tended to respond with traditional definitions of masculinity, picturing the ideal man as fearless, heterosexual, independent, unemotional, and superhumanly powerful. That is, they tended to draw on and reinforce dominant notions of masculinity. Recently, however, movies have started to break with convention, offering new images showing that the ideal cop or private detective can be nonwhite, female, and a quite ordinary (though of course heroic) person.

Traditional Masculinities

Like many noirs, *Kiss Me Deadly* focuses on a private detective, in this case Mike Hammer, the hero of a popular novel series by Mickey Spillane. Mike's masculinity is initially defined by his tough-guy

talk, the surly banter with which he figuratively hammers the other characters. The film opens on a terrified woman running down a lonely road at night; after almost hitting her with his automobile, Mike's first words are, "You almost wrecked my car. Well? Get in." But the woman is more amused than offended by this churlish gallantry, and the audience, taking its cue from her, settles in to enjoy Mike's outrageous surliness.

Another aspect of Mike's masculinity (as his surname hints) is sexuality. He is a "bedroom dick," we learn, a private investigator who specializes in proving infidelity in divorce cases, and his secretary, Velda, would happily be his sexual slave. But while women throw themselves at Mike, he reacts with indifference. His job is not to seduce but to save them.

Appearing shortly after World War II, *Kiss Me Deadly* offered escape into unregimented glamour for young men returning from combat and settling down to more humdrum lives. Mike does not live in one of the cookie-cutter housing developments where many GIs were raising their families but an elegant apartment with a rolling bar and high-tech answering machine. Drawing on the stylish masculinity of 1930s films,²¹ the movie portrays a detective untrammelled by wife, kids, or regular job, roaming the city at will, driving classy sports cars and rescuing nearly nude blonds at night to the velvety tones of Nat King Cole. The film's opening—the woman running, the credits zooming, the car swerving—bespeaks an existence of excitement and speed.

To underscore Mike's masculinity, *Kiss Me Deadly* contrasts him with two groups of other men, police officers and menial laborers. Neither has much to do with the plot; rather, they function as foils, their deficiencies highlighting Mike's virtues. Mike easily fools police officers at a roadblock, and he has no use for the hectoring feds who solicit his help. But he befriends slow-witted or simply square working-class men, some of them childish immigrants, others simply saps who eat dinner with their families.

In the world of *Kiss Me Deadly*, then, Mike towers above everyone else in intellect and sophistication. He can enter any building, detect the tiniest clue, solve the most impenetrable mystery. Fearless, clever, sexy, and cool, Mike can win almost any fight and persuade almost anyone to do his bidding; even policemen grudgingly admire him. Tireless and unflappable, Mike is never at a loss for a wisecrack. Moreover, beneath that hard shell he is all heart—the man women long for and other men dream to be.

Mike Hammer is only one type of noir hero, as Frank Krutnik points out in his study of noir and masculinity; and Mike's body—beefier than that of, say, Bogart—is only one type of noir-hero physique. But noir's insistence on displaying a tough-guy personality—gutsy, indomitable, aloof—in a tough-guy body of some sort, points toward the future of masculinity among crime-film heroes. In particular, it foreshadows the spectacles of masculinity staged by cop action films, with their skillful satisfaction of scopophilic desires, their cultivation of viewer enjoyment of hard-bodied heroes who banter their way through beatings. Film scholars differ in their interpretations of detection films' obsession with masculinity, with Krutnik, for example, arguing that in noirs it betokens an underlying anxiety about manliness.²² But the wisecracks, not to mention the cigarettes dangling from heroes' lips during fistfights, to me suggest a supreme confidence in male identity and sexuality. Indeed, part of the pleasure of watching a noir or cop action film is the protagonist's unshakeable poise and, well, cocksureness.

Which returns us to the *Dirty Harry*s: Nearly twenty years after the release of *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Magnum Force* used much the same strategies to define the ideal man. *Magnum Force*, as noted earlier, formed part of an ongoing political debate over the nature of good policing—its goals, its limits, and its relationship to law. This debate, which drives the plot, is also presented as a quarrel within Harry Callahan, a conflict between the neofascist tendencies attributed to his character after the first *Dirty Harry* film and the respect for law he claims in *Magnum Force*. The film takes its title from Harry's gun, the symbol of his virility. As the credits roll, a huge black handgun, a .44 Magnum, points leftward; when the credits end, it turns toward us, an emblem of both police power and phallic potency. From then on, guns and flashlights repeatedly point our way, threatening to go off. Harry, it goes without saying, is the best shot of all.

