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Masculinities on Film Special Issue

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Introduction

Robert J. Mundy and Jane M. Collins

In her groundbreaking 1995 book *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell proposes that the narratives we construct about masculine identity should use the plural form—masculinities—because no single concept of masculinity can encompass the multiplicity of masculine identities and their correspondences to a broad spectrum of power and privilege. In this volume of *The Human*, we likewise adopt that plural form to highlight the variety of uses filmmakers have found for positing, challenging and undermining a broad range of masculinities. Like Connell, we understand masculinities as constructs that are determined by both their historical moment and the political systems they inhabit and often uphold. However, the essays in this volume overwhelmingly address the way filmmakers have undermined the most dominant and conservative masculinities and allowed visual spaces where audiences can see the cracks and fissures in the political edifice of manhood. By focusing on characters and directors who are questioning how to enact masculinity, this volume continues the discussion of filmic spaces that challenge cultural hegemonies and encourage their reimagining.

Andrea Waling, of Australia’s La Trobe University, considers the construction of the “supervillain” in film, arguing that these characters offer a rich opportunity for exploring how ideals of masculinity and manhood are at once affirmed and problematized. In “Deconstructing the Super(her)ovillain: *Megamind* and Cinematic Representations of Masculinities,” Waling argues that *Megamind* offers a reversal of the traditional conception of superhero/supervillain relationship. She links this reversal to larger social anxieties about masculinity in Western culture. Finally, she argues that by challenging the traditional models of masculinity, the film opens a space to critique the consumerist, globalized and postfeminist world.

In “Where We (Don’t) Belong: ‘Chasing’ Kevin Smith’s Male Narratives of Space and Place,” Robert Mundy and Paul Ziek (both of Pace University, New York, USA) outline the multiple narratives of masculinity, time and space in the classic slacker film *Chasing Amy*. Focusing on the destabilizing role of time and setting on the construction of masculinities, Mundy and Ziek explore the cultural meanings of love and manhood for East Coast suburban Gen Xers in the 1990s, noting how the “standard” narratives the characters cling to are exploded as they venture into an urban world marked by sexual exploration and diversity.

In “The Triumph of Female Masculinity: Revenge and Violence in Tarantino’s *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*,” Tatiana Prorokova (Philipps-University, Marburg, Germany)
argues that director Quentin Tarantino and actress Uma Thurman create a character—The Bride—who is a violent “masculine woman.” Prorokova contends that Tarantino orchestrates a triumph of female masculinity by depicting male characters who pose no serious threat to The Bride. Rather, it is only another “masculine woman”—a trained assassin—who gives The Bride a run for her money. Blurring genres and gender expectations, Tarantino’s Kill Bill films open a space for a female masculinity more powerful, but also more violent, than the masculinities available for men.

Markus Spöhrer, of Germany’s University of Konstanz, looks at the relationship of masculinity and sexuality in Film Noir, arguing for a homophobic reading of The Maltese Falcon—as homosexuality is presented as a threat to men, resulting in “violent outbursts” or attempts to physically punish those men who dare challenge traditional, hegemonic notions of masculinity. “Homophobia and Violence in Film Noir: Homosexuality as a Threat to Masculinity in John Huston’s The Maltese Falcon” considers the historical moment in which the film was released and the subsequent social climate of that era, a time in which the Motion Picture Production Code or Hayes Code saw fit to implement and surveil Hollywood morality. Spöhrer draws attention to how homosexuality was “camouflaged,” providing the visual for a variety of male performances, while at the same time being coded so as to “Other” these “deviant” male characters, presenting their performance and embodiment of masculinity as feminized and therefore abnormal and worthy of great reproach.

In “Origin Stories: Rebooting Masculinity in Superhero Films After 9/11,” Owen Horton (University of Kentucky, USA) superimposes hegemonic male identity on the state, suggesting that the two share similar ideologies and have been constructed through indistinguishable narratives. Horton grounds his article in the rhetoric of the Bush Administration—noting the national directive to meet “trauma” with “vengeance.” In both the Dark Knight and Iron Man trilogies, Horton argues that good and evil are presented in like terms, mirroring “many of the ideological questions Americans were struggling with at the time.” Given the marred American landscape, these superhero films work to find a sense of resolve by reconstituting male supremacy, thus reconstructing the nation through a masculinity of violence.

Tamás Tukacs (University of Nyíregyháza, Nyíregyháza, Hungary), in his work “With Regard to Masculinity: On Hitchcock’s Rear Window,” builds a relationship between masculinity and visuality. In doing so, Tukacs presents Hitchcock’s male characters in a state of crisis—men who are “warped” and “injured”—men who are acting in response to the era that preceded the film, while simultaneously contending with contemporary masculine ideals. Told through the voyeuristic lens of the camera, masculinity is peered into, as it is considered in several historical contexts. In one moment, the camera captures momentary reality, displaying the fractured state of the male, and in another, the context and period of masculinity shifts, calling for the camera to no longer serve as a tool for documentation, but rather for an instrument of
surveillance, a reference to the time in which Rear Window was shot, a moment of Cold War espionage and McCarthy-era distrust.
Abstract
The archetype of the superhero has long been related to cultural imaginings of masculinity and manhood. As geek culture has become more mainstream, there has been a steady rise in popularity of films featuring superheroes and supervillains. While deconstructions and analyses of superheroes’ masculinity and sexuality are very common, there has surprisingly been little attention paid to supervillains in their own formulations of gender and identity. Common ways of approaching the supervillain have generally been through designations of being a feminised or emasculated Other. However, the supervillain can also be representative of conflicting and new ways of being masculine. This paper moves beyond typical focus on the male superhero, to the supervillain, and dismantle the assumption that he can only be understood as feminised, marginalised, or emasculated. Using *Megamind* (2010) as a point of analysis, and drawing from sociological conceptions of masculinity, this paper explores the masculine construction of the supervillain in film, and examines the ways such productions not only reflect certain ideals about masculinity and manhood, but are also affirmed, problematised and reimagined. I argue that *Megamind’s* inversion of the superhero/supervillain narrative links to broader social shifts, anxieties and concerns pertaining to men, masculinity and manhood in Western culture, potentially challenging traditional models in a consumerist, globalised and postfeminist environment. This paper explores how anti-intellectualism, sexuality, vulnerability, and binaries of the material/natural are entangled within complex imaginings of what it means to be a man, and what such entanglements can bring to our understanding of masculinity in the broader socio-cultural and political environment.

**Keywords:** masculinity, film, identity, hero, villain, crisis, sexuality, gender, animation.
Deconstructing the Super(hero)villain:  
*Megamind* and Cinematic Representations of Masculinity

Andrea Waling

**Introduction**

Superheroes have, for generations, functioned as Western pinnacles of masculinity and manhood, becoming key power fantasies for young boys and men alike.\(^1\)\(^2\) Indeed, many films centering on ideals of boy/manhood have often been in some way associated with a superhero. In this context, boys and men are subject to a discourse of heroism, one that is embedded with rigid ideals of morality, strength and loyalty.\(^3\)\(^4\) In the last decade, the proliferation of cultural interest in comic books has led to an explosion of superhero films, (from Marvel’s *Avengers*, *Spiderman* and *X-Men*, to DC’s *Superman*, *Green Lantern* and *Batman*).

More recently, however, we have begun to see a shift in focus from the male\(^5\) superhero to the male supervillain. New and upcoming releases, such as DC’s *Suicide Squad* (2016) and Marvel’s *Deadpool* (2016), alongside widespread fan adoration of villainous characters, such as Tom Hiddleston’s Loki from Thor/Avengers, and The Joker in his many incarnations, to television series such as *Gotham* (2014-Present) that explore imagined beginnings of iconic villains such as The Penguin and The Riddler, tell us that villainous characters have as strong a grip on the popular imagination as do heroes. Nevertheless, villains are rarely discussed in scholarship when exploring heroic masculinity. Often referred to in passing as feminised,\(^6\) or perhaps the unacknowledged

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5. Throughout the rest of this paper, references to supervillain/superheroes and heroes/villains are specifically referring to male-bodied, male identified characters.
lover in queer readings of eroticised superhero-supervillain homosociality, the cultural construct and meaning of the supervillain’s masculinity has been neglected or assumed in discussing the superhero’s. The male supervillain is often portrayed in varying ways to designate him as performing ‘bad’ masculinity, as being an Other, or for not adhering to traditional masculine convention. However, the assumption that he can only be understood as feminised, marginalised, or emasculated requires dismantling. What can the deconstruction of the supervillain identity in film tell us about ideals of masculinity, and how might these deconstructions link to larger socio-political and cultural concerns? How do such representations in film and animated features speak to anxieties concerning boy/manhood? Does our neglect of the supervillain’s masculinity in scholarship continue to subconsciously reflect our valuing, despite all critiques, of heroic masculinity? Are we afraid to find worth in the supervillain and what he can potentially bring to our discussions?

Using *Megamind* (2010) as a point of analysis, this paper explores shifts in superhero/supervillain narratives relating to themes of masculinity by focusing on the villain. *Megamind* is the story of two extra-terrestrials, Megamind and Metroman, who are sent away from their dying planets from the same star system to Earth. Megamind grows up to become a supervillain, while Metroman, a superhero. Megamind narrates his troubling childhood on Earth as a way to explain his current villainous condition and his competition with Metroman from infancy. Having grown up in a prison, Megamind attests that his understanding of goodness and virtue was compromised, whereas Metroman’s good fortune in being raised in a wealthy, heteronormative household has, as Megamind contends, allowed him to naturally become virtuous and moral. Throughout their lives, Metroman gains the favour of his peers and later the city for his feats of strength and supernatural abilities, whereas Megamind, despite his extreme intellectual capacity and innovative engineering, is shunned for his difference. As such, Metroman and Megamind become natural enemies in the battle for Metro City. As the story goes, Megamind is once again attempting to defeat Metroman, only this time, he succeeds, leaving devastation in his wake when he takes over the city. This conquest is followed by an existential crisis concerning the meaning of his life, his falling in love with Metroman’s love interest, and his creation of a new superhero to

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10 Roblou, “Complex Masculinities,” 76.
12 Heteronormative/heteronormativity is the belief that there are a distinct sex of genders with natural roles in life. Such beliefs include that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation, linked to heterosexism and homophobia, and often found in various social institutions such as family and education. See Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet” *Social Text*, no.29 (1991): 4.
find purpose again. However, when this new hero begins to take advantage of his newfound power and strength, Megamind, in turn, must become the hero at the end of the film.

*Megamind* illuminates the narrative of the superhero and supervillain in relation to cinematic representations of boy/manhood and masculinity. Building on the premise of ‘learned’ goodness and evil, *Megamind* provides insight into new ways of understanding masculinity by focusing on the supervillain, rather than the superhero, a theme beginning to emerge in other animated works, such as that of *Despicable Me* (2010). In this essay, the terms hero/villain and superhero/supervillain are used interchangeably, but refer specifically to those with supernatural abilities as found in popular media such as comics, as opposed to classic literary connotations. *Megamind*'s inversion of superhero/supervillain narratives links to broader social shifts, anxieties and concerns pertaining to men, masculinity and manhood in Western culture. In *Megamind*, masculinity is affirmed, problematised, and reimagined through the juxtaposition of the superhero/supervillain dynamic.

**Masculinity in Media**

The study of masculinity is approached through a sociological framework, where masculinity can be loosely defined as particular norms, behaviours and cultural practices associated with males. This paper refrains from the use of ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ a theoretical paradigm often used to analyse masculinity in both media and lived experiences, where there is an idealised, hegemonic form that men are expected to ascribe to. Connell’s original conception of this theoretical paradigm is meant to explain gendered power relations, but is often used in scholarship to define a ‘category’ of masculinity, which is a misinterpretation of Connell’s work. Hegemonic masculinity is conceptually valuable in exploring hierarchal ideals in relation to gender, but lacks exploration concerning the fluidity of masculinity in relation to contemporary cultural shifts, rather than gendered power dynamics. Thus a more flexible understanding of masculinity is needed where cultural ideals of masculinity are the consequence of broader social forces, that they are not by-products of biological sex but rather the derivatives of shifts and changes in the broader society. Masculinity can be understood as a variable and fluid concept, susceptible to the influence of other social institutions. Masculinity is often understood to encompass a specific set of traits that include stoicism, strength, masculinity, aggression, heterosexuality, hands-on, able-

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16 Ibid.
bodiedness and rationality.\textsuperscript{18} \textsuperscript{19} This definition is also known as ‘traditional’ masculinity, tied to roles such as the defender, the breadwinner, the father, the leader and the protector, and is considered to be not a binary opposite to femininity, but rather, a hierarchal one.\textsuperscript{20} However, with the rise of gay rights liberation, feminism, and globalisation, such ideals are no longer viable in contemporary Western culture, which some scholars maintain is a postfeminist climate.\textsuperscript{21} As such, new ideals of masculinit(ies) have emerged that are believed to be in continuous conflict with each other.\textsuperscript{22}

Moss notes that throughout the Western history of media, we have been offered a continuous set of conflicting tropes, images and ideals regarding what it means to be a man.\textsuperscript{23} As Moss highlights, differing socio-political and cultural contexts dictate what this man looks like, who he is and what he does.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, we do ourselves a disfavour by not looking at media representations and the cultural discourses embedded within our cultural artefacts. Studying imagery allows for us to readily explore how masculinity is being constructed on a visual scale and to determine whether or not these constructions are informing how we ourselves understand what it means to be masculine.\textsuperscript{25} \textsuperscript{26} Reeser contends that we have to remind ourselves of the very complex nature of media imagery and its meaning within a socio-cultural context. That imagery is both reflective of, and constitutive of, our contemporary reality.\textsuperscript{27}

Films, such as superhero genres, are fascinating artefacts to explore how masculinity is embedded, utilised, and contested. MacKinnon argues that particular genres of movies will utilise a specific narrative intended to attract a specific demographic.\textsuperscript{28} For MacKinnon, not only do films of the same genre share similar plots and subject matter; the men and the women who appear in them act and behave in ways which are stereotypical for that genre and conform to stereotypical ‘fantasies’ of the targeted audience.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, we often believe that action movies are geared towards boys and men because they naturally like action and superhero movies, and the characters behave in a particular way that appeal to boys and men’s ‘natural’ desires. However, MacKinnon questions this, arguing that movie genres such as

\textsuperscript{18} Raewyn Connell, \textit{Masculinities} (Sydney: Allen and Urwin, 1995), 43.
\textsuperscript{19} Raewyn Connell, \textit{The Men and the Boys} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 32.
\textsuperscript{21} A postfeminist climate is understood as one that both builds on and challenges second wave feminist ideology. See Rosalind Gill, \textit{Gender and the Media} (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 44.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Reeser, \textit{Masculinities in Theory}, 10.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Mackinnon, \textit{Representing Men}, 40.
superhero and action are geared towards boys and men because they recreate and sustain a social-cultural belief that men like superhero and action movies.\textsuperscript{30} Therefore, they utilise a set of characteristics and narratives about ideal masculine imagery that men are then expected to admire, and perhaps in some way or another, replicate in their daily lives.\textsuperscript{31}

**Heroic Masculinity & Villains as Other**

Heroes have been popular in academic discourse, with plenty of works that explore how the hero functions. Masculinity,\textsuperscript{32} nationhood,\textsuperscript{33} gender and sexuality,\textsuperscript{34} and bodies\textsuperscript{35} are but a few of the major points of enquiry for scholars in exploring cultural representations of superheroes. Narratives of superheroes tend to associate manhood and masculinity with “visibly contributing to mastery over the material world (technology, finances), political situations (war, terrorism), other living entities (enemies), and one’s personal destiny (autonomy).”\textsuperscript{36} The hero becomes, or is made, through birth or event,\textsuperscript{37} \textsuperscript{38} and is often juxtaposed against ‘evil’ forces.\textsuperscript{39} The villain, however, is difficult to locate in scholarship. Generally under-analysed, or only in addition to the superhero, the supervillain is often ignored in many writings. Despite the fact that the supervillain too is made, they are often characterised as having an innate ‘evil’ while simultaneously, provided with an origin story of good-gone-corrupted.

Heroes are typified by their self-sacrifice, their adherence to a strict honour code, and their concern for the greater good.\textsuperscript{40} \textsuperscript{41} The masculinity they embody is entangled with notions of morality, of self-sacrifice, and in some ways, perfection. Boon’s account of the hero and masculinity best surmises this man, where

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Roblou, “Complex Masculinities,” 76.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Gareth Schott, "From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes.” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 1, no. 1 (2010): 22.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Aaron Taylor, “’He’s Gotta Be Strong, and He’s Gotta Be Fast, and He’s Gotta Be Larger Than Life’: Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no.7 (2007): 346.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Kenneth Boon, “Heroes, Metanarratives, and the Paradox of Masculinity in Contemporary Western Culture,” *The Journal of Men's Studies* 13, no.3 (2005): 302.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Roblou, “Complex Masculinities,” 76.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Clarkson, “Virtual Heroes,” 177.
\end{itemize}

[9]
the hero figure encompasses both agency, in the aggrandisement of masculine accomplishment, and androgyny, in the exaltation of self-sacrifice...He [the great man] is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness; -- in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them.42

As Boon suggests, heroes are meant to function as the light in darkness, to find justice in corruption, and to uphold a set of standards and values that everyday citizens cannot.43 Villains, on the other hand, are “thinly developed disruptors of the hero’s peace, serving the narrative function of struggling against the hero’s journey, personifying fairly simple ‘evil’ in juxtaposition to the hero’s good.”44 The villain is believed to lack an inherent sense of morality, has a warped sense of morality, or is damaged to a point in which morality cannot exist within him. He is viewed only as a spectacle, someone we are meant to hate and disassociate from, rather than regarded as important or significant.

The hero’s body is unmistakably masculine, and it is this body that marks visually who the hero is. He maintains the now widely acknowledged broad shoulders and V-shaped torso, his arms and thighs bulge with muscles, his pecks and abs clearly discernible, or replicated in the costumes he wears.45 Indeed, as scholars point out, the hero’s body, and associated practices (e.g. fighting, running, flying) are often praised for their naturalness, their muscularity, and their mastery.46 47 Male heroic bodies are only enhanced, for some, by access to supernatural gifts or technology that aids, but does not replace, the body, such as that of Ironman.48 The superhero’s body, often muscular, is the site of his strength, virility and agility.49 His body becomes like a machine in its ever readiness, reliability, and immunity to mortal perils.50 51 52 53 The existence of such a

44 Wooden and Gillam, Pixar’s Boy Stories, 169.
46 Ibid.
47 Roblou, “Complex Masculinities,” 76.
51 Roblou, “Complex Masculinities,” 76.
body leaves the superhero as balanced, in control, and ever ready. There is never “a hesitation or a backward glance: the superhero knows what he has to do.”\textsuperscript{54} This allows such a hero to generate a masculinity that replaces control over external space with control over the body in situations of extreme risk. Such risk masculinity is performed by placing the body in life-threatening danger, on the edge of human capabilities of endurance and survival, and recovering physical safety through exceptional skill and reliance on ‘gut feelings.’\textsuperscript{55}

Male villains, however, often lack such bodies, with some exception. Some are marked by deformity, mutation, by short stature or asymmetry. Others may perhaps be giants, the muscular body taken to grotesque proportions and demonstrate brute monstrosity devoid of cognitive or rational thinking. Still others may be thin, gangly and wiry, relying on manipulation, status or extreme intellectual capabilities that may border on lunacy, rather than physical mastery. For many, their bodies are questionably masculine, perhaps androgynous, perceived as feminine, demonstrate engagement with perceived feminine practices (i.e. makeup or theatricality), or may be beyond the recognition of binary gender. Many villains will rely on material means, such as weapons, technology and gadgetry, rather than their physical bodies and are often ‘weakened’ when it fails, or access is hindered. While the hero too may use gadgets and technology, this is only to enhance his abilities. Batman is a prime example of such a hero, where while gadgetry and technology are a cornerstone of his existence, it is his physical strength and agility that enables him to ultimately succeed. Even exceptions, such as Ironman who is reliant on his suit to win his battles, is still positioned as natural, as his suit replicates the idealised hero’s body.\textsuperscript{56} The hero is situated as having natural abilities even when aided with technology or other superficial/supernatural means. However, the villain is configured as unnatural, and these ideals are then linked to beliefs about ‘good’ (hero) and ‘bad’ (villain) masculinity.

In such readings, the villain is generally positioned as either being too hyper-masculine, or lacking a masculine context as a way to contrast the identity of the hero. However, this is a too simplistic rendering of the villain’s masculinity. In focusing on Megamind’s villainous character, complicated and new forms of masculinity as fed through shifts and changes in socio-cultural beliefs and ideals can be recognised.

\textsuperscript{54} Roblou, “Complex Masculinities,” 79.
\textsuperscript{56} Masani, “Big Men in Spangly Outfits,” 12.
**Affirmation**

The initial recognition of Megamind’s villainy is achieved through the use of colours, the settings he resides in, his ineptness at physicality, and his great but rejected aptitude for intellectual innovation. Here is where standard, masculine ideals are affirmed for us in the heroic imagery of Metroman, and through the Othering of Megamind. These ideals are comforting, drawing from nostalgic imaginings of a time where masculinity is secure, stable and uncomplicated, linked to notions of protection and natural physicality. The beginning of the film is important, despite its humorous inclination, its use of strong colour contrasts in the representation of Megamind and Metroman already pinpoint to us who is valued and who is shunned. Kress and van Leeuwen note that colour can be understood as a grammatical language, it can give culturally understood meaning in given contexts. Such language can be learned over time and have an associative origin. Whiteness is often understood as a representation of purity, gold as opulence and warmth, blackness as fear, and blue, in some cultures, as cold and evil. Megamind is introduced to us here as having blue skin, bright green eyes, and a large, bald head, while Metroman resembles a human with light skin, a head full of brown hair, and soft blue eyes. The bodies of both are stark contrasts, with Metroman conforming to highly muscular ideals, while Megamind maintains a thin and wiry physique. Megamind is already framed here as different, as Other through his skin colour and physical features. We can, without much provocation, discern the hero and the villain through visual representation before any acts of good or evil are present. This use of colour differentiation continues, where Megamind is often placed in blue and black garb, residing in decrepit buildings, shrouded in darkness, and surrounded by mechanical creations, devoid of any interaction with the natural world as an extension of Megamind’s lack of engagement with natural physicality. Metroman is framed as ‘natural,’ often shown in garb and settings that reflect light and in constant interaction with the natural environment. Such representation is linked to both the hero’s existence within, and mastery of, the natural world. Megamind is configured as unnatural through his reliance on machinery to compensate for his frailer form. Megamind is thus marked, visually, as ‘non-masculine.’

Megamind maintains that his difficulty with morality is determined through his upbringing with criminals, but his experience in school says otherwise, that such understanding is damaged through the fear of his intellectual capabilities by his peers and figures of authority as a young child. Wooden and Gillam note that children who

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60 Aslam, “Are You Selling the Right Colour?” 16.
play in ways that do not conform to standard narratives, such as the destroying and rebuilding of toys, are often illustrative of a gifted mind.\textsuperscript{62} Actions or behaviours of such children, which appear delinquent, can be the consequence of thwarted intellectual gifts.\textsuperscript{63} Repeatedly, Megamind is shunned for his intellectual capacity and quick thinking against the bullying tirades of his peers as a child, his forms of play differing from the standard narratives. Through constant reprimand when technological attempts backfire, or his achievements ignored in the presence of the great physicality of Metroman, Megamind learns that his intellectual capacities are not valued, and that his worth is only obtained through behaving in felonious ways: it is the only thing that he is ‘good’ at. The film then “instructs its viewers clearly in the taxonomy of masculine talents” \textsuperscript{64} where the physicality of Metroman is praised and rewarded, while the superior mind of Megamind is configured as something to fear.

