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"You'll Have to Take It: Urban Vigilantism and American Film, 1967-1985"

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YOU'LL HAVE TO TAKE IT: URBAN VIGILANTISM AND AMERICAN FILM,
1967-1985

A Thesis Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Joseph Roskos
2014

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INTRODUCTION

A little over 45 years ago on October 18, 1968, in Detroit, Michigan, Republican vice-presidential candidate Spiro T. Agnew addressed a crowd about the city's conditions. He stated, "I've been in many of them (ghettos) and, to some extent, if you've seen one city slum you've seen them all."¹ In June 1967, Detroit had been engulfed in violence for five days after a riot erupted at a party in an unlicensed bar in an African American community. Police raided the party, but they retreated when the bar's patrons threw pebbles at them.² Officials later learned that the supposed "model city" for race relations was plagued by social and economic problems for African Americans.³ However, many white Americans perceived African Americans as straying from the non-violent and neutral mantra, "We shall overcome."

The Black Panther Party (1966) of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seal embodied this supposedly new form of racial pride. The words, "We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.... We will protect ourselves from the force and violence of the racist police and the racist military, by whatever means necessary," were

¹ Alan Axelrod, *America Out Loud: The Most Inspirational, Irreverent, Intelligent, Ignorant, Influential, and Important Things Americans Have Said and the Stories Behind Them* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2008), 212.

² Max Arthur Herman, *Fighting in the Streets: Ethnic Succession and Urban Unrest in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2005), 76.

³ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 40.

frightening to some whites.⁴ The rise of Blaxploitation films also reflected the assertiveness shown by black communities. It seemed that cities were aflame and law and order was crumbling before the march of protestors. A political advertisement from Nixon's 1968 campaign portrayed cities in chaos. In the advertisement, a voice said, "[T]here is no cause that justifies resort to violence. Let us recognize that the first right of every American is to be free from domestic violence..."⁵ If police authorities could not enforce the laws, then who could?

During the early 1970s, some moviegoers were relieved to know someone was symbolically protecting them from violence. As the lone gunslinger of the Wild West became less prominent in movies, a heroic and individualistic figure appeared on big screens across the nation: the vigilante. Movie posters reassured patrons, "Detective Harry Callahan. He doesn't break murder cases. He smashes them" and "Vigilante, city style—judge, jury, and executioner."⁶ By the end of the 1970s, the "Guardian Angels" were patrolling the streets of New York City. Within this environment, Bernhard Goetz shot four African American teenagers in a subway station in 1984. Although consistently disparaged by critics, vigilante films flourished as areas struggled to combat the crack-cocaine epidemic and criminal violence issues. Individual action and collective action coexisted, on-screen and off-screen. Real-life and fictional urban vigilantes collided,

⁴ "What We Want, What We Believe (1966): Black Panther Party," in *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America, 8th Edition*, William H. Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff, Beth Bailey, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 117-119.

⁵"The First Civil Right (Nixon, 1968)," Museum of the Moving Image.<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968/the-first-civil-right> (accessed December 19, 2013)

⁶"Dirty Harry (1971) Taglines," IMDB, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066999/taglines?ref_=tt_stry_tg (accessed December 19, 2013), and "Death Wish (1974) Taglines," IMDB, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071402/taglines?ref_=tt_stry_tg (accessed December 19, 2013).

interacting with each other and attempting to take back the streets, in reality and on the big screen.

In American culture, the valiant vigilante has been highly regarded for his ability to do for others what they could not do for themselves. They are the faces of bravery against perceived evils. Yet, the status of the vigilante has been subjected to intense scrutiny; the vigilante is praised and scorned. In reality, he is an armed man or group of citizens patrolling the neighborhood, looking for criminals and suspicious activity. Between 1967 and 1985, through individual and collective acts of vigilance, Americans responded to changing social, political, and economic conditions within cities that pitted white Americans against racial minorities, yet brought them together against crime, thus supplementing and challenging traditional forms of authority by becoming civically engaged.

My thesis is an effort to show how vigilantism as expressed through the politics of race interacted from the late 1960s until the mid-1980s, serving to support a culture of backlash that drew from the public's mistrust of government institutions and authorities, and its reactions to crime, class conflict, and racial tensions. Vigilante films served as the battleground where class conflicts were played out; violent backlash was realized; historical wars were refought; cultures and principles clashed; and people cleansed their communities of crime and illegal drug-use. The culture of backlash as portrayed in vigilante films as well as historical events showed how their relationship was mutually reinforcing through the legitimization of on-screen and off-screen vigilantism, which further normalized extralegal activity within American society. Overall, Americans within reality and film who were "left behind" by economic and social changes or fought

to keep communities from falling apart organized to defend their neighborhoods against crime, drugs, and urban decay.

Multiple historians throughout the twentieth century have discussed the study of vigilantism and its functions in American society. Historian Richard Maxwell Brown has written that during the nineteenth-century, vigilante groups primarily consisted of the local elite, who acted on their own to maintain community values and protect property. Brown writes that neo-vigilante groups and law enforcement tended to work with each other during the 1960s and early 1970s, yet extralegal violence still occurred.⁷ In his book, *Vigilantism: Political History of Private Power in America* (1990), William C. Culberson argues that domestic terrorism denies social progress in the United States, whereas vigilantism combats factors that undermine social order; as a progressive force, it challenges and criticizes social policy.⁸ Furthermore, historian William D. Carrigan's *The Making of a Lynching Culture* looks at the history of violence and vigilantism of central Texas from its independence to the mid-1910s, focusing on primary sources from the period, which show how the shaping of historical memory led to the glorification of violence and the creation of a culture that legitimized it.⁹ Author Jennet Kirkpatrick argues in *Uncivil Disobedience* (2008) that vigilante groups have often asserted that their conception of law is more "pure" than "institutional law because it represents the will of the people or their morality in an unadulterated form."¹⁰ Finally, in her recent work

⁷ Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 96-97, 127-129.

⁸ William C. Culberson, *Vigilantism: Political History of Private Power in America* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 42-43.

⁹ William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 3-12.

¹⁰ Jennet Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil Disobedience: Studies in Violence and Democratic Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 7-8.

Vigilantes and Lynch Mobs: Narratives of Community and Nation (2012), Lisa Arellano focuses on vigilante narratives and shows how vigilantes shaped and modified their narratives to legitimize their violent actions and how over time different groups of people modified and remolded these narratives.¹¹ Whereas most of the research of the previous authors focuses on vigilantism in American society until World War II, my research builds upon these historical studies by focusing on vigilantism as it applied to society between the late 1960s and mid-1980s.

The vigilante film genre has been addressed only briefly in historical works. Thus, much of the historical literature concerning the topic is devoid of in-depth analysis of films that showed how vigilante films conveyed white backlash during the 1970s and 1980s. In *Six Guns and Society* (1975), Will Wright argues that the vigilante character originated from the lone gunman in American Western films, stating that the vigilante is forced out of society due to his desire to right a wrong that has been done to him.¹² In addition, historian Ed Guerrero has argued in his book *Framing Blackness* (1993) that productions such as *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974) signaled a conservative white audience's desire to reject gains made by African Americans and liberal social and cultural reforms from the 1960s.¹³ Also, in the book *Shots in the Mirror* (2006), criminologist and historian Nicole Rafter argues that "Vigilante movies debate the strength and purpose of law, with most of them arguing we need more law, either to

¹¹ Lisa Arellano, *Vigilantes and Lynch Mobs: Narratives of Community and Nation* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012), 14-15.

¹² Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Analysis of the Western* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 156-157.

¹³ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), 104-110.

control the vigilantes or to make up for weaknesses of the law that engender vigilantism in the first place...”¹⁴

My interpretive approach operates within a cultural-historical framework that emphasizes the role that race, ethnicity, and class played in constructing, shaping, and modifying cultural images of criminality and vigilantism. My research focuses on analyzing vigilante films from the 1970s and 1980s to address and support my thesis. These films will be examined: *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Death Wish* (1974), *Vigilante Force* (1976), *The Exterminator* (1980), *We're Fighting Back* (1981), which was inspired by the formation of the “Guardian Angels” in 1979, *Fighting Back* (1982), *Vigilante* (1983), *The Annihilators* (1985), and *Death Wish 3* (1985). These films were chosen based on the time of their production and the centering of their narratives around an individual or extralegal body that defends itself against criminals when law enforcement is unable to function.

My thesis is divided into three chapters. Within each chapter, I address what substantive economic and social changes were occurring contemporaneously within urban areas during the time of the films’ production and how conservative politics interacted with the conveyance of crime as displayed through vigilante movies. Chapter 1 considers how housing discrimination, white flight, deindustrialization, and lack of economic opportunity for African Americans in the North in the post-World War II era contributed to the outbreak of civil disorder and rebellion within ghettos across America. The Newark Riot of 1967 is used as a case study to demonstrate how these factors

¹⁴Nicole Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 156

spawned a vigilante movement within Newark called the North Ward Citizens Committee, which was led by a politically ambitious and populist Italian American named Anthony Imperiale. During the latter half of the 1960s, crime and the perceived inability of law enforcement to handle these problems formulated and shaped public attitudes, thus laying the groundwork for the emergence of the urban vigilante. Moreover, U.S. Supreme Court rulings such as *Miranda* (1966) and *Mapp* (1961) became the subject of scrutiny among real conservative politicians and movie characters that disparaged the supposed inhibitions that these rulings placed on criminal prosecution. Within this chapter, the first vigilante films, *Dirty Harry* (1972) and *Death Wish* (1974), are analyzed.

Chapter 2 focuses on vigilante films produced between 1975 and 1985, noting how a subgenre of vigilante film developed, which focused on transposing the experiences of Vietnam veterans into American urban settings. The genre began to emphasize the collective nature of vigilantism (*Vigilante Force*, *The Exterminator*, and *The Annihilators*). Toward the end of the decade, both white and African American communities advocated the creation of community anti-crime organizations, aiming to prevent the sale of illegal drugs and street crimes such as muggings and vandalism. In both cases, the aim was not to address the causes of crime as much as it was to maintain law and order.

Chapter 3 addresses and analyzes films (*We're Fighting Back* and *Fighting Back*) that reflected the growth of extralegal community vigilante organizations during the latter half of the 1970s and into the 1980s, giving particular attention to New York City's vigilante organization, the "Guardian Angels," as well as addressing the actions of

Bernhard Goetz in 1984, the “Subway Vigilante.” In addition, Reagan’s presidency embodied the conservative politics of the era and addressed illegal drug-use and contemporary concerns about gang violence. Films such as *Vigilante* (1983) and *Death Wish 3* (1985) incorporated the elements of group vigilantism and gang violence.

Examining culture allows us to see how people dealt with perceived problems and why they acted in the ways that they did. As historian Lawrence Levine has written, “Audiences are in fact complex amalgams of cultures, tastes, and ideologies. They come to popular culture with a past, with ideas, with values, with expectations, with a sense of how things are and should be.”¹⁵ Readers and viewers are rarely passive consumers of culture. Likewise, writers, directors, and actors always bring their own set of values, ideas, and experiences with them while creating the form and substance of a product. Understanding the historical context of a film’s production can lead to understanding what contemporary issues, values, and principles were at stake. In this regard, my thesis builds upon the historical literature that pertains to how Americans living responded to decay, the impersonal nature of large cities, lack of economic opportunity, racial and class tensions, and rising crime rates during the 1970s and 1980s. We live in a world that simultaneously condemns violence against people and the violation of laws, while sometimes glorifying and/or excusing extralegal acts that result in a person’s death. The activities that members of society partake in tell us a great deal about them. In order to understand the people of a society, it is necessary to know who consumes a product, what they consume, how they consume it, and why they consume it.

¹⁵ Lawrence W. Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *The American Historical Review* 97, No. 5 (Dec., 1992); 1381.

CHAPTER 1
WHO'S GONNA SAVE US: THE BIRTH OF A VIGILANTE,
1967-1974

Several historical variables played a role in the emergence of vigilante films during the early 1970s. White flight, the urban riots of the latter 1960s, the prevalence of political rhetoric concerning “law and order” on the national and local level, conservative discontent over Supreme Court rulings, and changes in Hollywood film played significant roles in setting the stage for the release of the first vigilante films, *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*. White citizens in Newark reacted to these various changes, eventually prompting them to form the North Ward Citizens Committee in 1966, a white vigilante group that gained considerable media attention during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This movement and other smaller vigilante movements within American society during the late 1960s gave a face to working-class and middle-class discontent and concerns, which became essential ingredients in vigilante films that were released after *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*.

White Flight and Housing Discrimination

Like many cities across the nation during the 1950s and 1960s such as Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago, Newark lost a major part of its white population. Newark lost a substantial portion of its white inhabitants to the suburbs as African Americans and Hispanics began to fill-in the void that was left behind. African Americans soon were a majority of the city's overall population; by 1970, Newark's black population was 54 percent of the overall population.¹ Between 1950 and 1967, Newark's white population shrank from 363,000 to 158,000, while its African American population grew from 70,000 to 220,000.² Historian Thomas J. Sugrue notes that the partnership between the federal government and bankers and real-estate brokers made possible housing discrimination in the private sector. Restrictive housing covenants devised by white neighborhoods in the early twentieth century, which prevented "racial undesirables" from purchasing homes within white neighborhoods, were figured into the subdivision of residential housing areas. Residential ratings prevented the construction of new houses within areas that contained a significant African American population.³ Many African Americans still found it difficult to move into areas inhabited by whites. Although Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 was designed to eliminate housing and real-estate discrimination, the normalization of racially homogenized neighborhoods made white

¹ Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 45.

²"Newark: A Brief History," PBS, http://www.pbs.org/pov/streetfight/special_overview.php#.Ut_v7vso7yM (accessed 22 January 2014).

³ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 43-44.

ethnics feel that they had a right to prevent African Americans and other minorities from moving into their neighborhoods, thereby protecting their “skin privilege at all costs.”⁴

Federal funding for the construction of highways, the housing market, pent-up savings from wartime, and access to education and economic advancement funds provided by the GI Bill laid the foundation for economic prosperity in the aftermath of World War II. Yet, African American veterans did not have equal access to housing loans granted to white veterans via banks and guaranteed by the Veterans Administration. In New Jersey’s northern suburbs, fewer than one hundred of the sixty-seven thousand mortgages insured by the GI Bill supported home purchases by non-whites. Furthermore, the influx, segregation and confinement of African Americans, and the beginning signs of deindustrialization within cities during this time and subsequent decades negatively affected African Americans.⁵ Pushed by southern investment in capital and the mechanization of agriculture and pulled by northern demand for labor in manufacturing, low-wage services, and heavy industry, African Americans migrated north to attain economic advancement.⁶ African Americans desired to live in white and integrated communities where access to amenities and effective services and institutions were more available. However, whites tended to leave their neighborhoods when African Americans began to enter them, which stemmed from multiple causes such as white prejudice and

⁴ Legal Information Institute, “7 CFR 1901.203- TITLE VIII OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1968,” Cornell University Law School, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/7/1901.203> (accessed 21 January 2014); Gary Gerstle, “Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (September 1995): 584.

⁵Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 139-140.

⁶Massey and Denton, 45.

discrimination, and concern about how the change would affect factors such as property values, crime, and schools.⁷

Adieu Newark, Hello Division: The Newark Riot of 1967

Poor housing, lack of economic opportunity, and police brutality against African Americans plagued race relations within Newark. Moreover, the lack of representation in the mayor's seat, the City Council, Board of Education, or the Planning Board, incensed African Americans, despite being a majority of Newark's population. After the Newark riot in mid-July 1967, the activist Tom Hayden asserted, "The city's vast programs for urban renewal, highways, downtown development, and most recently, a 150 acre Medical School in the heart of the ghetto seemed almost deliberately designed to squeeze out this rapidly growing Negro community that represents a majority of the population."⁸

Like the disorder in Watts in 1965 and the later Detroit uprising in October 1967, Newark's crisis was started by an act of police brutality. On the night of July 12, 1967, two white Newark police officers stopped a black taxi driver's car. The officers beat up the taxi driver, breaking his ribs and charging him with assault and battery. Through taxi radios, a rumor spread that police murdered an African American taxi driver, which trickled into the streets and homes of Newark's black community, thereby lighting a fuse and setting off an explosion of riotous and rebellious behavior that engulfed Newark for

⁷Rachael A. Woldoff, *White Flight/ Black Flight: The Dynamics of Racial Change in an American Neighborhood* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 12-13.

⁸Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strains of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 229-231; Tom Hayden, *Rebellion in Newark: Official Violence and Ghetto Response* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 6.

five days. Ultimately, around ten million dollars' worth of white-owned and black-owned properties and businesses were destroyed.⁹

Through film and television, Americans witnessed the violence of the urban riots that engulfed the nation during the latter half of the 1960s, continuing a trend during the early 1960s that conveyed to the nation images of Southern white brutality against civil rights demonstrators and others. A year before Newark's riot, sociologist Lewis A. Coser wrote that such acts "became suicidal when they were performed under the glare of television cameras and under the observation of reporters for national newspapers and magazine."¹⁰ Within a different setting, white northerners criticized Southern police brutality against African Americans. When riots erupted across multiple northern cities during the latter half of the 1960s, white Americans sided with law enforcement, feeling threatened by what they perceived as black militancy.