Harry Callahan, like Mike Hammer before him, attracts women like flies but brushes them off, preoccupied with more important matters. Of the three women in *Magnum Force*, two make passes at Harry. The death-squad cops, too, are mad about Harry and his big gun. Harry professes indifference: "If the rest of you could shoot like them, I wouldn't care if the whole damn department was queer." But the film *does* care, defining good men as straight, bad ones as homosexual.²³

In Harry Callahan's case, as in that of Mike Hammer, impudence and caustic wit ("Do you feel lucky?"; "Go ahead, make my day") are

intrinsic to masculinity, evidence of imperturbable self-possession. But Eastwood's long, erect body even better expresses the controlled manhood of the action hero. Moreover, the *Dirty Harrys* go beyond *Kiss Me Deadly* and other noirs in the camera's willingness to ogle the hero's body and put it on display. With bigger budgets and better technology, the *Dirty Harrys* are also able to trump noirs in establishing the hero's dominance over the city, tracking Harry with cameras mounted on cranes and helicopters as he traverses San Francisco, using his movements to demark boundaries between lawfulness and violation. An example of this boundary-setting camera work can be found in the series' first film, when the villain Scorpio, careening through the city on a stolen school bus, looks out the window to see, on a distant bridge, the figure of Harry, calmly waiting for him. But throughout the series, Harry's urban trajectories lay down lines that bad guys should not presume to cross. His disciplining of the city, like his disciplining of himself, is part of his masculinity.

Masculinities and Race

That the lead characters of *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Magnum Force* are white is so obvious and predictable that we may take it for granted (especially if we are white), hardly realizing that race enters into cinematic definitions of both the good police officer and the perfect man. Nonetheless, on the ideological level, cop films have traditionally defined whiteness as a preferred status. They do not make the point explicitly, of course, and moviemakers may well deliver the message unconsciously (and indeed may be dismayed to recognize it in their work). But movies are full of meanings that are not explicitly articulated, including messages about race.²⁴

For example, if there are no African American characters at all in a movie, people of color may be more aware than whites of watching what critic Anna Everett calls a "segregated" film—one from which people like themselves are excluded; even if whites recognize the exclusion, it will have different meanings for them. Moreover, watching "integrated" films—movies with some African American actors and characters—people of color may be more conscious than whites of the racial hierarchy in which members of their group seldom qualify as the hero. (Again, even if whites are conscious of the hierarchy, it will have different implications for them.) In addition, because one

of the pleasures of watching a police movie is identification with the hero, people of color may forfeit some of that pleasure when the hero is white. One subtextual message in many movies is that whites are "privileged or ideal spectators."²⁵

Traditionally, the subtexts of cop films assumed or implied black inferiority. In *Kiss Me Deadly*, the highest-status black person, Nat King Cole, is present merely as a disembodied voice singing "Rather Have the Blues" on Mike's car radio. The black bartender and black singer at Pigalle, a bar Mike frequents, function only as props, to create an atmosphere and show that Mike is hip; they, too, are dehumanized. Eddie, the black gym manager, providing comic relief with his oversized cigar, petty criminality, and cowardice, is less a character than a personification of Sambo-like foolishness. Moreover, Mike does not even acknowledge the presence of a black man in the dead woman's apartment, packing her belongings. These messages of black inconsequence, like *Kiss Me Deadly's* parallel messages about ethnicity, elevate both Mike and Anglo-Saxon whiteness.

Kiss Me Deadly appeared on the verge of the Civil Rights movement; but two decades later, *Magnum Force* carried similar messages about race. Harry's African American sidekick, Early Smith (Felton Perry), exists mainly to demonstrate that Harry is not racist and that he is an excellent mentor, a good "father" to Early, in contrast to Briggs, the bad "father" of the vigilante cops. Indeed, Harry saves Early's life. But Early is also a foil: Less mature than Harry, weaker, and more squeamish, he merely watches during an airport scene in which Harry rescues a hijacked plane. While Harry detects a bomb in his own mailbox, saving himself and neighbors from destruction, the less-alert Early dies when his mailbox bomb explodes. Early exists to make points about Harry, not as a character in his own right.

