

# **Walking Wounded:**

Cinematic Representations of Masculine, Post-Modern Anxiety in the  
Urban Space

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the representation of post-modern, masculine anxiety in seven motion picture films. Drawing on the concept of pomophobia by Thomas B. Byers (1995), it examines the ways in which racially dominant, heterosexual masculinity is depicted in film as an embattled and besieged subjectivity, struggling to recover cultural dominance and authority which has been lost as a result of, amongst other socio-political forces, the limited yet significant gains made by feminism, the pervasive presence of non-white „others“ and the processes of post-Fordist de-industrialisation. This thesis draws on both historical and contemporary readings of the *flâneur*, the solitary, urban stroller, to consider the ways in which modern cinema allegorises this supposed male cultural displacement. By identifying the *flâneur* as a significant vehicle through which feelings of male anxiety are represented cinematically, this thesis argues that the urban space is frequently made the geographic site through which post-modern, masculine anxieties are rehearsed while providing the domain for patriarchal authority to be recovered. This thesis aims to contribute to the existing body of academic literature which views racially dominant, heterosexual masculinity as being in a perpetual state of crisis, requiring persistent reaffirmation in order to maintain its cultural privilege. Through a detailed analysis of seven motion picture films, this thesis will explore the varying strategies utilised to represent the recovery of masculine power, in the process revealing the hegemonic ideologies which are promulgated and sustained through these cinematic texts.

## **Declaration of Originality**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due references has been made in the text.

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# INTRODUCTION

Comes a time I'm tired of my feet and my fingernails  
and my hair and my shadow.

Comes a time I'm sick of being a man.

Pablo Neruda, *Walking Around* (1935).

Cinematic representations of the post-modern, masculine subject within the specific geographic location of urban space form the focus of this thesis. Through a close reading of several films which feature mobile, urban men as the central protagonists, it examines the ways in which post-modern anxieties regarding the perceived loss of male cultural hegemony are experienced in relation to gender, sexuality and race. Given that the city has long been held as a domain at the command of men, dispossession and alienation are no more vividly realised than when those of comparative cultural privilege (racially dominant<sup>1</sup> men) encounter previously marginalised people (women, gay and non-racially dominant men) within the public realm. Using Thomas B. Byers' (1995) concept of pomophobia, the thesis aims to arrive at a detailed understanding of how specifically masculine, urban located, post-modern anxieties are depicted in cinema and the various attempts made to restore hegemonic ideologies through these mediated representations.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter Five explores Black-authored films of the 1990s and examines how post-modern anxiety is articulated within Black-authored filmic texts. While this alternative reading of Black men in inner city Los Angeles as the culturally privileged group significantly disrupts even Byers' claim that pomophobia is ostensibly represented cinematically as a white male affliction (given that white men have traditionally been the culturally privileged group), Chapter Five will argue that the gendered, economic and political ideologies which inform post-modern anxiety are experienced and indeed redressed by Black men in much the same way as white men.

As I do not subscribe to the limiting and foreclosed implication of the term „African American“ which gestures towards an explicitly African culture and historical legacy (Pabst, 2008), this thesis will be using the term „Black“ throughout as it includes those people who are so referred within the US context. While I am mindful that such an all inclusive categorisation might be regarded as reductionist, there does not appear to be a great deal of variation between ethnic groups which are regarded as Black when represented in mainstream cinema. Indeed, the very limiting nature of Black, urban, under-class masculine experiences and modes of self-expression and the way the racially segregated, urban environment and socio-economic factors facilitate such limited representations in film forms much of the discussion in Chapter Five.



Scholarly discussion on the representations of men and masculinities more generally has offered a timely interrogation of what is frequently regarded as the un-stated „norm“ and a legitimising factor of the ongoing subordination of marginal subjectivities (Connell, 1987, 1995, 2000; Kimmel, 2006; Kimmel & Messner 1995). Much work in the field of masculinities studies suggests that traditional, „hegemonic“ modes of masculinity adopt strategies to recuperate cultural privilege deemed to be in decline (Horrocks, 1994; Malin, 2005; Mosse, 1996; Osborn, 2005). Cinema is one of several vehicles through which the sense of „masculine crisis“ is frequently conveyed and popularly accepted (Arthur, 1994; Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; Boman, 2003; Davies, 1995; Dunbar, 2004; Gill, 2003; Glover, 1993, Jeffords, 1988, 1994, Tasker, 1993a, 1993b, 2004). Feminist film scholars have made significant contributions to this area of research by exploring the phobic representation of women in film and the specifically masculine anxieties which underpin these depictions (Creed, 1993; Erens, 1990; Humm, 1997; McCabe, 2004; Mulvey, 1975, 1989, 1996; Thornham, 1999).

Byers“ (1995) article „Terminating The Post-modern: Masculinity and Pomophobia“ continues in the tradition of this scholarship by offering an innovative analytical approach towards understanding the proliferation of cinematic representations of the white male as a figure in crisis. Byers defines pomophobia as the condensation of deep and persistent fears on the part of the formerly dominant, traditional bourgeois masculine subject, stemming, in large part, from feminist-inspired cultural shifts of the post-World War II era (Byers, 1995, 1996). In his work, Byers argues that progressive social movements such as the second wave of feminism, civil rights and gay liberation have all contributed to a perceived undermining of racially dominant, heterosexual, masculine prerogatives. These movements, with the influence of post-Fordist, late-capitalist economic trends towards a more technologically-based workplace, brought about new employment and social arrangements, for instance, the reconfiguration of

the family, which led to the gradual erosion of the „male breadwinner“ model. America’s shame at defeat in the Vietnam War and „the general cultural disruption known as the “sixties”“ (Byers, 1996: 423), have also contributed to a sense of post-modern anxiety amongst racially dominant, heterosexual men. As a result, the pomophobe imagines the world as hostile and chaotic and, ignoring the comparative cultural privilege he nonetheless retains, he instead configures himself as a victim while viewing his gendered, sexed and raced „other“ as a subversive threat to his cultural authority.

Central to Byers’ theory is the assertion that the entire *concept* of identity is becoming increasingly untenable, with racially dominant, heterosexual male subjectivity proving the most unstable. Rather than realising the liberating possibilities of a post-patriarchal identity, the post-modern demise of the racially dominant, heterosexual patriarch has instead resulted in the panicked „defence of the (illusory) unity, integrity, and significance of the subject“ (Byers, 1995: 12). Byers’ illuminating account of pomophobia and his argument regarding the impact of structural change on traditional constructions of masculinity provide an analytical framework for the examination of the characters and narratives in the films to be analysed. Yet the concept of pomophobia appears to have been applied only occasionally by academics other than Byers. This is surprising given its potential to inform a variety of social justice issues, particularly women’s rights, which have consistently met with a „backlash“ (Faludi, 1991) response to efforts towards achieving gender equality, very often in precisely the manner which Byers describes. Furthermore, the concept of pomophobia has not been applied to films beyond the realm of science fiction cinema, apart from Byers’ own article „History Re-Membered: *Forrest Gump*, Postfeminist Masculinity and the Burial of the Counterculture“ (1996), which explores the phantasmic masculine reassertions embodied in Robert Zemeckis’ (1993) *Forrest Gump*. This dearth of research allows for the possibility of

extending this useful analytical framework to other cinematic genres, such as those that are more thoroughly rooted in social realism, or at least claim to be.

Despite several important academic explorations of filmic interpretations of masculinity in crisis (Arthur, 2004; Ashcraft & Flores, 2003; Gill, 2003; Jeffords, 1994; McCullough, 2005; Rehling, 2005; Tasker 1993a, 1993b), cinematic representations of specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety as it is depicted in arenas beyond the work place and the family unit remain largely unexplored. This is a remarkable absence, particularly since the ways in which these male anxieties are resolved within cinematic narratives often evoke several themes that are traditionally considered masculine preserves: the public space, mobility and violence. Focussing specifically on cinematic depictions of masculine post-modern anxiety as it is experienced within the urban space allows for a more thorough exploration of how selected motion picture films have represented the crisis in masculinity as a form of literal, spatial usurpation. Just as the workplace (Hicks, 2000; Hunter, 2003; McCullough, 2005; Rehling, 2005) and domestic sphere/family unit (Bruzzi, 2005; Franco, 2008; Modleski, 1991) have in recent times been portrayed in cinema as physical worlds increasingly inhospitable to men,<sup>2</sup> explicitly through a sense of lost or threatened male hegemony, the urban space has likewise undergone radical restructuring. This thesis will argue that the city not only functions cinematically as a domain whereby the cultural „other“ is most vividly and most frequently encountered but also as a site through which masculine authority is consolidated in the face of perceived cultural threat.

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<sup>2</sup> Some examples include *Three Men and a Baby* (1987, Dir: Leonard Nimoy), *Disclosure* (1994 Dir: Barry Levinson) and *The Full Monty* (1997, Dir: Peter Cattaneo). For further discussion, see Nicola Rehling (2005) „All Or Nothing: White Heterosexual Masculinity in Contemporary Popular Cinema“, Dissertation submitted to the Department of English Literature and Culture, School of English, Faculty of Philosophy, PhD thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

One male figure which might aid in an examination of the effect of the conditions of contemporary society on the specifically masculine subject is the nineteenth-century literary concept of the *flâneur*, the solitary, urban stroller (Baudelaire, 1964; Benjamin, 1999). Recent scholarly efforts (Brand, 1991; Featherstone, 1998; Friedberg, 1993, Gunning, 1997; Koppers, 1999; Lutz, 2006; Salzani, 2007; Tester, 1994; Werner, 2001; White, 2001) have looked beyond traditional interpretations of the *flâneur* as a venerated nineteenth-century figure and instead attended to the *flâneur*'s capacity to function allegorically for personal turmoil and urban chaos. With the aim of extending existing academic literature, this thesis will explore the inherent masculinity of the solitary, urban stroller by proffering the *post-modern flâneur* as a compelling cinematic vehicle through which the crisis in masculinity can be articulated. Emphasising the notion of crisis, which this thesis argues is implicit within the concept of the *flâneur*, permits a thorough engagement with the themes that inform the masculine, post-modern anxiety described by Byers (1995) as it is experienced within the specifically urban setting.

As a consequence of this renewed consideration of the *flâneur*, the urban, masculine figure utilised in this thesis has revised traditional interpretations which insist the solitary, urban stroller remain indifferent to his surroundings. In order to bring to light the changing nature of *flânerie* and the *flâneur*'s potential adaptability as both an avatar of urban experience and marker of the modern milieu, this thesis will explore briefly the *flâneur*'s shift from detached observer to engaged surveyor as seen in Edgar Allan Poe's (1845) short story „The Man of The Crowd“ (Brand, 1991; Gunning, 1997; Salzani, 2007; Werner, 2001). This engaged, existentially anxious figure of urban spectatorship provides at least the possibility to reposition the solitary, urban stroller within a post-modern context. Most crucially to this project, the *flâneur*'s sense of loss of control over the increasingly untenable nature of seemingly fixed identity borders reveals a similar ideological uncertainty to that of the

pomophobia observable within the films selected for analysis. In developing the argument of the solitary, urban stroller as surveyor impelled to make legible, if only symbolically, the perceived urban chaos which he observes, this thesis offers a developed reading of the *flâneur*, one which I term the *pomophobic flâneur*. Doing so both strengthens the affinities between solitary, urban strolling and specifically masculine discontent and expands upon the sense of cultural displacement felt when inhabiting a domain no longer maintained by a previously relied upon homogeneity which formerly guaranteed hegemonic masculine privilege.

The films selected for critical analysis are *Taxi Driver* (1976, Dir: Martin Scorsese), *Falling Down* (1993, Dir: Joel Schumacher), *Menace II Society* (1993, Dir: Albert and Allen Hughes), *Boyz N The Hood* (1991; Dir: John Singleton), *The Crow* (1993, Dir: Alex Proyas), *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993, Dir: Rolf De Heer) and *The King* (2005, Dir: James Marsh). All films discussed share most or all the following themes. Firstly, in all seven films, „anxieties regarding men’s disenfranchisement are spatially inscribed“ (Rehling, 2005: 40), with the majority of the storyline taking place either during or concluding an extended period outdoors. By employing a strong narrative journey (both actual and symbolic) which illustrates the significance (or frequency) of the protagonists’ personal injury, the protagonist’s sense of cultural displacement is allegorised through the urban malaise encountered within the public space.

Secondly, the male protagonist of each film deploys some mode of traditional masculinity in order to restore his embattled masculine authority. In *Taxi Driver* (Chapter Four) urban vigilantism in the form of the „New Warrior“ (Gibson, 1994) is the desired form of masculine restitution. In *Falling Down*, *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* (Chapter Five) similar forms of urban vigilantism are enacted, while in *The Crow* (Chapter Four), a specifically

mythopoetic, primitive masculinity is conveyed through the literal resurrection of protagonist Eric Draven. *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* (Chapter Six) both depict fatherhood as a critical role within which patriarchal dominance is simultaneously undermined and restored.

Thirdly, the protagonists' relationships with women constitute an important dimension of the elaborate recuperative strategy to restore masculine authority. Through the erasure, containment, infantilising or sexual objectification of women, traditional masculine authority is strengthened while the threat of women gaining social privilege is effectively assuaged.

Fourthly, violence is utilised as a form of masculine recuperation. Characterised by a sequence of altercations with real or imagined adversaries, violence is usually positioned as reacting against appropriate, albeit ineffective, modes of conduct; signalling to the ways in which prior (law abiding) attempts at restitution are unfulfilling. This, too, is a significant dimension of pomophobia, as the structures which maintain civic order and thus reinforce patriarchal privilege are frequently depicted cinematically as having been broken down (Byers, 1995).

Finally, the sense of chaos is symbolised through the visible representation of urban malaise which pervades all seven films included for analysis. Films such as *Taxi Driver*, *The Crow* (discussed in Chapter Four), *Falling Down* (Chapter Five) and *Bad Boy Bubby* (Chapter Six), specifically deploy urban blight as an allegory for social disorder generally. *The King* (Chapter Six) renders the otherwise pleasant (sub)urban environment of Corpus Christi, Texas as implicitly threatening through an emphasis on its repressiveness and moral hypocrisy. In *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* (Chapter Five), civil disorder is represented as an

integral part of urban life and an intrinsic component of Black, urban, under-class masculinity. The analysis of the films in the forthcoming chapters will expand upon these themes in revealing the gendered forces at play which deem these portrayals as culturally appropriate if not socially validated.

In some films selected for analysis, pomophobia is not exclusively depicted through the behaviour of the protagonist. Occasionally, existentialist or ideological uncertainty is conveyed through the „tone“ or „mood“ of the film. Various stylistic markers, like those recognised as constituting *film noir*, have been interpreted by film scholars as an articulation of specifically masculine discontent (Krutnik, 1991; Oliver & Trigo, 2002). *Noir*, as it is aesthetically and thematically deployed within the selected films, can supplement, or work in concert with, the post-modern anxieties exhibited by the lead character. Elements of pomophobia are most evident in the cinematic techniques used to convey „free-floating“ (Oliver & Trigo, 2002) feelings of loss, despair, nihilism and urban blight in *The Crow*. However *The Crow*'s *noir*-like depictions of female characters as „Dragon Lady“ seductresses or negligent mothers are also symptomatic, I argue, of underlying masculine anxieties regarding the inherent instability of the patriarchal order. A brief overview of *film noir* will be provided in Chapter Four, with particular focus on how *noir* functions allegorically as a stylistic manifestation of post-modern anxiety.

Most of the films selected for analysis are US produced, Hollywood financed and mainstream-recognised features. However, both *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* (Chapter Six) received a limited release and financial backing from outside of the US. By including these films, this thesis will demonstrate how certain ideological claims of masculine disenfranchisement are not solely the domain of US cultural and political arenas and indeed transcend these geographic demarcations. It is therefore not the concern of this thesis to

analyse the somewhat arbitrary distinctions/divisions between mainstream Hollywood cinematic releases and those which might be described as „independent“ or „art house“. Although this thesis is grounded in the historical and cultural context from which these films were produced and are consumed, it nevertheless argues that conclusions generated from readings of US films can be applicable to the Australian, UK and other Western capitalist contexts given that cinema holds equal status in forming social values in these countries as it does elsewhere.

Various pomophobic reactions to the limited advancements of civil and gay rights and the ways in which hostility towards racialised and sexualised „others“ are both implicitly conveyed in film are also made the subject of critical inquiry in this thesis. Issues of class will also be considered where relevant, particularly within the context of paid labour and how masculine anxieties regarding diminishing employment prospects are implicitly tied to economic circumstances thought to have been undermined by the gains of feminist-inspired workplace reform and the effects of global recession. Masculine articulations of post-modern angst stemming from the intimidating spectre of class-privileged, white-collared elites will also be explored, most notably in relation to the resentment of the protagonists of *Taxi Driver* (Chapter Four) and *Falling Down* (Chapter Five) as it is expressed towards those who wield superior economic power.

Film serves as the text to be analysed primarily because it remains a widely accessible, culturally privileged medium in which societal values and anxieties are constructed, reproduced and maintained (Turner, 2002). What is important and, indeed, what is perceived to be threatening to what is important is very often defined by and circulated through cultural product such as film and television. As Steven J. Ross (2002) asserts „for better or worse, many [filmgoers] pay far closer attention to the politics they see on screen than to the



pronouncements of politicians or civic leaders” (2002: 1). Critical cultural analysis offers a means through which to understand the way cultural and symbolic processes are connected to social, political and economic power (Barker, 2008). The fact that many who claim disenfranchisement use that which they have consumed via the media to justify their reactionary response, however misleading, is itself testament to the enduring relationship between the real and its referent and is indicative of the role seemingly disposable cultural products play in the lives of so many.<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason that cinema provides fertile ground for critical cultural analysis.

As a tool for examining representations of „reactions against progressive attempts to destabilise patriarchal heterosexual hegemony“ (Byers, 1995: 6), Byers’ concept of pomophobia offers much by way of analysing specifically masculine, cultural uncertainty even over a decade after its inception. The ongoing relevance of Byers’ important work reveals itself in the backlash responses to current cultural events occurring at the time of writing this thesis. The inherent conservatism in current Western political discourse which promotes images of resilient masculinity could be seen then as an inevitable extension to, or contemporary version of, the response to the supposed undermining of masculine privilege in the years immediately following the second wave women’s movement, the civil, gay and lesbian rights movements, the Vietnam War and processes of post-Fordist de-industrialisation. Pomophobia, then, is neither a newly emerging reaction to the apparent marginal repositioning of heteronormative, racially dominant masculinity, nor does it show any signs of abating within the current political climate.

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<sup>3</sup> It might be worth mentioning that the accumulation of such cultural product as a way to make sense of one’s environment was a practice carried out by the *flâneur*, a point to which this thesis will return in Chapter One.

With the exception of *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *The King* (2005), most of the films selected for analysis in this thesis were released during the 1990s. It is therefore worth considering what it was about this decade that produced a group of films which lend themselves particularly well to interpretations of a „backlash“ mentality. One might argue, as Byers (1995) has, that the 1990s spelled a critical moment in US history, when the factors which he identifies as converging to create a sense of pomophobia were the most visible. Nicola Rehling (2005) argues that three cultural events: the Thomas/Hill „affair“, whereby Anita Hill, a law professor and former colleague of Supreme Court Judge nominee Clarence Thomas, alleged during senate confirmation hearings that Thomas had sexually harassed her whilst she was working for him in the early 1980s; the Rodney King beating, whereby four white Los Angeles police officers were filmed allegedly assaulting King (a Black motorist); and the O.J. Simpson trial, held to determine the guilt of a former Black professional footballer who was accused of killing his white ex-wife and her white friend; led to the greater public awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace, institutionalised racism and domestic violence respectively.

The highly sensationalised nature of the prime-time coverage of these events likewise facilitated the public engagement with these cases and the gender, race and class inequalities upon which these events and concomitant political debates were premised (Fiske, 1996; Gooding-Williams, 1993; Morrison, 1992; Naficy, 2001; Rehling, 2006). John Fiske (1996) likewise sees the Simpson trial, the Clarence Thomas hearing, the L.A. „riots“ and the response of former Vice President Dan Quayle to the depiction of a single, working mother in the US sitcom *Murphy Brown* as „key indices of a crisis in the structure of feeling in the United States“ (1996: 1) which all emerged at this particular historical moment.<sup>4</sup> It might therefore be reasonable to assume that filmmakers around this time were implicitly

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<sup>4</sup> Black film theorist and historian Ed Guerrero (1993) has suggested that similar sensationalised media events of the early 1990s contributed to an already „intense period of nihilism“ (1993: 160). The rape trial of former US heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson and the retirement of professional basketballer Earvin „Magic“ Johnson (owing to his HIV positive status) had, according to Guerrero, „further [compounded] black feelings of alarm and despair“ (1993: 160) by making „outright racial conflict depressingly tangible“ (1993: 161).

referencing these specific struggles and anxieties via generally polemic texts, depicting not the events, but the underlying structuring norms which maintain white, patriarchal authority as susceptible to instability. Although seemingly fixed to a particular historical and geographical space, cinematic representations of existentialist uncertainty as a reaction to the perceived threat posed by the formerly marginalised have endured, albeit in less explicit forms, in the years which have followed. The fear of cultural „others“ dislodging existing power structures articulates, as Byers puts it, „*persistent fears*“ (1995: 6, my emphasis), those which have existed prior to the cultural events mentioned here (as evinced in my reading of *Taxi Driver*) and continue into the first decade of the twenty first-century (as evinced in my reading of *The King*). While the events of the 1990s certainly inform the films produced at the same time, I argue the underlying conflicts which shaped these events were never completely resolved, nor will they be so long as outmoded masculinities continue to be invoked and validated through mediated forms such as cinema as the most preferable strategy in defence against the erosions to masculine privilege wrought by progressive social initiatives and cultural shifts.

So while the films selected might occasionally reference a particular social or political event (for example, instances of police brutality and publicised cases of racism in Albert and Allen Hughes“ *Menace II Society* and the Christian fundamentalist push to have creationism recognised in US schools in *The King*), generally the films included for examination in this thesis do not overtly (or intentionally) refer to specific socio-political issues and events. The principle motivation for choosing these specific films (and writing this thesis more generally) is to highlight the operations of persistent and ubiquitous nature of hegemonic gender and race ideologies in much cultural product, particularly motion picture films which are presented to the audience in ways which inflate the tenuous claims of male victimhood.

Chapter One will provide a brief overview of the *flâneur*, its literary progenitors (Charles Baudelaire, 1964; Walter Benjamin, 1999, and Edgar Allan Poe, 1845), and the ways in which these historical imaginings, particularly Poe's short story „The Man of The Crowd“ (1845), inform the reading of *flânerie* as an articulation of specifically urban located, masculine crisis as it is used in this thesis. This chapter will then go on to develop the concept of the pomophobic *flâneur*, a figure which minimises Baudelaire's aloof detachment yet underscores the existentialist uncertainty of Poe's „detective“. This chapter will also briefly examine the various attempts by feminist historians to bring to light examples of the *flâneuse*, or female *flâneur*, and the essentialist determinants which render the *flâneuse*'s inclusion within the existing literary canon highly problematic. What emerges from these revisionist efforts is the way in which the urban space is implicitly gendered, and more crucial to this thesis, how women's growing visibility within the public domain reveals the inherent vulnerability or porosity of identity borders, particularly those which sustain masculine privilege. The capacity to which women undermine masculine authority through their presence in the urban space is just one dimension of the post-modern anxiety which will be examined in the films selected for analysis.

Chapter Two will establish the second plank of the overall theoretical approach from which this project is grounded by providing a short summary of some of the key developments in feminist film criticism. Charting the emergence of feminist film theory from Laura Mulvey's (1975) highly influential and later contested article „Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema“ to more contemporary debates regarding alternatively gendered and raced spectatorship, this chapter will then move towards a more focussed examination of cinematic masculinities as a subject of critical inquiry (Neale, 1983). The work of Susan Jeffords (1988, 1993, 1994), David Savran (1996) and Yvonne Tasker (1993a, 1993b, 1994) is especially pertinent here in establishing how cinema has provided both a terrain to explore the socially constructed,

performative, highly mediated and often existentially fraught nature of „hegemonic masculinity“ (Connell, 1987) as well as a medium through which the representation of specifically masculine anxieties in a post-modern era have found legitimacy.

Chapter Three will examine Byers“ (1995) concept of pomophobia and its application as a theoretical approach to understanding masculine post-modern anxiety as depicted in cinema. Where increased gender equality, post-Fordist employment changes and the reconfiguring of the family unit have been experienced as challenges to male dominance and patriarchal authority, a discourse of cultural dispossession has emerged as the preferred strategy towards masculine restoration, with attempting to reclaim their social privilege through the aggressive reinforcement of traditional structuring norms. This chapter provides both the historical context to the post-modern anxiety depicted in the films selected for analysis as well as the theoretical grounding to investigate the narrative, characterisation and plot development contained in the films examined in the chapters which follow.

Chapter Four will examine post-modern anxiety within the films *Taxi Driver* (1976; Dir: Martin Scorsese) and *The Crow* (1993; Dir: Alex Proyas). This chapter will also explore the respective recuperative strategies of both films“ protagonists in adopting exaggerated masculine identities to bring about a sense of urban legibility.<sup>5</sup> Such efforts, this chapter will argue, provide the means to neutralise and contain any perceived cultural threat while restoring masculine privilege. Cultural displacement as it is articulated through urban alienation in *Taxi Driver* and the ominous aesthetics of *The Crow* will be examined by utilising various academic interpretations of *film noir*, which, while a rather loose filmic genre, is generally understood by film scholars as possessing a series of consistent thematic and stylistic traits (Hirsch, 1999; Krutnik, 1991). Most significant is the work of Kelly Oliver

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<sup>5</sup> The term „legible“ when used in relation to the urban space will be deployed throughout this thesis in ways similar to Brand (1991) and Salzani (2007), who both use legible to denote „coherence“ as a text which can be „read“ and thus made subject to reform.

and Benigno Trigo (2002) who suggest the moody atmosphere characteristic of *film noir* allegorises specifically masculine post-World War II anxiety which the *noir* hero negotiates through condensing and displacing fears over marginalised subjectivities. This reading of *film noir* dovetails with Byers' concept of pomophobia, which likewise argues the formerly dominant masculine subject fears he is vulnerable to ideological attack by gendered, sexed and raced „others“. Extending their reading of *film noir* further to encompass seemingly insignificant elements such as lighting, sound and marginal figures, Oliver and Trigo (2002) go on to argue that the cultural uncertainty experienced by the male protagonists in *film noir* is not restricted to the behaviour and attitudes of the lead male character. Chapter Four will explore aspects of *The Crow* beyond Draven's evocation of primitive, essentialist masculinity as a way to demonstrate how post-modern anxieties over gender, sex and race can be represented cinematically as „free floating“ (2002: *xiv*) existentialist angst.

James William Gibson's (1994) „New Warrior“ figure will be used to examine the paramilitarism of *Taxi Driver*, which exerts a hostility towards those viewed as undermining white, heterosexual, masculine privilege in an effort to recoup losses following America's Vietnam War defeat. Academic criticisms of the mythopoetic movement will also inform the examination of how a „deep masculine“ (Bly, 1990) is evoked as a means through which Eric Draven reclaims male dominance within the fractured and chaotic post-modern urban space in *The Crow*.

Chapter Five provides an analysis of Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993), often cited as the harbinger of the „backlash“ film. Bill „D-FENS“ Foster's disproportionate rage levelled at the daily setbacks, which others have come to regard as mundane, signals the perceived loss of prominence and influence of class-privileged, professionally employed white men. Continuing the argument through a contrasting perspective on the narrative of white male

victimhood, where the raced „other“ is positioned as the most overt challenge to white hegemony, this chapter will then explore films produced by Black filmmakers around the same time of *Falling Down*’s release, with most attention focussed on Albert and Allen Hughes’ *Menace II Society* (1993). This film offers at least one alternative to the assumed marginalised status of the white man in *Falling Down*. By depicting Black masculinity as defined by and contingent upon inner city turmoil (Massood, 1996), as well as subject to the institutional racism which determines the degree of social mobility of young Black, under-class males, *Menace II Society* and the thematically similar *Boyz N The Hood* (1991; Dir: John Singleton) implicitly critique the centrality (hegemony) of white masculinity and simultaneously challenge the white male victimhood complaint.

Chapter Six will explore the ways in which masculine cultural dominance is consolidated through explicit appeals to the traditional bourgeois nuclear family in the films *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993, Dir: Rolf De Heer) and *The King* (2005, Dir: James Marsh). In both films, culturally and spatially displaced men reconcile their perceived marginality by attempting to reconnect (either physically or psychically) with paternal figures who have abandoned them. In *Bad Boy Bubby*, this is achieved by adopting the persona of „father“ („Pop“), while *The King* interrogates the hypocrisy of the conservative Right by exposing the repressive sex roles within and challenging the power of the father. This chapter will argue that such strategies are analogous to post-modern masculine angst more generally where the traditional masculine role is seen to have been challenged by progressive social change, not merely by women’s improved social status and the gradual moving away from the prescribed gender roles within the nuclear family. Despite their unique narrative form, non-Hollywood production and, in the case of *The King*, late release date, both films are nevertheless relevant to the research aims of this thesis and the social/political contextualisation of the film analysis overall through their evocation of international themes of post-modern alienation, which is articulated

in part by presenting the urban space as a post-apocalyptic „wasteland“. Chapter Six will argue that by generalising Bubby’s and Elvis’ experiences of the public sphere as threatening or unknowable, *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* engage with conservative readings of „suburbia“ as radically undermining in light of post-Fordist shifts within the workplace and greater social mobility of formerly marginalised cultural „others“. Both men take on the family unit – the site of their previous paternal abandonment – as a place where they each (in very different ways) reclaim their lost cultural authority. The application of religious dogma further contributes to the overall reinstating of traditional values which this chapter asserts are believed to have been undermined by permissive social politics within contemporary society.

This thesis concludes by contending that specifically masculine, post-modern anxieties as experienced in the urban space have found cultural expression in film. Through the examination of seven motion picture films which depict racially dominant, heterosexual men navigating the urban space, this thesis argues that social, political, cultural and economic shifts taking place in the years following World War II have brought about a sense of cultural displacement which has been allegorised cinematically through the motif of solitary urban strolling. The conclusion to this thesis will briefly summarise how pomophobia has been articulated in the selected film texts, as well as offer avenues for future research on cinematic representations of specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety in the years following the September 11 attacks.



# CHAPTER ONE

## *Going Nowhere: Urban Strolling as Masculine Anxiety In and Out of the Nineteenth Century*

### *Introduction*

This chapter provides the first of three planks which form the overarching theoretical framework for the film analysis undertaken in Chapters Four, Five and Six. First, a discussion of the historical and contemporary manifestations of the *flâneur* and its relevance as a cinematic device analogous of specifically masculine, urban located anxiety will be presented through a brief exploration of the literary works of Charles Baudelaire (1964), Walter Benjamin (1999) and Edgar Allan Poe (1845). Central to this overview of the nineteenth-century *flâneur* is the gradual shift away from detached indifference to engaged observation which literary historians (Brand, 1991; Gunning, 1997; Salzani, 2007; Werner, 2001) suggest Poe made most pronounced in the short story „The Man of The Crowd“ (1845). It is within this story, this chapter will argue, that the *flâneur*’s subtle transition from detached urban spectator to engaged surveyor is implicitly represented, providing the thematic underpinnings which inform the spatially inscribed, urban located anxieties of the *flâneur* more generally.

Most crucial to the development of the *flâneur* as „detective“ is the figure’s inherent vulnerability, manifested in his inability to control his environment or make legible what he perceives are fluid identity borders. The *flâneur* as detective, particularly as he is depicted in Poe’s „The Man of The Crowd“ provides at least the epistemological basis from which to develop a contemporary understanding of solitary urban strolling within a *post*-modern context. It is then that this chapter will offer the figure of the post-modern *flâneur*, one which I have termed the pomophobic *flâneur* (Byers, 1995). This figure conflates the urban spectatorship which characterised nineteenth-century urban strolling with the existentialist

anxiety and ideological uncertainty of Poe's embryonic detective. It is the pomophobic *flâneur*, both acute urban spectator and engaged surveyor, which provides the most appropriate lens through which to examine specifically masculine, urban located, post-modern anxiety represented in the films selected for analysis.

### ***The Physiology of the Urban Sketcher***

A *flâneur*, according to the French definition, is someone who „strolls through and observes the life of a city or town“ (Brand, 1991: 6). One who can „reap aesthetic meaning and an individual kind of existential security from the spectacle of the teeming crowds“ (Tester, 1994: 2), the *flâneur* is traditionally configured not solely as an actual individual who adopts „the perspective of a strolling or panoramically situated observer“ (Brand, 1991: 6), but also as a literary archetype or concept, evoked by both historical and contemporary writers as a paradigm, an aphorism, of modernity, urbanisation and public mobility.

The concept of the *flâneur* is thought to have originated in nineteenth-century Paris, where leisurely strolling was adopted as a way to better observe the dramatic and unprecedented urbanisation of the French capital. However, Dana Brand (1991) refutes the Parisian origins of the *flâneur* and instead claims it was in seventeenth-century London, where various factors, such as economic changes made possible by the profitable textile trade, as well as an unrestrictive market and fluid social arrangement „created an economic and cultural environment favourable for the development of a culture of urban spectacle“ (Brand, 1991: 15). Regardless of the exact geographic location of its genesis, the *flâneur* and *flânerie*, the act of strolling and looking, had a significant influence on urban culture, where a self-defined ordering of space permits the city to be experienced as a text and the subject of artistic representation (Tester, 1994).

It is in the work of Charles Baudelaire, particularly his essay „The Painter of Modern Life“ (*Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*“, 1964 [1863]) that the most sympathetic depiction of the *flâneur* is provided. In what was initially conceived as an appreciation of Dutch illustrator Constantin Guys, „The Painter of Modern Life“, and more specifically, section three: „The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowd, and Child“ (Baudelaire, 1964: 5-12), Baudelaire conceives of the *flâneur* in the following way:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. The passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.

(1964: 9).

For Baudelaire, the *flâneur* was something of an urban botanist, able to determine, through acute observational skills, the class, occupation, character, background and lifestyle of each passer-by. It is for this reason that Baudelaire regarded the nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneur* as a poet, extolled for his superior aesthetic sense, yet more importantly, possessed of a particular ability „to make for himself the meaning and the significance of the metropolitan spaces and the spectacle of the public“ (Tester, 1994: 4).

### **Flânerie as Crisis**

Although celebrated by Charles Baudelaire as a kind of hero of the urban panorama, later literary interpretations have regarded the *flâneur* as an inherently troubled individual, engaged in a relentless internal struggle and preoccupied with feelings of inadequacy and alienation. The *flâneur*’s desire to stroll, after all, appears to be motivated by some sort of

discontentment, a yearning, for experiences beyond the domestic sphere, which is portrayed alternatively as barren or dull (Tester, 1994). Walter Benjamin's *The Paris Arcades' Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*) drafted between 1927 and 1940 (although not published until 1982), offers perhaps the earliest critical examination of *flânerie*. Composed from a vast array of historical sources, such as the otherwise disposable ephemera produced at the time as well as Benjamin's own observations, *The Paris Arcades' Project* was intended as a literary documentation of not just the way industrial culture had transformed the appearance of the city, but the interpretative process itself (Buck-Morss, 1989). However as contemporary literary scholars have noted, Benjamin tended to dismiss the *flâneur* in *The Paris Arcades' Project* as „a fairly transparent social fantasy“ (Brand, 1991: 6), existing merely to reassure bourgeois society that the urban crowds were not as illegible, incoherent or as politically threatening as they first appear. The principle aim of *flânerie*, according to Benjamin, is to transform the chaos and indeterminacy of the urban space into „a legible, accessible and nonthreatening version of itself“ (Brand, 1991: 6). The implicit threat the social world poses for the *flâneur* therefore has since emerged in contemporary scholarly interpretations as a key characteristic of the urban stroller.

A re-occurring feature of these new readings of *flânerie* is the depiction of the city as an inherently fraught space, one which the modern urban subject experiences as confronting, unyielding and potentially undermining. Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough (2006) explain that „the metropolis must, then, be read not as the instrument or unproblematic site of masculine authority, but as the space which puts that desired authority at risk“ (2006: 10). The fear of loss of specifically masculine prominence is driving the existentialist anxieties which plague the *flâneur*. As such, the *flâneur* operates as „a compensation, a defence mechanism against the threats posed by his environment“ (2006: 10).

### *Detecting Dissent in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of The Crowd' (1845)*

The *flâneur*'s shift from aloof spectator to involved surveyor is most evident in the work of American author Edgar Allan Poe. Besides his reputation as a seminal horror writer, Poe is often credited as the progenitor of the detective story.<sup>6</sup> James V. Werner (2001) asserts that the creation of the detective tale as a popular literary genre was among the many achievements of Poe's life. For Werner, „the *flâneur* represents a pivotal influence on Poe's philosophical perspective and fictional aims and strategies overall“ (2001: 5). While it is often noted (Brand, 1991; Gunning, 1997; Tester, 1994; Werner, 2001) that the characteristics of *flânerie* are most expressively realised in Poe's featured detective, the brilliant yet eccentric Parisian Chevalier Auguste Dupin, it is one of Poe's earlier short stories, „The Man of The Crowd“ (1845), in which the character of the *flâneur* emerges as less a figure of detached indifference but of an urban spectator gifted with the ability to detect dissent and, symbolically at least, impose order on a fluid, implicitly volatile public space.

„The Man of The Crowd“, published a year before the first in Poe's detective trilogy, tells of an unnamed „convalescent“ (Poe, [1845] 1986: 129) recounting in minute detail the passing crowds from a window of a London coffee shop. As he watches, the narrator begins classifying the various pedestrians according to crude yet apparently telling physical attributes, from „upper clerks of staunch firms“ ([1845] 1986: 133) known by their „coats and pantaloons of black and brown“ ([1845] 1986: 133) to „swell pick-pockets“ ([1845] 1986: 133) of „dashing appearance“ ([1845] 1986: 133) betrayed by „an air of excessive frankness“ ([1845] 1986: 133). When he encounters a „decrepid old man“ ([1845] 1986: 135), the narrator becomes immediately absorbed. Unlike the other individuals who occupied the

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<sup>6</sup> Although Carlo Salzani (2007) suggests Walter Benjamin made multiple allusions to the *flâneur* as a detective-like figure in the early drafts of what later became *The Arcades' Project*, Salzani nevertheless admits that references „usually go no farther than a hint or suggestion“ (2007: 167).

crowded thoroughfares, the vagrant fails to conform to any established typology. Confused yet fascinated by the old man's indeterminate countenance, the narrator dispenses with his detached form of observation and, impelled by a „craving desire to keep the man in view“ ([1845] 1986: 136) adopts a detective-like form of shadowing in an attempt to „know more of him“ ([1845] 1986: 136). Poe writes:

I had now a good opportunity of examining his person. He was short in stature, very thin, and apparently very feeble. His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely-buttoned and evidently second handed *roquelaire* which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger. These observations heightened my curiosity, and I resolved to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go.

([1845] 1986: 136).

Realising his pursuit and desire to *know* the vagrant is ultimately futile, the narrator resigns his efforts and instead accepts that the old man, like the *Hortulus Animæ*, „*es lässt sich nicht lesen*“ („does not permit itself to be read“) ([1845] 1986: 129). The scholarly appeal of this otherwise „bare bones“ (Gunning, 1997: 25) narrative resides not only in Poe's ability to conjure a vivid snapshot of a specifically urban mode of spectatorship, but to communicate, implicitly at least, the potential for seemingly fixed identity borders to become unstable. Central to Poe's interpretation of both the public space and the old man is their apparent illegibility. Motivating the narrator is the way in which the apparently innocuous „man of the crowd“ ([1845] 1986: 140) disrupts the social categories which the narrator has constructed in order to derive a sense of mastery over the urban panorama. The unnamed narrator's need to arrange individuals into identifiable urban „types“ according to their physiognomy is itself a manifestation of what Werner (2001) terms „a comforting fantasy of control“ (2001: 20). Werner goes on to suggest that what lies at the heart of Poe's detective's ratiocination is a

pervasive anxiety over the persistent and unsettling porosity of both architectural and conceptual boundaries. To Werner, Poe's detective, whether he is C. Auguste Dupin or the eponymous „Man of The Crowd“, marked a significant transition from regarding the *flâneur* as a type of „philosophical promenader“ (Salzani, 2007: 173) to an engaged and involved surveyor.

The critical shift from detached, desultory observation to engaged, involved surveillance (and the intrinsic suspicion and paranoia evident in Poe's short story) within the urban pedestrian is explored in recent academic inquiries into „The Man of The Crowd“. These renewed scholarly interpretations of Poe's *flâneur* are particularly relevant to the subsequent film analysis chapters and thesis aims overall as they offer compelling insight into the ways in which the urban space impacts upon the solitary urban stroller's sense of self, revealing the underlying uncertainty that resides in those who construct their subjectivity in relation (indeed opposition) to the „other“. Carlos Salzani (2007) explains however that any attempt to bestow order upon the city through the assignment of „types“ is fruitless, as the urban environment persistently resists any effort to interpret it. The *flâneur* thus conceives of the modern city as „a place of danger, fear, and angst“ (2007: 168) and resolves instead to „turn into [a] detective, who searches the menacing urban masses for a trace of the criminal“ (2007: 171-72). Tom McDonough (2002) offered a similar account of Poe's *flâneur* by suggesting that depicting the city as an incomprehensible site in a permanent state of turmoil legitimated the „paranoiac“ obsession with order and propriety characteristic of bourgeois society.