The Old Neighborhood Strikes Back: Anthony Imperiale and the North Ward Citizens
Committee

The riot devastated many portions of Newark's African American community, leaving smoldering ruins of black-owned enterprises and straining relations with the city's Italian American population. Newark's Italian American population was not far-

⁹Brown, 229-231; Kevin Mumford, "Harvesting the Crisis: The Newark Uprising, the Kerner Commission, and Writings on Riots" in *African American Urban History Since World War II*, Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter, eds. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 203-204.

¹⁰Lewis A.Coser, "Some Social Functions of Violence," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 364, Patterns of Violence (Mar., 1966): 15-16.

removed from the early twentieth century when its whiteness was indeterminate.¹¹

Political and cultural changes frightened many Italian Americans who lived in Newark. One citizen recollected a time when whites were the majority within Newark, stating, “The Italians ran Newark for years and how many Italian names do you see on high schools? *None!* How many Italian flags do you see in school classrooms? *None!* What kind of special Italian food did they serve in the cafeterias? What kind of special Italian studies did we get in class?”¹²

One particular Newark resident, Anthony Imperiale, a deli owner and butcher by day and a defender of whites in Newark’s North Ward by night, voiced his opposition to the supposed unruliness of African Americans. Standing at about five feet and nine inches and weighing around two-hundred and thirty pounds, Imperiale appeared emblematic of white working-class resentment at the apparent disorder of American society. In response to the rise in criminal activity he viewed as infiltrating his neighborhood, Imperiale formed the North Ward’s Citizens Committee in 1966, an organization that promoted self-defense tactics for people. When the riots in Newark occurred in July 1967, Imperiale stood his ground with a baseball bat in hand, protecting his neighborhood from potential looters.¹³ Imperiale did not fit the traditional mold of vigilante leaders.¹⁴ His job as a butcher and deli owner exposed him to the toil of

¹¹ James R. Barrett and David Roediger, “Becoming American and Becoming White,” in *Major Problems in American Immigrant History, 2nd Edition*, Mae M. Ngai and Jon Gjerde, eds. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth CENGAGE Learning, 2013), 328-330.

¹² Clark Whelton, “White Law, Black Order,” *The Village Voice* 27, No.48, November 30, 1972.

¹³ David M. Halbfinger, “Anthony Imperiale, 68, Dies; Polarizing Force in Newark,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1999; “Anthony (Tough Tony) Michael Imperiale,” Find A Grave, July 8, 2004, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=9070589> (accessed 21 January 2014).

¹⁴ Brown, 105, 115; Vigilante movements during the nineteenth century were often divided along lines of class, placing societal elites in leadership positions, the middle and working classes in the position

attempting to sustain the economic well-being of his family. During an interview in early April 1969 with Newspaper Enterprises Association's Tom Tiede, Imperiale stated, "I'm a member of a minority myself. I got an \$8000 home, I grew up in the slum, my old man built houses to feed seven kids. I'm not threatening anybody. I just believe in America, see, and in law and order." Moreover, when reporters began to interview Imperiale, he attempted to clean up his rough demeanor. Tiede reported, "He (Imperiale) seldom says 'nigger' any more, he rarely offers to meet militants in the alley, and he has been taking private speech and vocabulary instruction (he's a high school dropout) to express himself in more acceptable language."¹⁵

Imperiale was "of another stripe," unlike other law and order proponents throughout the nation who limited their activity to the immediacy of "getting tough" with criminals. White audiences roared with applause to Imperiale's statements, such as "Are there no poor whites? But the Negroes get all the antipoverty money....The whites are the majority. You know how many of them come to me, night after night, because they can't get a job? They've been told, 'We have to hire Negroes first.'" Conditions in Newark's North Ward gradually deteriorated over the course of the 1960s. Although the ward's 43,000 citizens were predominantly Italian Americans, many whites associated the ward's deteriorating financial state with the influx of African Americans; state and national funds injected into Newark for internal improvements failed to improve the North Ward. Imperiale appealed to his audiences' economic sensibilities. To Imperiale's

of foot soldiers, patrolling the streets as the night watch and monitoring the lower or "undesirable" classes. Vigilante movements serve multiple functions such as the protection of property, the reinforcement of popular sovereignty, the defense of societal norms, filling a void of authority if it is lacking, or economic or political aggrandizement by a person or group of people.

¹⁵Tom Tiede, "Head-Cracking, Jail Tough Tony's Solution," *The Ocala Star-Banner*, April 10, 1969.

audience, the once-strong white middle-class ward faltered while it seemed that Newark's African American population was receiving undeserved financial help.¹⁶ Lower and lower middle-class whites carried the burdens of integration, for newly settled African Americans competed with them for jobs and political leadership. On the other hand, affluent liberal whites "were often sheltered, in their private lives, and largely immune to the costs of implementing minority claims."¹⁷

Imperiale did not hesitate to use racialized language. For example, Imperiale stated, "[S]ome Negroes don't deserve any favors. I read this book...titled 'Look Out Whitey, Black Power Gonna Get Your Momma....' [I]f that kind ever thinks they're gonna start anything here in Newark again, well, here's one white that's gonna be ready."¹⁸ Indeed, Imperiale's views about black militancy were somewhat justified. After the riot, the Newark Police Department appeared indifferent about the death of several African Americans, which prompted local black nationalist Willie Wright to state, "[T]hey are preparing to become involved in a genocide war with black people.... [T]he black man must get some ammunition, must get weapons, to defend themselves."¹⁹ What Imperiale mistook for aggression was actually self-defense against police brutality. In addition, during the mayoral race for Newark in 1970, Imperiale appealed to the racial sensibilities of his white constituents, "warning ward wives of Negro rapists and referring to the late civil rights leader as Martin Luther Coon." White anger against blacks marked the end of the Civil Rights Movement. Imperiale resented that African Americans seemed

¹⁶ Paul Goldberger, "Tony Imperiale Stands for Law and Order," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 28, 1968.

¹⁷ Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 12-13.

¹⁸ Tiede, "Head-Cracking."

¹⁹ Mumford, "Harvesting the Crisis," 216.

to receive privileges from the federal government, taking for granted the different benefits that he received because of his white skin. Yet, the “whitening” of Italian immigrants was recent and the memory of the denigration of Italian immigrants by “officially white Americans” probably lingered within their communities.

Although media outlets focused on Imperiale’s racist comments and believed that the North Ward Citizens Committee hated African Americans, the picture was more complicated. When journalist Tom Tiede participated in a ride-along with members of the organization, he commented on how they were “all young, sport-shirted men.... In the rear there is another prepster, a college student and a man who doesn’t give his occupation.... They just sign up for duty, they say, and are accepted...”²⁰ These citizens remembered the chaos and destruction of the riots. People witnessed the riot, heard stories about it from friends, saw images of it on television, or read about it in the newspaper. The ostensible breakdown of law and order prompted white citizens to come together and vow to protect their neighborhoods from “black encroachment.”²¹ During a ride-along with the North Ward Citizens Committee, Tiede spoke with the driver, who stated, “If we can stop a mugging, or a rape, or if our women are safe walking the streets, that’s our only reward.... That’s our job: to make the streets safe, understand?” Yet, racism played a role too. When Tiede asked the driver why he kept a yellow helmet in his car, the driver stated, “You know, the niggers is always tossing bricks.... [But] Tony don’t like them showing. Tony’s a wunnerful guy. He’s building this neighborhood back

²⁰ Tom Tiede, “Newark’s Vigilantes ‘Don’t Like Militancy Period,’” *The Ocala Star-Banner*, April 11, 1969.

²¹Brown, 118.

to what it was before everybody got scared of the niggers.”²² As the majority, whites asserted their hegemony over their African American neighbors through political and economic dominance. Yet, when blacks gradually outnumbered whites in the city, Newark’s white citizens began to feel threatened, for they were unfamiliar with their new neighbors.

Imperiale and his group quickly renounced the vigilante label used by journalists to describe them. Some people believed that Imperiale was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, a charge that he denied. Moreover, the New Jersey branch of the American Civil Liberties Union believed that he was the leader of a “secret, uniformed, paramilitary organization composed of white persons dedicated to opposing by force and violence attempts on the part of the Negro American to achieve equality.” Imperiale responded by stating, “Vigilantes are usually out to lynch somebody. But we’re not to lynch anybody. Our job here is to not act as police officers, but just to see that our families can come home from church, schools, subways, and stores in peace.”²³ In addition, one member of the North Ward Citizens Committee told the journalist Tom Tiede, “There was one guy, for example, who got shot in the leg when he tried to stop a burglar. There was that other guy who had to have 24 stitches in his back after going to the aid of a woman being assaulted.” The member admitted, “We just don’t like militancy that’s all. Black or white militancy, it makes no difference. We don’t like militancy period.”²⁴ Overall, Imperiale and his followers responded to their changing environment. During a period of social,

²²Tiede, “Newark’s Vigilantes.”

²³ Ronald Sullivan, “Newark’s White Vigilante Group, Opposed by Governor, Sees Itself as an Antidote to Riots,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1968.

²⁴Tiede, “Newark’s Vigilantes.”

political, and economic uncertainty, Imperiale and his followers found security by aligning themselves against some African Americans, who they perceived as threats.

Law and Order: The National Politics of Race, 1968

Politicians such as Richard Nixon and George Wallace vied for the votes of “forgotten men” such as Anthony Imperiale, who “do their taxes, obey most of the laws, [and] love their country...”²⁵ As a Republican presidential candidate in the election of 1968, Nixon appealed to white fears about acts of rebellion or protest by African Americans against institutions of authority as well as school desegregation and the implementation of busing to achieve it. Northern white working-class voters were also concerned about how the women’s rights movement and radicalized civil rights movement were “threatening the privileged centrality of the old New Deal base.”²⁶ Rising crime rates complemented the outbreak of riots and anti-war protests, creating an environment of social disorder and instability that many white voters feared.²⁷ FBI crime statistics indicated that the rate of property theft rose 73 percent between 1960 and 1967 and the rate of violent crime rose 57 percent; the availability of guns, increased drug-intake, and the coming of age of the “Baby Boomers” were some of the factors that

²⁵ Jason S. Campbell, Joseph R. Sahid and David P. Stang, *Law and Order Reconsidered: A Staff Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1969), 54-55.

²⁶ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 132.

²⁷ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations and the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 224-225.

contributed to the increase in crime rates.²⁸ Nixon was more implicit than Imperiale in appealing to voters' fears about crime and racial upheaval, saying things such as “[T]he violence being threatened for this summer (1968) is more in nature of war than a riot. A riot, by definition, is a spontaneous outburst; a war is subject to advance planning.”²⁹ Nixon and others tapped into the “subconscious connection many white Americans made between blackness and criminality, blackness and poverty, blackness and cultural degradation...,” which would later become central themes in vigilante films.³⁰

Supreme Court rulings pertaining to law enforcement also infuriated politicians and others during the presidential election of 1968. For example, presidential candidate George Wallace criticized the Supreme Court, stating “The Supreme Court has handcuffed the police....You had better be thankful for the police and the firemen....If it were not for them, you couldn't even ride in the streets...”³¹ Police officers across the nation generally followed the court rulings. However, a few police officers found it difficult to adapt the rulings from cases such as *Mapp* (1961) or *Miranda* (1966).³² For example, one veteran police officer of thirty years, Cummings from Hampton, Virginia, stated, “Now cop is a dirty name. You give a ‘nigro’ a parking ticket and he falls down on the sidewalk

²⁸ Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, And the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 125-127.

²⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon, Volume 2: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 125, 144-145.

³⁰ Stephen Lester, *George Wallace: American Populist* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 395.

³¹ George Wallace, “George C. Wallace, Speech at Madison Square Garden, Oct 24, 1968,” University of Maryland, <http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~ppennock/doc-Wallace.htm> (accessed 23 January 2014).

³² Legal Information Institute, “MAPP V. OHIO,” Cornell University Law School, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/367/643#writing-> (accessed 24 January 2014); “MIRANDA v. ARIZONA, 284 U.S. 436 (1966),” FindLaw, Thomson Reuters, <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=384&invol=436> (accessed 24 January 2014).

and starts hollerin' police brutality, and they have a riot."³³ To police officers such as Cummings, it was becoming difficult to play the role of "tough cop." In these different ways, politicians and law enforcement portrayed the Supreme Court's decisions as deliberately hamstringing law enforcement agencies.

White Americans became increasingly distrustful of African Americans as they began to move into cities that they had occupied, for some of them thought African Americans were undermining the communal solidarity and security of white neighborhoods. In response, whites created organizations that served to promote self-defense and popular sovereignty within an environment where authority was perceivably absent. Factors such as the depiction of violence in the media, the rhetoric of local and national politicians, lack of communal trust, and economic decay contributed to a rift between blacks and whites. Within this historical context, the early 1970s oversaw the production of vigilante films.

The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, it appeared that Hollywood's best days were behind it. The films of the 1970s generally reflected the ambiguity and malaise of national politics. Gone were the days when grandiose narratives were the staple of Hollywood productions. Economically, the industry was in dire financial straits. Between 1969 and 1972, the film industry was losing at least 500 million dollars per year. In addition, weekly attendance for theaters across the nation between 1969 and 1971 was 18

³³ Campbell, et al., 64-65.

million, nearly a third of what had been in 1950. Moreover, about two-thirds of moviegoers during that period fell between the ages of 15 and 29, the majority being males. As a result, many companies tied their fortunes to the advertising company Kinney National Service, hoping that movie promotions would boost profits; advertising targeted people between the ages of 12 and 26.³⁴

Within this environment, Blaxploitation films flourished. With white Americans leaving in droves to suburbia, many African Americans believed that theaters should show films that spoke to the African American experience. Because the African American population was younger than the white population, they were disproportionately the consumers of movies targeting the young. Campaigns against racial discrimination by groups such as the NAACP and the ACLU prompted Hollywood to re-evaluate and adjust its practices to counter the criticisms that especially struck at the industry during a time when it was faltering. Historian Ed Guerrero writes, “Thus, political and economic conditions, along with the allure and profitability of a rising black box office, proved irresistible.”³⁵ The success of films such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), and *Superfly* (1972) prompted many film studios and directors to cash-in on the Blaxploitation genre. Consequently, a flood of B-movies poured out of studios and saturated the film market with poorly made productions. Hollywood assessed the shifting attitudes concerning Blaxploitation films and made an effort to capitalize on

³⁴Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society since 1945, 3rd Edition* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2000), 102-103; J. Hobeman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media, and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New York: New Press, 2005), 253; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993), 83.

³⁵ Guerrero, 83-86.

the weakness of the genre.³⁶ Hollywood's attentiveness to shifting attitudes among audience members, played to its favor, for it "sensed that...both white guilt about the social status and problems of blacks had begun to disappear, and black civil rights organizations had lost much of their potency and power." Such conditions allowed films to return "to traditional values of home, family, and law and order."³⁷

Working Class Need Not Apply: *Dirty Harry* (1971) and the Struggle to Survive

The production of Don Siegel's gritty *Dirty Harry* began in the summer of 1971. Clint Eastwood, star of Italian spaghetti-western film director Sergio Leone's "The Man with No Name" series, was cast as the movie's main character, Harry Callahan. A quiet, cool, hipster-like enforcer of law and order, Eastwood was the paragon of introspective anger that projected itself outward via the extension of a smoking gun that knocked down criminals. Of Eastwood's character in Leone's films such as *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), Asian American militant Frank Chin wrote, "His role says, 'I am Nobody and you better not fuck with me.' Society takes this as a challenge and sets out to absorb or kill him."³⁸

On December 21, 1971, theaters released *Dirty Harry*. Film critics coolly received the movie's plot and were generally skeptical about the film's main character. Roger Greenspun wrote, "Dirty Harry fails in simple credibility so often and on so many levels

³⁶Guerrero, 83-86.

³⁷Quart and Auster, 112-113.

³⁸Hoberman, 320-322.

that it cannot even succeed...as a study in perversely complimentary psychoses.”³⁹

However, film critic Pauline Kael observed that the film was “cheered and applauded by Puerto Ricans in the audience, and they jeered—as they were meant to—when the maniac whined and pleaded for his legal rights.” Kael continued, “Puerto Ricans could applaud Harry because in the movie laws protecting the rights of the accused are seen not as remedies for the mistreatment of the poor by the police and the courts but as protection for evil abstracted from all social conditions...”⁴⁰

The tale of Harry Callahan leads viewers through the streets of San Francisco as Detective Callahan attempts to take down a sociopathic murderer known as Scorpio (Andrew Robinson). The film addresses what forms of extralegal activity are acceptable while examining the frustrations of the lower classes against the upper classes in the post-Civil Rights era and legal difficulties encountered by police officers. Throughout the film, Scorpio views his victims through the scope of his high-powered sniper rifle, indiscriminately killing whomever. Scorpio’s first victim is a young woman who swims in a pool located on top of a building. The world in *Dirty Harry* is a chaotic environment. The criminal elements of the world could rise above the protected classes, committing acts of violence against them; senseless and random violence threatens everyone. Scorpio represents the uprising of the dispossessed. In the majority of kill sequences throughout the film, Scorpio remains in the dominant position, always having absolute control over his helpless and unaware victims. Essentially, Scorpio abuses his vantage point of being

³⁹ Roger Greenspun, “Dirty Harry (1971),” *The New York Times*, December 23, 1971.