Sexuality and gender also play a role because ideal masculinity is often intricately related to acknowledgeable heterosexuality,\textsuperscript{65, 66} whereas sexuality that might appear ambiguous or queer is considered feminised.\textsuperscript{67, 68} Metroman’s heterosexuality is clearly articulated through the assumed romantic relationship between himself and Roxy the journalist (a gesture towards Lois Lane of \textit{Superman}), alongside the adoration from his female fans. Megamind, however, with his close and intimate friendship with Minion (a talking fish in a robot’s body), can be said to be sexually ambiguous, or perhaps, for some, homosexual. He is representative of what scholars refer to as the designated queer Other\textsuperscript{69} that challenges and seeks to undermine institutions of heterosexuality, binary gender, and masculinity. Minion’s questionable agendered form (lacking a gender) furthers this ambiguity, whereas Metroman’s relationship with Roxy is firmly planted in a simple binary of man/woman. Last, but not least, is the naming of such characters themselves. We are already positioned to view Metroman as ‘man’ due to the signifier in his name, a reminder that while Metroman is a hero, he is at his core, a man. Megamind, however, is designated as object, it or Other. The emphasis on ‘mind,’ referencing his acute intellectual abilities tells us he is not a man, and lacks a gendered context. Through these representations, and in conjunction with strategic use of setting and colour, viewers are taught that athletic prowess, strong bodies and social

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Wooden and Gillam, \textit{K. Pixar’s Boy Stories}, 173-174.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Wooden and Gillam, \textit{K. Pixar’s Boy Stories}, 164.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Michael Flood, “Male and Female Sluts: Shifts and Stabilities in the Regulation of Sexual Relations among Young Heterosexual Men,” \textit{Australian Feminist Studies} 28, no. 75 (2013): 97.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Diane Richardson, “Youth Masculinities: Compelling Male Heterosexuality,” \textit{The British Journal of Sociology} 61, no. 4 (2010): 739.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Judith Fathallah, “Moriarty’s Ghost or the Queer Disruption of the BBC’s Sherlock,” \textit{Television New Media} 16, no. 5 (2015): 492.
\end{itemize}
conformity as tied to (traditional) masculinity are good, while intellect, creativity and difference are bad.

**Problematisation**
Masculinity becomes *problematised* when Megamind ‘defeats’ Metroman in their latest battle. As ideal masculinity in the hero is configured around morality, natural strength and justice, the ‘death’ of Metroman signals to the troubling of traditional masculinity in the film. Megamind, already configured as the Other and as lacking any engagement with ideal forms of masculine identity, has triumphed not through physicality, but intellectual capacity. This troubling situation is furthered through a wake of devastation wrought onto the city, a reflection on what Edwards maintains is the damage changing ideals of masculinity can potentially have on broader social systems. Megamind’s existential crisis highlights that such a victory now entails the loss of purpose, what scholars contend is the ‘crisis’ of masculinity, reflected through the ‘crisis’ of MetroCity’s destruction and mishandling. Here, Megamind’s victory and subsequent personal loss is indicative of shifts in perceptions of masculinity, linked to the rising technological zeitgeist where intellectual prowess and technological aptitude are becoming more valued, the loss of physical and industrial labour to signify a masculine self to corporatisation and white collar office work, and shifts in social expectations regarding men’s gender presentation, signalling to the apprehension concerning the now aesthetically groomed male as culturally expected. In crisis, the nostalgia and lament for a simpler, stable, and more natural, traditional masculinity is often utilised as a response to the belief that the traditional roles of men have eroded, leaving them in a state of anxiety and insecurity.

In response to such crisis, Megamind attempts to reaffirm traditional masculinity by creating a new superhero, Titan. Drawing from his knowledge of ideal masculinity through the ‘deceased’ figure of Metroman (and his nostalgia for such a figure), Megamind endeavours to recreate such imagery through unnatural means as a way to quell his own personal dilemmas. This attempt parallels contemporary cultural practices in reinstating a much simpler, recognisable, and more natural, traditional masculinity as a response to ‘crisis’ by men who do not, or cannot, ascribe to such ideals

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76 Gee and Jackson, “Leisure Corporations,” 86.
and their ultimate failing in doing so. He is frustrated with Titan’s progress, finding him resistant and uninterested in upholding the traditional masculine attributes and values of Metroman. Instead, he is narcissistic, sexist, misogynistic and selfish, a reflection of what Waling and McCaughey term the retrosexual, a reversion back to archaic ideals of masculinity that while believed to be linked to traditional qualities and beliefs, are more marked by chauvinistic attitudes rather than heroic values of morality, selflessness and justice. Even the name, ‘Titan’ denotes a mythical origin, removing himself from ordinary, everyday existence as a man. Thus, masculinity becomes problematised, where the older, traditional model is no longer viable yet longed for, but is unable to be replicated in a postfeminist and globalised climate.

Re-imagination

What marks Megamind as subversive is his re-imagination of masculinity. Through Megamind we can see a reconfiguring of masculinity as articulated through changing social beliefs, practices and norms. In particular, the emergence of urban masculinities has led to labelling of iconic identity categories such as the metrosexual or the sensitive-new-age-guy (SNAG), where masculinity is compounded with a number of new cultural variants, such as engagement with consumption, fashion and technology, sensitivity, and intellectual prowess. Such depictions are made possible through Westernisation, consumerism, feminism, queer politics and globalisation, alongside the valuing of technological aptitude and a shift where men can engage in feminine practices, as long as they do so to seek the attentions of the opposite gender. This re-imagination is achieved through Megamind’s disguise as Bernard, a librarian that enables him to spend time with Metroman’s former love interest, Roxy. This disguise is representative of the acceptance of masculinity that is not embedded within traditional ideologies, but still maintains some engagement with them. Bernard, while geeky, intelligent and slim, is also courteous, a gentleman, and unmistakably, heterosexual. Through his engagement with Roxy as ‘Bernard,’ Megamind is able to shed any perceived homoeroticism regarding his relationship with Minion, which comes to a climatic end when Minion accuses Megamind of manipulating and tricking...

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79 Waling, “Heroes, Retros and Metros.”
82 Hall, *Metrosexual Masculinities*, 23.
86 Hall, *Metrosexual Masculinities*, 23.
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Roxy. Megamind’s conflict between who he is and who he wants to be is representative of the competing natures and tensions between different ideals of masculinity and its relationship to sexuality, where there are a multiplicity of forms available, but only one is believed to be the true and authentic version.87 Indeed, the difficulties that he experiences in trying to be both supervillain and everyday citizen in his roles as Megamind/Bernard, is reflective of such tensions between what it means to be masculine in a postfeminist and consumerist climate that is consistently selling new ideas and contesting old ones.88 What Megamind provides for us within this re-imagination is a look into raw vulnerability and emotion, in particular, when he is coldly rejected by Roxy when she learns of his true form, signalling both the anxieties and acceptances concerning men who engage in more feminine practices and do not adhere to traditional models, such as the fear of potential feminisation and homosexualisation.89

The most pivotal point in this re-imagination is at the end of the film where Megamind is able to defeat his newly created ‘hero’ Titan. This defeat signals the newfound acceptance of Megamind’s complicated masculinity, rather than insisting on the simpler, old form. However, this defeat is only achieved when Megamind is faced with the reality of Metroman’s hidden existence. Here, Megamind is confronted with the nostalgic image of masculinity he himself has been desperately trying to recreate, but its once glorious figure has now faded in the overweight, stubbled face of Metroman. Pertaining to what Davis notes is the reflexive nostalgia, the process of reflecting on events/times/places that move beyond a simple sentimentalisation to questioning the inherent positive evocation of a lived past,90 Megamind is forced to realise that perhaps his nostalgic remembrance of Metroman is only that and cannot be replicated. Feeling dejected, Megamind attempts to defeat Titan by using a disguise of the old Metroman, but he is easily found out. Such deception, and subsequent revelation, illustrates the complete loss of the traditional model of masculinity, and that Megamind must find a new form that can challenge and overcome Titan’s reign. Megamind thus draws on his own strengths as a supervillain (intellectualism, theatricality, mechanical innovation) and manages to defeat Titan, a reflection on the attempts to ‘defeat’ the concerns around traditional models of masculinity heavily entrenched with chauvinism, anti-intellectualism, and misogyny.91 Here, Megamind becomes publically recognised as valued, furthered by the draping of Metroman’s former white cape across his shoulders to signify the merging of different masculinities. No longer required to ‘hide’ as Bernard, nor remain in isolation, Megamind’s masculine

87 Waling, “Heroes, Retros and Metros.”
89 Hall, Metrosexual Masculinities, 23.
91 Raewyn Connell, Masculinities, (Sydney: Allen and Urwin, 1995), 43.
identity has become part of the larger social fabric. He has not ‘replaced’ the traditional form of Metroman. Indeed, Metroman’s hidden presence during Megamind’s public acknowledgement is a reminder that such ideals of masculinity continue to exist. Rather, Megamind’s acceptance is illustrative of broader socio-cultural beliefs that men can engage in feminine practices, the gift of extreme intellectualism can be a positive trait for men, and that men can maintain a number of different masculinities. Megamind’s acceptance also gestures towards more acknowledgement concerning the fluidity of sexuality and gender, as he repairs his relationships with both Roxy, his heterosexual love interest, and Minion, his sexually and gender ambiguous friend, but it is not made clear with whom he eventually (if at all) builds a romantic relationship.

Conclusion
There is value in exploring the supervillain beyond assumptions that his only function is the feminised, marginalised or emasculated Other when contrasted to that of the superhero. Megamind’s development as a character is reflective of the shifts in how we view and understand masculinity in a globalised and postfeminist era, rather than a simple opposition to the superhero’s masculine identity. By inverting the narrative whereby we are forced to reflect and sympathise with the supervillain rather than the superhero, we can see how masculinity is contested and complicated. Through Megamind, the cultural shifts and dynamics of masculinity are rendered visible, they are affirmed through the immediate association of Metroman as hero and Megamind as villain. Masculinities become problematised through the ‘death’ of Metroman and Megamind’s attempt at reviving such form, and they are reimagined through Megamind’s taking up of both new and old ways of being masculine. More importantly though, Megamind is flawed, and these flaws can be recognised that otherwise, must be ignored in the construct of the perfect, stoic, masculine superhero. Such recognition of these flaws enable the questioning of masculinity, and it is through the supervillain that we are able to relate to such a condition, the frailty and fluidity of what masculinity can be, rather than what it should be.

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Abstract

Director Kevin Smith understands guys, particularly the men of Generation X and of the Northeast corridor. In Smith’s “View Askewniverse,” his canon of films and assorted projects, much attention is given to time and place. Although his first feature, Clerks (1994), remains a critical and pop cultural marker of success, our work looks to review the relationship between gender, time, and physical space that takes place in Chasing Amy. We do this by considering the numerous male narratives that take shape, underscoring traditional notions of masculinity and/or challenging these very perceptions predicated on the settings in which events takes place. For Smith, the age-old adage rings true: location, location, location. Accordingly, masculinity functions in his films not in a sweeping essentialized sense, but rather as an identity marker forged in a distinct place. Smith’s approach to navigating his film or helping the viewer to do so is nothing if not overt. Shot in four locales, comic conventions, suburban NJ, urban NYC, and at a nondescript diner along the road of one of the many tributaries that spill in and out of Gotham, gender is brought under scrutiny. Smith notes each location, whether through drastic shifts in scenery, collocating main street USA with Broadway, or by simply opening the scene with text—a stark indicator of the here and now. In these localized vignettes, stories are told—particular narratives uttered—each with a distinct tone, highlighting the plurality of masculinity predicated on distinct moments rather than some overarching gendered script.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, masculinities, space, place, Generation X, Kevin Smith, slacker, gender fluidity
Where We (Don’t) Belong:  
“Chasing” Kevin Smith’s Male Narratives of Space and Place

Robert Mundy and Paul Ziek

Introduction

Location, Location, Location

Kevin Smith of Clerks fame understands guys, particularly men of Generation X and of the Northeast corridor. In Smith’s “View Askewniverse,” his canon of films and assorted projects, much attention is given to time and place. He, like many filmmakers, writers, and artists, is a product of his era, to this day maintaining the slovenly aesthetic—shorts, hat to the back, hockey jersey—that defined the slacker identity of 1990s, Generation X American culture. His first feature, Clerks (1994), remains a critical and pop cultural marker of success and situates him within the gestalt of fellow Gen X auteurs, writers and directors such as Richard Linklater (Slacker), Ben Stiller (Reality Bites), and Cameron Crowe (Singles). The male characters in Smith’s initial works, the aforementioned Clerks and later Mallrats, his comedic look at lost love and consumerism, find themselves in similar circumstances to the males of the film genre and larger generation—trapped in the day-to-day minutia of living—in what Douglas Coupland describes as working dead end “McJobs” —“A low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, no-future job in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who never held one” ¹ - all, in what seems to be, the avoidance of work—shirking what they see as partaking in the culture of their Boomer parents.

Smith’s distinction, what gives his films a sense of differentiation, is his use of setting, electing to situate the majority of his works in the middle-class suburbs of central New Jersey. In doing so, in keeping with the places and people he knows best, Smith creates true, robust characters rather than repeating archetypes; he breathes life and soul into men who could easily be stereotyped or casted to simply recapitulate male insurrection. For Smith, the age-old adage rings true: location, location, location. Accordingly, masculinity functions in his films not in a sweeping essentialized sense, but rather as an identity marker forged in a distinct place. Although suburban lives

often read as homogeneous over large swaths of the American landscape, the men Smith constructs are nothing if not, well, New Jersey. They are products of the urban sprawl, owners of post WWII tract homes reminiscent of Levittown, NY—hustlers, quick talkin’, rough around the edge sort of guys. Their collars are neither blue nor white—but rather a hybrid, suggesting that their lives remain intimately connected to manual labor, regardless of the middle-class zip codes in which they live. These are the sons of plumbers, factory workers, and longshoremen, and although more times than not college educated, their affect, language, and performance of masculinity signals more working than middle-class.

*Chasing Amy*, Smith’s third feature in what has been described as the New Jersey Trilogy is a pseudo romantic comedy that follows Holden, a twenty-something co-author of a popular underground comic book who falls in love with Alyssa, a lesbian, and eventually succumbs to the tensions created by her sexual past. Smith maintains his pact of keeping the narrative within the confines of suburbia; however, he does so only through brief interludes. Instead, Smith opts to juxtapose suburbia with the urban center of Manhattan, keeping his male characters in constant motion, as the title’s prominent use of the verb “chase” illustrates. Holden, along with his sidekick Banky, move throughout the film from locales of agency, the hamlets in which they live, work, and socialize, to spaces that leave them on the margin, the inner city culture that, although only miles away from their homes, reads as an exotic locale to these bridge and tunnel types. In doing so, masculinity is presented as fluid, evidenced by its changing narratives and performances that are predicated on the spaces in which the male characters find themselves.

Our work looks to review the relationship between gender, time, and physical space that takes place in *Chasing Amy* by considering the numerous male narratives that take shape, underscoring traditional notions of masculinity and/or challenging these very perceptions predicated on the settings in which events takes place. Smith’s approach to navigating gender in *Chasing Amy*, or helping the viewer to do so, is nothing if not overt. Shot in four locales, comic conventions, suburban NJ, urban NYC, and at a nondescript diner along the road of one of the many tributaries that spill in and out of Gotham, gender is scrutinized. Smith notes each location, whether through drastic shifts in scenery, collocating main street USA with Broadway, or by simply opening the scene with text—a stark indicator of the here and now. In these localized vignettes, stories are told, particular narratives uttered, each with a distinct tone, highlighting the plurality of masculinity predicated on distinct moments rather than some overarching gendered script.

Theoretically, Smith is doing something sophisticated with his presentation of masculinity in *Chasing Amy*, problematizing it in time and space. By identifying a moment in time (such as Generation X) Smith employs what Michel Foucault calls an
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archaeology, an excavating of masculinity from its prevailing narrative, thus making it responsive to a given historical and cultural moment—a specific time of specific events and circumstances. In his first maneuver, Smith isolates the larger male narrative from its extended history. In other words, he talks not of men in a sweeping sense, but of distinct men of a particular era, turning the viewer’s attention to contemporary gendered issues to highlight the play that exists between intersections of identity and time. From the opening scenes of the film, Banky and Holden are ostensibly aware of their gendered selves, along with the complications, the strikingly 1990s complications, that are attached to masculinity. Their frustrations are clearly tethered to the moment, indicative of the struggle to find generational male identity: to differentiate themselves from the presentations of masculinity that preceded them by their Baby Boomer fathers.

White middle-class men of Generation X struggled on many fronts, perhaps no more so than in scratching out a contemporary narrative to counter that of their predecessors. By the 1980s, fissures in the facade of masculinity were becoming more apparent, particularly in regard to work. The ethos of the era, consumerism, helped to construct men who were “upwardly mobile” in nature, desiring to “amass great wealth;” however, the competition for such material success proved rather problematic, leaving Boomer men alienated both at home and in the workforce, tethered to their cubicles, prepared for the drudgery of the day, to garner a wage—to quantify success according to what their salaries could purchase. As Michael Kimmel describes, Boomer despondency soon became what their sons of Gen X contended with:

Sometimes, this male malaise is expressed as a yearning for a deeper, more authentic version of masculinity than the one offered from the consumer economy... While in the 1980s, this sense that the standard definitions of masculinity had left middle-aged men seeking more emotional resonance..., by the mid-1990s, this had trickled down to their sons... A gnawing sense that their fathers’ world was hollow, meaningless, and inauthentic led these young men not to ponytails and red Miata convertibles but to “fight clubs.”

Were all men of this era destined to join bare knuckle, underground boxing clubs, to fight no holds barred in the basements of bars and parking lots of convenience stores? In simple terms, the obvious answer is no; however, the unease of the moment was palpable. Although frustration led to eventual anger, as the work of Chuck Palahniuk attests, such indignation was not the only manner in which men elected to

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perform their masculinity.\(^5\) For others, to be a man meant to simply drop out, to remove themselves from the rat race that defined their fathers’ existence.

Between these two polarized notions of masculinity, the gross imbalance between the angry male and the drop out or slacker, exists the men of *Chasing Amy*—characters who are living in a cultural moment of uncertainty, trying to come to terms, to script where they exist on the spectrum of male identity. As Michael Messner notes in *Politics of Masculinity: Men in Movements*, men of the 1990s, like generations before and after, found themselves confounded by the question of how to properly enact their masculine selves.\(^6\) Similar to men of previous generations, Gen Xers sought gendered security by either removing themselves from the public (slacker), the weekend retreats to find or to recover lost masculinity that Robert Bly discusses, or through a circling of the wagons around masculinity, protecting it against perceived attack, at all cost, as the Men’s Rights movement and its mission clearly articulates (anger).\(^7\) In creating this dichotomy, gender is incorrectly understood in fixed terms. Individual identity is far too complicated to suggest that we can place men into distinct boxes by assigning them definitive characteristics—markers that are present at all times in all spaces. Although the era certainly provides necessary context to a reading of men, in *Chasing Amy*, Smith does far more than respond to existing cultural trends.

If the sociocultural and socioeconomic moment of the 1990s functions in a macro sense to provide context for the film, geographic locations or physical spaces work in a localized, micro-sense to challenge the grand narrative of masculinity, both socially and historically. Anthony Giddens notes this connection between experience, identity, and space, arguing it is of the utmost importance when considering the lived experience.\(^8\) As Tim Cresswell points out in his review of the theoretical approaches to space and place, geographers informed by Marxism, feminism, and poststructuralism believe place to be socially constructed,\(^9\) that “Class, gender, and race have so often been treated as if they happened on the head of a pin. Well they don’t—they happen in space and place,”\(^10\) informing and being informed by those who move through these locales. In other words, space and place are gendered, just as Doreen Massey suggests: gender relations vary over space; they are symbolically gendered and some spaces are marked by the physical exclusion of particular sexes—home and workplace for example.\(^11\) In moving the male characters of the film from place to place, Smith draws our attention to an interesting phenomena, that identity is never neatly situated outside

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\(^10\) Ibid., 42.
of time and space, thus varying accordingly. Pierre Bourdieu clarifies this very idea, noting that capital extends beyond wealth to include social and cultural paradigms. Proximity to the authoritative center determines one’s value at that time. For example, a hyper-masculine persona may provide immense returns in a sports arena, but may be marginalized in a classroom setting. The ethos, agreed upon values and ethics of the majority, regulates what is permissible. However, such regulation extends beyond the abstract, written and unwritten codes of conduct, and is realized in more concrete ways. Individuals are in constant negotiation with each other and are therefore also mediating time and place, and accordingly, making the self public when one feels a significant amount of worth or muting the self, what Kenji Yoshino calls covering, when one feels compromised.

For the characters of the film, their identities and masculinities, which are hegemonic, subordinate, cooperative, and/or marginalized, are directly related to the milieu in which they find themselves. At times the men are “in-place,” working from a position of authority, and, at others, they are “out-of-place,” relegated to the margins. Therefore, the locations of the film are more than mere backdrops; rather, they serve an integral role in sussing out identity formation, or one’s multiple identities, determining what is produced and subsequently reproduced. Stuart Hall sees these multiples notions of identity as part and parcel of the postmodern subject:

The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent “self.” Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identities are constantly being shifted about”.

Smith’s male characters, whether in the comics they write or words they utter, are actively working to script their male narrative. In each distinct locale exists uncharted territory, as the film’s plot challenges male identity/performance in all spaces, leaving the men of Chasing Amy in a constant state of flux.

“I love this shit, man. This shit is awesome! I wish I was like these guys - getting all stoned, talking raw about chicks…”

17 *Chasing Amy*, directed by Kevin Smith (1997; Santa Monica, CA: Miramax, 2000), DVD.
In the opening scenes of *Chasing Amy*, Smith brings the audience’s attention to a sense of place and time. At a comic book convention, the “Third Annual Manhattan Comicon,” the viewer is immediately aware of location and narrative, both serving as tropes throughout the film, securing plot and providing context and nuance to the events and experiences that transpire in the scenes that follow. The camera, panning in on the words “comic” and “Manhattan,” focuses the viewer on place, along with the narrative that takes shape in accordance with the location. The convention is marked by a wide range of characters, women scantily dressed as alien/human hybrids, men looking like Star Trek Klingons, and guys who resemble just what one would believe the comic book enthusiast to look like: sloppy and disheveled—as if they just rolled out of bed in their parents’ basement.

In this unnatural, supernatural, or sci-fi-inspired setting, the dynamic of “out-of-place” or “in-place” is muddied—the parameters of what is permissible far more blurred, far less conforming. The comic convention seems to invite those who are “out-of-place,” allowing these individuals the freedom to revel in fictitious characters, to speak in cartoonish tongues, to find a respite from the marginality of their lives just outside the doors of the convention center. Here, the comic book reading, stereotypical virgin character, has a shot at intergalactic love whereas in his local community, sex seems to be as improbable as actually finding a universe beyond our own with a store-bought telescope. The space, regardless of the fictitious overtone, maintains a gendered identity. Hooper X, a gay man masquerading as a Black Panther, who writes a militant African American comic, brings to light issues surrounding masculinity, even in this galaxy far, far away. In public, his rhetoric reads like Marmaduke meets Malcolm X:

Always some white boy gotta invoke the holy trilogy. Bust this: Those movies are about how the white man keeps the brother man down, even in a galaxy far, far away. Check this shit: You got cracker farm boy Luke Skywalker, Nazi poster boy, blond hair, blue eyes. And then you got Darth Vader, the blackest brother in the galaxy, Nubian god!18

Hooper, although thoroughly well-versed in the racial issues of not only American culture but the Death Star, plays up his black rage and silences any notion of his homosexuality. Hooper speaks into his awareness, telling Holden and Banky that he needs “to sell the image to sell the book. I mean, would the audience still buy the whole black rage angle if they found out the book was written by a... you know...”19 As a man, anger is palatable at the comic convention; it is what is expected of a man of color; his marginal sexuality is not.