Crucial to readings of Poe's nineteenth-century urban spectator is the way in which the unnamed narrator, who initially begins the story as a detached observer, is drawn into the crowded city by the indecipherable vagrant and thus himself becomes the titular „man of the crowd“. In Poe's story, delving into (or succumbing to the allure of) the undulating multitude

comprised of the unreadable „other“ is itself symptomatic of existentialist anxiety. When the two poles collapse, so too does the sense of ideological completion. The act of *flânerie*, while intended to restore order, only inverts and complicates further the boundaries between the apparently opposed categories of “inner” and “outer” (Gunning, 1997; Salzani, 2007). Dana Brand (1991) explains further what appears to be a *motif* of Poe’s detective stories:

an individual with an excessive faith in his ability to systematically reduce chaos to coherence develops an obsessive identification with an individual whose behaviour calls into question the very possibility of such coherence.

(1991: 83).

So while the unnamed narrator in „The Man of The Crowd“ might be motivated to pursue the „decrepid“ old man through the streets of London by a desire to contain the seemingly illegible urban crowd, in essence, to „close the gap“ (Brand, 1991: 84) on his interpretation of the city, what really drives the convalescent is a wish to „close the gap in the reading of *himself*“ (1991: 84, my emphasis). In other words, the old man represents for the convalescent „a variety of things he wishes to repress about himself and his activity“ (1991: 84). Since the unnamed narrator’s failure to assimilate the vagrant into his itinerary of urban „types“ exposes his own precarious subjectivity, he resolves instead to „impose a reading upon the old man that stresses his absolute otherness“ (1991: 85), indicated in the narrator’s final impression of the old man as „the type and genius of deep crime“ (Poe, [1845] 1986: 140). Despite a brief and uncertain claim of seeing a „diamond and ... a dagger“ ([1845] 1986: 136) beneath the old man’s cloak, the events of the story give no explanation for why the unnamed narrator arrived at such a profound conclusion. Deeming the stranger as a threat permits, at least symbolically, the *flâneur* to impose and exercise some control over his environment and in turn, allay any potential it presents in undermining his own subjectivity.



The *flâneur*'s impression of the urban space as threatening and unreadable and his subsequent efforts to exert control and thus restore embattled cultural privilege is common to all of the films selected for analysis in the subsequent chapters. This thesis will extend the contemporary readings of the *flâneur* which have interpreted Poe's „Man of The Crowd“ as depicting more general, modernist existentialist angst by offering such scholarship as a way to explore the specifically gendered, sexed and raced post-modern, ideological uncertainty of the filmic protagonists in the seven selected films. Doing so provides the means to examine how cinematic representations of racially dominant, heterosexual men have responded to and addressed significant cultural shifts which have brought about a more diverse and (apparently) less legible contemporary urban space.

### ***The Politics of Location: Gender and Public Space***

In recent years, *flânerie*, an inherently masculine and middle-class occupation, has emerged as a topic of feminist critical inquiry. Of particular interest to feminist scholars are the implicit gendered notions of space and belonging (or not belonging) and the implications such assessments have for women in the public domain. Through the dedicated efforts of some contemporary feminist historians, the implicit maleness of the *flâneur* and *flânerie* (denoted in its gendering as a masculine French noun) has been challenged. Several notable historical cases of women who walked disbarred and unfettered throughout the city have been identified (Brewter, 1959; Buffi, 1996; Conor, 2004; Epstein Nord, 1995; Munt, 1995; Parkhurst Ferguson, 1994; Oliver Parsons, 1997; Pratt, 1992; Radner, 1994, 1999; Rappaport, 2000; Thomas, 2006; Valentine, 2001; Wolff, 1985, 1994). Examples of the *flâneuse*, or female *flâneur*, have been found in cinema such as in *Roman Holiday* (1953, Dir: William Wyler) and *Lost In Translation* (2003, Dir: Sophia Coppola) (Mahoney, 1997; Murphy, 2006), television series such as *Sex and the City* (Richards, 2003) and in literature such as Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* series (Susina, 2002). These alternative narratives of women in an

urban setting go some way towards contesting persistent metanarratives not only within the public space but within the ways of reading it. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed examination of the *flâneuse*, it is worth noting briefly how women's former absence (or perceived absence) within the urban space offered men a forum through which to demonstrate their spatial competence and cultural privilege. By challenging the assumed masculine preserve of the city, important and potentially radical ideological work regarding the presumed passivity of women can be performed. Relevant also to this thesis is the way in which women's foray into the city space and thus public life more generally has been viewed as threatening to men throughout history. The deliberate sanctioning of women's movements and the obscuring of historical evidence which reveals women's urban presence illustrates the obvious anxiety experienced by men over the prospect of literally „losing ground“ to formerly marginalised „others“. This theme of „deterritorialisation“ (Byers, 1995) and how it operates allegorically to articulate a sense of cultural dislocation within cinematic representations of masculine post-modern anxiety will be explored in greater detail in the film analysis chapters which follow.

As shown above, contemporary scholarship on the *flâneur* in literature examines the psychological motivations of the urban spectator. By exposing the inherently fractured nature of the urban space, Edgar Allan Poe's (1845) short story provides much by way of explaining the underlying existentialist anxiety of the *flâneur* which necessitates the process of surveillance he undertakes. The perceived threat embodied by those who dissent from the *flâneur*'s reading of the urban space might therefore be understood as a manifestation of the *flâneur*'s own ideological insecurities. Feminist historians have offered similar accounts for why women's presence in the city during the late-nineteenth century challenged patriarchal notions of gendered behaviour. The way in which spatial competence determines masculine authority and the capacity for that authority to be undermined more generally is therefore

integral to informing the film analysis chapters, as well as the broader theoretical aims, of this thesis.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has examined the literary development of the *flâneur*, from its early inception as an allegory of urban spectatorship to its eventual adaption to communicate the growing unease posed by the inscrutable, modern, industrial age. Edgar Allan Poe's (1845) „Man of The Crowd“ was crucial in revealing the inherent existentialist uncertainty and threatened ideological security of the nineteenth-century *flâneur*. Implicit in this depiction is the desire to exercise control over an increasingly fluid public body, a desire mitigated by a sense of lost patriarchal authority. Recent challenges from feminist historians and literary scholars have contributed to contemporary criticisms and teased out the „masculine anxieties embedded in the *flâneur*“ (D'Souza & McDonough, 2006: 1), complicating the apparently confident appropriation of the urban space by men. It is this work, along with contemporary interpretations of historical depictions of urban strolling and spectatorship (Brand, 1991; Gunning, 1997; Salzani, 2007; Tester, 1994; Werner, 2001) which have identified an inherent sense of crisis in both the act of *flânerie* and the associated symbolic ordering of space which characterises this activity. These renewed scholarly readings have permitted modernist depictions of *flânerie* to be extended to explore cinematic representations of urban located existential angst within the post-modern context, where specifically masculine anxieties have been understood as a response to radical cultural shifts and events occurring in the last 30 years (Byers, 1995). Pomophobic *flânerie*, as I have termed it, therefore reveals the underlying fears motivating the act of strolling and looking as symptomatic of a perceived undermining of masculine cultural privilege more generally and provides part of the theoretical framework used to examine post-modern anxiety depicted in the films selected for analysis in this thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Camera Gendera: A Short History of Studying Men in Film*

#### *Introduction*

Feminist film theory has illuminated the ways masculine privilege, its expression and apparent loss, is represented in cinema. This chapter will offer a brief overview of some of the key ideas within specifically feminist-informed, film studies to provide a second plank to the overall theoretical framework within which this thesis, and the film analysis in Chapters Four, Five and Six more specifically, is situated.

Early theoretical accounts, such as those which developed out of the second wave of feminism, as well as the extensive body of work that formed around the initial explorations of masculinity in film will be covered in this overview. Research by prominent Black masculinities scholars contributing to the field of film studies will be considered to examine the ways in which race and class interact with gender to inform the cinematic representations of non-white, urban located masculinities. Providing such an overview establishes the political imperatives from which these earlier inquiries into film emerged as well as locates the theoretical place of this author's research.

#### *Mulvey (1975) and The Male Gaze*

The emphasis on gender in the production of meaning through cinematic text grew out of the second wave women's movement of the 1960s (Erens, 1990; Thornham, 1999). Pioneering feminist theorists contributing to this area of study (Johnston 1973; Haskell, 1974; Mulvey, 1975; Rosen, 1973) were initially concerned with the presumption of woman as image and man as bearer of the look. Mulvey's (1975) highly influential article „Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema“ adopted a psychoanalytical approach towards exploring how the cinematic

apparatus legitimates and perpetuates the patriarchal order by reflecting „the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle“ (1975: 6). Phallogentrism, according to Mulvey, „depends on the image of the castrated woman *to give order and meaning to its world*“ (1975: 6, this author’s emphasis), claiming further that „it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies“ (1975: 6). According to Mulvey, the masculine gaze therefore relies on the subordinated subject position of the specularised women in order to maintain his gender dominance and furthermore reinforce social norms.

Important new scholarship emerged out of Mulvey’s initial work. Feminist film critics later engaged with cinema’s capacity to construct viewing subjects beyond a psychoanalytical frame by developing new theoretical models influenced by philosophical thinkers and semioticians such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Félix Guattari (Erens, 1990, Shaviro, 1993). Major contributions to this field of research focussed on the relationship between images and ideology and how these operate to strengthen patriarchal assumptions about women, their bodies and gendered roles within society (De Lauretis, 1984; Kuhn, 1985; Silverman, 1988). Marxist theory, which theoretically underpinned a significant strand of the second-wave women’s movement, provided the means towards understanding the production and promotion of patriarchal ideologies through cinematic images (Gledhill, 1994).

Feminist film theory has since evolved into an extensive field of research. While an exploration of these works cannot be adequately undertaken here, a few key themes of concern however included female audience responses to film (Stacey & Kuhn, 1998), lesbian, bi-sexual and queer spectatorship (Dyer, 1990; Rich, 1998; Whatling, 1997), representations of the mother/maternal (Creed 1993; Kaplan, 1983), and the *femme fatale* (Doane, 1991;

Kaplan, 1980; Modleski, 1988; Wager, 1997). As theoretical approaches towards deconstructing the image of femininity in principally Hollywood film began to develop, interest moved inevitably to depictions of men in film as a way to scrutinise the taken for granted, and often overlooked, structuring norms which inform gender inequality.

Steve Neale's article „Masculinity as Spectacle“ (1983) is regarded as initiating a new focus on the representation of men in film. By questioning the inherent binary of Mulvey's gendered spectator/spectacle relationship within those films which feature a spectacular form of masculinity, Neale's article sought to examine the ways „heterosexual masculinity is inscribed and the mechanisms, pressures and contradictions that inscription may involve“ (Neale, 1983: 4). Focussing specifically on cinematic examples of iconic leading men depicted as locked in gladiatorial combat, Western/Gangster-style shoot outs and exuberant musicals, Neale suggests that the dichotomy of the specularised image and the spectatorial look can easily apply to images of men. Neale (1983) goes on to argue that while men can certainly be made the subject of erotic display/gaze, the homoeroticism implicit in the male body being marked as the fetishised object of another male look is constantly regulated through a process of repression and disavowal. This is often achieved through the deployment of „sado-masochistic themes, scenes and phantasies“ (1983: 8), which aim to displace the erotic look and turns the objectified male into a figure of identification.

„Masculinity as Spectacle“ therefore regards cinematic masculinity as a contested site, which does not readily lend itself to a straightforward reading of authority, dominance or privilege. Most significant is the way in which Neale (1983) calls into question prior feminist understandings of masculinity as monolithic and self-confident. Examinations of images of men in cinema such as Neale's have revealed the complex, conflicting and at times highly unstable, socially constructed nature of masculinity (Flood, 2007). Other works in this area,

such as Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark's (1993) collection of essays *Screening The Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* thus conceive of not a single masculinity, but of multiple masculinities, which develop often as a result of endless negotiations with cultural prescriptions which deem gendered behaviour as either appropriate or inappropriate.

### ***Playing the Part: Masculinities and Performance***

These academic investigations into the capacity for masculinities to be hierarchically organised and the means by which certain modes of masculinity acquire cultural power or authority owe much to R.W. Connell's work on masculinities (1987, 1995, 2000). Although Connell engages little with the power of representations or popular culture performances of gender, her detailed work on the fragility of, and tensions between, masculinities is critical to understanding the constructed nature of masculinities, the existence of multiple masculinities and the ways in which certain masculinities are privileged over others.

Connell's (1987, 1995, 2000) work on hegemonic masculinity arguably exerts the most influence on this area of inquiry. In *Gender and Power* (1987), Connell posits „hegemony“ in this instance to mean „a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes“ (1987: 184). Hegemonic masculinity is, then, premised on the privileging of heteronormativity, the subordination or peripheralising of alternative masculinities and the maintenance of patriarchal structures which inform the gender order (Connell, 1987). Most significant to this thesis is the ways in which:

„the cultural ideal (or ideals) of masculinity need not correspond at all closely to the actual personalities of the majority of men. Indeed the winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures...“

(1987: 184).

This brings to light the extent to which hegemonic masculinity is sustained through the consent, co-operation and complicity of large groups of individuals who although might recognise how remote these ideals are from the everyday experiences of men, nevertheless support venerated models of masculinity and in doing so, maintain the practices which institutionalise patriarchal power. While a focus strictly on media images neglects the more material, economic and physical foundations of power, doing so provides at least some insight into what masculine models are valued and the means by which certain masculinities become hegemonic, and in which contexts. This point is especially important in the analysis of film, which, as a pervasive and influential cultural text, is responsible for the construction and diffusion of images of certain masculinities as „normative“ and „hegemonic“ and others as „threatening“ or „deviant“.

Masculinity develops at particular moments in history and within specific geographic locations in response to the social, cultural, political and economic context within which these processes occur (Kimmel, 2003). What it is to be a man, therefore, is not static, homogeneous or coherent, but instead subject to change over time and according to place. Definitions of masculinity also vary while the ways in which men become gendered too differ depending on these social, cultural and economic determinants (Edwards, 2006; Kimmel & Messner, 1995). Masculinities scholars have explored how performances of masculinities vary across social contexts, cultures and sub-cultures. Johnnie David Spraggins, Jr. (1999) has studied the „disvalued embodied power“ (1999: 45) of Black men in the US through the possession of firearms, noting that Black, urban masculinities are predicated on gun ownership only in environments and social settings where economically and culturally underprivileged Black men are not the numerical majority. In other words, acting aggressive, intimidating and „cool“ (Majors & Mancini Billson, 1992) is seen as a coping mechanism for those men who feel displaced or undermined within a certain cultural context. These insights are especially



useful in Chapter Five when I consider the films *Boyz N The Hood* (1991, Dir: John Singleton) and *Menace II Society* (1993, Dir: Albert & Allen Hughes) in greater detail.

The disjunct between the production of gender and the representation of gender has provided fertile ground for the development of new ideas and debates surrounding social constructivism and sexual difference. Filmic representations of masculinity are thus performative in a dual sense, both that of the theatrical/cinematic performance known to be a fiction and yet invested with the added power of cinematic apparatus and star system. They are also performative in Judith Butler's (1990) terms in that stylised acts present the appearance of a coherent and "natural" gendered and sexed identity. These performative acts are invested with additional power when they come to represent the fiction of an „essential“ or „true“ masculinity or femininity (Perberdy, 2011).

As David Buchbinder argues (1998) the power of such representations of hetero-normative masculinity works „both as a reflection of a particular social reality and as a model“ (1998: *ix*) for male audiences/viewers to adopt, adapt or to aspire to. Popular films may be fiction but the representations of characters, events and/or „solutions“ within are often informed by actual events or by understandings or myths about social truths – including those of gender, race and class norms.

Butler's (1990) work opened up new avenues for theorising masculinity, which by this time was seen to be, relative to femininity, „the greatest pretender“ (Edwards, 2006: 105). Masculinities scholars have since argued that men more directly „perform“ gender than women (Connell, 2000; Simpson, 1994; Tincknell & Chambers, 2002) and that performing masculinity „correctly“ depends on the understanding and maintenance of normative structures which subordinate and marginalise alternative ways of being.

Ideas about preferred modes of masculinity vary not only across culture and class but also over time. Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner's (1995) *Men's Lives* adopts a „life course perspective“ (1995: xxii) to examine the ways in which ideas about masculinity do not remain constant from infancy to old age but instead are re-defined with the passage of time. For Kimmel and Messner (1995):

... our identity as men is developed through a complex process of interaction with the culture in which we both learn the gender scripts appropriate to our culture and attempt to modify those scripts to make them more palatable.

(1995: xxi).

This work reiterates both the ways in which masculinities are constructed in relation to varying and dynamic social, cultural, political and economic determinants and the extent to which gender is performed. The extent to which historical moments and political initiatives also inform the evolution of modes of masculinities and the privileging of certain masculinities according to class, race and socio-political context forms the central theme of the film analysis chapters which follow.

### ***HTFU!: Muscularity as Masculinity in Motion Picture Films***

The work of Susan Jeffords (1988, 1993, 1994) examining the privileging of hegemonic representations of masculinity within the US action-adventure film of the mid 1980s and early 1990s remains a seminal work in the study of masculinities in cinema. In *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994), Jeffords explores how the ideological aims and muscle-bound physicality characteristic of the Hollywood action-adventure hero corresponds with the policies, both domestic and foreign, of the then Reagan administration. At the heart of Jeffords' argument is the way in which action-adventure cinema attempts to facilitate a type of national healing through the symbolic figuration of America as a wounded (male) warrior: profoundly shaken by its Vietnam War defeat yet still brimming with

potential. By positioning the action-adventure hero as a surrogate for the reclamation of national ideals like heroism, strength and determination, Jeffords argues films such as *First Blood* (1982, Dir: Ted Kotcheff), *The Terminator* (1984, Dir: James Cameron) and *Robocop* (1987, Dir: Paul Verhoeven) analogise the country's collective triumph over adversity, a concept Reagan mobilised to full effect when attempting to win „hearts and minds“ during his presidency. Any effort to re-establish national pride in the wake of shameful defeat however has nearly always been depicted through an explicitly white, masculine identity, a point also made in the robust „muscularity“ of the action-adventure hero.

Jeffords had earlier rehearsed this argument in the article „Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of The White American Man“ (1988). Teasing out further the inherent hostile tendencies of these masculine re-articulations, Jeffords (1988) argues that the regeneration of the white male as victim within public discourse and cultural representations following the Vietnam War „might also be seen as a mechanism for a revised repudiation of the feminine“ (1988: 529). This is achieved through depicting the „enemy“ – government figures or the Vietcong – as alternatively weak-willed, cowardly, unpredictable, indecisive or dependent, all identifying features „traditionally perceived in American culture as feminine characteristics against which the masculine is defined“ (1988: 527). Restructuring the image and position of the white American male, most notably through film portrayals of Vietnam veterans as unwilling, if slightly naïve, victims abandoned by the government and abused by their fellow citizens upon their return home, reasserts masculine dominance while re-establishing US imperialist power. For Jeffords, representations of unqualified masculinity as depicted in Vietnam War films therefore „must be reviewed in relation to gender and not merely as an endorsement of the military or an associated adventurism“ (1988: 534). Jeffords' analysis provides a useful introduction to James William Gibson's (1994) „New Warrior“ which

informs the militarism of post-Vietnam cinema such as *Taxi Driver*, a film which will be discussed in greater length in Chapter Three.

Masculinity as spectacle, whereby the male action hero is presented simultaneously as tortured yet powerfully authoritative is further explored in the works of David Savran (1996) and Yvonne Tasker (1993a, 1993b, 2004). Both authors view manifestations of reactionary, fractured heroism of action-adventure films, specifically the *Rambo* trilogy, as emblematic of the performative nature of gender, a concept spearheaded by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1991). Locating the articulation of a specifically (spectacularly) muscle-bound male suffering within a cultural context, Savran (1996) suggests the „slender and precarious gains“ (1996: 139) of social initiatives such as feminism and civil and gay rights activism combined with economic recession and sense of unease felt from the loss of the Vietnam War brought about a certain „reflexive-sadomasochism“ in the cinematic representation of a post-World War II masculinity. Savran conceives of the „reflexive-sadomasochist“ as one who „takes the role of the female, who can be occupational and emotional, and at the same time capable of portraying heroic masochism in the face of disasters“ (1996: 127). Both dominant and submissive, the reflexive-sadomasochist, Savran argues, is symptomatic of a white, masculine fantasmatic which emerged in the years following the 1960s „in order to facilitate an adjustment to changed material circumstances, by encouraging the white male subject“s simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the role of victim“ (1996: 128). The para-militarism of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* and Bill „D-FENS“ Foster in *Falling Down* exemplify this dominant/submissive subjectivity, as they relish their roles as victim yet at the same time assert their control through violence. This dichotomy and its ability to work as a recuperative strategy to restore ideological borders will be explored in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five.

Equally, Yvonne Tasker (1993a, 1993b) sees the masculinity embodied by the action-adventure hero of the 1980s and 1990s as operating within and reacting against wider systems of power, especially those which, in light of shifting definitions of men and women's roles, have become increasingly difficult to maintain. In „Dumb Movies for Dumb People: Masculinity, the Body, and the Voice in Contemporary Action Cinema“ Tasker (1993a) examines the performative aspects of masculinity in cinema and the ways in which being compelled to act „manly“ are attempts to reconcile broader anxieties regarding men's status within the current cultural context. Tasker sees the action genre as working through „a set of motifs related to sexuality and authority, motifs which are mapped on to both narrative structure and the body of the male hero“ (1993a: 233). As a result of this work, the previously assumed association between brute strength and male dominance has been significantly problematised, revealing instead that such depictions of masculinity are often deployed so as to give the appearance of ideological cohesion in an effort to safeguard against permeation by a perceived cultural threat. In this way, Jeffords's, Tasker's and Savran's insights complement theoretically Thomas B. Byers's (1995) concept of pomophobia, in which the key political and cultural shifts occurring in the post-WWII years have played out in both the aesthetic and narrative principles in certain contemporary films and revealed the vulnerabilities of hegemonic constructions of masculinity.

By way of demonstrating how such cinematic masculinities continue to be relevant even 15 years after these authors' articles were first published, it might be worth noting that as recently as 2008, quintessential „hard body“ Sylvester Stallone reprised his role as Vietnam/Cold War veteran John Rambo in the film *Rambo*<sup>7</sup>. Directed by Stallone, *Rambo* traces the iconic veteran's movements as he is recruited by a pastor in order to save a group of

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<sup>7</sup> The first John Rambo movie, *First Blood* (1982), is often erroneously referred to as *Rambo*, and thus should not be confused with the 2008 film *Rambo*.

kidnapped US missionaries held hostage by Burmese militia. While the religious aspect of Rambo's assignment could be read as simply reflecting the overt reference to Christianity within US political discourse following 9/11, it is also interesting to consider how such a supposedly historically located, iconic male figure, who played such a central role in cinematic constructions of national identity during the 1980s, remains a potent, at least readily accessible, symbol of strength, determination and US militarism almost 30 years after *First Blood* was released. Explanations of the cinematic tendency to recuperate the embattled patriarchal order through exaggerated depictions of violent masculinity as offered by Jeffords (1988, 1994) Tasker (1993a, 1993b, 2004) and Savran (1996) therefore remain key academic texts within the field of feminist film theory due to the endless appeal of narratives of culturally dominant men in crisis. While particular performances of masculinity are viewed as being more vulnerable to destabilisation than others, the recuperative strategies deployed to shore up this ideological uncertainty nonetheless revert to the same formula: deploying violence as a means to exert control over and thus alleviate the threat posed by his cultural „other“.

Jeffords's, Tasker's and Savran's work has provided meaningful insights into the ways in which specific political initiatives and events have provoked the anxiety, hostility and „backlash“ characteristic of the films that will later be examined. Nevertheless these authors only go so far towards explaining the social, cultural, political and economic context from which these specific representations of masculinity emerged. Other markers of identity, such as race, class and sexuality, are implicit in these readings of masculinity, however only through the ways in which white masculinity is privileged. This thesis goes onto argue in Chapter Five that there are examples of Black masculinity in film which, although marginalised within hierarchies of masculinities, negotiate/consolidate power imbalances through recuperative strategies similar to those described by Jeffords (1988, 1993, 1994) and

Tasker (1993a, 1993b, 2004). Theorists concerned with cinematic depictions of race in film also illuminate the ways non-white masculinities can also occupy places of privilege within certain contexts, thus further exposing the underlying patriarchal assumptions which reinforce gender inequality within marginalised groups.

### *Of Race and Men*

Research on representations of race in film has expanded significantly in the years following the theoretical breakthroughs which established feminist film theory as a critical component of the discipline of gender studies (Pines & Willemen, 1989). Bell hooks was among the first Black feminist authors to examine the complex inter-relationships between gender, race and class within mediated cultural product, which hooks views as inevitably tied to concepts of commodification and consumerism (1992, 2004). Critical of feminist film theory and its reliance on psychoanalytical explanations of sexual difference as the exclusive signifier of difference, hooks, writing within a cultural studies framework, argues that the Black female spectator has been largely ignored from structures of visual pleasure. Hooks suggests that it was the dominant tendency of white, middle-class feminists contributing to the construction of film theory to envision gender difference as the only determinant of women's oppression. The subversive potential of the Black female as spectator thus offers a significant contribution to film analysis theory proposed by Mulvey (1975), by exploring the ways in which race and class might resist, contest or oppose processes of audience identification. For hooks (1992):

Spaces of agency exist for black [sic] people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally.

(1992: 116).

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) hooks examines instances whereby the Eurocentric (implicitly masculine) gaze makes racial minorities the object of spectacle. Perhaps most interested in representations of Black masculinity, hooks warns against multicultural ideas of Black appreciation, which she argues occasionally slips uncomfortably into race appropriation and, at its furthest point, into domains which constitute an overt „exotification“<sup>8</sup> of Black men and their bodies. Hooks goes on to argue that Black producers of Black culture, such as film makers and rap artists, risk playing into the hands of white culture“s fascination with Blackness in ways which see racial difference recuperated into dominant ideologies. While representations of a specifically Black, male, „ghetto-centric“ experience might serve to protect Black men from white racist imaginings, hooks argues that such images „support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people“ (1992: 2) by offering little to no alternative to the cultural depiction of Black men as violent aggressors compensating for a denial of patriarchal power. Such limited depictions, hooks suggests, further reveal Black men“s privileged victim status within the sphere of anti-racist political discourse and highlight the continual marginality of Black female, Black gay male and Black lesbian experiences within cultural product such as film.

Paula J. Massood (1996, 2001, 2003) extended hook“s argument in her work regarding Black cinematic masculinities, specifically as they appear within the „Hood“ genre of film. Like hooks, Massood argues for the need for the Black community to maintain a cultural base from which to speak, and views the Hood genre as providing a medium through which the social, political and economic conditions affecting inner city Black people can be brought to mainstream attention. Nevertheless, these representations provide only a limited perspective, one which reinscribes and maintains the marginal status of Black women, a theme Massood

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<sup>8</sup> The exotification of Asian cultures within film has also been explored by film theorists. For more, see Marchetti, G. (1993), *Romance and The “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, University of California Press: Berkeley and Shimizu, C. Pa. (2007), *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, Duke University Press: Durham, North Carolina.



sees as especially prevalent in Albert and Allen Hughes' (1993) *Menace II Society* (discussed in Chapter Five). Crucial also to Massood's contribution to the study of masculinity in film is the way in which space and time come to bear on cinematic inscriptions of the Black inner city (Massood, 2003). Massood argues that through a similar temporal/spatial matrix, the Black, urban, under-class, masculine experience is both informed and defined by the extreme conditions of the city. These insights have been especially useful for this author's examination of the Hood genre and the way in which a particularly aggressive Black masculinity, predicated on gun culture, chronic unemployment, poverty and gang violence, is symptomatic of specifically masculine, post-modern anxieties regarding cultural dislocation more broadly. Massood makes her contribution to this area by suggesting that the socio-political conditions which cause masculinity to become unstable appear to be amplified within extreme environments. It is here that Massood's work proves valuable for the analysis of films which depict urban bound, post-modern masculine anxiety.

Feminist film theory provides not only the means through which to explore the representation of masculinities and femininities in cinema, but to understand and interrogate ideological predispositions embedded within these images which inform normative gender relations beyond their mediated manifestations. Focussing on cinematic masculinities more specifically allows for the examination of the contradictions present within masculinity. Of particular interest to contemporary gender studies scholars is the potential for masculinity to become susceptible to destabilisation, a theme that has emerged in recent studies into the crisis in masculinity. It is within the so-called „backlash“ films of the 1990s that this supposed crisis finds cultural expression. In researching the analytical chapters within this thesis, some of the most useful works in the field have been from those scholars who examine cinematic representations of specifically white masculinity experiencing and reacting to a sense of lost cultural dominance as a response to profound cultural shifts. Nevertheless,

scholarly works focussing on strictly white masculine post-modern anxiety seems preoccupied with representations of masculinity within the action-adventure genre. While these depictions are arguably the most spectacular embodiment of masculine crisis, it has proved advantageous to apply the arguments of Jeffords (1988, 1993, 1994) and Tasker (1993a, 1993b, 2004) to domains beyond the jungles of Vietnam or a post-apocalyptic, futuristic setting. Doing so reveals the extent to which specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety is observable within mainstream cinema, and not limited to contexts which are especially susceptible to hysterical, overtly militaristic, masochistic displays of violent aggression. Bell hooks (1992, 2004) and Paula J. Massood (1996, 2001, 2003) have enlivened this area of scholarship by infusing such readings of masculine crisis with analysis of films depicting the Black, urban located masculine experience. These authors' works thus provide a valuable contribution to the discussion of *Menace II Society* (Dir: Albert & Allen Hughes, 1993) and *Boyz N The Hood* (Dir: John Singleton, 1991) in Chapter Five of this thesis.

Crucial to the overall aim of this thesis is the examination of how cinema has represented the perceived loss of masculine authority within the urban space. This author argues that the either actual or perceived loss of prerogatives previously regarded as exclusively masculine prescribes and allegorises a deeper ideological uncertainty regarding men's current cultural status more broadly. Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis will explore this sense of cultural displacement as it is cinematically represented in seven films through the examination of the several key cultural shifts and their effect on the formerly privileged, masculine subject.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter provided a brief overview of some important contributions from feminist film theorists which began with Laura Mulvey's influential article on the masculine gaze (1975). Feminist film criticism has since expanded to consider the competing and subversive spectatorship which disrupts the implicitly gendered and heteronormative image/bearer of the look dichotomy while still maintaining the political initiatives intended by Mulvey's theory (Neale, 1983). Contemporary feminist film theory has responded to a preoccupation of gender studies scholars more generally by exploring representations of men in crisis, particularly as it has been depicted through the aesthetic of the action-adventure genre (Jeffords, 1988, 1994; Tasker, 1993a, 1993b, 2004). Studies into men in film have revealed how cinema reinforces gendered assumptions which inform patriarchal power, as well as how film operates as an apparatus through which to articulate masculine fears. The work of bell hooks (1992, 1994, 2004) has broadened the scope of analysis of representations of men in film by exposing the ideological claims which underpin cinematic depictions of non-white, under-class men. This research has helped illuminate the films selected for analysis in this thesis which allegorise the loss of masculine privilege within the urban space. The cultural shifts which Thomas B. Byers (1995) identifies as facilitating the sense of threatened patriarchal authority in the formerly privileged, masculine subject will be analysed in greater detail in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Behind You!: Pomophobia and Poor, Rich, Straight Whitey*

#### *Introduction*

In Chapter One, it was argued that the nineteenth-century solitary urban stroller has been interpreted as an allegory for cultural displacement (Brand, 1991; Gunning, 1997; Salzani, 2007; Tester, 1994; Werner, 2001). By highlighting the inherent discontent in the *flâneur*, particularly as *flânerie* is portrayed in Edgar Allan Poe's (1845) „Man of The Crowd“, the existentially uncertain yet acutely engaged urban spectator might achieve ideological completion through perceiving himself as vulnerable to the threats posed by his environment. In order to examine more thoroughly the social and cultural context from which the sense of masculine disaffection develops, Chapter Three will provide a brief summary of Thomas B. Byers' (1995, 1996) concept of pomophobia, a discussion which forms the third plank of the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Through pomophobia, Byers attributes the perception of male crisis to four key cultural events occurring during a particular moment in United States history: the re-emergence of the feminist movement; the rise of the civil rights movement; the gay and lesbian rights movements; and the United States' defeat in the Vietnam War. In addition to these shifts in contemporary Western society, the post-Fordist transformation of first world economies that led to the decline in traditional, blue-collar employment and recessions in both the United States and comparable capitalist economies has likewise offered explanation for the gradual erosion of traditional masculinity and its concomitant cultural privilege. David Savran (1996) has described the economic impact of these recessions on men as contributing to the „wholesale re-configuration of white American masculinity“ (1996: 135). Byers agrees, adding that transitions from an industrial to informational economy has forced the job market to downsize, creating insecurity amongst men who had formerly relied upon their status as

breadwinners to inform their masculine identity. It is these cultural shifts and events which Byers (1995, 1996) attributes to the radical destabilisation of normative masculinity in contemporary Western culture. Not only does Byers provide an incisive account of this previously unnamed cultural narrative, but he examines post-modern anxiety, or pomophobia, as it is represented specifically within motion picture films. Byers' concept therefore illuminates the specifically gendered, sexed, raced and class-based hostility displayed by the male protagonists within the films selected for analysis in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis. It is from his theory of pomophobia that I have developed the term *pomophobic flâneur* to account for the behaviours and attitudes of the protagonists in most of these films.

This chapter will examine how social change brought about by the above social, political and economic shifts identified by Byers has impacted upon gender relations, employment and the family. Establishing the link between these various cultural initiatives and events with the re-configuration of white, heterosexual masculinity as a vulnerable subjectivity forms part of the overall theoretical framework through which to explore the cinematic representations of specifically masculine, urban located, post-modern anxiety. It will be argued that threatened patriarchal authority within the private sphere of the family and the workplace provides the rationale, or impetus, for the hostilities towards marginalised „others“ which are cinematically rehearsed within the equally fragmented and uncertain terrain of the urban space. This chapter will begin by offering a brief overview of how the so-called crisis in masculinity has been understood by gender studies theorists. Doing so provides a useful starting point towards summarising Byers' (1995, 1996) contribution to this area of academic literature, which argues that advances in feminism, particularly as it has impacted upon the arrangement of the traditional bourgeois family, reproductive technology and the role of fathers, have brought about a shift in the construction of masculinity, producing an identity crisis in racially dominant, heterosexual men. These themes, as well as global recession and its effect on the

post-industrial workplace, will also be considered in this chapter. Finally, the role of the United States' defeat in the Vietnam War in creating a climate of national vulnerability concludes the exploration of the various cultural threats to the formerly dominant, masculine subject which converge to form what Byers has termed pomophobia.

### ***'Masculinity in Crisis'***

Commentators in both academic and non-academic fields suggest that masculinity is in crisis. According to Linda McDowell (2003) this crisis became most evident „sometime in the 1990s“, (2003: 58) when „the stories of what it means to be a man started to unravel“ (2003: 58). The sense of crisis – either real or symbolic – has come to constitute a widely employed, albeit heterogeneous, set of concerns regarding men as individual subjects but also masculinity as a cultural identity (Edwards, 2006).

Men's shifting and increasingly contradictory role in the post-modern, post-colonial, (post)-feminist world has been the subject of inquiry by academics from a diverse range of fields such as sociology (Brod & Kaufman, 1994; Carey, Maclean & White, 1996; Connell, 1987, 1995, 1997; Faludi, 1999; Kimmel 2006), media studies (Burgess, 1985; Craig, 1992; Hanke, 1998), cultural studies (Canaan; 1991; Clatterbaugh, 1990, 2000; Jackson, 2006) literary criticism (Baker, 2006; Hendershot, 1998; Roberts, 1999) and psychoanalysis (Horrocks, 1994; Mosse, 1996). Consequently, masculinities studies has emerged as a formidable area of research, with one author terming this encouraging theoretical treatment of the (heterosexual) male subject as „academic Viagra“ (Traister, 2000). However, as R. W. Connell (2001) notes, questions about men have „ceased to be a specialist concern of a small group of intellectuals“ (2001: 4), with media interest in masculinity – although intermittent – symptomatic of the move from strictly scholarly to mainstream, populist debate.

These media-based commentaries are often indicative of a wider moral panic concerning young boys and anti-social behaviour, usually attributed to a lack of socialisation or exposure to violence in the media. These debates became particularly prevalent in the aftermath of a spate of schoolyard shootings in the United States (Neroni, 2000), which extended the already fertile ideological ground regarding the crisis in boy's education (Biddulph & Stanish, 1997; Marsden, 1998). Such public debates around this time argued that the education system had become feminised due to the makeup of the staff being predominately female, increased academic performance of girls, resulting in poor academic performance amongst boys, low retention rates and thus diminished employment prospects for young men. The perceived detrimental effects of violent video games (Burrill, 2008), rap and heavy metal music have been made the focus of public debate regarding delinquency amongst adolescent boys (Binder, 1993; Wright, 2000). Higher rates of industrial accidents, alcoholism, tobacco use, substance abuse, high risk sexual behaviour, violent conduct, sporting injuries and motor vehicle death amongst young male drivers have all been viewed by social commentators not as symptomatic of a desire to conform to outmoded and increasingly obsolete cultural prescriptions of masculinity as gender studies theorists and sociologists have claimed (Connell, 2000; Hartig, 2000; Richardson & Scott, 2002; Walker, 1998), but as adaptive responses to contemporary society's apparent disengagement with values embodied within the traditional gender order.

In these instances atypical and extreme stories of individuals assume exaggerated importance as *typifying* all that is „wrong“ with contemporary society, while fictional cultural texts – such as popular films – likewise become symbols around which populist groups campaign. As mentioned previously in Chapter Two, cinematic representations of embattled and disillusioned men have come to stand in for, or work as condensing symbols of, current debates over the apparent sense of uncertainty brought about by the dissolution of structuring

norms which informed (and privileged) prior understandings of masculinity. Filmic portrayals of doggedly determined paternal men such as *Three Men and a Baby* (Dir: Leonard Nimoy, 1987) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Dir: Chris Columbus, 1993) for instance offer scenarios whereby the culturally dispossessed masculine subject facilitates both his own inclusion into domains thought to have been „feminised“ as well as the reassimilation of women back into traditional gender roles. Moreover, depictions of men who have been exploited or humiliated by „scheming“ and „unscrupulous“ women (both within the family and workplace) such as in *Disclosure*, (Dir: Barry Levinson, 1994) and *Fatal Attraction* (Dir: Adrian Lyne, 1987) give cultural weight or iconic status to the claim that social movements and initiatives intended to address the imbalance between the sexes have „gone too far“ and that white, heterosexual men are now victims of a variety of minority rights claims (discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four). Film, like all media forms, offers a vehicle through which dominant ideologies are constructed and disseminated, providing an accessible means through which the audience can engage and assimilate itself. It is for this reason that critically analysing cinematic texts is necessary to gain greater understanding of the culture from which the text emerged.

### ***Thomas B. Byers' Pomophobia (1995)***

The re-emergence of fictional masculinity in crisis provoked a proliferation of academic literature which examines the specifically filmic portrayal of predominantly white, heterosexual men as increasingly uncertain about issues of identity (Baker, 2006; Boman, 2003; Chaudhuri, 2006; Edwards, 2006; Fradley, 2004; Gill, 2003; Holland & O'Sullivan, 1999; Jeffords, 1988, 1993, 1994; Kimmel, 2006; Lehman, 1993, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Shaviro, 1993; Tasker, 1993a, 1993b, 2004). Thomas B. Byers (1995) offers perhaps the most pertinent contribution to this particular study with his theory of pomophobia. In his essay „Terminating the Postmodern: Masculinity and Pomophobia“ (1995) Byers has elaborated upon the concept of what feminists and masculinities theorists have previously termed simply



„backlash“ (Faludi, 1991; Flood, 2004; French, 1992; Oakley & Mitchell, 1997; Superson & Cudd, 2002). Defined by Byers as „reactions against progressive attempts to destabilize patriarchal heterosexual hegemony“ (Byers, 1995:6), pomophobia is characterised by hostilities towards, and an undue pre-occupation with, the perceived threat of the feminine (and feminised), racial, sexual, socio-economic, generational, and political „others“, indeed any force which challenges white, heterosexual, male superiority (Byers, 1995). For Byers, pomophobia is symptomatic of the post-modern era, where a single, unified and coherent identity is no longer viable. It is not, Byers explains, simply a „matter of the subject“s dislocation or transition from an old place to a new one“ (Byers, 1995: 7), but rather „the current crisis threatens to transform or even overthrow the whole *concept* of identity“ (1995: 7, emphasis in original). To combat the sense of cultural usurpation from formerly marginalised „others“ (women, gay, non-white men), the pomophobe will enact certain measures to restore their embattled patriarchy. A hysterical, sometimes elaborate, at times „spectacular“ (Byers, 1995: 6) reinvestment of traditional masculinity is the primary recuperative strategy towards reinforcing supposedly weakened identity borders.