⁴⁰Hoberman, 332.

able to look over people from the sky; Scorpio is the hunter, whereas Callahan must overcome legal obstacles and criticism to defeat him.⁴¹

In addition, Scorpio targets interest groups within his socioeconomic and political context, which includes a young upper-middle class woman, a Roman Catholic priest, an African American child, and a white teenaged middle-class girl. Although the African American child that Scorpio kills in the ghetto is not part of these privileged groups, Scorpio's murder of him is symbolic of white backlash during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Aside from the African American child, Scorpio's victims would not have had to deal with contemporary economic and social issues in the same way that the economic class that Scorpio belonged to did. The killing of the Catholic priest is symbolic of the frustration that working-class Catholics across many cities during the 1970s (especially San Francisco) felt toward liberal Catholic clergy who advocated open housing and fair employment.⁴²

In addition, when Scorpio takes a bus filled with children hostage toward the end of the movie, it is noticeable that the children of the bus come from different racial or white ethnic backgrounds. At one point, Scorpio asks the children to sing. The children happily sing "Old MacDonald" and "Row Your Boat." At one point, the bus enters a tunnel decorated with a rainbow, suggesting racial harmony. When the bus emerges from the dark tunnel, the children start to suspect that they are not going to school. Scorpio tells them, "We're going to the ice-cream factory," which prompts a child to scream, "I

⁴¹*Dirty Harry*, directed by Don Siegel (1971; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2001), DVD.

⁴²Zeit, 214; For further information on the role of Catholics in San Francisco during the 20th century, see William Issel's *Church and State in the City: Catholics and Politics in Twentieth-Century San Francisco* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).

want my mommy!”⁴³ It is during this scene that we see a kind of metaphor for the civil rights movement. Initially, the children joyously sing, thus symbolizing the perceived racial harmony that pervaded the early stages of the civil rights movement/s. Scorpio represents the divergence away from the prevailing “We Shall Overcome” mantra of the early movement/s. He becomes a radicalized embodiment of white liberals who promoted busing as a way to integration.⁴⁴ Over the 1950s and 1960s, the less privileged whites became clustered in cities as African Americans and other minorities began to settle in northern cities, noting “once desegregation began those whites in the city with the most resources could more easily escape the ‘law of the land’ by sending their children to private schools or moving out.”⁴⁵ In December 1971, San Francisco was in the process of enacting the “Horseshow Plan,” which was designed to desegregate its school system. Some Chinese American families in San Francisco’s Chinatown were active in anti-busing campaigns, feeling that the plan harmed their children by placing them in new environments and claiming that they did not have sufficient power to exercise their political voice against the issue.⁴⁶ Scorpio caricaturizes cross-city busing, posing as a radical militant by insisting that forced busing is the way to achieve desegregation.

Before the end of the film, Detective Callahan discovers where Scorpio lives. Scorpio lives in a small room at Kezar Stadium in Golden Gate Park. Familiar objects decorate Scorpio’s room: an American flag, football memorabilia, and stacks of clothing

⁴³Siegel, *Dirty Harry*.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s & 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 13.

⁴⁶ Cynthia Liao, “Rhetoric of Race and Rights in Chinese Parents’ Anti-Busing Campaign in San Francisco, 1971-1972,” Stanford University, May 2009, http://csre.stanford.edu/theses/09_CLiao_Thesis.pdf (accessed 29 January 2014).

piled up in a corner. These items symbolize certain aspects of society: the flag represents the patriotism amidst a period of time when lack of faith in the government and the army was prevalent, the various sports materials represent the culture of violence within American society, and the dirty clothes represent the difficulties that working-class families faced during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, it would have been difficult for Scorpio to garner the white working-class respectability that Harry Callahan earned from contemporary audiences. Scorpio's violent mode of democratic expression against perceived societal injustices was unacceptable to audiences. Scorpio tries to change the social and economic order, but he commits violent acts against people who do not violate the laws. As perceived beneficiaries of an unjust socioeconomic order, Scorpio's victims drive his rage.⁴⁷

If Scorpio is the non-sanctioned vigilante, then Harry Callahan is his antithesis: "The Legal Vigilante." According to author J. Hoberman, the "Legal Vigilante can break the rules, suspend constitutional guarantees, engage in illegal searches, torture, stalk, and even execute a suspect—all in the name of the greater good."⁴⁸ In the movie, we learn that Callahan lives in Potrero Hill, an area whose population consisted of mostly Irish immigrants with a spattering of Anglo Americans and other white ethnic groups during the early twentieth century.⁴⁹ Unlike Scorpio, most audience members would have been able to relate to Harry; he does not come from a privileged background. Callahan takes a no-nonsense approach to handling criminals. He witnesses the implementation of various

⁴⁷Siegel, *Dirty Harry*.

⁴⁸Hoberman, 326.

⁴⁹Cheryl and Clark Kaplan, "The Immigrants," *Shaping San Francisco*, 1964, http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Immigrants (accessed 29 January 2014)

Supreme Court rulings from the previous decade. Callahan's world is in a transitory period that might have left him behind. Moreover, when Callahan arrests Scorpio, the police department releases Scorpio because Callahan did not follow protocol. During a meeting, the district attorney confronts Callahan, telling him "Where the hell does it say you've got the right to kick down doors, torture suspects....Does *Escobedo* ring a bell? *Miranda*?" Callahan blurts out, "And what about her rights? Ann Mary Deacon? She's raped and left in a hole to die! Who speaks for her?"⁵⁰ Callahan confronts a system that has become tedious and regulated. He faces the dilemma of conforming to an authoritarian system. After Callahan lashes out at his superiors towards the end of the movie, he makes the transition from "Legal Vigilante" to vigilante. Callahan pursues Scorpio without the permission of his superiors, eventually killing Scorpio in the process. When Scorpio dies, Callahan takes his badge and throws it into a lake, severing his connection to lawful institutions and declaring his independence from them as a vigilante.⁵¹

Although the reviewers of the movie implicitly suggested that Callahan is a racist and one-dimensional, Callahan is complex. Film critic Pauline Kael and others categorized *Dirty Harry* as a "fascist film." Hoberman agreed with Kael, but added that it made more sense to view Harry Callahan as a "fascist hero," suggesting that Harry's hyper-masculinity and hatred for nuances and weakness were emblematic of Harry's outlook in life.⁵² For example, Callahan uses his instinct to stop a bank robbery that occurs, ultimately shooting both suspects. The scene is reminiscent of a western film:

⁵⁰Siegel, *Dirty Harry*.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Hoberman, 323.

Callahan acts as the sheriff of San Francisco and protects its citizens by ridding the streets of crime. The streets of San Francisco are re-creations of brutal frontier conditions during the nineteenth century.⁵³ Callahan's actions blur the distinctions between fascism and democratic populism; he derives his extralegal powers from the silent and vocal consent of his contemporaries. Popular judgment condemns Scorpio because he violates the rights of other people. In this way, the film asks viewers to consider whether Scorpio is entitled to his rights. In Callahan's view, the justice system should have taken away Scorpio's rights, yet the justice system does not prosecute him. By being a criminal, Scorpio is a non-person, which entails that he does not have rights. Moreover, a sophisticated framework of values that rely upon work ethic, intuition, and the determination to survive is the basis of Callahan's actions. Callahan struggles to survive in a world that is changing. When Callahan cannot work within the law, he decides to work outside of the law, in the process showing the perceived weaknesses of the laws while correcting injustices.

It Can Happen to You: *Death Wish* (1974) and Legitimized Vigilantism

On a cold night in New York City in late 1971, Brian Garfield and his wife walked to their car after a late-night party and were startled to find that someone slashed the canvas of their drop-top convertible: the experience partially inspired Garfield to write a novel about anger towards crime. In an interview, Garfield recalled, "I knew the vandal had done us no real harm... Yet, my first response to the discovery of this

⁵³Brown, 112-113.

mindless violence was swift and stark....My boundaries had been violated, my property trespassed upon. He had no right. 'I'll kill the son of a bitch.'"⁵⁴ Bookstores released Brian Garfield's *Death Wish* (1972) less than a year after *Dirty Harry*'s release in theaters. Garfield's book tells a tale about a New York City accountant named Paul Benjamin, who becomes a vigilante after a group of criminals rape and assault his wife and daughter. The novel *Death Wish* captured the anger of some of the citizens of New York City, asking an important question to its readers: if it happened to you, then how would you react?

Two years after the publication of *Death Wish*, it was released as a major film. In his autobiography, director Michael Winner recollected a conversation that he had with his friend Charles Bronson. Winner wrote, "The best script I've got is *Death Wish*. It's about a man whose wife and daughter are mugged and he goes out and shoots muggers. Charlie said, 'I'd like to do that.' I said, 'The film?' Charlie said, 'No. Shoot muggers.'"⁵⁵ Bronson's character Paul Kersey is a man who has a good job as an architect, works hard, loves his wife and daughter, and is humble. In real life, Bronson rarely attended social functions and preferred to spend his time at home with his family.⁵⁶ Film reviewers generally criticized the film. Roger Ebert wrote, "Literally every shadow holds a mugger; every subway train harbors a killer; the park is a breeding ground for crime. Urban paranoia is one thing, but 'Death Wish' is another....It's propaganda for private gun ownership and a call to vigilante justice. Even the cops seem to see it that

⁵⁴ Paul Talbot, *Bronson's Loose! The Making of the Death Wish Films* (Kindle) (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Publishing, 2006), 17/179.

⁵⁵ Michael Winner, *Winner Takes All: A Life of Sorts* (Kindle) (London: Portico Books, 2004), 3341/5858.

⁵⁶ Brian D' Ambrosio, *Menacing Face Worth Millions: A Life of Charles Bronson* (Kindle) (Seattle, WA: Amazon Digital Sales, 2011), 497, 513/8129.

way...”⁵⁷ Film critic Vincent Canby wrote that the film “takes a very dim view of New York City, particularly of its muggers who, according to this film, could be easily eliminated if every upright, middle-class, middle-aged citizen got himself a gun and used it at least three times a week.”⁵⁸ Restrictive gun licensing was one of the hallmarks of legislation in New York City during the time.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, the film does not explicitly advocate private gun ownership, for throughout the movie people who are inspired by Paul Kersey’s actions do not defend themselves against criminals with firearms.

Despite what critics said about the film, moviegoers responded differently to the film. Journalist Judy Klemesrud observed that audience members were vocal, noting how “[A] black man sitting alone in front of me led the cheers in my section. ‘Get the mother,’ he frequently uttered, with no regard for the muggers’ race.” Klemesrud noted several responses from viewers such as “I think what Bronson did was right—no one else is doing anything,” “I’ve never seen so much racism in a movie—six blacks get killed for every white,” and “I don’t approve of the killing, but at least the people he killed were not good people.”⁶⁰ Kersey was/is multiple things to different people: enforcer, racist, and defender. During a time when crime was a problem in New York City, people flocked to see Kersey. Kersey does on film what citizens wished someone would do in reality: take action and kill criminals.

⁵⁷ Roger Ebert, “Death Wish,” Rogerebert.com, January 1, 1974, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/death-wish-1974> (accessed 30 January 2014).

⁵⁸ Vincent Canby, “Death Wish (1974),” *The New York Times*, July 25, 1974.

⁵⁹ Franklin E. Zimring, “Firearms and Federal Law: The Gun-Control Act of 1968,” *Journal of Legal Studies* 4 (1975): 175.

⁶⁰ Talbot, 39-41/179.

Kersey's dilemma harkens back to popular American western films. Bronson's character is similar to the western hero, for "His desire for revenge—that is, for justice—has forced him out of society and brought him to oppose its laws and institutions. He became 'judge, jury, and executioner.'"⁶¹ The assertion that vigilante films like *Death Wish* were re-creations of the Elizabethan revenge plot is valid, yet *Death Wish* was about more than just revenge and race.⁶² *Death Wish* addresses the threat that crime poses to societal stability and the need for citizens to defend public spaces when police officers are unable to protect them.

During the opening scenes, Paul Kersey and his wife Joanna enjoy their vacation in Hawaii, a world far-removed from New York City, a gritty and polluted environment. In the film, Kersey is an architect, a man who designs buildings, molding unsettled environments and ridding them of any blemishes. Kersey's work world is crafted and calculated. Mathematical laws and angles govern his world, preserving stability and enhancing the make-up of an environment. After his vacation, Kersey's co-worker reminds him about crime by stating, "There were fifteen murders the first week and twenty-one [murders] last week in this goddamn city. Decent people are gonna have to work here and live somewhere else." Kersey's response is, "By decent people you mean people who can afford to live somewhere else."⁶³ Historically, political ideology and the theme of law and order were connected, but it was not entirely the domain of conservatives. Although contemporary liberal politicians were unable to grasp the law

⁶¹ Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 157-158.

⁶²Nicole Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 194.

⁶³*Death Wish*, directed by Michael Winner (1974; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

and order them like their conservative counterparts, they played a large role in advocating gun control to deter crime.⁶⁴

A few days after Kersey and his wife return from their vacation, muggers kill his wife and rape and humiliate his daughter. Kersey is concerned about the capture of the criminals that attacked his family, yet he does not channel his anger towards tracking them down and killing them. Rather, Kersey's directs his anger against criminals in general and the inefficiency of law enforcement. In the film, Kersey quickly becomes a vigilante. While visiting Arizona on a business trip, Kersey witnesses a tourist attraction that shows bandits being defeated by a sheriff. A man narrates the scene and states, "The outlaw life seemed a shortcut to money, which could buy liquor, women, and a turn at the gambler's table. But there were honest men with dreams, who would fight to protect their miserable hovels and who were to plant the roots that would grow into a nation." After his trip to Arizona, Kersey returns to New York City with the mentality of a gun-slinging vigilante. When Kersey confronts muggers or instigates trouble, he fires from the hip, replicating the play-actors that he witnessed in the tourist attraction. Kersey confronts criminals in secluded areas, giving the impression that Kersey is a gunslinger waiting for a duel to start. Before Kersey passes out from a gunshot wound towards the end of the movie, he says to a mugger, "Feel your hand....Draw!"⁶⁵

Law enforcement is virtually non-existent until Kersey's actions prompt law enforcement to become visibly active on the streets to counter his cult-status with the citizens of New York City. In addition, Kersey inspires citizens to take action against

⁶⁴Flamm, 124-125.

⁶⁵Winner, *Death Wish*.

crime. For example, a construction worker tells a story, which highlights working-class anger towards crime rather than government policies. In the interview, the worker states, “Me and my crew was working down in the hole while one of the boys on the steel yelled down, ‘Hey there’s a mugging going on.’ So we came out of the hole...and we caught this guy runnin’ and we roughed him up a little bit before the police came.”⁶⁶ In the early 1970s, construction workers participated in “hardhat” demonstrations in the first two weeks of spring in 1970, protesting against the liberal Mayor John Lindsay as well as beating-up anti-war advocates.⁶⁷ Moreover, crime rates have decreased in the city because of the actions of Kersey and others. By allowing Kersey to leave the city on their terms, the NYPD reaps the benefits of his actions while contemporaneously building-up its own public image and presence on the streets by being more active in protecting the citizens of New York City.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Kersey fights undesirables who have undermined social stability. Vigilantism directs Kersey’s actions, which are “acted upon rather than spoken” when he feels the need to fill the void of official authority to promote the well-being of society.⁶⁹ Kersey derives his power to act from uncertain political conditions that allow him to interpret the

⁶⁶Winner, *Death Wish*.

⁶⁷ “New York: Hard Hats,” *Newsweek*, 25 May 1970.

⁶⁸Winner, *Death Wish*.

⁶⁹William C. Culberson, *Vigilantism: Political History of Private Power in America* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 36.

popular will of the people.⁷⁰ Kersey's actions emphasize the exercise of private power against criminal disorder in the absence of state authorities. Kersey is disinterested in his public persona, as notoriety risks revealing his identity as the vigilante. In contrast to *Death Wish*, other vigilante films such as *Vigilante Force* and *The Annihilators* would emphasize the efforts of vigilante groups in shaping their image. As noted by Culberson, "Groups are bent on the protection of privilege, and often they profit from ambiguity and mystification, which hide facts from those over whom power is exerted," thus enabling "a group to tell its story as it would like to be believed, promoting its own interests and constituencies."⁷¹ Kersey does not help construct his narrative; instead, journalists, police officers, and news reporters construct it for him.