18 *Chasing Amy*, directed by Kevin Smith (1997; Santa Monica, CA: Miramax, 2000), DVD.
19 Ibid.
Hooper X is adept at knowing the expectations of place, because, his sexuality and race often signal him as other, and present numerous opportunities for him to be oppressed: “Screw that all for one shit, alright? I gotta deal with being a minority in a minority of the minority, and nobody's supportin' my ass.” For Banky and Holden, Smith’s leading men, two cartoonists who script the highly successful comic Bluntman and Chronic, their respective abilities to understand sociocultural and/or socioeconomic privilege/marginalization is far less pronounced, far more naive. As two white, seemingly middle-class, men, their existence is marked by privilege, a freedom they both benefit from. In the world of comics, they embody the status quo of society - stories of weed and women, fornication and flatulence - the malaise of suburban men in their twenties. At first glance, Holden and Banky seem to deserve such criticism, as they are quintessential “Generation X heroes” Holden, a Cobain-like cardigan on his back, goatee framing his face, Marlboro Red in hand, and Banky, Holden’s second in command, hat on backwards and beard unkempt, embody the slacker aesthetic of the 90s. However, neither feels particularly comfortable with such a moniker: Banky works almost tirelessly throughout the film to understand his maleness as he loses his friend to love, and Holden attempts to assert himself as a man both in his relationship and in his career.

While at the same convention, Banky is first brought to the viewer’s attention in the midst of a tirade. His role in the creation of the comic he shares with Holden is questioned by a couple of men seeking autographs. In their brief dialogue, the autograph seekers press Banky to explain his work, stating outright that Banky is only a “tracer.” Insulted, Banky attempts to express his artistic merit: “I ink and I am the colorist; the guy next to me draws it…” “It’s not tracing, alright! I add depth and shading to give the characters more definition. Only then does the drawing truly take shape” - ironic seeing as Banky lacks both. His effort, however, falls on deaf ears, with the patron getting the final word: “No, no, no. You go over what he draws with a pen. That’s tracing!” In this exchange, Banky’s masculinity is challenged. The scene plays out in an all too uncommon manner - men checking men, one surveilling the other in a ritualistic asserting of bravado, what Michael Kimmel speaks of in his work “Masculinity and Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender

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20 Ibid.
23 *Chasing Amy*
24 Ibid.
Identity” - the policing of men by men and the subsequent “apologizing” that occurs when men act outside of the script.

Holden, a bit more ego than id, also finds the convention center to be a place strewn with complications. He has attempted, quite literally, to script himself, but has failed in articulating this message to his readership, men who see his work as more “Bill and Ted meets Cheech and Chong” than “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern meet Vladimir and Estragon” - what Holden expects. Although his comic is driven by the exploits of his two stoner friends -- Jay, (Bluntman), a hypersexual, misogynistic, homophobe, and Silent Bob (Chronic), an introvert who rarely utters a word, as his name suggests -- and speaks to a disillusioned generation of men, he sees his work as more art than smut. Holden's plight is not unusual given the era, and he battles masculine ideals on two fronts. In a sense, Holden embodies the slacker identity synonymous with the time, writing comics, what many would see as a childish endeavor, opting to craft male “superheroes” who are in all actuality petty criminals, loafers of the highest order. At the same time, he leverages his Jersey home and the men who have opted out of the culture for his financial gain. Regardless of his true desire for being a cartoonist, these two readings of Holden complicate his ability to understand himself. In other words, can one be a slacker and an entrepreneur at once?

In the early stages of the film, Holden and Banky are tasked with determining who they are as men in the tumult of generational change. The convention, a space where, presumably, anything goes, presents concern for these men, as neither manages to script a self according to how they would like to be recognized. The two suffer from identical maladies, but from opposite sides of the same coin. In his working relationship, Banky is feminized, thus countering how he perceives himself to be: the “hegemonic” male. What he wants and what he is, in terms of his presentation of masculinity, is rather different - actually oppositional. Under the gaze of the male comic patrons, Banky wilts to a state of “subordination.” His masculinity is questioned, as it is assigned “othered” status. To regain his self-worth, Banky plays into one of masculinity’s greatest flaws - to hulk up, to counter verbal violence with threats of physical. Holden, too, struggles with notions of hegemonic masculinity; however, he operates from a position of decided subversion. His privilege in the space allows him to be introspective, seeing as he has all of the tools to dominate the room—handsome, articulate, and talented, not to mention white and male. The cultural understanding of manhood, however, even within the comic convention, is in line with the hegemonic.

27 Chasing Amy
As the teen who is seeking his autograph points out, Holden’s words do not convey his intended sentiment; rather, his “art” recapitulates problematic male signifiers: pot smoking’, blunt rollin’, chick talkin’ dudes.

“Something You Should Know… She has a boyfriend?”

As the comic convention comes to a close, the viewer is finally introduced to the female lead of the film, Alyssa, operating as the force that moves the story’s plot and challenges the nascent male scripts Banky and Holden live and write. Through some foreshadowing, she is characterized as a “kitten with a whip” by Hooper, suggesting that her disposition may initially read as calm, possibly subservient; however, what she brings to the film is anything but that. As most scenes will attest, Smith’s language is pretty robust, full of the bon mots he has been recognized for drafting. In the midst of such rich dialogue, location is again made a focal point, with Hooper inviting Holden and Banky out for drinks, post event. Noting their “out-of-place” status on the streets of Manhattan, Hooper asks if the men will “Sprint back to the Lincoln Tunnel or can you stay for a round in the big, scary city?” The two, visually aware of Hooper’s dig, understand the role they fulfill as two Jersey suburbanites. The immediate chemistry, or perceived chemistry for the likes of Holden, between himself and Alyssa is enough to keep him in the city for a couple of extra hours. Drinks are had, dense chatter verbalized, and by the end of the first city scene, Holden’s desire for Alyssa is plainly apparent. The inner-city bar as a distinct place with distinct codes and understandings is made evident through the conversation as well, making the viewer aware of what comes with a shift in scenery. The space, along with the heteronormative readings of comics is queered by Hooper much to the dismay of Banky: “Archie was the bitch and Jughead was the butch. That’s why Jughead wears that crown-looking hat all the time. He the king of queen Archie’s world.”

For Holden, however, his masculine/sexual conflict will hit far closer to home than the musings of some cartoon, high school misfits. Initially, Alyssa seems to be just another conquest, a notch on the bedpost if you will. He is the leading man of his own experience, and this interlude should present as no different than his past dalliances. What will seemingly, or what Holden suspects, be the greatest obstacle is the distance that separates them - the urban and suburban lives they lead. Smith elects to highlight the shift in location by spelling it out for the viewer as he has done previously: “Red Bank, NJ - Bank Holdup Studios.” While in their studio, Holden is invited back into the city to meet up with Alyssa at a club. Hooper, acting as Alyssa’s proxy, makes clear the

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28 *Chasing Amy*
29 Ibid.
30 *Chasing Amy*
31 Ibid.
variance between these suburban men and an urban identity, noting: “I know how you burb thangs hate the city, but there is a shindig going down tonight that I think you would really get into.”32 The “Meow Mix,” another indicator of shifting space, a smoky Lower-East Side lesbian haunt, is murky, in a literal sense, as smoking had not yet been banned in New York City bars, and in a metaphorical sense, as Banky and Holden, so caught up in this heterosexual narrative they have penned, miss the immediate irony of their introduction to the club - a moment when Hooper queers their relationship, asking Banky “where is his better half?”33

For a moment, Holden, swept up by Alyssa’s beauty and the prospect of bedding her, perceives the gay bar in which he stands as an extension of a middle-class, suburban watering hole. He is blinded by his purported privilege, because he has navigated this space time and time again in his life. Judging by his entrance into the bar, he knows the dance steps, literally, all too well, even mentioning his ability to “cabbage patch” - a clear nod to the era and his non-cosmopolitan ways. In Alyssa, he finds a fellow suburbanite, a woman whom he believes to have shared a past, a local product who knows the places, such as Quickie Mart, an homage to Clerks, and the people, the “girl who fucked a dead guy there.”34 For a moment, Alyssa and Holden’s narratives parallel one another. In this same setting, Banky is even more oblivious, unable to read the obvious context of the bar, revelling in the fact that there are “a lot of chicks in this place,”35 lost to the fact that he is in a lesbian club, convinced that with more women, his chances for “hooking up” increase. Hooper, in earshot, sarcastically responds: “You are such a man”36 - really saying, you fool, open your eyes, look around.

“I love you, I always will. Know that. But I’m not your fucking whore.”37

The remaining scenes of the movie take place, for the most part, outside of the city in the homogenous confines of suburbia. The narrative of this space is tangible, challenging both the masculine identity Banky and Holden have constructed as writing “partners” and friends and the nascent romantic script Alyssa and Holden try so desperately to develop. At home, Banky struggles with the growth of the platonic/sexual relationship Holden and Alyssa have developed. The writing studio he shares has been disrupted, as Holden has breached the man code by allowing a woman to come between the two men: “This relationship is affecting you, our work and our

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32 Chasing Amy
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
friendship and the time’s gonna come when I throw down the gauntlet and say it’s me or her. Then what are you going to say?” In moments such as these, Banky is emblematic of the Gen X male that Michael Kimmel discusses, men who avoid work and delay adulthood, guys who display a fraternal ideal even when well outside of a permissible college age.

Although Banky is perhaps being a bit dramatic, suggesting that with Alyssa’s inclusion his relationship with Holden can no longer exist, he is also rather insightful. Alyssa’s life embodies movement, in the physical sense, from the suburbs to an urban setting and back, and ideologically, transcending the normative experience that suburbia engenders. In the city, where Banky and Holden struggle to find their way, their performance of masculinity, although at times muted, remains evident, perhaps marginal, but nevertheless accepted. For Alyssa and Holden to succeed in suburbia, she must wash herself clean of her past - all that does not fall in line with the heterosexual narrative of the space. In essence, she must apologize by repenting. Ironically, both terms, to apologize and repent, suggest a sense of utterance - an articulating of her transgressions. However, the opposite remains true, as only her silence will afford her true access. In their first scene in suburbia, Holden, sitting on a swing in the park, “playfully” explains his understanding of sexuality and gender, noting that relationships between men and women are correct because it is the “standard” - just like virginity is lost only when a man makes love to a woman… “the standard.” Holden, indicative of Michel Foucault’s understanding of sexuality and power, regulates what he, along with the suburban space, dictates as acceptable.

Through discourse or the act of silencing, Holden, patriarchally, limits her “mobility, in terms of both space and identity”. As the films progresses, Holden’s desire to rescript, to shoehorn, Alyssa into a heteronormative relationship/identity destroys their affair, despite the affection the two have for each other.

Holden’s ego, his inability to appreciate Alyssa as a person, a sexual being, complicates their relationship. The gendered/sexualized narrative of his hometown becomes a burden he is neither prepared nor equipped to challenge. At a hockey game, Alyssa draws the viewer's attention back to her out-of-place status, electing to support the visiting team: “Since most of these people are rooting for the home team, I am gonna cheer for the visitors. I’m a big vistors fan.” No greater truth could be uttered in this film. Alyssa, in the hockey arena, Holden’s studio, any space for that matter, is passing through. While a fight unfolds on the ice between two players, Holden does

38 Chasing Amy
41 Massey, Space, Place, Gender, 179
42 Chasing Amy
the same in the stands, instead opting for a passive-aggressive approach to battle, questioning Alyssa’s sexual past. Until this moment, Alyssa was only a lesbian, an innocuous sexual identity in the world of heteronormative suburbia, fake, pseudo sex as he alludes. But now, upon learning of her heterosexual history, Holden feels emasculated. He is no longer the only one doing the fucking; he is late to that party and thus feels duped, even victimized. As a conquest, not an equitable partner, Alyssa fires away at Holden: “I blew him while Cody fucked me!” A knockout both on the ice and in their relationship.

Conclusion
By the end of the film, Holden is orphaned from both of his relationships. In a final attempt to right the ship, to bring order to the chaos of the moment, he marches forth, again, as the hegemonic male. With Banky and Alyssa in the room, his apology reads more like his own hedonistic musings. His intentions are genuine, his realization that his relationship with Banky has been damaged, that there may indeed be traces of homosexual lust between the two, and that he doesn’t “know how to deal with your [Alyssa’s] past,” times and places that are bigger than himself - a man he sees as being “inadequate” to rival her sheer power. His approach at resolution, however, is gravely flawed, thinking that having sex with both parties will somehow bring them all closer. Candor aside, this tableau is unmistakably about Holden, a hollow attempt at allowing himself to maintain all iterations of his male identity. In his home, just feet away from where he scribbles his comic characters, Holden looks to create a scenario in which he maintains his past and his future. The space cannot hold such a narrative. Alyssa leaves, this time for good, and the place again resembles what it once was. Parting, she looks at Banky and says “he is yours again.”

In a diner, a space that functions as neither here nor there in the sense of the urban/suburban dynamic of the film, Holden finally comes to understand his own gender and sexuality. Sitting with Silent Bob, his friend and comic muse, he learns of what it means to “chase.” In essence, if he had continued on such a journey, chasing rather than somehow trying to situate, to combat natural movement, perhaps the film would have ended differently. Bob eruditely urges Holden to think beyond the context: “In love, you have to put the individual ahead of their actions. Always.” The diner signals the road, movement, and thus Holden is aware that space can be subverted, that the hegemonic must not be recapitulated to find solace, that although seemingly natural, rigidity is antithetical to life, that if the narrative is constructed, it can be

43 Chasing Amy
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Chasing Amy

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subverted. At the picture’s conclusion, Holden is back at the convention center; however, this time, he is the artist he longed to be earlier in the film. His writing is no longer full of angst; rather, it is “more personal.” Standing in front of Alyssa, who is again dating a woman, he tells her of his indie comic, the one about hurt and loss, the one about the places he had been. He apologizes and walks away, prepared to negotiate the spaces in which he finds himself rather than creating spaces to support who he believes he should be.

Bibliography:


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47 Creswell, *Place: an introduction*, 46


Female Masculinity: 
Revenge and Violence in Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* Vol.1 and Vol.2

Tatiana Prorokova

Abstract

This article examines the notion of female masculinity and gives an overview of how it is represented in film and specifically in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* Vol.1 and Vol.2. I argue that in Tarantino’s film, female masculinity is to a great extent portrayed through violence. Moreover, The Bride incarnates two powerful representations of the monstrous-feminine described by Barbara Creed, being a woman as castrated and a woman as castrator at the same time. Hence, the article also investigates the connection between female masculinity and so-called female monstrosity as well as the way it is displayed in *Kill Bill* Vol.1 and Vol.2. Finally, a detailed analysis of one of the most violent scenes in the film – the fight between The Bride and the bodyguards of O’Ren Ishii – is provided.

**Keywords:** female masculinity, action film, violence, revenge, *Kill Bill* Vol. 1, 2
Female Masculinity: Revenge and Violence in Tarantino’s Kill Bill Vol.1 and Vol.2

Tatiana Prorokova

Introduction

Kill Bill Vol.1 (2003) and Vol.2 (2004) is a successful story of a revengeful bride (Uma Thurman) created by Quentin Tarantino. The Bride – a young pregnant woman who is about to get married – cardinally transforms after the massacre in the chapel, when her closest friends and the bridegroom are killed in cold blood. Miraculously, The Bride survives and, given this chance, she starts to avenge on those five killers who inflicted pain and suffering on her. Analyzing the main heroine, one can see that she is a very strong, staunch, and powerful woman. I argue that introducing such a heroine, Tarantino confronts masculinity with femininity. These two categories, however, should not be mixed with biological division of human beings into males and females. Masculinity, therefore, should not be assigned only to men because women can be masculine, too, and vice versa. Judith Halberstam argues that masculinity should not be reduced down to “male body and its effects.” Moreover, the scholar states that “heroic masculinities” are only one manifestation of masculinity, its version that has become usual and acceptable for society.1 One can speculate that the “traditional” association of masculinity with men could have been caused by the influence of patriarchy that for a considerable time has been a norm for society.

Before analyzing Tarantino’s Kill Bill, it is important to locate the film in the context of the action movie genre. There is a long line of masculinized (generally violent) female figures in the action genre, starting most prominently with Ripley in the first Alien film and concluding with such modern heroines as Lara Croft, Charlie’s Angels, and The Bride. In connection with that, it is pertinent to scrutinize the concept of masculinity, with a particular stress on female masculinity.

Introducing the Concept of Female Masculinity

According to Andrew P. Smiler, gender is defined as “an organizing construct of individual lives, social practices, and institutions.”2 The analysis of the notion of

“gender” reveals the problem of binary oppositions related to the concepts of active and passive roles in society.⁴ There is an opinion that men and women are “expected to demonstrate the attitudes, behaviors, and traits that befit their sex.”⁵ Examination of these oppositions reveals the existence of femininity and masculinity.⁶ Femininity is interpreted as “the trait of behaving in ways considered typical for women,”⁷ while masculinity is understood as “manliness; the quality or condition of being male.”⁸ At the same time, masculinity is characterized as “the trait of behaving in ways considered typical for men” and as “the properties characteristic of the male sex.”⁹ These definitions obviously narrow the meanings of both concepts, revealing a strong delimitation between the two. It is apparent that these definitions are inaccurate because masculinity should not be considered a purely man’s prerogative due to his biological and physiological characteristics; the same applies to femininity.

Halberstam claims that it is hard to define masculinity simply because society cannot “recognize” it.¹⁰ One often associates masculinity with male body and male strength, i.e., with a conventional understanding of manliness, suppressing any other alternatives. An obvious explanation of the widespread of such understanding is the influence of patriarchy. Radical changes took place within society only in the twentieth century with the emergence of feminist movements that suggested looking into the concepts of femininity and masculinity from another standpoint. Nevertheless, Halberstam states that female masculinity is still considered just “the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity” so that male masculinity appears to be “the real thing.”¹¹ In addition to that, the research on masculinity proves that there is “no interest in masculinity without men.”¹² Yet, this article claims that masculinity can exist without men and there are examples of women that prove it.

Masculinity is generally associated with the notions of “power”, “legitimacy”, and “privilege.”¹³ That means that the one who “possesses” masculinity has certain authority and control. Clearly, decades ago, a woman simply could not have such privileges due to the reign of patriarchy. Today, “modern masculinity” is most often recognized as female masculinity.¹⁴ Thus, in film, “male masculinity very often appears as only a shadow of a more powerful and convincing alternative masculinity,” which

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⁵ Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, “Gender.” Web.
⁹ Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 1.
¹⁰ Ibid., 1.
¹¹ Ibid., 13.
¹² Ibid., 2.
¹³ Ibid., 3.
only proves that masculinity is “multiple” and that it “shapes everyone.” Halberstam also speaks about a “failure in a collective imagination,” underlining that society is very reluctant to accept the existence of female masculinity, being too dependent on the stereotype of “masculinity as a property of male bodies” and rejecting “ambiguously gendered bodies,” despite a number of examples of strong women, women bodybuilders, transgendered people, lesbians, etc. The scholar refers to Paul Smith who claims that “the equation of maleness plus masculinity . . . adds up to social legitimacy,” which only reaffirms Halberstam’s argument concerning the inability of society to accept anything but male masculinity. The general attitude toward women as victims (because they are weaker than men) explains why female masculinity is frequently neglected.

Stacey Waite argues that “masculinity worn on the ‘female’ body can change an environment in specific ways, can change the bodies in that environment, can call the entire notion of the body and the environment into question, because it troubles their meaning,” which, I contend, perfectly explains why it is so difficult for society to accept the existence of female masculinity. The scholar claims that the social rejection of female masculinity does not allow masculine women feel comfortable with themselves: “. . . There is a sense in which I have ‘stolen’ masculinity, a sense in which I have taken an inheritance that does not belong to me or to my line of people – namely ‘women.’ Masculinity, is, in a sense, a type of inherited capital (the male body) that prepares a man for his acquisition of cultural or social capital.” The interference of women in the “balanced system” of patriarchy is inevitably considered negative. As a consequence, neither society feels comfortable with the “new” issues, nor masculine women feel happy living in such prejudged society. According to Waite, the latter happens because women feel a certain threat towards themselves: “. . . I stand nervously with the women in my class . . . . They are nervous too. We do not speak. We look at the white floor. Or I do. There is the sense there is a man in this room. There is the sense of invasion, of the criminal.” The scholar continues: “My parents refer to me as ‘she’; you may do the same. But it doesn’t mean you know anything about how I throw a ball.” Thus, it becomes clear that there are women who, according to Joan Riviere, seek for

14 Ibid., 3, 4.
15 Ibid., 15.
16 Quoted in Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 16.
18 Ibid., 179.
19 Ibid., 180, emphasis added.
20 Ibid., 183.
“‘recognition’ of their masculinity from men and claim to be the equals of men, or in other words, to be men themselves.”

**Female Masculinity in Film**

Masculinity is not a man’s prerogative, and numerous examples from media, film, literature, and everyday life prove that female masculinity exists; moreover, as Halberstam puts it, frequently, female masculinity can be even “more powerful and convincing” than male masculinity. Various representations of female masculinity in film prove this assumption, too.

Portraying women as action heroines is quite a new tendency in cinema. For decades, the action genre was the men’s world. Moreover, it was the world where “heroes” were allowed to have certain drawbacks:

[They could] have broken teeth and squint like Clint Eastwood, suffer from a speech defect like Sylvester Stallone, have foreign accents like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jean-Claude Van Damme, be old like Charles Bronson, bald like Kojak, wear constant I-am-very-very-pissed-off expressions like Steven Seagal, or be just plain ugly like Chuck Norris.

A heroine, on the contrary, has to be young and sexy. If she naturally does not look so, the solution is to have a plastic surgery. Women on screen are not covered in blood, they do not sweat, they always have fresh makeup and clean clothes, no matter how long and hard they fight.

There are different interpretations of who the first female action heroine was. Rikke Schubart, for instance, argues that African-American actress Pam Grier turned the tables on with her films *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). After that, women started to appear on screen, performing the roles that were usually played by men:


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22 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 3.
24 Ibid., 5.
25 Ibid., 5.
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elite soldiers (G.I. Jane, 1997), and computer game heroines (Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, 2001).26

Hilary Neroni draws attention to the late 1980s, when “the violent woman has become a staple in contemporary American cinema,” and calls Thelma and Louise (1991) the pioneer-film that presented the first action heroine to the viewers.27 Jeffrey A. Brown argues that Ursula Andress (Dr. No [1963]) is the prototype of the modern action heroine.28 Thus, scholars agree that the action genre became also a women’s territory around forty-fifty years ago and flourished with the release of Alien in 1979. As Ivonne Tasker puts it, there was “the heroine’s move from her position as a subsidiary character within the action narrative, to the central role of action heroine, a figure who commands the narrative.”29

Nowadays, the audience has a strong preference to see a woman rather than a man in an action film. The great success of Crouching Tiger (2000), Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001), Charlie’s Angels (2003), Kill Bill Vol.1 and Vol.2 (2003, 2004), Salt (2010), Hanna (2011) and a large number of other films proves it. Additionally, one should not forget about such TV-series as Xena: Warrior Princess (1995-2001) and Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), where for years the audience could observe pretty young girls, killing natural and supernatural creatures in cold blood.