The concept of pomophobia has not been widely applied within cinema studies despite its intended use as a means through which to understand reactionary male protagonists within film. Those works which do utilise the concept appear only to examine films which might be regarded as largely science fiction, action-adventure or fantasy. Laura Bartlett and Thomas B. Byers“ „Back to the Future: The Humanist Matrix“ (2003) and Amanda Fernbach“s „The Fetishization of Masculinity in Science Fiction: The Cyborg and the Console Cowboy“ (2000) both examine the trends in contemporary Sci-Fi cinema which articulate the apocalyptic anxieties of the post-modern, post-human subject. In „History Re-Membered – „Forrest Gump“, Postfeminist Masculinity, and the Burial of the Counterculture“ (1996) Byers, working from his pomophobia thesis, views the film *Forrest Gump* (1994, Dir: Robert

Zemeckis) as having an overt conservative and reactionary agenda, exemplified in the deliberate erasure or negative portrayal of the counterculture movements and those engaged with them. The naïve, passive and indiscriminating (if not intellectually disabled) first person narration of the titular character makes this „re-membering/rewriting“ (Byers, 1996: 421) of a particularly progressive moment in US history all the more credible to the audience.

Interestingly, scholarly discussion on pomophobia has been used to include depictions of the pomophobe in literary fiction, such as in Mark Storey’s examination of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* and Dennis Cooper’s *Frisk* (Storey, 2005). By examining examples of men increasingly uncertain about their changing role within contemporary society as it is represented in modern literature, Storey (2005) offers the potential for explorations of specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety to be extended to domains beyond science fiction cinema. The concept of pomophobia can usefully be applied to explore representations of men reacting against and attempting to reconcile a sense of cultural displacement within the urban space, a domain which has not previously been analysed in terms of the specific socio-political events which have supposedly given rise to feelings of post-modern angst in men. Analysing such filmic representations of specifically urban bound, post-modern masculine anxiety reveals the underlying ideological uncertainties which inform masculine discontent as well as exposes the role of cinema in perpetuating notions of male victimisation within the wider social context.

This chapter now moves to briefly explore each facet of the social, political, cultural and economic developments which Byers (1995, 1996) identifies as contributing towards a sense of post-modern anxiety. Examining each of the social, political, cultural and economic shifts which have occurred in the post-World War II years and impacted on the experiences of formerly dominant men provides the socio-political context for the film analysis chapters.

## ***Feminism***

Feminism remains one of the most conspicuous challenges to white, male cultural hegemony. Not only does feminism offer a critique of patriarchal and phallogocentric ways of thinking which facilitate women's oppression, feminism also proposes that gendered identities are not fixed, but instead develop through a process of interaction with the various social institutions which determine appropriate and inappropriate gender behaviour (Cranny-Francis et al., 2003). If gender is understood to be a product of social/cultural conditioning, then the gendering/sexing practices which maintain patriarchal prerogatives can be examined critically. Through questioning the „naturalness“ of gender binaries, feminism has provided the theoretical framework (and possible practical action) to challenge conservative, pejorative notions of race, ethnicity and sexuality. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, inter-sexed and queer identities are fundamentally interrogative of categories of gender and sexuality and therefore expose the fragility – or at least potential fluidity – of existing gender, sexual, and in some cases biological, identities (Smith, 1996).

Instrumental in bringing about considerable practical change (through the reformation of rape, sexual assault, domestic violence and abortion laws, no-fault divorce and equal opportunity legislation amongst others) as well as proving beneficial to the lives of many women therapeutically, feminism offers a great deal in terms of strategies for men to „deconstruct and dismantle their own culturally determined masculinity“ (McLean, 1996: 15). However it is the reconfiguring of gender relations brought about by the feminist movement (particularly in its second wave incarnation during the 1960s and 1970s) which has been the focus of much anger and resentment by men. „Feminism“, as Christine Boman (2003) explains, „represents a significant challenge to the patriarchal gender order and, as such, it has often been met with resistance and hostility by men whose interests are best served by maintaining the *status quo*“ (Boman, 2003: 129).

In Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999) feminism (and feminists in particular) are constructed by her interviewees as an ubiquitous and incendiary force, implicated somehow in every major disruption to the respondent's life story. Feminists are blamed for the dissolution of marriages, as exemplified in one respondent's comments: „It basically was the feminist movement who destroyed my marriage...because [my wife] went to college in the sixties. She's so twisted now she can't trust a man, especially a husband" (1999: 416). Feminist-inspired workplace reform is seen by another respondent as compromising occupational safety: „When I was an ironworker, there were some women up there, thirty feet in the air. Women shouldn't be up that high. They're gonna get you killed. They need to stay where they are placed" (1999: 415). The discontent expressed by the men in Faludi's book highlights the ways in which feminism has threatened the hegemonic discourses which formerly hegemonic men depend on in order to construct their normative masculinity and in turn individual women are blamed for these men's subsequent insecurity and resentment. The hostility expressed by these real-life informants is echoed in the reactionary ideology presented in Schumacher's *Falling Down* (explored in Chapter Five), which portrays the female characters, all of whom occupy considerably less screen time (and physical space) than the male characters, as stifling men's independent, professional pursuits with excessive demands or shrewish hysteria (Dunn & Winchester, 1999).

### ***Civil Rights***

Claims of male disenfranchisement are often tinged with an implicit racial component. The civil rights movement of the mid-1950s to late 1960s in the US is regarded by Byers (1995, 1996) as a significant element in the cinema re-imagining of the white man as „victim". Legislation enacted in the US during the 1960s which sought the banning of discrimination on the grounds of race – the most significant being the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – remain amongst the greatest achievements of post-World War II political activism. However

the movement was equally successful in revealing the „institutional racism“ which underpins wider systems of oppression (Guinier & Torres, 2002). For that reason, efforts to address racial inequality have been interpreted by those who rely on such structures to maintain their cultural dominance as not simply a critique of the asymmetrical distribution of resources, but as a concerted move to bring about „the general collapse of master narratives“ (Byers, 1995: 6), an anxiety that characterises pomophobia.

Although the civil rights movement and the affirmative action legislation which followed has not resulted in any decline of economic or political authority for whites (Savran, 1996), attempts to end racial discrimination, strengthen voting rights and improve economic self-sufficiency amongst Black communities continues to be viewed by conservatives as an implicit attack on the prerogatives which previously sustained normative white privilege. Claims of „reverse racism“, where members of racially dominant groups perceive their access to rights as having been compromised following such legislation characterises much of the racist hostility expressed by D-FENS in *Falling Down* (Chapter Five) and by Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (Chapter Four). Indeed, the “racial „other“ as threat” motif re-emerges later in Chapter Six when the „outsider“ status of Elvis Valderez and reactive insularity of the residents of Corpus Christi, Texas, forms part of the overall examination of James Marsh’s *The King*. The implicit stereotyping of non-white „others“ as criminal, even in instances where minority races occupy positions of authority is also apparent in Alex Proyas’ (1994) *The Crow* (discussed in greater length in Chapter Four).

Most crucial to my reading of the selected films which explicitly engage with racial politics is the representation of „Black rage“ (Diawara, 1993) in the portrayals of Black, urban, under-class males in *Boys N The Hood* and *Menace II Society*. Although affirmative action legislation within the US did guarantee Black individuals greater equality with whites within

a legal context, these important gains did not necessarily translate to greater social mobility and economic improvement for under-class non-whites living in the inner cities (Guerrero, 1993). As Singleton's (1991) and the Hughes Brothers' (1993) films illustrate, Black people and other minority races within the US continue to lag behind whites with regards to all relevant social indicators including housing, education, income, employment and health (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). The lack of real progress in the lives of most inhabitants of the „hood, I argue, informs the compensatory sexism and hyper-masculine behaviour of the young, Black, urban male protagonists in the Hood films discussed in Chapter Five.

### ***Employment and Post-Industrial Collapse***

Opposition to feminist activism and affirmative action legislation is at its most intense when attributed as the cause of men's unemployment. Not only does employment offer a means by which men construct a sense of self worth, it also has a significant impact on young men's social development. In *Redundant Masculinities?: Employment Change and White Working Class Youth* (2003) Linda McDowell notes that for many young men, „holding down a job and bringing in money [is] seen as the chief route to constructing an independent adult masculine identity“ (2003: 165). However several factors, such as the decline of manufacturing, downsizing and the increasing participation of women in the workforce have, according to Tim Edwards (2006), contributed to the „undermining of any direct relationship of masculinity with work *per se*“ (2006: 9).

The shift from manufacturing employment to service-sector occupations has transformed the workplace for many men. Service work, according to McDowell, „demands care, deference and docility as key attributes of a desirable workplace identity – characteristics that are more commonly identified as feminine than masculine traits“ (2003: 3). This „feminisation“ of the labour market has ensured that women are now seen as preferred employees in these

emerging service industries. During the 1970s and 1980s feminist activism around equality of employment resulted in numerous policy and institutional shifts allowing for greater female participation within paid work. Affirmative action legislation for instance was introduced to overcome prejudices and structural barriers to women's promotions. In the US similar legislation was introduced for Black and other minority race employees. These measures to achieve structural equality have been greatly resented by many white men who see their opportunities for advancement and for economic security as limited through the promotion of women and non-whites. Others argue that whilst affirmative action was an appropriate measure for a specific historical period it is now obsolete and indeed threatens men's chances of promotions. The growing visibility of women and non-whites within the once exclusively white male workplace is a theme inferred in the films *Taxi Driver* (Chapter Four) and *Falling Down* (Chapter Five).

### ***Downsizing***

Through retrenchments or redundancies, or through failing to replace workers who resigned, more than half of all workplaces in major developed economies had undergone some form of downsizing by the mid 1990s (Rifkin, 1995). Technological advances have contributed to the massive lay-offs within the manufacturing sector, particularly within the US. In *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin (1995) argues that the continued reliance on machine surrogates has forced „millions of blue and white collar workers into unemployment lines, or worse still, breadlines“ (1995: 3). The threat of technological dispossession viewed by Rifkin as more a measure to increase productivity and profits rather than to liberate people from extended work hours (Rifkin, 1995), has been the source of added anxiety to male employees who see their job security already compromised by progressive equal opportunity and affirmative action initiatives.

Rifkin (1995) suggests that unemployed men have reacted in extreme ways to communicate occupational insecurities. The hard-core unemployed, those who have been out of work for six months or more, become so discouraged by the job seeking experience that they stop looking for work altogether. Such is the profound psychological impact of joblessness that, it has been suggested, the long term unemployed manifest symptoms of a slow death. Ill health, isolation and in extreme cases, suicide result for men for whom work has been an integral part of daily existence (Rifkin, 1995). Even more startling, downsizing and the inevitable retrenchments have incited men to become demonstratively hostile towards co-workers and employers. Rifkin explains how laid off employees are shooting their workmates „with increasing frequency“, (1995: 196), making homicide the third major cause of death in the workplace (Rifkin, 1995). Some of the cases of workplace violence experienced in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s can be seen reflected in the plot of *Falling Down* (1993, Dir: Joel Schumacher) when Bill „D-FENS“ Foster threatens a shopkeeper with a baseball bat for refusing him change and antagonises staff and customers whilst brandishing an automatic machine gun at a fast food outlet when he is denied the breakfast menu because he is a few seconds late. The role of down-sizing in bringing about occupational (indeed psychological) insecurity in men who rely upon their employment status to assure their social power is also referenced in *Falling Down*, explored in greater detail in Chapter Five.

### ***Changing Gender Roles in Families***

With the interplay of the aforementioned factors resulting in an increasingly diverse labour force, men are no longer the sole breadwinner of the majority of households. As such, „the “dual earner” has increasingly become the usual arrangement for couples since the 1950s“ (Edwards & Wajcman, 2005: 46). This trend is especially pronounced in capitalist economies such as the US, UK and Australia, where „neo-liberal policies of deregulation have predominated“ (Edwards & Wajcman, 2005: 46). Many feminist academics therefore have



speculated that the apparently changing attitudes towards women in the workforce is less to do with the growing acceptance of women as economically viable citizens, and more to do with the need to contribute to the household income due to increases in the cost of living (Craig, 2006; Probert, 2002; Singleton & Maher, 2004). Paul Edwards & Judy Wajcman (2005) for instance attribute the rates of women in employment to overall changes in capitalism, resulting in an „intensification of market pressures over the last few decades“ (2005: 46). Following dramatic, yet „stilted“ (Probert, 2002) shifts within the workforce, the institution of the family has undergone change. Tim Edwards (2006) argues that:

while women undoubtedly often remain disadvantaged in many ways, there is also little doubt that any simplistic equation of masculinity and men with the public sphere and work, and femininity and women with the private sphere and home, has at least become more complex even if it has not necessarily begun to break down.

(2006: 9).

Couples have had to re-negotiate new patterns of parental responsibility to accommodate the strain felt by dual-income households. Women have been exposed to powerful cultural rhetoric which suggests that it is possible to maintain a household whilst still be engaged in paid employment. Despite the frequency and voracity with which the image of the „supermum“ has been promoted in popular culture, some women report that it is difficult to combine these roles (Edwards & Wajcman, 2005; Probert, 2002; Singleton & Maher, 2004). Some women who actively pursued career advancement throughout their twenties and thirties have expressed resentment for having remained childless and single. With careers which are no longer rewarding and the prospect of remaining an „empty nester“ daunting, they blame second wave feminist claims that it was possible for women to „have it all“ for their personal situation (Haussegger, 2002, 2005). Furthermore, the suggestion that “selfish” women, “seduced” away from the traditional role of motherhood by feminism, voluntarily abandon their role as mothers in order to pursue an independent life of paid work or sexual adventure

away from their children has become a recognisable cultural image frequently rehearsed in film. E. Anne Kaplan (1990) has suggested that disparaging cinematic representations of mothers who attempt to combine sex, work and motherhood „are part of a larger societal need to control female sexuality, and re-position the nuclear family with woman safely within it“ (1990: 409). Chapter Four examines how such conservative interpretations of feminism operate in concert with other post-modern cultural shifts to destabilise Eric Draven“s already vulnerable masculine subjectivity in *The Crow*.

As social debates rage regarding female aspirations, sacrifices and the long term personal and social implications of both, media commentary has vaunted the „New Man“ (Singleton & Maher, 2004), as an identity which permits men to be more emotionally expressive than traditional constructions of masculinity. Despite popular media commentary surrounding the „New Man“, „new dad“ (Flood, 2004) or „metrosexual“ (Gotting, 2003), men“s greater participation in parenting has been conditional. Andrew Singleton and JaneMaree Maher (2004) note that „quality time“ spent with children is usually undertaken in „blocks“, conveniently compartmentalised and arranged so as to not compromise paid work commitments. Such an arrangement is only permissible due to greater leisure time afforded to men and not, Singleton and Maher (2004) argue, evidence of Generation X men engaging with feminist discourses of equity. Nor has men“s greater involvement in childcare necessarily led to men“s greater domestic contribution. Academics and social policy research reveals only modest changes in relation to men“s commitment to domestic labour (La Rossa, 1988). Recent studies have shown that although men“s household contribution has increased, women are still primarily responsible for the initiating, managing and carrying out of household work (Bourke, 2004; Craig, 2006; Singleton & Maher, 2004; Sullivan, 2000). According to Edwards and Wajcman (2005), „any convergence in men“s and women“s time spent in housework has occurred because women are doing less rather than because „new“

men have discovered how fulfilling housework can be" (2005: 53). Women's increasing expectations that men will take up a greater share of domestic responsibility and the tension around such negotiations is another factor cited by men who are resentful of the changes in their roles.

### ***The Family and Men's (Threatened) Identity as Fathers***

With the link between men and work having become increasingly precarious, some men have recuperated their masculine identity through investing heavily in their role as fathers. Prior to the shift in familial arrangements, these identities were determined principally by their occupational status. Some men have embraced the cultural shifts which have allowed for greater, more intimate involvement with their children (Cooksey & Fondell, 1996; Gavanas, 2004), with studies showing contemporary fathers spend more time engaged in routine child care and "fun" activities with children than any previous generation of men (Sayer, Bianchi & Robinson, 2004).

However attempts to revalidate the role of fathers through public campaigns, academic and populist literature have been met with scepticism by some masculinities studies theorists (Flood, 2004; Messner, 1997) with some regarding this renewed interest by men in their paternal status as more a response to a perceived threat of loss than a genuine desire to have expressive and intimate interactions with their children. Michael Flood (2004) argues that although some divorced fathers prioritise the relationships with their children and seek to maintain amicable, co-parenting arrangements with their former wives, it is also common for men to respond with „strategies of parental and financial withdrawal" (2004: 263). Stories of „deadbeat dads" who repudiate their paternal responsibility through seeking to deny their dependents" monetary support post-divorce proliferate, as do accounts of fathers who kill

their former spouses and/or children in revenge for initiating marital breakup<sup>9</sup>. The increased coverage of domestic violence, child abuse, incest, and men's general abandonment of parental responsibility has contributed to an undermining of the traditional roles of fathers (Edwards, 2006; Messner, 1997). Advancements in reproductive technology, such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment, the availability of DNA testing to determine parentage of children, as well as the increasing social acceptance of „matrifocal“ families and same sex parenting has also provoked anxiety felt by some fathers (Flood, 2004).

As well as contrasting representations of paternal responsibility and behaviour, there have been contradictory messages regarding the degree of paternal involvement. Natasha Cabrera, Catherine Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2000) suggest that although there has been a recorded increased absence of non-residential fathers in the lives of children, there has also been an increased involvement of fathers in intact families (Cabrera et al., 2000). Clearly modern Western fatherhood has become „a paradox of complex and competing images“ (Talbot, 2005: 58) with a noticeable disparity existing between the discourse of fatherhood and practice of fatherhood (La Rossa, 1988). Ralph La Rossa (1988) examined this apparent asynchrony in greater detail and found that although society appears to have been receptive to a *cultural* shift towards more nurturing and engaged fathering (as evident in the popular cultural discourses of the „New Man“), any tangible *behavioural* changes to fathering has been minimal and localised within a specific group of middle-class men (La Rossa, 1988). The emotive debates and media moral panics around threatened paternity, estrangement from father figures as a consequence of single, female headed households and how these non-traditional familial arrangements are perceived to negatively affect the psychological

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Maddison (1999) and Marian Sawyer (1999) reference the case of Robert Clive Parsons, who during the lunch time adjournment of a custodial and maintenance hearing at the Dandenong Family Court, stabbed his estranged wife Angela Parsons 48 times. During his trial for murder, it was revealed that Parsons had buried \$400,000 in his backyard to avoid paying child support.

development of men, particularly as they inform masculine subjectivity and claims to space are relevant in the analysis of *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* in Chapter Six.

### ***Vietnam War Defeat***

War has always provided a domain to construct, perpetuate and maintain specifically masculine ideals (Garton, 1998; Morgan, 1994). Embodying gendered metaphors of patriotism, heroism, discipline and solidarity, military service has been a rite of passage and initiation into manhood for centuries. Although some academics have argued that the nexus linking masculinity, violence and the military has been complicated in recent times due to various cultural shifts within the defence force (Morgan, 1994), warfare remains a site where the most pervasive and dominant gendered imagery prevails. Indeed, gendered binaries of feminine/masculine, heterosexual/homosexual and the gendered division of labour are no starker than when operating within the military. Although formal female participation in the armed forces has led to the erosion of the „absolute masculine monopoly of war and soldiering“ (Morgan, 1994: 170), women’s role in military service in the US remains peripheral and largely non-combatant, where the probability of immediate risk to physical safety and the taking of human life is remote (Morgan, 1994). For these reasons, female military roles are not viewed as equal to men’s nor are the wartime contributions of women taken so seriously.

The warrior-like symbolism of the combat soldier has come to articulate otherwise abstract concepts, playing a significant part in establishing national (and gendered) identities. However engagement of the US and its allies in the conflict between North Vietnam and South Vietnam did not produce such a consistent reading. With the questioning of traditional attitudes and values during the 1960s, the role of the soldier, indeed the role of the military in modern liberal democracies, was made problematic and the link between military life and the

making of masculinity increasingly unstable.

The perceived futility of war and the associated trauma has often served as a potent counterblast to the heroic symbol of the soldier. During the Vietnam War, widely regarded as a brutal and unjust conflict, the overwhelming personal cost was employed to stimulate public objection through various methods. Powerful mediated images, made possible in part by the unprecedented and explicit media coverage, exposed the public to the conflict and its wider cultural implications (Gitlin, 1980). Anti-war protesters mobilised images of civilian fatalities (from the controversial use of chemical defoliants) as well as the staggering body count of young, seemingly ill-prepared soldiers, to discredit the US military efforts in Vietnam. Protest songs of the 1960s and 1970s conveyed images of loss and trauma in their lyrics.<sup>10</sup> The justification for intervention, particularly the perceived threat of communist expansionism („the domino theory“), was received with a degree of scepticism, and was interpreted by opponents as implicitly imperialist.

The legitimacy of Vietnam veterans was further undermined by the revelations of war-time atrocities. Unlike the widely praised veteran of previous World Wars, combat soldiers of Vietnam were met with hostility upon return to their respective home countries. Trauma suffered by soldiers through the witnessing or perpetrating of such atrocities has led to the diminishing of respect afforded to military servicemen. Instead of being viewed as a physical and moral exemplar, the Vietnam veteran has come to constitute a threatening and troubled

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<sup>10</sup> Countless protest songs emerged as a part of the anti-Vietnam efforts of the counterculture. Some notable titles include „Eve of Destruction“, written by P. F. Sloan and performed by many artists however most notably by Barry McGuire (1965), „I-Feel-Like-I‘m-Fixin‘-To-Die-Rag“ by Country Joe and the Fish (1967), „War (What Is It Good For?)“ written by Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, performed by Edwin Starr (1969), „Fortunate Son“ written by John Fogerty and performed by Creedence Clearwater Revival (1969), „Happy Xmas (War Is Over)“ written by John Lennon and performed by The Plastic Ono Band (1971), „Billy, Don‘t Be A Hero“, written by Mitch Murray and Peter Callander, performed by Paper Lace (1978), and „I Was Only Nineteen“, written by John Schumann and performed by Redgum (1983). Some contemporary performers have continued this musical tradition, such as R.E.M with „Orange Crush“ (1989), and Alice in Chains with „Rooster“ (1993).

individual, thus increasing veterans' resentment and sense of dislocation.<sup>11</sup> The way in which the Vietnam veteran has come to embody the despair, trauma and sense of hopelessness wrought by the US and its allies' loss in that conflict was previously discussed in relation to the work of Susan Jeffords (1988, 1993, 1994) in Chapter Two.

Traditional models of masculinity were further challenged by the availability of other, specifically anti-authoritarian, methods of political expression. For instance those who refused to partake in the Vietnam War were not maligned for their cowardice, but validated, especially through pop cultural forms such as rock music and film, for their courageous resistance to Government coercion. Conscription, most notably the implementation of a televised lottery draw to determine military commitment, came to be regarded as a highly callous method of recruitment. Despite powerful political rhetoric vilifying the „draft dodger“ as well as mainstream society ostracism, the new left counterculture offered an equally persuasive sentiment in the form of the slogan „Women Say Yes To Men Who Say No“ (Bly, 1990; Connell, 2000; Morgan, 1994). Such a statement not only deemed conscientious objection to be a valid and respectable anti-war protest, but made those who chose to do so socially (and sexually) desirable. Rejecting military service became a means by which traditional authoritarian, state-sanctioned and violent masculinities were rejected in favour of a promise of a new, more peaceful, „tuned in, dropped out“ counterculture masculinity. This was profoundly confusing to, and bitterly resented by, many Vietnam veterans in both the US and Australia.

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<sup>11</sup> The image of the angry, beleaguered veteran has been deployed as a familiar cinematic trope to communicate the soldiering experience in numerous filmic treatments of the Vietnam War, for instance *The Deer Hunter* (Dir: 1978, Michael Cimino), *Coming Home* (1978, Dir: Hal Ashby), *Apocalypse Now!* (1979, Dir: Frances Ford Coppola), *Platoon* (1986, Dir: Oliver Stone), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987, Dir: Stanley Kubrick), *Hamburger Hill* (1987, Dir: Jarrett Warren), *Bat\*21* (1988, Dir: Peter Markle), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989, Dir: Oliver Stone), and the TV series *China Beach* (1988 – 1991) and *Tour of Duty* (1987 – 1990).

Byers (1995) argues that America's defeat in Vietnam contributed to a profound loss of self, disillusionment and mistrust of state power and a dramatic re-thinking of the validity of war as a gendering practice for a particular generation of American men. The impact of this fundamental challenge of previously privileged and unquestioningly accepted versions of masculinity can be seen in cultural representations from rock n' roll to film (Dunbar, 2004). Nevertheless, or perhaps in part *because* of this destabilisation, those seeking a return to a traditional masculine model often „uncritically embrace warrior images, without any trace of discomfort“ (Kimmel & Kaufman, 1994: 280). Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (Chapter Four) and Bill „D-FENS“ Foster in *Falling Down* (Chapter Five) both appropriate paramilitary culture (Gibson, 1994) to literalise urban warfare in a way that underscores the supposed threatening nature of the post-modern, urban environment.

### ***Conclusion***

The crisis in masculinity has been the subject of both academic and public debate. The shifts in configuration of work and family relations, the move from an industrial to a technological economy and the subversive possibilities brought about by the women's movement have led to a change in material circumstances of racially dominant, heterosexual masculinity. Masculinities theorists have explained the hostile reaction to the above social initiatives by suggesting such responses are indicative of the fear of loss of prominence of formerly dominant men who rely upon structuring norms which privilege traditional expressions of masculinity. Thomas B. Byers (1995, 1996) has made an important contribution to this debate by analysing the masculine anxiety implicit within two popular cinematic texts from the 1990s. The hysteria and paranoia implicit in these examples, according to Byers „represent a set of deep and persistent fears on the part of a formerly dominant order that has begun to recognise that it is becoming residual“ (Byers, 1995: 6). While Byers' insights have been used to explore examples of post-modern anxiety within modern literature (Storey,



2005), pomophobia, as Byers has termed it, has yet to be applied to films beyond the action-adventure or science fiction genre. Given its versatility as an analytical tool in examining different fictional mediums, I suggest that Byers' concept of pomophobia might also be applied to critique films which depict post-modern anxiety in men experiencing and reconciling a sense of cultural displacement within the urban space. Such an analysis can add to our understanding of the way fictional characters, such as the protagonists in film, can come to stand in as powerful symbols of what is „wrong“ with society and can inflame populist debates around gender and race equality. Cinematic representations of masculine angst within domains beyond the workplace and familial setting could therefore be understood in terms of the supposed loss of white masculine privilege in an era of greater gender and racial diversity. The anxieties experienced and the recuperative strategies towards consolidating masculine privilege within the films selected for analysis in this thesis likewise reflect, I argue, a perceived loss of authority on the part of the formerly dominant, masculine subject. The following chapters examine the ways in which the urban located, post-modern anxiety represented in the films selected for analysis can be interpreted as responses to the cultural shifts and events identified by Byers (1995). Contemporary readings of the *flâneur* will be applied together with Byers' concept to the seven selected films in an effort to examine how cinema has employed solitary urban strolling as an allegory for specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety within the urban space.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Saving The World From Tomorrow: The Flâneur as Urban Vigilante*

#### *Introduction*

This chapter will explore the recuperative strategies employed by both protagonists in the films *Taxi Driver* (1976, Dir: Martin Scorsese) and *The Crow* (1993, Dir: Alex Proyas) to examine the ways in which specifically masculine, urban located, post-modern anxieties are negotiated within these cinematic texts. By highlighting the way solitary, on-foot urban movement is deployed as a means through which both films' lead characters experience the urban space, this chapter will establish both characters as examples of post-modern *flânerie*, with a particular focus on how moving through the city both facilitates and annuls a sense of urban bound, existentialist angst. Although both protagonists are responding to similar fears of apparent social destabilisation, predicated on male feelings of loss of privilege (Byers, 1995), the masculinities they summon in order to redress the perceived uncertainties of the post-modern world differ less in degree than in kind. In the film *The Crow*, lead protagonist Eric Draven<sup>12</sup> attends to the post-modern dislocation of contemporary society by evoking a primitive, animalistic, „deep“ masculinity, similar to that championed by Robert Bly (1990) and other mythopoetic advocates. In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle favours the similarly mythic however less primal, paramilitary masculinity, which James William Gibson (1994: 17) has termed the „New Warrior“. Although both mythic archetypes expose the inherent instability of the traditional male subject, both succeed in further reinforcing traditional notions of male dominance and authority.

Despite having been released almost two decades apart, *Taxi Driver* and *The Crow* share a number of thematic similarities. Both films follow the solitary movements of a male

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<sup>12</sup> Eric Draven is an aural pun on Edgar Allan Poe's „The Raven“ (1845).

protagonist to represent a specifically masculine discontent with the contemporary world. Both place this anxiety within the specific geographic location of the urban space. Both films present the city as isolating, hostile and threatening. Both films offer overtly conservative readings of the urban space by accentuating the apparently escalating crime rate, the corruption at the hands of a criminal under-class and condemn the ineffectual nature of modern policing. Both films validate vigilantism as a resolution to this apparent urban chaos. The female characters in both films function primarily as „props“ (Schroeder, 2001: 148), objects against which the masculinity of the male leads is defined and displayed. Like Bickle, Draven successfully reunites a young girl with her mother. The chivalrous rescue of Iris in *Taxi Driver* and Sarah in *The Crow* are both predicated on notions of male spatial competency and female urban vulnerability. Although Bickle and Draven’s feelings towards the young girls are ostensibly compassionate, their attitudes towards the adult women they encounter are largely condemnatory.

Both films utilise distinctive *noir* aesthetics, those which allegorise a specifically masculine sense of post-modern anxiety stemming from a confluence of various historical shifts which brought about changes to social institutions which previously maintained white, masculine cultural privilege. Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo (2002) suggest that the „free-floating anxiety of *noir*“ (2002: *xiv*) can be anchored to „a complex constellation of concrete anxieties over race, sex, and maternity“ (2002: *xiv*), which is condensed and displaced onto an „abstract angst over the fickle finger of fate or a nihilistic human condition“ (2002: *xiv*). Oliver and Trigo (2002) go on to argue that this free-floating anxiety both hides and reveals a „*primal* anxiety“ (2002: *xiv*, my emphasis) over the arbitrary and blurred borders of identity, a claim which complements theoretically Byers’ suggestion that „hatred of and violence against the marginalized“ (1995: 5) is a manifestation of a crisis which „threatens to transform or even overthrow the whole *concept* of identity“ (1995: 7, emphasis in original). In other words, post-

modern anxieties regarding the blurring of racial, sexual and national identity borders work together to create the free-floating, existentialist anxiety and nihilism characteristic of *noir*. This *noir* anxiety is evident in Bickle's sense of alienation in *Taxi Driver*, but is less discernible in *The Crow*. However as Oliver and Trigo (2002) note, existentialist anxieties „often appear as insignificant details or marginal figures“ (2002: xv). While it is the case that Eric Draven exhibits a preoccupation with ensuring both Sarah and her mother, Darla, are reassimilated back into the domestic sphere, actions which might be interpreted as responding to a particular gendered threat to his cultural hegemony, *The Crow* depicts the perceived breakdown of the patriarchal order more convincingly through its fatalistic tone, ominous mood, use of dramatic lighting, evocative music, moral ambiguity and the centrality of destiny as a determinant to Draven's life course. Such elements, however minor, „can also become the repository of displaced desire or fear“ (2002: xix). It is for this reason and those previously listed that I have paired *The Crow* with *Taxi Driver* as cinematic representations of pomophobia (Byers, 1995).

## **Taxi Driver**

Working night shifts as a taxi driver frequenting the more malignant sections of New York City, Bickle is a potentially volatile social isolate who begins to psychologically unravel. His inarticulate lament and frustrated anger culminated first in an assassination attempt against a presidential candidate, then in a shooting rampage against a „pimp“, and finally the rescue of a pre-adolescent prostitute. In the analysis of *Taxi Driver* (1976, Dir: Martin Scorsese), this chapter will consider the spatially inscribed, post-modern anxieties of the film's protagonist, Travis Bickle, by exploring the interplay between the existential uncertainty represented in the *flâneur*, the reactive hostility of pomophobia (Byers, 1995) and the restorative possibility of Gibson's (1994) „New Warrior“.

### *God's Lonely Man – A Portrait of Travis Bickle*

One of the more remarkable aspects of *Taxi Driver* is the filmmaker's ability to maintain the anonymity and ambiguity of the character Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro). Despite almost two hours spent sharing his personal space, exposed to his point of view and being made privy to his most intimate thoughts, the audience cannot ever assemble a cohesive profile of Bickle beyond that which is implied through his increasingly disturbed actions. However this indefinite deferral of any biographical knowledge of Bickle is symptomatic of the depersonalising effects of urban living whereby compacted living environments do not necessarily equate to a strengthening of social relations (Clapp, 2005). It is appropriate therefore that Bickle remain enigmatic in order to convey *Taxi Driver*'s broader comment regarding urban alienation.

From the opening title sequence of *Taxi Driver*, Bickle's identity is closely guarded. His entrance into the film is itself mysterious. A slowly accelerating taxi disperses a plume of subway smoke revealing the film title. After a shot of a vibrantly coloured street luridly filmed at night through a rain drenched windscreen, Bickle makes his appearance in the form of a pair of dark, narrow eyes which fill the entire shot. Although his eyes – which scan from left to right, fixated upon something unseen – reflect the hazy traffic lights of the streets ahead, Bickle is not operating the taxi; he is instead on foot, proceeding towards the taxi company where he will apply for work. The darkness dissolves, and the scene inexplicably shifts to daytime, where Bickle, filmed from behind, emerges from the shroud of darkness into an early morning mist. This stylistic technique of gradually revealing Bickle in disjointed pieces gives the impression that he has spontaneously materialised from the atmosphere.

After entering the premises of the taxi company, Bickle is immediately engaged in a brief and informal interview with the company manager. What might have functioned as a preliminary

introduction to Bickle only serves to further frustrate any real attempt to *know* him. Important personal information is only ever hinted at, and what is revealed is fragmented and inadequate. However this sequence is calculating in that it merely alludes to what cannot ever be known. As his mysterious, inexplicable arrival into the film suggests, he had not existed until this moment.

In the interview, Bickle claims to be 26 however he looks aged beyond his years. He appears to be of Mediterranean origin,<sup>13</sup> yet the name Travis Bickle does not suggest as much. Bickle's working-class status is confirmed when he admits in the interview to only having received intermittent formal education („some – here and there“). His interrupted education might not necessarily denote his level of intellect (although he does not know the meaning of „moonlighting“); instead, it might be indicative of impermanent living arrangements or a drifter-like, rootless lifestyle. His desire to work long hours is motivated not by financial gain but by an unsuccessful attempt to relieve a sleep disorder. He manages to endear himself momentarily to his prospective boss with the revelation that he was once in the US Marines, however was dismissed from service duties with an „honourable discharge“. This intriguing piece of information might be the key to understanding Bickle's state of mind and subsequent violent conduct however the circumstances which led to his termination are not further elucidated.

Bickle's soon-to-be colleague „Wizard“ (Pete Boyle) can be seen engaged in an animated argument with another man in the background behind the manager's desk. The details of the exchange might be insulated yet the antagonism is apparent. From this display, as well as the obvious tension expressed between Bickle and the company manager during the interview (the manager appears particularly angered when Bickle responds to inquiries about his driving

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<sup>13</sup> While the ethnic inflections of the character Bickle by the Italian background of DeNiro cannot be ignored, it does not significantly inform the presumed marginality of Bickle.

record with the words „clean, like my conscience“), the viewer is made aware of the hostility which envelops Bickle and the film as a whole.

Although Bickle emerges from this somewhat perfunctory interview as little more than a rudimentary sketch of a person, this expository scene serves two contradictory purposes: on the one hand his persistent anonymity permits his assimilation into the faceless mass of „everyman“, facilitating audience identification with Bickle as a familiar yet unremarkable character; on the other hand, framing Bickle as inherently unknowable, and therefore threatening, successfully installs a separation between Bickle and the viewer. Audiences can thus observe Bickle’s psychopathology from a comfortable distance without implying a unity, indeed identification, with him.

#### ***A Walking Contradiction – Travis Bickle as Pomophobic Flâneur***

One aspect of Bickle’s character which satisfies the fundamental criteria of the *flâneur* is his mobility within a strictly urban setting. Besides the occasional moment when Bickle is seen, dormant, in his apartment, he is endlessly on the move. At first he travels by car, and in the latter half of *Taxi Driver* Bickle, appearing to have dispensed with his night job altogether, traverses the urban space on foot.

Bickle’s use of a motor vehicle to conduct his private observations might complicate his status as a *flâneur*. However recent scholarship has widened the definition of *flânerie* by incorporating contemporary modes of travel and spectatorship (Featherstone, 1998). In „The *Flâneur*, the City and Virtual Public Life“ Mike Featherstone (1998) considers the advent of automotive technology and its impact on the act of *flânerie*. Featherstone concludes that new forms of urban locomotion might offer new ways of experiencing the urban landscape, and that observing the world through the window of a passing train or the windscreen of a car

offers an equivalent to actual, bodily perambulations (Featherstone, 1998). According to Featherstone, the mobility of the gaze is as important to the act of *flânerie* as the physical mobility of the *flâneur*. So long as the *flâneur* is observing, and the gaze itself is not impeded, then the use of a vehicle does not necessarily detract from the aesthetic experience of urban strolling. Motor vehicle use<sup>14</sup> might even be regarded as especially conducive to the act of *flânerie* as constant vigilance and concentration on the surrounding environment is necessary in order to maintain motor safety. Whilst concentrating on the road ahead, the *flâneur* is able to take in impressions at an accelerated pace and far more indiscriminate manner than on foot. Featherstone suggests that whilst driving, with the constant shifting between immersion and detachment, the experience of *flânerie* is intensified, allowing for the development of „an attitude in which the urban landscape itself becomes perceived as fragmented yet allegoric, as everyday life itself undergoes a process of aestheticisation“ (Featherstone, 1998: 8).

The use of diary entries as a way to document his urban observations also links Bickle to his modernist predecessors. Travis Bickle provides the film’s narration in much the same way as Walter Benjamin’s (1999) disjointed *Paris Arcades Project (Das Passagen-Werk)*. In brief yet impassive voiceovers, Bickle relays the day’s notable events as well as general statements about society in no apparent chronological order. The progression from one day to the next is never clearly presented, forcing the audience to break with traditional modes of storytelling to drift unbounded by time with Bickle through sharing his spatial (indeed temporal) dislocations (Kolker, 2000).

Despite similarities to the reading of the *flâneur* by Baudelaire and Benjamin, Bickle is perhaps best understood as an example of Edgar Allan Poe’s (1845) urban stroller, the

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<sup>14</sup> This incorporation of automotive technology into contemporary definitions of *flânerie* is also critical in the discussion of *Menace II Society* (Chapter Five).



*flâneur*-as-detective, who seeks to reform the perceived indeterminacy of the urban space by imposing epistemological control over the otherwise illegible crowd. As discussed in Chapter One, existentialist completion is achieved by first viewing the environment as chaotic and formless, yet also as a site which can be brought to yield and made legible. By regarding all those whom he encounters as ideologically uncertain, the *flâneur* is able to shore up his own precarious subjectivity. Bickle does this by reducing the seemingly unreadable „other“ to crude urban „types“, pronouncing the city of New York as awash with degenerates who threaten to overthrow, or have already successfully dislodged, his patriarchal privilege. Keith Tester (1994) offers a poignant interpretation of Poe’s *flâneur* when he writes:

The *flâneur* senses – or perhaps it is better to say he allows himself the conceit – that without him the world will lack meaning and he is engulfed by the sense of the deluge which might rain without him.

(1994: 10).

In his efforts to restore order to society and thus facilitate his own post-modern recovery, Bickle must „close the gap in his reading of the urban crowd“ (Brand, 1991: 84) by establishing a divide between himself and the degenerate „others“ he fears becoming, a distance, Brand argues, that is implicit in „[the *flâneur*’s] acts of interpretative observation“ (1991: 85). Bickle goes about this by underscoring the criminal nature of his fellow citizens whilst emphasising his own moral superiority. As Carlo Salzani puts it, the *flâneur* as detective views the city as a crime scene (Salzani 2007), a site which, while inhospitable and dangerous, can at least be read as such. However like his modernist forebear, Bickle’s desire for order to assuage feelings of anxiety only leads to further psychological unrest, with the quest for satisfaction remaining eternally fugitive. As Tester (1994) explains, „the search for self-hood through the diagnosis of dissatisfaction does not at all lead in the end to satisfaction; it just leads to more dissatisfaction“ (1994: 5-6). Believing the environment to be irredeemable, Bickle phantasmagorically becomes a hero through the attempted assassination

of a political figure before violently intervening into in the life of pre-adolescent prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster). Although the assassination fails, Bickle does succeed in bringing about some cultural cohesion when he eventually reassimilates Iris back into the domestic sphere. In this way, Bickle has transcended the stultifying anonymity of the crowd, achieved infamy through his heroic deeds and finally exercised a form of social control over the undulating masses.