However, law enforcement punishes Kersey for his actions, resulting in his banishment from New York City. The police officer who arrests Kersey gives him an ultimatum: leave town before sundown. During Kersey's absence on the movie screen, subsequent vigilante films emphasized vigilantism's group dynamic. In films such as *Vigilante Force* (1976), *The Exterminator* (1980), and *The Annihilators* (1985), the town or city becomes a battleground where returning Vietnam veterans confront a country in disarray, forcing them to search and destroy criminals. In reality, American citizens continued to form new anti-crime organizations and became more active in demonstrating their discontent.

⁷⁰ Jennet Kirkpatrick, *Uncivil Disobedience: Studies in Violence and Democratic Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 49.

⁷¹Culberson, 36.

CHAPTER 2

URBAN JUNGLE: CRIME AND WAR IN VIGILANTE FILMS, 1976-1985

Less than a year after Nixon's resignation in August 1974, and two months after the fall of Saigon, President Gerald Ford delivered a special message to Congress. Ford addressed "...street crime, crime that invades our neighborhoods and our homes--murders, robberies, rapes, muggings, holdups, break-ins--the kind of brutal violence that makes us fearful of strangers and afraid to go out at night."¹ Crime was not simply a catchword used by politicians; crime was a legitimate concern for many people, especially within black communities, who attempted to find out the causes of crime and devised remedies for them. When the Vietnam War ended, it was refought alongside the contemporary battle against crime in America.

Something Must Be Done: Anti-Crime Measures

Ford's message was relevant to African American communities. *Ebony* magazine published an array of articles between the mid-1970s and early 1980s that discussed

¹Gerald R. Ford, "Special Message to the Congress on Crime.," *The American Presidency Project*, June 19, 1975, edited by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=5007> (accessed 10 February 2014).

methods of coping with crime within African American communities. In an article from the early 1980s, readers were encouraged to make sure that their yards were well-lit and to change walking directions at night if one suspected that he or she were being followed.² Such methods were common and inexpensive ways to protect oneself from crime. Crime forced citizens to watch where they walked and when they walked; contemporary demographic changes as well as the flow of criminal activity adjusted their walking patterns. Thus, citizens acted to reestablish previously defined spatial barriers by expanding public areas whose accessibility had been contracted by crime. Organizations such as New Detroit, Inc. and the Black Economic Development Conference in Philadelphia launched crusades against crime and promoted social and economic reforms. Although they were not vigilante groups, these groups were emblematic of a broad movement within cities in the northeastern United States that witnessed the creation of neighborhood patrol groups.

Moreover, Ford's solution to addressing the problem of crime was to bolster restrictions on illegal handgun ownership and strengthen local and state law enforcement. Ford stated, "I do not seek vindictive punishment of the criminal, but protection of the innocent victim. The victims are my primary concern. That is why I do not talk about law and order and why I turn to the Constitutional guarantee of domestic tranquility. The emphasis in our efforts must be providing protection for the victims of crime." By emphasizing the "guarantee of domestic tranquility" in combination with his focus on state and local jurisdiction over crime prevention, Ford appealed to the localism of

²Lynn Norment, "50 Ways to Protect Yourself against Crime," *Ebony* 37, Issue 8 (Jun., 1982): 58.

communities.³ Moreover, Ford appealed to anti-crime grassroots efforts, which encouraged white and African American middle-class sensibilities, for “The fight against black-on-black crime will be won only if responsible blacks organize and win that fight themselves.”⁴

Moreover, there were multiple viewpoints among African Americans about the causes of crime, ranging from broken families to individual and systematic forms of racial discrimination. In 1979, Atlanta’s Police Chief Dr. George Napper stated, “A family forced to do without its chief breadwinner because of confinement in prison, must often rely on government assistance, handouts and, not infrequently, theft, to maintain its existence.”⁵ Furthermore, Atlantic Public Safety Director Dr. Lee Brown believed that systematic racial discrimination was the cause of crime, stating, “Many people still believe there are no root causes. They feel the answer to the problem is bigger jails.... Medicine, for example, does not only react to disease, but attempts to prevent it from returning. We have to begin to think that way when we’re talking about crime too.”⁶ Despite what blacks or whites thought about the root causes of crime or ways to prevent it, vigilante movies mostly continued to express the viewpoint that criminal behavior was an incurable pathological disorder. Films used media portrayals of criminals prowling the streets at night. The race of the criminals became less important, yet a superior-inferior racial dynamic still served as the basis for their characteristics.

³Ford, “Special Message.”

⁴“What You Can Do to Combat Crime,” *Ebony* 30, Issue 3 (Jan., 1975): 116.

⁵“A Divided Community: Crime Breeds Mistrust, Uncertainty, Fear and Anxiety,” *Ebony*, Special Edition (Aug., 1979): 36.

⁶“Urbanization and Family Breakdown: Most Agree on a Correlation Between City Life, Crime,” *Ebony*, Special Edition (Aug., 1979): 76.

The Vietnam Veteran Vigilante and *Vigilante Force* (1976)

A year and a half after the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, theaters released George Armitage's *Vigilante Force* on September 9, 1976.⁷ The fall of Saigon marked the cataclysmic end of a war that had cost the United States tens of thousands of lives of young men and served as the background and sometimes epicenter upon which the transformation of the United States' social, political, and cultural environment occurred. Thousands of Vietnamese and American military personnel scrambled to escape from Saigon via helicopter and boat as the North Vietnamese Army launched the last assault of the war.⁸ In 1972, the journalist Frances Fitzgerald wrote, "The United States might leave Vietnam, but the Vietnam War would never leave the United States. The soldiers would bring it back with them like an addiction. The civilians may neglect or try to ignore it, but those who have seen combat must find a reason for that killing..." However, "the politicians could give no satisfactory answer to many of those who had killed or watched their comrades being killed."⁹

The Vietnam veteran as vigilante was a peculiarity among other vigilantes. After faithfully serving his country, the Vietnam veteran returned home to a cold-shouldered public, for the war that he had fought was associated with conniving government leaders and authorities; the public did not treat him like a hero, for he was the embodiment of a war that helped to splinter American society. By serving in Vietnam, the veteran had become depraved; his experience in a foreign land had somehow tainted his character and

⁷ "Vigilante Force (1976)," *Rotten Tomatoes*, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/vigilante_force/ (accessed 12 February 2014).

⁸ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History, 2nd Edition* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 682-683.

⁹ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 423-424.

mentality. A degree of foreignness and unruliness supposedly marked him. Americans had vicariously experienced the horrors of the war by watching news about it during the 1960s and early 1970s. As a result, there may have been a tendency for people to look askance at the returning veterans. Vietnam veterans were stereotyped as psychologically unstable. The portrayal of the war was clear to the public: the war had a corrupting influence that would come back with some of the soldiers. Despite portrayals of Vietnam veterans as drug addicts, unemployable, and neglected by American society, the reality was that Vietnam veterans were largely successful when readjusting to civilian life, earning an average higher median income than their non-combatant peers (by \$24) and taking advantage of the GI Bill. In 1977, 64 percent of Vietnam veterans, compared to 55 percent of World War II veterans and 43.4 percent of Korean War veterans, used their war benefits. Overall, the American media and anti-war movement used the image of a corrupted Vietnam soldier to criticize government war policies and advocate domestic reforms.¹⁰

In the late 1970s, some American authors and film directors tried to make sense of the war. Books such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) and Tim O'Brien's *Going after Cacciato* (1978) used vivid imagery to embed the Vietnam experience into the nation's conscience. Many films such as *Boys in Company C* (1978), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) dealt with the experiences of soldiers in Vietnam in surrealistic

¹⁰ Eric T. Dean, Jr., "The Myth of the Troubled and Scorned Vietnam Veteran," *Journal of American Studies* 26, No. 1 (Apr., 1992): 61-66.

or exaggerated ways.¹¹ Later films such as *The Exterminator* and *The Annihilators* were released within a political and cultural environment marked by the “new patriotism.” The new patriotism substituted historical rights and the responsibilities of the nation with public displays of power and individual celebrations of success, ultimately serving to project the notion that “imagined power and majesty of the nation state compensate for the loss of individual and collective power.”¹² During this period, films re-envisioned the outcome of the Vietnam War and transposed the war into American society. Within this discourse, the Vietnam veteran returned with a set of skills and experiences that equipped him to deal with crime.

George Armitage’s *Vigilante Force* shifted the battle for control of the streets back to California. One film reviewer wrote that it was “a film of such consuming sleaziness of motivation and rationale that the feeblest gestures toward credibility and mere continuity are bypassed in the name of the next clop to the head, bullet to the gut, and fireball to the available epidermis.”¹³ In addition, one critic wrote, “This action-drama mishmash is wildly off-kilter, thoughtless and mean-spirited... Kristofferson is gruff and rude throughout.”¹⁴ Star actor Kris Kristofferson reportedly stated that he understood the film to be a “black comedy about post-Vietnam America.” Kristofferson’s

¹¹ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society since 1945, 3rd Edition* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2002), 119; In the same year that George Armitage’s *Vigilante Force* was released, Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), starring Robert De Niro, dealt with the psychological readjustment of a Vietnam veteran back into civilian society. The main character Travis’ anger and violent outbursts against criminals and other people stem from his inability to adjust to a society that rejects him and be loved, thus he is not necessarily a vigilante. For a more detailed examination of the film, see film critic Michael Dempsey’s review. (Michael Dempsey, “Taxi Driver by Martin Scorsese; Michael Phillips; Julia Phillips; Tony Bill,” *Film Quarterly* 29, No. 4 (Summer, 1976): 37-41.

¹² George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 80-84.

¹³ Richard T. Jameson, “Review: Vigilante Force,” *Movietone News* 52, October 1976.

¹⁴ Stephen Miller, *Kristofferson: The Wild American* (Kindle) (New York: Omnibus Press, 2010), 2625-2636/4992.

biographer Stephen Miller writes that the film is “largely forgettable, lacking any kind of serious point beyond getting over some of the difficulties an ex-soldier can experience when re-adjusting to everyday civilian life.”¹⁵ The film uses the mythology of the Wild West, an environment where outlaws, sheriffs, and Native Americans clash while progress rides along a railroad, overshadowing class and racial conflict, and women serve as buffers between disorder and white civilization.¹⁶ In essence, the authorities of the town in the film struggle to maintain law and order while attempting to promote economic development.

The film takes place in 1976 amidst the energy crisis and the nation’s bicentennial celebration. Oil fields line the outskirts of the town. However, the town’s economic conditions create the impression that many are struggling to find employment. The opening scenes of the film are somewhat comedic and violent: a banjo plays while strippers, boozers, and gamblers drink whiskey while throwing money on the tables, and renegades toss police officers through windows. As he looks disgustingly at the debaucheries around him, one townsman states, “If we open up the oil field, we better hire the unemployed....They’re workingmen, it’s the scum that follow them in.”¹⁷ Indeed, it follows that “the scum” are detrimental to the capitalistic order of society; they invert the social order by speculating (gambling). Furthermore, the film suggests that

¹⁵Miller, 2631/4992.

¹⁶Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998),74-79.

¹⁷*Vigilante Force*, directed by George Armitage(1976: Beverly Hills, CA: MGM Studios, 2011), DVD.

management and labor will work together in harmony in the absence of the boisterous and destructive elements.¹⁸

Yet, the disorder of Main Street juxtaposes the quiet pleasantries of suburbia: a paperboy tosses a newspaper into the back of Ben Arnold's pickup truck. Nevertheless, Ben's coworker comments, "If this is God's country, he's using it as a hideout." Whereas "the scum" use foul language while dancing wildly, the respectable citizens partake in an ordered hoedown. The entertainment is predictable and clean, leaving little room for disorderly conduct. Yet, the wily bunch of misfits is not entirely tolerant. During one scene, a drunken man smashes a disco record, complaining that he does not want to listen to "faggot music," which is a mixture of disco and rock music.¹⁹ The man states, "There must be a Buddy Holly record here somewhere."²⁰ The reference to Buddy Holly suggests the desire to recreate the experience of living during a time that is supposedly not marred by dirty lyrics, racial conflict, and class tension.

Moreover, one of the major themes of the movie is the assertion of the will of the dominant order of citizens over the transitory social misfits and criminals of the town; criminals do not have the same rights as the working-class and middle-class citizens of the town. The criminals sacrifice their rights by violating the rights of others. To reestablish the social and economic order, the town's authorities hire an enforcer and his posse to clean up the town. Country singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson starred as the gruff and calculatingly aggressive Aaron Arnold, who is a Vietnam veteran. Ben asks his

¹⁸Slotkin, 64.

¹⁹ David Nicholls, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 372.

²⁰ Armitage, *Vigilante Force*.

brother Aaron to help the town's undermanned police force. At one point, Aaron states "You know the last time I showed up in town, they tried to throw me a parade: in one end and out the other." The lack of pomp and circumstance within town when he returns from Vietnam upsets Aaron. Yet, parades were not too common after previous wars such as World War II and World War I.²¹ Eventually, Aaron accepts the job as enforcer for the town, which prompts him to hire a gang of former police officers and Vietnam veterans who have violent temperaments and questionable backgrounds.

As legally sanctioned mercenaries, the peace officers are in a unique position that enables them to dole out "justice." Yet, Aaron's gang eventually oversteps its granted authority by replacing the town's criminal organization with itself; they swiftly appropriate authority from the regular police force and the mayor, who responds to criticism about the hiring of Aaron and his posse by stating, "I got a town to run. A town under attack!" By intimidating the town's banker and stealing the purchase order sheets from the town's sheriff Harry Lee to buy heavy armaments ("enough to take back Saigon"), Aaron strikes at institutions of power that purportedly betrayed him during the war.²² Slotkin writes that the "post-Frontier" environment of vigilante films is urbanized, yet stunted by the constriction of powerful and conspiratorial institutions and banking interests that undermine the advance of economic progress and redemption.²³ In *Vigilante Force*, the bank does not necessarily undermine economic progress; rather, the bank cautiously upholds the status-quo.

²¹Dean, Jr., 67.

²²Ibid.

²³Slotkin, 634.

The narrative of the film becomes particularly interesting when Aaron murders Sheriff Harry Lee and Ben's girlfriend Victoria. Ben and his rifle club, "The Green Mountain Boys," decide to form a vigilante group that will counter Aaron's group. As the narrative reaches its end, it becomes quirky. The town's parade celebrates the nation's bicentennial, which features a whitened view of American history via a diorama of progress that features people dressed up as Irish and English settlers and the Green Mountain Boys as Indian-Hunters/minutemen wearing coonskin hats. During the final shootout, the Green Mountain Boys reenact a historically distorted version of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, which began on April 19, 1775. The Green Mountain Boys fire at Aaron's gang as it stashes its weaponry in the back of a station wagon; coincidentally, Aaron's gang is dressed in flamboyant marching band uniforms that satirize the British redcoats. Mimicking American colonials that harassed British soldiers who retreated to Boston after failing to confiscate a cache of weapons in Concord, Massachusetts, Ben's citizen-soldiers attack Aaron's gang, shooting them as they scurry through the hollow buildings of a ghost town. The movie ends when Aaron climbs to the top of a gas tank and shouts, "I ain't lost the war yet," as he explodes when the gas tank explodes, becoming a casualty of his war, the Vietnam War.²⁴

The film's ending suggests that vigilantism is part of the nation's history, playing an integral role in its founding. A revolutionary ideology that seeks to overturn the existing order of society does not undergird the actions of Ben's followers. Ben and his followers yearn to return to the way things supposedly were. Aaron and his posse are not

²⁴ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789, 2nd Edition* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2006), 1-5; Armitage, *Vigilante Force*.

criminals until they abuse their power and begin to extort money (symbolic taxes) from the town's law-abiding citizens. In this way, Aaron and his followers become criminal outsiders and strangers (or Hessian mercenaries). Aaron betrays Ben's trust, gradually resulting in the severance of their brotherly relationship. In addition, it is clear that whites dominate the town: whites run the town government, serve as police officers, operate the bank, and work in the oil fields. Through discipline and determination, the Green Mountain Boys reestablish law and order within town and lay the groundwork for economic development and the preservation of middle-class values by ridding the town of its criminals, eventually returning to their homes like good republican vigilantes.

The War Comes Home: *The Exterminator* (1980)

As shown in *Vigilante Force*, Aaron and his posse overstep their legal boundaries, thus undermining their control of the town. Initially hailed as heroes by the town, the Vietnam veterans become criminals. Aaron is unable to readjust into civilian society when his brother Ben grants him the opportunity to do so. As a result, the non-veteran heroes are the victors of the war at home and the unofficially sanctioned vigilantes in the end. Aaron's grudge against authority figures and the system never subsides, which suggests that the war perhaps contributed to hardening his justification for rebelling against authority figures. Unlike *Vigilante Force*, the subsequent vigilante movies with Vietnam veterans tied their experiences more directly to vigilantism. Like other vigilante films before it, film reviewers disapproved of James Glickenhaus' *The Exterminator* (1980). Roger Ebert wrote that the film's plot was laughable and described it as a film

marked by senseless and “moronic violence,” existing “primarily to show burnings, shootings, gougings, grindings, and beheadings.”²⁵ Film reviewer Tom Buckley wrote that *The Exterminator* paled in comparison to *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*, noting “Those films look like high art in comparison with this one. Even connoisseurs of violence will be disappointed in ‘The Exterminator’ since its grisly events are not actually shown on screen.”²⁶ Despite its shortcomings, *The Exterminator* discusses the readjustment of veterans into American society, transposes the Vietnam War into American society, and enmeshes it with contemporary concerns about racial minorities and crime.

