DON SIEGEL, FILM NOIR, and POLITICS

The Twists and Turns of a "Post-Noir Anti-Auteur"

by Marc Svetov
Special to the Sentinel

Bill Eppridge

"I can't understand why, when a film is made purely for entertainment, it should be criticized on a political basis."
—Don Siegel

Don Siegel (1911–1991) enjoyed a reputation as a maker of fast, violent, action-laden films. He learned his craft from scratch, starting out at Warner Bros. in 1933 as a film librarian. Shortly thereafter he became assistant head of the insert department; this turned into the job of setting up the studio's montage department. He also worked as a member of "Stage 5, Special Effects," the team headed by cinematographer and future director Byron Haskin. Siegel's montage credits include *They Drive by Night* (1940), *Casablanca* (1942), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), and many, many more. By 1940 he was also doing second-unit directing—that meant mostly scenes of action and violence, where he would make a study of the director's style and try to make his own work blend.

All of these experiences served him exceedingly well when he began directing his own features in 1946. It was training in the "old-time disciplines of learning how to make movies. Don went from there," said Haskin about his former Stage 5 team member. "He had . . . great intelligence, tremendous reflexes. He's a great con man, slippery as an eel, and there's no sequence that can fool him."

Producer Mark Hellinger wanted Siegel for *The Killers* in 1946, but Jack Warner nixed it; Siegel's first film was, instead, *The Verdict,* a Gothic noir set in London and starring Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre. His subsequent work in noir was extensive: *The Big Steal* (1949), with Robert Mitchum and Jane Greer, is a successful hybrid of humor and noir. *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), starring a never-better Neville Brand, is a hard-hitting prison film. *Private Hell 36* (1954) is an underrated police noir with Howard Duff, Ida Lupino, and Steve Cochran. The sci-fi/noir hybrid *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) was followed by *Baby Face Nelson* (1957) with Mickey Rooney, which many credit as starting the fad for doomed, lover/killer couples, culminating in *Bonnie and Clyde*. The extraordinary noir *The Lineup* (1958), with Eli Wallach giving an immortal characterization of the psychotic hit man Dancer, was followed by *The Killers* (1964), which featured an iconic performance by Lee Marvin, whose verbal refrain of: "We don't have the time" accompanies its "wall-to-wall violence"—a phrase Siegel later used to describe *Dirty Harry* (1971).

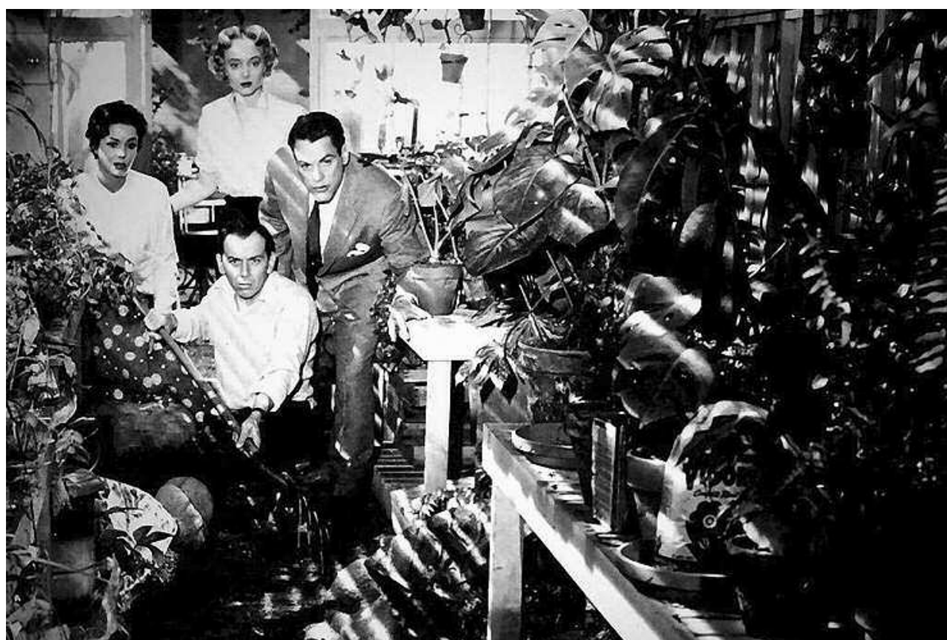
In Siegel's films, there are few loose ends. He was a craftsman who looked on his work as something to be accomplished efficiently, solidly, quietly, in an organized fashion. On set he was a technician and an artist, a man entirely in command but never a megalomaniac. He enjoyed adding humorous flourishes to plots. It was strange, many said, that he never made a comedy, because he obviously had the comic touch. Siegel had sure taste when it came to storytelling and recognized an absurd plot when he saw one. He preferred stories that were direct, lithe, and hardboiled, yet not tough to the point of being inhumane, and he disliked superfluous talk. Siegel's noir roles for Richard Widmark, Clint Eastwood, and Robert Mitchum were like the progeny of Howard Hawks, whose laconic heroes displayed a consistent code of conduct not unlike Hemingway's.