Schubart claims that a female heroine provokes two major responses from critics. On the one hand, postfeminists believe that her appearance on screen is a sign of progressiveness and equality, and that the fact that she can use “masculine violence” marks the end of such oppositions as “male versus female” and “active versus passive.” On the other hand, feminist critics see a female heroine as “a sign of oppression,” because although she is given certain power, she still has to obey the rules declared by men – to look pretty all the time, wear makeup, and have plastic surgeries – so that she remains an eroticized object.30

An interesting observation is made by Martha McCaughey and Neal King who argue that the action woman, no matter if she is a “malicious villain” or if she “save[s] the world from destruction,” “falls below standards of human decency.” That is why action heroines are often called “mean women.” Society considers their actions much more shocking and appalling than the same (or even more violent) actions committed

26 Ibid., 6.
30 Schubart, Super Bitches and Action Babes, 6.
by men, despite (or perhaps because of) the tendency of men to appear on screen as villains much more often compared to women.³¹

One can notice that the modern action heroine has inherited certain features from her predecessors: she is a sleuth, a femme fatale, a tomboy, and a mod.³² At the same time, she can be aggressive and masculine, sexy and kind.³³ E. Ann Kaplan argues:

[When a woman] takes on the ‘masculine’ role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action, she nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics in so doing – not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like men whose position she has usurped.³⁴

The action heroine is always strong. However, the manifestation of her strength differs from that of the male action hero’s, who is over-muscled and heavy. Male clumsiness is substituted with female lightness and quickness as now action actresses can “kick, jump, and fly better than Seagal ever could.”³⁵ There are two constituent parts of any action film: the number of special effects and the amount of dialogue. Action heroines do not really have much to say: “Talk too much and the heroine loses her mystique and starts to remind men of their ex-wives.”³⁶

Apparently, the action heroine changes certain conventions and “force[s] a new understanding of cultural norms.” The action heroine is a “direct affront to notions of gender acceptability.” In action films, the audience sees her as “more than just a woman” because she “takes on a male role.”³⁷ Frequently, action heroines combine femininity and masculinity, possessing such characteristics as “height, muscular physique and boyish short hair” and “exaggerated female sexuality” at the same time, which underlines the important role of body in action cinema.³⁸

Another pivotal issue that is important to address is female violence and its connection to female masculinity. According to Neroni, the first violent woman appeared on screen in the 1940s as a femme fatale; later, in the 1970s, in horror and Blaxploitation films; finally, in the late 1980s, the violent woman was omnipresent in film and received a considerable response from the audience.³⁹ The scholar points out that women in those films were not only violent but also independent, tough, and

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³² Brown, Dangerous Curves, 6.
³⁶ Ibid., 17.
³⁷ Brown, Dangerous Curves, 10.
³⁸ Tasker, Spectacular Bodies, 14, 17.
³⁹ Neroni, The Violent Woman, 21, 27, 33.
intelligent. Moreover, they used violence not because they wanted to but because “extreme circumstances” “forced” them to behave like that.40

Today, one can seldom observe a woman who cannot hold her own in film. Female characters do not wait for men to protect them. This change has destabilized the social order and provoked certain questions concerning gender identity. Since it is generally accepted that violence is the characteristic that defines masculinity, one can conclude that a violent woman is a masculine woman. That is why masculinity and violence are inseparable in action cinema.41

Thus, among the traits that define masculinity, violence is the key one. Normally, a man resorts to violence to protect his family or the ones who are weak and therefore need help. Being the action heroine, a woman can easily take on a role of a violent heroine as well. Relating the concepts of violence and masculinity, Neroni claims:

Violence itself doesn’t entirely make up masculinity, but it is also not possible to entirely erase violence from masculinity. One cannot separate ideas of masculinity from violence in our society - which is why, for example, a woman committing violence is inevitably at some point referred to as masculine. . . . The intertwined nature of violence and masculinity is one of the reasons the violent woman is so threatening; she breaks up this symbolic relationship between violence and masculinity.42

Apparently, reactions towards the violent woman are very diverse. Most often, the violent woman makes the audience feel uncomfortable. Her behavior provokes the question: Why does she act like that? It might sometimes be hard to find an explanation for such demeanor but it is definite that no action heroine represents passivity. The success of action films obviously consists in their ability to, borrowing from Tasker, “articulate” gender.43

**The Violent and Masculine Heroines in Kill Bill**

Violence and female masculinity are inseparable concepts in contemporary culture. This article focuses on Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* Vol.1 and Vol.2 to investigate “the complex treatment of women” in the film.44 Female body is the central concept in the film because Tarantino attempts to show how a woman tries to negotiate her place in

40 Ibid., 29, 30.
41 Ibid., 15, 19.
42 Ibid., 45-46.
patriarchal society (that is portrayed as an extremely violent one) through her body that is "marked" with the traces of abuse, violence, rape, fear, and hatred.\textsuperscript{45}

The director demonstrates that if a woman wants to be violent, she has to "choose between . . . domesticity . . . [and] heroic glory."\textsuperscript{46} Apart from narrating the story of the main heroine, The Bride, Tarantino explores the issue of female violence through the representation of three other women, who are trained killers, too. However, the difference between them (The Bride, on the one hand, and the group of the assassins, on the other hand) is crucial. While the actions of The Bride are her own choice provoked by the desire to revenge, the three killers are manipulated by a man. This can be observed, for example, in the episode, when Elle Driver (Daryl Hannah) comes to the hospital ward to give The Bride the fatal injection but her action is interrupted by the phone call from Bill (David Carradine). He informs her about his plan on how to kill The Bride (the audience witnesses him stroking a sword that, as Reilly has argues earlier, obviously stands for a phallus,\textsuperscript{47} intensifying the fact that Bill is a man and it is his prerogative to give orders, while women have to obey and carry them out). And Elle obeys. O’Ren Ishii, whose parents were killed by Matsumoto, now works for an “American version” of him – Bill. Another example is Sophie Fatale (Julie Dreyfus) – the translator of O’Ren Oshii – who, after having been physically mutilated (her arms are chopped off), returns to Bill, seeking for his protection and thus showing how devoted she is. In fact, the whole idea that a group of women obey one man seems very patriarchal.

Ian Reilly pays special attention to the way female bodies are disfigured in the film. The audience sees the scooped-out eye of Elle Driver, the scalped head of O’Ren Oshii, and the chopped arms of Sophie Fatale. Thus, the film turns the mutilation of female bodies into a perverse spectacle. No matter how severely damaged female body is, it is still an object of the gaze. Moreover, it is “the female’s lack” that arouses one’s interest. The female becomes an object of desire in two ways. On the one hand, her “defects” are cosmetically improved: for instance, the missing eye of Elle Driver is always covered with an eye patch; in addition, the eye patch becomes an accessory that emphasizes her sexuality and seductiveness when she wears a nurse’s uniform. On the other hand, “the means through which the body achieves its lack becomes the object of the gaze.” The scene, when O’Ren Oshii is scalped in a brutal way vividly illustrates it. All in all, Tarantino focuses not only on the depiction of the story of revenge but also on “coupling” violence with the alluring mutilation of women, which makes the aesthetics of \textit{Kill Bill} Vo.1 and Vol.2.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 27-28.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 41-42.
Tarantino demonstrates what happens to a woman if she gives up violence and chooses domesticity, i.e., she will suffer for preferring femininity to masculinity. A clear example of that is The Bride herself. Bill does not accept her choice to marry and have a child and eventually punishes The Bride for refusing to remain a violent assassin. Later, The Bride understands that it is impossible to return to domesticity after all the violent actions she has committed and explains it to Vernita Green (Vivica A. Fox) who used to be an assassin, too. Interestingly, in this scene, The Bride takes on the role of Bill, attacking Vernita at home. As soon as Vernita’s daughter returns from school, the two women pretend that nothing is going on (although there is a mess in the living room, and the faces of both are covered in blood). They hide their arms behind their backs as if they are children who have just done the wrong thing. This desire to protect the girl from seeing violence seems very far-fetched because no matter how hard Vernita tries to become a good mother and live a domestic life, her past will never let her do that. She is finally killed by The Bride. Reilly claims that the end of this scene serves to “reinforce our understanding of the destructive nature of male heroism”: the fact that Vernita’s daughter witnesses the killing of her mother signifies that “the cycle of female violence – particularly, the cycle of violence committed by women against women – will continue.”

Thus Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* can be read as a story of different women who commit violence against men and women in order to get their place in a patriarchal system. However, as the film suggests, they often do not understand that their attempt to be violent and masculine is controlled by a man.

**The Multiple Personalities of The Bride**

In his film, Tarantino introduces four women who create this fanciful atmosphere: “Where women go . . . limbs fly. Heads roll. Blood spurts in three shades of red.” Yet, Thurman’s heroine is not only the main but also the most versatile one. Schubart points out four archetypes of The Bride: The Child, The Amazon, The Dominatrix, and The Mother. Only two of them, namely The Amazon and The Dominatrix, explicitly characterize her as a masculine woman. However, the other two sides of The Bride do not reduce her masculine characteristics; on the contrary, they help the audience understand why a beautiful young woman turns into a violent warrior.

The versatility of Thurman’s heroine is also symbolically revealed in the variety of the names she has. Thus, apart from The Bride, she is also Black Mamba, Arlene Machiavelli, Beatrix Kiddo, and Mommy, all of which characterize her as The Amazon,

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49 Ibid., 41.
The Dominatrix, The Child, and The Mother, respectively. Although the film displays different moments from The Bride’s life, there is no specific focus on a particular one; on the contrary, Tarantino shows how these archetypes interweave, revealing that in the course of the film, Thurman’s heroine equally combines the features of The Amazon, The Dominatrix, The Child, and The Mother.

Before analyzing the heroic project of The Bride, it seems reasonable to remember how it all started, which is only explained in *Kill Bill* Vol.2. The film opens with the scene in the chapel, and the audience finds out that The Bride is about to get married. Later, Bill appears but only The Bride knows who he really is; everyone else mistakes him for her father. This mistake is, however, very symbolic because although Bill is not her biological father, he is the one who has literally made The Bride who she is – the best of his assassins. Thus, Bill is, as Schubart puts it, “the creator” of The Bride.\(^52\) This argument validates the heroine’s first archetype – The Child.

However, when The Bride finds out that she herself will be a mother, her life as an assassin crashes as she is now guided by the maternal instinct to protect her unborn child. Thus, The Bride reveals her entity as The Mother. It is vividly illustrated in *Kill Bill* Vol. 2, when The Bride explains to her potential victim that she is pregnant and therefore she is scared for the well-being of her child. This reason seems to be enough for both heroines to leave without hurting each other. Nevertheless, “being a mother does not soften this female hero.”\(^53\) On the contrary, after Bill’s attempt to kill The Bride and her unborn baby, Thurman’s heroine turns into a revengeful monster, the character so much different from that young (and as it seems) fragile woman in the chapel. The heroic project of The Bride is to revenge on everyone who ruined her plan to be a happy woman and a mother.

Yet, one should not forget that initially The Bride is an assassin. Her eagerness to fight and kill metaphorically makes her an Amazon warrior. After the massacre in the chapel, her assassin nature is only intensified. “‘Cunt’ along with ‘bitch’ are simultaneously derogatory swear words and positive adjectives signaling Amazon strength, independence, and willpower.”\(^54\) The image of an Amazon warrior perhaps most aptly illustrates how masculine the revenge has made her. Obviously, The Bride’s past as an assassin proves that she had already possessed such qualities as toughness, cruelty, and ability to control her emotions; however, the deprivation of the child has intensified them all.

Finally, the fourth archetype of The Bride is The Dominatrix. Thurman’s heroine is portrayed as a powerful woman; yet, visually she does not resemble one. More than that, despite her attractive appearance, The Bride is not displayed as a seductive

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\(^{52}\) Ibid., 307.  
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 311.  
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 307.
woman. Schubart argues that Tarantino avoids making a reference to the dominatrix figure in the costumes of Thurman’s heroine:

Bridal dress; yellow sports outfit copied from Bruce Lee’s costume in *Game of Death* (1978); humble training clothes; tight low cut jeans, fitted leather jacket and tricolor cowboy boots when she comes to kill Budd; and pastel-colored summer skirt and loose top when she confronts Bill. No whips, high heels or black leather.55

The scholar claims that the typical dominatrix archetypes in this film are O’Ren and Elle.56 Nevertheless, one can speculate that the costumes of The Bride that visually hide her femininity help therefore unveil her masculine side. Schubert argues that the “sexiness” of The Dominatrix is indicated by the voice-over that “woman-on-woman violence is ‘hot’ and ‘naughty,’”57 which is demonstrated in The Bride’s merciless killing of the other female assassins.

Thus, the audience perceives The Bride as well as the other female assassins as masculine through violence they commit in the film. Neroni claims that violence is the “ultimate masculine signifier.”58 In addition to that, the scholar speaks about the “overwhelming” reaction towards violent women.59 Indeed, traditionally, a woman is not supposed to be violent. Any display of violence leads to an unruly reaction from the audience that eventually expects the justification of such behavior. We find feminine violence disturbing because it is “extralegal,” while masculine violence is an “integral part of the legal system.”60 Committing violence, The Bride takes on a role of a man, thus, violating the existing opposition of “active” and “passive” roles, described by Laura Mulvey.61 The Bride disrupts the balanced relationship between the two, demonstrating that she does not need a male protector. That proves that she feels masculine enough to take care of herself. Moreover, The Bride obviously belongs to the type of a “powerful woman who intimidates [all] male characters in the film.”62

There is another approach to analyze The Bride, namely Barbara Creed’s theory of representing a woman as castrator or castrated can be applied to the main heroine of *Kill Bill* Vol.1 and Vol.2. Moreover, I contend that The Bride incorporates both representations at once. On the one hand, she is a castrated woman. Creed states that a

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55 Ibid., 309.
56 Ibid., 309.
57 Ibid., 310.
58 Neroni, *The Violent Woman*, 52.
59 Ibid., 59.
60 Ibid., 104.
woman can be castrated “either literally or symbolically.” The Bride is castrated in both ways. In the very first scene, the audience observes The Bride being intimidated, covered in blood, which portrays her as a victimized woman. This is exactly what Creed calls “literal castration.” In addition to that, The Bride is castrated symbolically, i.e., “she feels she has been robbed unjustly of her rightful destiny.” The audience is aware that The Bride is pregnant and that she is going to get married. However, her plans are severely disturbed by Bill and his Deadly Vipers Assassination Squad who kill everybody in the chapel, including the unborn baby (as The Bride believes). This savage reprisal turns The Bride into a woman castrator, the one “who seeks revenge on men who have raped or abused her in some way.” Judith Butler claims that a woman castrator is primarily aggressive and she desires to “castrate and take the place of the masculine subject.” Yet, Thurman’s heroine does not want to revenge only on a man. The audience mainly observes how she kills women (Vernita Green, O’Ren Oshii, and Elle Driver). Nevertheless, it is clear that they are just obstacles on the way to her main aim – Bill. Additionally, The Bride kills the two men who raped her in the hospital while she was in a coma, which only intensifies her nature as a woman castrator. Moreover, the way she kills the man who paid to rape her parallels the myth of vagina dentate or “toothed vagina,” also described by Creed. The Bride does not deprive the man of his penis, but she tears off his lower lip using her teeth, thereby killing him.

Creed argues that a woman can be represented in the “twin roles” – as castrator and castrated – however, most often it is the image of castrator that “dominates the ending,” when a woman becomes “deadly and dangerous.” Kill Bill Vol.1 and Vol.2 does not become an exception: the castration of The Bride provokes her to become a castrator herself.

One can argue that The Bride is a phallic heroine since she is so powerful and dangerous. However, the notions “phallic woman” and “woman castrator” should not be confused because “man’s fear that woman might castrate him either symbolically or literally is not necessarily related to his infantile belief that she is phallic.” Creed contends that “the penis, as such, is not an instrument of incorporation or castration but of penetration. In representations of penis as an instrument of violence, it doesn’t threaten to castrate but rather to penetrate and split open, explode, tear apart.” Usually a heroine who carries a gun is considered a phallic woman. The Bride has a sword – the arm that can obviously be referred to as a phallic symbol. However, here

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64 Ibid., 122.
65 Ibid., 123.
67 Creed, The Monstrous Feminine, 105-108.
68 Ibid., 127-128, author’s emphasis.
69 Ibid., 157, author’s emphasis.
70 Ibid., 157.
the argument of Elisabeth Pötler seems reasonable, namely that there is one perfect example of a phallic woman in the film: personal bodyguard of O’Ren Ichii Gogo (Chiaki Kuriyama). In the scene, when she asks a man in a bar if he wants to have sex with her and gets a positive reply, she stabs him asking: “Do you still wish to penetrate me? Or is it I who has penetrated you?” Yet, Gogo is a psychotic person, “which suggests that such logic is not shared by the heroine.” In addition, The Bride does not use the sword as the object that penetrates. She usually decapitates her victims or chops their limbs off, which obviously has nothing to do with an act of penetration. These speculations also help me refute the theory that “only phallic masculinity is violent,” which, according to Creed, is supported by some scholars. Although The Bride’s phallic masculinity can be disproved, the heroine is still a vivid example of how a female can be violent and thus possess masculinity.

The scene that perhaps most vividly illustrates this argument and thus deserves special attention is the one when The Bride fights against O’Ren Ishii’s guard – the army of warriors known as “Crazy 88.” The scene opens with The Bride screaming in Japanese that she and O’Ren have some unfinished business, which immediately impels the warriors to check what is going on. Then, the audience observes O’Ren’s translator Sofie, who is obviously hurt (the blood in the corner of her mouth indicates that), whereupon the camera focuses on The Bride’s face and, for the first time in this scene, the audience sees a close-up of her eyes that gaze up. The position of the characters here is very important. The Bride stays down, while O’Ren and her bodyguards are one level up. At the beginning of the scene, O’Ren clearly plays an active role. It can be understood from her position on screen: she is the one who can observe everything that happens on the lower level; she is the one who gazes down with haughtiness. Apparently, O’Ren understands her dominant position: The Bride is alone while O’Ren has 88 warriors who are here to protect her. The Bride, however, does not look vulnerable. She understands that she will have to fight alone but her gaze is directed up at O’Ren; the close-up of her eyes reveals that she is fearless, determined, and unconquerable.

To illustrate the radical transformation of The Bride – from the victim to the revengeful monster – the film flashes back to the earlier scene, when O’Ren stays next to The Bride in the chapel and watches her dying. They were positioned in the same way: since The Bride was a victim, she was lying down on the floor, whereas O’Ren was gazing down at her. O’Ren was an active female while The Bride – a passive one. This memory intensifies The Bride’s anger and she fiercely chops off Sofie’s arm (the woman

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71 *Kill Bill* Vol.1, directed by Quentin Tarantino (2003; Miramax Films, 2003), 1:00:22-1:00:33.
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– Tatiana Prorokova

still remains her hostage). The camera immediately focuses on O’Ren and we can observe a close-up of her face that displays confusion, perplexity, and fright. The camera again shows a close-up of The Bride’s eyes that reflect her confidence. She steps out of the puddle of Sofie’s blood. Provided with a panoramic view, the audience sees people who were dancing in the hall before The Bride came, screaming and running out of the building. Once the hall is empty, the camera focuses on The Bride again. Tarantino uses high-angle and low-angle shots, showing her from all sides, as well as from above and down.

O’Ren attacks first: she orders one of the members of “Crazy 88” to kill The Bride. From this moment on, the transformation of the Bride becomes apparent, and the audience observes a truly masculine woman. The camera zooms in on Thurman’s heroine again, showing the ironic smile upon her face, and then immediately on the sword that she holds in her hand. The Bride transfixes the first warrior with the sword and then, lifting him up, throws him into the pool. She demonstrates her strength and advantage over O’Ren and her army of killers. As soon as The Bride kills the man, O’Ren sends another five warriors to accomplish the mission. Adroitly and artfully, The Bride finishes them off, too. Although she is the one who controls the action, the atmosphere seems to be tensed, which is achieved through the sound effects: we hear yells of the warriors and clanks of the swords, and then it gets immediately quite. The screams alternate with quietness, which, as a matter of fact, creates this tension.

The next one who attempts to kill the Bride is Gogo – the personal bodyguard of O’Ren. This moment in the scene is crucial since it displays the fight between two women. Indeed, while the members of “Crazy 88” are all men, Gogo is the only bodyguard who is a female. It is evident that she is a strong opponent because just as The Bride, Gogo is a masculine woman. Arguably, this is the main reason why she is the only one from O’Ren’s guards who constitutes a menace for The Bride. While The Bride feels that she is stronger than men, which underscores the power of female masculinity, she cannot be so sure when her opponent is another violent woman. The camera rotates, demonstrating the two fighters from above and down. A few seconds from the scene are filmed in slow motion, precisely, when Gogo hurls her bludgeon at The Bride, while the latter manages to protect herself, using a table as a shield. Later, we see the bludgeon, destroying the table in slow motion, thus, indicating that if The Bride had procrastinated the time, she would already have been dead. Indeed, the concept of time is very important in this scene; it is The Bride’s knack for using the sword as well as her quickness and promptness that save her from death.

Thurman’s heroine is obviously strong, both morally and physically. However, her physical strength is sometimes perceived as supernatural power. She kills Gogo and the warriors, simultaneously performing a number of tricks. In addition to that, every jump is accompanied with music that sounds very similar to the one used in cartoons while magic is performed. That can also signify The Bride’s superpower. The concept of
female body that can kill in such an elegant and beautiful way is clearly important to Tarantino. Pötler claims that the use of special effects in this scene makes “impossible acrobatics possible.”

After having killed Gogo, The Bride’s mission continues as she is now to kill the male bodyguards. The next scene vividly illustrates my earlier argument that while another masculine heroine can be dangerous and might kill The Bride, one man is not capable of that. Therefore, the film claims that female masculinity is more powerful than male masculinity. Because of this, when The Bride has to fight another heroine, she has only one opponent (Gogo); however, as soon as she has to fight male heroes, she faces a whole group. The Bride picks up the sword from the floor. At this moment, the camera looks up from under the transparent floor, on which The Bride is standing. The huge figure of Thurman’s heroine that the audience witnesses on screen stands for the superiority of The Bride over O’Ren. Later on, The Bride observes how the warriors of “Crazy 88” burst into the building. The camera shows a close-up of The Bride’s eyes that move from right to left and then up, thus, informing the audience about where the warriors appear from. The camera moves slowly, providing us with a panoramic view: The Bride is surrounded by the whole army of O’Ren’s warriors. As soon as she lifts her sword up, prepared to attack, every warrior steps back, although holding their weapons in readiness.

The camera that later moves on a track focuses on the warriors, gradually showing everybody who is involved. Then it zooms in from above and the fight starts. Apart from yelling, we can hear how blood gushes from chopped-off limbs. The Bride demonstrates the mastery of the sword. She eventually jumps up on the next level of the building – where O’Ren was standing at the beginning of the scene – thus, symbolically replacing O’Ren and becoming an active heroine. The fight continues, sometimes in slow motion, in order to demonstrate the beauty and accuracy of The Bride’s tricks.

The aesthetics of the scene is created through the grace of The Bride’s movements that makes the fight look like a dance. When the fight continues on the upper level, the light is turned off and the audience sees only the dark figures of The Bride and the survived from “Crazy 88” against the blue background. This part of the scene visually resembles a dance because one can see the bodies moving gracefully and efficiently, in the dark, as if on the dance floor.