A variety of cinematic techniques are employed to provide commentary on Bickle's own psychological state beyond that which he offers freely in his voice over narration. The abrupt cuts from one seemingly unrelated incident to the next communicate both the nature of Bickle's work and lifestyle (sequential, routine, transient, fleeting) and his gradual mental decline. Scenes are sound bridged by the bluesy, *noir* soundtrack which builds to a discordant crescendo to unsettle the otherwise meandering pace of Bernard Herrmann's composition. Expressionist lighting is used during the night scenes to emphasise the invasiveness of street lights and neon signs advertising greasy spoon dives and adult entertainment venues. Slow motion takes, such as that used during a scene where Bickle is walking amidst a sea of other pedestrians, effectively heighten the sense of dislocation and estrangement. Point of view shots utilised in scenes where the camera is positioned directly behind Bickle in the driver's seat or in front of him to better film through the windshield or in the rear view mirror of his taxi succeed in drawing the viewer into Bickle's lonely and at times distorted perspective.

### ***Paen to Pomophobic Pain***

Bickle's dystopian viewpoint might be the most visible symptom of his pomophobia. Not only do fears of the post-modern age permeate the paranoid and nihilistic sentiments of Travis Bickle as a character, but they also reside in the film as a cultural text more generally. Academics have remarked upon the significance of the release date of *Taxi Driver*, which

occurred in the aftermath of several important cultural events. Matthew J. Iannucci (2005) for instance suggests Bickle's personal feelings of pessimism and paranoia were an allegorical reflection of a wider psychic wounding of a society still affected by America's Vietnam War defeat, the Watergate „affair“, which led to the threat of impeachment and subsequent resignation of President Nixon, and the fiscal setbacks which ensued (Iannucci, 2005). It is social transformations such as these, as well as a failure of the capitalist system to address the needs of the socially disenfranchised, which Iannucci argues inform Bickle's antisocial character and sense of displacement. Cynthia J. Fuchs (1991) argues „*Taxi Driver* reveals the disordering effects and the disordered foundations of Vietnam, representing not the war, but its dispersion“ (1991: 34). Amy Taubin (2000) points to the centrality of the Vietnam war defeat in mitigating the sense of loss which pervades *Taxi Driver*, however she draws out in her analysis the specific masculine anxieties which plague Bickle, by noting the impact of the concomitant feminist and civil rights movements and the subsequent effect these cultural shifts had on US social politics (Taubin, 2000).

These events and their cultural effects have led not only to a feeling of dislocation, but as Byers (1995) suggests, a loss of identity, particularly for men who rely on traditional constructions of masculinity to sustain their political, social, cultural and economic dominance. Indeed, Iannucci (2005) goes on to describe Bickle as a „reactive immigrant exiled to an inner city sprawl where he is slowly dehumanized by a post-modern society“ (2005: 2). Bereft of any distinct identity of his own, Bickle begins to cultivate a persona consisting of a „potpourri of idolatry and maxims drawn from popular culture, especially from violent movies and television news“ (2005: 1). However Scorsese's equation of the media violence Bickle is exposed to and the violence Bickle eventually carries out is communicated with careful restraint. There is little to suggest that Bickle's state of mind has been altered as a result of violent news images, as he seems equally affected by the „real life“ happenings he

witnesses nightly. Furthermore, the seemingly benign displays of intimacy from the dancing couples on *American Bandstand* or the declarations of love uttered by the actors on daytime soap operas are equally successful in eliciting Bickle's contempt, evident by his pointing a loaded gun and cocking the hammer at the TV screen. This kind of inexplicable hostility speaks of an underlying pathology which is not easily reconciled through a simplistic „cause and effect“ argument.<sup>15</sup> Loneliness might account for his frustrations however the suggestion that being socially isolated necessarily leads to violence is a dubious equation. I am mindful also of the implications present in positioning Bickle's violence (and possible madness) within a socio-economic context. While linking violent conduct to working-class/under-class masculinity harks to a representational trope not uncommon when screening angry male loners (see for instance Katz & Earp, 1999), this is a conclusion I am eager to avoid for both

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<sup>15</sup> This debate is relevant in light of the actions of John Hinckley Jr., who on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1981, made an assassination attempt against the life of US President Ronald Reagan. Hinckley had admitted to carrying out the shooting, which wounded Reagan, a press secretary, a police officer and a secret service agent, in order to rouse the attentions of actor Jodie Foster, with whom Hinckley had developed an obsession. According to trial accounts, Hinckley had identified strongly with the Travis Bickle character in *Taxi Driver*. Hinckley began to mimic many of Bickle's mannerisms, emulate his style of dress and had even fabricated a relationship with a woman in the numerous letters sent to his parents in much the same way Bickle had. His stalking of Jodie Foster was motivated by a delusional need to „save her“ as Bickle had done with the character of Iris in *Taxi Driver*. Although *Taxi Driver* was broadcast at Hinckley's trial by the defence, the jury found the film merely provided the „script“ on which to fashion the shooting Hinckley would later carry out. His actions, the jury found, were symptomatic of a mental illness, possibly schizophrenia. After three days deliberation, the jury returned a „not guilty“ verdict by reasons of insanity. Following Hinckley's contentious acquittal, the US Senate passed legislation limiting the use of the insanity plea in several states (Caplan, 1984). Despite the ruling, which proved little beyond Hinckley's own mental state, conservative social commentators regularly return to the case as evidence of a possible link between violent film and violent conduct.

Paul Schrader is said to have based the character of Travis Bickle on Arthur Bremer who, on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1972, carried out an assassination attempt on Alabama Governor and Democratic presidential candidate George Wallace. Bremer's botched shooting resulted in Wallace suffering permanent paralysis and various health complications which contributed to his death in 1998. Wallace's body guard, a campaign volunteer and a secret service agent were also wounded in the shooting. Bremer admitted at his trial that the attempt on Wallace's life was not in opposition to Wallace's politics, which were fiercely pro-segregationist, but a desire to attain public recognition. Bremer exhibited several notable personality traits which Schrader later drew upon in creating Bickle. Like Bickle, Bremer was a marginally employed, solitary individual who had „an inability to engage in small talk“ (Carter, 1995: 420). Teachers and former school mates recalled Bremer as „a pathetic loner with a disconcerting habit of laughing inappropriately“ (1995: 419). He once startled his land lady when she caught a glimpse of Bremer sporting a shaven head, which he explained was in response to his humiliation following his rejection by a 15 year-old girl he had become infatuated with (Carter, 1995). Upon Bremer's arrest, police recovered numerous hand written notes, gun enthusiast magazines, Wallace and Nixon campaign propaganda, and material promoting various militia groups from Bremer's dishevelled apartment. Bremer received a 63 year prison sentence at his trial in August 1972, and was released in November, 2007. A book of Bremer's compiled journal entries entitled *An Assassin's Diary* was released in 1973. For further discussion, see Stephan Leshner (1994) *George Wallace: American Populist*, Addison-Wesley: Reading, Massachusetts and Dan T. Carter (1995) *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, Simon & Schuster: New York.

the classist assumptions such a reading of Bickle generates and its insufficiency as an explanation for his conduct. Despite this, it can be suggested that violence perpetrated by working-class/under-class men might be due to their powerlessness in relation to those men who are less socially and economically marginalised. Christine Boman (2003) for instance argues, „some working-class men may try to overcome feelings of powerlessness by asserting their dominance over women and children“ (2003: 127). Tendencies towards violent behaviour might therefore offer a way to compensate for feelings of inferiority in men of subordinate class positions, a means through which to wrest power (and honour) away from men who are more highly placed amongst the hierarchal organisation of masculinities (Connell, 2000, 2005). Socio-economic particularities, then, certainly inform Bickle’s hostilities, however the discussion regarding the nexus between economic marginality and violent masculinities might be enriched if considered in conjunction with the contingent social/cultural factors with which Bickle struggles to reconcile his marginal subjectivity. These include factors which have transformed the (supposedly) formerly coherent environment into the increasingly hybridised contemporary West.

Both Robert Phillip Kolker (2000) and Matthew J. Iannucci (2005) contemplate this possibility when they draw distinct parallels between *Taxi Driver* and Western-style revenge dramas like John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). In such narrative formulas a heroically vengeful yet equally prejudiced man sets out, *against all odds*, to address an injury which is usually framed as an attack on white colonialist power. The earlier tale made explicit appeals to imperialist connotations of maintaining „racial“ segregation and white authority, popularising then current anxieties regarding miscegenation. *Taxi Driver* offers a contemporary rendition of the „gunslinger“ ethos, whereby rugged individualism is likewise adopted as the preferred strategy for the restitution of structuring norms. The traditional white masculine subject of the post-1960s era however appeals to those who view the limited

yet significant gains made by feminism, gay and lesbian rights, civil rights and the concomitant affirmative action legislation as well as the changes to the labour market following large scale deindustrialisation as threatening to white, patriarchal dominance. *Taxi Driver* appears to depict the anxieties of a collapse of master narratives, where conservative notions of sex, gender and race are no longer relevant or adequate to navigate the perceived uncertainty of post-modern society, evident in Bickle's selective scapegoating of gendered, „racial“ and cultural „others“.

### ***Noir Anxiety and the Hard-Boiled Hero***

While the Western formula of a lone „gunslinger“ has often been cited in critical film analysis of *Taxi Driver* as a possible narrative template, the somewhat rigid formula of good versus evil is not necessarily applicable to the character of Bickle, particularly the morally confused hero status Bickle achieves at the film's conclusion. It is perhaps more appropriate to regard *Taxi Driver* as being an example of *film noir*. While *noir* as a film genre is problematic<sup>16</sup> and by no means adequately functions as a comprehensive categorisation of film (given numerous trans-generic variations<sup>17</sup> which the already slippery term struggles to accommodate) theorists have nevertheless alluded to a series of identifiable stylistic, thematic and narrative conventions which although not necessarily specific to *noir* are still recognisable as at least indicative of an existing and cohesive set of principles. *Taxi Driver* qualifies as an example

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<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to arrive at any comprehensive definition of film *noir* (indeed it is counterproductive to the aims of critical inquiry to do so). However it is perhaps important to acknowledge briefly the widely held claim amongst film theorists that the *noir* label emerged originally not as a coherent classification of Hollywood film, but as a term used by French film critics to denote a particular style of filmmaking in the immediate post-World War II period. Reluctant to endorse a set of principles which a film needs to satisfy in order to be regarded as *noir*, Frank Krutnik (1991) instead prefers to view *noir* as a phenomenon, which carries with it „generic, stylistic and cyclic manifestations“ (1991: 24). Those films included within the „*noir* corpus“ (1991: 19) share at least similarities in „conventions of characterisation, narration, sexual representation, generic production and narrative development“ (1991: 24).

<sup>17</sup> There is also the debate regarding whether *noir* is in fact a genre of film at all but rather a style, given its common application within various other film genres (Johnson, 2007). Less a film genre and more a popular cachet of film promoters, neo-*noir* (*Basic Instinct* (1992, Dir: Paul Verhoeven)), psycho-*noir* (*Fight Club* (1999, Dir: David Fincher)), *noir*-comedy (*Play It Again, Sam* (1972, Dir: Herbert Ross)), *noir*-Western (*Unforgiven* (1992, Dir: Clint Eastwood)), *noir*-science fiction (*Blade Runner* (1982, Dir: Ridley Scott)) superhero-*noir* (*Batman* (1989, Dir: Tim Burton)) and *noir*-musical (*New York, New York* (1977, Dir: Martin Scorsese)) have all been regarded as either examples of or contemporary variations on the *noir* style.

of *film noir* by having what Frank Krutnik (1991) calls „„noirish““ characteristics or sequences“ (1991: 17). These include: a *chiaroscuro* visual stylisation, a critique of the values of post-War American society, a „psychological“ trend in the representation of character and a recurring attention to excessive and obsessive sexuality (Krutnik, 1991). Jans B. Wager (2005) identifies key technical features typical to classic *film noir* such as lighting techniques, camera positioning, voice-over narration and episodic structure of storytelling (Wager, 2005). While *Taxi Driver* possesses all these elements, it is the „mood“ of paranoia characteristic of the *noir* style which is most significant to this discussion. The atmosphere of foreboding is evident not only in Bickle“s sense of displacement but in the visual cues which emphasise a lawlessness or cynicism towards institutions such as policing and government. The feeling that the world is progressing at a pace and in a direction that is foreign to the central protagonist is characteristic of both *Taxi Driver* and *film noir* generally. Crime is often represented as omnipresent, while the *noir* hero is depicted as „weak, confused, unstable and ineffectual“ (Spicer, 2007: 47). It is this „pervasive problematising of masculine identity and of the legitimising framework of male authority“ (Krutnik, 1991: 99) that qualifies *Taxi Driver* as an example of *film noir* and Travis Bickle as a *noir* hero.

Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo (2002) provide a theory which is perhaps the most helpful to the aims of this thesis. In *Noir Anxiety* (2002) Oliver and Trigo argue that the nihilistic mood, existentialist dread and fatalistic tone of *film noir* are manifestations of anxieties regarding race, gender, maternity and nationality. Some film scholars have made similar claims which link the sense of doom in *film noir* with existentialist angst inherent in the human condition generally (see for instance Durgnat, 1998; Hirsch, 1999; Johnson, 2007), however Oliver and Trigo (2002) posit that these anxieties became amplified during the post-World War II years, when patriarchal dominance began to be „chipped away“ (Oliver & Trigo, 2002: *xiii*) by the ensuing social shifts. Using Sigmund Freud“s (1900) theory of condensation and

displacement, Oliver and Trigo (2002) argue that anxieties regarding ambiguous sexual, racial and national identities are condensed and displaced over the „free-floating existential anxiety“ (2002: *xiv*) in *film noir*. Furthermore, Oliver and Trigo (2002) explain that these fears cannot simply be interpreted as the paraphrased responses to post-World War II cultural shifts but as „symptoms of concrete anxieties over race, sex, maternity, and national origin that *threaten the very possibility of identity by undermining its boundaries*“ (Oliver & Trigo, 2002: *xiv*, my emphasis). This notion of a primal anxiety over the blurring of borders runs parallel to the concept of pomophobia by Thomas. B. Byers. Cultural undermining from sexual, racial and non-familiar (foreign) „others“ is not only interpreted as a threat to patriarchal authority but as equally harmful to the integrity of existing social categories which maintain white, heterosexual masculine privilege.

These fears over dislocation and loss of control are articulated in the fearless, heroically insubordinate lone male who, operating outside the confines of any systematised or institutional policing procedure, strives to maintain social cohesion (and stabilise his own fractured masculine identity in the process) within an already chaotic and uncertain environment. Although the *noir* hero appears as a potent and capable symbol of masculinity, he is nevertheless revealed to be vulnerable to radical destabilisation. As Frank Krutnik (1991) explains, „the conventionalised figuration of „tough“, controlled and unified masculinity is invoked [in *film noir*] not so much as a model of worthwhile or realistic achievement but more as a worrying mark of what precisely is lacking“ (1991: 88). In order to address these profound feelings of masculine inadequacy, the *noir* hero must continuously affirm his physical prowess and mental stamina against various adversaries (crooks, „by the book“ cops, seductive women) to sustain his place within the gender order. This is done in various ways, from the often daring investigation of crime to the aggressive and competitive



ways in which the *noir* hero conducts social interactions. These aspects of the *noir* hero function to facilitate some form of masculine consolidation.

Before considering the various processes of re-masculinisation employed by the character of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, this chapter will turn first to a discussion of the ways in which post-modern anxieties, particularly the fear of displacement, are experienced within the traditionally male controlled and male coded space of the city. Doing so allows for a deeper analysis of how male disenfranchisement within the literal space of the city acts as a metaphor for the perceived loss of male cultural dominance within domains beyond the public realm.

### ***'Clean, real clean, like my conscience' – Myopic Dystopia in Taxi Driver***

New York has long been the predominant locale for cinematic representations of urban alienation, isolation and victimisation (Clapp, 2005). Crucial to understanding Bickle's sense of psychological estrangement is the environment in which he operates. In *Taxi Driver*, the urban space is overwhelmingly portrayed as a frightening wasteland. Although Bickle's gaze remains impassive, the selective use of provocative visual cues aims to legitimise feelings of distress. The city's built environment is physically depleted. The wet streets from the occasional rain storm are the only indication of the existence of a natural world beyond this wholly urbanised space. The fragmented yet densely arranged housing sectors force those of formerly distinct social types to live and operate within close proximity of one another, stimulating resentment and anti-social behaviour. The garbage strewn sidewalks signify both economic decline and consumer greed. Leisure sites, instead of aiming to appeal to varied tastes of a heterogeneous populace, appear exclusively comprised of establishments which cater to the decadent interests of shadowy patrons.

In „City/Cinema/Dream“, Jon Lewis (1991) explores how contemporary cinematic portrayals have depicted „the city“ in ostensibly negative terms, being alternatively allegorical of moral „darkness“, a prison, a receptacle for human refuse and a built, ideological space where personal and artistic expression is threatened by stifling and stupefying late capitalist intrusions. This disparaging portrayal of the city has its antecedents in literature and the arts, which mobilise the „widely-held view that large cities are alienating and hostile places, in which there are enormous contrasts in wealth and living conditions and in which there is a seamy underlife [sic] all too ready to rise to the surface“ (Gold, 1985: 125). Indeed, many of the „urban sketches“ of Charles Baudelaire (1964) and Walter Benjamin (1999) were as much a comment on the urban malaise as they were a study of the interpretative process. However unlike Baudelaire and Benjamin, contemporary cinematic depictions of the urban space tend to undermine the city’s potential to inspire its inhabitants to forge an identity through self-expression and reflection and instead emphasise the hazards of urban living. The city in *Taxi Driver*, however typical of anti-urban depictions of New York, is nevertheless also a result of Bickle’s spatial and temporal distortion. While there might be some degree of similarity between the actual New York and the virtual New York of *Taxi Driver*, it is Bickle’s perspective that informs the film’s dystopic *mise-en-scène*. Any decent image of humanity is either dissolved into the dense yet inconsequential background or is conveniently filtered from Bickle’s gaze entirely. Kolker (2000) remarks on the saturation of negative imagery which pervades Bickle’s depiction of New York:

Neither coincidence nor a reflection of “reality” explains why the only people Travis sees are the mad and disenfranchised, why the only streets he sees are the stews of the city, why the cafeteria frequented late at night by him and his cronies is populated only by pimps and nodding drug addicts. These are the only people and the only places of which Travis is aware. They constitute the only things he perceives and, since the viewer’s perceptions in the film are so restricted to his own, the only things the viewer is permitted to see as well.

(2000: 226).

The viewer is not presented with an accurate rendering of the city, instead we see the crude and selective interpretations of a man so embittered by his own isolation and personal failings that he excoriates the genuinely disenfranchised to assuage the fears and resentments which fill his dark and paranoid universe. There is further rationale behind this deliberately biased depiction of the urban environment. Portraying every city dweller as corrupt or antagonistic provides the moral validation for Bickle's own infractions. He is himself dangerously volatile and menacing however when assessed against the hostility expressed by others (or at least, that Bickle perceives in others) his response could appear reasonable as a strategy of pre-emption.

In the scenes unmediated by Bickle (for instance the conversation between Betsy and a colleague and those among his fellow cabbies) it is revealed just how disproportionate his anxieties are. Outside of Bickle's paranoid gaze, all other exchanges are conducted with relative comfort, and in some instances are tinged with light hearted humour. Although hardly scintillating, such exchanges do not indicate the same unease which characterise Bickle's social interactions. While such scenes, however brief, might expose the extent to which Bickle has come to project his personal insecurities onto others, they might also point to the apparent obliviousness with which others conduct their daily activities. In the later iconic scene where Bickle privately indulges his sadomasochistic fantasies in a duel with his own reflection („you talkin' to me?"), he describes himself as a man „who would not take *it* anymore" and one who „stood up" against various urban „filth". Such self assessment suggests that while all others merely tolerate or „take *it*", Bickle, being the ever alert self-appointed „guardian" of the city, is more aware, and therefore more vulnerable to what he regards as the realities of modern society.

Bickle's routes are only ever travelled at night, evoking the usual anxieties regarding abandonment and the potential hidden danger associated with darkness. His interactions with disquieting night time clientele are so commonplace such encounters begin to border on the mundane. The frequency of otherwise exceptional scenes has a numbing effect on Bickle. Crazy derelicts raging aloud or the pacing, cantankerous "hookers" fail to solicit a reaction, even when they are seated in the back of his taxi. However Bickle is easily intimidated, and although he (initially) withholds any explicit reaction, appears visibly disturbed by these events. Bickle also experiences daylight as confronting, evident in his slouching posture and cautious gait. He anaesthetises himself by periodically swigging alcohol.

Within the confines of his apartment, Bickle is alone but for his thoughts. It is here that the most introspection takes place. Observations continue within places of business such as the coffee shop where he and his colleagues occasionally exchange amusing yet embellished stories of colourful fares. Bickle appears particularly receptive to reports of violent attacks perpetrated on hapless cab operators, and displays a certain discomfort even when in the presence of his colleagues.

Despite the disgust with which he views the city, Bickle appears simultaneously fascinated by that which he judges to be abject. He immerses himself in the apparent malaise, or, as Scorsese describes it „[puts] himself in the occasion of sin“ (quoted in Taubin, 2000: 24), even when not required to do so through work. His frequenting of porn theatres for instance might bring him into contact with precisely the social types he condemns. He boasts that he never refuses a fare („I'll go anywhere, anytime ... makes no difference to me“) which too might explain why he perceives himself to be besieged by deviants. These interactions with the seamier side of urban existence doubtless inform Bickle's distrust for all the city's dwellers. It is ideological contradictions in Bickle's character such as this which indicate not Bickle's

desire to ingratiate himself into this cohort of individuals but that they represent the only society he has access to (Clapp, 2005). Although Bickle appears out of place with his surrounds, it is not immediately clear where, if anywhere, he might be better suited. Therefore, it is not Bickle's aim to transcend the urban malaise he so detests but rather to redeem it.

One strategy for redemption is the systematic purification of an unclean city. Bickle is pre-occupied with contaminants, both actual and imagined, which threaten to disturb the already hostile atmosphere. Natural elements are evoked as a possible antidote to the various urban „pollutants“. Bickle explains in one of his journal entries:

May 10<sup>th</sup>. Thank God for the rain which has helped wash all the garbage and the trash off the sidewalks ... All the animals come out at night: whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies. Sick. Venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.

This obsession with maintaining a healthy environment extends to his own corporeality:

June 28<sup>th</sup>. I gotta get in shape now. Too much sitting has ruined my body; too much abuse has gone on too long. From now on I'm gonna do fifty push ups each morning. Fifty pull ups. There'll be no more pills. There'll be no more bad food, no more destroyers of my body. From now on it'll be total organisation. Every muscle must be tight.

Relentless weight lifting, dietary restrictions and holding a clenched fist over the lit stove seem to attest to a type of self loathing, however they also indicate Bickle's desire for control and personal discipline reminiscent of the „reflexive sadomasochism“ identified by David Savran (1996). Other unorthodox methods are undertaken to recover physiological wholeness. As noted earlier, Bickle insists on working nightshifts in a vain attempt to

alleviate his insomnia, spending what little leisure time he has frequenting x-rated movie venues in an equally fruitless effort to induce sleep.

In segments of confessional speech, Bickle stoically describes to the viewer the odious and demeaning nature of his work: „each night when I return the car to the garage, I have to clean the cum off the backseat. Some nights I clean off the blood“. The discharged bodily fluids of others become allegorical of social decline, lawlessness and a lack of personal restraint. Bickle further promotes his equation of bodily waste to human deviance when presidential candidate Charles Palantine (Leonard Harris) becomes a passenger in his taxi one evening. When asked by Palantine „what’s the one thing that bugs [Bickle] the most about this country“, Bickle responds candidly to the point of awkwardness and his words are delivered with a contrived *naïveté*:

You should clean up this city here. This city is like an open sewer. It’s full of filth and scum. Sometimes I can hardly take it. Whoever becomes the president should really clean it up ... I think the president should just clean up this whole mess here, should just flush it right down the fucking toilet.

Bickle’s fears of the grime in the city and its capacity to contaminate the actual physical subject signify, albeit rather literally, the anxiety associated with the dissolution of a cohesive identity. Amy Taubin (2000) points to this possibility when she notes „[Bickle] ... as a paranoid [sic], has problems with boundaries and splitting“ (2000: 22). However it could be argued that Bickle’s „problem“ is less one of individual character, and more of a specific class of white, heterosexual men who fear losing their dominant status to previously subordinate groups. The notion of colonisation is literalised in Bickle’s anxieties over his amorphous, atrophied and „ruined“ body which needs tightening up through physical exercise and organisation through detoxification which he sees as gradually becoming vulnerable to permeations. As Cynthia J. Fuchs (1991) further explains:

His own body is becoming part of the Otherness of the world. In reconstructing his own body to destroy the corrupt social body, he erects a boundary between himself and the Other, even as that definition collapses internally.

(1991: 43).

What might operate as purely allegorical is genuinely felt by Bickle; in fact he does allude in the exchange with Palantine to the fact that the mere smell of the waste in the city elicits in him a physical response. Bickle's fear of contagion therefore represents insecurities about his own social position and his displacing of these anxieties onto the urban space at large posits modern society as equally vulnerable.

Despite the fear of deterritorialisation (Byers, 1995) these urban contaminants ultimately serve a therapeutic function. Defilement from the various pollutants are key to Bickle's sense of dislocation and therefore ridding his city (and thus his own body) of these impurities is vital for Bickle's trajectory towards redemption. Susan Jeffords (1988, 1993, 1994) and Yvonne Tasker (1993a, 1993b, 2004) posited a similar argument when they suggested the muscle-bound „hard bodies“ of action-adventure movies of the 1980s and 1990s were intended to symbolically re-make America as a nation in the image of a strong, taut, impervious patriarch. Later parts of this chapter will examine the notion of the „possessed male“ and how it serves as a potent metaphor for the loss of traditional masculine authority more thoroughly in the analysis of *The Crow*, however first this chapter will move to an exploration of the ways in which Bickle's white, heterosexual, masculine identity is defined in relation to others and strengthened through the marginalising of gendered, sexual and racial minorities.

### ***Depictions of Gendered, Sexed and Raced 'Others' in Taxi Driver***

In „Inventions of Gender and Place in Films“ (1999), Kevin M. Dunn and Hilary P.M. Winchester argue that:

Many mainstream films are positioned within the structures of capitalism, patriarchy and ethnocentrism. As such, women are stereotyped and objectified, the working-class are patronised or criticised and ethnic minorities are either demonised or parodied.

(1999: 182).

In *Taxi Driver*, Bickle's specifically post-modern masculine anxieties are projected towards those who stand to benefit the most from progressive social change, policies and attitudes that threaten to undermine his already loosening grasp on the privileges his white, heterosexual masculinity had previously afforded him. Bickle's attitudes towards women, gays and non-whites reflect the insecurities brought about by the presumed loss of cultural dominance. In order to legitimise his perception of his own marginality, Bickle is required to re-invest in the marginalised subjectivities which he encounters with a degree of privilege which far outweighs his own, while simultaneously „emptying“ his white male subject position of any ontological meaning (Rehling, 2005).

Bickle's mistrust of Black men is evident in his interactions with a Black colleague, Charlie T (Norman Matlock). While Charlie T's presence in the film is slight, he nonetheless helps inform the „racial“ component of Bickle's anger and aids in the construction of Black men as a threat to white masculine privilege. In a scene where Bickle first becomes acquainted with his fellow cabbies, Charlie T is seen seated with Bickle's colleagues silently reading a newspaper. Although Charlie T barely acknowledges him, he manages to intimidate Bickle by simply being present. In a wide shot of the assembled cabbies, Bickle is positioned as far away from Charlie T as the table will allow. Here, Charlie T, who through deliberate



narrative restrictions is never permitted to develop as a character beyond a looming figure, is emblematic of Bickle's anxieties regarding the inherent vulnerabilities of his white racial privilege.

Charlie T's presumed criminal nature is further implied through his likeness to other Black men who are present within Bickle's impassive observations. In the same scene, Bickle hesitantly scans across the coffee shop to see an array of inert yet highly decorative Black men in gaudy outfits. Although playing on white-authored stereotypes of Black men as more style conscious than white men, such fashions have been deployed in popular culture as a way to display the wearer's ostentatious wealth derived from criminal activity such as drug dealing or „pimping“. The reluctant gaze with which he responds to these men aids in Bickle's perception of himself as a white minority displaced by an emerging class of criminal non-whites. Amy Taubin (2000) also remarks upon the subtle strategic integration of outlandish Black men as objectified „local colour“ (2000: 16) to reinforce or justify Bickle's fear of spatial, indeed cultural usurpation. Jim Pines (1996) likewise comments upon the appearance of Black men in white-authored films „as an inflated but exotic backdrop“ (1996: 507). Charlie T, too, is dressed in a flamboyant yet slightly more subdued variation of the „pimp“ clothing. While Charlie T's sense of dress might also denote an appeal to then contemporary trends in fashion, his constantly shielded eyes might also suggest a defiant resistance to authoritative gaze. Susan Bordo (1999) writes that such playfully decorative and visually bold fashions grew out of a tradition in Black aesthetics which aimed to subvert European colonialist notions of class and patriotism whilst reclaiming ownership of the body which was „so intimately and degradingly under the control of the slave owner“ (1999: 209). Black men, according to Bordo (1999) „used “style” aggressively to assert opposition to the culture that had made [them] marginal to begin with“ (1999: 211).

Charlie T's difference from the white employees and sameness to what is depicted as an ostensibly Black sub-culture is further demonstrated in Bickle's unease. While Bickle never utters a racist statement (although he does use the racial epithet „spooks“ in one of his diary entries) he nevertheless views Black men as a potential threat to his safety. In a later scene, Charlie T gestures to Travis with an extended finger, mimicking the firing action of a gun. Although done in a playful manner, Charlie T's gesture, while addressing Bickle as „killer“ resonates with Bickle as a statement of intent. Washed in low light, the camera frames Charlie T's frozen stance completely as it draws away slowly, intensifying the sense of menace. Bickle, noticeably intimidated, continues looking over his shoulder at the seated Charlie T as he exits the coffee shop. When he is outside a barely visible Black figure with a casual stride passes Bickle. With only the red tint of neon signs and traffic lights to illuminate the night scene, the pedestrian can be seen turning to face Bickle. The camera then cuts to Bickle's reaction which is again apprehensive. While still focusing on Bickle, the camera pans from right to left to approximate the pedestrian's gaze. No words are spoken but the tension is palpable.

This suspicion of Black men is further communicated when Bickle shoots dead a Black armed robber (Nat Grant) without compunction during a late night stop for provisions at a deli. While this scene is may well be intended to demonstrate Bickle's realisation of his capacity to commit murder, it is perhaps necessary also to acknowledge that the armed robber depicted is Black when, given the swift nature of his screen appearance, he could have easily have been depicted as white. The deli killing, like the brief yet meaningful moment with Charlie T, highlights Bickle's conflation of Black men with threatening individuals handling guns, whether they are actual or imaginary.

All such scenes act to further inform the paranoid delusions which Bickle has come to rely on to construct his sense of reality and therefore arguably should be regarded as a distortion of perception, like every other emblem of urban decay presented in *Taxi Driver* so far. Nevertheless, the inclusion of such representations still reinforces stereotypes, a charge that director Martin Scorsese and screenwriter Paul Schrader have been careful to refute. In Amy Taubin's *Taxi Driver* (2000), Schrader addresses the racist aspects of the Bickle character. According to Schrader, Bickle „directs his anger at people who are a little lower on the totem pole than he is“ (Schrader, as quoted in Taubin, 2000: 16-17). While aware of how representations of Black men might be interpreted by film audiences, Schrader's attempt to justify the use of such extreme portrayals of Black masculinity (through acknowledging Bickle's racism) does not weaken Bickle's claim to marginal status altogether. Instead Schrader's insistence upon Bickle's victimhood ignores the genuine economic, social and cultural marginality of non-whites.

Male homosexuality is another cultural identity which reveals the underlying insecurities of Bickle's masculine subjectivity. Bickle's colleague Wizard, who has a penchant for telling tall stories, describes an incident whereby a gay couple, identifiable solely by their rhinestone T-shirts, have a verbal altercation which escalates to mild assault during their commute. In his passive efforts to reprimand the couple, an underlying hostility inevitably intrudes:

„I don't care what you do in the privacy of your own home, behind closed doors. This is an American free country, we've got the pursuit of happiness thing, you're consenting, you're adult, but in my ... cab, don't go busting heads. God love ya, do what you want“.

While Wizard attempts an assimilation of gay men into mainstream society through evoking the entitlements of liberal democracy, he nonetheless denies homosexuals these same rights when, using rather crude heterosexist assumptions regarding appearance and behaviour, he renders male homosexuality acceptable only when operating exclusively within the private

realm, „behind closed doors“. By consigning the publicly feuding gay couple to the domestic sphere, Wizard simultaneously feminises and conceals gay men. Later a second colleague chimes in: „tell them to go to California, because out in California when two fags split up, one’s got to pay the other one alimony“. Again, this sentiment appears to hint at a degree of tolerance, even to suggest a strategy whereby economic protection under the law is assured, however it is undermined by the hostility embedded in the mocking tone with which the statement is delivered and the indiscriminate use of the epithet „fag“. Significantly, both men, perhaps in defence of their own threatened masculine identities, reference the legislation protecting the safety and rights of gays and lesbians which, in their clumsy explanation, are made to appear excessive or preposterous. Furthermore, locations beyond the familiar jurisdictions are portrayed as cosmopolitan or eccentric, revered not for their tolerant nature but more for their mythic allure.

Although Bickle remains silent during this exchange, his complicity in these attitudes is demonstrated with the use of homophobic slurs like „buggers“, „queens“ and „fairies“ in his diatribe regarding urban contaminants. Like the „dopers“ and „junkies“ he fulminates against, male homosexuality performed or displayed on the streets succeeds in offending Bickle through its capacity to subvert and disrupt social norms. Gay men are dehumanised through their reduction to „animals“ and criminalised by their supposed proximity to prostitutes while drug users are rendered abject through their likeness to „garbage“. Amy Taubin (2000) suggests that Bickle’s homophobia stems from his fears of being assailed whilst undertaking work. While the taxi provides Bickle with armour, that very masculine of artifices, it also „leaves him vulnerable to attack – specifically to penetration from the rear“ (2000: 42). In an effort to sufficiently safeguard himself against such exposure, Bickle’s heterosexuality has to be endlessly reassessed and verified through his relentless objectification of women with the use of pornography and his association with Betsy which, analysed in greater detail below,

operates purely in terms of Bickle's position as spectator and Betsy as the fetishised object of desire (Mulvey, 1975).

As if to symbolise yet another frontier on which Bickle has lost ground, his relationships with women are especially revealing of his heterosexual, masculine insecurities. Bickle's thwarted heterosexual desire is galvanised when he encounters Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), an attractive, professional, upper-class campaign worker. Somewhat out of place amongst the usual throng of haggard and harried pedestrians, Betsy moves through the city with a cool, detached resolve. Bickle records the moment in his diary: „She appeared like an angel; out of this filthy mass. She is alone. *They* cannot touch her“. As Fuchs (1991) further explains:

Travis insulates Betsy; he defines her by her Otherness, her whiteness, her purity. Yet the paradox he establishes here cannot be sustained, even within the logic of his madness. Even as he describes her, she shuts the door, disappearing from view.

(1991: 39).

Bickle's final words, uttered abruptly, are further emphasised by the camera panning across the words written in his diary. At least one other onlooker has noticed Betsy – a man sitting at the entrance of the campaign office played by *Taxi Driver* director, Martin Scorsese. However the banal conversation between her and a colleague at Palantine's campaign headquarters reveals Betsy to be rather ordinary and two dimensional, vulnerable to the charms of the vapid Senator Palantine, yet unaffected by the urban irritants which have so besieged Bickle.

To Bickle, he and Betsy are destined for one another. They are two lost souls seeking companionship through a mutual sense of isolation. This connection is communicated through Scorsese's use of a slow motion shot of Betsy entering the campaign office. She too, like Bickle, walks out of step with others and resists the pace and cadence of the city. Indeed, Bickle attempts to make this equation when he confidently storms Betsy's workplace one day,

declares her to be the most beautiful woman he has ever seen, offers to volunteer to campaign for Palantine and invites her on a date. According to Cynthia J. Fuchs (1991) „He interprets Betsy according to his need for a rescue mission, making her an objective of his subjective search for meaning by her similarity to himself“ (1991: 40). However the suggestion that any such emotional bond exists between the two seems to indicate a delusional pattern of thinking by Bickle. Unlike Bickle, Betsy is able, superficially at least, to be convivial towards her work colleagues, as demonstrated in the earlier exchange between her and a co-worker. Bickle’s own social isolation and desire for companionship leads him to project his inadequacies onto Betsy. He tells her he thinks she is lonely, despite there being no evidence to suggest this is the case. Nevertheless Betsy appears for the moment to respond positively to Bickle and agrees to meet him for lunch. To herald the happy occasion, Bickle reverts once again to his habit of pedantic note taking when he writes:

May 26<sup>th</sup>, 4:00pm. I took Betsy to Child’s Coffee Shop on Columbus Circle. I had black coffee and apple pie with a slice of melted yellow cheese. I think that was a good selection. Betsy had coffee and a fruit salad dish. She could have had anything she wanted.

During their date however significant personality differences begin to emerge. Betsy does not understand Bickle’s jokes, and his attempts to alert her to her own social isolation are no more successful than his earlier efforts. Bickle becomes defensive when Betsy likens him to Kris Kristofferson’s song, „He’s a Pilgrim“. Betsy, quoting from the song, states: „he’s a prophet, he’s a pusher ... partly truth and partly fiction ... [He’s] a walking contradiction“. Bickle responds coldly: „I’m no pusher. I never have pushed“, leading Betsy to clarify: „No, no. Just the part about the contradiction. You *are* that“.

Betsy's intrigue, or as Kolker (2000) puts it, „preppy curiosity about the freakish and the threatening“ (2000: 228), soon turns to disgust when Bickle tactlessly takes her to an x-rated movie theatre for a disastrous second date. Offended by the gesture, Betsy storms out of the theatre and promptly severs contact with Bickle. This misguided attempt at courtship reveals the extent of Bickle's lack of socialisation as well as his inability to assimilate the various aspects of his fractured life.

After a series of curt phone calls and vain attempts to appease Betsy with flowers, Bickle begins stalking her and later threatens Betsy at her workplace, at which point her smitten colleague Tom (Albert Brooks) heroically intervenes. In recognition of his romantic failings, Bickle opines the following indictment:

I realise now how much she's just like the others. Cold and distant. There are many people like that. Women for sure. They're like a union.

In order to define her difference from himself by noting her sameness with the world (and thus legitimising his feelings of isolation), Bickle construes Betsy as being a constituent part of a threatening, powerful yet unknowable „other“. It is a changed discursive practice from his initial efforts to emphasise a sameness between them as socially alienated misfits.

As *Taxi Driver* privileges Bickle's subjectivity, Betsy's is conveniently denied. Whilst she is depicted as rather narcissistic, her reaction to the porn movie seems to hint at a personal integrity greater than first permitted in her superficial obsequiousness when reciting coldly Palantine's political attributes to Tom. However the audience's sympathies are funnelled towards Bickle at his humiliating spurning and not to Betsy, who clearly was hurt by Bickle's thoughtlessness, or who, as Amy Taubin (2000) suggests: „has been subjected to something close to date rape“ (2000: 49). While the unwitting *violating* of Betsy demonstrates Bickle's painful *naiveté* and lack of understanding of middle-class gender relations, it might also be

interpreted as a strategy to undercut Betsy's comparable social privilege through the explicit re-imposition of sexual difference. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Betsy is engaged with or indeed cognisant of feminist politics, she has certainly profited from the limited gains of the women's movement which her status as a single, professionally employed (and evidently moneyed) woman attests. Betsy therefore can be seen to signify Bickle's fears of masculine dispossession within the workplace and the urban space (illustrated in Betsy's cool command of both spheres) as well as Bickle's loss of virility. This reading of Bickle as hostile to feminist social reform is most evident in his angered equation of women with a „cold and distant“ union. Betsy in this instance therefore functions as a *femme fatale*, who, as Frank Krutnik (1991) explains, „is often a scapegoat, or, to use one of the reoccurring epithets of the „tough“ thriller, a „fall-guy“, for a more extensive and much less easily acknowledged erosion of confidence in the structuring mechanism of masculine identity and the masculine role“ (1991: 64).

Bickle's genuine dismay at Betsy's rejection suggests he must be ignorant of the traditions of heterosexual courtship. Less an unbalanced maladaptive, Bickle emerges as a victim of not just Betsy, who is presented as a prissy ice-queen, but of contemporary society generally, where unprecedented cultural changes have permitted such uncertainty to foster. While it appears that Betsy has recovered from the ordeal (in the subsequent scenes in which Betsy features, she is shown to be evidently unaffected as she carries out work for Palantine), Bickle has been irrevocably damaged. The systematic prioritising of Bickle's perspective allows only for his psychological state to be screened whilst Betsy is portrayed as blithely getting on with business. The resultant hypocrisy compounded with his humiliating rejection ultimately catapults Bickle into madness. However Bickle's excruciating lack of awareness of „appropriate“ middle-class gender relations demonstrated in his thoughtless choice of date venue is swiftly redressed in his chivalrous rescue of a 14 year-old prostitute.



