1 Losing Ground at the Movies

"Fuck that, fuck you, fuck that! Look at him. He's nothing. The guy's a piece of shit."

Joe the piece of shit (and the Last Boy Scout) is a private eye, captive of a wealthy criminal, and object of a thug's abuse. Joe asks the latter, "You got a cigarette?"

"Cigarette? Yeah, sure, I got a cigarette."

"You got a light?"

"Yeah, I got a light." But with the light comes a painful crack to Joe's jaw.

The thug chuckles over the bleeding captive, "Hey Baby, I thought you were tough. See, Pablo," he says to the other thug, who toys at a piano, "he's not so bad."

But Joe isn't finished: "I seem to have dropped my cigarette," he says in measured provocation. "May I have another?"

Intrigued, the thug plays along. "Sure. Sure thing, Buddy."

"I'm going to need a light," Joe whispers in warning, "If you touch me again, I'll kill you."

The thug whispers back, "You know I'm going to touch you," and then gives Joe his light and a truly vicious blow to the jaw. Jubilant, he rejoices over his fallen victim: "Bumba! Baby! Haaaa haa ha! Ooooh, Baby! Two for two. We've got two for—" But Joe suddenly comes back with a punch of his own and knocks the thug to the floor dead.

Problem Movies

Cops love their self-abusing vengeance and never more than when they fight rich and perverse white men. *The Last Boy Scout* well represents the cop action genre. Working-class community protectors—cops, for short—blow through racial guilt, sexual hostility, and class resentment with a wise-cracking defiance and a lot of firepower. By pitting themselves against the rich, racist, and woman-hating criminal class, cops stand tall at the centers of their stories. Hard times give them opportunities to retake the center stage they feel they've lost. While on that stage, with all eyes fixed upon them, heroes find privilege, guilt, and dishonor among white men; target the richest with their gunplay; and do their own bloody penance for white male sins. They stake out a white guy turf on which they can star as the most qualified, while they punish the evil around and within them.

In a world that has lost ground to lunacy and greed,[1] cops possess the killing skills they'll need to protect their society from the very corruption that has: (1) given white guys lions' shares of our world's resources, (2) made them look like nasty oppressors to their families and colleagues, and (3) eaten at their status by corrupting their valued blue-collar/professional jobs and turning them into low-status service workers. Cops are not sure what to do about this, and the genre tells stories in which they make some hard decisions. Cop action fixes on arguments over the privileges that so many feel they have lost to moral and economic decline, and it tells a story about workers in a diminishing world. Through close study of the 193 movies that formed the cop action genre from 1980 through 1997, I show how cops mount a morality play about what different people deserve, how they lost it, and what they can do about it.

Cop action mixes the following elements: Whether in law enforcement or civilian work, heroes protect people from harm. They face combinations of three threats to their happi-

ness: alienation from employers, estrangement from loved ones, and violence from criminals. Heroes join forces with fellow employees or bystanders (sidekicks) who give support. Together the heroes and sidekicks argue about class, gender, or race relations and then defeat the criminals with bloody violence. By the conclusions of these stories many heroes have bettered their lives—reconciled with intimates, forged bonds with sidekicks, massacred enemies, or earned respect from communities they have saved. But just as many other heroes have suffered serious losses, most rooted in the guilt they share with the criminals they hunt.

Cop action plays to a wide and hungry audience, and so I train my analysis on the genre's characters and the moral lessons that their heroism offers onlookers. Not all cop action movies hit big, but most make money, and many find huge audiences (the "dirty" Harry, *Die Hard*, and *Lethal Weapon* series, for instance). Some loose and changing combination of the elements of cop action movies must draw our collective interest: the plot structures, the brawny stars, the graphic violence to male bodies, and the good ol' boy humor that keeps murderous movies from becoming too grim. While I cannot describe which qualities in which combinations draw crowds to which movie, I can show what fantasies of sin, guilt, and revenge these movies offer to people losing ground and arguing over privilege. That is, leaving aside the issue of any consumer's interpretation, I treat the genre as a set of stories guided by a common, though complex, moral logic. Assuming that they owe their mass success to more than a big coincidence, I describe how cop action speaks to political struggles and fantasies of rage. Movies can seem "right" if they reflect common assumptions about the world and offer ways to make sense of it. The moral logic of this fictional world merits study because it can offer a version of widespread anger available nowhere else.