It is helpful to consider how the film’s main character John Eastland’s experiences in Vietnam affect him. During the mid-1970s to early 1980s, psychiatrists experimented with new ways to address the psychological effects that war had on returning veterans and how those effects inhibited the ability of veterans to reintegrate into civilian society; the American Psychiatric Association recognized PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) as a mental illness in 1980.²⁷ In some ways, Eastland is a modern embodiment of the “Indian-hunter” character of American mythology and literature, who was marked by the pursuit of ephemeral material splendor, “love of

²⁵Roger Ebert, “The Exterminator,” Rogerebert.com, March 7, 1980, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-exterminator> (accessed 15 February 2014); Al Delugach, “Cannon Bid as Major Studio Is Cliffhanger: Firm’s Future at Risk in High-Stakes Gamble,” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1986; Richard P. Salgado, “Regulating a Video Revolution,” *Yale Law & Policy Review* 7, No. 2 (1989): 521, 527-528. Access to violent action and horror movies on VHS was easier during the growth of the prerecorded VHS tape industry during the early 1980s. Films such as *The Exterminator* and its sequel *The Exterminator 2*, produced by Cannon Group, the *Missing in Action* series, and the *Death Wish* series frightened parents who desired that the video rental industry be regulated. The VHS industry kept alive vigilante films, which would have largely been forgotten.

²⁶ Tom Buckley, “The Exterminator (1980),” *The New York Times*, September 11, 1980.

²⁷ Dean Jr., 69-71.

exploit and violence for the sake of their blood-stirring excitement,” and anti-intellectualism.²⁸ John Eastland does not appear to have any regrets about how he survived the Vietnam War, nor does his inability to express regret inhibit his ability as well as his comrade Michael Jefferson’s ability to reintegrate into American society.²⁹

In the beginning of the film, Eastland and his fellow soldier Jefferson dodge an artillery barrage on a battlefield somewhere in Vietnam. Vietnamese soldiers briefly capture Eastland and Jefferson. Eventually, Jefferson and Eastland gruesomely kill the Vietnamese soldiers. Later in the film, Eastland remembers these events. For example, Eastland interrogates a member from the gang Ghetto Ghouls with a flamethrower, threatening to torch him if he does not reveal the identity and location of the men who have paralyzed Jefferson. Eastland ties the gang member to two wooden poles that are similar to the stakes that Eastland’s adversaries tie him to during his capture in Vietnam. When Eastland finds the culprits that paralyzed Michael, he executes them in a manner similar to the way he had killed a Vietnamese soldier who struggled to crawl away from him. After killing the criminals who paralyzed Jefferson, Eastland visits Jefferson in the hospital, stating to Jefferson, “It was like we were back in ‘Nam. It didn’t matter if it was right or wrong, I just did it.” Eastland’s desire for vengeance against his friend Jefferson’s attackers motivates his actions. Like the message on the helicopter that rescues Eastland and Jefferson, Eastland must follow the oath that attaches him to his comrades, “Death before Dishonor.”³⁰

²⁸ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 307.

²⁹ *The Exterminator*, directed by James Glickenhaus (1980: Santa Monica, CA: Tango Environment, 2005), DVD.

³⁰ Glickenhaus, *The Exterminator*.

Eastland's actions are justifiable when he views his victims as Vietcong. Moreover, the racial transformation process does not preclude the existence of more than one racial or ethnic background. For example, the man who stabs Jefferson with a gardening tool is marked as being Cuban by the flag pin that he wears in his black beret.³¹ The collage of different symbols, including the flag pin (communism), black beret (militancy), and poster (revolutionary) combined with the racial transformation of the criminal tell the viewer about how race, economics, and politics are intertwined. Many knowledgeable viewers of the film might have tied the Cuban criminal to contemporary reports that stated that Fidel Castro was beginning to empty jails and mental hospitals as a way to encourage their inhabitants to immigrate to the United States.³²

As the movie progresses, Eastland becomes a vigilante, which allows him to commit more acts of violence because his criteria for violent action includes crimes that affect people that he does not know. When members of the Ghetto Ghouls mug an old woman, Eastland steals a young man's motorcycle and chases them down, eventually killing all three gang members. Moreover, after Eastland kills a mob boss, he sends a letter to a television station. The letter states, "The people of New York have been terrorized by criminals for too long. Politicians have stood idly by as thugs and killers have taken over our streets, our lives." Eastland believes that he is a crusader against crime. No longer does Eastland kill his victims with his semi-automatic rifle. Instead, he

³¹Glickenhau, *The Exterminator*.

³² Aristide R. Zolberg, "Refugees Enter America Through the Side Door," in *Major Problems in American Immigrant History*, 2nd Edition, Mae M. Ngai and Jon Gjerde, eds. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013), 551.

begins to use a revolver, thus conveying that he is becoming more like other vigilantes such as Dirty Harry and Paul Kersey.³³

The character Agent Shaw, a CIA operative, believes that Eastland's motives are politically subversive. Shaw states, "The exterminator has been stirring up a lot of resentment against politicians and the judicial system. This could easily be the work of the opposition party, or even of a foreign government." Shaw's suggestion that Eastland is a domestic terrorist or foreign agent is questionable, yet it highlighted contemporary suspicion towards governmental authority in reality. On the other hand, Eastland's other adversary Detective James Dalton is more realistic than Agent Shaw about Eastland's intentions. Dalton is circumspect about his police work, not drawing elaborate conclusions based on circumstantial evidence. In addition, what is interesting about *The Exterminator* is that Dalton does not overstep his legal boundaries, unlike in *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish*. Dalton obtains an arrest warrant and organizes a raid when he finds out that Eastland is the vigilante. Dalton's good police work leads him to discover Eastland's connection to Jefferson.³⁴ When Dalton's raid fails, Eastland contacts him, setting up a meeting with him that will take place in the city's naval yard. Shortly thereafter, they are ambushed by an unknown sniper and his accomplice (purportedly Agent Shaw), who says, "Washington will be pleased." After Dalton dies, Eastland washes ashore at the Statue of Liberty, crawling in the water like the Vietnamese soldier that he executed.³⁵

³³Glickenhau, *The Exterminator*.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

The War Revisited: *The Annihilators* (1985)

Although contemporary film reviewers did not take *The Exterminator* seriously, the film shows how the Vietnam War narrative fits the vigilante genre. *The Exterminator* uses racial transmutation and masking to legitimize extralegal violence against criminals to criticize politicians and law enforcement; at the same time, the criminals are marked as sneaky and conniving “gooks,” which separates them from “model minority” Asian Americans who were stereotyped as extremely disciplined, hardworking, and successful.³⁶ Yet in the end, government forces betray Eastland and thwart his efforts to continue and win the Vietnam War in America.

Unlike *Vigilante Force* and *The Exterminator*, *The Annihilators* was released directly to VHS in 1985, thus why it lacked contemporary film reviews.³⁷ The film was released on VHS during the same year that *Rambo First Blood: Part II* was released. Films such as *Rambo* depicted elite soldiers who used primitive weapons to defeat the oddly technologically superior NVA and Vietcong and tried to solidify their role as “the true patriots.” In 1985 in Boston, at an autograph signing, a group of Vietnam veterans protested Stallone’s movie because they thought it “simplified issues and exploited the

³⁶ Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999), 189-203.

³⁷ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society since 1945, 3rd Edition* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2000), 128-131; Michael A. Cusumano, Yiorgos Mylonadis, and Richard S. Rosenbloom, “Strategic Maneuvering and Mass-Market Dynamics: The Triumph of VHS over Beta,” *The Business History Review* 66, No. 1, High-Technology Industries (Spring, 1992): 83-86. Hollywood film studios faced another financial dilemma during the early 1980s. The inflationary impact of Reagan’s economic policies on interest rates during the 1980s prompted Hollywood studios to cut back on film production and reorganize themselves under the economic protection of conglomerates such as Coca Cola, which obtained Columbia Pictures in 1982, and Rupert Murdoch, who purchased Twentieth Century Fox in 1985. The conglomerates took advantage of new technologies such as video cassettes to market old films and eventually capitalized on the growth of the VHS and VCR market, which was embodied in the growth of private rental enterprises across the country during the early to mid-1980s.

war for profits.” A group of teenagers waiting for Stallone’s autograph jeered the veterans and threw rocks at them, saying that Stallone was the “real patriot.”³⁸

Although produced during the era of new patriotism, *The Annihilators* emphasizes that Vietnam veterans and their experiences could empower citizens while revitalizing communities by expunging them of drugs, gangs, and citizen indifference. Whereas *Rambo* focuses on a disgruntled Vietnam veteran who disdains the U.S. government because he feels betrayed by it, *The Annihilators* focuses on a squadron of Vietnam veterans who come together to avenge the death of their fallen comrade Joey, a paraplegic who is killed by a gang. When medics wheel Joey’s body out of a store on a gurney, the neighborhood’s citizens silently watch him pass by as Captain Lombard says, “Somebody talk to me. Two people are butchered together in broad daylight and nobody says a word.” Before his death, Joey talks to a few of his neighbors and says, “It’s not right what these gangs are doing. When all a person needs is just a little dignity.” The citizens realize the severity of their situation after Joey’s death, thus they seek help from Joey’s squadron comrade Louie, who calls his Vietnam friends Ray, Garrett, and Bill, an alcoholic who lives in an abandoned bus. When Bill comes home from the war, everything and everyone whom he had known is gone, for a freeway was put “through the old neighborhood.”³⁹

To prepare themselves for the task that lies ahead of them, the veterans go on a reconnaissance mission, scoping out the environment and finding out what sort of crime takes place in the neighborhood. The fictional neighborhood South Point, which is

³⁸Lipsitz, 80-81, 88.

³⁹*The Annihilators*, directed by Charles E. Sellier Jr., (Beverly Hills, CA: Starmaker/Anchorbay Entertainment, 1991), VHS.

located somewhere near Atlanta, Georgia, is a city marked by roaming gangs and terrified citizens peering through their windows. The veterans prepare the neighborhood's citizens by holding a self-defense demonstration in a park and teaching the concept of unity to the citizens by creating a three-tap alert system for the citizens to use during times of danger. The veterans build a personal relationship with the neighborhood's citizens, thus allowing them to disregard the construction of their image using media forms.

Moreover, when Louie states, "We gotta make a plan and follow through, just like 'Nam," he takes a somewhat positive outlook on the outcome of the Vietnam War. However, instead of hunting substitutes for Vietnamese soldiers, the veterans become more like the enemy combatants whom they fought in the war. For example, after a shootout with the Rollers gang, a citizen named Marie hides the veterans' weapons to prevent the police from arresting the veterans.⁴⁰ This example gives the impression that the veterans are the Vietcong or NVA, and the citizens are the villagers who occasionally stockpiled weapons for them. Nonetheless, the veterans (foreigners) enter from the outside to fight crime (communism); the veterans in *The Annihilators* ultimately succeed in building peaceful relations with South Point's citizens (Vietnamese).⁴¹

In the movie, the veterans find out that gangs are responsible for crimes in South Point, for the Scorpions operate the city's illegal arms trade, the Turks run the gambling and prostitution rings, and the Rollers are the "king [s] of the hill," for they control "90 percent of the action." Eventually, it is revealed that the Rollers operate a drug-trafficking

⁴⁰Sellier, Jr., *The Annihilators*.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

ring based on the trade of heroin.⁴² Some viewers of the film were perhaps reminded that a report conducted during the early 1970s found that between 40 percent and 50 percent of American soldiers in Vietnam had used heroin between 1970 and 1972. Moreover, heroin-use among veterans at home was largely exaggerated, for a follow-up study conducted between 1974 and 1975 indicated that only three percent of veterans regularly used heroin, whereas drugs such as alcohol, marijuana, and amphetamine abuse was more common among them.⁴³

Oddly, the gangs are not in conflict with each other, for no violence occurs between them. Each gang operates its respective illegal enterprise/s within separate zones. In addition, Roy Boy and his followers participate in a criminal culture of honor based on respect. In Roy Boy's world, fear and personal status based on the expansion of his share in the city's heroin trade are the foundation of respect.⁴⁴ Moreover, the gangs occasionally serve as surrogate families for the city's youth, providing them with money for information about potential rivals.⁴⁵ Some people argued during the time that children who grew up without a stable family were more prone to join gangs than children who had both parents.⁴⁶ Yet, because the teenagers attend school, it is more likely that they desire to "act out" against their parents. Over the course of the movie, the rebelliousness of a group of teenagers grows, yet vanishes at the end of the movie. In the beginning of the film, the teenagers run through the streets kicking around trashcans. Later, the teenagers laugh at the self-defense demonstration held by the veterans. While eating and

⁴²Sellier, Jr., *The Annihilators*.

⁴³ Eric C. Schneider, *Smack: Heroin and the American City* (Kindle) (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 3559/6040.

⁴⁴ David T. Courtwright, *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 234-238.

⁴⁵Courtwright, 238-239.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 240-241.

hanging out at a local burger joint, the leader of the Rollers, Roy Boy, offers money to the group of teenagers for information about the veterans. Roy Boy acknowledges the assistance of the teenagers and consequently hires them to act as his personal lookout for veterans, paying them money and saying, "I'm the guy looking out for your future."⁴⁷

What occurs in this scene is the intrusion of undesirable elements into a spatial environment that attracts young people. The outdoor burger joint collides with street crime. The teenagers are able to move into the realm of crime by simply hopping over a small brick wall. The scene places emphasis on the intrusion of heroin-use into public and private establishments visited by teenagers, a common theme used in books such as *Holiday of Horrors* and *The Narcotics Menace*.⁴⁸ The teenagers do not use heroin, but they become indirectly involved in its permitted use by others by looking for the veterans, so that they do not disrupt the Rollers' drug-trafficking scheme. However, the teenagers eventually reject the gang. In the end, the teenagers' training from the veterans saves them. One of Roy Boy's followers is distracted while attempting to kidnap a bus filled with teenagers, which leads to his death when a teenager stabs him in the neck. To protect and preserve the safety, purity, and innocence of the bus space, the teenagers must kill. Ultimately, the veterans defeat Roy Boy and the Rollers, thus signifying a symbolic triumph over the NVA.⁴⁹

⁴⁷Sellier, Jr., *The Annihilators*.

⁴⁸Schneider, 1245/6040.

⁴⁹Sellier, Jr., *The Annihilators*.

Conclusion

While *Vigilante Force* depicts returning Vietnam veterans as negative and disruptive outsiders, *The Exterminator* portrays Vietnam veterans as a positive force against crime and disorder. Eastland's recreation of the Vietnam War in the United States is a failure, for government forces prevent him from further completing his mission. In contrast, the veterans in *The Annihilators* successfully train the citizens of South Point to defend themselves (govern themselves) and defeat the Rollers. Although each film is unique, there are common themes: the mistrust of government officials and law enforcement, the transposition of the Vietnam War into American society, the inability and ability of readjusting into civilian life, the use of military training in urban warfare, and the scourge of drugs. Moreover, legitimate concerns about crimes pertaining to drug trafficking and gang activity played important roles in showing that real people felt threatened by these problems. Within the same period (1976-1985), the traditional vigilante genre developed along similar lines, pitting white and multiracial communities against a racially and ethnically diverse set of criminals, tackling contemporary political and social issues. Vigilantism continued to play a critical role in the discussion about what role citizens had in enforcing justice. During the late 1970s, New York City witnessed the birth of a non-violent subway patrol group, the Guardian Angels, a group whose popularity spread throughout the United States and motivated people to stand up to crime.

CHAPTER 3

TAKING IT BACK: URBAN VIGILANTISM AND COMMUNITY, 1980-1985

In a satirical and political song that encapsulated many important issues of the 1980s, social critic and punk rocker Jello Biafra sings, “You see a black face, you see a crack-head/ You see a black face, you see Willie Horton with a knife.../ You see one Willie Horton, you’ve seen them all...” and “Proud neighborhoods with baseball bats/ Why do they get so much press?”¹ Biafra’s lyrics allude to the infamous Willie Horton advertisement, a racially charged commercial that enmeshed blackness and criminality, the crack-cocaine epidemic, and the portrayal of how the media depicted some Americans who fought back against crime.²

Despite the scourges of crack-cocaine, Americans were invited to feel confident again about their government.³ During the 1980s, American society was marked by President Reagan’s attempt to restore pride in America’s national institutions. Reagan described his becoming president as an event made possible by the voters, who “rounded

¹Jello Biafra and DOA, “Full Metal Jackoff,” *Last Scream of the Missing Neighbors*, 1989. Compact disc.