### ***Thank Heaven For Little Girls: Reinforcing Gender Norms in Taxi Driver***

Bickle first encounters Iris (Jodie Foster) during one of his usual late night fares and almost runs her over as she crosses the street. They meet again later when she enters his taxi attempting to flee her pimp, Sport (Harvey Keitel). Her effort to escape is unsuccessful and Iris is dragged from the backseat by Sport. This initial brief meeting with Iris occurs just prior to Bickle taking Betsy to the porn theatre. The order in which these scenes appear demonstrates how Bickle has fused these two distinct female characters into a single impression. Although there remains a vast contrast between their personalities, Bickle transforms them both into subjects of his chivalrous heroics: Betsy, the superficial yet confident „white angel“ is lonely and exploited by Palantine; Iris, the naïve yet spunky „poor girl“, is troubled and corrupted by Sport. However later, the film subverts these readings into a single monolithic conglomerate, where they are indistinguishable from one another. As Fuchs (1991) argues, „the women are both part of the expansive Otherness that terrifies Travis. Both are, at last, untouchable and unfathomable objectives. Both are, at last, two more impossible missions“ (1991: 40). Threatened by their potential to undermine his authority, Bickle’s rendering permits them none of the agency they clearly exert. Each, according to Kolker, is „not a character so much as a further creation of [Bickle’s] aberrant sensibility“ (Kolker, 2000: 228), „a cipher“ as Fuchs (1991) puts it, „by which to interpret [himself]“ (1991: 40). Conversely, the men in these women’s lives are endowed by Bickle with significant power which is further evidence of his skewed perception. Palantine’s relationship with Betsy, who is merely one of many anonymous campaign workers, is too distant to allow for the manipulation Bickle suspects. Despite her service to his campaign and attendance at his rallies, there is little evidence that Betsy and Palantine have ever privately interacted. Sport is indeed predatory, however his lack of cultural capital allows him only the capacity to profit from the most vulnerable members of society. Although he dwarfs Bickle with his physical presence and bravado, Sport represents a depleted and disenfranchised

masculinity not dissimilar to Bickle's own. Ultimately both Palantine and Sport pose a greater threat to Bickle than to either woman. The powerful, sophisticated and charming Palantine exerts influence and commands the attention Bickle desperately seeks, whilst Sport embodies the rugged individualism which Bickle aspires to achieve.

Given the relational nature of masculinity, it is often other men whom Bickle encounters that provide a gender model against which Bickle's own male identity is assessed. Immediately after his awkward experience with Betsy, Bickle tends to a late night fare (played by director Martin Scorsese) who betrays to Bickle his calculated plans to kill his wife for having an affair with a Black man. In the exchange, during which Bickle appears genuinely unnerved, the passenger intimates an overtly sexualised mode of murder which involves shooting his unfaithful wife in the genitals. This is a crucial scene as it communicates the misogynist and racist tones of Bickle's own violent fantasies. The passenger *is* Bickle, or at least, serves as Bickle's mouthpiece for the hostilities he has hitherto struggled to articulate. If Betsy's humiliating spurning of him provides the necessary injurious catalyst, then the encounter with this passenger provides the script to undertake the homicidal campaign he will later carry out.

Failing to purify himself of the infecting surrounds, Bickle turns instead to free Iris from hers. After an unsuccessful attempt to reason with Iris within the private setting of her flophouse, he manages to persuade her to meet with him (which is no great feat given the fact that her company can be easily bought), and tries to extricate her from the influence of Sport. Unlike his lunch with Betsy, Bickle does not present the details of the date to the audience through a diary entry, signalling, according to Fuchs (1991), „Travis's diminishing control over his narrative“ (1991: 53). Within the innocuous setting of a coffee shop, Bickle makes an impassioned plea: „You can't live like this. It's a Hell. A girl should live at home“. Returning Iris to her parents represents Bickle's attempt to re-assimilate Iris back into a

traditional role. While juxtaposing the „Hell“ of the urban space to the preferred comfort and security of the private domain, Bickle imagines Iris as not only a domestic subject (evoking conservative ideologies of docile, usually domestically dextrous women inhabiting the private realm of the family home and seldom venturing beyond) but also as ultimately servile, evident in his later highlighting of Iris“ physical attributes which appear surface level and strictly ornamental: „You should be dressed up, you should be going out with boys, you should be going to school, you know, that kind of stuff“. While Bickle“s concern for Iris lies primarily with her vulnerability as a minor, he nevertheless does not neglect to mention her role as a potential mate for a male regardless of her youth. Bickle“s conservative understanding of feminine roles does not permit much by way of an alternative to her current situation. The lifestyle offered by Bickle „may be cleaner and more moral but no less oppressive and sentimental“ (Kolker, 2000: 230). He gives scant consideration to the possibility that for Iris, the family home embodies none of the safety and comfort he believes it to.

Bickle“s fears for Iris“ safety might be genuine however her spatial, specifically urban adroitness has the potential to generate concern. Iris, like Betsy, confidently moves throughout the city untroubled by any danger. She displays her urban competency further through high risk behaviour within the public space and her command and use of vernacular. Iris jokingly enquires as to whether Bickle is a „narc“ when she playfully interrogates him. When Bickle, in an attempt to undermine her affections for her pimp accuses Sport of being a „dope shooter“, Iris again cuts Bickle down by suggesting he „try looking at his own eyeballs in the mirror“. As Frank Krutnik (1991) explains, the „hard-boiled“ argot of *film noir* functions primarily as a means by which the *noir* hero undermines his adversary and is „often more a measure of the hero“s prowess than the use of guns and other more tangible aids to violence“ (1991: 43). When deployed by women however the cynical delivery of speech is a strategy by which a woman can challenge her exclusion from „the masculine regime of

language“ (Krutnik, 1991: 44). However this display of agency is swiftly dismissed by Bickle. He appears flabbergasted by Iris“ flippant responses, and delivers a stern rebuttal to her justifying her rebelliousness as „women“s lib“. Her wry words invite more of Bickle“s rancour, much less for her sarcasm than her defiance. What has descended into a match of wits soon thaws when Iris acquiesces to Bickle“s urgings. When Iris suggests she would rather live in a commune in Vermont than return home to her parents, Bickle demonstrates his hitherto unseen capacity to compromise and offers her the money to relocate.

In the following scene, Iris reveals herself to be nowhere as malleable as Bickle perceives her. In the only scene not mediated by Bickle“s gaze, Iris expresses her discomfort with prostitution as Sport pacifies her with a slow dance and empty, laboured sentimentality. „I don“t like what I“m doing, Sport“, Iris bemoans. Again, the apparently exploited female displays some resistance against her oppressor. Yet Iris“ moxie does little to appease Bickle, who by now is equipping himself with the necessary tools to finally act upon his long held resentments.

***‘Here’s a man who would not take it anymore’ – The (Re)making of ‘Paramilitary Manhood’ in Taxi Driver***

In *Warrior Dreams: Paramilitary Culture in Post-Vietnam America* (1994), James William Gibson suggests that America“s defeat in the Vietnam War has fostered the rise of a masculine myth which embraces and celebrates the regenerative nature of violence. Shamed by the defeat by the technologically inferior Vietcong and shaken by the cultural ambiguity the conflict produced, Gibson links the paramilitary culture, or „New Warrior“ (1994: 17) ideal to subsequent US foreign and national security policies. Gibson argues that the Reagan and Bush (Snr.) administrations had attempted to redress this defeat by sublimating their „attacks“ on enemies viewed relatively more beatable yet equally threatening to the American

social fabric: drugs, crime, illegal immigration, gay marriage and reproductive freedom (Gibson, 1994). Gibson explains that the allure of the paramilitary warrior myth, which proves especially appealing to white males, articulates the „dreams of redeeming Vietnam and recovering from all the other disappointments and traumas of the late 1960s and 1970s“ (1994: 269). Most pointedly, Gibson claims that the shock felt by the Vietnam defeat was further magnified by the conflagration of social transformations such as the women’s movement, the civil rights movement, and the manufacturing decline following economic recession. Gibson writes:

American men – lacking confidence in the government and the economy, troubled by the changing relations between the sexes, uncertain of their identity or their future – began to dream, to fantasize about the powers and features of another kind of man who could retake and reorder the world.

(1994: 11).

Gibson extends this reading of post-Vietnam American culture to the rise of popular (fictional) representations of heroic, anti-authoritarian, violent masculinities. It is here, Gibson argues, that the „warrior dreams“ of discontented American men are more vividly realised. Echoing Susan Jeffords“ (1988, 1994) claim that national and gendered identities are shaped by the militarised masculinities (or „hard bodies“) characteristic of action blockbusters of the 1980s, Gibson goes further in suggesting that the paramilitary culture exemplified in cultural forms such as films, television and literature permeates beyond mere pleasurable pursuits. Paramilitary culture, according to Gibson, validates the actual pathological excesses (and post-modern anxieties) of various individuals by suggesting a way of expressing them. As well as operating at an institutional level, para-militarist ideology is evident within Right wing fanaticism, racist and neo-Nazi organisations, as well as gun enthusiast clubs and conservative religious denominations such as the Promise Keepers which advocate a specifically „muscular“ Christianity (Gibson, 1994; Heath, 2003).

In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle undergoes a process of re-masculinisation through drawing on this specific para-militaristic culture. He begins by purchasing an arsenal of weapons from a nefarious arms dealer, „Easy Andy“ (Steven Prince). In a hotel room, the weapons are strewn across the bed in an almost erotic display. The camera pans across the guns, lingering on their sleek, streamlined form. Bickle handles them all, aims each at pedestrians on the street below, all the while only half listening to Easy Andy’s sales pitch. The guns are feminised, occasionally referred to by Easy Andy as „beauties“ and at one point „a little honey“. However they also represent the phallic surrogates to Bickle’s castrated, emasculated self. These are the tools by which Bickle will become wholly male again. As Taubin explicitly suggests, „it’s as if Travis was being offered cocks of every shape and size“ (2000: 53). Foster Hirsch (1999) also makes this comparison, by stating that „guns replace [Bickle’s] apparently inactive phallus“ (1999: 236). Indeed, Scorsese’s weaving of fetishised, eroticised guns with sexual violence is apparent in the preceding scene, where Bickle attends the porn theatre and sits impassively gesturing to the actors on screen the same shooting motion made by Charlie T. Here, Bickle play acts the phantasmic longing of destroying the genitalia of the „actors“ onscreen as suggested by the vengeful husband played by Scorsese.

More episodic than systematised, Bickle’s violent campaign in the beginning seems as directionless as his own rage, undergoing a series of mutations levelled at those who pose more an assumed threat to Bickle than an actual one. His obsession with Senator Palantine, the slick presidential candidate, has been festering since his failed courtship of Betsy. Bickle had earlier begun attending Palantine’s public appearances, honing his well-crafted surveillance techniques by discreetly staking out the crowd and applauding each empty campaign platitude accordingly. After his meeting with Iris, Bickle attends a later rally,

however this time he is armed and now sporting a distinctive Mohawk<sup>18</sup> style haircut. Bickle might view Palantine as a threatening, possibly corrupt symbol of inauthentic authority and thus a deserving target of his frustrations, or, as Kolker (2000) argues, „[killing Palantine] points out how terribly distant vulgar politics is from “the people” it professes to address and how distant is Travis from anything as communal as politics“ (2000: 227). Cynthia J. Fuchs (1991) and Amy Taubin (2000) also refer to Bickle’s estrangement from the crowd Palantine addresses, made all the more obvious by Bickle’s changed physical appearance.

Being a regular yet not wholly discerning follower of the tabloid news, Bickle recognises the social capital gained from taking the life of a public figure. For Bickle, to profit from causing death through an assassination might be the necessary route to securing celebrity and thus alleviating his anonymity. Entirely prepared to shoot down Palantine, Bickle’s efforts are thwarted by the candidate’s approaching bodyguards. He manages to elude the authorities and escape detection, however is left shaken by the failed assassination attempt. It is here Bickle’s „rescue“ of Iris becomes imperative. However the extricating of Iris from the influence of Sport by no means provides adequate explanation for Bickle’s violence. His major impulse is killing and any meaning he can imbue the shooting with is only retroactively applied. Fuchs’ (1991) interpretation of the plot to kill Sport is perhaps most accurate in conflating Bickle’s role as the city’s overseer, his desire for both physical as well as spatial cohesion and the restoration of normative masculinity. According to Fuchs (1991):

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<sup>18</sup> The Mowhawk haircut, shaven but for a narrow strip of hair running down the middle of the scalp from the forehead to the nape of the neck, is, besides an clear appropriation of the Native American Mohican traditional dress, a reference to the Special Forces practice of shaving one’s head in preparation for a kill (Taubin, 2000).

The heroic rescue becomes Travis's mission only when the assassination fails, yet the two actions share the same objective: to purify polluted streets, to exorcise "bad ideas". Travis's need for redemptive duty is left over from the marines; he needs a mission to make existence tolerable ... Again undertaking a combat mission, Travis is able at last to embrace the full deployment and destruction of his body.

(1991: 46).

After the frenzied departure from the campaign rally, Bickle returns to his apartment, subdues himself with painkillers then sets out – presumably that same evening – to kill Sport. Weaving his way through the traffic in his cab, ignoring those who attempt to hail him, Bickle reconciles his destructive actions with a type of grim inevitability. He recites from his journal:

Now I see it clearly. My whole life has pointed in one direction. I see that now.  
There never has been any choice for me.

Leaping from his car he accosts Sport who is standing outside the entrance of the flophouse. After briefly quizzing Sport on his „pimp business“, Bickle draws a gun with startling speed. „Suck on this“ remarks Bickle, firing a single shot into Sport's abdomen. Amy Taubin (2000) interprets this „familiar tough guy expression“ (2000: 69) as an amalgamation of homophobia and castration anxiety informed by the porn movies he regularly consumes as well as the violence he has been carefully cultivating. After shooting Sport, Bickle walks away casually, almost aimlessly then sits on a neighbouring front step to regain his composure. He then ascends the stairs towards Iris's room, guns down Iris's avuncular time keeper, then Sport, who has recovered enough to get a clear aim at Bickle, and a plaid-suited „john“ whose time with Iris was interrupted by the shootout. The scene is almost entirely mute but for the sound of gun fire and gushing blood. Iris's sobbing is the only pathetic counterpoint to the bloodbath. After the massacre, Bickle attempts to take his own life, however his gun has been entirely emptied of bullets. When a mob of police descend upon the building, Bickle, having been shot in the neck and in the shoulder, is slumped against the wall and drenched with blood, a



final indignant defilement from the „filth“ he so detests. With his last reserves of energy, Bickle slowly draws his forefinger to his temple and gestures to the police officers the same firing action issued towards him from Charlie T. A slow overhead shot of the carnage scans the scene in a series of red-hued lap dissolves.

While the climactic shootout is Bickle's way of effecting the radical changes he has longed to carry out, redemption is ultimately realised through the assignment of traditional gender roles. Iris is subsequently returned to her parents, evident in the letter read in a disembodied voice by Iris' father, who thanks Bickle for his daughter's safe return. This validation by Iris' parents presumably eradicates any need for criminal charges to be brought against Bickle, who has by now been lauded in the numerous newspaper clippings which are plastered about his dishevelled apartment. After a brief convalescence, Bickle returns to work and is seen in the next shot to be displaying improved sociability as he chats with his fellow cabbies outside a fashionable hotel awaiting fares. His fare for the night is Betsy, who is now depicted as less the object of unattainable desire, but a past obsession, literally „behind him“ as Amy Taubin (2000: 73) notes as she appears seated in the cab's back seat, a mere reflection in Bickle's rear-view mirror. Smiling sweetly she comments on Bickle's media generated hero status. Bickle slyly plays down his heroics, an attempt by Scorsese, according to Foster Hirsch (1999), to separate the film from the „warped spin“ (1999: 236) of the media that mistakes pathology for heroism. As the scene concludes to usher in the rolling credits, the audience is offered two narrative possibilities: Bickle, the principled vigilante, now a reformed character, can ease himself back into civilised society. Or instead, having cheated death and escaped a criminal charge, Bickle can never be fully rehabilitated and thus still possesses the potential to psychologically unravel in the future. Bickle's deadening, paranoid eyes in the rear-view mirror seem to attest to the latter.

This concluding scene has been the subject of some disagreement amongst film scholars. Some have dismissed the rather abrupt change in Betsy's attitude towards Bickle as pure fantasy, while other critics have argued that Bickle's status as a hero further underscores the redemptive ability of the media. What can be extrapolated at least is that both women, Betsy and Iris, are successfully assimilated back into traditional female roles. Iris is returned to the family fold whilst Betsy, once powerfully erotic, is now evidently unable to provoke the longing in Bickle she once could. However Bickle, either defined as a media star or unpredictable maladroit has regained his masculine privilege. He emerges from his ordeal unscathed, seemingly unaffected, if not rehabilitated.

In *Taxi Driver*, Travis Bickle's ideological and existential uncertainty is allegorised through utilising the narrative device of solitary, urban mobility. Rendering the urban space as the locus of Bickle's unease, as well as a site where masculine restitution takes place, *Taxi Driver* implicitly engages with the post-World War II cultural shifts which inform Bickle's sense of cultural displacement by depicting the city as fractured and chaotic. The persistent, threatening presence of non-white men and the destabilising impact of women who operate outside traditional gender norms provide justification for Bickle's post-modern angst via their portrayal as hostile usurpers of public space. Free-floating existential anxiety is condensed and displaced onto these marginal characters as a stylistic device to articulate the sense of lost patriarchal privilege. Cultural „others“ therefore simultaneously represent for Bickle both the social initiatives which he perceives as having undermined his white, masculine authority as well as the ideological opposite against which he defines his own flailing subjectivity. Bickle's para-militaristic campaign against Senator Palantine and then Sport finalises this strategy towards ideological recovery.

## **The Crow**

Another film in which an existentially uncertain, urban figure is presented as a means through which to examine the destabilising effects of the post-modern world is *The Crow*, based on the comic book series of the same name by James O'Barr. *The Crow* (1994, Dir: Alex Proyas) is a darkly Gothic revenge thriller that sees slain musician Eric Draven (Brandon Lee) resurrected by a crow in order to exact revenge on his and his *fiancée*'s killers.

*The Crow* adopts *film noir* narrative styles and cinematic techniques to allegorise the existential uncertainty of Draven as a solitary urban stroller. The film thus articulates a sense of pomophobia more succinctly than through the overt referencing of cultural shifts which are perceived as having undermined the formerly dominant, white, masculine subject. While opposition to feminist-inspired political initiatives is apparent in the depiction of gendered and raced „others“ in *The Crow*, it is the sense of foreboding and urban unrest manifest in the seemingly insignificant details such as lighting, sounds and the disparaging depiction of the city that communicates most strongly the existential, free-floating angst of the lead protagonist. It will be argued, then, that such anxiety is symptomatic of the specifically masculine, post-modern condition, where the urban space is implicitly made the site for these cultural destabilisations.

The backdrop of abandoned warehouses, rain sodden streets and general urban decay provides the necessary dramatic setting, along with the atmospheric alternative rock soundtrack for *The Crow*'s oddly romantic tale of vengeance. However it is the dramatic behind-the-scenes events that have generated enduring morbid fascination. Eight days before the film's completion, lead actor Brandon Lee (son of martial arts exponent Bruce Lee) was accidentally shot and killed on the set of *The Crow*. The film was completed with the seamless integration of body doubles and computer generated images. What might have been initially regarded as

crass exploitation of a yet to be realised acting talent (Lee had a somewhat forgettable film career prior to his death), *The Crow* was received favourably by critics and audiences alike, and spawned a number of sequels.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The Ghost Who Walks – Eric Draven as Pomophobic Flâneur***

Draven's status as a post-modern *flâneur* is characterised primarily by his desire to impose social order. The intensity with which he violently redresses his and his *fiancée's* murder and the fact that he is resurrected for the very purpose of establishing stability in a supposedly fractured urban environment mirrors the ideological aims of Poe's *flâneur*. His un-dead state literalises Draven's existential instability while his pursuit of those who disrupt his sense of selfhood, like that of Poe's (1845) unnamed convalescent, represents more general anxieties regarding the threatening nature of the contemporary urban space. Given Draven cannot „rest“ until he successfully „put[s] the wrong things right“, his very existence, then, depends on his ability to bring structure to a chaotic world. Interestingly, Carlo Salvani (2007) figures the narrator of Poe's „Man of the Crowd“ and the *flâneur* more generally as „the werewolf restlessly roaming a social wilderness“ (2007: 173). The primitive overtones in Salvani's reading are especially apt for Draven, who is likewise lured into the urban space by the animal desire to detect and ultimately annihilate traces of the criminal. However Draven's actions and the social commentary embedded in the depiction of the human condition in *The Crow* as a whole go beyond simply representing one man's quest for justice. The process of supernatural transformation Draven undergoes might be read as a reaction to „soft“ constructions of masculinity, whereby only a primitive form of masculinity is thought adequate to confront the perceived challenges of the post-modern world. Feminist ideologies,

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<sup>19</sup> All three sequels, *The Crow: City of Angels* (1996, Dir: Tim Pope), *The Crow: Salvation* (2000, Dir: Bharat Nalluri), and *The Crow: Wicked Prayer* (2006, Dir: Lance Mungia) received negative critical and commercial reception, with the latter two both relegated to direct-to-video releases. The TV series *The Crow: Stairway To Heaven* likewise failed to capture the acclaim of the first film.

such as those which have facilitated women's greater public visibility and the reconfiguration of the traditional nuclear family are presented in *The Crow* as bringing about social collapse and a sense of free-floating existentialist angst, condensed and displaced onto the marginal female characters Darla, Sarah and Myca. The representation of non-white „others“ as exotic, menacing, incompetent and adversarial is also suggestive of hostilities towards formerly marginal people occupying positions of power. It is for these reasons that *The Crow* as a film might be regarded as projecting aspects of pomophobia.

Following an examination of the use of *noir* aesthetics to communicate the condensed and displaced existentialist anxiety over the perceived loss of white, male cultural authority, this section will go on to explore how these same fears are condensed and displaced onto representations of female and non-white subjectivities. It will be argued that these readings, together with contemporary interpretations of the *flâneur* as an urban subject ideologically at odds with his surroundings, reveal *The Crow* to be a cinematic representation of specifically masculine, urban bound post-modern anxieties.

### ***Rise From Your Grave! – Resurrecting the Urban Stroller***

Aspects of Eric Draven's character are gradually revealed via a series of painful flashbacks he suffers after emerging from his grave. These memories are accessed only once Draven is occupying his loft apartment. Using some sort of supernatural ability, he is able to view his own murder and the brutal rape and murder of his *fiancée* by simply holding various items in the house. After reliving his own knifing and subsequent shooting by a gang of street hoodlums, Draven is forced to view the assault of his *fiancée* Shelly (Sofia Shinas). The attack on Shelly is depicted through rapid edits of distorted, brief shots filmed through a dark red filter and accompanied by melancholic choral music. Shelly's rape, though not explicitly shown, is represented using this same technique. The sense of menace is emphasised through

the use of a fish eye lens to depict her assailants as leering psychopaths and to approximate Shelly's dwarfed visual perspective.

Following the series of violent, quick takes of the couple's murder, Draven uses the photographs left amongst the debris of the abandoned loft to access moments of domestic bliss between him and Shelly. Filmed at a slower pace with a less claustrophobic tone, the ensuing scenes show the two playfully cavorting, declaring their love for one another and engaging in other amorous displays of affection. A wedding dress, bridal magazines and invitations signify also that the couple had planned to wed. Throughout this flashback sequence, details of Draven's character begin to emerge. He is young, exuberant with a cheerful disposition. His professional life appears somewhat marginal to his creative pursuits which involve music. Indeed his physical appearance attests to a life devoted to either menial labour or a career within the performing arts. Prominently displayed promotional posters and record covers reveal Draven's role as a guitarist in an alternative rock band. Despite the occasional presence of Sarah (Rochelle Davis), the adolescent runaway Draven and Shelly have become surrogate parents to, the couple appear largely isolated from others, presumably because their passion for one another is all consuming. Portraying their relationship as one of unwavering commitment communicates literally the film's subtext of the enduring nature of true love.

While Draven is portrayed as a previously gentle and affectionate young man, his character undergoes a significant shift after resurrection, presumably to equip him with the purpose driven indifference necessary to embark upon a violent campaign of revenge. Symptomatic also of Draven's movement from acceptable modes of conduct to vigilantism is his literal movement from the domestic space of the home to the public space of the city. Positing Draven as a primarily domestic being might have been an effort to represent then popular

cultural rhetoric regarding the „New Man“ which, as Chapter Three explained, was largely a media construct (Craig, 1992; Sullivan, 2000). Nevertheless the image of the domestic man who displays contentment by occupying the private sphere melds agreeably (if only quixotically) with Draven’s character of a sensitive musician who lives only for his girlfriend and his music.

Following his return to life, Draven experiences only intense distress when occupying the loft, besieged with images of his and Shelly’s murders. Certain visual and aural techniques are utilised to achieve this effect. Ghostly shadows cast across the rooms and a calamitous thunderstorm infiltrates the loft’s interior to render the domestic space hostile, undercutting all the warmth and comfort Draven’s home with Shelly previously possessed. By reinscribing the loft as a place of significant unrest, the film appears to be challenging Draven’s previous domestic status, suggesting perhaps that this „soft“ masculinity did not adequately protect him and Shelly when confronted with the subversive urban „types“ which made up the criminal horde that attacked them. It could be argued then that portraying the loft as having been violently overrun by natural elements and outsiders is a visual illustration of Draven’s masculine lack, symbolised here as a breakdown of the arbitrary distinction between “inner” and “outer”. *The Crow* appears to suggest, then, that to deal with the post-modern world and its capacity to „deterritorialize“ (Byers, 1995: 10), or blur borders, a more primitive masculinity is required. Draven’s literal resurrection and acquisition of super-human strength is therefore not only necessary to carry out the vengeance killings on his assailants, but is a strategy to facilitate the re-establishment of boundaries undermined by cultural „others“.

As earlier argued, *noir*’s distinctive stylistic elements are key to interpreting condensed and displaced anxieties regarding post-modern destabilisations more broadly (Oliver & Trigo, 2002). When deployed within the urban space, these *noir* aesthetics can work to

communicate the free-floating existentialist anxiety and ideological uncertainty experienced by the solitary urban stroller. This discussion now moves to examine the ways in which anxieties regarding gender, sex and race are allegorised through the dramatic depiction of a decimated, fractured city in *The Crow*.

***'Bad people out on the street tonight' – The Dystopic City in The Crow***

Despite its supernatural overtones, *The Crow* is typical of many urban narratives of the 1990s in its depiction of the urban space. The streets are awash with rain (a long-established convention to express melancholia) and urban detritus such as discarded petrol barrels and waste disposal bins. Decaying and condemned housing and boarded up businesses constitute the city's industrial centre. Eerie cathedrals and cemeteries are interspersed throughout to create a dark foreboding sensation. Draven moves about the city purposefully, however, conscious of impending yet not immediately visible danger. The camera's lens shifts from the aerial and slightly opaque perspective of the crow, which navigates the path for Draven, to Draven's own lateral viewpoint, effectively communicating Draven's psychic connection to his animal familiar/totem and the city's ubiquity.

The city of *The Crow* is relatively uninhabited, however what little human interaction is had is exclusively hostile. The city (the exact geographic location of which is never betrayed to the audience, through the graphic novel is set in Detroit, Michigan) is constantly shrouded in darkness, punctuated only occasionally by the neon lights of nightclubs. This deliberate staging of all of Draven's movements at night evokes anxieties regarding darkness acting as a veil for criminal activity and accentuates the ominous nature of a city already mired in crime.

To emphasise the urban setting as a synthetic environment, *The Crow* deploys several thematic cues to mark the city's break with the natural world. Natural forces are often evoked



as a curative to urban decay. In an early scene, a cynical hotdog stand vendor muses casually to Officer Albrecht (Bernie Hudson), who investigated Draven's murder one year ago and will go on to become his sole ally: „What this place needs is a good natural catastrophe. An earthquake, tornado. Maybe a flood, like in the Bible“. However, incessant downpours soon become an irritant rather than a curative for the teenage street kid Sarah, who expresses a wish for it to stop raining.

Fire is also evoked as a cleansing agent against urban detritus. Barely moments after the exchange with the hotdog seller, Albrecht leaves to inspect an explosion which sounds in the distance. T-Bird (David Patrick Kelly) who has detonated the explosion remarks to a bound and gagged store owner: „Lake Erie actually caught on fire once from all the crap floating around in it. I wish I could have seen that“. Fire (more specifically, arson) provides a motif to emphasise the hellish thematic style of *The Crow*. Head villain Top Dollar (Michael Wincott) proposes to his gathered minions that he wants to start a fire so big that „the Gods will notice us again“. This sentiment betrays both Top Dollar's indiscriminate approach to crime as well as the belief that the city is godforsaken. Draven employs arson as a method of law enforcement when he torches pawn broker Gideon's (Jon Polito) store.

Presenting the urban setting as either aesthetically displeasing or inimical to personal comfort is indicative of wider social understandings of the culture within which the city appears. As Jon Lewis (1991) writes „the city is a graffiti-decorated, obscenity-filled sewer – a metaphor regarding the state of things in American culture in general“ (1991: 245). However, offering such an overtly conservative reading of modern society ameliorates the need to address the structural inequalities which might account for the crimes of the city's inhabitants as well as exonerating those who pursue justice by violent retaliation. It is, in other words, a convenient device to convey a sense of doom without engaging theoretically with the cultural

particularities which might have brought about such apathy in the first place. It is here that Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo's (2002) insights regarding the aesthetic and thematic generic markers of *film noir* as a condensation and displacement of post-World War II masculine anxiety might once again prove relevant. In common with the analysis of *Taxi Driver*, in *The Crow* the nihilism embedded in *film noir*'s lugubrious atmosphere communicates allegorically the loss of masculine authority and dominance to gendered, sexed and raced „others“. This gradual dissolution of male privilege presents, for Oliver and Trigo (2002), boundary transgressing potential, which threatens to overthrow the entire concept of identity. The *noir* hero must therefore furiously defend not just his own volatile subjectivity, but the structuring norms which maintain order within the urban setting. Depicting the urban space as inherently fraught allegorises the sense of cultural displacement symptomatic of pomophobia.

### ***Man (Dis)possessed – Primal Masculinity in The Crow***

At the centre of *The Crow* is the miraculous resurrection of Draven one year after his brutal murder. Unlike other urban vigilantes such as Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver* and Bill „DEFENSE“ Foster of *Falling Down* (Chapter Five) for whom the acquisition of firearms and deployment of para-militaristic swagger facilitates their existentialist recovery, Draven's transformation from waif musician to violent social reformer is achieved through assuming a state of animal primitivism. Restoring Draven's formerly privileged subject position relies on the employing of strength, athleticism, aggression and the capacity to engage his adversaries in a physical altercation, all qualities which have traditionally been coded as masculine. Yet as this section will demonstrate, Draven's evocation of primitive masculinity, like Bickle's para-militarism, works not only as a strategy to recuperate traditional forms of masculine expression and dominance but also to restore order to a fractured and chaotic society. This is further achieved through reinscribing traditional gendered roles to street kid Sarah and her estranged mother Darla, both of whom Draven views as having become unmoored from their

rightful places in the world. It could be argued, then, that necessitating the domestication of Sarah and Darla is Draven's way of re-establishing the traditional nuclear family, a site that has thought to have been undermined by the feminist questioning of the biologically determined nature of sex roles yet remains a terrain through which patriarchal authority can be exercised. Draven's behaviour is therefore symptomatic not only of his desire to restore his own embattled masculinity, but to strengthen gender demarcations more generally.

This section will now explore the especially primitive form of violent masculinity Draven enacts to carry out his revenge campaign. It will be argued that the summoning of an animal primitivism to facilitate Draven's return to life can be understood by reference to the mythopoetic men's movement. Practitioners of the mythopoetic men's movement encourage the evocation of mythic archetypes to bring about emotional and psychological well-being in men. Although the mythopoetic men's movement does not advocate the use of violence to redress personal injury, the language of mythopoetry, such as that utilised by the movement's leader Robert Bly (1990) is infused with hostility towards what the mythopoetic men's movement views as „soft“ constructions of masculinity. The tendency to regard post-World War II social movements and cultural events as having damaged men psychologically displays a noticeable ambivalence, indeed frequently overt resentment, towards feminist activism and converges, I argue, with the pomophobia described by Byers (1995). Following an overview of Draven's primitive resurrection, this section will demonstrate how a mythopoetic approach to restoring masculine privilege is further articulated through his aggressive tactics in reuniting Sarah with her mother Darla.

In *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990), Robert Bly suggests that contemporary Western men have been psychologically weakened by a variety of forces which threaten to invade men's „psychic house“ (1990: 146). Using a mix of re-worked folklore, poetry and personal

anecdotes, Bly argues in *Iron John* that contemporary modes of masculinity, characterised by an ongoing dependence on mother-figures, have resulted in the loss of vitality, spontaneity and a „general sense of confusion about maleness“ (1990: 43). Shifts in familial arrangements initiated principally by the feminist questioning of traditional gender roles, the industrial revolution or „the high tech culture“ (1990: 156), as Bly puts it, and the resultant destabilising effects of late-capitalist economics have all contributed to the apparent cultural dislocation of the white, heterosexual, masculine subject. Rather than viewing these cultural shifts and their effects as evidence of the tenuousness of any intrinsic or *natural* difference in men and women, Bly instead advocates for the continual restoration of a biological essentialist distinction between the sexes. According to Bly, progressive attempts to bring about the abolition of the culturally valued behaviours which reinforce and perpetuate inequality lead to confusion and disillusionment among those men who rely on traditional/normative constructions of masculinity to inform their sense of self.

The apparent undermining of traditional forms of masculinity by the radical reordering of post-modern society in the manner described by Bly bears significant resemblances to aspects of Byers“ concept of pomophobia. Byers (1995) regards an undue preoccupation with maintaining largely imagined identity borders as symptomatic of intense ideological uncertainty, whereby the dominant masculine subject perceives the current social arrangements as a type of psychic „deterritorialization“ (Byers, 1995: 10). To combat this invasion of ideological borders allegorised through instances of social instability/ radical reform, Bly suggests the wounded man must „bring the interior warrior back to life“ (1990: 146). According to Bly, „every modern man has, lying at the bottom of his psyche, a large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet“ (1990: 6) which has been repressed and replaced by a „sanitized, hairless, shallow man“ (1990: 6) in order to adapt to the expectations

of work, family and intimate relationships with women. „Welcoming“ this hairy wild man, Bly argues, brings with it possibilities of personal fulfilment (Bly, 1990).

In *The Crow*, this evocation of the hairy, wild man within is realised through Draven’s literal resurrection and reincarnation as a violent, visually confronting, irrepressible and seemingly indestructible urban vigilante. Draven’s return to life is represented as both primal yet cinematically conventional. In the dead of night during a powerful rainstorm, a watchful crow summons Draven from his grave precisely one year after his murder. Draven claws his way out of the earth, lets out a visceral howl and in typical Hollywood stylised transformation from civilian to warrior, tears off his burial suit, revealing his bare, buffed torso. Atypical of Hollywood representations of resurrections is Draven’s otherwise untouched form. Despite the scars from his fatal knifing, he does not display the usual signs of decomposition such as rotting flesh or festering wounds. Apart from being drenched by the rain and exhibiting a shambling gait, physically at least Draven is in fine fettle. Moments after emerging from his grave, he appears to have fully adapted to his un-dead form, equipped with an agility and athleticism not previously demonstrated in the moments prior to his death. Unlike Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver*, who superintends his own training in preparation to confront „urban filth“, Draven’s vigilantism indeed comes from *deep within*, an evocation of an already dormant „wild man“.

As well as his ability to channel memories from people and inanimate objects present at times of significant psychological trauma, Draven also appears to possess powers to withstand any injury. When Draven performs an acrobatic jump by launching himself off the window ledge framed by shattered glass, his lacerated palms instantaneously heal. This capacity to remain unaffected by physical pain or harm is evident later when Draven tries to recover his *fiancée*’s engagement ring, pilfered by one of her assailants and sold to the pawn broker Gideon, who

also becomes victim to Draven's violent retribution for shamelessly trading on the stolen property of murder victims. Draven is shot in the chest by the pawn broker when he confronts him, yet once again the healing process is accelerated. The scene is repeated again later when Draven urges another of his killers to fire his gun, over which Draven has placed his open palm. The bullet is shown to penetrate his hand graphically, yet the entry wound closes instantly. Draven's immortality therefore is the literal, physical manifestation of his figurative masculine regeneration.

Draven's cosmetic transformation from musician to superhuman avenger also succeeds in evoking a primitive masculinity. During the particularly effective sequence, Draven uses remnants of his *fiancée's* makeup to whiten his face and blacken his eyes and lips. He draws an elongated line from both his eyes down to his cheeks to resemble dark tears and two lines extend upwards from the corners of his mouth to create a sinister grin. It is not immediately clear why Draven adopts this specific image however one of three British theatrical masks, Irony, is seen suspended on the mirror as Draven assumes this persona. Draven is seen playfully taunting Shelly with the mask during a more pleasant episode of the flashback sequence. The application of this particular look is also reminiscent of „corpse paint“, believed to have origins within a legion of huntsman from Teutonic mythology (Briggs, 1976), and later taken up by members of the Black metal music scene of Norway.<sup>20</sup> This „warrior paint“ however becomes the source of derision from those whom he encounters. Draven is referred to as a „down“ by Sarah, a „dead whore“ by one of his killers and alternatively as a „mime“ and as „Snow White“ by Albrecht. One might argue then that Draven himself challenges the very identity borders he is attempting to restore by being thoroughly „post-human“, at once man and animal, live yet dead, masculine and feminine. Yet it is in the discomfort, unease and desire to „put the wrong things right“ so he can finally

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<sup>20</sup> Similarities have also been noted between Draven's face paint and that worn in German Expressionist cinema.

rest in peace that the most overtly reactionary readings of post-modern society in *The Crow* can be observed. No obvious ideological sentiment of militarism or nationalism can be read in the figure of Draven, however it is in the urgency with which Draven addresses the allegorical dissolution of identity borders which renders both Draven and his violent motivations as pomophobic.

### ***Distressed Damsels and Fatale Femmes***

The anti-feminist tendency in the mythopoetic men's movement to reimpose essentialist gender roles is evidence of the profound unease of some men with women's improved social mobility over the last 30 years (Byers, 1995). This specifically masculine sense of loss is offered an explanation by advocates of the mythopoetic men's movement who suggest men have been marginalised within the domestic space by social forces and cultural events that have brought about greater equality between the sexes. Feminism and industrial reform for instance have been viewed by mythopoetic advocates as having contributed to the burying of knowledge of age old, *instinctual* rites of passage which facilitate young boys' development into responsible and assertive men (Pearce, 2001; Torgovnick, 1998). Women's greater workplace participation has led to an undermining of men's exclusive claim to paid labour while the growing social acceptance of single parent, women-headed families has brought about the breakdown of traditional familial arrangements. Such feelings of cultural usurpation might provide the context within which Draven's actions are best understood, more specifically, the aggressive nature with which he restores the mother/daughter bond between Sarah and Darla in *The Crow*. This section will now move to explore how free-floating existential anxiety is presented in the condensed figures of Sarah and Darla, who signify the combined threat of women's occupation of the urban space, female sexuality and the maternal.

It is revealed through the several traumatic flashbacks that Draven and *fiancée* Shelly had become surrogate parents to Sarah following her estrangement from her morphine addicted mother, Darla (Anna Levine). The sudden, violent death of Draven and Shelly thrusts Sarah once again back onto the unpredictable, lawless streets. However, Sarah does not embody the qualities one might expect from an orphaned and homeless pre-adolescent girl. Despite her youth, Sarah is able to negotiate the urban setting with success, surviving independently but with the occasional charitable offer of food from Officer Albrecht and the nightclub barman who employs her mother. Sarah traverses the street atop her skateboard with competence and although she cuts a lonely figure against the dark, post-apocalyptic city, appears to have become accustomed to her environment. Street smart and assertive, Sarah has cultivated an image that is better suited to her surrounds. A severe haircut and boyish clothing might reflect then contemporary trends in fashion but also might be regarded as a deliberate repudiation of her femininity which would otherwise make her vulnerable. Such is Sarah's bravery that even an encounter with the un-dead Draven does not elicit the fear one might expect when engaging a walking corpse.

Seemingly troubled by Sarah's unsupervised occupation of the urban space, Draven interrupts his murderous campaign to locate her mother, Darla, a morphine addicted bar maid, with the aim of mending their fractured relationship. After dramatically entering the austere doss house Darla shares with Funboy, Draven neutralises Funboy with a bullet to the leg and corners a petrified Darla in the bathroom. While Darla grips a razorblade in terror, Draven employs the antiquated verse from William Makepeace Thackeray: „Mother is the name for God on the lips and hearts of all children“ (2008: 372) as a statement of the familial ideologies motivating Draven's restoration of Darla back to the domestic sphere. Despite Sarah giving no indication, Draven implies that he is acting on Sarah's urgings with: „your daughter is out there on the streets, waiting for you“. Genuinely traumatised, Darla runs from the drug den



and back to the home she formerly shared with her daughter where she is found the following morning, miraculously clear eyed and tastefully dressed, frying eggs for Sarah.