The triumph of female masculinity is rendered in the scene’s final image of The Bride. She stands very much above those who survived and yells: “Those of you lucky enough to still be alive, go and take your life with you. But leave the limbs you have lost behind. They belong to me now!” She gazes forward, stands firmly, the sword erect:

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she finally appears as a truly superior woman, a lonely fighter who will never stop until she fulfills her aim.

**Conclusion**

Despite the violence that is committed throughout the film, *Kill Bill*’s ending can be considered a positive one: The Bride revenged on everybody who was on her list and finally reunited with her daughter. An interesting remark was made by Neroni in respect of violent women in Hollywood films, namely that in the end, they frequently stay alive but are “left on their own.”\(^77\) This theory can be applied to The Bride, too. One could have expected that having seen how good the relationship between Bill and their daughter was, The Bride would have forgiven him or at least tried to forget about her revenge for the sake of family happiness. However, as a professional killer, she remains firm and finishes her business. Neroni claims that while heterosexual couples usually “end up in a romantic union,” it is hard to integrate a violent masculine woman into a “typical narrative structure,”\(^78\) which accurately underscores the complex nature of female masculinity.

**Bibliography**


http://englishthesaurus.net/antonym/femininity.


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\(^77\) Neroni, *The Violent Woman*, 85.

\(^78\) Ibid., 85.


http://englishthesaurus.net/antonym/masculinity.


Homophobia and Violence in Film Noir: Homosexuality as a Threat to Masculinity in John Huston's The Maltese Falcon

Markus Spöhrer

Abstract

Recent research has shown that film noir’s ambiguous atmosphere, narrative structures and formal devices provide a nutrient media for (connoted) homosexual characters. While the iconography of homosexual characters in film noir as well as the corresponding socio-political and film historical conditions are well researched, the narrative and narratological consequences of homosexuality in film noir are rarely addressed. Thus, the chapter offers an analysis of John Huston's The Maltese Falcon (1941) in terms of the relations of the homosexual characters to the protagonist Sam Spade. The analysis is based on a description of the ‘gay gangsters’ Joel Cairo and Wilmer Cook which figure in place of the ‘femme fatal’ in this film and can be identified as homosexuals by relating to Richard Dyer's “gay iconography”. I will then argue that the homosexual characters’ femininity is presented as a threat to Spade's masculinity, which results in physical and verbal violence against them. With regard to Robin Wood’s model of the “repressed other”, my thesis is therefore that Spade's violent outbursts can be considered homophobic actions, which enables a reading of the film as a ‘narrative of homophobia’.

Keywords: film noir, The Maltese Falcon, masculinity, homosexuality, homophobia, gay iconography, violence, Richard Dyer
Homophobia and Violence in Film Noir: Homosexuality as a Threat to Masculinity in John Huston's The Maltese Falcon

Markus Spöhrer

Introduction
Within film studies, a certain tendency towards indecision and uncertainty can be observed of how to accurately or systematically describe the elements and attributes of the set of films, which are labelled ‘film noir.’ However, I will argue that within this discursive ambiguity and uncertainty a productive space emerges that allows for new perspectives on and approaches to film noir. This disagreement within academic discourse, and the difficulty which stems from defining film noir, is maybe rooted in its general tendency towards ambiguity, uncertainty, opacity, instability and puzzling structures or even a general “feeling of not knowing”.

Film noir’s generic set of attributes generally include a certain dreamlike quality, its sometimes paradoxical or contradictory and maze-like narratives and its dubious, unratable characters, which are not seldom sexually confused. Or as Richard Dyer summarizes: “film noir’s general uncertainty how to decipher the world”. Consequently, in recent research on film noir, the claim was made that in this ambiguous atmosphere a ‘nutrient media’ for homosexual characters is given. Moreover, it is even “widely known that male homosexuals figure significantly in film noir”, if only in the form of ambiguous, connoted homosexuals. While the iconography of homosexual characters in film noir, as well as the corresponding socio-political and film historical conditions are well researched, the narrative and narratological consequences of homosexuality in film noir have rarely been addressed, although Dyer

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4 Dyer, The Culture of Queers, 90.
5 Cf. Ibid.
6 Ibid., 90
has frequently pointed out to the fact that connotative homosexuality is a consequence of the “uncertainty [that] is built into noir’s central narrative organization”.8

Thus, my concern is to illustrate these narrative consequences by using one filmic example. I will analyze John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) in terms of the relations of the homosexual characters to the protagonist of the film—in this case Humphrey Bogart's portrait of private eye Sam Spade. I will base my analysis on a description of the ‘gay gangsters’ Joel Cairo and Wilmer Cook, which figure in place of the ‘femme fatal' in this movie and which can be identified by relating to Dyer's “gay iconography.” 9 I will then argue that the homosexual character's femininity (or feminine attributes) are presented as a threat to Spade's masculinity, which results in physical and verbal violence against them. My thesis is, therefore, that Spade's violent outbursts can be considered as homophobic actions, which allows for a reading of the film as a ‘narrative of homophobia.’

**Gay Iconography**

Although during the 1930s-1950s direct representations of sexual intercourse, above all homosexual intercourse, was strictly forbidden by the censorship of the Production Code10, filmmakers produced a system of codes that referred to homosexuality: “In the realm of true film noir, where the darkness offers both menace and comfort, homosexuals wear distinctly detectable camouflage”.11 This “detectable camouflage” is discussed by Dyer who describes what he calls the “gay iconography,”12 an iconography developed in and for film noir, but which draws from influences of an existing cultural pool of gay images, like literature and gay sub-culture.13

Dyer argues that in film noir, homosexuality is presented through the “gender inversion model,” this means that same-sex desire is linked to characteristic stereotypical traits of the opposite sex, which made homosexual people easily identifiable as such.14 In this respect homosexual characters in film noir feature attributes, which are traditionally linked to the opposite gender, assuming that sexual desire is linked to a certain stereotypical gender identity.15 However, Dyer consistently

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8 Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, 90.
10 Cf. Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*.
15 This of course refers to specific culturally and historically conditioned constructions and practices of what it means to be “masculine” or a “man”. Studying masculinity thus requires both a historical and a comparative approach. Cf. Kimmel, Michael S., and Michael A. Messner. “Introduction.” In *Men’s Lives*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel, and Michael A. Messner. xiii-xxiii. Bosten: Allyn and Bacon, 1995, xxi. Also it is significant to be aware of the fact that “masculinity also varies within any one society by the various types of cultural groups that compose it” (ibid.). “Masculinity” then is not a stable constant, but rather depended on
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points to the fact that homosexuality in film noir is always uncertain. We must therefore consider, that these characters are not to be read as homosexuals exclusively, but since any direct sexual representations are absent, these characters could also be considered heterosexual. It is the “understanding, [that] queer has something to do with not being properly masculine or feminine,” which one might also call “gender in-betweenism”. Consequently, this must eventually lead to an ambiguous reading of these characters. Dyer argues that male homosexual characters in film noir are “fastidiously and just a little over-elaborately dressed, coiffed, manicured and perfumed, their speech is over-refined and their wit bitchy, and they love art, antiques, jewelry and cuisine” and additionally “make-up and hair design can also suggest the queer, as when male characters wear frilly clothing, obvious makeup or certain haircuts”. These characters are attributed with culturally manufactured gender traits traditionally associated with femininity. In contrast to this, male gender traits are attached to lesbian characters in film noir: “[F]emales are large, big boned or fat, have cropped or tightly drawn back hair, wear shapeless or else highly tailored clothes and generally work for a living”, and consequently “reject traditionally feminine fashion for a sparse, harsh look of plain gray dresses, sensible shoes, and short or pulled-back hair”. However, queerness can also be hinted at in dialogue, by use of “queer names”, certain stereotypical ‘queer’ cultural practices (e.g. the “lisp”), certain “props that seem to define something about their sexuality” and “even music can be used to suggest that a film character is not quite straight”.

Joel Cairo - The “Deadly Sissy”

The central example of coded homosexuality in Maltese Falcon is the “deadly sissy,” Joel Cairo. Richard Barrios is thus convinced of Cairo’s homosexuality that he describes Maltese Falcon as “one of the few films of the decade in which the presence of

various social or (sub)cultural environments as well as ‘lived’ practices and highly individual conceptualizations of one’s gender. Cf. Whitehead, Stephen M. and, Frank J. Barrett. “The Sociology of Masculinity.” In The Masculinities Reader, edited by Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, 1-26. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001. However, for an analysis of the constructions of masculinity of a specific film genre – like film noir – another important factor requires consideration: In order to be classified as genres, which doubtlessly need to be considered as historically evolving and transforming as well, stock characters such as the ‘hard-boiled detective’ are much more ‘condensed’ and stereotyped as far as their attributed masculinity is concerned as I hope to show in my comparison of private eye Sam Spade and his homosexual antagonist Joel Cairo.

16 Dyer, The Culture of Queers, 97.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 96.
20 Dyer, The Culture of Queers, 96.
21 Benshoff and Griffin, Queer Images, 15.
22 Ibid.
a gay character is well established and unarguable”.

The way in which Cairo is introduced when he first appears in the movie, results in the impression that something is literally ‘queer’ (in terms of ‘strange’) about this character. Consider the shot and reverse shot when Effie hands Cairo’s calling card to Spade: Effie smiles tauntingly as she presents the card, while Spade in the reverse shot looks surprised at it, before he realizes that the card is perfumed. Effie reacts to Spade’s confusion by explaining that what he smells is “gardenia” – not exactly the way a stereotypical male (in the cultural and historical context of 1940s America) would introduce himself. Interestingly, the female character confirms and hints at certain forms of specific historical and cultural “dominant discourses and ideologies of masculinism” Cairo’s perfumed card does not follow.

As Cairo enters the room, the camera zooms on Spade’s face, which is shot in close-up and we can see Spade’s eyes enlarge in terror, as he looks at Cairo, who cannot yet be seen by the spectator. Furthermore the name ‘Cairo’ is not only linked to exoticism, but is his appearance’s strangeness or otherness is emphasized by “some flowery ‘exotic’ music on the sound track to place Cairo”. Although the spectator has not yet have had a chance to take a glimpse at him, this introductory scene has placed him into a queer or even homosexual context already. Cairo, “queered in his physical appearance, wears an elegant suit with a silver brooch and an exclusively fancy bow-tie. In addition to this, he wears a hat, which he carries in his hands so that his crimped hair shows. On his hands he has white silken gloves, which he folds together in an attentive manner.. As he undresses his gloves, his hands reveal a ring as an accessory. His diligently arranged vesture suggests that this extravagant character is really concerned about his physical appearance, which is a coded way of pointing out to his homosexuality. Spruceness, elegance, and carefully chosen vesture are indicators for culturally engineered female gender. However, attached to the male body, these attributes function as codes that hint at the character’s homosexuality. In this respect the ‘gender inversion’ works within (or against) a specific ideological framework that is culturally and historically conditioned, because specific types of clothing, accessories or “other accompanying accoutrements are commonly used to signify gender […] identity” and thus (re)produce normative “cultural conceptions of maleness.”

Gutterman notes that for example “physical strength, blue jeans, muscle shirts, tank tops, motorcycles” can be considered “conventional characteristics of normative male

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24 Ibid. 187.
25 Interestingly Spade’s secretary Effie was supposed to characterize Cairo with the words “this guy is queer” in an early version of the script (Barrios, 2002, 187).
26 Whitehead and Barrett, “The Sociology of Masculinity”, 15
27 Barrios, Screened Out, 187.
29 Ibid.
Homophobia and Violence in Film Noir: Homosexuality as a Threat to Masculinity in John Huston's The Maltese Falcon – Markus Spöhrer

gender identity” in the case of the historical context of film noir (or classical Hollywood respectively) the male hat, trench coat and the neck tie can be added.

The inverted gender is not only visible on the level of clothing, as other aspects of Cairo’s character signal femininity. Peter Lorre seems to have the perfect physical appearance to depict Cairo and consequently Barrios recognizes that “Lorre’s small frame and brittle neuroticism are subtle and perfect.” In contrast to Bogart’s angular face, Lorre has a rather smooth and roundish face with big expressive looking eyes. Noticeable is the almost exaggerated facial expression with which Lorre presents Cairo’s character in contrast to Bogart’s cool and much more narrowed facial expression and gesture. Cairo elegantly expresses his concern to Spade by using sophisticated language (with a German accent, supporting a sense of ‘exoticism’ or ‘strangeness’), while he smiles gently or sometimes even lasciviously at Spade, making an effort to move in discreetly. Obviously, Lorre pushed his way of talking to the limit, since Huston was directed by production supervisor Hal Wallis to follow the Production Code: “Make sure that he rounds out his words and enunciates as clearly as possible...Also don’t try to get a nancy quality into him, because if you do we will have trouble with the picture.”

In contrast to this, the private eye Spade is attributed with a specific cultural and historical masculinity: Being masculine here means to be a ‘tough guy’. This includes a “cynical way of acting which separated one from the world of everyday emotions.” Also Spade follows a “defeatist code”, his own laws and personal ethics. He is constantly demonstrating “exceptional physical endurance”, he is never a “weak ‘sap’” and he has a presumably “healthily desire for beautiful women”. However, at the same time the hard-boiled detective seems to be reluctant to commit to long-term relationships. In this respect hard-boiledness excludes the noirish anti-hero from being the “good-provider” from practicing presumably stable conventional bourgeois lifestyles and “avoid[s] domestic tasks and family activities that are considered ‘women’s work’”. According to Andrew Spicer, “Spade is an egotistical competitor,
hard, sarcastic and motivated largely by a determination to win out over everybody rather than a commitment to truths and justice”.

If we consider Cairo’s looks and behavior in contrast to the hard-boiled masculinity of Spade, the homosexual implication in Cairo (as being the effeminate counterpart) is highlighted even more: Spade wears an unimpressive suit, nothing fancy, with no brooch or any other accessory on it and wears a standard male hat. While Cairo is talking to him, he is sitting casually in his chair, smoking a cigarette, while keeping a “straight face.” He does not make an effort as elaborate as Cairo, which stresses the differences between them. This is brilliantly depicted in the scene in which Cairo recovers from Spade’s punch. In a whiningly voice and with a huffy facial expression, Cairo makes him aware of the fact that his vesture was damaged: “Look what you did to my shirt,” and as a consequence Spade tauntingly answers “sorry” - with a spiteful smile on his face.

Another noticeable marker for homosexuality is of course the stressing of Cairo’s use of perfume—both on his calling card and on his silk handkerchief, which Sam Spade sniffs distrustfully. Dyer argues that perfume on males in classical movies is more than just a feminine attribute: “it is insidious: it gets in everywhere, can’t be seen or touched or, therefore controlled, it’s a typically female piece of indirection, of a piece with seduction, manipulation, deceit and the other strategies of fatality”.

Besides his perfumed handkerchiefs, Cairo carries around other suspicious objects: Spade finds in Cairo’s pocket a heart-shaped box for pastilles, which is shot for only a few seconds, but perfectly fits Cairo’s queer feminine character. However, the most obvious of his objects, which additionally functions as a fetish object, is his “phallic walking stick.” In Spade’s office, Cairo obsessively touches his stick and even places it to his lips “in a gesture of symbolic fellatio.” In the following reverse shot, we see Spade in the background and Cairo in the foreground with the phallically shaped stick directly pointing to Spade’s mouth. Various techniques are used to make Joel Cairo an ambiguous character: he seems to be linked to exoticism by means of soundtrack and because of his oriental name. Cairo’s origin is left uncertain, evidenced by the passports and coins from. The uncertainty or the “in-betweenism” of his gender is consequently paralleled with his not being rooted anywhere and being in between various nationalities. This parallelism is also stressed by Brigid’s sarcastic remark on an incident in Istanbul, where Cairo had a little problem with “that young boy,” which links his exoticism to his homosexuality.

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41 Spicer, _Film Noir_, 87.
42 Dyer, _The Culture of Queers_, 102.
43 Benshoff and Griffin, _Queer Images_, 35.
44 Ibid., 31.
Narrative Function in the Maltese Falcon: Queer Characters as Threats to Masculinity

Homosexuality in film noir is not only present as far as iconography is concerned, but can also be identified in terms of narrative structures. Harper Cossar discusses what he calls a “Narrative of Homosexual Desire” in a specific film noir. Cossar bases his arguments on an extension of Woods psychoanalytical concept of “the repressed Other via the Monster” in his “chronicle of the ideological bases of the horror film”. It is not my concern to summarize Cossar’s paper, but rather develop my argument on the basis of his adaptation of Wood’s model of sexual repression in the horror film to film noir. According to Woods’ theory, the monster in horror films:

 [...] represents forms of sexuality which are inimical to the status quo...Surplus repression involves the repression of desires that could be expressed but that are treated as threatening to the existing order. It is these forms of surplus repression - bisexuality, homosexuality, female desire and so forth - that the monster represents.

As Dyer argues, homosexuality in film noir is always linked to villainy or that the “femme fatale” and the homosexuals share the same iconography and in doing so they represent “otherness” in film noir (cf. Dyer, 2002, 60-61): “In film noir, the gay male characters are linked iconographically to the femme fatale who lures the hero to his ruin. Of course the monster in horror films does not lure the ‘heroes’ to their ruin as the “deadly sissies” in films noir do, but clearly the reaction to their otherness is the same: “[T]here are only two ways to manage the Other: destroy/reject it or to tame/absorb it”. However, the first of these two ways seems to be the more frequently used in film noir. Consequently, Wood argues that there is a link between homophobia and violence, which can be considered a direct result of the repression of homosexual desire:

Homophobia results when...repression is less than completely successful  – when that is, one’s homosexuality is experienced as a constant, if unconscious threat….Masculine violence in our culture (the construction of male as violent) must be read as the result of the repression of.

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46 Ibid., 145.
48 As with the stereotypical masculinity of the hard-boiled detective, who, as I suggested above might be considered as a subversion of cultural and cinematic imaginations of the ‘good husband’, the ‘femme fatale’ can also be regarded as a negotiation of ideologically charged representations of bourgeois imaginations of femininity: “She represents an explicit challenge to the postwar consensus that women should be fulfilled by the roles of wife and mother” (Spicer, 2002, 91).
49 Cossar, “The Revenge”, 146.
bisexuality. Violence against woman: the woman represents the threat of the man’s repressed femininity. Violence against other men: the man represents the threat of the arousal of homosexual desires.\textsuperscript{50}

In \textit{Maltese Falcon}, violence against other men is strikingly present, especially against the iconographically connoted homosexuals. Dyer claims that film noir in general is “is characterized by a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity”\textsuperscript{51} and in his analysis of crime films, Thomas Leitch elaborates on that statement by arguing that this is an anxiety that “since it cannot be expressed directly […] is marked by the threatening predominance of nonmasculine images to indicate the boundaries of categories that cannot be constructed in positive terms”.\textsuperscript{52}

Winkler argues that the narrative of \textit{Maltese Falcon} is motivated through the threatening of masculinity by Brigid O'Shaughnessy:

As [Archer's] peer, Bogey has to revenge his death, even if he disliked him or at best was indifferent towards him. Because Brigid did not only outsmart a man, but she also did that as a \textit{woman} and has therefore hurt masculinity in general. Not for reasons of professional honour does Bogey step into the breach for Miles Archer, but in order to regain lost territory.\textsuperscript{53}

Willi Winkler argues that the fact that Spade turns Brigid in to the police has to be done for the sake of masculinity. My argument, however, is that Brigid is only one of the threats to Spade’s masculinity. Homosexuals, however, pose the greater threat, as they inhere female attributes, and even worse, lack male attributes. If Winkler is right, Spade’s violent reactions towards Cairo and also his deep hatred towards Wilmer Cook could also be read as defense against their attack on masculinity, which ultimately turns into homophobia. Spade’s violent eruptions, therefore, are direct responses to the homosexuality of the gay characters and indications of his homophobia.

The first time Spade uses physical violence is when Cairo visits him at his office. As argued earlier in this essay, Spade’s reaction to Cairo’s appearance indicates that he is well aware of his queerness. As Cairo threatens him with a gun and tells him that he intends to search his offices, Spade does not seem to be too concerned. He clasps his hands together at the back of his neck as instructed. One could argue that he does that because he has nothing of value (especially not the Falcon), which Cairo might want to have. Also one might suspect that Spade has already planned to knock him down at the

\textsuperscript{50} Quoted in ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
right moment. However, my argument is that Spade does not care about the physical threat as long as his masculinity is not in danger. Prior to the physical assault, one gets the impression that his violence against Cairo is a reaction to the way in which Cairo tries to search him: Cairo touches Spade’s backside with his hand, which looks so obviously intended that it almost appears to be a joke. Thus it is Cairo’s homosexuality that threatens Cairo and not the fact that he is held at gunpoint. This makes even more sense if we consider the further narrative course of this scene: After Cairo has recovered from the punch, he threatens Spade a second time with the gun. Spade grins and puts his hands in the air. Once again he is not concerned about him searching his office, but obviously very sure that Cairo has learned his lesson and won’t touch his private parts again. In a later scene, when Cairo and Brigid meet at Spade’s apartment, Cairo gets beaten up a second time. Even before Cairo enters the room, he instantly calls attention to the fact that Wilmer is lingering outside the apartment. One gets the impression that Wilmer’s presence excites Cairo and as Brigid refers to some kind of “trouble,” Cairo had with a “boy” in Istanbul, Cairo harshly replies: “You mean the one you couldn’t get to come to…”\textsuperscript{54} And even before Cairo is able to finish his sentence, he is both slapped by Brigid and shortly afterwards by Spade, who adds: “Yes – and when you are slapped you take it and like it.”\textsuperscript{55} Vito Russo implies that Brigid’s innuendo to the incident in Istanbul is a sarcastic remark, which points to Cairo’s homosexuality.\textsuperscript{56} The strange intermezzo between Cairo and Brigid can furthermore be understood as “sexual rivalry.”\textsuperscript{57} In contrast to Cairo, Brigid was probably dismissed by Wilmer and Cairo’s “mothering affection”\textsuperscript{58} and which can be read as a hint at an erotic relationship between the two of them.

The violent outcome of the scene is a reaction to the culminating (and emerging) homosexuality of Cairo. His homosexuality cannot become more obvious (for reasons of censorship and Spade feeling sexually threatened again), physical violence seems to be the only solution. One could of course argue that Spade reacts to Cairo’s getting rough with Brigid, but as we learn later on, Spade does not really care about Brigid, since he turns her in to the police. Thus, the violence against Cairo is once again rooted in Spade’s homophobia. Cairo’s unmanly, queer misogyny\textsuperscript{59} results in Spade feeling threatened by the Other, resulting in violent outbursts.

Even more interesting is the relation between Spade and Cook. Initially, there is no reason to suspect Cook to be a homosexual. However, Spade seems to have guessed his sexual identity, since he derisively calls him a “gunsel.” According to Russo this expression refers to “a passive sodomite, especially a young, inexperienced boy

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, directed by John Huston (1941; Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, directed by John Huston (1941; Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.
\textsuperscript{56} Russo, \textit{The Celluloid Closet}, 46.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Dyer, \textit{The Culture of Queers}, 113.
companion” (among other ‘heterosexual’ connotations). The fact that the word is connoted in different ways fits the uncertain and ambiguous character of the film and the way in which Wilmer can be read. Wilmer is not iconographically linked to homosexuality like Cairo. His vesture has no feminine traits, and he is not as eloquent and exotic. Still, his voice is very soft, and he has a very small, thin frame. Yet if we assume that Wilmer is a homosexual, the manner in which Spade deals with Wilmer make sense. It seems that the narrative pattern of violence and homophobia hint at his sexuality. At first Spade only notices that he is tailed by Wilmer. However, he seems to be very suspicious of him, since he observes Wilmer through the window in his apartment: We can see Wilmer lingering outside of the apartment, obviously waiting for Spade to leave the house again. Later in the apartment sequence, in the scene in which Brigid reveals that she is a “liar,” Spade tries to kiss her in front of the window. However, close before he touches her lips, he hesitates and rather takes a suspicious glimpse at Wilmer outside, who is still standing in front of the apartment and appears strikingly threatening. In this ‘heterosexual situation’ – a man and a woman who are about to kiss each other and thus confirming a socially prescribed heterosexual ‘foreplay’ (and reproducing a well-known cinematic cliché) – Wilmer comes visually and metaphorically between them, and thus is a menace to Spade’s masculinity. He is cinematographically “threatening the heterosexual union”.