The most explicit sex scene in *Magnum Force* involves an African American pimp who rapes an African American prostitute and then beats her to death. Here the film draws on the long-term association of blackness with sexual savagery. The scene, which has no relevance to the plot, exists to imply that whites are more civilized than blacks and to offer an opportunity for voyeurism to viewers who might be offended by the rape of a white woman.

For anyone who belongs to groups that movies subtextually denigrate, spectatorship requires what W. E. B. Du Bois called a "double consciousness": One is forced to identify simultaneously with one's

oppressor and one's own group.²⁶ To experience the pleasures of film, one must to some degree negate oneself. Thus, spectatorship re-creates social hierarchies.

Cop action films seem to thumb their collective nose at political correctness, insisting on the whiteness of their heroes and nonwhiteness (at least much of the time) of their sidekicks.²⁷ However, while acknowledging the centrality of race in cop action, Neal King argues that such movies are not simply racist. Their working-class heroes ("louts") would not have such a sense of losing ground were they not white males in a profession that until recently excluded everyone else. But they realize, King maintains, that their true enemy is rich white men (or surrogates in the form of Japanese businessmen or hippie-nazi-queers), and cop heroes eventually apologize to sidekicks whom they may have earlier insulted, bonding with them so completely that, as in the penultimate scene of *Lethal Weapon*, black and white partners draw their guns in unison. Moreover, King continues, the heroes come to feel guilty about their racism, which is why they volunteer for so much punishment before the final showdown. In this interpretation, what cop action heroes patrol is not the city but the boundaries of whiteness; in a sense, they learn to police themselves. "The fun," King concludes, "comes in watching the white guys figure out how to get along in a changing world, and watching everyone else learn how to deal with [these] buffoons."²⁸

While King's argument may be overly psychoanalytical for these simple action heroes, it usefully forestalls hasty conclusions about the meanings of race in cop action. The genre, King points out, forces viewers to examine racial tensions and to listen as a range of nonwhite characters argue back against the protagonists' white male authority.²⁹

A new set of detection films with black male leads avoids the head-on collisions of cop action, conducting race discussions more civilly. *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) turns noir traditions inside out, most overtly by featuring a black private eye, Ezekiel ("Easy") Rawlins (Denzel Washington). While nostalgically re-creating a black suburb of the post-World War II period, the movie exposes the era's overt racism. Mouse (Don Cheadle), the knee-jerk assassin, provides comic relief and a sharp contrast to Easy's more mature and complicated character, but instead of laughing at Mouse, the film dwells affectionately on his gold tooth, natty clothes, and harebrained violence.

Other recent films, too, try to counterbalance earlier, raced definitions of the Good Cop. *Shoot to Kill* (1988) features Sidney Poitier



Figure 4.2. *Seven* (1995) blends two genres, the cop and the serial killer film, while at the same time invoking a much earlier narrative tradition, that of the medieval morality play. It was the first major cop film to depict a black officer as more skillful than his white buddy. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

as an aging cop who teams up with a younger, more active civilian (Tom Berenger) to traipse through the Pacific Northwest in search of a killer. *Seven* (1995) gives us—at last—a police movie in which the black cop (Morgan Freeman) is not only the hero but also a better officer than his younger WASP partner (Brad Pitt). In *Enemy of the State* (1998), Will Smith stars as a lawyer forced to investigate a surveillance conspiracy, while *The Bone Collector* (1999) and *Man on Fire* (2004) both star Denzel Washington in coplike roles.

Revising Traditional Masculinities

As these examples indicate, late twentieth-century police films began to comment critically on earlier cinematic conventions of masculinity. While they continued to pose the question of what constitutes good policing, some police films now answered it differently and more inclusively.