Emerging from this rather heavy-handed resolution is the conservative assignation of culturally appropriate gender behaviour to Sarah and Darla. Despite being more adept and easily more familiar with the street, the preferred place for Sarah – indeed all young girls – is within the confines of the domestic space with a mother. Draven’s pejorative and essentialist reading of femininity ultimately negates Sarah’s mobility in exchange for a not wholly satisfying domestic existence. Darla too seems equally unprepared for the domestic role she has been relegated to. Struggling with the task of preparing breakfast for Sarah, Darla remarks that she „never was too good at this Mommy shit“, before Sarah conciliates Darla’s shortcomings by appeasing Darla’s efforts and finally referring to her as „Mom“.

The character of Darla could therefore be interpreted as a foil to attack feminist ideologies which challenge the assumed natural link between femininity and „Mothering“. While *The Crow* does not rehearse anxieties regarding the usurping, exclusionary potential of maternity, it does however depict motherhood as a domain for the assignation of patriarchal control. While Darla’s screen time is minimal (indeed, her brief presence in *The Crow* is itself illustrative of her relegation to the margins of narrative) she performs the important function of allowing Draven, and *The Crow* more specifically, to stage a scenario to negatively judge a non-conforming mother figure so as to restructure motherhood in a manner that patriarchy deems appropriate. As E. Anne Kaplan (1983) explains, cinema will often „reinscribe the Mother in the position patriarchy desires for her, in so doing teach the female audience the dangers of stepping out of the given position“ (Kaplan, 1983: 128). Portraying Darla as a „bad“ mother provides *The Crow* the necessary justification for her being taught her proper place in the gender order.

Darla does more than violate the patriarchal constructions of motherhood through her negligence and her absence from her daughter's life. Her drug use features as the ultimate abnegation of her maternal responsibility. Presented less as a hopeless and pitiable addict, Darla is depicted as wantonly pursuing her own self interests at the expense of her daughter. In the moment when Draven squeezes her arm to extract the morphine from her still fresh injection wounds, Darla's addiction is rendered visceral. The sight of a murky substance oozing from Darla's flesh evokes readings of horror and abjection (Kristeva, 1982). Although this scene underscores the severity of Darla's deviance, the fact that she appears to have overcome her addiction the following morning suggests her drug use was a mere extension or exaggeration of her already obvious lack as a mother.

Darla's sexuality is likewise represented as subverting her role as mother. She is shown in one scene, seated at a bar, ignoring her daughter whilst sharing an intimate moment with Funboy. Typical of many Hollywood representations of motherhood, Darla is not permitted to be at once both maternal and sexual. To occupy both subject positions seems at least to contradict and thus undermine the much vaunted role of nurturer who is, ideally, supposed to be entirely devoted to her child.

Her drug use, sexuality and association with criminals might offer good reason for Draven to express concern, however Darla's capacity to resist conservative prescriptions of motherhood hints at the potential vulnerability of identity borders. By uttering „I never was too good at this Mommy shit“, Darla reveals the culturally constructed nature of motherhood as well as exposing how being a „good“ mother (indeed *any* type of mother) is largely performative. Darla's single mother (read absent partner) status is placed at the centre of her inability to parent effectively while her drug use and neglect/abandonment of her daughter feature as convenient tropes to explore the extent of her gender insubordination.

Oliver and Trigo (2002) note that in *film noir*, a number of condensed and displaced fears which both hide and reveal free-floating existential anxiety can be brought together in one figure. It is often the case that „fears of racial difference are displaced onto fears of sexual difference ... and vice versa“ (2002: xviii). One such female character that might be interpreted as a confluence of existential anxieties regarding female sexuality and racial difference is the almost mute girlfriend of the head villain. Myca (Bai Ling) is both half sister and lover to Top Dollar and appears to derive perverse pleasure from seeing people in pain. Her specific predilection for extracting the eyes from Top Dollar’s various victims becomes Myca’s ultimate undoing when Draven’s crow guide claws out her eyes before she plummets to her death from the bell tower of the church during the final showdown between Draven and his assailants. More intuitive than active, Myca appears to be possessed of an ability to receive morbid presentiments about the fate of Top Dollar and Draven. Playing into Occidental assumptions of the mystic powers of Eastern women, Myca’s Asian-ness is constructed as being on the one hand overtly treacherous whilst on the other enticingly attractive. Myca might therefore be regarded as a contemporary equivalent of the 1940s „Dragon Lady“,<sup>21</sup> who undertakes her criminal calculations through using her sexual wiles to entrap white heroes (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). These aspects of Myca’s race are manifest through her cold, monotone style of speech which suggests a type of Zen asceticism whilst her *risqué* dress sense succeeds in portraying Myca as sexually licentious. Whilst being simultaneously depicted as demure yet deviant, Myca’s Asian femininity thus constitutes displaced Occidental patriarchal desires and fears regarding race and female sexuality (Oliver & Trigo, 2002).

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<sup>21</sup> The character of Myca differs from this classic Hollywood stereotype only in that she is depicted by a Chinese actor. „Dragon Ladies“ of the interwar period were commonly played by white or Hispanic actors, further compounding the racism inherent in these roles. For more, see Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2004) *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, Blackwell Publications: Malden, Massachusetts.

Myca's racial ambiguity also exposes the free-floating existential anxiety over blurred national identity boundaries. Although clearly of Chinese descent, Myca is also Top Dollar's sister. This revelation complicates both characters' racial status since Top Dollar appears to be Anglo-American. Pawn broker Gideon expresses disbelief when it is revealed that the couple are related, however when Top Dollar clarifies that Myca is his father's daughter, anxiety over the incestuous nature of their relationship is conveniently pacified whilst fears of miscegenation are permitted to flourish. Further muddying the familial ties which bind the pair, Myca also provides maternal reassurance to Top Dollar, demonstrated in a scene where Top Dollar is recounting a doomsday prophecy imparted to him by his father, gesturing towards to some kind of innate, yet paternally predisposed aggression. She often pacifies Top Dollar with a motherly kiss on the forehead.

Further emphasising her own possible psychic connection to primal beings (as well as reinforcing the previously mentioned Orientalist assumptions of Asian women's apparent mysticism), Myca is the first to determine the link between Draven and his crow guide. Myca's cat-like appearance likewise communicates her animalism. She is often seen sprawled seductively on table tops or provocatively attired to emphasise her lithe figure. In a particularly lingering (and utterly redundant) shower scene, Myca assumes a reptilian form made all the more possible as she appears shot from behind with her facial features obscured. The sheen of the running water on her skin completes the effect.

### ***Menacing Masculinities in The Crow***

While the marginal female characters in *The Crow* operate as condensations and displacements of anxious relations to sex and race, male characters likewise hide and reveal the „concrete anxieties“ (Oliver & Trigo, 2002: *xiv*) regarding racial difference and the threat that such raced subjects pose to the structuring norms which maintain white, male cultural

privilege (Oliver and Trigo, 2002). This final section will explore the unconscious fears embedded in the characters Officer Albrecht and Detective Torres through their depiction as hostile and wilfully insubordinate. It will be argued that although Albrecht and Torres are atypical cinematic depictions of non-white masculinity given they are both men of „colour“ operating within law enforcement, their nihilistic worldview and propensity to bend the rules compromises their status as professional law men and therefore might be interpreted as manifestations of the free-floating existentialist anxiety of pomophobia condensed and displaced onto morally ambiguous racial „others“. However such representations cannot be read as solely a means through which to denigrate raced subjectivities and privilege whiteness. Albrecht and Torres“ use of combative „hard boiled“ argot might be perceived as playing into white cultural imaginings of racialised subjects as „brutes“ (hooks, 2004; Jackson, 2006), yet depicting both men as heroically cavalier furthers the ideological aims of *The Crow* which suggest patriarchal privilege (and by extension, social order) can only be maintained through adopting traditional forms of „tough“ masculinity. Albrecht and Torres thus serve the dual purpose of both validating certain constructions of violent masculinity whilst still stereotyping the non-white „other“.

Established as a sergeant having been demoted to the rank of officer at the beginning of *The Crow*, Albrecht is consistently antagonised by homicide Detective Torres (Marco Rodriguez), the pockmarked naysayer who brandishes his colleague“s demotion as an emblem of inferiority in the numerous „hard boiled“ insults he delivers. Albrecht usually responds in kind, however in the initial scene when he is tending to the murders of Draven and Shelly, Albrecht uses his relative compassion as a counterattack to Torres“ insensitivities, suggesting to Torres the *real* reason he was demoted was because he „wasn“t a big enough asshole“. While this claim proves effective in undermining Torres in this instance, Albrecht sees the cultural currency of aggressive discursive practices. Furthermore, by inferring that only an

„asshole“ can resolve a conflict, make an arrest or successfully ascend the career ladder Albrecht implicitly reinforces the notion that „tough“ constructions of masculinity yield results.

Albrecht’s marginalised masculine status might ensure his morally superior position, yet *The Crow* goes on to undermine Albrecht by depicting him in the subsequent scenes as largely ineffectual although well-meaning. Although occasionally seen responding to signs of danger, Albrecht always appears moments after a crime has already been committed and in one scene loses trace of Draven even after having apprehended him. Concealing his knowledge of Draven’s vigilante killings might allow Draven to evade police detection and continue on his quest for vengeance, but he is reprimanded for doing so by Torres, who questions Albrecht’s ability to adhere to law. A later scene portrays Albrecht mulling over case-findings in his underwear whilst still wearing his police hat. This might have been intended as an attempt to inject some humour into an otherwise dreary film however it also succeeds in making him appear ridiculous. In the final altercation with Top Dollar towards the end of *The Crow*, he is shot and rendered incapacitated. He survives, but Albrecht is unable to pursue Draven’s assailants from this point forward. Nevertheless, Albrecht’s injuries, in familiar „reflexive sadomasochistic“ (Savran, 1996) style, eventually bring about his re-masculinisation. At the film’s conclusion, Albrecht is placed into the back of an ambulance on a stretcher and reports to Torres, who was absent during the entire bloody altercation with Top Dollar, that Torres had „missed it“, a claim Torres had often used against Albrecht to undermine his policing efforts. To this end Albrecht successfully restores his masculine authority previously undermined by Torres through deploying violence and *noir* argot. A similar transformative process, whereby a heroically insubordinate police officer challenges his superior in ways which reinforce patriarchal norms is depicted through the character of Prendergast in Joel Schumacher’s (1992) *Falling Down* (Chapter Five).

While *The Crow* has instances of fetishising the non-white „other“, Albrecht’s Blackness is given no such representational space. Attempts to communicate Albrecht’s racial status are most obvious in the relational aspects hinted towards in his brief interaction with the otherwise obsolete character of Annabella, a Black, female police officer seen only briefly carrying out clerical duties for Albrecht. The fact that Albrecht’s marginalised racial subjectivity is not made overt is a somewhat refreshing change to „cop dramas“ which almost always lend some level of narrative thrust to the race of the leading Black protagonist as either a device to screen radical race politics (*In The Heat of the Night*, *Shaft*, *Die Hard With A Vengeance*) or provide comic relief (the *Beverly Hills Cop* series, *Lethal Weapon* series, *Bad Company*, *Bad Boys 1 and 2*, the *Rush Hour* series, *Bullet Proof*). While portraying a Black police officer as dedicated might suggest a representational trend away from contemporary depictions of wise cracking, irredeemably criminally orientated Black police officers typical of „action-comedies“ and „buddy films“ (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004), Albrecht nonetheless still embodies some significant pejorative readings of race which are worth considering.

Racialised associations between Blackness and evil in *The Crow* are most evident when Albrecht shares screen time with Detective Torres, a Hispanic. Although positioning a Black man in opposition to a Hispanic might have provided a safe domain to screen Black masculine angst – the scenario would have had very different ideological implications had the detective been depicted as white – locating both Blacks and Hispanics as outside white dominated power structures simply permits these hierarchies to be reproduced through the act of making them invisible. Given that Torres’ Hispanic subjectivity is devoid of any representational space, both men are rendered ontologically insignificant. This reading further implies that Black male subjectivity and Hispanic male subjectivity are mutable as a kind of amorphous, non-descript, non-white category, eliding the specificity of Black and

Hispanic social, cultural and economic oppression and the complicity of white cultural hegemony in maintaining racial hierarchies. Screening conflict between two non-whites also underscores the white-authored claim of inherent criminality within marginalised ethnicities (the „greaser“ and „gangsta“ stereotype of Hispanic and Black Americans respectively) where despite both character’s role as enforcers of the law, both are susceptible to criminal suggestion. While *The Crow* requires an absent or ineffectual police force in order to facilitate Draven’s vigilantism (indeed, with the exception of Annabella, Albrecht and Torres are the only visible face of law enforcement presented in *The Crow*), corruption and inefficiency occurs not at an institutional level but is communicated through Torres’ and Albrecht’s individual personality traits. Torres is needlessly foulmouthed and adversarial, whilst Albrecht uses questionable tactics to serve and protect. Even the superfluous Annabella registers surprise at Eric and Shelly’s efforts to challenge tenant eviction in a neighbourhood so crime ridden, as if to suggest that she as a police officer would bypass the obligations of her job and not attempt to intervene. Although Albrecht’s willingness to bend the rules ultimately delivers a positive outcome, these numerous infractions nevertheless undermine his integrity. Ultimately both characters risk fuelling damaging racist stereotypes, symptomatic of a pomophobic tendency towards the representation of raced „others“ in *The Crow*.

Through the use of *noir* aesthetics, *The Crow* represents the condensed and displaced free-floating existential anxiety of the white male subject within the urban space. The evocation of a primitive masculinity depicted through the literal resurrection of Eric Draven restores the structuring norms which maintain masculine privilege perceived as undermined by cultural „others“.



## ***Conclusion***

*Taxi Driver* and *The Crow* offer alternative means by which the assumed challenge to white, heterosexual, masculine authority can be addressed. In *Taxi Driver*, Bickle enacts a specifically para-militaristic form of masculinity while in *The Crow*, a primal version of masculinity is adopted by Eric Draven. Both protagonists accrue power and assuage post-modern anxiety through violence, which, positioned as a reaction against appropriate modes of conduct, signals to the ways in which (law abiding) strategies towards conflict resolution are unfulfilling. Draven pursues a largely individual quest for justice; however his campaign is not directed exclusively towards those responsible for his death. He also intervenes in the affairs of those women he deems to have transgressed what he considers acceptable moral boundaries by imposing on them a return to traditional femininity and motherhood. Travis Bickle's motives for criminal retribution on the other hand are less defined than Draven's, however they make a more overt statement regarding the general decay of contemporary society through legitimising his place within it.

In each film, overt critiques of contemporary society can be identified. In both *Taxi Driver* and *The Crow*, the urban space is made the site where much of the hostilities transpire, as well as providing the location where restorative violence can be enacted. Both films depict masculinity as radically unstable and susceptible to corporeal permeations. Anxieties over the breakdown of boundaries are readable as anxieties over the collapse of a coherent identity. Bickle and Draven work out these fears through the systematic purification of the city and its inhabitants they view as contributing to the destruction of the urban body which in turn is made analogous to masculine subjectivity.

Both *Taxi Driver* and *The Crow* engage with, either explicitly or through a process of condensation and displacement, the notion of lost (white) masculine cultural authority facilitated by the increasing public visibility of non-racially dominant „others“. In order to emphasise the perceived threat of the formerly marginalised, Black and other minority race individuals are often depicted in white-authored texts as inherently criminal and viewed as both contributing to the overall breakdown of civic order as well as legitimising anxieties in whites. The next chapter extends this argument by analysing three examples of overtly raced cinematic representations of the urban space to illustrate the ways in which specifically masculine, post-modern anxieties are articulated through the theme of thwarted spatial mobility by cultural „others“.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Botanist on Asphalt in the Concrete Jungle – White Male Victimhood and Black Male Superiority in the ‘Hood*

#### *Introduction*

Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993) is among a collection of cinematic texts which might be referred to as „white male paranoia fantasy“ films (Sartelle, 1996: 524), an extensive group of films covering a variety of genres which reached their peak in the late 1980s to early 1990s before becoming less popular in the years which followed. Although the cinematic „angry white man“ is by no means a recent phenomenon<sup>22</sup> it was, as Susan Jeffords (1993, 1994), Yvonne Tasker (1993a, 1993b) and Linda McDowell (2003) have discovered, a cinematic archetype most visible during the 1990s, presumably in response to the numerous cultural events which brought to light the persistent fears of the dominant order regarding gender and race relations (previously discussed in the Introduction).

„White male paranoia fantasy“ films sought to present the normative white male as the minoritised „other“ while previously marginalised people (women, non-white, and gay men) are depicted as the „oppressor“. These apparent challenges to white, heterosexual, male cultural hegemony are symptomatic of post-feminist, post-civil rights, post-Vietnam and post-Fordist cultural shifts, which, while exerting a profound experiential effect on actual men's lives (Byers, 1995), have also influenced Hollywood's representations of the male hero (Jeffords, 1988, 1993, 1994; Savran, 1998; Tasker, 1993a, 1993b, 2004).

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<sup>22</sup> Although there emerged a proliferation of so called „backlash“ films during the nineties, Phil Powrie (1997) identifies a specifically masculine crisis within French cinema of the 1980s. For more, see Powrie's (1997) *French Cinema in the 1980s: Nostalgia and the Crisis of Masculinity*, Clarendon Press: Oxford; New York.

Such depictions of white male victimhood emerged contemporaneous to the „Hood“ genre of film. Characterised by an explicit referencing of the cultural, political and economic issues affecting the lives of inner city Black communities, Hood films vividly conveyed the prevalence of gun culture, chronic unemployment, police harassment/surveillance, poverty and violent death in the lives of young Black men living in the inner cities, or neighbourhoods („hoods“), of Los Angeles, especially as they limit and define the identities of young Black males. Albert and Allen Hughes“ *Menace II Society* (1993) and the thematically similar *Boyz N The Hood* (1991, Dir: John Singleton) are two examples of Black-authored, male-centred and “ghetto-centric” (Guerrero, 1993: 159) Hood films that came to epitomise the genre.

The overt ideological nature of *Menace II Society*, *Boyz N The Hood* and *Falling Down* make them well suited for analytical comparison. Indeed, all three films mobilise to certain degrees the notion that traditional modes of masculinity have been undermined by social forces which the protagonists of these films view as facilitating the advancement of cultural „others“. *Falling Down* and both Hood films selected for analysis in this chapter include conservative tendencies towards privileging the victimisation of men who occupy positions of power within their respective domains. Furthermore, the strategies deployed to recuperate embattled masculine authority differ little between each film. Bill „D-FENS“ (so called after his license plate) Foster in *Falling Down*, Caine and O-Dog in *Menace II Society* and Tre and Doughboy in *Boyz N The Hood* all respond to their apparent cultural displacement through marginalising non-hegemonic subjectivities.

However it is each film“s protagonists“ relationship to the urban environment that provides insight into the ways in which specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety is most vividly expressed. Like *Taxi Driver* and *The Crow* pomophobia is represented cinematically through the theme of thwarted spatial mobility. All three films locate the urban space as a terrain

upon which cultural displacement is experienced and a domain within which masculine privilege can be restored. *Falling Down* and both Hood films allegorise this sense of ideological uncertainty through employing the narrative device of *flânerie*, depicted as either solitary urban strolling or automotive „cruising“ – the moving about the city in cars.

It is also through the theme of thwarted spatial mobility that the most pronounced differences between these three films become apparent. The urban space is represented as a site where specifically masculine, post-modern anxieties become manifest. Whereas *Falling Down* represents Los Angeles as a seemingly impenetrable space where physical movement is hindered by interracial antagonism and the hostile occupation of the urban centre by minoritised, raced „others“, *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* instead depict the sectoral control imposed on predominantly Black communities by largely unseen white authorities. In this instance, spatial movement by Black inner city youths is restricted by internalised fears or limits as well as actual, physical boundaries exemplified through police surveillance, segregation, economic deprivation and in-group hostilities (Chan, 1998; Guerrero, 1993; Massood, 1996). This reading significantly challenges the notions of loss of white cultural dominance presented in *Falling Down*.

Yet as this chapter's analysis of *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* will demonstrate, Black, under-class masculinity as it is cinematically represented in Hood films is consolidated by appeals to traditional modes of masculinity. R. W. Connell (1995) explains, „hegemonic masculinity among whites sustains the institutional oppression and physical terror that have framed the making of masculinities in black communities“ (1995: 80). In other words, although Black, urban, under-class males remain marginalised to white males in the context of US race relations, Black males construct ways to assert dominance within the already oppressed group. This is achieved, as this chapter will go on to explore, through the use of

violence against and intimidation of other Black men, particularly those considered subordinate to the already oppressed group (ie: gay men, feminised men) and through the „erasure“ or „containment“ of women. Yet as Connell (1995) argues, „marginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group“ (1995: 80-1, emphasis in original) and that while Black men might exert a hegemonic, dominant subjectivity, this „does not yield social authority to Black men generally“ (1995: 81).

Despite these competing discourses on the lack of spatial mobility within – and out of – the „hood by Black filmmakers, the supposed marginality of the formerly dominant white, masculine subject is represented explicitly in *Falling Down* as contingent upon the interference and threatening presence of raced „others“ within these same urban spaces. While *Falling Down* explores white masculine anxieties related to unemployment, loss of paternal rights and status as a consumer, it is D-FENS“ cultural displacement by non-whites which dominates the narrative.

The following analysis of *Falling Down* therefore performs two functions. Firstly, it engages with the film“s status as the first US motion picture to establish the „angry white man“ as a cinematic and cultural figure. Secondly, it provides a reference point to the discussion of those films produced by Black filmmakers around the same time of *Falling Down*“s release, specifically Albert and Allen Hughes“ *Menace II Society* (1993) and John Singleton“s (1991) *Boyz N The Hood*. Singleton“s film remains a significant cultural text as it is perhaps the first Black-authored, cinematic production to have garnered acclaim amongst (white) mainstream audiences and critics. However it is *Menace II Society* that will be subjected to a more detailed examination as it offers, through the absence of any „happy ending“, an altogether more dire perspective on the specifically masculine, post-modern (Black) experience.

This chapter will consider the various ways in which the paranoid, hysterical and extreme responses to apparent spatial displacement by gendered and raced „others“ allegorise the sense of cultural dispossession experienced by those men who rely on socially constructed notions of normative masculinity to sustain their patriarchal authority in the face of perceived cultural redundancy. It will be argued that despite their differences, *Falling Down*, *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* communicate elements of pomophobia (Byers, 1995).

### **Falling Down**

*Falling Down* (1993, Dir: Joel Schumacher) centres primarily on the efforts of a recently divorced, recently retrenched, middle-class white man to return home to attend his daughter’s birthday party, an event which as an estranged husband, he has not actually been invited to. During his pedestrian commute, a series of encounters with various members of the urban population obstruct his path, frustrate his progress, challenge his sense of self and gradually propel him towards violent reparation. Interspersed throughout is the similar „going home“ journey of an older white male police officer facing retirement. Throughout the film, both men undergo a transformative process whereby their previously challenged masculine authority is reconstituted through reactionary, retributive violence which ultimately reinstates their patriarchal dominance.

Through depicting D-FENS as victimised, *Falling Down* attempts to portray the plight of men more generally. Yet during the course of the film, D-FENS’ actions become increasingly indefensible, a point *Falling Down*’s director, Joel Schumacher, noted in an interview he gave upon the film’s release: „the fact that [the audience] can’t work out if [D-FENS] is the bad guy or good guy is the point“ (Salisbury, 1993: 77, emphasis in original). While this claim to complicate the attitudes embedded in a highly divisive film might not be entirely sincere, it

does highlight the ways in which *Falling Down* is conscious of the criticisms it invites, familiar with the representational trend it borrows from, and mindful of the varied nature of its audience response. As Joseph Sartelle (1996) suggests, *Falling Down* is „a kind of critical commentary of the white male paranoia of which it was an example“ (1996: 525).

Owing largely to its provocative „backlash“ agenda and its overt engagement with identity politics, *Falling Down* has proven a worthwhile text for analysis. Several comprehensive critiques of *Falling Down* by scholars from various academic disciplines focus specifically on those very themes which I am addressing in this thesis. Masculinity and its representation as an ontological uncertainty as depicted in *Falling Down* had been eloquently examined by Nicola Rehling (2005). Kevin M. Dunn and Hilary P.M. Winchester (1999) chart the various post-modern anxieties which underpin the narrative trajectory (indeed ideological statement) of *Falling Down*, with a specific focus on the gendered allocation of space. Jude Davies (1995) explores the possibility of post-Cold War US economics as a determinant of white middle-class male disenfranchisement as represented in *Falling Down*. Anxieties regarding racial displacement through the increasingly fragmented or „polyglot“ nature of Los Angeles have been examined as motivation behind the hostilities expressed by *Falling Down*’s lead protagonist. Elana Zilberg (1998) views *Falling Down* as a representation of a defensive reaction to the „changing cultural cartographies of continental American landscapes“ (1998: 187) specifically the Latinisation or “browning” (1998: 187) of Los Angeles’ urban centre. Building upon Zilberg’s critique, this chapter aims to address the phobic representation of re-territorialisation in *Falling Down* as a challenge to the cultural centrality, authority and privilege of middle-class white males by incorporating the contemporary interpretations of Edgar Allan Poe’s (1845) depiction of the *flâneur* as a means through which to inform the sense of existentialist uncertainty experienced by D-FENS who struggles to negotiate his place within an increasingly illegible urban space.



***'An Ordinary Man at War with the Everyday World': D-FENS as Pomophobic Flâneur***

*Falling Down* begins with the sound of a series of concentrated intakes of breath, which gradually dissipates with the image of a stern mouth, lips slightly parted and dotted with sweat filling the entire screen shot, feeding the sense of claustrophobia. Maintaining the same degree of extreme closeness, the camera pans slowly up towards the individual's nose and left eye, drawing back to reveal a bespectacled white man with a precision flat-top hair cut, white, short-sleeved shirt with a navy tie. He is seated inside a car, fiercely gripping the steering wheel and evidently stationary in traffic. As the unsettling soundtrack of shrill, sustained chords bleeds in, the protagonist (Michael Douglas) appears visibly irritated. The trickle of sweat on his nose and the steam from the car engines around him suggest the intense temperature. As the protagonist sits rigid with frustration in his car, the audience is invited to inhabit his stifled space and by extension, his tortured psyche (Rehling, 2005; Zilberg, 1998).

The shot then pans out beyond the interior of the protagonist's car and towards the urban chaos around him. He is trapped within an unmoving line of other vehicles, each giving off an excruciating din. Restless children occupying a school bus festooned with an American flag launch paper planes out of the window towards the traffic below hinting at not merely youthful boredom but a breakdown of discipline. A convertible in which two businessmen dispatch competing verbal tirades to another via a cell phone suggests a sort of defiant display of power. Various visual signifiers continue the sensory assault whilst offering priggish social comment. A Garfield car window decal with a maniacal grin evokes a type of mocking sardonic irreverence. Various bumper stickers promoting financial advice („Financial Freedom“), religious salvation („He died for our sins“) and driver obstinacy („How's My Driving? Dial 1-800 EAT SHIT“) mesh piety with corporate greed. A woman applying lipstick in a distorted, bisecting mirror points to the absurdity of the pursuit of vanity. These „mini worlds“ evince further *Falling Down*'s explicit claim towards the fragmenting of the

urban space, as well as illustrating the increasingly untenable nature of the public/private divide.

Strong correlations can be made here between D-FENS' anxiety over the commuters he is sharing this stultifying experience with and the need of the unnamed narrator to categorise the decrepit old man in Edgar Allan Poe's (1845) „The Man of The Crowd“. Clearly D-FENS' fellow motorists can be read – indeed, it is their very legibility which renders them so threatening – however it is D-FENS' interpretation of these individuals that reveals the unease which informs the *flâneur*'s own existentialist uncertainty. While elements of each individual's character are visibly inscribed in this opening scene of *Falling Down*, allowing for a coherent ordering of identities according to type, D-FENS' anxiety and paranoia depicts them, similar to Poe's convalescent, as strangely one-dimensional, deemed so through the supposedly telling attributes yielded from clothing, external appearance and behaviour. The possibility of an individual occupying multiple subject positions even in a post-modern context, then, seems an unreasonable proposition to D-FENS. He instead sees the businessmen barking orders over the phone as *only* aggressive capitalists, the schoolchildren on the bus as *only* unruly youths and the woman applying lipstick as *only* monstrously narcissistic. As in Poe's „Man of The Crowd“, these crudely constructed subjectivities in the initial moments of *Falling Down* exist primarily to create the „other“ against which D-FENS is defined. If he cannot successfully erect an ideological divide between himself and those who make up this perceived malevolence (discovering, as Poe puts it, the phantom „diamond and ... a dagger“), D-FENS risks undermining the structuring norms which maintain his cultural privilege, becoming just one of the many „ordinary men“ stuck in traffic.

A persistent fly and a non-operational air conditioner further compound D-FENS' escalating exasperation. He attempts to ratchet open the car window in an effort to introduce some air,

although audiences might question the wisdom of this move given the obvious atmospheric pollution. His patience is exhausted when the car window also proves faulty. When he fails to swat the fly despite his furious and undignified attack with a rolled magazine, D-FENS“ can tolerate no more. After little hesitation, he seizes his briefcase, abandons his car and takes off on foot amidst the congestion, sweltering heat and verbal abuse of fellow commuters. „Where do you think you“re going?“ one particularly indignant motorist calls. „I“m going home!“ D-FENS answers back. However as Nichola Rehling (2005) explains:

we later learn that this home no longer exists, rendering his odyssey a desire for things to go back to the way they were, to a culturally uniformed America he could make sense of, an America where white middle-class men were guaranteed the privileges, on both the public and private front, that traditionally accompanied their sex and skin colour.

(2005: 47).

Kevin M. Dunn and Hilary P. M. Winchester (1999) agree by arguing that „symbolically [D-FENS“] journey is aimed at reclaiming a past“ (1999: 182). This reading proves particularly accurate given that the various urban images which register with D-FENS appear both contextually disparate and decidedly multicultural. Here, the previously discussed anxieties regarding the dissolution of gender, race and class boundaries (Byers, 1995) are especially apt in explaining D-FENS“ frustrations. The visual cues make explicit that these anxieties are founded principally in the loss of prominence (indeed visibility) of his previously pre-eminent cultural identity.

Typical of most action thrillers, D-FENS“ personal biography is gradually revealed over the span of the film. In *Falling Down*“s case, the audience only comes to know key elements of D-FENS“ character during his increasingly hostile telephone calls to his estranged ex-wife (Barbara Hershey) and through the piecing together of seemingly unrelated police reports of

his vigilante actions by Prendergast (Robert Duvall). He is divorced, has a restraining order against him which prohibits any contact with his young daughter Adele, and has recently been made redundant by massive downsizing. D-FENS, as his number plate proudly attests, defines himself through his former job as an engineer in the defence industry.

Given the rather slow unfolding of biographic information regarding D-FENS, his identity is largely physically constituted. Much can be deduced from his appearance alone. He is male, middle-aged, middle-class and appears professionally employed. However, significant effort has been made to generalise this narrative. According to Jude Davies (1995) the filmmaker employs a „double identity“ (1995: 148) for *Falling Down*’s central protagonist, positing D-FENS as at once universal and particular. Keeping concealed all that previously affirmed his identity by removing it entirely (through divorce, redundancy and a restraining order) D-FENS further becomes the blank canvas upon which the audience inscribes their own personal anxieties regarding employment and interpersonal relationships. The opening scene depicting the frustration of being caught in gridlock traffic during a heatwave makes implicit appeals to a common experience. However this deliberate disavowal of the very aspects which constitute his identity is precisely what informs D-FENS’ sense of masculine crisis. Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily (2008) suggest D-FENS undergoes „the psychological disintegration experienced when a white male subject encounters redundancy, marital break-up and restricted fathering rights“ (2008: 45). By portraying the „everyday man“ as spatially, professionally as well as maritally dispossessed, white male middle-class resentment as well as D-FENS’ subsequent violent conduct is at least made understandable.

While this rendering of D-FENS as an anonymous „everyman“ attempts a strategic positioning of him as an identification figure to audiences, the fact that D-FENS is clearly male and clearly white renders these initial efforts to universalise the narrative ineffective. Dunn and

Winchester (1999) argue „*Falling Down* attempts a criticism of (sub)urban society, but it does it almost exclusively from a white, male middle-class perspective“ (1995: 189). As *Falling Down*’s unsophisticated claims of gender and ethnic disenfranchisement suggest, D-FENS analogously portrays the specific fears of white masculine hegemony becoming peripheral. „He“, as Richard Dyer (1997) bluntly puts it, „is nothing“ (1997: 218). Figuring the generality of D-FENS’ sex and race therefore suggests an ambivalent attitude towards patriarchal gender and ethnic hierarchies which privileges white males (Davies, 1995; Dyer, 1997). Women who might be more attuned to these signs of building rage in men and, fearful of its consequences, might respond less favourably to such a violent response and thus struggle to insert their own experience within this scenario. Furthermore, his „hyper-pinched“ (Beasley, 2009) appearance: severe haircut, outdated, unfashionable attire, prominent display of pens in breast pocket and grim, pained expression suggests not an axiomatic universality but instead a construction of masculinity edging precariously towards parody. However, as examined in Chapter Four, concerns over corporeal permutations often manifest themselves through adopting rigid conventions in and surveillance of appearance, allegorising the ailing civic body for which the masculine subject views himself as solely responsible. D-FENS’ disciplined dress might be read therefore as an attempt to reform (or literally *defend*) the city against corruption. As R. W. Connell (1987) explains, „the body remains the screen on which the well-launched dramas of power and anxiety are projected“ (1987: 82). By the film’s conclusion, D-FENS has embraced the para-militaristic „urban warrior“ ideal and substitutes his shirt and tie with army fatigues, gesturing towards both his rejection of conventional modes of conduct as well as his revolt against the corporate commoditisation of the individual.

D-FENS’ real name, Bill Foster, is only revealed midway through *Falling Down*. This too suggests a depersonalisation strategy; however this moniker also, despite being non-gendered

and racially unspecific is, according to Richard Dyer (1997), „obviously symbolic“ (1997: 220). Elizabeth Mahoney (1997) offers a pointed interpretation in suggesting that the number plate „is represented, albeit *in extremis*, as the last “d-fender” of an old cultural and social order which has long since disappeared“ (1997: 174). Jude Davies (1995) interprets the use of the abstract pseudonym as an echoing of Gangster rap artists such as Ezy-E and Ice-T.<sup>23</sup> This attempt to maintain a link with „angry“ Black culture (Davies, 1995: 148) is further testament to the ambivalence towards privileged white racial identity as well as D-FENS“ appropriation of Black discourses of oppression (later discussed in greater detail).

### ***‘White Shirt and Tie in Gangland’: The Fractured Urban Space in Falling Down***

D-FENS“ discomfort with his surroundings is articulated principally in relation to a sense of loss of spatial dominance to raced „others“. Despite attempts by the filmmaker to present *Falling Down* as a contemporary tale of urban alienation, of „a seemingly ordinary man ... who snaps suddenly“ (Schumacher, as cited in Davies, 1995: 148), the film is equally readable as a text which depicts the spatial displacement of a middle-class white man by previously marginalised people. The usual signifiers such as dilapidated buildings, homeless panhandlers, graffiti and garbage strewn streets are consistently utilised in the depiction of the city as „claustrophobic, invasive and stagnant“ (Mahoney, 1997: 174), however the „problem“ with urban living is most distinctly represented through the presumed growing visibility of ethnic minorities. D-FENS“ frustrated efforts at carrying out everyday commercial transactions<sup>24</sup> are in effect attempts to disguise the racial and gendered character of many of the other confrontations on his journey. Those who D-FENS encounters are portrayed as hostile and irrationally violent; fanatically defending the very space D-FENS, a white, class privileged male, previously held sovereign claim to. He perceives himself to be, as Richard

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<sup>23</sup> More recent performers such as Jay-Z, DMX, C-Murder, T Pain and 50 Cent might also be possible equivalents.

<sup>24</sup> For instance the scene when D-FENS holds at gun point the staff and patrons of Whammy Burger, incensed by their refusal to serve him the breakfast menu because he is three minutes late.

Dyer (1997) suggests, „an endangered species“ (1997: 217). While denying his access to areas which would have formerly been seen as cultural entitlements, the public space simultaneously provides the locus to „reassert the cultural and racial hegemony of the Anglo American male over a disconcerting proliferation of multiple counter-publics“ (Zilberg, 1998: 189).

The sense of spatial dislocation is articulated through depicting Los Angeles as fractured and hybridised. This rendering of the city as a series of fragmented worlds, of multiple public spaces under sectoral control of ethnic groups is symbolic of a number of white, male reactionary phobias. The apparent social exclusion of previously dominant groups by previously marginalised people is inherent in the claims of white male victimhood. Thomas B. Byers (1995) refers to the „liquid onsets“ (1995: 8), or fluidity, which challenge the unity and permanence of social territory and by extension, masculine identity. D-FENS, according to Zilberg (1998), serves as an example of the „distress and unease which some would argue as being particular to the late-twentieth century: place-panic or an insecurity of territory“ (1998: 186).

The inaccessibility of the built environment is extended to include the family home. D-FENS“ continuously thwarted attempts to return to a home he is no longer permitted to enter points to the closing off of the domestic space to men, which fuels D-FENS“ resentment towards his wife who is depicted as hostile and uncompromising. Representing his wife in this way also make an implicit remark towards the supposed anti-male (or feminist inspired) bias within family law.<sup>25</sup> As Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily (2008) argue, the „split portrayal“ of the lead protagonist as Bill Foster/D-FENS evinces „the schizophrenic relationships masculinity forges with the public and the private, hinting strongly at the

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<sup>25</sup> The suspicion of, or resentment towards, the family court which enacted and enforced the restraining order against D-FENS is a feature of his aversion to governance and policing.

psychological trauma that ensues when structural and deep personal changes occur" (2008: 45).

Fear over loss of spatial dominance is most vividly realised in D-FENS" violent altercation with a Korean storeowner. When D-FENS" request for change for the pay phone is ungraciously refused by Mr Lee (Michael Paul Chan) D-FENS attempts to procure the change by purchasing a can of Coke. Already incensed by the storeowner"s inability to pronounce certain English words („you come to *my* country ... and don"t even have the good grace to learn *my* language"), D-FENS finally boils over when he is charged 85 cents for the Coke, a price D-FENS finds not only exorbitant but which also does not allow for change for the telephone. D-FENS quickly launches into a racially charged verbal attack against the storeowner. Offended by the suggestion he was intending to rob the store, D-FENS takes a baseball bat from Mr Lee, and as the storeowner cowers beneath the counter, D-FENS begins to furiously quiz him on the price of random merchandise, ritualistically destroying the displays with the baseball bat when dissatisfied with the storeowner"s response. Buoyed by the temporary exhilaration of acting powerfully against the symbolic cause of the injuries done to him and, as Nichola Rehling (2005) and Kevin M. Dunn and Hilary P. M. Winchester (1999) have previously noted, an expressed desire to return to the past, D-FENS offers a wisecrack typical of action heroes: „I"m rolling back prices to 1965. What do you think of that?" Here, the Korean owned store becomes the arena for the symbolic reconstruction of the white masculine norm; where paramilitary revenge fantasies (heroic triumph over non-white interlopers) can be stylistically played out (discussed further below). It is, however, worth attending to the cinematography of the scene itself, particularly the way in which it attempts a not-too-subtle allegory of the Vietnam War.<sup>26</sup> The sequence is shot in sepia suggesting

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<sup>26</sup> This is not an entirely farfetched assessment given D-FENS" obvious geographical confusion. He initially mistakes the Korean storeowner as Chinese („you don"t have „V"s in China?") and later, during the ensuing struggle over the baseball bat, remarks „What is this? The last stand on Fiji?"



lowlight which is somewhat incongruous given D-FENS will later refer to the fact that this is a „rare morning“. It might be argued therefore that the filmmaker is attempting to construct the sense of jungle, that „well-known *cliché* about urban America“ (Dyer, 1997: 217), through approximating the setting sun often employed in US cinematic depictions of Asian war zones (*Apocalypse Now!*, *Bat\*21*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon*). Various other signifiers lend themselves to such a reading. The dark, earthy tones, dense shadows, the sound of turning helicopter blades circling above (despite, as Rehling (2005) has noted, no helicopter is ever visible), atmospheric mist and foreboding mood are all potent signifiers of the hallucinatory and primal aura of Vietnam or Korea.<sup>27</sup> D-FENS“ anger over the price of a can of Coke might also be unpacked as signifying fears of the Asian appropriation of American consumer culture (Klein, 1990). The storeowner“s greed, a long standing negative stereotype about Asian shopkeepers, juxtaposed with D-FENS“ (initial) capacity to negotiate a price makes similar allusions towards Asian financial power (Rehling, 2005).