As Siegel's career began to gather momentum in the mid-1950s, the apparent political messages in his films began to crowd out their cinematic virtues. This would crescendo as he entered into an association with Clint Eastwood, and it drowned out discussions of Siegel's craft in the nascent posturings of what we now know as "the culture wars."

•

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS is often discussed as a condemnation of Senator Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism. When the film came out, the witch-hunt era had been over for a couple of years, dying with the 1954 Army–McCarthy hearings when President Eisenhower made it known he was putting his foot down. Edward R. Murrow's TV broadcasts led to censure of the shenanigans as a scourge on America and its values.

But *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* doesn't say



Dana Wynter, Carolyn Jones, King Donovan, and Kevin McCarthy are justifiably suspicious of the pods germinating in the greenhouse in Siegel's 1956 sci-fi classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; above, Siegel directs McCarthy and Wynter

Previous page, top: Siegel directing Clint Eastwood on location in *Dirty Harry*

Above: Howard Duff and Steve Cochran in Siegel's 1954 "dirty cop" drama *Private Hell 36*

Right: Eastwood hunts down the psycho-killer Scorpio in Siegel's controversial and popular *Dirty Harry*

what many think it does about paranoia. In the film, the paranoia is for a good reason. The pods *do* exist; there *is* a conspiracy. It is no figment of a fevered imagination, no invention of a proto-Fascist politician with his own agenda. In essence it is a McCarthyite vision come to real life. This is not to say that Siegel was a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary; he wasn't. But the film tells its own story, and that story is clear: McCarthyism is an accurate and appropriate response to a national threat.

The fear of Communism is palpable. Trucks are loaded with pod people ready to do their duty, reminiscent of city dwellers shipped to the country to do "useful" work during the Cultural Revolution in China. Ideology replaces the thoughts and emotions of loved ones ("He's not my Uncle Ira!"). Then there is the fruitless warning against the pods taking over, as when Dr. Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) despairs of trying to convince others that the pod people "aren't like us."

When George Orwell's *Animal Farm* was published in 1945, one Soviet official maintained that Orwell was not criticizing Communism—that the farmyard portrayed in the novel was not Stalin's egalitarian "heaven" but, instead, market-driven Capitalism! Characterizing *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* as a critique of McCarthyism makes just as little sense. In the following decade, the 1950s as an era came to symbolize everything everybody loved to hate, especially among the younger generation that was then making its mark. Don Siegel reacted viscerally.

Crime in the Streets (1956), starring John Cassavetes and Mark Rydell as disturbed young delinquents, presages Siegel's take on youth in the 1960s. He is not enamored of rebellion for its own sake, for that is simply nihilism—though he's sensitive enough to discern that it might be a way out of the hopelessness of dysfunctional families and neighborhoods. In the film, the choice is up to the main hood, played by Cassavetes, and the conclusion is ambiguous.

The figureheads of the 1960s student revolts and counterculture, which allegedly liberated and civilized American society from the bad old days of Mom and Dad's generation, were flower-wearing, dope-loving hippies . . . with flowers definitely playing second fiddle. In *Coogan's Bluff* (1968) and *Dirty Harry*, Siegel recognizes the dark side of hippiedom—the self-centeredness, the whininess, the self-righteousness—which in his eyes also threatened America's social fabric. (It is perhaps not coincidental that the Manson murders happened at just this time.) Siegel had a deep, intuitive insight into the youth culture of the 1960s and harbored no great love for it; nor did he take its talk of love and peace at face value. He looked at his own time with jaundiced eyes.