In the next scene at the hotel Belvedere, Wilmer reappears in the lobby and Spade is instantly aware of his presence. As he makes Luke aware of the fact that he lets “these cheap gunmen hang around in the lobby with their heaters bulging in their clothes,” Wilmer is thus perplexed and intimidated that he can hardly speak, but his facial expression says a thousand words and so does Spade’s, as he blows the smoke of his cigarette into Cook’s face. Not only was he displayed as a “snitch,” but also his homosexuality was revealed. In addition to that, taking into consideration that he might be a connoted homosexual, the “bulging heaters,” can be read as a phallic connotation. While Spade “seems to take great pleasure throughout the film in the homophobic humiliation of homosexuals, that is, ’beating up on fags’,” at some point in the film's narrative he doesn’t seem to be amused anymore by being tailed by Wilmer. His behavior towards Wilmer becomes more and more malicious: after having unarmed Wilmer and made him look the fool in front of his master Gutman, Spade is seriously angry and asks Gutman to “Keep that gunsel away from me while you’re making up

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60 Russo, The Celluloid Closet, 46.
61 Dyer, The Matter of Images, 62. The shot is carefully constructed in this way, so that we can see the couple in front of the window facing each other, while Wilmer outside is still visible through the glass of the window, creating the impression that he is ‘standing’ between them or ‘separating’ them cinematographically.
your mind. I’ll kill him if you don’t.”

Gary Morris accurately concludes that Spade’s threat to kill Wilmer, “points to emotions beyond the story proper, the fear of a homosexual pursuer that unhinges even an unflappable character like Spade”. Spade is not only willing to harm the homosexual threat, but is eager to get rid of it forever. After failing to reject the Other, it has to be destroyed.

The desire to destroy this threat to masculinity culminates in the final sequence as Brigid, Cairo, Wilmer, Gutman and Spade meet at his apartment. It is Spade’s concern to find a ‘fall guy’ for the three murders, before he can hand out the Falcon to Gutman. As Gutman tries to convince Spade that he can handle the police, Spade’s response is that “they are up to my neck.” His own proposal is to “give them the gusen” as he viciously nods towards Wilmer and adds that “he’s made to order for the part.” This is especially true if we read him in terms of a homophobic narrative because as we learn early on in the film, Spade is very well capable of dealing with the police. His concern is to get rid of the threat to his masculinity. This also seems to be an easy way to deal a lot of damage to Wilmer: not only is Wilmer found guilty for murder in three cases, but as a consequence he is probably punished with death penalty or is at least locked away forever. Interestingly, as Gutman refuses to sacrifice Wilmer, whom he considers a “son,” Spade has a new idea: “I have another suggestion. It may not be as good as the first one but its better than nothing. Give them Cairo.” He is not as good as Wilmer, since he is not a threat anymore, as Spade has taught him that he should not play with his masculinity. Cairo is the lesser of two evils, but he is still a source for homoerotic tensions. As Spade provokes Wilmer some more, he threatens him with the gun and consequently is overcome by Spade. Gutman is convinced that they should take Wilmer for the fall guy. Naturally, Cairo is visibly relieved. Later on as they learn that the Falcon is a fake, Wilmer manages to run away, and Spade turns Brigid in to the police. The fact that he even betrays her, shows how far he is removed from such a thing as homosexuality. Furthermore it is his homophobic conduct and therefore his ultimate masculinity, which makes him the only gainer in the end – at least he is left with Gutman’s money and is free from any trouble with the law.

It is Spade’s status as nonfemale and nongay that rescues him from full complicity in the film’s villainous conspiracy. Spade is admirably, heroically, masculine because he is not female or homosexual; and in the zero-sum economy of hard-boiled movies, the vindication of Spade’s sexual prowess requires that all other sexual possibilities be impeached.

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63 The Maltese Falcon, directed by John Huston (1941; Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.
65 The Maltese Falcon, directed by John Huston (1941; Warner Home Video, 2006), DVD.
66 Leitch, Crime Films, 198.
Thus we can conclude that *Maltese Falcon*’s narrative is structured through Spade’s constant confirmation of his masculinity whenever he feels that it is in danger, which is manifest in his violence especially against homosexual characters, “whom the film leaves demystified, disempowered, defeated and dehumanized”.67

**Conclusion**

Homosexual characters in film noir are at any time “uncertain” or ambiguous. However, in the first place they can be read as heterosexuals, because an obvious portrayal was oppressed by the Production Code of that time. In most cases the characters in the scripts of the films were rather obviously gay, but had to be rewritten as a consequence of the Hays office’s censorship. In this respect, homosexual characters were camouflaged, but with a bit of subtleness so that they could still be deciphered as such, but were not ‘suspicious’ to the censors anymore. Spade’s conversation with Cairo almost appears to be an ironic allegory:

Sam Spade: “It might be better all around if we put our cards on the table.
Joel Cairo: “I don’t think that would be better”.

Filmmakers were simply not allowed to reveal their character’s homosexuality, in contrast to the novels the films were based on in many cases: While in Dashiell Hammet’s literary version (1930), the homosexual tendency of the villains seemed to be ‘unproblematic,’ the rather obvious gay relationship between the two gangsters was disguised for the production of the cinematic version of *Maltese Falcon*. To the same degree, it was a common practice not to confess an actor’s homosexuality or bisexuality to the public and studios made an effort not to reveal their actor’s true sexual orientation, in order to protect their reputation. It was not unusual that studios fired actors, when they refused to keep their homosexuality a secret.

In order to decipher a film noir’s character as a homosexual, one has to consider that it is not one single aspect that alludes to sexuality but rather a sum of stereotypical signs or markers that connote homosexuality. There are different iconographic devices that are culturally and film-historically established and linked with homosexuality. When taken as a whole, they suggest that specific social, cultural – or in this case: cinematic elements - point out to the sexual orientation of a character, such as vesture, accessories, fetish objects, language and habits (by using the gender inversion model). In many cases, conclusions about one’s gayness can also be drawn, if their reactions to other characters, their facial expression and their gestures are taken into consideration. Additionally, the setting in which a character dwells can also be connoted with homosexuality and may thus highlight the impression of homosexuality. Sometimes

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67 Ibid.
there is a homosexual implication in the actor itself—either if he is an ‘out of the closet’ homosexual himself (which was rather rare in the ‘classical Hollywood era’) or he has played other homosexual characters before.

The narrative of a film noir can also be structured around the homosexuality of the characters or rather be defined through the homophobic reactions of other characters. On a non-homosexual level, violence against the sissy characters makes sense if we consider the roles that such characters are given: besides being highly unmasculine and dubious, these characters are in every case villains. In this respect violence and punishment against them is represented as justified and as their unmasculine aura is linked to villainy. While this is certainly a highly negative connotation, one might consider reading these films - by referring to David Gutterman’s remarks about contemporary gay male gender identity practices – as spaces of negotiation: “The conflicts between individual nonnormative sexuality and cultural conceptions of normative maleness create interesting places if slippage where the standards of gender are undermined and contested”.68

**Bibliography**


68 Gutterman, “Postmodernism”, 63.


Origin Stories: 
Rebooting Masculinity in Superhero Films After 9/11

Owen R. Horton

Abstract

In the hours, weeks, and months following the 9/11 terror attacks, the Bush administration pushed for retributive justice as a means of healing a deep national trauma. This push replicated what Christina Cavedon notes was a larger shift in rhetoric away from passive terms such as bereaved and toward active terms such as survivors to describe family members of those killed. In both cases, action as a healing mechanism became the central thesis for Americans during the War on Terror. In the following years, narratives about severe trauma and masculine heroism became linked—in order for the hero’s triumph to be righteous, audiences first had to see him suffer. This paper examines the origin stories from two post-9/11 superhero film trilogies—Christopher Nolan’s Batman films and Jon Favreau’s Iron Man films—as a way of understanding how these shifts in nationalist and masculine rhetoric manifested in popular culture. At the same time, this paper advances the idea that this new, fragile, broken, and vulnerable masculinity that emerges during the War on Terror is not reflective of a progressive turn toward what R.W. Connell calls masculinities, but instead replicates a regressive masculinity that uses violence and aggression to reclaim “lost” patriarchal power.

Keywords: Superhero; 9/11; terrorism; masculinity; trauma; Batman; Iron Man; Christopher Nolan; George W. Bush; nationalism.
Origin Stories: 
Rebooting Masculinity in Superhero Films After 9/11

Owen R. Horton

Introduction

Forces of Evil

On September 11, 2001, around 8:30pm, President George W. Bush addressed the nation. In this speech, as in many subsequent speeches in the coming months and years, Bush drew distinct lines between good and evil, terror and resolve, and present and future. Perhaps most importantly, Bush highlighted the uniquely communal experience of the 9/11 attacks on the American psyche: “The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger.”1 Two elements of this sentence are intriguing: first, Bush acknowledges that 9/11 was a traumatic experience mediated by television; second, he quite instructively moves the nation from experience (“disbelief”) to trauma (“terrible sadness”) to vengeance (“unyielding anger”). That the attacks were distributed and received through mass media is crucial to understanding how an event that directly affected thousands of people could become resonant for hundreds of millions. Unlike other national tragedies, the 9/11 attacks were experienced either first-hand via live television or second-hand through continuous media repetitions of the moments of impact, explosion, and collapse. What Americans shared, then, was both a trauma through media and a trauma from media—the act of watching and re-watching the attacks was enough to cause Post-Traumatic Stress symptoms in people who lived thousands of miles away.2 Beyond acknowledging the communal experience of 9/11, Bush’s rhetorical movement instructs Americans how to move forward. I read Bush’s desire to move beyond sadness toward retaliation as a refusal to accept the trauma, and the vulnerability it represents, as real. In other words, if that terror, fear, and sadness that Americans felt could be refocused into revenge, then control could be restored and the trauma—loss, instability, helplessness—could be erased.

http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58057.
The impulse to fast-track healing through revenge is common in both post-9/11 media and in narrative. Americans were eager to move past this moment of vulnerability, sadness, and fear because it runs so antithetical to our national mythology. Christina Cavedon notes that post-9/11 rhetoric focused on the idea of families not as “bereaved” but as “survivors,” which she believes has connections to Bush’s desire to move forward:

Whereas survivor implicates an active, heroic position that speaks of resilience to the effects of the traumatic experience, bereaved summons up the notion of a passive subject [...] In a post-9/11 context, the term survivor became preferred to the term bereaved because it helped to immediately activate the already amply discussed American resilience template.3 (170)

The “resilience template” Cavedon mentions echoes in Bush’s speech: “These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve.”4 The focus on American resolve, resilience, or determination marks a shift in American self-identification. Cavedon notes that “9/11 was traumatic for Americans not directly affected by the attacks because it countered previously held beliefs of safety,”5 a belief system she calls the “myth of American invulnerability.”6 9/11 marks a drastic and seismic shift in the national mythologies of America and Americans—what was once invulnerable, safe, and powerful was now broken, damaged, and traumatized. Bush’s desire to move from trauma to revenge, then, was as much about preserving this cultural self-identification as it was with any military intelligence. Like the bereaved and survivor phrasings Cavedon mentions, the movement toward an aggressive response repositioned the United States in an active rather than passive role.

This sudden rupture of American mythos sent shockwaves through connected mythologies of identity—prominent among which is masculinity and the nation. Susan Jeffords notes that in the aftermath of both the Vietnam War and second-wave feminism, both national and masculine identities changed to accommodate new challenges to the status quo: “[Richard] Nixon’s and [Men’s Rights Activist Robert] Bly’s scenarios link the crisis of a nation with the crisis of manhood.”7 For Jeffords,
masculinity and nationalism are intertwined, in that they share the same myths and fables, an idea that is also advanced by Joane Nagel8 (“Masculinity and nationalism articulate well with one another”) and that is central to my argument here. As with Nixon’s and Bly’s responses to second-wave feminism, I believe the national response to 9/11 mirrored a restructuring and reconfiguring of masculinity: as conceptions of American as synonym for free, powerful, or invulnerable were problematized, only to ultimately be reframed through a new lens in which American became synonymous with resilient, indomitable, or communal, so too myths of masculinity were transformed.

It is through this lens of myth sharing that I will examine the cinematic reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity in America post 9/11. Connell asserts that hegemonic masculinity “is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same.”9 As such, we can only understand masculinity through the gender and power relations of a time and place. While Nagel and Connell have their own definitions, allow me to offer mine: *hegemonic masculinity* contains all the prescriptive myths of manhood that are constructed through images and representations in popular culture, in this case film. I use the term “myths” because masculinity is a cultural narrative, shaped through cultural stories and texts. These myths function to reinforce patriarchal power, and are thus largely reflective of those in power: white, heterosexual, and aggressive. Like hegemonic masculinity, *hegemonic nationalism* is the collection of narratives about American-ness. And like hegemonic masculinity, while hegemonic nationalism depends on the illusion that it is essential, eternal or “natural,” in fact both collections of narratives are actively constructed and reconstructed to meet the requirements of changing circumstances. The 9/11 attacks, then, represent a crucial moment for the investigation of nationalist and masculine myths: for a brief moment, because of the abrupt nature of the attacks and subsequent shift, we are able to see the active processes of reconfiguration, reconstruction, and reframing both American and masculine ideals. In the days, weeks, and months following 9/11, we are able to track the rebooting of masculinity much more clearly.

In this article, I will examine a particular genre of film that works through questions of power and vulnerability in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks: superhero films. Because they straddle a line between fantasy and science fiction, superhero films found themselves uniquely positioned to work through issues of national fantasy as the United States engaged in an increasingly technological war. Similarly, because the superhero mythos presents clear depictions of good and evil, strength and weakness, and power and vulnerability, these films mirrored many of the

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ideological questions Americans were struggling with at the time. Most important of all, superhero films produce and reinforce connections between masculinity, violence, and nationalism. Despite Marvel’s recent attempts to diversify casting, these films are largely about powerful white men solving their problems through aggression and brutality. Increasingly, these problems they attempt to solve revolve around masculine crisis in the face of trauma. This article will closely examine the ways in which two separate superhero trilogies—The Dark Knight trilogy and the Iron Man trilogy—worked through increasingly explicit references to modern terrorism and the philosophical struggles related to it. As this article progresses, I will make connections between the traumatic origin story and the broken super hero with the United States’ engagements domestically and overseas in the war on terror. Simultaneously, I will track the ways in which violence and aggression are presented as modes of healing. These two trends present a reconfigured masculinity, but not a new one. Rather, the myth that masculine power comes from violence situates these films within a traditional hegemonic American masculinity.

**Origin Stories**

Origin stories are a crucial part of superhero films after 9/11. The two films I focus on here—Batman Begins<sup>10</sup> (2005) and Iron Man<sup>11</sup> (2008)—both acknowledge a larger history for their heroes and explicitly link the hero to his trauma in order to understand the trauma as part of the hero. In both these films, as well as other superhero films since 9/11, superheroes are framed as not just conquering and overcoming trauma, but as owing their identities to that trauma. The traumatic origin story, I suggest, resonates because it reflects a shift in national consciousness following 9/11: the illusions of invulnerability safety were shattered, and in the aftermath nationalist and masculine rhetoric reconfigured itself around concepts of resolve, revenge, and steadfastness. The drive to reconfigure is, as it was in the case of Bush’s speech, designed to circumvent the natural traumatic response in the name of accelerated healing, but recovery cannot be occur instantaneously—only time can heal that wound.

The breakdown of a masculine mythos, arguably, was already in cinematic evidence before 9/11. “I had a bad dream”<sup>12</sup> are the only words super-man David Dunn (Bruce Willis) mumbles to his wife Audrey (Robin Wright) as he curls up in her arms and embraces her in M. Night Shyamalan’s 2000 film Unbreakable. In this moment, Dunn oozes an uncharacteristic vulnerability. Although the film chronicles his emergence as a traditional hero as he slowly discovers the supreme physical powers he possesses, this

<sup>10</sup> *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2005. Warner Bros), DVD.
<sup>12</sup> *Unbreakable*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan (2000. Touchstone Pictures), DVD.
less conventional moment is arguably his triumph. *Unbreakable’s* main action plot centers on Dunn’s discovery of, and crisis of faith in, his newfound super powers; at the same time, the film tracks a melodramatic plot wherein Dunn struggles to reunite with his estranged wife and mend his relationship with his son. His “bad dream” is the years he spent shutting Audrey out of his life and distancing himself from Joseph. Shyamalan deploys the metaphors of rebirth or waking in order to draw a sharp line between the pre-empowered and post-empowered Dunn—a line marked solely by the train crash. The crucial element of this superhero story, then, is the trauma: we cannot imagine Dunn as a superhero if he had not first suffered the trauma of the train accident. The prevalence of the origin story in post-9/11 superhero films interests me specifically because of this link between trauma and origin. In *Unbreakable*, as in other superhero films of the 21st century, the trauma is what creates the hero, the trauma is necessary for the hero to emerge, the trauma is the genesis of the hero’s story. Shyamalan makes a point to juxtapose Dunn’s unrestrained physical gifts with the paralyzing emotional fragility he experiences in his personal relationships. The juxtaposition identifies the key irony of the film: how can someone so strong, so unable to be hurt, be at the same time so broken and helpless?

While *Unbreakable* debuted in 2000, it serves as a template for the post-9/11 superhero films I track because of its nuanced treatment of masculinity and its focus on the origin story. Dunn finds the genesis of his power tied to an event of extreme trauma. So, too, does Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy (*Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight*13 (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises*14 (2012)), which has a strong focus on Batman’s origin. While previous films (Tim Burton’s *Batman*15 (1989) and *Batman Returns*16 (1992) and Joel Schumacher’s *Batman Forever*17 (1995) and *Batman and Robin*18 (1997) have merely acknowledged the trauma that caused Bruce Wayne to become Batman, only Nolan lingers on that moment. In Burton’s film, Batman is already Batman, and we see the Waynes murdered only through a brief flashback that serves a secondary plot point of identifying the Joker as the murderer. Nolan, in contrast, does not simply show Thomas and Martha Wayne’s murder, he situates the audience within their world. The majority of the first act presents a world not unlike 1980s America: Gotham has a terrible wealth disparity problem, causing crime to skyrocket. Bruce’s family is largely immune to the issues of that world—they are one of the wealthiest families in the world, and Wayne Manor sits outside the dark slums of the city. Much of the opening act tracks Bruce (Gus Lewis) as a young boy, enjoying the idyllic grounds of his estate. On those grounds, or rather in them, Bruce has his first encounter with fear: he falls into

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13 *The Dark Knight*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2008. Warner Bros), DVD.
14 *The Dark Knight Rises*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2012. Warner Bros), DVD.
15 *Batman*, directed by Tim Burton (1989. Warner Bros), DVD.
18 *Batman & Robin*, directed by Joel Schumacher (1997. Warner Bros), DVD.
a cave and is swarmed by bats. The moment is highlighted by Bruce’s inability to shake off the psychological trauma, and his newfound terror toward bats. If fear is the theme of this film, Nolan introduces the audience to it early. Here, fear is about the unknown, the shadows, and the monstrous, but it is also a fear which sticks. Bruce is not simply able to experience his fear and move on, he is haunted by it, he dreams of it, and he sees it in his waking life as well. In an attempt to get him out of the house, Bruce’s parents bring him to the opera. While there, Bruce again (re)experiences his terror when the actors of Mefistofele dress as bats and swing from wires. Bruce experiences a form of Post-Traumatic Stress, as the previous trauma he experienced with the bats now bleeds over into his waking moment, causing him to relive his nightmare in the cave.

Bruce’s inability to put the moment in the cave behind him leads directly into the next, more major psychic trauma. Nolan deviates from the traditional Batman origin story in this detail—he wants to explicitly tie the Waynes’ murder to Bruce’s fear. Because Bruce is afraid, the Waynes leave the theatre early, because they leave the theatre early they happen upon Joe Chill (Richard Brake), and despite Thomas’ (Linus Roache) attempt to diffuse the situation, Chill murders them both. As he lies on the street dying, Thomas calls Bruce over. With his last breaths, he tells Bruce “don’t be afraid,”19 re-seeding the idea that Bruce’s fear and his parents’ murder are connected. Although the film is titled Batman Begins, it may be better to think about it as “Batman beginning,” in that the film details several ongoing and interconnected events that culminate in the creation of the Dark Knight. The first trauma Bruce experiences—the flying bats—not only sets the stage for the second trauma, it is instructive for him as he moves forward. His inability to face his fear of bats leads directly into the murder of parents, and for this reason he comes to view fear—especially fear of the supernatural—as a weakness. The second trauma, and his father’s last words, prepare Bruce for the beginning of his journey to becoming Batman. Bruce learns that fear is something to be mastered. Through this masculine mastery, he becomes immune to fear and able to wield it as a weapon against those weaker.

Bruce Wayne’s journey to become Batman comes in two stages: the previously mentioned childhood stage, in which he learns about the nature of fear and discovers the need to master it, and the second stage in which he actually masters it. Nolan structures the beginning of the film so that neither stage is privileged, and instead weaves them together despite the 20-year gap that separates them. As Bruce first meets Ducard (Liam Neeson), the film flashes back to the murder; throughout his training these flashbacks will continue to tie the events of the first and second trauma to his choice to become Batman. Bruce’s initiation into Ra’s Al Ghul’s (Ken Watanabe, but also Liam Neeson) ninja group, the League of Shadows, is an initiation into fear. The skills and techniques he learns are structured in two categories: the mind and the body. His

19 Batman Begins, directed by Christopher Nolan (2005. Warner Bros), DVD.
body learns to master physical weakness and become invisible; his mind learns the strength that comes from immunity to fear and the ability inflict it. As he trains with Ducard, Bruce learns the League’s philosophies on justice, fear, and revenge. Ducard tells Bruce “your parents’ death was not your fault,” which Bruce initially receives a reassuring statement, until Ducard continues: “it was your father’s.”

While the two men swordfight on a fragile sheet of ice above a frozen lake, Ducard continues his verbal insults while Bruce defends his father. Here, Ducard assaults not just Bruce but his fears as well. In forcing Bruce to acknowledge his father’s role in his own death, Ducard presents the League’s thesis that fear is a deadly yet controllable weakness. The only cure, according to the League is “the will to act.” Thomas’ failure to act, Ducard argues, is as much a cause of his death as the man who pulled the trigger—action, then, is the only appropriate response to fear.

