Hard Bodies
Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era

In Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era, Susan Jeffords attempts to define American masculinity and situate that monolithic concept in the blockbuster films of the decade (1980–92). For the most part, the volume succeeds in sketching out the parameters of a definition of masculinity, grounded in the “hard-body” physicality and persona of Ronald Reagan, whose face appears on the cover with an Arnold Schwarzenegger torso.

The public persona of the president is obviously important in addressing issues of masculinity in the 1980s, so Jeffords concentrates on “the correspondences between the public and popular images of ‘Ronald Reagan’ and the action-adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and ‘good old Americanness’ that made the Reagan Revolution possible.” (15) She chooses just those films that prove her thesis and ignores (or misreads) those that might provide counterfactual evidence. Furthermore, she makes her case primarily through the analysis of plot events, dialogue, and characterizations. The cinematic and psychoanalytic signifiers of masculinity are all but ignored. As a result, the specificity of cinema and some of its primary scholarly methodologies are elided in favor of a sociological “images of men” perspective. Although some of the analysis here is impressive, film theory (especially feminist film theory) moved away from this approach twenty years ago.

Jeffords uses as her sample the films most seen by U.S. moviegoing audiences during the 1980s, which she avers “were largely and consistently concerned with portrayals of white male action heroes.” (12) In theory, using the highest grossing films of a period as a sample should give us some insight into the dominant values of the mass audience, but Jeffords ignores many box-office smashes or Academy Award winners that do not fit her white male “hard-body” paradigm: Tootsie, Ordinary People, The Elephant Man, Gandhi, Amadeus, The Color Purple, and many others. One would be hard-pressed to tie these films to the Reagan iconography of masculinity.

Undeniably, the Reagan persona and policies had many obvious avatars in the popular American films of the 1980s. That said, Jeffords’s essentializing can be disconcerting. It is one thing to equate Robocop’s crime-fighting abilities with the New Right’s law-and-order rhetoric in a general way; it is quite another thing to trot out Reagan’s 1981 inaugural address (“It is time to check and reverse the growth of government . . .”) and compare it with Robocop’s mission: “Reagan, like Robocop, touted himself as the defender of the average citizen who needed a break from too much government” (20). Jeffords’s analysis, here and elsewhere, would be more astute if it were less one note, e.g., “[The] articulations of bodies constituted the imaginary of the Reagan agenda and the site of its materialization” (24). For Jeffords, the era of greed was the era of hard bodies; the material relations of production are read through the cookie cutter grid of masculinity. The problem of the 1980s, though, was not that Reagan chopped wood or mounted a horse; it was that he chopped social programs and mounted an unprecedented military/nuclear buildup. The problem was not his image but his public policies.

Naturally, Jeffords is on solid ground when she analyzes the Rambo character as a Reaganite icon. The hypermasculinity and hard body of Sylvester Stallone came to represent a national mastery over foreign and domestic enemies. But in pinning her thesis on one hook—physiognomy—Jeffords minimizes the complex of articulations and determinants that make up any cultural artifact.

Jeffords’s analyses of The Terminator, Lethal Weapon, and Robocop are insightful. She suggests that although “the Rambo films worked out the Reagan foreign policy through battles with the Soviet Union, these films work out the Reagan domestic policy through homefront battles with internal enemies of Reaganism: terrorism, lawlessness, disloyalty, and the deterioration of the family” (53). Here, at least, Jeffords concedes that masculinity is not the main issue but a symbolic figuration of a larger structuring system in 1980s cinema.

One chapter of Hard Bodies deals with fathers and sons, a theme that is found in many of the biggest box-office hits of the 1980s. In her discussion of the Back to the Future films, Jeffords’s Reagan analogies seem more apt: “As Marty coaches his father from a wimp to a rescuer, Reagan set out to coach America from acting the part of the ‘wimp’ of the Carter years . . . to being the economically and socially successful international father of the Reagan years” (71). Although an exact homology is implied here (Marty = Reagan), Jeffords also contends that Doc Brown is a Reagan surrogate, because he survived an assassination attempt in the first Back to the Future film. The interpretations are more convincing here because Jeffords generally uses direct evidence from the films to support her claims.