In *Coogan's Bluff*, when Coogan (Clint Eastwood) arrives at Bellevue to pick up the wanted killer Ringerman (Don Stroud), the latter is recovering from a "bad LSD trip" and can't be moved. His whacked-out girlfriend Linny Raven (Tisha Sterling) does not seem to have much to do with peace and love either, except in a negative sense.

Scorpio in *Dirty Harry* is a blond, curly-haired, psychopathic killer wearing the accoutrements of a peacenik. Siegel said: "I do another thing with the killer that has been criticized. I have him wearing the largest buckle I could have made with a lopsided peace symbol on it. . . . I have a funny feeling that this guy, who is absolutely hopeless, dreadful, impossible, an unspeakable killer, really feels that the world is wrong and he is right, that he really stands for and believes in peace."

When *Dirty Harry* was released in 1971, many viewers called detective Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) a fascist; liberals viewed the film as an outrageous glorification of law and order. Today, this fast-paced and perfectly narrated police thriller is somewhat of a cult film for audiences across the political spectrum. Inspector Callahan definitely has a reactionary outlook, neatly dividing citizens into good people and criminals, and viewing rehabilitation of bad guys as something of a joke. Siegel quite deliberately reveals, however, that Callahan is more than just a chauvinistic, white, male bigot. He does this in two key scenes: Just after the detective has foiled the two black bank robbers and humiliated the wounded one with his "Make my day" comment, we see him with a black intern with whom he obviously has a close, long-term friendship. Following is the scene in which he first meets his Mexican American partner, Chico, and curses every ethnic and religious group under the sun . . . then winks, as if to say, this man is a tease but no bigot. Siegel claimed that the two scenes were intended to make clear to audiences that here was a man who was tough, a bit of a goading personality, but not a maniac without a moral compass.

The killer Scorpio has kidnapped a 14-year-old girl for ransom money. Not knowing whether the child is still alive, Callahan beats him up to learn where he's hidden her. At issue is whether or not his actions constitute police brutality. Naturally, Scorpio had already murdered her.

"The more you describe, analyze and explain a character, the less real he becomes. The trick is to suggest—to try to leave holes, problems, questions that the viewer's imagination will fill in a much more satisfying way than we could ever do."

—Don Siegel

In 2003 there was a famous court case in Frankfurt with the same scenario, involving a kidnapper of an 11-year-old boy, a criminal named Magnus Gaefgen, and Frankfurt police chief Wolfgang Daschner. Daschner threatened to manhandle Gaefgen while he was in custody. Not knowing that Gaefgen had already murdered the child, he indicated to Gaefgen that he would torture him until he confessed in hopes that the police could find the boy alive.

Discussion of the case was heated in the German press. In the end Daschner was not sentenced to prison but just temporarily suspended from the force. Although the general public and even the judge sympathized with his action, it was generally acknowledged that the police must not torture nor threaten with torture, even when the life of a child is at stake, because it constitutes a path to hell for a civ-

Above left: Lee Marvin sprawled out at the finish of Siegel's *The Killers*, the first motion picture ever made specifically for television; it was deemed too violent for broadcast and released to theaters instead

Above: Poster art for *Charley Varrick*, heralding Siegel as "the Man who brought you *Dirty Harry*." After 40 years as a director, Siegel was recognized as America's preeminent craftsman of crime thrillers

ilization based on law. Of course, in *Dirty Harry,* Callahan saves the lives of a busload of children before he shoots Scorpio. But it's a good thing, as well, that in the end he throws his police badge away.

Siegel makes the character of Scorpio so persuasively awful that when Callahan finally kills him, the audience breathes an audible sigh of relief. It is a striking example of Siegel's skillful channelling of audience expectations, never disappointing, never intending solely to "educate." He was a magician when it came to creating tension and tempo and he loved and handled masterfully the element of surprise.