Cop action grapples with the frequency of divorce, delinquency among children, sexual deviance among men, sale of

drugs to children and the poor, violent crime in general, control of that crime by police, preferential treatment of suspects by race, affirmative action in a meritocracy, segregation and harassment on the job site, deskilling of professional labor, devaluation of blue-collar work, corruption among ruling-class men, and conspiracy theories of economic crisis.[2] The genre weaves these issues into a large story about working-class public servants who feel devoted to and let down by the society they protect. They protest everything mentioned above and prove their worth by killing the men they blame—mostly upper-class, white, male figures of unrestrained greed. The heroes are most often young to middle-aged, working-class, white, and male; and they are usually paired with partners who differ in age, race, class, or gender. The genre thus responds to the sense of "losing ground" felt by so many and maintains a remarkable crossover appeal as it depicts the struggles of the white guy cops with the others around them, be they colleagues, families, or criminals.

Why does Joe talk as he does and beat his captor to death, for instance? What moral logic grounds the horseplay? I assume that it matters that Joe asks the brutal criminal for another light, that he knows that violence will follow, that the thug condescends in a sexual way (his "Ooh Baby" sounds like a lascivious purr), that the scene plays like a ritual of self-invited abuse. As I describe the sense that such details can make to someone mindful of corruption and lost ground, I lay out this world's moral logic and thus one of our collective fantasies of evil and its due.

Joe's masochism tells first of his duty and strength to endure a terrible job serving others, and second of his relegation by others to just that hard labor. The rich white man who holds Joe captive in *The Last Boy Scout* will try to use Joe to make money in a crooked way while he maintains his own upstanding facade. Joe, however, remains pointedly "low-life" (so he calls himself) and unimpressed with the criminal's high-brow

status. After he kills the purring thug, Joe meets a more dangerous criminal—a blond, effete, and sadistic man who typifies the threatening, Aryan adversaries of this genre. When Joe rises up in defiance to slaughter them all, he both resembles and wreaks revenge on the scourge of a world losing ground: the greedy, corrupt, brutal, white-male upper class. His attack on the well-off and oppressive, repeated across the cop action genre, suggests deep feelings for the race, gender, and class-based privileges that these doomed criminals, and Joe for that matter, represent. In short, Joe submits to punishment for the sins of the rich white men with whom he shares guilt for a world's ills. He both joins in their spree and moves away from their greed by blowing them all away.

For another example, about two-thirds of the way through *Lethal Weapon 2*, a cop glowers at the criminals he holds at gunpoint.

> I'll make a little deal with you Arjen, or "Aryan," or whatever the fuck your name is. You fold up your tents and get the fuck out of my country, and I won't do anything to you. I'll leave you alone. 'Cause if you stick around here I'm going to fuck your ass. I'm going to send you home with your balls in a sling. You got that?

We might be puzzled to hear such a sodomite threat from a loudly homophobic cop (who refers to the idea of sex between women as "disgusting" and reacts to his male partner's touch with the rhetorical, "What are you, a fag?"). I show that these threats amount to sodomite promises more ordered than random obscenity, that celebrate the most dangerous and deviant play that men can enjoy. With these obscenities, cops voice a popular anxiety over (and interest in) corruption among powerful men, one often portrayed in terms of homoeroticism. Men hold center stage and women join the fray mostly to demand attention, scream, and occasionally die. In the context of fears of losing ground to those corrupted by their privileges, the otherwise senseless details tell a story of our problems and

possible solutions to them. That so many of us find sense in cop movies suggests that we can relate to some of these views and fantasies. Indeed, by looking at what real people have to say about lost ground, we can begin to form a framework through which to view this genre and learn from it. I pause here to look at complaints that real people voiced about their country during the time cop movies grew so popular.

That Sinking Feeling

Cops wrestle with contested privileges and ground lost by decent folk, including the white, working-class, male "regular joes" who serve as most of the heroes. Outside these movies debate over political privileges in the United States has grown so widespread that even popular journalists consider it news.[3] Raymond Williams describes large-scale patterns of emotion as "structures of feeling," which he connects to this popular expression of resentment and fears of "losing ground."[4] The structure of feeling provides a way for people to make sense of troubled, diminished lives. It presents sources of and solutions to their problems and gives them a way to throw in their lots with what one critic has called a "culture of complaint."[5] Indeed, demographic and economic shifts have brought what postmodern theorists call a "decentering" of the politically neutral citizen of middle-class American dreams, such that people who might have counted prosperity among their birthrights have a hard time ignoring the disinterest of multinational capitalists in the welfare of their workers.[6] What's more, those who do "succeed" have a hard time chalking up their successes to a rational meritocracy. Finally, people who watch factories, mines, or offices close and must take service jobs in an economy undergoing a "feminization" of labor as heavy-duty blue-collar jobs disappear in favor of lower-status service work, have a hard time holding onto their sense of autonomous, middle-class achievement. This means that promises of prosperity for the