One sign of this trend was the release of *RoboCop*, a parody of the Eastwoodian supercop who feels nothing, fears nothing, and shoots everything in sight. *RoboCop* talks tough, but his wisecracks are

computer-programmed. Like Harry, he has a bigger gun than other officers and (in a scene that specifically cites *Magnum Force*) beats them all at target practice; however, the mindless RoboCop keeps shooting till the target is destroyed. Confronting definitional issues head-on, *RoboCop* poses this question: If we could build a mechanical police officer—invulnerable to bullets, programmed to detect all bad guys, and equipped to wipe them out without pause—would *this* be the ideal cop? The movie explores the issue through a character that is a cross between an (almost) dead police officer named Murphy (Peter Weller) and a robotic shell. Half-human and half-machine, RoboCop realizes the perfect-cop dream of earlier police films. True, he is absurdly violent, but his vigilantism has almost rid Detroit of crime.

Just as he is about to kill Detroit's number one bad guy, Clarence Boddeker, however, RoboCop gets a message from his internal computer: UPHOLD THE LAW. Like Harry Callahan before him, RoboCop suddenly becomes admirable because he does *not* take the law into his own hands. Soon we are given yet another reason for respect: In a final battle with the evil enforcement-droid ED-209, RoboCop wins because his partial humanity makes him more intelligent. At the film's end, he dismantles his metal frame, renouncing invulnerability and returning to ordinary manhood. Murphy's search for identity, and the film's search for the perfect officer, is complete.

RoboCop's gender critique halts abruptly, however, when it turns to femininity. Reflecting the then-recent entry of women into policing, the film gives Murphy a female buddy, Ann Lewis (Nancy Allen). Yet it takes the male's point of view, asking how women cops affect male officers' sense of masculinity. At their first encounter, Lewis and Murphy verbally tussle over who will drive the squad car, an argument he settles by slipping behind the wheel. Later we see Lewis bringing Murphy coffee, an act that is supposed to show that she has risen above petty concerns about servitude but actually suggests the opposite. Lewis is invariably—and cheerfully—subservient.

Lewis is also less competent than Murphy. When she catches a member of Boddeker's gang who is urinating, she glances down, enabling the man to disarm her; thus, moments later she cannot protect Murphy from Boddeker's gunfire. This scene implies that women's entry into policing can spell death for their partners—just what opponents of female officers were predicting.

Internal Affairs, starring Andy Garcia as the new guy in the internal affairs division of the Los Angeles Police Department and Richard

Gere as the low-down, manipulative cop who is his quarry, shows a greater awareness of and sophistication about gender issues. Yet it is unable to move beyond a deep ambivalence toward female cops, represented here, in a fine performance by Laurie Metcalf, by Garcia's partner. Metcalf's character outranks Garcia's, and he both respects her superior skills and values her as a friend. But at the same time, *Internal Affairs* has Garcia give her orders and describe her as a "dyke." Gere shoots her in the end, and the film closes without revealing whether she is going to live, another sign, perhaps, of its ambivalence toward female cops.

Director Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* goes further in questioning traditional ideas about what it means to be a good police officer. Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is exactly what her names suggests: clear, sterling, and bright. Her character incorporates some traits of earlier male police heroes; for example, although men find her attractive, Clarice shuns romance to focus on her work. Her only real competition as hero is Hannibal ("the Cannibal") Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), and he is "pure psychopath," evil to her good. Like male officers, Clarice does not drop her eyes when others stare but returns looks with a steady gaze. This insistence on her right to look, moreover, does not bring doom, as a mere female glance does in *RoboCop*.

While Clarice Starling's character echoes that of earlier police heroes, however, it also creates a new model. Clarice does not talk tough or insult others. She is not a know-it-all ("I want to learn from you," she tells Hannibal). Nor is she unfeeling; in fact, the film centers around her attempt to come to grips with the death of her father, her need for a good parent, and her compassion for unfortunates. Although Clarice is as impassive as Harry Callahan in the face of horrors, she can also cry.

Like many male cop film heroes, Clarice has an African American sidekick, in this case another agent-in-training. Ardelia is a less important character than Clarice, but she is not given negative traits to contrast with Clarice's positive ones. The two women sleuth together (in nightgowns, no less!—shades of Nancy Drew), cooperating to solve the mystery of the killer's identity.³⁰

Devil in a Blue Dress poses yet another sort of challenge to traditional cinematic definitions of the good police officer. While the film's central theme is racism, this is also a movie about breaking free of dysfunctional concepts of masculinity and being a good man. Through the character of Easy Rawlins, it shows that the ideal man can be tough

and sensitive at the same time. Whereas the hardbitten detective of traditional noirs is a static character, perfectly formed from the start, Easy's character develops as he learns how to outsmart his enemies. At the start of the film he is penniless and unemployed; at the end he plans to become a private investigator. In the final scene we see Easy surrounded not by the sports cars and guns that have long signified masculinity but children and families. It is a domestic scene, a representation of an aspect of life—ordinary, relaxed, community life—that earlier police films rigorously excluded.