²John Brady, *Bad Boy: The Life and Politics of Lee Atwater* (New York: Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1997), 173-190.

³Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, “The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare,” in *Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice*, Craig Reinerman and Harry G. Levine, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 18-19; David T. Courtwright, *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 250.

up a posse, swore in this old sheriff, and sent us riding into town.”⁴ While the Reagan administration’s policies were divisive, many Americans were attracted to Reagan’s personality and confidence. One biographer writes, “Reagan believed that freedom would triumph. He believed in heroism, in the triumph of goodness, in happy endings....Most Americans believed in these things too, and Reagan knew they believed in them.”⁵ Some Americans might have expected Reagan to take a more active role as “Sheriff-in-Chief.” Like his Republican predecessors, Reagan promoted new measures that would purportedly assist different states and cities in their efforts to deter crime. Reagan believed that the ultimate responsibility of enforcing the laws rested in the hands of state and local authorities. He stated, “It’s time to get these hardened criminals off the street and into jail. The primary responsibility for dealing with these career criminals must, of course, rest with local and state authorities.”⁶ Reagan portrayed himself as a sheriff despite not acting as one. Reagan’s belief that the American people should fight for justice was reflected in the vigilante films of the early 1980s and the actions of Americans in reality.

Citizens acted as vigilantes and fought the encroachment of drugs and gang violence when police authorities were undermanned. For example, New York City Councilman Wendell Foster lamented that street corners were crowded with drug dealers and their clientele, seeming like “people were lined up as if they were at Madison Square Garden for a free Michael Jackson concert.” Yet, people were taking action, for “In

⁴ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II, Seventh Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 448.

⁵ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 43.

⁶Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Federal Drug Policy,” *The American Presidency Project*, October 2, 1982, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43085> (accessed 24 February 2014).

community after community residents are no longer sitting idly by and watching the drug take over in their neighborhoods. Some have gone so far as to form vigilante groups whose main object is to keep cocaine peddlers away.”⁷ Moreover, drug dealers were viewed as dangerous and particularly violent, especially if they were members of a gang. Gun-toting teenage gangbangers terrified many citizens. In an article, Lt. Hourie Taylor of the Los Angeles Police Department stated, “How can you tell the kid who dropped out of school to go and find a job somewhere that pays minimum wage when he can make \$200 a day selling drugs....He’ll say he can make money for himself, plus help his mama out.” Children as young as eight years old could be gang members. A teenager named Jallay Hall joined the Westside Rolling Forties at the age of eight “because gangs were the only way of life in his neighborhood.” Hall stated, “I was netting \$350 a day. I’m not rolling in money or nothing. There are eight of us in the dope house taking turns doing what we got to do.”⁸ Reagan talked about how “children with excellent grades, athletic promise, outgoing personalities, but who, because of drugs, became shells of their former selves....” tailoring his message to appeal to the middle class and perhaps implicitly neglecting inner-city youths.⁹

During the early to mid-1980s, vigilante films returned to the historical themes that had been central to creating the environment in which they flourished. The films focused on citizens clashing with gangs. These films include *We’re Fighting Back* (1980), *Fighting Back* (1982), *Vigilante* (1983), and *Death Wish 3* (1985). Each tells a story about men and women of all backgrounds who stayed behind while other people

⁷“How to Deal with the Cocaine Scourge,” *Ebony* 41, Issue 12 (Oct., 1986): 133-134.

⁸Aldore Collier, “To Deal and Die in L.A.,” *Ebony* 44, Issue 10 (Aug., 1989): 106-110.

⁹Reagan, “Radio Address...”

fled to the suburbs. They are not the Paul Kerseys, Harry Callahans, or John Eastlands; rather, they are the Tony Imperiales and the Guardian Angels of the big screen, for they are tired of disorder, crime, and inefficient law enforcement. Like Imperiale, they witness the old neighborhood's decay and the vanishing sense of community; these were the "proud neighborhoods with baseball bats." In the films, it is imperative that community patrol groups portrayed themselves in a positive manner in order to deflect criticism about their activities. Within these movies, there is an effort to show multiracial and multiethnic solidarity among the characters while juxtaposing criminal activity and gang violence. The characters are left to fend for themselves, protecting their families and communities against criminals and gangs ("us" versus "them"), thus setting the stage for a battle between order and chaos.

Curtis Sliwa and the Guardian Angels

During the 1970s, citizens of New York City expressed their outrage at the condition of public transportation.¹⁰ Knowing that going to work each day might entail a confrontation with a mugger or a thief on the subway train was disheartening to many people. The reality was that it was simply impossible to furnish enough workers to patrol every area in New York City, above and below ground. As a result, citizens of New York City took precautions to prevent themselves from becoming victims of crime, sometimes forming volunteer patrol groups.

¹⁰ MyFootage.com, "Stock Footage- Grime and Crime in New York 1970s- Public Transportation Issues," *You Tube*, April 11, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdDUmvPK2OM> (accessed 30 January 2014).

The actions of one citizen and a group of volunteers served as the basis for *We're Fighting Back*. The tough-talking and streetwise leader of the Guardian Angels Curtis Sliwa grew up in a humble middle-class family. Sliwa grew up in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn. Sociologist Jonathan Rieder noted that Canarsians felt threatened by street crime, which instilled a sense of personal loss of security and the ability to move freely through the city.¹¹ Moreover, Sliwa formed the "Magnificent 13," a subway patrol group, in February 1979 while working at a McDonald's restaurant in the South Bronx. The group's activities expanded, and the amount of volunteers increased. Their iconic red berets and t-shirts that bared the emblem of a winged pyramid, which had an eyeball, identified the group's members.¹²

By 1982, the group claimed to have 2,200 members and about 1,800 members in training in 41 cities, which included Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Miami, and Los Angeles. In an interview, Sliwa stated, "In Los Angeles I was astounded to see blond-haired, blue-eyed boys drive up in cars with surfboards, park and go out on patrol." In general, the composition of Guardian Angels chapters throughout the country differed depending on where they were formed. Throughout suburbs in the Midwest and West, the majority of volunteers were middle-class whites, whereas in cities, various racial minorities and white ethnic groups composed the makeup of the volunteer groups.¹³

¹¹ Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and the Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 57.

¹² Mark A. Uhlig, "Sliwa, Angels' Founder. A Herald, Not a Cherub," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1988; 3RDRAIL 1988, "GUARDIAN ANGELS FIRST PATROLS AS MAGNIFICENT 13 LATE 1970'S BEFORE CURTIS CHANGED THE NAME," *You Tube*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XL-EvV-Cuo> (accessed 27 February 2014).

¹³"Guardian Angels' Growing Pains," *Time* 119, Issue 3, January 18, 1982.

Actor/director Lou Antonio directed a made-for-television movie called *We're Fighting Back*. As part of a deal to tell the story of the Guardian Angels, Curtis Sliwa agreed to a payment of \$30,000 and a percentage of the profits earned from the story. However, prior to the airing of the film, Sliwa tried to block its airing, for he believed that it portrayed him as a "glowering and hardened vigilante." Ultimately, Sliwa failed in a court bid to block the airing of the movie, and it was released on CBS in April 1981.¹⁴ On the day of its release, television critic John J. O'Connor noted his disapproval of the film, writing how at the end of the movie, "Life is back to the way it was, without people being afraid," thus the film missed the opportunity to raise more issues about the nature of vigilantism.¹⁵ In addition, the movie served as a promotion for joining the group or establishing a local chapter. Chapter Commander Marcus Dent of Baltimore reminisced about when he became interested in the Guardian Angels. Dent stated, "I first learned about the Guardian Angels from a television show, it was a one-time thing called *We're Fighting Back*. I remember thinking the Angels seemed like superheroes, like community soldiers.... I was 18 and I thought it looked cool."¹⁶ While considering the economic and social conditions that fostered criminal activity and the role that the media played in shaping public perceptions of vigilante groups, *We're Fighting Back* examines how dangerous environments helped to formulate notions about criminality.

The film *We're Fighting Back* starts with a sequence of shots of the streets of New York City marked by piles of trash. Troubled by how the Bronx has changed over

¹⁴ "Picks and Pans Review: We're Fighting Back," *People Magazine*, April 27, 1981.

¹⁵ John J. O'Connor, "TV: Drama of Young Crime-Fighter," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1981.

¹⁶ Marcus Dent, "Biography: Strider," *The Baltimore Guardian Angels*, <http://www.baltimoreguardianangels.org/index.php?page=about-us&bio=strider> (accessed 16 March 2014).

the years, Mr. Casey laments the neighborhood's condition, stating to his son Case, "It's a shame, I hate to see Anderson's bakery go...Every time I come back here the city's dirtier, a little meaner.... You know there are undeveloped countries that are better run than this."¹⁷ Mr. Casey's nostalgia shows that he gradually lost his personal attachment to the area. Casey feels that the people simply submitted to the deterioration of their environmental circumstances and allowed criminals to roam freely through the streets and harass them.

The problems of litter scattered across what little greenery exists, the general sense that the physical environment is almost beyond repair, and the impression that the streets belong to youthful gangs are the concerns of Casey and others. Although he blames the diverse group of "street punks" for many things, Mr. Casey does not state who is specifically responsible for the neighborhood's changes. Moreover, the absence of recreational activities and organizations suggests that the people of the community lack personal and financial connections with each other. At one point, Case's close friend Preacher recollects how the neighborhood was innocent and inviting when he was young, for he was able to go to movie theaters, play basketball, and hang out at different places, stating "You know the ten years in Alabama, I never saw nothing like this. Down in

¹⁷3RDRAIL1988. "GUARDIAN ANGELS 'WE'RE FIGHTING BACK' MAGNIFICENT 13 STORY PART 1-10." *You Tube*, March 10, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Dd_3jOiFzU&list=PL9D479BB8060B89B9 (accessed 1 March 2014); Jim Rooney, *Organizing the South Bronx* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 58. During the 1970s, the effects of white flight took their toll on the South Bronx; vacant apartment buildings previously occupied by middle-class whites were converted into Section 8 public housing to accommodate the city's financial struggles and deter squatters, drug addicts, and criminals from occupying the empty buildings. Gradually, single-parent families, young and sometimes unemployed Hispanics moved into the apartments, which resulted in the virtual redlining of every apartment building and complex within the South Bronx. Absentee landlords were partially responsible for these changes because they invested very little money into the converted housing. Plummeting property values prompted many landlords in the South Bronx to hire men to burn down their properties so that they could collect insurance money.

Birmingham, you know, I told the kids that I grew up in the Bronx, and they said, ‘Man that must’ve been awful.’ I like this place, I used to have good times here.” The neighborhood has become a place where people “are afraid to talk with each other, afraid to look at each other.”¹⁸ Preacher and Case are angry because the people around them fail to recognize that they are bound together. In the movie, the community is a social organism in which if one part (citizen) of the body (community) is harmed then other parts of the body would be affected. As a result, crime alienates the citizens of the community.

As the movie progresses, Case’s concern about the neighborhood grows. While working at the “Bronx Burger” with his friends Benny, the son of Dominican Republic immigrants, Ling (the son of Chinese immigrants), and Preacher, Case confronts a police officer, asking why the cop does not do more to protect the neighborhood’s citizens. The tired cop forcefully replies that the police force is understaffed. As a result, Case and his friends form a volunteer neighborhood patrol group, deterring criminal and gang activity within subway trains and stations. During this point, the actions of Case and his friends are not widely known within the South Bronx. They do not have uniforms to mark themselves, which blurs the group’s identity as a positive force.¹⁹ In addition, the threat of violence and possible death by confronting gang members and criminals was serious during the early years of the Guardian Angels. For example, in January 1982, Frank Melvin, a member of the Guardian Angels chapter in Newark, was shot to death while on patrol duty by a police officer who mistook him for a suspect in a break-in investigation. The Newark Police Department called the shooting a tragic accident, yet Curtis Sliwa

¹⁸ 3RDRAIL1988.

¹⁹Ibid.

was unconvinced, stating that it was a “coldblooded killing,” which prompted him to organize a protest march on Washington D.C. for a federal investigation of Melvin’s death. About 500 mourners attended Melvin’s funeral and an honor guard of around 300 young African Americans, Hispanics, and Chinese Americans conveyed their condolences by donning the group’s signature red berets.²⁰

In the aftermath of a fight with a gang, the group gains attention from the media. During an interview, Case states, “The cops do as much as they can, but look at your average transit cop: a forty-four year old guy, working twelve hours a day, wearing forty pounds of gun, nightstick, mace, bullets, and radio around his waist. You think that’s gonna deter some 15 year old in sneakers? No, but we’ll deter him.” Much like the Guardian Angels of New York City, Case acts as a fictional Sliwa and utilizes the media to depict his group in a favorable manner. Case criticizes the state of law enforcement agents, yet his real targets are those who manage law enforcement agencies; Case shapes the group’s image to show it as working in conjunction with traditional law enforcement.²¹

Moreover, Case continues to state, “We can just feel where the trouble is gonna come from because we know that world. You take away our home lives, our strong parenting, telling us right from wrong, and what you got? We could have all been in gangs. We know the language, we know the rules, we know how to walk down *there*.”²² Case’s argument relates to Daniel Moynihan’s report about black poverty. In his report, Moynihan posited, “The fundamental problem...is that of family structure. The

²⁰*Time*, “Guardian Angels’ Growing...”

²¹3RDRAIL1988.

²²*Ibid*.

evidence—not final, but powerfully persuasive—is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling,” citing poor education, access to employment, increased divorces, and an increase in illegitimate children as factors.²³ Case suggests that the problems facing families of different races within impoverished areas are relatively similar. He criticizes the purported lack of strong families, yet simultaneously sympathizes with children who grow up in poor economic and familial circumstances.

Although he does not offer a solution to ameliorate economic and social conditions, Case believes that a strong community could be a substitute for “broken families.” During the group’s first official meeting, Case states to the potential members, “We’re not about street justice....And if you’re joining for kicks, you’re gonna be disappointed because it ain’t no fun getting called nigger, chink, honky, night after night....We’re standing up to these punks, but we’re not sinking to their level to do it.”²⁴ During the early 1980s, *Chicago Sun-Times* reporter Michael Cordts went undercover as a Guardian Angel and found that “recruits were poorly trained in citizens’ legal rights; two violence-prone youths were graduated simply to bolster the size of the chapter...” Rahni Fiduccia of the Guardian Angels chapter in Chicago stated, “Most applicants think the Guardian Angels are a glorified Bruce Lee Squad and they just want to go out there and smash heads.”²⁵ The volunteer groups inadvertently served as outlets for racial

²³Daniel Moynihan, “The Moynihan Report (1965),” *Blackpast.org*, March 1965, <http://www.blackpast.org/primary/moynihan-report-1965#chapter2> (accessed 1 March 2014).

²⁴ 3RDRAIL1988. During this scene, the viewer is introduced to the character Chris Capoletti, a female that asserts her strength against crime to Case and others. Yet, she still maintains the status as a caretaker for male characters such as Case; Case’s father asks Chris to look after Case when he leaves because he feels that Case might do something reckless. Hence, she partially fulfills the masculine conception of idealized womanhood. For more information, see G.J. Barker-Benfield’s *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1976).

²⁵*Time*, “Guardian Angels’...”

violence. Media portrayals of the Guardian Angels perhaps convinced viewers that they beat up racial minorities. Moreover, *We're Fighting Back* emphasizes multiracial solidarity against crime; all productive citizens are encouraged to put a stake in their society, whereas the criminal elements of society are condemned.²⁶ Overall, the movie portrays the Guardian Angels as a force for good in society. The movie conveys how the public perceived the group in reality, the diversity of the group, and its use of the media to enhance its image.

Fighting Back (1982), Narrative, and Political Power

In an interview with James Manion of the Associated Press in 1979, Anthony Imperiale discussed his recent success as a candidate for New Jersey's state assembly. Imperiale stated, "I surprised the hell out of them by getting elected I know that. But the people who voted for me are those everyday people getting victimized out there by violence and corruption." Manion wrote, "[N]o famous names spring to his lips when asked who should play Anthony Imperiale in a film being planned by Columbia Pictures. After a long pause, he answered 'That's a tough one. I really don't know. I don't think I'll be in it, but I do want it to tell the whole story.'"²⁷ Columbia Pictures never produced the film about Imperiale's exploits. However, it is believed that *Fighting Back*, which

²⁶3RDRAIL1988.

