

Gunslinging Justice: The American Culture of Gun Violence in Westerns and the Law

Justin A. Joyce. Manchester University Press, 2018.

With mass gun violence regularly appearing in the news, the possession and regulation of firearms has become an increasingly controversial issue in American culture. This debate is often tangled in deciphering the Second Amendment's four ambiguous clauses. Justin Joyce takes a unique approach to understanding the amendment in his book *Gunslinging Justice*. Joyce reflects on the interrelationship between American law and culture by tracing the development of self-defense jurisprudence and notions of justifiable gun use in cinematic westerns. Rather than arguing how to interpret the law, he considers its cultural influence by locating evidence of the emerging self-defense doctrine in westerns. Joyce's argument sidesteps contentious discussions of morality to instead examine America's changing mindset about maintaining order on the fringes of society.

Joyce's central argument is in conversation with Gallagher and Carter's work on the western film genre's "evolutionary hypothesis" (40), but it diverges from existing scholarship in questioning "whether the genre is necessarily a conservative, reactionary genre, or if...it could instead be productively read in relationship to the American legal system's evolution as progressive" (42). Joyce posits that westerns are not inherently antilaw. Rather, they supplement the American legal system where law enforcement is absent or ineffective. As interpretations of constitutional gun use broaden, encompassing individual rights alongside the developing self-defense doctrine, westerns "test the limits of American gun violence and self-defense within an imaginative frame" (91). The genre establishes norms surrounding justifiable gun violence by imagining mythic heroes who shoot with restraint, in self-defense, or in the interest of protecting the community from lawlessness.

Joyce employs a weaving metaphor to analogize the interrelationship between American jurisprudence and its cultural products: legal and cultural discourses are woven together to form the "richly textured fabric of American gun culture" (10). His seven chapters build

on one another to demonstrate how these discourses are woven together in a jointly evolving, reciprocal relationship. *Gunslinging Justice* begins by defining justice and tracking how interpretations of constitutional gun use have evolved over the nation's history. At the outset, Joyce differentiates justice from revenge by citing Francis Bacon's claim that "revenge [is] a kind of 'wild justice' which 'putteth the law out of office'" (32). Aside from briefly analyzing revenge in films like *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972), the first half of the book is devoted chiefly to historicizing two interpretations of the Second Amendment: the transition from retreat to "stand your ground," and the shift from gun use as a collective duty for national defense to an individual right for self-defense.

Having contextualized American self-defense jurisprudence at the start, the remaining chapters weave legal conceptions of justifiable gun use with the genre's oft-lamented normalization of violence. Chapter Four explores gun iconography in westerns to demonstrate the co-evolution of these two discourses. As constitutional interpretations of the Second Amendment tend toward self-defense, westerns favor "swiftly drawn pistol[s]" over "surely aimed rifles[s]" (93). Pistols, Joyce argues, "symbolize the promise of an autonomous, self-reliant individual...and that individual's right to act in his or her own defense" while rifles symbolize "collective action of national defense" (93). In Chapter Five, Joyce identifies gunslinging heroes of the film western who establish a masculine standard of self-restraint, ultimately claiming that sensible heroes like Shane normalize appropriate gun use.

The final two chapters analyze contemporary cultural products with sections on Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), the FX television series *Justified* (2010-), and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012). Joyce's analyses focus on the moral ambiguity associated with using extralegal means to right injustices despite existing legal structures. He also questions whether justifiable homicide is treated similarly when committed by women and people of color, basing his argument in contemporary westerns such as *Justified* and *Django Unchained*.

Even with significant portions of the book devoted to discussing constitutionality, Joyce's argument is never lost in legal jargon or mired in personal politics. He thoroughly explores how westerns respond to paradigm shifts in American jurisprudence. However, readers are ultimately left wanting more engagement

with the westerns themselves. Joyce concludes by speculating about the genre's future as it responds to the nation's present racial anxieties. He anticipates the genre's portrayal of justifiable vengeance is shifting "from preserving the sanctity of the private home. . .to the torture and brutalization of bodies" (220). Perhaps the conclusion feels unresolved because the contemporary westerns he includes attempt to work out unresolved issues, namely the nation's legal ambivalence in the face of ongoing racial injustices. *Gunslinging Justice* ultimately invites readers to question justice in a nation plagued by mass violence.

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Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema

Todd Berliner. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Todd Berliner's *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* relies primarily on film history and experimental psychology to support its arguments about the entertainment strategies of Hollywood cinema. People, Berliner notes, do not experience Hollywood movies as "mildly pleasant," but instead as intensely interesting and pleasurable, and further asserts that "Hollywood makes the most widely successful pleasure-giving artworks the world has ever known" (3). While many film scholars "draw a distinction between entertainment and art," Berliner argues that not only does entertainment cinema offer specifically aesthetic pleasure but that such aesthetic pleasure is, in fact, the "chief appeal" of Hollywood movies (2).

The book offers a cognitive approach that sees pleasure as resulting from aesthetic strategies and qualities that are "intrinsic and observable" and that involve the "moment-to-moment direct experience" of the film (5). Such a focus requires tools that might be unfamiliar to film scholars, whether students or professors. Berliner offers a clear but rigorous approach to understanding aesthetic pleasure via terminology from the psychological sciences, such as processing fluency and the Wundt Curve (which represents the relationship between a work's complexity and its pleasingness), as well as through discussions of how Hollywood seeks a balance by offering cognitive complexity that nevertheless does not overwhelm the spectator (26–30).

While it might be unusual for a book on Hollywood cinema to include so much theoretical framing from the fields of psychological science, Berliner notes that not only is scientific knowledge useful in many fields but it also would be "irresponsible" to pretend that such a large body of work on how the human mind interacts with cinema simply does not exist. The book does not treat pleasure as a simple or self-evident term. Instead, Berliner takes a deliberately "pluralistic approach" to defining aesthetic pleasure and he notes that "perception of an artwork's sensory properties," in terms of cinema going, include lighting, music, shots, and so on (5). In fact, anything that a movie-watcher perceives through sight or sound which then incites some sort of "mentation" counts in Berliner's study (5). While these aspects of film have long been objects of study, Berliner's approach to them is decidedly new.

Berliner's methodology also requires a new look at the audience. Unlike approaches that posit filmgoers who are seen "largely as victims of ideology, mass media, and Hollywood formula," he assumes a mentally "active and engaged" spectator who performs "cognitive work" (4). Current theories of movie-goers do not account for the success of some films and the failure of others, which Berliner attributes to their respective aesthetic strategies, which have been largely ignored in condescending assumptions that such movies are simplistic and their pleasures obvious.

Berliner sets out to explain three aspects of Hollywood cinema: the "intrinsic properties characteristic of Hollywood cinema that induce aesthetic pleasure," the "cognitive and affective processes" that happen during movie-viewing, and the "exhilarated aesthetic experiences" of Hollywood movies (5). To accomplish this, the book has five parts. The first part examines "Hollywood's general principles for creating aesthetic pleasure for a mass audience," while the other four parts each focus on a single component of Hollywood's aesthetic design: narrative, style, ideology, and genre. Each chapter begins with a theoretical essay which is followed by case studies. In addition to referencing many films throughout the book, these in-depth case studies include *His Girl Friday*, *Double Indemnity*, *Raging Bull*, and *Starship Troopers*.

Even when Berliner takes on familiar topics, such as Hollywood's classical narrative structure and genre, his approach gives new interest and insight. For example, after discussing the familiar outline of Bordwell's understanding of Hollywood narrative unity, Berliner