Beyond action, Ducard also illustrates the power of vengeance. After the sword fight, the two men sit at a campfire. Here, Nolan presents Ducard in the fatherly mentor role—he gently comforts Bruce and offers words of guidance for dealing with trauma. He is, he reveals, also familiar with extreme loss and pain: his wife was “taken” from him. Her death spurs Ducard to understand that there are evil people out there who “must be fought with hesitation, without pity.” Again, action in the face of trauma is stressed, as Ducard emphasizes the need for a quick and sure response to any assault. His last comment, “without pity,” also reveals the black-and-white nature of the League’s world view. When imagining the enemy as evil and undeserving of pity, one can escape the moral qualms that come from violent retribution. This is where Ducard’s lesson shifts slightly: he cautions Bruce that while his anger gives him “great power,” it has the potential to destroy him if left unchecked. When Bruce asks what stopped Ducard’s revenge from destroying him, Ducard tells him “vengeance.” Here, Ducard’s philosophy mirrors the Bush doctrine from the evening of September 11: the quick movement from trauma to revenge, specifically designed to take back lost power. Thomas Wayne’s refusal to act caused his own death, Bruce’s inability to avenge his parents’ death causes that trauma to fester, and the League of Shadows offers the healing salve of vengeance if Bruce can master his mind and his body.

The final act of training privileges the power of the mind, however, as Bruce must confront his fear in order to become a true ninja. In this scene, Bruce inhales a fear-inducing toxin and faces a wall of ninjas dressed identically. Among these masked men is Ducard, who periodically leaps from the shadows of anonymity to attack Bruce. As he fends off Ducard’s attacks, Bruce slowly makes his way to a chest. Ducard instructs him to embrace his worst fear, and Bruce opens the box revealing bats. As the bats

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20 *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2005. Warner Bros), DVD.
21 Ibid. Ducard tells him “your father failed to act.”
22 Ibid.
23 *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2005. Warner Bros), DVD.
24 Ibid.
swarm him, Bruce falls to the ground in shock. Nolan edits this scene with quick-cuts back to Bruce’s childhood experience in the cave—these quick-cuts last a fraction of a second and feature exaggerated volume so as to mimic the heightened sensitivity of a traumatic flashback. As he composes himself, Hans Zimmer’s soundtrack crescendos into a climax and Bruce stands, empowered. The segment only lasts a few seconds, but Nolan’s drive to link Bruce’s ninja training with the traumas of his past serves to reinforce the League of Shadows’ emphasis on the healing power of vengeance. Bruce learns the mental skills and philosophies of the League: the connection between fear and hesitation, the need for swift action and revenge as a response to an attack, and the ability to master and instill fear through shock and awe. He learns that fear and trauma are simply temporary conditions that can be brushed away with retaliation and aggression. Most of all, Bruce learns to understand his trauma and fear as necessary components of his soon-to-be-super heroic self: he cannot master his fear and use his trauma as revenge fuel if he never experiences pain and loss. This initiation and reconfiguration of values mirrors the experience of Americans after 9/11 and during the buildup to the Iraq War, as the Bush administration attempted to redirect feelings of vulnerability into aggressive responses.

Unlike Bruce Wayne, Tony Stark’s/Iron Man’s childhood was relatively tame. Certainly, as Jon Favreau’s Iron Man 25 (2008) and Iron Man 26 (2010) reveal, he has some unresolved daddy issues; however, nothing traumatic or scaring. Instead, and in contrast to the opening of Nolan’s trilogy, Iron Man begins by focusing on how great Tony’s life is. He gets to ride-along with soldiers (all of whom worship him), seduce beautiful women, and drink and party to his heart’s content, all while engaging in blatant war profiteering. The movie cold-opens into the aforementioned ride-along—Tony is in a Humvee in the desert, riding with soldiers. The ensuing chaos in the aftermath of a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) attack gives spectacle to a concept Americans were familiar with at the time: the terrifying unpredictability of the improvised explosive device (IED) attack. Here, Tony’s world becomes shattered as he takes shrapnel to the chest and begins bleeding out through his bullet-proof vest. The film immediately reverses time to 48 hours earlier. Like Batman Begins, Iron Man can only proceed with trauma after it has chronicled how idyllic Tony’s life was.

This cut back in time illustrates not just the incredible luxury Tony has, but simultaneously shows how quickly this can all be ripped apart. What we see as the film begins is an innocent Tony, unaware of the evil in the world and how close it is to him. He believes himself untouchable. Through this attack, Favreau illustrates the “invincibility myth” 27 Cavedon writes about—Americans, like Tony, believed

26 Iron Man 2, directed by Jon Favreau (2010. Paramount Pictures), DVD.
themselves “safe” from foreign terror attacks prior to 9/11, whether by wealth, power, location, or simply arrogance. Stark ascribes to these same myths about himself and enjoys a naïve life of luxury and “artistic” freedom. The realization that he can be touched, however, is not the end of the nightmare. Tony is kidnapped by the 10 Rings, an uninspired and generic take on Middle Eastern terrorists. The scene is oriented from Tony’s perspective as the 10 Rings shoot a hostage video. This video style, with a hostage on his or her knees while masked men with guns surround a single speaker reading a prepared statement, was and is instantly recognizable to Americans who have seen similar videos on television and online news.

Immediately after the hostage video, the film cuts backward 36 hours. Favreau’s choice to cut back highlights the importance of understanding the attack and subsequent hostage situation as a massive schism in this story. For both Iron Man and Batman Begins, there is a strong need to look at the trauma and understand it as momentous. Tony’s abduction is Bruce’s fall into the bat cave; his time in the cave is Joe Chill shooting Thomas and Martha Wayne. Experiences of momentous trauma would be familiar to any American who watched the twin towers coming down on live television. Like Bruce’s story, Tony’s trauma functions as a prerequisite for his training and ascension. However, in order to highlight the triumph of the ascension, Favreau chooses to illustrate the depths of Tony’s innocence prior to the trauma. As Stark parties, drinks, and beds beautiful women, Favreau positions the camera in a position of judgement. When young Bruce Wayne enjoys the posh life of wealth prior to his traumas, Nolan never asks us to consider the moral nature of that wealth; Favreau does. In these few hours, Tony does not just have fun—he skips out on responsibilities, leaves messes for his friends to clean up, and bullies his friend into shirking responsibilities as well. The camera, and the narrative, frame his naivety and innocence not as marks of invulnerability, but rather as marks of arrogance and foolishness. Tony is being punished for his immorality, but the 10 Rings are unfit arbiters. Rather, we need Tony himself to stand in judgement of his past self by remolding himself into something new and greater.

The molding (or perhaps molting) occurs in the cave. Like Bruce, Tony receives aid and mentoring from an older man, Yinsen (Shaun Toub). Like Ra’s Al Ghul, Tony’s mentor is an Orientalized stereotype: a noble Arabic doctor who also suffers under the oppressive yoke of the 10 Rings. As soon as Yinsen tells Tony about his family back home, we know this man will not make out of the cave alive. Yinsen is here to teach Tony about responsibility and morality, lessons Americans were eager for at this time. By 2008, popular opinion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had shifted dramatically. Barack Obama’s election was due in some part to his promise to end

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28 Tony runs the family business—weapons manufacturing—for which he has a prodigious talent.
29 A Pew research study found that American support for the Iraq war was at 72% in March 2003. It dropped to 47% in favor by February 2005, the year Batman Begins was released, almost even with unfavorable opinions.
these increasingly unpopular wars. The war lost support not simply because of its length, but because of the uncertainty about America’s place abroad and our moral authority in declaring war. Favreau’s need to distinguish between “good” Afghans and “bad” Afghans happens more than once in this film, but it is most pronounced during Tony’s time in the cave. Yinsen saves Tony’s life by installing a magnet that keeps bomb shrapnel from flowing into his heart. Raza (Faran Tahir), the leader of this particular terrorist cell, orders Tony to build an advanced missile.

Tony and Yinsen formulate a plot: instead of building a missile, they will instead build a weaponized suit of armor to help Tony escape. The plot relies heavily on the incompetence of the terrorists: we have to believe that they are incapable of distinguishing between a giant robot and a missile. Certainly, this extension of the “good” Afghans “bad” Afghans split relies on notions of Afghanistan as a primitive and nomadic cultural Other. Favreau highlights this presentation by juxtaposing shots of Tony and Yinsen working on the Iron Man armor with shots of four terrorists huddling over a campfire outside. This is a well-funded and well-connected terrorist organization, with enough clout to acquire Stark Corporation military weapons and missiles, and yet their facilities lack even the most rudimentary heating systems. The primitive terrorists also allow Favreau to manipulate the mise-en-scene to further distinguish Yinsen as a “good” Afghani: while the foot-soldiers wear ragged clothes and mismatched military gear, Yinsen—their prisoner—wears a three-piece suit, still relatively clean despite his surroundings.

Having effectively marked Yinsen as a noble among the savages, Favreau works to set up his heroic sacrifice. After Yinsen tells Tony he will see his family30 “when [he] leave[s] this place,”31 he turns the statement back on Tony. Tony reveals that he has no family, and Yinsen replies “so you are a man who has everything, and nothing.”32 Yinsen means to call into question Tony’s conception of wealth, but he also draws a line between passive (accumulating inherited wealth) and active (having a family or loved ones to fight for) lifestyles. Part of Tony’s training, beyond the creation of the MK1 Iron Man armor, is the shift from a passive empowered role to an active one. He needs to use his power, or groups like the 10 Rings will turn it against him. The hostage situation teaches Tony that his work and production has been corrupted and stolen, but it also gives him something to fight for and against: he is forced into a proximity to a terrorism he thought himself safe from. Like Bruce Wayne, Tony is touched by trauma and finds himself more aware, more resolute, and more prepared to deal with the threats that had once been invisible to him. Now, knowing the fear of victimization and understanding

By 2008, favorable opinions accounted for just 38% of the total. The decline was both drastic and consistent for both wars. Source: http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/

30 Who we later learn has been killed
the evil of his foes, Tony can emerge from the cave with the resolve and purpose necessary to fight this great evil.

In the flashback before Tony leaves for Afghanistan, Tony is cornered by a reporter. During her line of question, she brings up his war profiteering and the financial windfalls his family has enjoyed from American military campaigns abroad. Defensively, he cites the great contributions military technology has had domestically in the forms of medical science and automated farming. He goes on to emphasize Howard Stark’s role in winning World War II, saying that his father had a saying: “Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy.”33 The incredible size of his phallic “stick” is a great source of pride for Tony, and certainly the events that follow are as much about regaining that stick as they are about safety or peace. Tony’s stick-measuring contest with the terrorists is a one-sided battle, but only after he emerges from the cave and reclaims his power for himself. Meanwhile, his above quote both infantilizes and empowers himself: referring to his father’s power and prestige situates him as the son living under the patriarchal shadow, while his implicit belief that his stick is the biggest presents himself as untouchable. Tony’s thought process here is an indictment of the American invulnerability mythology Cavedon cites: he naively believes that his safety is a birthright. Just like 9/11, Tony’s kidnapping at the beginning of the film is a shocking and traumatic event that forces him to reconsider this personal narrative.

Conclusion

Strength through Struggle

Both Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark experience extreme trauma on the way to their rise into superhero-dom. What I find interesting about their stories in the desire by both Nolan and Favreau to link the trauma to the power. In Batman’s case, trauma presents him with drive necessary to discipline his mind and body in order to overcome fear. For Iron Man, the trauma shakes him from his idyllic life and awakens him to the necessity of action. These films, emerging out of an America struggling to rebuild its sense of identity after 9/11, present trauma as a prerequisite to strength—thus crafting a world in which the attacks were merely Part One of an ascension. At the same time, these films fixate on the need to negotiate damaged masculinities resulting from that same trauma. Masculinity and Nationalism are linked in these films as both men combat both foreign forces and father figures in their attempt to rebuild themselves post-trauma. This rebuilt masculinity, however, remains conservative and hegemonic in its mythology—the films present violence as only method available for masculine power and healing. Thus, just as Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark find themselves forever

33 Ibid.
changed by their struggles, so was the American national mythos rebooted to reflect a strength of character in surviving trauma.

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With Regard to Masculinity:  
On Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*

Tamás Tukacs

**Abstract**

The study looks into Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 movie *Rear Window* from the aspect of gender roles and visuality. More specifically, it seeks an answer to the question of the relationship between the main preoccupation of the temporarily invalid protagonist, Jeff, that is, surveillance and peeping, and his masculinity. The study first reviews the main tendencies of the movie’s reception, the main thematic centres of the film, and then wants to take sides in the question whether this Hitchcock work attempts to propagate a new, active, emancipated female ideal, or just the contrary, it strengthens traditional, patriarchal and paternalistic gender positions.

**Keywords:** Hitchcock, *Rear Window*, male gaze, masculinity, masculinity in crisis, impotence, gender
With Regard to Masculinity:
On Hitchcock’s Rear Window

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Introduction

Critical Reception

Rear Window has been treated along the lines of three main critical interpretations. First, several critical interpretations raise the possibility of a self-reflective allegorical reading. In this view, Rear Window is a sort of meta-commentary on the process of filmic art and filmmaking.¹ This reading is valid, for Jeff’s windows, on which the blinds are rolled up and down at the beginning and end of the film, respectively, suggesting a strong theatrical analogy, frame the movie. The “curtain goes up” at the beginning, starting the show in which Jeff (and later Lisa, and his nurse, Stella, and finally Jeff’s friend, Inspector Doyle) first watches and then actively participates. Neither Jeff nor Lisa remain mere spectators, then, of the events in the opposite block. The second group of critical narratives examine the parallels hidden in the film. Rear Window is a particularly well-composed movie (perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the lodgers is a composer who finishes his piece exactly by the end of the movie). Rear Window does not exclusively build on sight but sounds penetrating from the street and opposite apartments play an equally important role. Murray Pomerance points out that, for instance, while Jeff is making a phone call, watching Miss Torso, the ballerina, one can hear a fragment from Leonard Bernstein’s ballet Fancy Free (1944). In Bernstein’s work, three sailors are discovering New York and make the acquaintance of girls.² This is exactly what the male protagonist is unable to do, being tied to a wheelchair. Or when Miss Lonelyheart is attempting to turn off the advances of an excited young man, the sounds of the song “Mona Lisa,” composed by one of the characters, can be heard, referring to Jeff’s girlfriend Lisa.³ In general, these and similar such scenes offer intriguing parallels to Jeff’s and Lisa’s situation.

The third, and last, group of critical readings tend to discuss the characters’ gender positions and identities, and, in connection with that, the importance of visuality. This is the critical reading I would like to dwell upon in this paper, suggesting

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a connection between masculinity and visuality. According to John Fawell, to regard Hitchcock as a misogynist director is a widespread notion, which might be justified by films like Psycho (1960), Marnie (1964) or Frenzy (1972). He, however, refutes this claim, saying that Hitchcock is “unambiguous, sometimes even vicious, broadside in the male psyche and male sexual insecurity [...]”, while his filmic art is “a kind of ode to female wisdom and style, an appreciation of women that avoids condescension or paternalism.” In this reading, Rear Window is an excellent example of masculine sexual insecurity and the reversal of traditional gender roles. In my reading I intend to challenge Fawell’s treatment of Hitchcock’s films as odes “to female wisdom and style,” pointing out the director’s underlying patriarchal agenda behind Rear Window.

Context and Background

To be able to treat the connection of masculinity and visuality in Rear Window, some context and background needs to be outlined first. The film is not without precedents in discussing the relationship between the two concepts mentioned above. In the 1950s and 60s, several literary and cinematic texts were authored that tackled the dilemma of symbolic male impotence, often related to visuality and usually embedded in a crime/thriller plot. The protagonist of Michael Powell’s Peeping Tom (1960), for instance, the subject of his father’s bizarre psychological experiments, feels a perverted desire to record the suffering and the agony of women whom he tortures. Similar aspects are treated in John Fowles’s novel The Collector (1963), whose main character, Clegg, kidnaps the object of his love, Miranda, and keeps her locked in his country cottage. In this novel, an emphasised, though not unambiguous, contrast is suggested between Clegg’s hobby, photography, and Miranda’s preoccupation, painting, hinting at the inauthenticity of the former. Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blow-Up (1966) features Thomas, the cynical fashion photographer, who objectifies women with his camera, and, by chance, discovers the traces of a murder on a photo he shot. In this regard, Hitchcock’s movie may be seen as a precursor of an important thematic element in 1960s film and fiction (which, of course, resurfaces later on as well), embedding the motif of photography in the thriller plot.

The works mentioned above are not only linked by common themes and generic characteristics but also by the thematic thread in which the male protagonist establishes a contradictory relationship with objectified women through the technical means of visuality. On the other hand, these works also exhibit a crisis of gender positions, particularly in regard to masculinity, combining the representation of this crisis with a crime plot. All of the male characters use cameras to compensate for their warped or

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injured masculinity, or what they perceive to be as such. However, Hitchcock’s movie, together with the works just referenced, looks critically at masculinity, particularly its unstable and insecure nature. According to Brian Baker, “masculinity has been periodically in crisis over the last hundred years or so.” 5 He mentions three distinct waves (the end of the 19th century, the 1950s and the 1990s) when the structures of hegemonic masculinity seemed to be in decline, which, he claims, is apparent in films like Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959) and *Psycho* (1960), and more recently in movies like *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* (both 1999). 6 However, the phenomenon of injured masculinity was not only typical at this distinct moment but it is relevant throughout most of the twentieth century. The questioning of previously taken-for-granted forms of gender differences was given a new impetus by the horrible experiences of the war, when traditional concepts of heroism, self-sacrifice, patriotism and virility were undermined both by the actual events and the subsequent cultural and ideological changes. Some 80,000 cases of “shell-shock” had been treated in the units of the Royal Army Medical Corps in Britain and some 200,000 veterans received pensions for nervous disorders after the war. 7 Cases of shell shock were initially explained as the lack of masculinity, courage, stamina or patriotism. Later, due to the massive scale of cases, traditional concepts of masculinity fell to question, as the identity and subsequent performance could no longer hold. The discovery of “male hysteria” in Freudian psychoanalysis, or the symptom complex of shell shock, as it was called at the time, proved that the traditional dichotomies of sensitive/irrational female and sensible/rational male could no longer be supported, which led to a profound change in the image of masculinity identified with stamina and strength. The seemingly strong but tormented heroes Hemingway or Scott Fitzgerald or the gender insecurity of T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock sufficiently attest to the fundamental alterations in the masculine ideal.

*Rear Window*, on the other hand, was made in an era that seemed to go back to a more traditional concept of manhood. The decline of hegemonic masculinity might have seemed valid until the Second World War, when the very historical circumstances necessitated the backlash towards a more virile ideal. The second war did not appear to have produced the same devaluation of masculinity as the first one; on the contrary, the war produced the image of the kind of hero, who, in the American context at least, carries on his civilian occupation in a suburban home in a strongly traditional family set-up with a partner as full-time housewife. In the British context, the 1950s is the era of the “angry young men” with their powerful assertion of gender identities, misogynist and xenophobic tendencies. All in all, the 1950s, the era when *Rear Window*

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6 Ibid., 65.
7 Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics.* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 1.
was shot, again seems a period when a more traditional idea of masculinity was dominating the cultural scene – as it is visible in the representation of Jeff as a war veteran and adventurer, and Lisa as complying, obedient girlfriend.

The notions of watching and surveillance also appeared to have played a significant part in this reinforcement of the masculine ideal in the period referred to. It was of paramount importance in the Cold War context to guard the American nation state against the infiltration of communism and “to fail in producing hegemonic masculinity is to open the floodgates to communism.”

Therefore, as Baker argues, it was necessary to (re-)create the image of “armoured masculinity” in order to withstand the penetration, infiltration or “flood” of the red menace; and the very metaphorics of the process (solid vs. liquid, firm vs. fluid) leads one back to the anti-feminist rhetoric of anti-modernist critical narratives, associating femininity with uncontrollable movement to be contained or resisted.

One possible reading, then, of *Rear Window* is to analyse it as a gendered allegory of anti-communist tendencies of the 1950s—related to visuality. According to Walter Metz, the main organising principle of the film is the ideology of McCarthysm and national security policy. Jeff’s ambiguous gender position is perhaps best highlighted by the fact that he is wounded by compulsive masculinity, and at the same time works to maintain this position through a sort of reconnaissance of the other side of the street, which calls attention to the insecurity of his masculinity. Jeff may be seen a “McCarthyst” subject inasmuch as his surveillance of the activities of the neighbouring apartments is based in the logic that the safety of the United States is prone to Communist subversion at its weakest point, that is, in the private setting of the family. That is why it is needful to watch every minute transgression and eliminate it.

An equally relevant point is the tradition of English Puritanism, which devalues the subject in relation to the community and treats it as the performer of community will. Puritanism requires conformity of the individual, so the uncovered sins and vices must be retaliated because what is at stake is the future of the whole community. Thus, the protagonist is presented as a WASP anti-communist masculine ideal of the 1950s—in theory. Similarly to the two Hitchcock films mentioned above, *Rear Window* intends to cover those fissures in this masculine ideal whose precedents go back to the period of modernism. While seeing Jeff as a powerful masculine subject strongly in control of what is happening around him through surveillance, critical readings generally call attention to his symbolic impotence. The title of the present article refers to a problematic relationship of surveillance and masculinity. The paper attempts to answer the question as to what extent we can speak about the crisis of masculinity and what effects it has on gender roles. In this paper, I am going to argue that contrary to the

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seemingly critical plot of examining the crisis of masculinity, Hitchcock really uses the screen as a “screen” to cover the underlying crisis with a paternalistic, pre-modern and traditional representation of masculinity that objectifies the other sex by taking pleasure in voyeurism.

**Masculinity and Visuality**

The film suggests that Jeff’s position is that of the weak, inactive, constrained and symbolically impotent male, while the female characters surrounding him, especially Lisa and Stella, are active, creative and have a stronger identity. Thus, *Rear Window* appears to be an example of the reversal of traditional gender positions—a sort of critique on the return of masculine ideals in the 1950s. Jeff’s symbolic impotence is undeniably manifested in several ways. We learn, in the course of the movie, that he is supposed to be some kind of archetypal heroic male ideal, since he takes photographs in distant places, living in Spartanal circumstances; he is also a Second World War veteran, who served as a photographer on a reconnaissance aeroplane; and the accident that made him temporarily invalid took place during a car race. (It is profoundly ironic that he was not wounded in action but in civilian life.) Now he is trying to compensate for this lost masculinity in diverse ways: staying with classic Freudian reading, with various prostheses like his “absurdly phallic camera lens,” and flashbulbs in the closing scenes, which he uses to blind Thorwald, who is intruding into his flat. It is also significant that he is unable to open the wine bottle and the waiter. As Susan White claims, Jeff does not act but reacts.

The most important means replacing his masculinity are, besides his camera, the voyeuristic investigation process that he carries out by the surveillance of the house opposite. A gender-based approach to the film inevitably calls up Laura Mulvey’s study, “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,” in which she mentions, among others, Hitchcock’s films to illustrate the process in the course of which the male gaze objectifies women: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly.” What fantasies does Jeff exactly project onto female characters and his environment in general through his male gaze? It would be simple to argue, for instance, that Thorwald’s horrible deed, killing and dismembering his wife, is a projection of the sceptical, insecure and impotent Jeff, who is trying to eschew Lisa’s entireties and attempts to get rid of her because she is simply too perfect for him. It is intriguing that Jeff gives women names

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11 Ibid., 189.

[91]
whom she sees referring to their body parts.\textsuperscript{13} That is why the ballerina becomes Miss Torso and the solitary woman on the ground floor Miss Lonelyheart, and it is also significant that the amateur female sculptor on the ground floor is making a statue in the film in the style of Henry Moore that has no arms or head. These examples could be seen as manifestations of Jeff’s hidden desires with which he secretly wishes to identify with Thorwald.