Jeffords then returns to the Rambo series as an exemplar of the symbolic father-son relationship
(Trautman-Rambo) and the importance of the father figure’s role in constructing images of masculinity. In doing so, she traces the changes through all three Rambo films. In the final installment, Rambo takes the place of his symbolic father and becomes a father himself, to a young Afghan boy. The comparisons to Bush replacing Reagan as the nation’s father figure are intriguing, albeit simplistic. In fact, Rambo is a rather transparent cultural symbol of masculinity and Reaganism; references to the superhero appear on 54 pages. This attention to one character throws off the balance of the book and suggests again that the author has just used the most obvious examples to prove her contentions.

At one point, Jeffords eschews a causal connection between real-life politics and the films of that era: “It is not possible to say that the Reagan Revolution caused such stories to be written or to be so popularly viewed.” (86) But she provides a reflection theory explanation: “Both the Reagan Revolution and these film sequences captured in some sense the concerns of American audiences and offered a resolution to their anxieties through the restoration of a happy father/son relationship.” (86–87) Unfortunately, equating Col. Trautman, Doc Brown, Dr. Jones, and Obi-Wan Kenobe with Ronald Reagan because they all “stand as emblems of a personal and national identity that could be recaptured” (87) is as imprecise as the nostrums of the 1980s.

One important aspect of Jeffords’s thesis is on target: that the male body image of the Reagan years was altered during the Bush administration. For Jeffords, the Bush era saw “a rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented values” (13). Indeed, Chapter Four is devoted to the Bush style: a mix of the Reagan inheritance and Bush’s “kinder, gentler” vision of America. This combination is best exemplified by Twins (1988). Jeffords’s basic premise is ingenious: that Schwarzenegger and DeVito represent Reagan and Bush, the different sides of the Republican party. It was, in fact, the Republican campaign strategy in 1988 to portray George Bush as Reagan II, as twins with the same conservative inheritance. At times, however, the analogy seems forced: “When it is said of [the DeVito character] that ‘you’ll probably find him in jail,’ there is an echo of Bush’s own tainted role in Iran-contra.” (93)

Jeffords posits an emotional domestic hero figure, a transition figure between Reagan and Bush. Jeffords’s analysis is lucid and penetrating with regard to the Bush-era films: “The hard body that emblematized a renewed national and international strength has been repudiated, not for a return to the soft body of the Carter years, but for the creation of a body in which strength is defined internally rather than externally, as a matter of moral rather than muscle fiber.” (136) In one instance, however, her analysis is dead wrong: “The blockbuster male heroes of the late 1980s are almost exclusively white men, because mainstream America was not prepared to perceive African-American men in the position of controlling and defining justice.” (138) This ignores the Beverly Hills Cop series, Lean on Me, several Spike Lee films, Stand and Deliver, and many other independent black/Latino films and, furthermore, blames American society for creating these all-white images, rather than the Hollywood film establishment.

Moving to the early 1990s, Jeffords provides a political analysis focused mainly on “family values,” the only “secure legacy of the Reagan ideology.” (141) According to Jeffords, Kindergarten Cop (1990) “shows how the transition from law enforcer to family man was sketched out.” (141) Her plot analysis here fits her thesis perfectly since John Kimball is transformed from brutal cop (Reagan) to nurturing kindergarten teacher (Bush). As the author summarizes, “The message? The emotionally and physically whole man of the eighties would rather be a father than a warrior.” (143) In her search for a monolithic, one-sentence “message,” Jeffords too often posits an unalloyed image of masculinity that claims to represent the age, when every era produces contradictory and polyvalent discourses on how men should behave, look, and think.

Even Beauty and the Beast is recruited to the cause: “[The Beast] is the New Man, the one who can transform himself from the hardened, muscle-bound domineering man of the eighties into the considerate, loving, and self-sacrificing man of the nineties.” (153) The transmogrification is most apparent in Terminator 2, in which the title character’s persona was altered radically from the first installment (“Once he was programmed to destroy the future. Now his mission is to save it”). The “reprogrammed” Terminator, who is a “kinder, gentler” version of the earlier machine, is, however, also equated to Reagan.