²⁷James Manion, "New Jersey's gun-toting vigilante Anthony Imperiale is back in politics," *Lewiston Journal* 119, November 21, 1979.

was produced by Permut Presentations and directed by Lewis Teague, was inspired by Imperiale's actions.²⁸

Released in theaters on May 21, 1982, *Fighting Back* tells the tale of an Italian American deli-owner from Philadelphia named John D'Angelo (Tom Skerritt) and his efforts to eliminate crime in his neighborhood. Shortly after the film was released, Richard F. Shepard of *The New York Times* wrote that the film "addresses itself to crime on the streets and, although the message does not get delivered with crystal clarity, the movie is fast-moving, attention-holding and even thought-provoking." Shepard commended the cast of the film and the men and women behind its production and wrote that the film was "puzzling, more realistic in its parts than in its whole, which tries to attack the entire problem of crime and neighborhood self-protection, of selfless community service and of temptations to use service as a stepping stone."²⁹ Until 1982, mainstream films such as *Vigilante Force* and *The Exterminator* represented the genre, which were blasted by film critics as incoherent, goofy, or poor imitations of Michael Winner's *Death Wish*. Contemporary discussion about *Fighting Back* was sparse, which is unfortunate because the movie was a comprehensive discussion about vigilantism. During the weekend of its opening on May 21, 1982, the film competed with movies such as *Conan the Barbarian*, *The Road Warrior*, and *Porky's*. The film netted \$1,624,381 in its first weekend, yet its profits dropped by 25 percent during the following weekend. Instead of financing advertising for *Fighting Back*, Paramount Pictures' funds may have been dedicated to promoting *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, which was released on

²⁸"Deaths Elsewhere: Anthony Imperiale, 68, a political firebrand who served as..." *The Baltimore Sun*, December 29, 1999.

²⁹Richard F. Shepard, "Fighting Back (1982)," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1982.

June 4, 1982 and netted \$14,347,221 in its first weekend.³⁰ Movie reviewers and film critics were perhaps dissuaded from writing about the movie because of the possible belief that it was just another vigilante film. Likewise, reviewers may have not had the option of reviewing the film if they were assigned by their superiors to write reviews for different films or fulfill a quota. Hence, the opportunity was missed for film critics to discuss the film's complexity.

Fighting Back deals with the various uses of vigilantism, highlighting how its proponents shape the public's perception of vigilante groups and its functions as a community builder and platform for political change. *Fighting Back* opens within a dark television studio, where producers are editing parts of a documentary called "Violence in America: The Killing of the Dream," which shows the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and attempted assassinations against Pope John Paul II and Ronald Reagan. Immediately, the movie begins with tying violence into the nation's political, social, and economic history. There is a careful arrangement of images, sounds, and reels of television to portray the threats of crime and violence.³¹

After the preview of the documentary, the movie cuts to a congregation of a large group of people at Mariano's apartment. Young and old as well as black and white people mingle, laugh and smile, and reminisce about past events. Yet, the celebration stems from

³⁰ "Weekend Box Office: May 21-23, 1982, Weekend," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/weekend/chart/?yr=1982&wknd=21&p=.htm> (accessed 16 March 2014); "Average Movie Ticket price by year," *Made Deal*, http://www.mixhosting.net/mall/average_movie_ticket_price_by_year.html (accessed 16 March 2014); "Weekend Box Office: May 28-31, 1982," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/weekend/chart/?view=&yr=1982&wknd=22a&p=.htm> (accessed 16 March 2014); "Weekend Box Office: June 4-6, 1982," *Box Office Mojo*, <http://boxofficemojo.com/weekend/chart/?view=&yr=1982&wknd=23&p=.htm> (accessed 16 March 2014).

³¹*Fighting Back*, directed by Lewis Teague (1982: Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 1992) VHS.

the elderly Mariano's decision to leave the neighborhood. Many for-sale signs are present throughout the movie on the windows of homes or front lawns, thus hinting at white flight yet misrepresenting the fact that lower and middle-class whites failed to stay and replace the white community that was growing older.³² Although it is not noted what prompts Mariano to move away from the neighborhood, John perhaps hints at Mariano's justification for leaving. After Mariano leaves, John states to his wife Lisa, "I'm glad he didn't get shot here, everybody gets shot here."

John's optimism about the state of his neighborhood suddenly changes after a series of events affects his family. For example, John's wife Lisa suffers a miscarriage after an angry pimp named Eldorado crashes into their car. Furthermore, John's mother Vera is mugged while picking up her prescription at a store in the evening; one of the muggers cuts off her finger so that he can retrieve her ring. Later, John learns that the police are unable to pursue his mother's assailants and there is the impression that they are not too concerned about it. As a result, John organizes a community meeting where he talks to his neighbors about crime, pleading to his peers to join him in forming a neighborhood patrol group. Several citizens hesitate joining the group, citing the dangers of confronting criminals or making citizens' arrests. Yet, some people support the group. One African American citizen says, "I just wanna say, I got a lot of reasons for not getting involved in this...But those cleaners, my father worked real hard for that and the last time they got robbed, they roughed up Gene."³³ Moreover, the film's respectable citizens have a personal and economic attachment to the community, whereas criminals, who are non-citizens, do not have a meaningful attachment to it; their pursuits are

³²Woldoff, 27.

³³Teague, *Fighting Back*.

enervating, draining the community's essence so that they can fulfill their transitory and empty desires (drugs and alcohol). The protection of property is a strong justification for extralegal activity against criminals.

John's efforts lead to the creation of the People's Neighborhood Patrol. The PNP's activities are a mixture of extralegal activities marked by violence while loosely working with law enforcement. During an interview with the mayor and police commissioner, John states, "We have no problem with the police. A few of them ride along with us....If I'm doing something illegal then arrest me. I gotta do what I gotta do"; John's close friend Vince Morelli is a police officer. During one scene, John and his friends start a fight in a bar where Eldorado and other ostensibly lowly figures are present; at the end of the brawl, John asserts his middle-class identity and relevance to the community's economic well-being by stating, "My name is John D'Angelo. I own a deli and I make the best hot hero in town."³⁴

Crime, race, and politics are important themes that mark John's transformation into a vigilante. The theme of race as a predictor of criminal behavior is present throughout the movie. Even though his mother's assailants wear masks, John believes that his mother's attackers are African Americans. While in the hospital, a police officer talks to John and suggests that the assailants of John's mother are African Americans, thus helping to build John's conviction. When John is led to PNP's headquarters to see the men who attacked his mother, John sees that one of the muggers is an African American and proceeds to beat him up, prompting Ivanhoe Washington, an African American leader, to stop him and point to the white mugger. Washington states, "There's

³⁴ Teague, *Fighting Back*.

your black male at 20. It's always gotta be the black guy, right John?"³⁵ John's actions are vengeful and he desires to protect citizens, which clouds his judgment. In this way, the film asks viewers to question using instinct to identify criminals.

Although it seems like John is pushed into becoming politically active, John recognizes the importance of shaping his public image by taking action; he may not understand the different causes of crime, yet he recognizes that the public favored using force against criminals. After smashing Eldorado's car with his car and throwing trashcans at his windshield, the neighborhood's Italian American community celebrates John's actions, just like Imperiale.³⁶ Consequently, John's popularity leads to an interview with a journalist. During his interview, John states "If the agencies of this city cannot protect the rights of my children and lives in this neighborhood, then we as parents reserve the right to protect the rights of our children, whatever way we can..." John's statement is structurally similar and worded somewhat differently from Imperiale's recorded speech in the movie, which is "If the law cannot control it because the mayor will not make 'em, then it is time for us under the Constitution to defend ourselves to the limit." Other people flatter John, which causes him to utter statements such as "Guys like me have special responsibilities, the problem ain't just in the streets, it's the politicians, the judges..."³⁷

Nonetheless, people are skeptical about John's motives. In a conversation, John's friend Vincent says to him, "The patrol's changed, they're getting out of hand, and you've changed, John. You know what you're becoming? You're becoming another

³⁵Teague, *Fighting Back*.

³⁶Tom Tiede, "Gibson Battles an Image," *The Tuscaloosa News*, July 29, 1970.

³⁷Teague, *Fighting Back*.

goddamn police problem.” When Eldorado’s gang kills Vince, John becomes distraught. After Vincent’s funeral, John’s political advisers tell him, “Let’s turn this into something positive. The time’s right, John. You’re hot. And the funeral just gave you national profile, that’s all. Timing is everything in politics, it’s just a game of opportunities.” The death of Guardian Angel member Frank Melvin in January 1982 may have inspired the film. Curtis Sliwa partially used that tragic event to draw national attention to himself and the Guardian Angels. After weighing his options, John decides to rally the PNP and show force against the criminals that control the park. John is arrested during the “battle” in the park, yet the police commissioner allows him to walk free as a political favor, leaving him with information about Eldorado, who John kills by dropping a bomb through the top of his car. In the end, John wins an election for city council.³⁸

Fighting Back’s in-depth examination of the dynamics of urban vigilantism demonstrates its political and racial dimensions. The film asks viewers to question the characters’ motivations as well as how narrative construction constitutes a major role in shaping the public’s view of vigilante activity. John D’Angelo’s motivations for forming the People’s Neighborhood Patrol initially stems from his desire to provide security for his community. D’Angelo becomes enmeshed in his role as a crusader against crime; he rides the waves of political opportunism created by his successes as a neighborhood watchman. As the literal and political defender of the people, D’Angelo becomes the physical embodiment of law and order; his ascension into political power legitimizes extralegal action as a form of democratic expression.

³⁸ Teague, *Fighting Back*.

Some Lights, No Cameras, Much Action: *Vigilante* (1983) and the Secret War

Movie theaters released William Lustig's *Vigilante*, which starred Robert Forster and Fred Williamson, in September 1983. Lustig's *Vigilante* examines the struggle of citizens to cope with crime, justice's weaknesses, and crime's effect on gender norms within the family. As in *Fighting Back*, crime is associated with outsiders and there is a clear distinction between "good" people of color and "bad" people of color. Within the historical context that the film was made, one Canarsie homeowner noted, "It's the minority's right to move where they want. I wouldn't mind if a colored family moved next door if they were upstanding and fine like me....But I don't want trash who will frighten me. My problem is walking in the streets and seeing people in the street who I don't know whether they are going to bother me."³⁹ In the movie, dirty-looking men assault young females while senior citizens cower in fear, hiding behind the doors and walls of their apartment rooms, refusing to talk to investigators.⁴⁰ Although it appears that citizens do not know anything about the crime, they withhold information from the police because they distrust them. Instead, citizens seek help from the local vigilante group.

The group has a covert relationship with the community, serving as an underground guerrilla network. The relationship between the community and the vigilantes reflects a transposition of the Vietnam War narrative, yet the vigilantes are portrayed as Vietcong that use the help of citizens to fend off the figurative American imperialist forces (the criminals). The vigilante group's secrecy is conveyed by how

³⁹Rieder, 83.

⁴⁰*Vigilante*, directed by William Lustig (1982; West Hollywood, CA: Blue Underground/ Magnum Motion Pictures, 2007) DVD.

citizens refuse to talk to police officers when they are asked for information about a crime; instead, an old lady rides along with Nick, Burke, and Ramon in their van while she points out the criminal to them on the street; the criminal is paralyzed by Nick, Burke, and Ramon. In the movie's opening scene, Nick teaches prospective vigilantes in a classroom-like setting. Trainees are shown shooting guns at a firing-range. At one point, Nick states, "We ain't got the police, the prosecutors, the courts, or the prisons...When you can't go to the corner to buy a pack of cigarettes after dark, you have a moral obligation, the right to self-preservation. This is our Waterloo, baby! If you want your city back, you gotta take it, dig it? Take it!"⁴¹

In addition, racial profiling is questioned throughout the film. After completing his transaction, Nick stares down the drug dealer, which prompts the dealer to turn around and walk in the opposite direction. Nick becomes the hunter while the drug dealer becomes his prey. However, Nick is not marked as a dangerous African American. The viewer is supposed to know that Nick stands for vigilante justice and order. "Good crime" is permissible, whereas "bad crime" is not tolerated.⁴² Criminals have the right to live as long as they are isolated and excluded from society, thus preventing them from doing harm to it. When traditional methods of criminal prosecution and law enforcement fail to deter criminal activity or allow its continuance, extralegal justice is permissible as an alternative method. In the minds of Nick and others, the victims of crime deserve justice, whether it is legal or illegal. The message is that gangs that menace law-abiding citizens should not exist.

⁴¹Lustig, *Vigilante*.

⁴²Ibid.

The movie's main character Eddie Marino faces the aforementioned dilemma in the movie. Eddie Marino is a middle-aged workingman who wants to make life better for his wife Vickie and his son Scott. Together they enjoy a picnic in the park where Eddie teaches his son how to fly a remote-controlled airplane (the sky is the limit) and suggests to his wife that when he saves enough money from work, they will be able to take a vacation. Yet hovering in the background of this peaceful environment is the threat of crime. While at a gas station, Vickie shouts at a Hispanic male named Rico (Willie Colón) because he harasses an old gas station attendant. Like Lisa D'Angelo from *Fighting Back*, Vickie Marino is a strong and assertive female. However, Vickie's violation of gender norms that situates males as the dominant force within American society leads to her being attacked by Rico; her son Scott is executed by an African American criminal named Prago (Don Blakely). Eddie is distressed about the death of his son and the stabbing of his wife; Nick offers to help him find the people who killed his son and assaulted his wife, yet Eddie declines his offer.⁴³

Eddie acknowledges that the threat of crime is real, yet he does not believe that the enforcers and interpreters of the law can be criminals or become corrupt. However, when Judge Sinclair gives Rico a lenient sentence and suspends his time in jail, Eddie loses faith in the capacity of humans to do good and his anger leads to his temporary detainment in prison for showing contempt of court. Eddie's trust in the system is betrayed when he learns that Rico will not be punished for his crimes; Eddie assumes that Rico's rights would be deprived from him, but the justice system fails to perform this function. Hence, the operation of the system appears flawed. Likewise, despite killing

⁴³Lustig, *Vigilante*.

Eddie's son, Prago is never tried for the crime: it is as if the crime never happened. After leaving prison, Eddie is a hardened individual who wants revenge, which leads him to kill Rico and eventually track down Prago.⁴⁴

As noted by Jonathan Rieder, "The milieus of plebeian youths and adults celebrate toughness as a cultural ideal, supply their members with experience in fighting, and reject the sanctity of due process."⁴⁵ Eddie oversteps the ideal of toughness by killing Rico, thus solidifying his manhood and demonstrating his capacity to act. However, Vickie leaves Eddie after he kills Rico.⁴⁶ Eddie fulfills his role as the economic provider for his family, yet fails to protect his family. Vickie perhaps understands that she fails to protect the domestic sphere, yet she does not blame herself for her son's death. By confronting Rico at the gas station (a public place), she invites the corruptive elements of society into her house. Yet, Vickie protests society's prescribed gender roles; she challenges them not because they partially constrain her activity, but because they fail to protect her home. Vickie criticizes the failure of men to prevent the possibility of corruptive elements (or crime) from seeping into the domestic sphere. Eddie's initial failure to realize the ideal of toughness and masculinity leads to estrangement from his wife.⁴⁷

Eddie concludes his vigilante activity by killing Judge Sinclair with a car bomb; Sinclair's words, "The court sentences you to two years, sentence to be suspended" echo in the background as Eddie detonates the car bomb.⁴⁸ Overall, *Vigilante* examines the

⁴⁴Lustig, *Vigilante*.

⁴⁵Rieder, 179.

⁴⁶Lustig, *Vigilante*.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Lustig, *Vigilante*.

internal shortfalls of the American justice system by depicting it as corrupt and ineffective, thus prompting the characters in the movie to dole out justice on their own terms. Eddie enters the community's vigilante network and asserts his patriarchal role and masculinity by ultimately killing Rico, yet he is unable to salvage his marriage and become a vigilante hero.

Bernie Goetz, Subway Vigilante

Nearly a year before the release of *Death Wish 3* on November 1, 1985, a man named Bernhard Goetz shot four young African Americans on a subway train in New York City on December 22, 1984, claiming that they threatened him. A New York Police Department hotline established for tips about the subway shooter "...instead attracted hundreds of callers who expressed support for the gunman's actions. Some people offered to help pay legal expenses and others suggested that he run for Mayor."⁴⁹ Eventually, Goetz surrendered to the police. Goetz was acquitted of attempted murder and first-degree assault charges, yet was convicted on illegal possession of a firearm.⁵⁰

Friends and relatives painted a picture of a complicated man. Physically, Goetz did not look the part of a heroic vigilante; his brother-in-law Dr. Norman Weinstein stated, "Bernhard is basically a wimp. He has glasses. Not terribly stylish. Bernhard

⁴⁹ Suzanne Daley, "Man Tells Police He Shot Youths in Subway Train," *The New York Times*, January 1, 1985; Richard Stengel, "A Troubled and Troubling Life: Who Is Bernhard Goetz, and Why Did He Do What He Did?" *Time*, April 8, 1985.