Detection movies have also started questioning the heterosexism that lies at the heart of dominant definitions of the real man and good cop, and revision is taking place in the genre where one might least expect it: cop action films. Cop action is saturated with sexuality—displays of half-naked male bodies, spurting blood, baseball bats and battering rams and machine guns, slashed thighs, orgasmic pain, beatific smiles, heads caught in crotch holds, tangles of thrashing male limbs, constant “fuck you”s, anal rape jokes (“I never forget an asshole,” Sergeant Martin Riggs [Mel Gibson] announces in *Lethal Weapon*; “I’m going to catch them and fuck them”), and endless sadomasochism. Moreover, these films overflow with intense buddy love—and it is love between men who, although they don’t make a big deal of it, cannot help but notice that the other is impossibly attractive. What are we to make of all this sexuality and adoration?

Again, *Heroes in Hard Times* proves useful. Refusing to label action heroes as straight, gay, or bisexual, King concludes that, irrespective of what their sexual preferences may be when they are with their wives and girlfriends, cop action heroes when they are with each other enjoy sex through beatings, rippings, and sexualized banter.

If Martin of *Lethal Weapon 2* says that he will fuck a man’s ass, later takes it in the thigh with a large knife, rams the blade back into his opponent’s chest, and then drops a trailer on him with a happy smile, then maybe that’s the sort of fucking Martin likes to do. Next, a criminal shoots Martin many times, and sidekick Roger blows that criminal away. Roger cradles the wounded Martin in his arms; the two seem happy as the sidekick gently strokes his bleeding hero and they joke about the danger of smoking cigarettes. They giggle as Martin tells Roger what a beautiful man he is and asks him for a kiss.

King concludes:

This is their sexuality. This is what they want. This is how they live and die hard. The payoff scenes for which people know this genre leave

straight gentleness behind and give over to the wilder side of physical play: the wrenching, sodomite trauma to manly bodies that bring these movies to their collective climax.³¹

Cop action films, then, open up space for a sexuality that is neither straight nor queer nor bisexual but intense, playful, and powerful. King terms it "sodomite slaughter."

Film theory validates itself to the extent that it illuminates movies themselves. King's sodomite-slaughter thesis brings a new level of intelligibility to the viewing of cop action, even when a specific film is less drenched in sexual content than a *Die Hard* or *Lethal Weapon*. John Woo's *The Killer* (1989), about the relationship between a hit man named Jeffrey (Chow Yun-Fat) and a police inspector named Eddie Li (Danny Lee), is a case in point. As Eddie hunts Jeffrey down, he studies evidence of his quarry's choices and values; the more he learns, the more admiring he becomes ("He's no ordinary assassin"), especially as he realizes that Jeffrey in fact cares deeply about justice. In their first encounter, the two men can't take their eyes off one another (partly because they are pointing revolvers at one another's temples). Circumstances (love of the same woman, hatred of a common enemy) push them into partnership and—there is no better way to put it—they fall in love. The latent eroticism of their connection, their wild romanticism, and their fantasies of oneness make *The Killer* primarily the story of a perfect, tragic love—although it is also a Hong Kong action film in which the bodies pile up and cars explode. The love is one we cannot name, since "sodomite slaughter" hardly applies to a film in which the touching is always chaste,³² no one shouts "fuck you," and even the shooters wear suits and ties. But at least we can recognize the narrative for what it is: a story of ardent, doomed love.