The characters“ appearance and mannerisms likewise mobilise war discourses regarding the presumed otherness of „Third World“ peoples whilst exaggerating the supposed civilised sophistication of „the West“. When D-FENS first enters the store, Mr Lee appears sweaty, dishevelled, smoking and scratching his stomach like a grooming ape. When ducking for cover during D-FENS“ angered rampage, he is seen curled up, supine, gritting his teeth. D-FENS embodies the binary opposite to this forceful statement of Asian primitivism. Despite his ferocity and the ensuing struggle, D-FENS retains a disciplined appearance; his face impassive, his shirt unruffled and his pens still fastened to his breast pocket.

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<sup>27</sup> Hazel V. Carby (1998) has likewise identified the cinematic convention of drawing aesthetic parallels between Vietnam and inner city Los Angeles in her analysis of Lawrence Kasdan“s (1991) film *Grand Canyon*. For more, see H. Z. Carby (1998) „Lethal Weapons and City Games“ (Chapter Six) in *Race Men*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 169-193.

This „third-worlding“ (Zilberg, 1998) of Los Angeles is further hinted at in the following scene when D-FENS, having destroyed the Korean’s store and acquired adequate change, makes a telephone call to his ex-wife from a payphone located beside a series of „exotic“ shop fronts. D-FENS registers discomfort whilst occupying the bustling promenade. Inhabited entirely by immigrants, New Age spiritualists and vendors selling oranges and peanuts, Venice Beach appears decidedly „un-American“. Fliers plastered in the interior of the phone booth are written in Spanish. Samba music plays in the background. It has become unrecognisable to D-FENS, „transformed by alien immigration and New Age developments“ (Dyer, 1997: 218). While such multiculturalism might inject vitality into a city, evidence of a lively dynamism, Los Angeles is instead depicted as „a site of stasis“ (Mahoney, 1997: 174), a city that is rotting and visibly infected, presumably by the very ethnicity of these influences.

The sense of spatial usurpation is further communicated in the following encounter with Latino gang members who threaten D-FENS when he inadvertently wanders onto their „turf“. His inability to read their illegible „tag“ triggers yet another verbal attack over the proper utilisation of English by non-whites (demonstrated further in the Latinos use of unintelligible and expletive laden expression). After attempts to defuse escalating hostilities prove futile (during which D-FENS’ self-righteous efforts to consider the Latino men’s claim to private space is peppered with antagonism) the gang members demand his briefcase. D-FENS responds by beating the pair with his baseball bat. When they flee in panic, D-FENS taunts the two repeatedly with the statement he has endlessly rehearsed: „clear the path! I’m going home!“ – his mantra for re-asserting his threatened authority.

The failed attempt to gun down D-FENS whilst he is standing in at the phone booth depicts the Latino gang as violent, irrational bunglers, and positions D-FENS as a hero, invulnerable to danger and beyond accountability. Triumphantly emerging from the spray of bullets which

is seen to have fatally injured at least two innocent bystanders, D-FENS casually walks up to the Latino driver, who is trapped in his crashed car, and shoots him in the leg as he begs for his life in plain sight of the gathered onlookers. D-FENS then grabs their duffle bag full of weapons. He exits the scene striding confidently through the mass of people to the strains of exultant music.

Walking carelessly from the carnage, duffle bag of guns in hand, D-FENS attempts to board a bus however he is pushed aside by a swarm of commuters. Left stranded without means of locomotion, D-FENS gazes across the urban terrain. *Falling Down* now attempts to reposition D-FENS' building frustration as a symptom of general urban blight and social breakdown. Dilapidated buildings, gang graffiti, fenced off housing and little natural life dominate the scene, visual cues which are at once legible yet paradoxical. The sympathetic image of a (Black) veteran with a placard appealing for food for instance is almost immediately undermined by the fast talking (white) beggar, depicted as a conniving scrounger, who feigns a military past to elicit sympathy from D-FENS. Despite the harassment he endures by the man, D-FENS displays little hostility towards him<sup>28</sup> and instead denies him the money that he is requesting by simply walking away from the beggar and the poverty he inhabits. Swarming flies, dust, heat-haze and immigrants selling putrefying fruit further underscore the „decaying“ city analogy. However given the all-consuming nature of the urban blight which fills the shots of the city, it is D-FENS who is positioned as „other“, conspicuously misplaced amongst the stifling tumult which surrounds him.

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<sup>28</sup> It is the inconsistencies of D-FENS' behaviour within this encounter which reveal the implicit racism of *Falling Down*. While appeals for money have previously triggered D-FENS' violence, the panhandler receives only stalwart refusal. The Korean storeowner however, who had earlier made a (valid) request for payment, was dealt a vicious attack. The use and ownership of urban space appears to determine the nature of the response from D-FENS. Outraged by D-FENS' refusal of change, the beggar angrily instructs him that „this is my park, I live here!“, whereas the Korean storeowner made no such exclusive claim to space when D-FENS was destroying his store. While I argue that D-FENS' violence is largely racially motivated, no clear explanation for his response can be drawn from purely bigoted attitudes alone. As Dunn and Winchester (1999) suggest, „*Falling Down* is a realist commentary upon urban space at one moment, and then it is allowed a convenient slippage back to being a „tale“ about reality or „just a movie“ in its depictions of social relations“ (1999: 188).

### ***Measuring Manhood in Falling Down***

While much has been said of the racism embedded in *Falling Down*, the construction of gender within the film has only occasionally been considered in scholarly criticisms (Dunn & Winchester, 1999). Feminist accounts have gone some way in addressing the misogyny depicted in *Falling Down*, however the focus within these analyses has been directed towards the representation of female characters, especially that of Beth, D-FENS' ex-wife, who is portrayed as wholly domestic and largely marginal to the film's action-based plot.

As many academics have pointed out (Davies, 1995; Dunn & Winchester, 1999; Dyer, 1997; Rehling, 2005) *Falling Down* is less a story about a man, but a story about two men, both of whom are complicit in perpetrating patriarchal oppression. Nichola Rehling (2005) and Jude Davies (1995) posit D-FENS' masculinity as „inherently relational“ (Davies, 1995), that is, his identity is defined exclusively against that embodied by other men. This section will focus on the constructions of gendered difference in *Falling Down*, however with a specific emphasis on the ways in which both D-FENS and Prendergast reassert white masculinity as the dominant, structuring norm.

Like D-FENS, Prendergast's masculine crisis is played out and ultimately resolved within an urban setting. As D-FENS disappears over a lush knoll towards his home in Venice Beach, Prendergast is also seated, stationary amongst the traffic. He is comparatively more relaxed than other commuters even to the point of registering mild amusement over the inventive defacement of a billboard advertisement. The billboard, on which a tanned model in a bikini is featured, has the added graffiti of a small, crudely drawn man with flailing arms wedged between the model's breasts and accompanied by a speech bubble which reads „help me!“. This scene marks the first in a series of narrative convergences between D-FENS and Prendergast, establishing the male protagonists as inherently linked by a common claim to

victimhood. In this instance, the pair's shared fear of being suffocated/stifled by women is depicted (Rehling, 2005). However the scene might also imply Prendergast's ability to shrug off such petty nuisances as traffic jams and receptivity to crass humour, further stressing his placid, unassuming masculinity, which is constantly portrayed in opposition to D-FENS' excessive, extreme, inherently unstable masculinity, as the more preferable model (Dunn & Winchester, 1999). Nevertheless, Prendergast's various „shortcomings“ which might suggest a weakness of masculine character (for instance his reluctance to swear, failure to respond when his patriarchal authority is challenged, continued reticence towards his demanding, over-dependent wife, tolerance of the mockery and ridicule he endures from his colleagues and, most vilified of all, his willingness to retire) are ultimately corrected through the predictable application of restorative violence.

This paralleling of narratives is evident once again during Mr Lee's attempts to file a complaint against D-FENS. Prendergast's efforts to tend to the complaint are obstructed by Mr Lee's vague articulation of the incident, however Prendergast seems more preoccupied by the report that the store was destroyed, not robbed, and the attack was carried out by a white man in a white shirt and tie. He assumes his Japanese-American colleague can understand what the Korean storeowner is saying, mirroring D-FENS' earlier erroneous presumption that Mr Lee was Chinese. This confusion over nationality, framed here as an innocent slip by Prendergast, further asserts the inherent relational nature of the two men's masculinity as well as downplays the implicit racism of D-FENS' attack against the storeowner.

The parallel narrative of Prendergast, the older white male cop on his last day before retirement charts a similar masculine transformation to D-FENS. By their very narrative pairing, Prendergast and D-FENS are seen to have a lot in common. Like D-FENS, Prendergast is experiencing the inadequacies brought about by occupational insecurity, forced

into early retirement from a job which has been of late mostly desk-bound. Like D-FENS, Prendergast's spatial movements have been obstructed, however in Prendergast's case it is largely due to his wife's concern for his physical safety. The demands by his wife (Tuesday Weld) are what led him to retire in the first place, mirroring in part D-FENS' ex-wife Beth's refusal to allow him to attend their daughter's birthday party. Like D-FENS, Prendergast has also lost a daughter, the former to a custody ruling and restraining order, the latter to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Richard Dyer (1997) interprets the death of daughters in *Falling Down* as an implicitly white anxiety regarding reproduction, arguing that „the fact that in both cases it is daughters, not sons, ... suggests the end of a lineage“ (1997: 218). The shared physical resemblance between Prendergast's wife, who snivels and weeps whilst clutching a photo of her dead child during her tearful telephone calls to Prendergast and D-FENS' mother, who is also depicted as insecure, seen tending to a glass menagerie further underscores the relational nature of the two male protagonists. D-FENS' ex-wife Beth, while masterfully commanding the „seemingly safe, maternal, feminized space of home“ (Mahoney, 1997: 174) is nonetheless represented as frantic when she rushes home to answer the wailing telephone and scatty when she cannot remember if the restraining order issued against D-FENS was measured in yards or metres.<sup>29</sup> Despite their similarities, Prendergast is depicted throughout as patient, stable and considerate, able to tolerate the tedious office pranks played on him by male colleagues as well as foster warm relations with his female Latina co-worker Sandra<sup>30</sup> (Rachel Ticotin). To this end, Prendergast represents a masculine identity that has adapted to the changes wrought by the women's movement, civil rights, urban change and

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<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the domestic space is rendered powerfully authoritative in *Falling Down* by virtue of its very inaccessibility. There exists subtle suggestion that precisely what is mitigating D-FENS' explosive violence in the public sphere is the fact that he is no longer permitted to inhabit the family home he once shared with Beth and his daughter, linking „his excess and inability to survive in the public world to the spaces which he formerly inhabited“ (Mahoney, 1997: 177). The remoteness present in his mother is likewise positioned as a catalyst for D-FENS' public outbursts. Nevertheless, the relative tranquillity of the domestic space is juxtaposed with the chaos of the outside world during the sequence whereby D-FENS' is targeted by the vengeful Latino gang. The ideological trajectory originally set in motion by urban located animosity is eschewed somewhat when such scenes are interspersed with D-FENS' attempts to contact his ex-wife. Presumably Beth's home, which is depicted as decidedly cheery, is constructed as a sanctuary of sorts from the turmoil within the public space.

<sup>30</sup> Another female police officer addressed exclusively by her first name.

post-Fordism without (apparently) experiencing a sense of threat or backlash mentality. As Jude Davies (1995) writes, „Prendergast embodies an acceptable masculinity alongside which D-FENS can be judged“ (1995: 150).

Although the more passive identity of Prendergast goes some way to counter-balance the violent masculinity embodied by D-FENS, *Falling Down*’s self-conscious attempts to preempt criticisms by presenting a „politically correct“ masculinity only reinforce white, male, patriarchal authority. Richard Dyer (1997) suggests that „Prendergast is just another version of D-FENS, but what may appear superficial differences ... are important in resecuring the social position of whiteness that D-FENS“ more extreme character risks undermining“ (Dyer, 1997: 221). Jude Davies (1995) likewise argues that Prendergast’s gestures of egalitarianism, expressed primarily through rapprochement „are after all strategies to restabilise the cultural centrality of white males“ (Davies, 1995: 149).

Portraying Prendergast as embattled allows for his own masculine transformation to occur. Beneath intense professional and personal pressures, Prendergast shouts at his wife, orders her to prepare his dinner according to his instruction, punches a colleague who has been ridiculing him all day, and finally asserts himself to his belligerent captain by swearing at him on live television, at once publicly undermining his superior’s authority and addressing his previous reluctance to curse. The journey towards masculine restitution which Prendergast undertakes ultimately arrives at an ideologically dubious conclusion, however one which permits him to retain his patriarchal authority. Prendergast refuses to attend his own farewell party organised by his co-workers, complete with „strip-o-gram“. While he avoids the inherent chauvinism of witnessing a strip tease, Prendergast does so only in favour of carrying out the search for D-FENS which allows him to enact his bravado in other ways. Prendergast comes from behind the desk to which he had been indefinitely assigned, effectively shaking

off the shackles of „effeminate officialdom“ (Davies, 1995: 147) heroically pursues D-FENS to the pier, violently dispatches him before going to comfort Beth and her child. Having accrued hero status through his seemingly one man campaign to apprehend D-FENS, Prendergast decides not to retire, defying his wife’s wishes and thus restoring his masculine authority on all fronts.

As Prendergast reclaims his patriarchal dominance, D-FENS charts a similar path towards redemption. Having ploughed his way through the city, frightened his wife and provoked a city wide pursuit, D-FENS orchestrates his own death by compelling Prendergast to shoot him in order to provide financially for his daughter through his life insurance. The trajectory from initially sympathetic everyday guy to machine-gun toting psychopath finally resolves itself in narrative closure when D-FENS is exonerated through the evocation of fatherly duties. However this transparent attempt to once again manipulate audience’s reactions might not be wholly satisfying as D-FENS’ responsibility is once again deferred, absolved through appeals to crisis resolution. Commenting with some irony on *Falling Down*, Richard Dyer (1997) points out that D-FENS „has done the only decent thing left for a white male begetter in the modern world to do: annihilate himself so that reproduction is taken care of by a corporation“ (1997: 218). The final image of the film further complicates D-FENS’ character development. As a home movie plays, seemingly to no-one, D-FENS is seen yelling at Beth when their daughter refuses to sit on a rocking horse. While this concluding scene suggests an underlying aggression which justifies Beth’s initial fears for her safety, it only offers some evidence of D-FENS’ hostilities towards his ex-wife. His role as a father and his desire to initiate contact with his daughter provides the most comprehensive motivation for his day long descent into lunacy and remains persistent despite endless obstruction. Nevertheless, this attempt to once again resituate D-FENS’ behaviour, this time in relation to unwavering filial duty, does not sufficiently explain the highly raced violence perpetrated by D-FENS.



This transformative narrative permits both men to, as Nichola Rehling (2005) suggests „have it both ways“, by expressing the concrete, and what are perceived as legitimate, anxieties regarding cultural „others“ and their capacity to usurp privilege, undergo masculine transformation and to ultimately arrive at a comfortable middle ground.

### ***‘I’m the Bad Guy?’: Para-militarism in Falling Down***

In typical Hollywood action hero tradition, D-FENS is required to visibly alter his appearance to fully articulate his masculine transformation. In *Falling Down*, like that of *Taxi Driver*, D-FENS deploys a para-militaristic masculinity through the acquisition of firearms and the adoption of army fatigues. This unsubtle physical mutation from put upon „dupe“ to machine-gun wielding, camo-swathed urban warrior conveys the excesses of his violent, military informed masculinity. As his anger intensifies, D-FENS“ state of mind deteriorates, pushing him ever closer to insanity and ultimately culminating in his committing his first act of murder. Despite his now homicidal behaviour, the strategic narrative incorporation of an inflated neo-Nazi character provides the necessary extremist offset to legitimise D-FENS“ racism and homophobia.

Successfully eluding police detection following the attack on the Latino gangsters, D-FENS enters an army surplus store. Having been following D-FENS“ exploits on police radio, the proprietor, Nick (Frederic Forrest), instantly recognises him as the wanted gunman. When D-FENS inquires about a pair of boots, Nick regales D-FENS with a sales pitch imbued with violent and vilifying homophobia delivered principally to insult the only other patrons of the store, a stereotypical gay male couple. One of the men, the more obviously coded gay of the two, responds by destroying a store display unit. His actions, together with his initial interest in the army garb, posit gay men as being „no less violent than the store owner“ (Dyer, 1997: 219) as well as depicting D-FENS“ historical privileges and status as being further

undermined by gays, a formerly excluded group. Indeed, the use of anti-gay epithets in this scene contributes to the ongoing maintenance of D-FENS' "normality". By positioning these incitements as the statements of an extremist (Dunn & Winchester, 1999), D-FENS' views and actions are legitimised whilst his position as a heterosexual male is reinforced.

Remaining indifferent to the ensuing fracas, D-FENS settles on a pair of Vietnam jungle boots, further bolstering the reading of D-FENS' para-militarism as an intent to „reclaim a past“ (Dunn & Winchester, 1999: 182) in which he had power, authority and agency. As D-FENS is trying on the boots, Prendergast's partner Sandra enters the surplus store to execute a search for D-FENS. Knowing D-FENS is the fugitive for whom Sandra is looking Nick diverts her attention by antagonising her before she leaves. Having successfully covered for D-FENS, Nick invites him into his back room which is festooned with fascist regalia: portraits of Adolf Hitler, swastikas and various other Nazi artefacts. With child-like enthusiasm, Nick offers D-FENS an empty can of what he claims formerly contained Zyklon-B as a souvenir. He then shows D-FENS his bazooka. Assuming he recognises a secret collaborator, Nick interprets D-FENS' behaviour at Whammy Burger as an implicit challenge to „all the niggers working there“. It is at this point that the narrative attempts to establish a distinction between the indiscriminate violence of D-FENS from the overt racism, homophobia, sexism and anti-Semitism of the neo-Nazi. „We're the same, you and me“ Nick suggests to which D-FENS responds with: „We're not the same. I'm an American, you're a sick asshole“. Insulted by D-FENS' abusive rejection of his offer of solidarity, the neo-Nazi pulls a gun on D-FENS, handcuffing him to a counter while taunting him with the prediction of the rape he will receive from „some big buck nigger“ in prison. The camera then closes in on a blurry shot of the neo-Nazi repeatedly mouthing the words „give it to me“, which D-FENS interprets simultaneously as the orgasmic utterings of the hypothetical Black rapist, the suspected, pleasurable response of himself to his own sexual assault as well as the psychotic,

self immolating request of Nick. Becoming psychologically unhinged, D-FENS plunges the Latino's flick knife into Nick's shoulder before shooting him dead.

In his analysis of *Falling Down*, Jude Davies (1995) explores this scene in some detail. Drawing out D-FENS' appeal for pluralism, Davies at the same time points to how the momentary framing of D-FENS' violence as „justified and expedient“ (1995: 149) is undermined immediately by D-FENS killing of the neo-Nazi. I break with Davies' interpretation of this scene temporarily in that the supposed „liberal credentials“ (Davies, 1995: 149) which the film attempts to exercise are, like most of the ideological claims made in *Falling Down*, over-determined. The suggestion that D-FENS „defines Americanness as an openness to debate and respect for diversity, against the closedness of racism and fascism“ (1995: 149) momentarily presenting D-FENS as a „paradigmatic synthesis of political correctness and „true“ masculinity“ (1995: 149) is entirely dismissive of D-FENS' prior violent altercations which have been overwhelmingly directed towards those who make up this otherness (the Korean storeowner, the Latino youths, Beth). If anything, this scene relies on gendered instead of racial hierarchies to communicate anxieties over displacement. The suggestion of a prison assault, as well as the threatening homoeroticism of Nick, both succeed in challenging D-FENS' masculinity more than his racial identity.

The killing of the neo-Nazi symbolises D-FENS' rejection of the „third masculine position“ which Davies (1995) identifies. Destroying that which undermines his normalised masculinity would permit D-FENS to retain his formerly privileged position. In this pivotal scene, as those interrupted by scenes featuring Prendergast, D-FENS' masculinity is defined by a shared relatedness yet against a competing (indeed in this case, intimidating) alternative masculine model.

In many ways *Falling Down* can be read as the cinematic realisation of Byers' (1995) pomophobia. D-FENS' displacement professionally, as an economic provider, as head of the household and as a free moving agent within the urban space exemplifies the post-modern anxiety associated with the perceived loss of patriarchal privilege and racial dominance, as well as a destabilisation of the post-modern identity more generally (Byers, 1995). However rather than being produced and consumed as an overtly oppositional text with an intentional „backlash“ agenda, *Falling Down* complicates this reading by employing elements of „political correctness“ and multiculturalism. Although these efforts go some way towards universalising the text, *Falling Down*'s ambivalent treatment of the middle-class white man as „normative“ reinforces patriarchal gender and ethnic hierarchies by positioning D-FENS as just another in the many persecuted identities inhabiting Los Angeles.

*Falling Down* represents the realisation of recuperative strategies and processes of D-FENS through para-militarism yet at the same time reinforces normative, structuring masculinity through the lead male protagonists. The inclusion of extremists within the narrative (the neo-Nazi army surplus proprietor and the disproportionately violent Latino gang members, for instance) mollify D-FENS' own hostilities by making him appear reasonable, thus suppressing the racial prejudices implicit in D-FENS' actions. The attitudes displayed by D-FENS in relation to the changing spatial landscape of Los Angeles and the manner in which it is addressed reflects what Byers (1995) regards as pomophobia.

Extending the analysis of cinematic representations of white male cultural displacement through a comparative study of claims of impaired social/geographic mobility by Black men, this chapter now turns to an analysis of two Black-authored films released around the same time of *Falling Down*, namely Albert and Allen Hughes' *Menace II Society* (1993). By exploring the recuperative strategies employed by the male protagonists in the Hood genre of

film this section will examine how traditional modes of masculinities, enacted as a strategy to exert a cultural dominance within the otherwise marginalised Black community, implicitly critique claims of white, male victimhood by highlighting the objectionable living conditions of the inner city. It will be argued that recuperative strategies employed by young, Black, under-class, urban men in these films are informed by white-authored patriarchy. Gun culture, gang violence and intimidation is therefore intended to both challenge the institutional oppression of young, Black, under-class, urban men by white authorities as well as undermine the perceived threat of cultural „others“ within the „hood.

### ***Fade to Black***

Like *Falling Down*, Albert and Allen Hughes' (1993) *Menace II Society* articulates masculinity as an inherently fraught subjectivity and identifies the urban space as the site through which specifically masculine, post-modern anxieties are experienced and reconciled. The following section of this chapter explores the ways in which the young Black, urban, under-class male protagonists in *Menace II Society*, and the Hood genre of film more generally, maintain gender authority to compensate for their lack of racial or class dominance relative to that of white males. It will be argued that while the sense of cultural marginalisation experienced by the Hood protagonist is in part facilitated by systemic race and class discrimination, Black masculinity is nevertheless recuperated through the subjugation of women, the stigmatisation of homosexuality and the fostering of hyper-masculine attitudes. Given that their post-modern anxieties are articulated in a manner which undermines the cultural and political shifts of the previous 30 years that have arguably brought about improved status for formerly marginal people, it is therefore appropriate to regard the regressive attitudes of the young men in Hood films as at least partially symptomatic of pomophobia (Byers, 1995). Recalling R. W. Connell's (1995), argument regarding marginalised masculinities, whereby hegemonic members of an otherwise

oppressed group consolidate their power through further subordinating non-hegemonic subjectivities, Black, urban, under-class males within the specific context of the „hood constitute the dominant order and are likewise disposed to identify as victims of cultural „others“.

This section will first examine how *flânerie*, specifically contemporary interpretations of Poe’s „Man of The Crowd“ (1845) might inform the narrative style of *Menace II Society* and the Hood genre of film generally. It will be argued that urban „strolling“<sup>31</sup> is utilised in the Hood film to allegorise the sense of cultural displacement. *Noir* aesthetics, particularly as they are deployed within Black-authored cultural texts such as the Hood film, will also be discussed, as well as the way in which the *noir* cinema style further articulates an atmosphere of foreboding which aids in the construction of the urban space as a site whereby patriarchal privilege is undermined.

Secondly, this section examines strategies towards masculine consolidation which include the use of violence as well as the various discursive practices used to intimidate and denigrate non-hegemonic subjectivities. It will be argued that *Menace II Society*, and cinematic depictions of Black, urban bound, cultural dislocation more broadly, although intended as an antidote to mainstream, white, cultural representations of contemporary urban life, do not subvert white-authored depictions of specifically masculine post-modern anxiety. Black filmmakers appear to be borrowing from established repertoires to express post-modern, masculine angst when representing the Black, urban, under-class, male experience (Guerrero, 1993). As this chapter will go on to explore, the perceived loss of Black male cultural hegemony within the specific context of the „hood is recuperated in ways which reinforce traditional notions of gender.

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<sup>31</sup> As discussed in the analysis of *Taxi Driver*, driving in cars also constitutes urban strolling by Mike Featherstone’s (1998) account.

Thirdly, this section explores examples of „erasure“ or „containment“ of women in *Menace II Society*, specifically the ways in which the female characters are given little narrative space in the Hood film. By retaining a male perspective throughout, these films overlook the effects of social and economic deprivation on young, Black, under-class, urban women. Female characters function primarily as a means to further depict masculine frustrations thus reinstating the crisis in masculinity as the central problematic.

Finally, this section examines the representational differences in which elder males or more cynical male peers function as mentors in the lives of the male protagonists in *Menace II Society* and the thematically similar *Boyz N The Hood* (1991, Dir: John Singleton). Despite charting a similar ideological terrain and sharing numerous narrative conventions, it is with regards to the role of fathers in determining the success of the young leads that *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* most obviously diverge. Whereas *Boyz N The Hood* stresses the importance of strong father figures as enabling influences on young, Black inner city males, this simplistic reliance on the role of the father is challenged in *Menace II Society* where the veritable stream of potential father figures presented to lead protagonist Caine are systematically revealed to be physically inaccessible, excessively moral or equally misguided. While both films offer differing perspectives on the effects of positive fathering in shaping the experiences of young Black men in the inner cities, the mothers of each protagonist in both *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* are absent from the narrative, highlighting further the residual/auxiliary role of women within the urban male experience while reinforcing the culturally privileged position of Black, urban, under-class men within cinematic representations of the „hood.

## **Menace II Society**

*Menace II Society* charts the coming of age journey of its young Black male protagonist and the way he negotiates his personal aspirations with the obligations to friends and family amidst the extreme chaos of the „hood (or „ghetto“). Spanning the summer break after high school graduation, the film introduces viewers to the various (often violent) urban rituals which shape the protagonist’s outlook and determine the limited choices available to young, urban, under-class Black men in contemporary America generally. From complicity in a double homicide, to drug dealing and ultimately death by shooting, the events which transpire throughout this urban odyssey force the central lead to consider his life’s purpose and place in the world. Like *Falling Down*, *Menace II Society* employs the familiar journey towards some form of deliverance (while evoking the predictable trope of violence as masculine regeneration and social reformer), however, it is one so fraught with crisis it can only ever be symbolically realised.

### ***Locating The Hood Film***

The early 1990s saw the emergence of a succession of so called Hood films, those which depicted the contemporary conditions affecting Black, urban, under-class and generally male youths.<sup>32</sup> Described as a „renaissance“ by Paula J. Massood (2006), Hood films, also referred to as „Black Realism“ or „Black Urban Cinema“, were created by „film literate“ (Massood, 1996: 85) Black writers and directors and presented a vivid, often confronting portrayal of specifically Black urban experiences with which a predominately white movie-going audience had previously seldom engaged. Other films of this genre include *New Jack City* (1991, Dir: Mario van Peebles) *Straight out of Brooklyn* (1991, Dir: Matty Rich), *Juice* (1992, Dir: Ernest

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<sup>32</sup> Possibly the only example to subvert the ostensibly male-centred/authored Hood film is *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (1992, Dir: Leslie Harris), which tells the story of Chantal (Ariyan A. Johnson), an under-class yet precocious young woman who negotiates a reconciliation between an unplanned pregnancy and her aspirations to become a doctor. For further discussion, see Elizabeth Mahoney (1997) „The People in Parentheses: Spaces Under Pressure in the Post-Modern City“ in David B. Clarke (ed.) *The Cinematic City*, Routledge: London, New York, pp. 168-185.



Dickerson, 1992), *South Central* (Steve Anderson, 1992), *New Jersey Drive* (Nick Gomez, 1995) and *Clockers* (Spike Lee, 1995). The genre became so idiosyncratic that it was later parodied in the Wayans' Brothers comedy *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996, Dir: Paris Barclay).

While Massood (1996) chronicles the literary and cinematic antecedents from which urban depictions of under-class Black experiences were borne, Hood films of the 1990s were the first Black-authored motion pictures to have received mainstream Hollywood distribution. Kenneth Chan (1998) argues this apparent embracing of Black-centred films was mainly due to the „socioeconomic conditions which affect decision making in white-dominated Hollywood“ (1998: 37), reflecting the need to appeal to a Black movie-viewing audience (Chan, 1998). Black filmmakers, whether to appease „the powers-that-be in Hollywood so as to sustain financial input“ (Chan, 1998: 36) or to „increase awareness and political pressure for positive change“ (1998: 36), depict the urban space as inherently fraught, replete with gang violence, drugs, police brutality, unemployment and poor housing. As a result, Hood films are imbued with an explicit political ideology or as Foster Hirsch (1999) puts it, „a sober didactic intent“ (1999: 292). John Singleton's *Boyz N The Hood* (1991) for instance opens with a stark title card which reads „One out of 21 black males will be killed – at the hands of another black male“. From even before the film commences, Singleton's narrative intentions are made clear. While *Boyz N The Hood* is unique in its use of such explicit filmic cues, most Hood films are purposefully constructed as oppositional texts which challenge the existing (white-authored) representations of the Black (male) experience. Due to the specificity of these inner city portrayals, a discernable Hood aesthetic emerged. References to the fashion, dialect and music<sup>33</sup> of Black inner city youths, as well as the casting of prominent hip hop

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<sup>33</sup> Through a variety of means, but possibly most likely through their referencing in Hood films, certain cultural forms consequently became less narrowly defined as strictly „Black“. Gangster rap for instance, despite its perceived association with anti-social behaviour, has since found a receptive crossover audience with white, middle-class youths via its presence within Hood films.

artists in both lead and supporting roles promoted the various aspects of the rich, vibrant, Black urban culture (Dyson, 1992).

### ***This Ain't No Fairytale: The Noirification of The 'Hood***

The urban space plays an important role in establishing the urban Black male identity. Young male inhabitants form a sense of self according to the particular coordinates of the city space. More specifically, the precariousness of daily living, made so by the influences of drugs, poverty, racism, unemployment and gang culture, also shape the lead's ideals, attitudes and values by which they conduct their daily interactions. Insignificant or marginal elements communicate visually the sense of dread and foreboding thought indicative of the inner city. Litter, derelict housing, abandoned cars, untended lawns festooned with discarded living room furniture operate cinematically to at once expose the objectionable living conditions of the „hood and render visible a feeling of disillusionment, lack of decorum and frustration. While these signifiers might also connote urban stagnation, various other cinematic cues are utilised to represent densely populated neighbourhoods teeming with life. When patrolling police are sighted, the locals scatter. The cackles of the loitering gangs and the aggressive rap music issuing from street corners and car stereos feed the atmosphere of intimidation, inadequate living conditions and stifled overcrowding. Crime is everywhere. It is ever present to the point that it becomes customary and experienced or undertaken in any register, from petty theft to brazen daytime homicides. Such images appear to play into (conservative) white claims of a lack of respect for public order by the Black community, an assumption frequently rehearsed in *Falling Down* in the numerous disparaging portrayals of ramshackle „ghettoes“ and „barrios“.

Infrastructure such as the housing, the neighbourhood and places of business proliferate in the *mise-en-scène* of *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood*. These motifs work to situate more

centrally those spaces (and by extension, the experiences of those who reside within those spaces) which mainstream Hollywood cinema had previously pushed to the margins (Massood, 1996). Lingering shots of street signage such as „Stop“, „One Way“ and „Do Not Enter“ signify the ways in which free passage within these specialised zones is restricted and monitored. Massood (1996) evokes the notion of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon (Foucault, 1977) when discussing the use of other visual cues such as police helicopter searchlights beamed down from above. This oppressive interference of authority is further denoted in the aural presence of helicopter blades which, like in *Falling Down*, are heard yet never seen. Massood (1996) claims these urban cinematic motifs „serve as the invisible, though central and constant, signification for the limitation of movement and the power relations inherent in that delimitation“ (1996: 90). The presence of police crime-scene yellow tape in the opening moments of *Boyz N The Hood* suggests both obstruction and the ubiquitous nature of crime. As Kenneth Chan (1998) explains, „relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life“ (1998: 43). Gunshot-blasted campaign posters of former US President Ronald Reagan are plastered about the neighbourhood in the early scenes depicting Tre and friends’ childhood. The sense of psychological confinement is literalised through the various physical barriers which impede movement both inside and outside of the „hood. The constraints of inner city living are therefore seen to effectively „psychologically colonise“ (Nadell, 1995: 450) Black male minds from childhood. Kenneth Chan (1998) goes onto suggest that „the ghetto, the „hood“ and the housing projects are ultimately racist spatial constructions intended as physical and psychological barriers“ (1998: 44). In other words, despite these oppressive manifestations of state surveillance and „control“, these systems are inadequate to manage order and thus create oppression without any improved functionality.

It might be advantageous to reintegrate a reading of *film noir* to understand the Hood genres' characteristic cinematic style. As Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo (2002) remind us, „various phobias, fears and anxieties over race, sex and origin are displaced and condensed to create a sense of free-floating existential angst in film *noir*“ (2002: xvii). Otherwise insignificant elements such as urban detritus, lugubrious lighting and in the case of *Menace II Society* particularly, the predominance of night scenes then become the sites for this displaced and condensed anxiety. Referring once again to the use of *film noir* in *Taxi Driver* and *The Crow* (Chapter Four), such motifs, styles and effects are manifestations of the anxieties borne out of the socio-political and cultural factors which have led to the perceived loss of authority of the dominant, masculine subject.

Manthia Diawara (1993) has written more specifically of how *noir* stylisation is deployed within the Chester Himes' novel *A Rage in Harlem* (1957) an example of what Diawara regards as „*noir* by noirs“ (1993: 526), Black-authored *noir* that appropriates the established tenets of *noir* to describe the Black public sphere and a Black way of life. Unlike white-authored *noir*, where those white individuals who exhibit low moral behaviour are rendered “black”, *noir* by noirs on the other hand redeploys *noir* elements in order to shed light, as it were, on the social injustices under which Black people live. Diawara suggests that the Hood genre of film utilises *noir* in the same way to cinematically connote the „Black rage“ (1993: 528) experienced by inhabiting such bleak, urban conditions. Diawara explains further:

By *Black rage*, I refer to a set of violent and uncontrollable relations in Black communities induced by a sense of frustration, confinement, and White racism. Rage often takes the form of eroticized violence by men against women and homosexuals, a savage explosion on the part of some characters against others whom they seek to control, and a perverse mimicry of the status quo through recourse to disfigurement, mutilation, and a grotesque positioning of weaker characters by stronger ones.

(1993: 528, emphasis in original).

Here, Diawara (1993) acknowledges how *noir* aesthetics are intrinsically informed by the social and political forces which define and limit the lives of those within inner city Black communities. Motifs within the urban space therefore work in conjunction with the particularities of characterisation and narrative within *Menace II Society* to communicate the existentialist angst experienced by Black, urban, under-class male youths and facilitates the behaviours and attitudes with which to address this sense of ideological uncertainty. In *Menace II Society* and Hood films more generally, these anxieties and resentments are expressed in ways markedly similar to the pomophobic responses in *Falling Down* and *Taxi Driver* notwithstanding the significant additional contribution of racism.

Crucial to this thesis' aims, Diawara's (1993) reading of Black *noir* suggests the strategies used to re-establish Black patriarchal privilege often reflect, or *mimic*, those that are deployed in white-authored text to restore white, male authority. Violence, homophobia and misogyny are likewise utilised in Black-authored *noir* to stabilise patriarchy and control women (of which more will be said below). Nevertheless, I am mindful of the folly of simply collapsing Black masculinity with white masculinity. As Roland L. Jackson II (2006) explains:

The indisputable and tragic reality is that Black males have been pathologized and labelled as violent/criminal, sexual and incompetent/uneducated individuals. It is the prevalent set of stereotypical depictions of Black masculinity as a stigmatized condition or of Black males as an "endangered species" that makes it extremely difficult to theorize Black masculinities the same ways as White or other marginalized group masculinities.

(2006: 128).

That being said, Black masculinities scholars such as Jackson (2006) and bell hooks (2004) tend to agree that the „constellation of media representations of Black males“ (Jackson, 2006: 128) are extremely narrow, while the literature pertaining to Black masculinities does not presuppose that Black men have internalised (and are thus complicit in) conventional

constructions of patriarchal masculinity. It is important, then, to reiterate here that this section is interested in the ways in which Black, urban, under-class masculinity has been cinematically represented and what mediated depictions can tell us about the culture that produces such images. Scholarship on *film noir* therefore offers an explanation of both the cinematic styles of the Hood genre and the social and cultural specificities which informs it.

### ***Rodney King and The LA Riots***

While these specific portrayals of Black urban life are in part determined by the stylistic nature of the films and semi-autobiographical intent of their directors (Jackson, 2006), much of the narrative content is shaped by the political, social, economical and historical context which permitted these films to be publically embraced. Massood (1996) identifies the „concurrent rise in mainstream media interest devoted to the problems of the “inner city”“ (1996: 85) during the 1990s as a possible explanation for why Hood films enjoyed brief popularity at this time. Racial conflict within the hitherto racially tolerant inner cities of Los Angeles which provided the location for many Hood films reached unprecedented levels in the earlier part of the 1990s (Joyce, 2003), primarily in response to the highly visible nature of two divisive cultural events. In order to thoroughly understand the cultural significance of these films and the representations of besieged racial minorities they produce it is important to consider their presence in relation to the social, political and historical context in which they appeared. One incident which significantly impacted upon the narrative constructions of race relations in contemporary US films and the complex interplay of ideological, political and economic forces which inform such representations was what came to be known as the „Rodney King beating“ which led to the subsequent LA „riots“.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> While social commentators have alternatively referred to the events of April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1992 as an „insurrection“, „unrest“ or „uprising“, the term „riot“ will be used here as it implies unruly, anti-social behaviour and is thus indicative of the racist narrative structure which prevailed during the dominant media coverage of the events following the Rodney King verdict.

On the night of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March, 1991, white San Fernando Valley resident George Holliday videotaped what appeared to be three Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers repeatedly beating Rodney King, a Black motorist who had failed to yield to California Highway Patrol officers after a high speed pursuit through the residential Lake View Terrace district of Los Angeles. The tape shows Supervisory Sergeant Stacey Koon administering two shocks of 50,000 volts of electricity from a TASER gun when King was alleged to have violently refused arrest. As he lay on the road, the three officers began beating King with their batons. Holliday sold the footage to a local LA TV station and US national broadcaster CNN aired it following day. What amounted to 82 seconds of silent, distorted, black and white footage of white LAPD officers beating an unarmed, Black motorist became key evidence in a high profile (and highly mediated) legal trial when Sgt. Koon and the three officers were charged with excessive use of force.

The trial and the news media's screening of the contested video footage made the Rodney King incident a polarising cultural event, „whose significance lay in both the broad antagonisms that structured it and its distribution across the nation and the world“ (Fiske, 1998: 125). Many Black LA residents claimed the officers' behaviour was evident of the undercurrent of racial hostilities towards Blacks by the predominately white LAPD (Jacobs, 1996; Joyce, 2003). Conservative commentators on the other hand suggested that Sgt. Koon and his co-accused were operating within the limits of police procedure and responded in a way reasonable for making a combative, belligerent and intoxicated felony evader comply (Koon, 1994). Such was the visceral nature of the video, made all the more affecting by its heavy rotation as a television news item,<sup>35</sup> that there were few spectators who did not engage at least in part with the debates which would erupt over the video's existence (Feldman, 2004).

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<sup>35</sup> The Rodney King „beating“ was the first instance of citizen-recorded video to become a national news sensation – a phenomenon which has since become overly familiar with the advent of digital cameras and camera phones.

Following the acquittal of all four defendants on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1992, riots broke out across inner-city Los Angeles (Joyce, 2003). The riots continued for at least six days and claimed the lives of 53 individuals. The LA riots had become the most costly civil disturbance in US history (Bergesen & Herman, 1998; Jacobs, 1996) with material losses estimated to be up to US\$1 billion. Like the Rodney King beating and trial, the LA riots were subject to extensive media coverage (Naficy, 2001).

After the riots, the Department of Justice reinstated the investigation where Sgt. Koon and the three officers were tried on charges of violating King's constitutional rights with the wilful use of unreasonable force. The federal trial focused more on the evidence as to the training of officers with less emphasis on the interpretation of the Holliday videotape. The jury delivered guilty verdicts to one Officer Laurence Powell and Sgt. Stacey Koon, both of whom were sentenced to 30 months in prison (a sentence later reduced as a result of a Supreme Court granted five-level departure), while the two other accused were acquitted of all charges. Rodney King was later awarded US\$3.8million compensation in a civil case lawsuit brought against the city of Los Angeles.