⁵⁰ Myra Friedman and Michael Daly, "My Neighbor Bernie Goetz," *New York Magazine*, February 18, 1985.

doesn't project a macho image. Bernhard looks like a good victim."⁵¹ Goetz's friend Paul Barbuto said that "So he would go to the extreme of saying 'nigger' and 'spic' just to get the liberals wild, because he's pissed at them. He can also say the city government needs to be doing something for black kids. That's Bernie."⁵²

Despite his apparent feebleness, many journalists and people compared Goetz to the main character in *Death Wish*. The lyrics of a contemporary song were inspired by Goetz, "I'm not going to give you my pay/ Try and take it away/ Come on, make my day/ They call him the vigilante," blending references to Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* and Paul Kersey in *Death Wish*. Even the Guardian Angels showed their support by asking pedestrians to fill a bucket with money for Goetz's legal defense.⁵³ Furthermore, throughout the year critics claimed that *Death Wish 3* sought to glorify and exploit Goetz's actions. However in an interview, the film's director Michael Winner stated, "We made *Death Wish* in 1974....He's a very slow learner if it took him eleven years to follow this film...."⁵⁴ In an interview after his acquittal, Goetz told journalist Carole Agus about the public's conception of him as a real-life Paul Kersey from *Death Wish*. Goetz said, "Wrong movie, it was more like *A Clockwork Orange*. *A Clockwork Orange* had three or four boys in it. What happened? The boys (on the subway) were similar to the boys in *A Clockwork Orange* who came upon someone who had a gun. If you understand that, you'll understand...the whole thing." Goetz revealed little about his intentions leading up to his trial. The public constructed Goetz's narrative and his

⁵¹Carole Agus, "Wolf or Wimp? Myths and Realities of Bernhard Goetz, Subway Vigilante," *Newsday Magazine*, December 14, 1986.

⁵²Friedman and Daly, "My Neighbor..."

⁵³ John Leo, "Behavior: Low Profile for a Legend Bernhard Goetz," *Time*, January 21, 1985.

⁵⁴ Paul Talbot, *Bronson's Loose! The Making of the Death Wish Films* (Kindle) (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse Publishing, 2006), 81-82/179.

vigilante profile. Agus concluded, “For his story to be told at all, it had to be told by others.”⁵⁵

Defenders of Their Way of Life: *Death Wish 3* (1985)

Critics may have been relieved or upset that the plot of *Death Wish 3* did not verify their suspicions that it was produced in light of Bernhard Goetz’s actions. Nonetheless, film reviewers did not praise the movie. One reviewer wrote, “There is not a moment of credibility in the movie and the ending is sheer chaos, and anticlimactic at that. Mr. Winner runs out of imagination before Mr. Bronson runs out of ammunition.”⁵⁶ In his review of *Death Wish 3*, Roger Ebert wrote, “I guess it's supposed to be heartwarming to see whites, blacks and Latinos working side by side to rape, pillage and murder.”⁵⁷ In fact, director Michael Winner wanted to make the movie feel less intense and violent than the previous films, for he stated, “I thought we’d cheer it up. It was a different era and I thought we’d have these enormous stunts and buildings blowing up. I must add, I didn’t write the script. The script had most of that in, but I did think we really could go ‘gung ho.’”⁵⁸

The plot of *Death Wish 3* revolves around the return of Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) to New York City to visit his friend Charlie, a decorated soldier whose apartment walls are decorated with war memorabilia and paintings of the Wild West. Unfortunately, a gang led by a man named Fraker (Gavan O’Herliy) robs and murders

⁵⁵Agus, “Wolf or Wimp?”

⁵⁶Walter Goodman, “Death Wish 3 (1985),” *The New York Times*, November 3, 1985.

⁵⁷Roger Ebert, “Death Wish 3,” Rogerebert.com, November 5, 1985, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/death-wish-3-1985> (accessed 4 March 2014).

⁵⁸Talbot, 77/189.

Charlie. Kersey enters Charlie's apartment prior to Charlie's death, just before the arrival of police officers who arrest him as the suspected murderer. Nonetheless, the police department's Captain Striker (Ed Lauter) makes a deal with Kersey that stipulates that Kersey eradicate crime within Charlie's neighborhood. Kersey does not talk a lot throughout the movie, which makes him somewhat similar to Goetz. However, Kersey's actions have become routine by this point and the media is almost non-existent in the film. On the other hand, Goetz attracted a lot of attention from the media and welcomed its construction of his image. Moreover, Goetz was only charged with illegal possession of a firearm, thereby sanctioning his violent actions. In this regard, *Death Wish 3* shows law enforcement's conditional acceptance of extralegal activity, for police officers view it as an auxiliary tool.⁵⁹ Moreover, the film's environment and the material bearings of certain characters throughout the movie comment on contemporary politics and the struggle between "old immigrants" and "new migrants"; and the recreation of past events in a modern setting is also important to examine to understand the film's conservative and patriotic outlook.

The neighborhood in the film is an environment where the old and new clash. Within Charlie's apartment building, odors of stuffed cabbage cooked by a Jewish couple, the Kaprovs, fill the hallways. An old couple, Emile and Marta, own a local store that their neighbors often visit. Yet, the neighborhood's security is never certain. Fraker's gang members come and go as they please, sneaking through windows, raping and robbing whomever they wish. The Kaprovs are unable to protect themselves with a gun because police officers confiscate it from them. Goetz obtained his weapon from out of

⁵⁹*Triple Feature: Death Wish 2, Death Wish 3, and Death Wish 4*, directed by Michael Winner and J. Lee Thompson. (1985: Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, 2007), DVD.

state and used it to protect himself, whereas in the movie Kersey purchases a mail-order gun, thereby undermining New York City's gun restrictions. When Kersey kills gang members, citizens applaud him. Thus, the movie reflected a portion of the public's approval of Goetz's actions.⁶⁰

Old citizens like Kersey's acquaintance Bennett lament the departure of his friends. Bennett states, "I fix clocks, meters for the cab company and I got a little place down the street, that's what I do. I'm not gonna get run outta here." As a World War II veteran, Bennett is a dutiful soldier that does not want the neighborhood to be ruined; he serves his country on the battlefield and on the domestic front, building himself a company and working as a repairman. Bennett and others are representations of the Euro-centric construction of the "new immigrants" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States, which included immigrants from Southeastern and Eastern European countries. The movie implies that they acculturated themselves into American society and became productive citizens. In this sense, they are "model Americans." The abandoned buildings and the brick piles that inhabit the neighborhood are implicitly blamed on the criminals who cause mayhem in the streets; what Bennett and others have symbolically constructed in the past is de-constructed by criminals and gangs in the present. The street punks mock the way that Bennett and others live. They are foreigners among people like Bennett, yet this does not preclude the existence of similarities between the two groups. Fraker's gang does not observe the formalities of economic dispossession. Their existence is based on brute force and they are marked as such by Luftwaffe earrings

⁶⁰Winner, *Death Wish 3*.

(German fascists) and Rising Sun headbands (Japanese imperialists).⁶¹ Within its historical context, the skinhead subculture (and the right-wing politics of it) started to take hold within American punk music.⁶² Hardcore punk rocker Jello Biafra stated that New York was a center for skinhead punks during the mid-1980s.⁶³ Moreover, within punk culture, the tearing of jeans and other articles of clothing over time was viewed as an act of rebellion against the ebb and flow of mass-market consumerism.⁶⁴ The torn and raggedy clothing of Fraker and his gang suggests the harshness of living conditions within the neighborhood. Fraker's gang is impoverished, yet the gang prizes ephemeral goods such as technology, illegal drugs, and other consumer goods. In the end, the neighborhood's citizens join Kersey in fending off the invasion of Fraker's gang and a motorcycle gang; the battle is ultimately a struggle between two different, though similar ways of life. With help from Captain Striker and Rodriguez (the good Hispanic), Kersey defeats Fraker's forces.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Overall, the films examined demonstrate the desire of some American citizens to punish drug traffickers and gangs. On film and in reality, communities became battlegrounds where productive citizens battled gangs; communities that upheld noble

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Timothy S. Brown, "Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and 'Nazi Rock' in England and Germany," *Journal of Social History* 38, No. 1 (Autumn, 2004): 162.

⁶³ Steve Blush, ed. George Petros, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History, 2nd edition* (Kindle) (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010), 33/404.

⁶⁴ Kevin C. Dunn, "Never Mind the Bollocks: The Punk Rock Politics of Global Communication," *Review of International Studies* 34, Cultures and Politics of Global Communication (2008): 195.

⁶⁵ Winner, *Death Wish 3*.

principles and desired order confronted disruptive forces that threatened communal harmony. Characters like Case Morgan and John D'Angelo represented people like Curtis Sliwa and Anthony Imperiale, who played important roles in mobilizing multiracial and white ethnic efforts towards fighting crime where there was a perceived absence of effective law enforcement. Within films such as *We're Fighting Back* and *Fighting Back* and reality, the shaping of a group's public image became integral to making a group appear non-threatening to the public order; the construction of a group's narrative and exposure to the media also served the function of advancing political ambitions or persuading public officials. The films deconstruct the notion that African Americans and other racial minorities could only be criminals. Nonetheless, some people and politicians still held the notion that criminality was only a black issue (ex. Willie Horton). In essence, these films suggest that justice is determined on a moral basis and the people have a right to dole it out to criminals either when they do not agree with the justice system or when they feel it incapable of efficiently enforcing the laws.

CONCLUSION

Each day that I come home from school or work, I drive by an old “Neighborhood Watch” sign that depicts a menacing black figure. The sign allows its viewer to make his or her own judgment about who the man in black is. About a year ago, I had an experience when I went to my nephew’s bus stop to pick him up after school. During that time, my hair almost reached my shoulders, and I had not shaved my facial hair for about two months. I stood on the street corner as a police car pulled up across the street at the intersection and stopped there for about three minutes with the cop looking in my direction. Eventually, he left and my nephew’s bus arrived. The bus’ door opened and I waited for my nephew, but I was disappointed when the bus driver told me that my nephew could not leave with me because I was not on “the list” to pick him up, despite my nephew’s plea that I was his uncle. Eventually, my mother picked Tommy up from the bus stop. A day later, I found out that there was not a pickup list.

Throughout my entire life, I rarely felt insecure within my neighborhood; the village gives the impression that everyone knows each other. Yet, the village gives the impression that some people are peering through their windows, but I feel somewhat secure because I belong to the community. My status within the neighborhood differs

from the status of non-residents. Imagine how an African American male or Hispanic who was not a resident might feel about the same scenario. How would they feel about those vigilant eyes?

If the historical conditions of the village (or any suburban town or city) were different and it was located in an urban area, then circumstances would be different. The predominantly white middle-class and working-class population of Southeastern and Eastern European background would most likely get along with each other and perhaps take it for granted that they lived in a residentially segregated area. Sure, African Americans and others would live in the city, but they would be contained in their neighborhoods. Television and newspapers might show ghettos in uproar and report about increasing crime rates. Would all African Americans be like the ones you saw on television or read about in the newspaper, or just some of them? What if legal segregation was suddenly overturned and the predominantly white population began to move away because upwardly mobile African Americans or other minorities began to move into the neighborhood? Property prices would depreciate because discriminatory real estate and housing practices redlined portions of the neighborhood. Years of hard work toward economic prosperity and security and future economic prospects would dwindle before your eyes. The absence of the white middle-class tax base would leave school systems in terrible shape and eradicate public amenities. The community would fragment, but you would be hesitant to move because you have known this area for your entire life. Would the fear of racial threat override your desire to stay and prompt you to move or would you decide to stay and adapt to the changing environment?

It is easy to look at action films or vigilante films and simply dismiss them as racist. I knew that race was an important factor, yet it was not the only factor, for it was intertwined with contemporary concerns about the relation of citizens to traditional forms of authority and the right of citizens to become involved in asserting extralegal authority. Economic and social concerns as well as views about community, justice, inclusion/exclusion, and democratic power were addressed. Historian Thomas J. Sugrue argues that decay in post-war Detroit and other cities across the United States stemmed from “coincidence and mutual reinforcement of race, economics, and politics in a particular historical moment, the period from the 1940s to the 1960s...”¹ Because of these changes, new forces challenged the strength of communities. White, black, and multiracial communities responded to the challenge of adapting to the influx of people who they viewed as different from themselves. Rather than allow themselves to decay, the old communities (white, black, and multiracial/ethnic) fought back. To these communities, crime became the scapegoat for decay, which often entailed the racialization of criminals. In the process, urban communities were strengthened despite being challenged by crime, drugs, and deindustrialization.

Backlash has largely been considered by writers who focus on white Americans who reacted against crime, counterculture, the breakdown of the family, and federal legislation that ostensibly favored minority groups, highlighting the strength of the “behavior and the moral standards of traditional ways.”² As observed throughout this

¹ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.

² James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 676.

paper, backlash did not always denote confrontation between whites and racial minorities. For example, African Americans who lived in cities conveyed similar grievances with white ethnics about crime (black on black) and lack of economic opportunity. In addition to deterring crime, blacks sought to use organizations to promote legislation that favored economic progress. To assert that backlash was a white conservative response to perceived threats is to undermine the actions taken by middle-class and working-class Americans of all backgrounds in different urban environments to improve their conditions. Backlash against crime entailed racial and class tensions while attempting to preserve the current order, yet it also served as a constructive force that sought to improve local circumstances.

Vigilante films addressed these aforementioned contemporary concerns and other issues. Initially, movies such as *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* emphasized the legacy of American Westerns and the concept of the urban frontier. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin argues that the vigilante genre “inverted the Myth of the Frontier that informed the Westerns. The borders their heroes confront are impermeable to the forces of progress and civilized enlightenment,” thus emphasizing a “post-Frontier” society.³ Although Slotkin’s argument is valid because vigilantes confronted immovable barriers such as powerful public and private institutions, the vigilantes operated within environments that were deconstructed to fit frontier conditions. Either legal authorities were sapped of their efficacy or they abused their power. Urban life reverted into frontier life. This was accomplished by emphasizing the deindustrialization of cities; the incoming migrants

³ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 634-635.

symbolized the unruliness of frontier conditions as well as the hopes of economic betterment. Unfortunately, migrants entered an environment that deferred their desires for improvement. Within these conditions, law-abiding citizens and criminals fought against each other for control and different sets of reasons.

To their contemporary audiences, Harry Callahan and Paul Kersey symbolized white working-class frustration against racial minorities and the government's inadequacies. The American working-class felt "squeezed" by African Americans and other minorities, yet *Dirty Harry*'s characters Harry Callahan and Scorpio showed that working-class frustration was directed towards liberal court rulings, specialization in the workplace, and other economic and social classes within white communities.⁴ Although it has been argued by historian Ed Guerrero that vigilante films were representative of the conservative white backlash against liberal social and cultural changes of the 1960s, it is evident that vigilante films addressed widespread concerns about community. Initially, the city was a battleground where vigilantes fought individual criminals. Films such as *Vigilante Force*, *We're Fighting Back*, *Fighting Back*, *Vigilante*, *The Annihilators*, and *Death Wish 3* emphasized the group dynamic of vigilantism and defined who the criminals were, whereas films such as *Dirty Harry*, *Death Wish*, and *The Exterminator* posited that anyone could be a criminal. In the former group of films, two sides were created: the respectable citizens and the gangs. Moreover, vigilante films helped to legitimize extralegal violence by reinforcing its importance to the nation's mythology.

⁴ Robert Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions, 1920-1985* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 169-170; Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 198.

Between the late 1960s and mid-1980s, national political concerns reflected a portion of the public's contemporary concern about racial upheaval and increasing crime rates. Citizens called for order within an American society that appeared to be cracking at the seams, hinting that only a strong leader and a strong government were capable of putting an end to societal disarray. Republican presidents talked tough about crime to the American people while leaving the work to state and local law enforcement agencies to deal with it; something *needed* to be done about crime, but it was not the federal government's responsibility to micro-manage it.⁵ By not becoming directly involved, politicians indirectly encouraged citizens to use creative ways to handle crime and address other aspects of urban decay.

When law enforcement did not adequately address crime in certain areas, groups of normal Americans were at the vanguard when it came to enforcing law and order; they were the foot soldiers and the leaders of movements that tackled the threat of crime within their communities. They voiced their concerns about crime by writing about it and speaking to public officials and reporters about their experiences with crime in their daily lives. In some instances, their concerns were taken seriously, yet in other cases their concerns were ignored or dismissed as simply racist. In Newark, a group of citizens led by Anthony Imperiale symbolized physical white backlash against blacks. On the other hand, Curtis Sliwa and the Guardian Angels of New York City formed a multiracial effort to deter crime throughout the city's subways and streets; race was detached from discussions amongst the group about fighting crime, thus emphasizing the need for

⁵Vesla M. Weaver, "Frontlash: Race and the Development of Punitive Crime Policy," *Studies in American Political Development* 21, (Fall 2007): 262-265.

communal solidarity. Although public officials and journalists criticized vigilantes within reality and films for their actions, many average Americans applauded their ability to directly address a problem and take action to fix it. Urban vigilante groups saw themselves not as disruptive forces within American society but as constructive forces that made themselves directly accountable to their respective communities and supporters. By using the media as a tool for discourse and image-shaping, urban vigilantes were able to broaden their base of support and encourage people to consider the strengths and weaknesses of vigilantism as a viable form of democratic expression.

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