Cops in Postmodernist and Critical Films

Postmodernist and alternative-tradition films comment, albeit in very different ways, on both conventional cop film heroes and the politically correct protagonists of more recent detection movies. Making fun of cop film traditions, postmodernist films parody their earnestness and mock their idols. *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) clowns around with two coplike characters, one of them Mr. Orange (Tim Roth), an undercover officer whom the robbers think is their accomplice. Wounded in an early scene, Mr. Orange spends most of the movie on the floor



Figure 4.3. John Woo's *The Killer* (1989) pairs a police officer with an assassin, but like the more traditional cop-buddy film, this film, too, explores an intense male friendship, one here made all the more pleasurable by the potential lethality of its embrace. Photo used by permission of Photofest.

bleeding to death from a stomach wound. That his agony seems to occur in real time, taking as long as the movie itself, creates tension between the viewers' expectation that someone will call an ambulance and the criminals' outlandish indifference. Even Mr. White (Harvey Keitel), the sole character concerned about Mr. Orange's plight, refuses to call a doctor and spends a lot of time on the floor with Orange, locked in a sticky embrace that pokes fun at the male bonding of cop action films. The second coplike character is a security guard whom we see tied to a chair and brutalized by the "stone-cold psychopath" Mr. Blonde, who performs a courtship dance, cuts off the guard's ear, and inquires, "Was that as good for you as it was for me?" Writer-director Quentin Tarantino shows no reverence whatsoever for traditional cop heroes, dicing and sending them up with glee.

Another postmodernist movie, *Fargo*, satirizes both the action cop protagonist and the trend toward culturally sensitive cop heroes through the character of Marge Gunderson, who is not only female but also hugely pregnant. Banal and bland, obsessed by food, and devoted to a dolt, Marge nonetheless catches the killer, reacting matter-of-factly to what he is doing to his accomplice in the wood chipper. The writer-director team of Ethan and Joel Coen takes the potentially

boring, goody-two-shoes character of Marge and, through deft lampooning of cop film traditions, makes her memorable.

Alternative-tradition films, on the other hand, give us unredeemable cops, lost souls doomed to wander forever in a maze of cynicism. *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985) begins with an older secret service agent being shot to death under ambiguous circumstances; we cannot tell whether he was part of a counterfeiting scheme. His younger partner sets out to avenge the death but, pursuing that end through illegal means, moves ever deeper into the heart of darkness. His new buddy is shocked ("Why don't you just go blow his [a suspect's] brains out?" he asks sarcastically; "That's what you want to do, isn't it?"). But the avenger has already decided that "I can do whatever I want," and so he does, until he himself is killed. At that point the new partner takes over as the bad cop, starting a fresh cycle of brutality and betrayal.

State of Grace (1990), another critical film, stars Séan Penn as an undercover cop who returns to his old New York City haunts and links up with former gang friends. His assignment grows increasingly difficult as he becomes divided between his loyalty to his old criminal companions and to the cops with whom he secretly works. Eventually crushed by the strain of this double life, he tries to quit the force but cannot. Without resolving the issue of torn loyalties, the movie ends by killing nearly everyone off during a hyperviolent shoot-out in a bar. Penn's character survives but seems destined for a life of sorrow and despondency.

Movies in the alternative or critical tradition gravitate toward the character of the corrupt police officer, demonstrating that there is no such thing as a good cop (*Bad Lieutenant* [1992], *Q & A*, *Romeo Is Bleeding*). By implication, they also suggest that there is no such thing as a good man. In both respects they differ from the noir tradition in which they have their origins. Noirs expose a murky world in which everyone is tinged with sin and despair, but their private eyes are nonetheless admirable, wise guys who can solve the mystery and get the girl. Alternative-tradition police films, on the other hand, have no heroes. When postmodernist films deny us heroes, they do so in order to comment on other movies—to burlesque crime movie traditions. But alternative-tradition films aim at negating the very idea of the hero.

Thus, detection films continue to evolve in a variety of directions, adapting to new environments, extending into previously undiscov-

ered niches, incorporating the latest cultural trends, cross-fertilizing with other genres. This vigorous multiplication can madden the tidy taxonomist, but it is a sign of the genre's vitality, and by examining the subtypes we can come to appreciate the genre's amoeba-like adaptability.