The final chapter of Hard Bodies explores the Reagan legacy, especially Clint Eastwood’s Unforgiven (1992). According to Jeffords, the protagonist is “both father and gunfighter, able to live in a peaceful world but also able to survive in a ‘dangerous and unpredictable place.’” (180) One could argue that the aging of the Eastwood persona signifies a need for a once-great America to revert to its former ruthlessness. Even though Munny has trouble mounting his horse and is beset by illness and dread, he still acts out the macho role when the chips are down. Despite this critique, Jeffords does bring some observant details to the fore. For one, she notices the abundance of American flags and hollow patriotism in Unforgiven, as well as the low-angle shots of Eastwood, with red, white, and blue bunting in the background.
Ultimately, Jeffords’s conclusion is insightful and clearly stated: “The hard body has remained a theme that epitomizes the national imaginary that made the Reagan Revolution possible . . . [It] continues, in the post-Reagan, post-cold war era, to find the national models of masculinity conveyed by some of Hollywood’s most successful films.” (192) Nonetheless, these are still dangerous images, representing “the desperation of an aging superpower that is reluctant . . . to relinquish its international status and influence.” (193) Thinking ahead, Jeffords predicts that the Clinton presidency may usher in a “redefinition of the masculine” and “another phase in the extended narrative of ‘American identity.’” (23)

Hard Bodies’s ideological heart and mind are in the right (or should I say “left”) place. I only wish that the filmic evidence proffered had clinched the case and that the author’s methodology had been more informed by recent cinema scholarship and paradigms.

Frank P. Tomasulo teaches film history, theory, and criticism at Georgia State University in Atlanta. He is also the editor of the Journal of Film and Video.

Hollywood in Berlin
American Cinema and Weimar Germany

Thomas Saunders intends his history of German-American film relations during the Weimar Republic to rectify two misconceptions common to studies of this well-documented era. First, previous studies of the Weimar cinema have focused on selected masterpieces. Saunders argues that the Weimar cinema was “a blend of kitsch, realism and expressionism with German accents but anchored in international narrative and identificatory modalities.” (8) Second, most discussions of German-American film relations have presented a static rather than evolving association and assumed American ascendency extrapolated from the experience of other European cinemas. Saunders marshals a wealth of documentary evidence to prove that German-American film relations were highly complex and very contentious.

Citing distribution agreements, exhibition statistics, publicity campaigns, and most of all film reviews, Saunders traces the vicissitudes of Hollywood’s impact on the Weimar film market. The earliest Hollywood releases (mostly thriller serials) were dismissed as hopelessly sensationalist, suitable only for “hillbillies in Arizona,” as one critic put it. (130) In 1924, a broad range of American films was released, including high quality films such as Cecil B. De Mille’s Saturday Night and Erich von Stroheim’s Greed, and American dominance of the Weimar film industry reached its peak. In the extensive critical reassessment that ensued, Hollywood films garnered praise for their technical achievements but they were found wanting in historical sense, narrative coherence, and ethical complexity.

Saunders urges us not to take these claims too seriously. Critics were more aghast that films like Elmo, The Mighty were a hit with supposedly sophisticated German audiences than genuinely disturbed by the aesthetic shortcomings of American films. Saunders also reminds us that Weimar studios had designs on the same world market dominated by Hollywood, only to find that German culture was far less exportable than was American culture. While German film producers failed to seriously challenge Hollywood in the global market, they managed to prevent their total eradication in the domestic market. Hollywood burst onto the world scene in 1917 but did not capture a significant share of the German market until at least five years later. Even then it never monopolized exhibition space to the extent that it did in Britain or France. Weimar Germany could resist American films because it had an internationally secure reputation for high quality, innovative films earned in the years immediately following the war. Furthermore, countering the assumption that Hollywood dominance was irreversible, with the coming of sound American films almost completely vanished from the German market, much to everyone’s surprise.

The strengths and weaknesses of Saunders’ study lie in his use of source material. He is very scrupulous about conjecture, preferring to relate only what he can document. For example, in 1924 the Weimar film industry insisted that Hollywood’s popularity was waning. Saunders finds inconclusive evidence for this claim. Unable to reach any conclusions from the “conflicting evidence” of gate receipts, (150) he proceeds to document the bulk of his historical narrative with film essays in the popular and trade presses.

This strategy has benefits, but a few drawbacks as well. On the positive side, Saunders uncovers some remarkably thoughtful and insightful critics writing for the popular press, most notably Hans Siemens, whom Saunders invokes whenever he needs someone to deflate the pompous declarations of some journalistic hack with a reactionary political agenda. In 1921, when most of his colleagues still had scant praise for the American cinema, Siemens had the temerity to suggest that the domes-