Tania Modleski, however, points out Mulvey’s theory does not work perfectly in the case of \textit{Rear Window}. She argues that Lisa is not an objectified, passive character. On the contrary, he is the one who is active and refuses to keep a voyeuristic distance from the “text” but leaves the flat and merges into the “screen” studied by Jeff. It is generally women who take an active role around Jeff. Stella, the home-care nurse comes and goes, watches the trailer, Lisa orders dinner, and they together invade the block opposite. Meanwhile, Inspector Doyle is not willing to start an investigation and refuses to enter the suspect’s flat (which he justifies by legal scruples). Thus, \textit{Rear Window} seems not to be a drama of active/male gaze and passive/female objectified body. On the contrary, it appears to be a conflict of inverted gender roles.

\textit{Jeff’s Melancholic View}

But let us have a closer look into what is exactly taking place in the film. A careful scrutiny of the movie reveals that instead of a “McCarthyst” subject, Jeff is essentially melancholic subject, a sort of symbolic figure of modernity and fragmentation. What connects this to his symbolic impotence is that he strives to put an end to the fragmented world around him, wishing to identify with Stella. To accomplish this aim, he is going to use his girlfriend, Lisa, whom he can watch unrestrained in a voyeuristic manner on the “screen” of the opposite house. A strong sense of fragmentation is already present in the starting few shots of the film. The block opposite reminds one of a “dollhouse,” transmitting a feeling of completeness and unity,\textsuperscript{14} but in my view, the effect is just the opposite: the building divided into separate flats narrate parallel stories, just like on a divided screen, that do not communicate with each other, except for at the end, when Miss Lonelyheart goes over to the composer’s. Another very literal example of fragmentation is Jeff’s broken leg. Inscribed on the cast reads: “Here lie the broken bones of LBJ.” The sentence carries a double meaning, for the verb “lie” refers to Jeff’s passivity, even symbolic death, and, on the other hand, conveys the meaning of “falsehood” or “deception.” The opening scenes carry on with the motif of fragmentation: we can see Jeff’s broken camera, then the focus moves on to a photo of the broken car that caused Jeff’s injury, and next we


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 75
see samples of photos that Jeff made during his travels. The shot stops at a picture of Lisa, a negative record (a private, framed picture in Jeff’s room) and finally, the positive picture closes the shot on a magazine cover, suggesting a break and contrast between the private and public selves of Lisa.

This fragmented world is a filmic representation of a melancholic perspective. One suffering from the illness of melancholy cannot help looking at the world as a heap of fragments and ruins.\textsuperscript{15} The melancholic is simply attuned to the world differently. Their inner melancholy is not projected onto the world and the external world is not the cause of their melancholy. Melancholy reflects “being-in-the-world” in which the self and the world are not strictly separated from each other, which is why it is impossible to talk about “melancholy mood” as an object.\textsuperscript{16} The one who is sick of melancholy is simply not at home in this world, they lack the idea of a homely, cosy space, consequently the world appears to them as uncanny. The melancholic characters are deviant subjects who occupy a mysterious social non-place,\textsuperscript{17} rejecting the socially sanctioned norms of behaviour. They are sorts of passive rebels, as if floating in society as ghosts.\textsuperscript{18} The cause of their melancholy is a split or rupture that renders the normal working of memory impossible. In a melancholic world, any concept of unity or completeness is doomed to fail, because a gap always appears that undermines the intention of totalizing.

Jeff may be seen as a melancholic subject, for (even if temporarily) he is an outsider, pushed to the margins of society, disrupting the normal codes of socially sanctioned manners, trespassing the limits of others’ right to privacy. He looks at the world voyeuristically and starts to fabricate uncanny stories about the neighbours. Besides, he is a deviant subject and rejects the liaison with Lisa, consciously differentiating himself from the average upper-middle-class life represented by her. He travels to distant places alone, which is incompatible with the comfortable life that Lisa has. Thirdly, a rupture indeed takes place in his life (the accident) that forces him to stay passive in the wheelchair. Finally, a very obvious point may be mentioned that proves his melancholic disposition: he is a bored, disillusioned, cynical character who starts peeping in order to overcome his ennui.

The connection between melancholia and photography could be unravelled with the help of certain classic studies about photography (Barthes’ 	extit{Camera Lucida} or Susan Sontag’s 	extit{On Photography}) and these theories could presumably work in connection with films mentioned at the beginning of the paper that feature actual scenes of taking

\textsuperscript{15} See, e.g. FöldényiLászló. 	extit{Melankólia. [Melancholy]} (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1992.)
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 265.
photographs. An important difference here is that Jeff does not take snapshots but only uses his bulky camera lens as a spyglass. The melancholy disposition can be highlighted in this case with reference to the thriller/crime plot. The detective (who, to go back to the original meaning of the word, looks, watches, detects) carries out work that is compatible with the basic trope of melancholia, that is, metonymy. What usually happens is that the detective collects traces connected to the perpetrator metonymically, and going back in time, he constructs a coherent narrative from these traces, which leads to the solution. The goal of Jeff’s activities, then, is to fabricate a linear story to fill in gaps and ruptures and do away with fragmentation presented at the beginning of the film. The telling names also reinforce this idea; the female names, Stella and Lisa, suggest stability, unity and coherence, while his name (L. B. Jefferies) most often appears in a shortened, fragmented way (LBJ or Jeff), besides that of Thorwald, a reference to “hammer” and “wood,” also conveying a sense of disintegration and violence.

The connection of melancholia and metonymy is supplemented by another, related, trope, allegory. *Rear Window* may be regarded as an allegorical metacommentary of film making itself. However, the melancholic gaze that sees the world as a collection of fragments and runs, ultimately, creates an allegorical image. The literal meaning of allegory is “to speak otherwise”; in more concrete terms, the effect of the trope can be traced back to the oscillating movement of the interpretation of two superimposed images (the literal and the allegorical meaning). When Jeff—to prove that Thorwald has buried something in the garden and that is why the flowers now seem shorter—uses slides to compare the garden as it was a few days ago and as it is now is the point when he melancholic-allegorizing gaze achieves its full effect. This is the moment when temporal gaps are filled, the fissure between the past and the present ceases to exist, and with the help of two superimposed images, fragmentation is replaced by “the whole picture.” The metonymic gaps, therefore, are replaced by metaphorical identification.

This leads us back to the gender coding of the movie mentioned above. Several studies point out the parallel between the bedridden Mrs Thorwald and the passivity of Jeff, and together with this, the symbolic similarity of Thorwald and Lisa. Both are active, serving the passive other with food. At the same time, the problem of whether to or to what extent can the active Thorwald be seen as a projection of the fears and desires of the invalid Jeff is unavoidable to raise; Page, for that matter, directly describes Jeff as

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an “isolated paranoiac.”

Jeff’s temporary invalidity, his phobia of marriage, and his reluctance from establishing a proper relationship with Lisa opens ways to interesting speculations. Jeff’s suggested identification with Thorwald reveals that Jeff does not intend to establish a conventional love relationship with Lisa but wants to use her as the object of his fantasies. The plot of the film might be summarised in a way that Jeff’s vision is basically infantile inasmuch as he desires the position of a strong and experienced mother figure, Stella, who is able to construct coherent plots. In order to fulfil this desire, he wishes to exclude the brutal father figure (Thorwald), the allegory of fragmentation and castration. Motivated by a sense of omnipotence and fantasy and the pleasant feeling that the voyeur sees all but they are invisible, he attempts to fulfil this desire with voyeurism. The turning point in this narrative is when Thorwald, the menacing father figure, looks over to Jeff’s flat into his camera; in other words, when the childish voyeur is caught in the act and is threatened by symbolic castration (his camera being taken away that stands for his injured masculinity). When Thorwald breaks into Jeff’s flat, he blinds him with flashbulbs (another reference to the Oedipal plot), but here he still remains invisible for the father’s gaze. Nevertheless, Jeff uses Lisa to fulfil his desire, who is already a mere spectacle (her name alludes to Mona Lisa, which only exists as an image). Lisa, on the other hand, is willing to play that part in Jeff’s fantasy.

The crisis of Jeff’s masculinity is thus manifested by the fact that he is unable to find connections between isolated, fragmented details. It might seem a minute detail, but at the beginning of the film we learn that the experienced Stella is actually a good detective (at least that is what she claims): he asserts that she was able to foretell the Great Depression only because the CEO of General Motors produced psychosomatic symptoms, and she argued that that could only mean serious financial and economic problems. In other words, Stella was able to fabricate a coherent narrative based on metonymic signs. This is the position and knowledge that Jeff craves, and one of the main motives why he begins to assemble a story from the signs he observes. Female characters in the film, especially Stella and Lisa (but also Miss Torso) are characterised by perfectness and completeness.

Jeff justifies his reluctance to marry Lisa by claiming that she is too perfect for her. His desire, on the other hand, is a perfectly rounded narrative free of fissures and gaps, and he uses Lisa to construct such a narrative.

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The Object of Male Gaze

The turning point of the film is when Lisa starts to show interest in the events in the opposite house and says to Jeff: “Tell me everything you saw and what you think it means.” So the woman identifies herself with Jeff’s perspective (she wants to see what he sees), and accepts the interpretations offered by Jeff. Lisa does not appear as the counterpoint of the impotent Jeff, and *Rear Window* does not undermine the active/male and passive/female dichotomy by featuring Lisa not only as a passive spectator of events but as an active agent. Jeff uses Lisa, even putting her life at risk in order to construct a coherent narrative and master Stella’s position. He realizes his fantasies through Lisa, and she seems to be a partner in this. When she is not yet convinced about the truth of Jeff’s theories, Lisa shuts the blinds and forces him to look at her, saying, “There is nothing to see.” The message behind this sentence is “look at me, not at what Thorwald is doing.” That is, she exposes herself to Jeff’s male gaze consciously. When she offers an explanation preferred by Jeff as well, the man becomes friendlier and invites her into his lap, whereas earlier, even when kissing, he constantly had the murder case in his mind.

In other words, Lisa becomes visible and a spectacle for Jeff when she finally is willing to participate in his attempt at constructing a story. Lisa does make attempts at objectifying herself in front of Jeff’s male gaze: she takes out her nightwear from her tiny suitcase and appears dressed in it in the doorway, offering herself symbolically to Jeff. The most obvious example of Lisa’s self-objectification is when she enters Thorwald’s flat and plays her role in front of the man as a spectator. By putting on Mrs Thorwald’s wedding ring she sends obvious visual signs to Jeff, besides identifying herself with the passive victim. At that point it seems as if Jeff were only watching an exciting thriller with Lisa in the leading role. She is nothing else than mere spectacle, which is not surprising, taking into consideration that by profession she is a fashion model, that is, a simulacrum, a prey to a myriad of male gazes.

The conclusion of the film is also significant from this aspect. Although the majority of critical interpretations emphasise that Jeff, after his other leg also breaks as a result of an almost fatal encounter with Thorwald, acquires into a more passive and vulnerable position, while Lisa is reading *Beyond the High Himalayas*, a travelogue by William O. Douglas, published in 1952, a presumably very masculine volume. So apparently Jeff becomes more “feminine” and Lisa more “masculine.” But as soon as Jeff drifts off to sleep, she puts down her book and starts to skim through (not read) *Bazaar*, a fashion magazine. That is to say, she remains exposed to the male gaze (although Jeff does not see her at the moment), while Jeff becomes almost a complete invalid, at the mercy of caring women.

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22 *Rear Window*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1954; Universal Studios, 2007), DVD.
23 Ibid.
Conclusion

Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* has been mainly looked at as an example of the crisis of masculinity, revealing the protagonist’s symbolic impotence. In my reading, the film is far from undermining traditional gender roles and Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. Just the contrary, the film enacts Mulvey’s narrative with its strongly conservative, patriarchal and paternalistic overtones. Contrary to what the movie might suggest at first, that is, putting forward a claim for an active, conscious femininity, by suggesting a reversal of the traditional binarity of active/male and passive/female, Jeff actually objectifies Lisa, rendering her a spectacle for Jeff’s Oedipal fantasies. The male protagonist, representing fragmentation, essentially desires the position of the experienced Stella, the symbol of unity, and wants to project his fantasy of solving the murder case by putting Lisa on the “screen” of the opposite house, enjoying her performance. *Rear Window* seems an example of the crisis of masculinity – in the context of the works by Powell, Fowles and Antonioni – but also as proof of Hitchcock’s hidden paternalistic agenda to be “screened” by the illusion that this particular film is “a kind of ode to female wisdom and style.”

Bibliography


With Regard to Masculinity: 
On Hitchcock’s Rear Window
– Tamás Tukacs


Forging the Boy

by

Andrew P. Dillon

I’m a man, forged American. Learned to hurl cunt, faggot, and fat-ass fast enough to stay on the simpler side of boyhood.

Lanky in high school—6'2", 150#—but I could eat twelve burgers in a sitting. Enough red meat to prove I had balls.

Stopped shaving in college for something rough to cover my smooth Greek cheeks. Twisted open Bud Heavy bottles with forearm skin.

To drink with Dad and Chris, carried a flask and forced bottom-shelf rye every night after 10, July 2011, ’til I could stomach oak-aged mash & malt.

By 25, knew how to growl and pound my chest—earned the nickname MadBear. Used my dick as a barometer for loneliness, those dark years after.

Now, I squat stacked steel to feel like a man. Measure testosterone in 20kg plates to negate that weak teenager. I’m forging the boy who can climb—despite depression, anxiety, the cyclical desire to die—through this world, in this skin, with this porous heart he’s not supposed to expose.

I’m a man, forged American: bearded, cockstrong, double Rebel Yell neat, hold the door for any woman, but brother don’t look me in the eye.

See how broad my chest? How stiff my jaw? Hope that leather jacket’s tight enough to brace your spine. Don’t let your girl see me make you a bitch.

I’m a man. I can do this all night. All my life. Another step up the ladder. Another sad motherfucker with my foot in his face.

Instructions on Being a Sea Creature

by

Allen Braden

If you are a whale, your mouth should be in your forehead, not to mention your blowhole gasping exclamations nearby! If not, then you may need gills folded like taffy and oxygenated. Besotted, Pliny the Elder declared a dolphin’s tongue better than those of most humans of his acquaintance. You should be so lucky. Your eyes may migrate, fleeing the symmetry of your face or you may never sleep again. Say good bye to opposable thumbs. On the other hand (so to speak), you get to spawn thousands. Practice lurking, breaching, crushing ship hulls like cellophane. Who else finds their way by singing?

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Coastal Note Inland

by

Allen Braden

The unshaven have a place here too.
Sirens Bar lures a drunk inside
only to cut him off. Salt air sobers
the rest of us to sip or use a straw.
Off Quincy Dock, jellyfish school
as if Planned Parenthood
dumped all its discontinued sponges,
all its expired condoms into the sea.
Innocence cartwheels along damp sand.
Are you alone reading this?
The tide rolls pasta out of kelp
along Dungeness Spit.
A doe and her spotty twins
circle my cabin twice a day.
All right out of some brochure.
Reminders I belong somewhere.
Are apricots still on the trees there?
Market steady to a nickel higher?
Cash comes ashore in a ship’s hold.
No chance of rainfall today.
Tomorrow looks doubtful too.

previously published in Talking River Review
Borders of the body
by
Shawn Bodden

The jackets are more than moth-eaten, 
having lain in a pile in a corner 
for the long while my grandfather 
has struggled to remember our names.

They seem to carry some history
sewn in their sleeves,
although we all know his habit 
of pillaging the flea markets,
gathering all the strange appendages, 
instruments and unwanted fabrics 
simply to have them.

The green tweed draws my eye, 
and I wonder when he wore it last, if ever,
if maybe another man’s family didn’t know 
what to do with this shape of a man, 
the ghost of his hands, the borders 
of his body after he himself had passed.

My grandfather saw something in that jacket 
when he haggled it free from the clothes rack, 
but now my father holds the coat close to his own face 
struggling to find signs of someone. Musculature 
turned macramé; our farmer gone to yarn; 
he tugs a thread from the edge of the pocket, 
and I just hope he’ll leave it—doesn’t dare put it on.
Femme Poem #2
by
Allison Blevins

Every woman I’ve loved is a man. Women who shake their hair like men, palm my lower back, wear their jeans low.

All that I love is delicate, petals on a bough: a strong tongue in a female mouth, men’s trousers on curved hips in a men’s bathroom stall.

I want to say this is masculinity done right. This is a hand on my throat without the anticipation of being crushed beneath the buckle of a belt . . . my father’s belts. Neat. Belts in black and brown rows. I want to say I love a woman as a man in a woman’s body, a woman in a body made hard and lean, a body made to glow in the reflection of all the lamplight eyes glaring as she walks down the street. I fear you will hear:

I want a man. I just know what I want—boxer briefs hugging a woman’s legs, musk, and the stink of armpits I want to lose myself in.
Mammy's Boy

by

Jack Little

His feet sopped wet from weekend football  
she cooked Sunday roast
ice sheets of windy slate on the sidelines  
it’s five against one
  “I’m moving to Mexico”, I said
What footy teams are there?  
A nervous look
What do they eat?  
A supportive smile
  “I’m not coming home for Christmas”
  We understand.
His love gruff and kind  
My knowledge shallow  
Your vulnerabilities are mine
Her love a blanket  
I selfishly ignore?
NYC Sidewalk Preacher

by

Gail Braune Comorat

I’m not curing despair, just as the hooker strolling beside me is not an island with ocean liners wrecked on her shores. I see how she accustoms herself to the fringed shadows beneath these slick heat clouds. This last year she survived with memorized psalms. She wound them like pieces of red string around her ravaged hands. And her despair? It still saves her, it still looks like a hole in her sky.
Contributors
(in alphabetical order)

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Allen Braden is the author of A Wreath of Down and Drops of Blood (University of Georgia) and Elegy in the Passive Voice (University of Alaska/Fairbanks). He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and from Artist Trust of Washington State. His poems have been anthologized in The Bedford Introduction to Literature, Poetry: An Introduction, Best New Poets and Spreading the Word: Editors on Poetry. He teaches at Tacoma Community College in Washington State and volunteers for AWP's Writer to Writer mentorship program.

Allison Blevins

Allison Blevins received her MFA at Queens University of Charlotte and is a Lecturer for the Women's Studies Program at Pittsburg State University and the Department of English and Philosophy at Missouri Southern State University. Her poetry has appeared in such journals as the minnesota review, Sinister Wisdom, Pilgrimage, and Josephine Quarterly. She lives in Joplin, Missouri, with her wife and two children.

Andrea Waling

Andrea Waling is a research officer in the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society the Australian at La Trobe University, as well as an on-going affiliate of the School of Social Sciences at Monash University. Her research interests include theoretical and empirical examinations of men and masculinity, and investigations of sex and gender in the media. A new addition to ARCSHS, she has been brought on board to work on "Muscling Up: Australian Men, Sexualisation and Body Image Enhancement" (2015-2017), an ARC Discovery project with Prof Gary Dowsett, Dr Duane Duncan, and Dr Steven Angelides that seeks to investigate the body image-enhancing practices of Australian men in relation to broader issues of masculinity and embodied subjectivity in late modernity. Outside of ARCSHS, Andrea is a CI on a series of collaborations. She's working with Dr James Roffee (Monash University) and Dr Bianca Fileborn (ARCSHS) investigating LGBTIQ experiences of safety (and unsafety), and with David Fildes (AHSRI) exploring the experiences of CALD men in Men’s Sheds.
Andrew P. Dillon

Andrew P. Dillon earned a BA in English from the University of Tennessee, where he also graduated as a member of the inaugural MFA class in 2014. He has been nominated for the Best New Poets anthology and a Pushcart Prize, and was awarded a scholarship to the Virginia Center for Creative Arts workshop in Auvillar, France. His poetry is forthcoming or has appeared most recently in Review Americana, Potomac Review, One Trick Pony Review, Connotation Press, and Beecher’s. His poem in this issue is representative of his recent turn toward writing poems centered on social consciousness and social justice. He once taught ESL in Seoul, South Korea and Freshman Composition at the University of Tennessee, but currently works as a technical writer in Knoxville, TN.

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Gail Braune Comorat's poems have appeared in Grist, Adanna, Gargoyle, Mudfish, and The Widows’ Handbook. Her chapbook, Phases of the Moon, was published by Finishing Line Press. She’s twice received fellowships from the Delaware Division of the Arts for her poetry. A founding member of Rehoboth Beach Writers’ Guild, she spends part of the year teaching poetry in Delaware. She’s happiest in winter when she travels to Mazatlán.

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Jack Little is a British-Mexican poet, editor, translator and primary school teacher based in Mexico City. Jack is a fluent Spanish speaker and in 2015, he participated in the International Book Fair in Mexico City. He is the founding editor of The Ofi Press, an online cultural journal with an international focus now in its 46th edition. Jack will publish a series of e-books of young Mexican poets in translation throughout 2016. In 2014 he was an associate editor for the Enemies Anthology, a collaborative project between poets from London and Mexico City. His first pamphlet 'Elsewhere' was published by Eyewear in the summer of 2015 and his most recent work has been published in Periódico de Poesía, Otoliths, Wasafiri, Lighthouse, M58 and Numero Cinq. Jack will graduate with a Master's in Education in the summer of 2016 and will then go to Achill Island in the west of Ireland to take up his first writing residency. www.ofipress.com

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Jane Collins is an Associate Professor at Pace University in Pleasantville, NY, where she teaches literature, film and creative writing. She has published essays on Early Modern women writers, college pedagogy and Shakespeare in performance. Her poems and interviews of poets have appeared in Puerto Del Sol, The Greensboro Review, Confrontation, The Seattle Review and other journals.

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Markus Spöhrer

Markus Spöhrer studied American Cultural Studies, German Studies and English Literature at the University of Tübingen, Germany and also Film Production, Film History and Popular Music at the University of Miami, Coral Gables. He did his Ph. D. at the University of Konstanz, Germany (Media Studies). Currently he is a Postdoctoral researcher in the DFG project “Mediale Teilhabe” (Media and Participation). Also he is working as a lecturer of contemporary German film, theory of media, culture and film. His research interests are film production, media philosophy, philosophy of science and Science and Technology Studies, human enhancement, and participation cultures of the cochlear implant.

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Mustafa Bal is currently an assistant professor and the chairman of the department of English language and literature at the TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara, Turkey. He specializes in contemporary British drama and drama/theatre theory. Comparative literary and cultural studies that cover subjects on British and Turkish literatures and cultures are among his academic interests. Dr. Bal is the editor-in-chief of The Human journal. Apart from his poems, article and poetry translations, papers, and essays that appeared in national and international journals, Dr. Bal is also the Turkish translator of J. Joyce’s Dubliners (as Dublinliler), N. Gogol’s The Overcoat (as Palto), and Daniela Sacerdoti’s best-seller Dreams (as Rüyalar).

Owen R. Horton

Owen R. Horton is a PhD candidate (May 2017 graduation) at the University of Kentucky, focusing on Film and Masculinities. His dissertation, titled “Rebooting Masculinity After 9/11: Men on Film During the War on Terror,” examines traditionally masculine film genres such as the Bond film, the War film, and the Superhero film. In it, he argues that the rebooting of the American identity after 9/11 mirrors a rebranding of masculinity in films during the same time frame, and that each genre offers insights into the fears and fantasies of Americans in the aftermath of the attacks.

Paul Ziek

Paul Ziek is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Media, Communications and Visual Arts at Pace University where he teaches strategic and organizational communication in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. His research interest is how the communication–information–media matrix shapes communication and interaction.
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Robert Mundy is a graduate of Stony Brook University and St. John’s University. As an Assistant Professor in the English and Modern Languages Department at Pace University, he teaches both composition and gender studies courses. Outside of the classroom, he acts as the WPA and co-director of the WEC program. His research focuses on composition theory/pedagogy, writing center theory/practice, and gender, namely masculinity studies.

Shawn Bodden

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