Notes

1. Other films of the period with female sleuths include *The Thin Man* (1934) and its five sequels, all of them featuring the mystery-solving couple played by Myrna Loy and William Powell; Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), with Joan Fontaine as the young second wife who must solve the mystery of her predecessor's identity; and *Nancy Drew, Reporter* (1939), based on a popular book series about a girl detective. For a useful analysis of masculinity in some of these movies, see Todd 2005.
2. See, especially, Greenfield, Osborn, and Robson 2001b.
3. President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice 1967.
4. The straightlaced cop figure turns up again in *L. A. Confidential* (1997) in the character of Exley (Guy Pearce), the prim, bespectacled young cop who takes himself too seriously.
5. This aspect of noir tradition was carried into the 1960s by the James Bond series, featuring a hero who, like noir protagonists, was both naughty and nice.
6. Schickel 1996: 258.
7. In the same year, 1968, Siegel also released *Madigan*, another urban police film, and director Peter Yates released *Bullitt*, a prototypical cop film starring Steve McQueen.
8. Paul Newman, a liberal, and Frank Sinatra turned down the Dirty Harry role before it was accepted by the more conservative Eastwood.
9. Carlos Clarens (1980: 303) writes: "*Dirty Harry* was reviewed in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* as a violation of civil rights . . . and attacked as excessively violent by practically everybody." For quotes from the reviews, including those by the *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael, who was deeply offended by the film, see Schickel 1996.
10. The other *Dirty Harry* sequels are *The Enforcer* (1976), *Sudden Impact* (1983), and *The Dead Pool* (1988).
11. Warshow 1974b.
12. Wood 1992: 478.
13. Cawelti, as quoted in Maltby 1995: 121.
14. The Internet Movie Database lists 193 blaxploitation movies and indicates that the genre had a lengthy run. However, the blaxploitation film's popularity reached its peak in the 1970s. George (1994: 63) holds that *Rocky* (1976), by showing Hollywood "that the black action crowd can be attracted by films with prominent black second bananas," dealt "a crucial death blow to the already sagging blaxploitation genre." Also see Reid 1995.

15. The history of the film and gays' objections to it are outlined by Russo (1987), who calls *Cruising's* release "the last straw in a long stream of Hollywood horrors" about gay life (239). Compare Willis (1997), who argues that *Cruising* is "not so much homophobic as intent on targeting and aggravating homophobic fantasies that the spectator may harbor" (233 n. 27).
16. Lewine 1997: CY4.
17. Lane 1997: 78.
18. For more examples, see Hale 1998.
19. For analyses of buddy films, see Brown 1993 and Fuchs 1993.
20. King 1999: 2.
21. See Todd 2005.
22. Krutnik 1991: part 3. The debates are summarized by King 1999.
23. *Magnum Force* again tweaks homosexuals in a scene in which a fey neighbor flirts madly with Harry.
24. Ames 1992; Dyer 1997.
25. Everett 1995–96: 28.
26. Du Bois 1997 (1903): 49. The psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1968) referred to this experience as having a "colonized" mind.
27. King (1999: 42) reports that in the 193 cop action movies he studied, 80 percent of the heroes were white, compared to 40 percent of the sidekicks.
28. King 1999: 16.
29. Christopher Ames (1992) makes related points about cop action films, noting that the genre's interracial buddy teams reverse the nineteenth-century racist formula that pits the civilized white man against the dark-skinned savage. The white cop of *Lethal Weapon* and other cop action movies is the more savage of the two, and the black partner is sometimes portrayed as not only more civilized but also in need of remasculinization by his wilder colleague. Ames, like King, recognizes the strong homoerotic undercurrents of cop action movies that feature buddies, speaking of such partnerships as "idyllic anti-marriages" (a concept he borrows from Leslie Fielder) in the tradition of *Huck Finn* and *Moby Dick*.
30. While *Silence of the Lambs* rejects many of the gender and racial assumptions of earlier cop films, it reforges links between criminality and homosexuality. The character of Buffalo Bill is little more than a collection of clichés about gay men: He communicates with his current victim in faggy baby talk and he hates women even while trying to become one. In our fullest view of him, Buffalo Bill is in drag, a nipple pierced by a ring, dancing nude. *Silence of the Lambs* has shaken off other biases but continues to denigrate homosexuality.
31. King 1999: 177.
32. Chaste but not lacking sexuality, as in the sacramental church scene when Eddie pours gunpowder into Jeffrey's wound while Jeffrey bites down on something hard, in this case a stick.