All through *The Big Steal,* Army Captain Vincent Blake (William Bendix) has been pursuing Duke Halliday (Robert Mitchum). Despite obscure hints to the contrary, the audience believes Bendix to be the legitimate government agent, but it turns out that he is the master thief and willing to murder everyone involved to get the money Mitchum has allegedly stolen from the army.

In *Charley Varrick* (1973) the audience spends the first part of the film wondering why the main character (Walter Matthau) is so inept and clumsy, only to find out at the end that it is all part of his plan for the coup of a lifetime. The fast and carefully constructed story evolves in a world of moral ambivalence and violence, where a not-so-good-guy is still a lot better than the bad guys. He is a descendant of the classic noir hero, a man who is never *very* good—whose character may in fact be profoundly ambiguous—but who in the end proves to have some sense of morals.

There are strong echoes of Varrick's character in Josh Brolin's Llewellyn Moss in *No Country for Old Men* (2007), except that the Coens kill off their loner who takes on the big guys long before the end of the film—to thwart anticipations, to ruin the story, to shock. It is something Siegel would never have done, for he believed in satisfying the basic needs of an audience, including its moral demand for the not-always-so-good guy to win in the end. The relentless killer (Joe Don Baker) in *Charley Varrick* also reappears in the Coen brothers' "remake" (played by Javier Bardem), and again the Coens refuse catharsis. They let the dead-eyed murderer walk away at the finale, whereas Siegel's pudgy, smiling killer gets his comeuppance.

Siegel counterposed these character explorations with a high degree of technical cinematic accomplishment: It was a way of having his aesthetic cake and eating it too. (This also seems to have rubbed off on the Coen brothers, and, in certain of his films, Quentin Tarantino, though perhaps not in a way that Siegel would necessarily endorse.) He made difficult shots but never for their own sake, nor did he engage in in-depth psychological portraits. Siegel referred at times to his own "fancy directing." When the story demanded that he do unusual things with the camera, he called himself "Don Siegelini," a self-deprecating characterization of a profound craftsman . . .

"I'm a firm believer in entertainment, hoping that every picture I make will be a commercial success."

—Don Siegel

. . . *and* artist. For there is no doubt that, while he was producing entertaining, commercially successful films, Siegel was also creating film art. Despite the braying against *Dirty Harry*'s political propensities, it came out right around the time Siegel began to be taken seriously as a film artist. Manny Farber wrote an appreciative review of *Coogan's Bluff* in 1969, and Stuart Kaminsky's book-length study of the director was published in 1974. Andrew Sarris had been preparing the ground, too, with his extensive reevaluation of "commercial" Hollywood directors, putting them on a par with world-class film artists, auteurs—a reclassification that the European critics, particularly the *Cahiers du cinéma* crowd, had long supported.

"[Don Siegel] is pretty much the perfect director," John Cassavetes commented, "with a sense of economy that will never bore an audience, a great feeling for movement and entertainment, an ability to get actors to perform well, and he presents a strong theme."

He was a master in the use of music to highlight events, to create mood, to add a flourish to the drama, outstanding examples being Lalo Schifrin's collaborative work in *Dirty Harry* and Ennio Morricone's in *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970).

In all of Siegel's work there is a fine sense of dramatic balance, even when he had to work with poor scripts. Lalo Schifrin describes it in musical terms: "Because of [Siegel's] experience in montage, he [was] aware of pace and rhythm in filmmaking. He [was] very aware of tempo, and I'm not talking about musical tempo."

All that said, Siegel's oeuvre *is* uneven. Some of the subjects he was hired to do were beneath his professional level in terms of making story sense, and he knew it, but he was contractually forced to do them. By the late 1960s, though, he was getting better stories to work with and directed a diverse group of films that are increasingly regarded as classics. These exceptionally solid, artistically satisfying films include *The Shootist* (1976), a Western with John Wayne in his final role, as well as the quintet of color noir/cop films *The Killers, Coogan's Bluff, Madigan* (1968), *Dirty Harry,* and *Charley Varrick*.

He was a thoroughgoing Hollywood professional who often reached the level of artistry. His reputation has been growing since his death. And his singular duality—the flash of noir with the irony of character-inflected politics—looks more subtle and nuanced in our current age of "one-note complexities." ■