### ***Interpretations of the LA Riots***

While the rioting was perceived as an uprising by the subordinated Black community against the socially privileged white community (a misguided assumption given weight by another highly circulated video – this time filmed by a television news crew – of white man Reginald Denny being dragged from his vehicle and beaten by a group of Black youths) the overwhelming targets of the riot violence were Koreans, Hispanics and other Blacks (Fiske, 1998). In explaining this, Fiske (1998) refers to „weak“ or „horizontal racism“ (1998: 155) whereby the scramble for resources, whether they be social, political, legal, educational, occupational, institutional or economical, reduces subaltern social groups to racial



antagonism, while keeping „whites safely out of the firing line“ (1998: 156). Patrick D. Joyce (2003), in his exhaustive study of Black-Korean racial tension, notes that „in the wake of rapid population change, new immigrants and old minorities competed for scarce resources or fought for social and political inclusion in the racial hierarchy“ (2003:4).

Albert Bergesen and Max Herman (1998) instead posit what they have termed „hyper-ethnic succession theory“ (Bergesen & Herman, 1998) as a possible explanation for the rioting. Expanding on the notion of „ethnic competition theory“ (Olzak et al., 1996), which places identities and boundaries instead of resources at the centre of the conflict, Bergesen and Herman hypothesise that the desegregation of predominantly Black neighbourhoods by the increased migration of Mexicans, Central Americans and Koreans has historically generated racial unrest within areas where the established and dominant residential group is a racial minority (Bergesen & Herman, 1998). This compelling explanation then might illuminate also the racist hostility directed towards the Korean store owner, Mr Lee, in *Falling Down*. D-FENS“ anger over high-priced goods reflects instead long held resentments against those who appear to be profiting from the apparent subjugation of the dominant group. As Jerry G. Watts (1993) writes:

[D]uring moments of high stress, Americans, white and black, become quite skilful at generating paranoid-style objectifications of “others”. This phobic response is directed at an imaginary enemy in the guise of real people; yet, it is subconsciously responding to a growing sense of disorder and lack of control.

(1993: 245).

Rodney King’s (hyper)visibility as a victim of police brutality in the public space of „the street“, as a specularised media figure, objectified (even dissected) within the namely white court of law lays bare the racist apparatus of various social institutions to public scrutiny: law enforcement agencies, the judicial system and the mainstream media. However a lesser known yet still salient criminal case occurring around the same time as the Rodney King

beating might account for why Korean store owners were specifically targeted during the LA riots.

### ***The Latasha Harlins Shooting and Menace II Society***

On the morning of March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1991, merely 13 days after the beating of Rodney King, a 42 year-old Korean merchant Soon Ja Du shot and killed 15 year-old Black teen Latasha Harlins when Du suspected the Harlins of attempting to steal a bottle of orange juice from her store. Although found guilty of voluntary manslaughter, the presiding Supreme Court Judge reduced the 16 year prison sentence to five years probation, issued a US\$500 fine and ordered Du to pay for Latasha Harlins' funeral (Joyce, 2003).

Soon Du's lenient sentencing provoked a series of sporadic violent attacks against Korean owned stores, including arson, vandalism, looting and assault. As Patrick D. Joyce (2003) explains, the Rodney King beating and Latasha Harlins shooting had „become intertwined via twin perceived failures of the justice system“ (Joyce, 2003: 149). Both Korean and Black community activists attempted to maintain order after the verdict was announced, however the public anger generated from both cases only exasperated the simmering resentment which had already existed between Koreans and Blacks in the inner cities of Los Angeles.

The theme of racial tension and the complex ways in which such prejudice is enacted is vividly portrayed in the opening moments of *Menace II Society* where the lead male protagonist is implicated in the shooting deaths of a Korean merchant and his wife. Caine Lawson accompanied by his friend Kevin, known as „O-Dog“, enters the local Korean-owned grocery store for alcohol. Caine is immediately reprimanded by the male attendant for drinking in the store whilst O-Dog becomes increasingly incensed by what he perceives to be the female shop attendant's suspicious shadowing of him. Some angry words are exchanged,

and the youths are ordered to leave. Caine and O-Dog begrudgingly comply until the male shop attendant utters the phrase which ultimately seals his fate: „I feel sorry for your mother“. O-Dog promptly shoots the man dead, instructs the woman to retrieve the incriminating video from the surveillance camera before shooting her dead. He steals what little money is in the cash register, retrieves some more money from the dead man’s pockets then, with Caine visibly shaken, the two flee the scene. Reflecting on the incident, Caine highlights the seeming inevitability of this traumatic experience:

„[I] went into the store just to get a beer, [and] came out an accessory to murder and armed robbery. It’s funny like that in the „hood sometimes; you never knew what was gonna happen or when“.

Caine’s flippancy towards the daily shootings and murders, which others might view as confronting, illustrates the ways in which such mindless violence has come to be regarded by Watts residents as an unavoidable constant as well as denote how moments of social significance permeate and energise modes of storytelling of contemporary filmmakers. Given the complexity of the social and political conditions within which the Hood films are produced and consumed, *Menace II Society* is not so easily reconciled with the backlash agenda of white-authored texts such as *Falling Down*. Instead the film often vigorously engages with and self-consciously references the debates surrounding racially motivated violent events of the time. This scene might therefore be read as an implicit reference towards the Harlins shooting and the intense anger felt by the Black community following the trial verdict.

The blurry news reel footage of the 1965 Watts Riots<sup>36</sup> that plays over the opening credit sequence of *Menace II Society* also establishes the specificity of the location which features so prominently in the narrative as well determining the specific cultural milieu from which the film emerged. While this is an evocative device, the use of actual news footage is only partially successful as a marker of a historically significant event,<sup>37</sup> as Massood explains, it shirks any meaningful exploration of incidents which have shaped the post-Watts „hood by simply offering „stylised, historical lip service“ (1996: 45). However the use of mediated images such as the Watts riots does succeed in establishing stylistic synthesis between that which occurred in 1965 and the riots which erupted in response to the Rodney King trial verdict. This strategic use of archival footage implicitly references the LA riots in a manner which would be immediately familiar to 1993 audiences, whilst indicating the omnipresent nature and enduring historical antecedents of the violence, civil unrest and social disadvantage affecting this predominantly Black suburb and providing *Menace II Society* with the type of ethnographic realism its filmmakers are intent on creating.

This chapter will now turn to an analysis of *Menace II Society*’s narrative formula. Regarded as a „coming-of-age“ (Schroeder, 2001: 152) story, *Menace II Society* charts the emotional and psychological development of the protagonist Caine via several key milestones taking place during the summer following his high school graduation. It will be argued that the use of first person, voice over narration, the emphasis on spatial movement and the use of social categories to establish urban types as a means to interpret not just the inhabitants but the city more generally might be regarded as principles of *flânerie*.

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<sup>36</sup> The Watts Riots, a large scale riot which began 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1965 and ended six days later was reportedly the result of growing resentment stemming from the apparently racially motivated arrest of Black motorist Marquette Frye by white highway patrol officer Lee Minikus. Frye’s forceful apprehension eventually escalated into a city wide riot in which 34 people were killed, over 1000 were reportedly injured, and considerable damage was caused to private businesses. For a more detailed account, see Gerald Hornes’s (1996) *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville.

<sup>37</sup> Director Spike Lee had utilised this same technique by including the footage of Rodney King’s assault in the opening scenes of the „bio-pic“ *Malcolm X* (1992).

### ***Caine Unable: Coming of Age in the Hood***

*Menace II Society* is propelled by the central narration of Caine (Tyrin Turner), a recent high school graduate, petty drug dealer and resident of the conflict ridden Watts District of Los Angeles, California. While the opening scene in the Korean store is chronologically misplaced with regards to Caine's life story, the film follows an otherwise linear sequence of events, starting from Caine's childhood to his untimely – yet framed within the film as inevitable – demise.

The Watts riots news footage, with subtle voice over prompting by Caine, conveniently leads into a scenario from Caine's tumultuous childhood which he suspects primed him for a life of crime and premature death. It is here that the clumsy inclusion of Watts riot footage reveals itself as a technique to indicate time, seemingly to date the first in a series of personal milestones for Caine which chronicles his ongoing proximity to violent death and how it is inevitably tied to the urban environment. Filmed in lurid red and black as if lit by a strobe light, Caine, still in rompers, navigates the crowded hallways of his parents' home which the disembodied voice of a now teenaged Caine describes as operating primarily as a drug den and party venue for recently remanded criminals. Caine witnesses his mother's compulsive drug use and his father's (played fleetingly by Samuel L. Jackson) violent temper which is depicted with startling immediacy when he shoots dead an associate over an unpaid loan. This shocking scene, while vividly portrayed as all too real, is hallucinatory in its effect as Caine's father's voice slows to a distorted murmur and disperses as if it were a dream. As the image fades, the viewer is returned to contemporary Watts where Caine, now a teenager, is seated at a desk in a class room on his last day of high school. He responds to his pager as a teacher congratulates the class on their completion of their high school education. Unenthused, Caine instead directs his attentions to his drug business which, he explains, eclipsed his scholarly efforts.

This depiction of Caine's life as frequently attacked, often in peril differs little from previously mentioned motion picture films which feature embattled masculine subjects occupying the fractured urban setting. Dabbling in car theft and drug dealing, Caine is able to supplement his meagre earnings with the occasional mugging. The film establishes that he lives with his grandparents however Caine appears more often to be in the company of O-Dog (Larenz Tate). The summer break following graduation is characterised by a series of violent incidents which serve as a constant reminder of the precarious nature of urban existence for young Black, urban, under-class men. On a routine petrol stop, Caine and his cousin Harold (Saafir) become victims of a botched carjacking which leaves Caine seriously wounded and Harold dead. After a brief stay in hospital, Caine accompanies O-Dog on a frenzied yet premeditated revenge killing. This does little to appease Caine, however the realisation that he does indeed possess the ability to kill (which he previously doubted) appears to momentarily trouble him. Caine is pursued by police in relation to his role in the convenience store killings however he is able to elude criminal charges despite being detained for questioning.

During this time Caine engages in a brief sexual encounter with a relatively unknown girl, Illena (Erin Leshawn Wiley), which results in an unplanned pregnancy. He maintains a platonic relationship with a female friend, Ronnie (Jada Pinkett), to whom he provides occasional financial support. He also takes on caregiver duties of Ronnie's young son, Anthony (Jullian Roy Doster). Apart from these momentary acts of tenderness towards Ronnie and Anthony, Caine does little to prove himself as compassionate or thoughtful; he is only slightly more innocent than O-Dog, and never completely condemns his friend's reckless behaviour. The convenience store murders, in which Caine is doubtless implicated, register more through a fear of arrest and not as a source of remorse. O-Dog continues to exhibit the tape depicting the murder of the store clerks to his friends, whilst Caine grows increasingly

anxious about its existence. Despite his bravado, Caine spends most of the screen time being pursued and terrified, struggling to fulfil the expectations of various authority figures (the education system, the police, his grandparents) and those of women (particularly Illena, which ultimately proves fatal).

Friends Stacey (Ryan Williams) and Sharief (Vonte Sweet) offer Caine the chance for a new start by accompanying them to the more liveable Kansas where Stacey plans to launch a football career. Likewise Ronnie appeals to Caine to move to Atlanta with her and Anthony where she will begin a well paying secretarial position. After some consideration, and an enlightening prison visit with Ronnie's ex-partner Pernell (Glen Plummer), Caine agrees to leave Watts with Ronnie. During the pack up, for which O-Dog volunteers his help, Caine is shot dead by Illena's disgruntled cousin on the street outside Ronnie's home. After the killing, it is revealed that Caine, in a final, uncharacteristically selfless act, has draped himself over Anthony, who was casually playing on the streets before the chaotic shootout erupted, effectively giving his own life to save that of the boy's. Through this self-sacrificing display, Caine is redeemed as the ideal father when so many other paternal figures had failed him.

### ***Tell Your Story Walking: The Flâneur in the Hood***

As previously stated, *Menace II Society*, like many of its Hood film predecessors, employs the „coming-of-age“ trope to chart Caine's psychological development. Caine's eventual emotional maturation is depicted through physical movement from one location to the next. While his destination is unclear, and with Caine's indecisiveness regarding his future exacerbating his restlessness, a solely domestic existence is routinely rejected in favour of pursuing other avenues of personal fulfilment such as criminal behaviour and high-risk sex.

The voice over narration, described as „*noir*-like“ (Gormley, 2003: 187) positions Caine as a sort of local guide who canvasses the urban space, equipped with privileged insight with which to educate the uninitiated. This first person perspective operates as a way to legitimate the narration as authentic, however Paula J. Massood (1993) remarks upon Caine’s unreliability as a narrator by highlighting the distinction between what he conveys in voice-over and what ultimately takes place on screen. Massood argues that „Caine repeatedly questions his actions and seemingly makes a decision, only to oppose that decision through his actions that follow, without offering any explanation“ (1993: 44).

In several key ways, Caine is a post-modern *flâneur*. He traverses the city of Watts mainly on foot, occasionally by car, composing his own personal urban sketch from the daily, often confronting events he encounters. His life is rootless and transitory; he never resigns himself to a single, static location. The transition from one day to the next is only made apparent by the coming of darkness, which even then is spent moving around the city. This fractured existence is characterised by Caine’s perambulation from one state of impermanence to the next, while the urban „scrapbooking“ of pertinent vignettes demonstrates how *flânerie* operates as the principle motif which drives the narrative in *Menace II Society*.

Like Edgar Allan Poe’s unnamed convalescent in „The Man of The Crowd“ (1845), Caine establishes typologies of the city’s inhabitants, determining each individual’s character through their appearance and behaviour. Given the proliferation of violence, Caine regards most people he interacts with as threatening and thus consigns them all to the category of criminal, with post-modern anxieties becoming free-floating; displaced and condensed over the entire urban community (Oliver & Trigo, 2002). As Erin Schroeder (2001) puts it, „the enemy is the violently uncertain nature of the urban space itself“ (Schroeder, 2001: 163). By erecting a barrier between him and the otherness against which he is defined, the *flâneur*



attempts to eliminate any resemblance he might share with those who undermine his spatial (indeed cultural) superiority. Yet Caine's subjectivity is susceptible to permeation. As his complicity in the convenience store murders and petty criminality attests, Caine might not be as different from the urban threat he has rendered „other“. Like Poe's unnamed convalescent and Schrader's/Scorsese's (1976) Travis Bickle, Caine initially begins his story as a detached, casual observer yet eventually comes to constitute the very „other“ against which he constructs his subjectivity.

It is his sense of thwarted authority, lack of ideological completion, and own uneasy occupation of the fractured urban space that cements Caine as a pomophobic *flâneur*. For the post-modern *flâneur*, reconciling his own uncertain subjectivity is his primary motivation. This is achieved, as described in Chapter One, through regarding the urban space as ultimately illegible. The realisation that the city „does not permit itself to be read“ (Poe, [1845] 1986: 131) legitimates the ideological project of the pomophobic *flâneur* by providing an unknowable and therefore implicitly threatening site over which he – symbolically at least – can impose order, exercise control and ultimately „close the gap in the reading of himself“ (Brand, 1991: 84).

The specifically Black male, urban under-class experience is allegorised through the narrative devices of urban strolling/automotive „cruising“ and spectatorship in the Hood film. *Noir* aesthetics are utilised to communicate the threatening nature of the inner city by depicting the „hood as dilapidated, contaminated, and chaotic. These motifs and cinematic techniques are manifestations of the existentialist angst which Black, urban, under-class males experience as a result of the socio-economic conditions that limit and define their lives.

Key cultural events such as the Rodney King „beating“ which sparked a city-wide riot and the shooting of teenager Latasha Harlins by a Korean store owner are implicitly referenced in the opening moments of *Menace II Society* through the evocation of the 1965 Watts riots and Caine’s involvement in the convenience store double murder. These incidences render visible the repressive structures which inform the anger and frustration felt by inner city, under-class Black male youths and the mundane nature of such conflicts by depicting them in *Menace II Society* as part of the urban landscape.

### ***‘America’s Nightmare’: Black, Urban Masculinity in Menace II Society***

Like many films within the Hood genre, *Menace II Society* places at its centre the individual experiences of and relationships between Black urban males. While Caine remains both sole narrator and principal film subject throughout, Black, urban masculinity is also represented through the various other male characters of *Menace II Society*. Caine’s older cousin Harold is the first in a string of potential father figures as well as hero to Caine. Whilst barely surviving the first 10 minutes of the film, Harold’s influence is immense, making his untimely death all the more significant to Caine’s psychological development. Sharief, whom Caine describes as „an ex-knucklehead turned Muslim“, is the most sensible of the group; he is the subject of derision from Caine and his friends for his rather forceful yet well-meaning attempts to proselytize his Islamic faith. Stacy occupies a somewhat anonymous role amongst Caine’s circle of friends however he does provide Caine with the means of escape through an invitation to accompany himself and Sharief in their move to Kansas. Anthony’s spatial presence is slight given his youth however his innocence is often played off in narrative formula against Caine and his friend’s corruptibility; as well he occupies the symbolic role of Caine’s latent assuming of parental responsibility. Caine’s Grandfather (Arnold Johnson) is depicted as a weathered anachronism, having neither the insight nor persuasive abilities to redress Caine’s anti-social behaviour. Grandpa’s frail physical form ensures his presence (and

thus ideological influence) remain minimal. Furthermore, Grandpa signifies visually the impotence that older – law abiding – Black men face in the struggle with younger, head-strong generations who dabble in crime.

It is O-Dog who has the most influence in shaping both Caine's understanding of himself and his perception of his environment. Described by Caine as „America's nightmare: young, Black, and [doesn't] give a fuck“, O-Dog, a ruthless, sociopathic teen functions primarily as the „exaggerated embodiment of all the white cultural imagination's affective responses to images of Black masculinity“ (Gormley, 2003: 189). This characterisation is mobilised to full effect in the opening scene which introduces the audience to the extent of O-Dog's frightening unpredictability. The senseless murder of the Korean merchants is just one in a series of violent incidents which is the result of O-Dog exacerbating an otherwise forgettable dispute. O-Dog's routine volatility is further demonstrated in a scene when he is solicited by a drug addled client with an offer of oral sex as substitute for an outstanding debt. O-Dog interprets this desperate offer as an unforgivable challenge to his heterosexual masculinity, and immediately shoots the man dead.

While O-Dog's temperamental nature, nonchalant public marijuana use and defiant swagger attest to a type of cultivated impunity indicative of a youthful disobedience, they are equally an embodiment of white racial imaginings of the young Black male stereotype. As much as the Hughes Brothers might attempt to offer an accurate depiction of inner city youth – the tagline for *Menace II Society*'s DVD release is „this is the truth. This is what's real“ – O-Dog is, as Paul Gormley (2003) reminds us, a cultural construct fashioned largely from white authored „Gangster“ films. While recognised as something of an exaggerated portrayal, the Hughes Brothers nonetheless manipulate this image of Black masculinity in order to

interrogate the underlying racist ideologies which maintain and reinforce these derogatory renderings of the Black male figure. The seemingly inflated character of O-Dog might therefore be what Erin Schroeder (2001) regards as „the [Hughes Brothers] self-conscious evaluation of their own position in popular culture and their fluent filmic vocabularies“ (2001: 148). Film theorists such as Gormley (2003) have written of the popular representation of the Black male body and its capacity to „evoke immediate sensations of fear and paranoia“ (2003: 186) in the (white) audience. Ronald L. Jackson II (2006) likewise asserts that „the thug“s sometimes perennially dystopic ... behaviours only recapitulate and exacerbate the public paranoia about the beast-like nature of the Black male as brute“ (2006: 118).

The white fear elicited by the Black male body is in part represented in *Menace II Society* through the Black males“ spatial competence within the inner cities. Just as D-FENS“ anxieties were especially pronounced when occupying the non-white sections of Los Angeles in *Falling Down*, the „hood is characterised by the exclusive occupation of the inner city space by hostile Black men. In *Menace II Society*, women are seldom seen outside the domestic sphere (a point to which I will later return), while whites exist only on the periphery or are altogether absent.

This notion of Black male territoriality is illustrated in an inconsequential yet telling scene where a white collaborator in a stolen car racket shows obvious discomfort when inhabiting the Black inner city. He is depicted as jittery and ill-placed, made all the more conspicuous by his severe and outdated attire while the Black man he converses with, an associate of Caine and O-Dog“s, is portrayed as unnecessarily stern, intimating the simpering white man with his threatening physical presence. To further underscore the incongruity of the white man“s presence, the Black man repeatedly refers to the white man as „nigger“, possibly out of force of habit rather than with ironic intent. Intimidating white men appears, then, to be

another strategy of Black, under-class, urban men youths to demonstrate spatial/cultural authority over their white oppressors. As bell hooks (2004) explains, „young black males, particularly under-class males, often derive a sense of satisfaction from being able to create fear in others, particularly white folks“ (2004: 49).

This scene also illustrates the way in which whiteness, by the Black under-class males within the „hood, is regarded as an emasculated state. While interracial social relationships are largely absent from the narrative of *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood*, moments depicting antagonism between Black and white people are often included principally to explore the uneasy nature of race relations within the US more generally. From the perspective of the Black male youths in *Menace II Society*, whiteness, though the privileged subjectivity within domains beyond the „hood, is regarded as a subordinate racial status from inside, representing not just the conservative, repressive and restrictive elements that characterise the police force and criminal justice system that oppress and marginalise the Black urban under-class, but the „soft“ or weak (female) gendered alternative against which Black urban masculinity is opposed. It is precisely the Black man’s resistance to structuring norms which makes Black urban masculinity so appealing to white spectators. This is evidenced in the considerable cross-over appeal of rap,<sup>38</sup> hip hop and Gangsta *chic* amongst the white middle-class (Wahl, 1999). As bell hooks (2004) writes: „Black masculinity ... [is] seen as the quintessential embodiment of man as “outsider” and “rebel”... Black males had access to the “cool” white men longed for“ (2004: 13-14). However the extent to which Black urban under-class males are resisting white ideologies is questionable given Black masculinity has, as previously mentioned, historically been informed by colonialist

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<sup>38</sup> However recently rap artists have been heavily criticised for disengaging with the politics which initially characterised Gangsta rap and instead colluding with the white, capitalist-dominated music industry to produce music which, while commercially successful, is devoid of any potentially subversive, ideological message. For more, see R. L. Jackson (2006), „“If It Feels This Good Getting” Used”: Exploring the Hypertext of Black Sexuality in Hip-Hop Music and Pimp Movies“ (Chapter Four) in *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Radical Politics in Popular Media* State University of New York Press: Albany.

prescriptions of gender roles (hooks, 2004). In other words, while the concept of racial otherness is by now understood and accepted as relational (Miles & Brown, 2003), both Black men and white men (at least within the „hood) have equal claim to patriarchy, which, although arguably authored by white colonialists (hooks, 1992; 2004), still permits Black men to exercise gender dominance and thus claim a privileged, yet inherently unstable, subject position within the „hood.

### ***Take It Like A Man: Gun Culture, Homophobia and the Making of Masculinity in Menace II Society***

Like *Falling Down*, *Taxi Driver* and *The Crow* (Chapter Four), restorative and retributive violence is deployed by the characters in *Menace II Society* as a strategy to recuperate lost cultural authority. This section will argue that violence, whilst used to intimidate and bolster one’s reputation as a „tough guy“, also implicitly conveys the specifically masculine anxieties associated with the gradual dissolution of the structuring norms which previously maintained patriarchal privilege (Byers, 1995). Indeed the anti-authoritarian stance of many of the characters within Hood films, illustrated in the almost obligatory engagement with criminality, suggests directly the intensity with which the Black, urban, under-class male struggles to reconcile his subjectivity in the face of cultural displacement. Manthia Diawara (1993) recognises violence as a „communicative act“ (1993: 530), accessible to individuals who view their social agency and economic empowerment as frustrated by people perceived as obstacles. The machismo displayed by Hood protagonists therefore comes to represent not so much an excess of power, but a lack of power from which pomophobia is derived.

Black masculine authority within the urban space is simultaneously restored and maintained through violence, usually in the form of revenge killings. In Hood films, death by shooting is the conventional response to conflict to the point that it tends to take on an almost banal

familiarity. Through its vigorous employment as narrative trope, violence is treated by both *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* as a typical, almost inevitable occurrence. While mindless killings often serve as a means to extract revenge over petty offence or wounded pride, they can also act as a strategy by which a reputation of violent intimidation can be cultivated – where insulation against further victimisation can be achieved, whilst earning considerable social currency amongst peers. Johnnie David Spraggins Jr. (1999) attributes the increased need for Black male youths to engage in violent displays of masculinity to the lack of opportunities available for Black men to express their masculinity in „culturally approved ways“ (1999: 45). Diminished employment and education prospects faced by Black men in America limit the access to the breadwinner identity, which significantly affects the earning potential and standard of living of Black men. Unable to provide for their families through legitimate work, Black men are more inclined to resort to alternative (illegal) avenues to secure an income „where guns are a necessary means of protection“ (1999: 48). The decreased self worth brought about by economic deprivation and cultural devaluation likewise leads Black men to bolster their masculine identity through equally valorised – albeit less socially accepted – forms of masculine expression, namely anti-social, violent behaviour (hooks, 2004).

The „tough guise“ (Katz & Earp, 1999) persona is one method of compensating for the perceived loss of power or potency that Mathew Henry (2004) identifies as having become increasingly prevalent in contemporary media portrayals of Black masculinity. While the „tough guise“ can be adopted by men of any cultural background, it is often aligned with Black masculinity and Black culture through an identification with „urban life, rampant materialism, fatalistic attitudes, physical strength and the acquisition of respect through violence or the implicit threat of violence“ (Henry, 2004: 121). Henry Majors and Janet

Mancini Billson (1992) earlier posited what they termed „cool pose“, which is characterised as:

presenting to the world an emotionless, fearless and aloof front [which] counters the low sense of inner control, lack of inner strength, absence of stability, damaged pride, shattered confidence and fragile social competence.

(1992: 8).

As previously stated, it is the hostile nature of the urban environment which compels young Black men to adopt an image of inflated and robust masculinity, however a distrust of the dominant (white) political establishment also accounts for why many Black inner city youths use retributive killings as a means of redress. *Menace II Society* makes several allusions to corrupt law enforcement agencies. The police force is portrayed as ineffective or absent, present only when carrying out arbitrary displays of power (when assaulting Caine and Sharief one evening for no apparent reason and when detaining and interrogating Caine over the Korean store homicides yet never formally charging him). He is the victim of police brutality on at least two occasions, and although the filmmakers attempt to amend the perception that all police officers are violent bigots in a particularly melodramatic moment between Ronnie and Anthony, there is no instance when the police are presented as attending to crime or competently upholding the law. In light of the Rodney King beating this depiction of police might seem apt, yet it also suggests the multiple levels of society from which young Black men are antagonised (Spraggins, 1999).

Given that the police are represented merely as agents of the state whose role is to establish and patrol geographical borders that contain the Black community away from the white neighbourhood and business districts instead of serving the interests of the community, Black communities are seen to have no other choice than to take matters into their own hands to amend disputes. Such strategies are made all the more possible in a culture which insists



upon violence as a social reformer, where the perpetrators often go unpunished and where hand guns (licensed or otherwise) are readily accessible. This vigilante approach to conflict resolution materialises not as an alternative to legitimate policing but as a type of internalised „auto-destruction“ (Nadell, 1995), whereby Black male youths become the prime targets of the rage and frustrations of other Black male youths, as stated in Singleton’s dramatic title card.

Many political conservatives often attribute an innate racial pathology as a predictor of crime perpetrated by Black male youths, however James Nadell (1995) identifies European and Euro-American capitalist expansion, which he regards as „racist capitalism“ (1995: 447), as significantly affecting the attempts of the Black under-class to overcome socio-economic conditions. The oppression and exploitation of Black communities through racist state policies and institutions, combined with the „frustration of subscribing to a work ethic which fails to reward as promised“ (Chan, 1998: 37) and physical isolation from the dominant culture through geographic segregation motivates many young, Black, inner city residents to undertake criminal enterprises. Manthia Diawara (1993) likewise recognises the allure of criminality for young, disaffected, urban Black men when she writes:

To break the law is to fight one’s captivity, and to claim the right to invent oneself. Lawbreakers are usually the first to challenge the status quo, and to generate new ways of being that later become styles for the community, symbols of freedom, or elements of Black nationalism.

(1993: 533).

Manhood can further be asserted by displaying a vigorous sexual appetite, with masculinity made dependent on continuously proving oneself through sexual conquests. In Singleton’s *Boyz N The Hood* (1991) Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) is embarrassed into lying to his father, Furious, (Laurence Fishburne) that he has lost his virginity. Rather than admit that he has yet to become sexually active, Tre devises a fictitious report of a casual sexual encounter

only to be scolded by his father for claiming to have not used appropriate contraception. When Tre recalls the shame of remaining sexually inexperienced to his friend Ricky (Morris Chestnut), his is further mocked. When Tre finally does lose his virginity to long term girlfriend Brandi (Nia Long) who had previously displayed sexual restraint for religious reasons, the event is framed as a „fugitive moment of true erotic and spiritual union“ (Dyson, 1992: 134). While the couple’s first experience of sex is tenderly handled, possessing none of the impetuosity or tawdriness of Tre’s previous (invented) sexual experience, it nonetheless reinforces the view that instances of intense emotional connectedness can only be demonstrated through physical intimacy. Furthermore, Tre and Brandi are only able to consummate their love once Tre displays sufficient vulnerability, having earlier broken down in tears after being threatened with a gun by police. Brandi responds with a comforting embrace, signalling her preparedness for sex. As it is the experiences of Tre which are privileged in the narrative of *Boyz N The Hood*, Brandi’s subjectivity is denied, with her role becoming merely one of providing a place of safety and reassurance for Tre from the chaos „outside“. Such a moment of unencumbered and unadulterated affection, which is made all the more poignant given Tre’s obvious distress, subverts the previous displays of Black manhood demonstrated by the male leads of *Boyz N The Hood*.

In order to understand fully the significance of the prescriptive socially-constructed nature of Black masculinity, it might be useful to consider the specific historical and cultural context from which these images emerge. The United States’ slavery and segregationist past installed the ethnic differences which postulated the innate physical, intellectual, behavioural and interpersonal inferiority of the Black race. Government policy, commodified mass media images, as well as pseudoscientific “research” further propelled and legitimated these white colonialist assumptions (hooks, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Ward, 2005). Public trading, flogging, lynching and castration of Black male slaves were strategies to exploit, humiliate, objectify

and emasculate as well as maintain the racial dichotomy of white privilege and Black subordination (White & White, 1998). Furthermore, exercising violent control over their charges allowed white slaveholders to assuage fears and anxieties regarding the supposed brute strength and insatiable sexual appetite of Black men. For instance, castration was routinely practiced to render the Black male slaves impotent (unable to sire a family or experience sexual pleasure) as well as „[expel] any threat that Black men would retaliate against white men’s raping of Black women by raping *his* women – white women“ (Jackson, 2006: 18, emphasis in original).

The systematic dehumanisation of Blacks continued long after slavery ended, with US segregation laws mandating not only the restriction to public activities and facilities (*de jure* segregation) but re-establishing white domination over Blacks following emancipation (*de facto* segregation). Black men responded with strategies to repudiate effeminacy by cultivating an image of hyper-masculinity, which extols „strength, toughness, pride, control, pose and emotionlessness“ (Ward, 2005: 496). As Ronald L. Jackson II (2006) explains, Black men employed a sort of redemption logic to appropriate a degree of patriarchal power:

Black men incurred psychological damage from enslavement, which left them as undignified expatriates in their own homes, removal from familial responsibilities except as breadwinner, and in some severe cases castrated ... Anxious to recapture the ultimate attribute and sign of a man – control – their only recourse was to seize reckless control over and in every visible aspect of their life from women to materialistic resources.

(2006: 118).

While these strategies reflect the patriarchy, sexism, heterosexism and market materialism of wider US society, Black men nonetheless are subject to an essentialist epistemology whereby being „criminal, angry and incapacitated“ (Jackson, 2006: 2) becomes a racial and cultural

given (Giroux, 1995). So enduring is the legacy of slave-era stereotypes<sup>39</sup> that they continue to shape the contemporary image of the Black man as „untamed, uncivilised, unthinking and unfeeling“ (hooks, 2004: *xii*). As previously argued (hooks, 2004), enslaved Black men were „socialised“ into accepting the patriarchal masculinity of colonising white settlers with regards to their treatment of Black women. Bell hooks refers to this as a type of „plantation patriarchy“ (2004), whereby Black masculinity as performed and extolled within the context of the „hood is simply the result of having absorbed white-supremacist definitions of masculinity. Any misogyny expressed by Black men towards Black women is therefore the product of interaction with white colonialist powers. While Jackson (2006) argues that Blackness is „discursively bound to an ideological matrix propagated by a socially preponderate whiteness“ (2006: 2), he nonetheless argues that „whites *and* Blacks facilitate the present-day perpetuation of race and racism via their active complicity with daily institutional racial inscriptions“ (2006: 3, emphasis in original). Such „racially xenophobic tendencies“ (2006: 9) are „diluted and recycled“ (2006: 9) by way of various cultural mediums, including cinema. Black filmmakers are among those complicit in the production and maintenance of Black masculine images and such portrayals are nowhere more apparent than in Hood films.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it would not be inconsistent to align these regenerative masculine practices with those theorised by Byers (1995). While Black men in wider society remain subject to racial oppression, within the geographical and cultural context of the predominately Black neighbourhood of Watts, Black men become the socially privileged group. The Hood protagonist engages in the same recuperative strategies as the white men of „white male paranoia fantasy“ films in order to consolidate this relative social power.

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<sup>39</sup> These depictions were however challenged by the powerful messages of the civil rights era, yet it has been argued that as „civil rights“ gains did not translate into real economic progress for the majority of urban blacks trapped in northern ghettos“ (Guerrero, 1993: 159), such stereotypes persist and are indeed appropriated by young, under-class, inner city Black men as a recuperative strategy.

<sup>40</sup> Rap music is another cultural manifestation of this strategy.

Violence and high-risk sexual behaviour therefore become ways to claim and assert masculinity. Gun culture and gang violence of the inner cities, Connell (1995) reminds us, „is a striking example of the assertion of marginalized masculinities against other men“ (1995: 83). Displaying personal strength and courage through violence not only permits for the consolidation of besieged manhood, but maintains the gender order and mobilises identification with male peers.

Intense loyalty is regularly displayed between male friends in Hood films in order to exhibit a personal machismo or bravery. As a consequence, showing concern or emotion is derided even in the face of extreme trauma. In *Menace II Society*, Caine and O-Dog ridicule one another’s panicked reaction to Caine being seriously wounded in the aftermath of the carjacking which claimed the life of Harold. Young men attach derogatory, feminised terms to other young men who are perceived to be conducting themselves in an unmanly way („acting like a little bitch/ho“). Such sexually charged epithets „have by now become the standard linguistic currency that young black males often use to demonstrate their authentic machismo“ (Dyson, 1992: 131), with these slurs becoming a severe negation of one’s masculine identity when affixed to other men.<sup>41</sup> Through the mutual assigning of disparaging terminology to both women and feminised men, both groups are positioned in opposition, and thus subordinate to, heterosexual and hyper-masculine men. Gendered epithets therefore operate to establish the norm by which masculine behaviour is assessed, maintained and reinforced while privileging those masculinities which most closely conform to the ideal image. The hostility displayed by Caine and his friends towards sexualised „others“ is indicative of the need to „legitimate, consolidate and essentialise [heterosexual Black men’s] cultural ascendancy“ (Ward, 2005: 496). As Elijah G. Ward (2005) explains:

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<sup>41</sup> James Nadell (1995) regards the indiscriminate use of the term „bitch“ by Black men as a symptom of self-alienation, „internalizing the traditional Euro-American definitions and devaluations of African American women“ (1995: 458), however offers no such colonialist explanation when the term is applied to other men. As such, I will regard the use of „bitch“ as a purely derogatory comment, which operates outside any such historical reading of Black male oppression.

it is a coping strategy black men use to allay and triumph over the anxieties and stresses of racism and related blocked social opportunities, as well as a means to express bitterness, contempt and rage towards the dominant ideology.

(2005: 496).

The parallels between unmanly (read feminine) behaviour and homosexuality is clear in many of the verbal insults dispatched in *Menace II Society*. While anti-homosexual sentiment exists in all cultural groups, according to Ward (2005), Black nationalism, as well as Black churches, are „easy to identify as visible fonts of homophobic rhetoric“ (2005: 495), promoting and validating anti-gay sentiment within Black communities. Ward argues that these social forces not only contribute to the further stigmatisation of gay/bisexual Black men, but also „adversely shape the lives of ... black heterosexual males and females“ (2005: 493). As ideologies of heteronormativity are predicated on displays of „power and dominance often through physical and sexually aggressive behaviours“ (Ward, 2005: 496), many heterosexual men are encouraged to exert their masculinity by engaging in unsafe sexual practices, such as unprotected sex with multiple sex partners. Hood films often refer (albeit briefly) to the consequences of such actions, yet depict the various characters giving typically scant consideration to the increased risk of exposure to sexually transmitted infection. The glib or dismissive retorts to these risks depict the apparent ignorance of young Black urban males of the realities of infectious sexual illness. In *Boyz n The Hood*, Doughboy (Ice Cube) ridicules a friend who displays a worrying *naïveté* when questioning whether AIDS can be contracted from receiving oral sex from a drug user. Tre appeases his father’s questioning on whether he „used protection“ during his invented episode of casual sex with „I didn’t need to. She said she was on the pill“. To which Furious angrily replies: „a pill ain’t gonna keep your dick from falling off!“ A coarse exchange between Sharief and Caine in *Menace II Society* also permits the integration of a „safe sex“ message however it is premature paternity that is mobilised in both films as the most feared outcome of casual and unprotected sex.

### ***Bros Before Hoes: The Erasure and Containment of Women***

Caine's post-modern anxiety is most apparent during his interactions with women. Through defining the behaviour of women as either socially acceptable or morally transgressive, beleaguered Black masculinity is able to be recuperated while maintaining the gender order. This strategy highlights further the way race is made the social terrain for the subordination of women to be enacted as well as demonstrates the limiting and inevitable dichotomy of female characters in male dominated, male authored motion pictures.

Cinema studies scholars such as Beretta E. Smith-Shomade (2003) have recently explored the heretofore largely overlooked role of women within „hip-hop Gangsta films“<sup>42</sup> and their critical capacity in transforming the genre. While Smith-Shomade concedes the inclusion of women within these films continues to purvey „standard generic fare“ (2003: 25), she nonetheless argues that Black women featured in these films, released contemporaneously with the Hood films discussed in this chapter, in ways that significantly enhances both their agency and status within male-dominated arenas. However despite the possible scope for cultural change brought about by such renewed appreciation for Black female characters in urban crime dramas, the directors of *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* nevertheless rely on existing cinematic conventions and limited gender stereotypes when depicting Black, urban, under-class women. Black female characters, if they exist at all in Hood films, are still denied visual space and voice. The roles they are allocated consist largely of moralising, domesticated matriarchs or sexualised appendages to the male protagonists.

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<sup>42</sup> „Hip hop Gangsta films“ are described as Black male centric crime dramas which specifically reference structured, organised crime. Some titles include *Rage in Harlem* (1991, Dir: Bill Duke), *Hoodlum* (Dir: Bill Duke, 1997), *New Jack City* (Dir: Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Sugar Hill* (Dir: Leon Ichaso, 1994) and *Clockers* (Dir: Spike Lee, 1995). *Set It Off* (Dir: F. Gary Gray, 1996) is perhaps the only example of this genre where women feature as the central players.

This section will argue that Black women's lack of representation within Hood films coincides with homophobic representations which endow Black, urban, under-class men privileged victim status. When Black women are erased or marginalised within cinematic depictions of urban life, the threat women pose to Black, urban, under-class masculinity is contained thus permitting Black men access the prerogatives of patriarchy.

Despite the prominence of male mentorship and male to male relationships (discussed at greater length below), well worn stereotypes of women as the passive overseers of morality abound in *Menace II Society*. The only truly visible female role is presented in Caine's potential love interest, Ronnie. As Caine's only tentative (female) connection to a world less doomed, Ronnie is warm, pleasant and retiring. She speaks sternly in a language atypical of inner city youth, free of expletives or Ebonics.<sup>43</sup> Caine's association with Ronnie is cemented through their joint parental duties five year old Anthony. The boy admires Caine, and it appears Caine derives some pleasure in his surrogate paternal role with which he can exercise some belated responsibility. Ronnie takes considered measures to ensure her son is not exposed to the same damaging effects of the city which Caine has come to regard as commonplace. With the exception of the occasional use of foul language and the time Caine permitted Anthony to fire his gun, Ronnie is approving of this complex domestic arrangement. Romantic interest in Ronnie, which Caine admits to be harbouring, is stifled through the threat of violent reprimand by Ronnie's jailed ex-partner Pernell despite his indefinite incarceration. Pernell acted as a mentor to Caine when he was young, and to attempt a physical relationship with the mother of Pernell's child would be, according to Caine, highly disrespectful. Like many female characters in the Hood film, Ronnie signifies a test of loyalty between men rather than being a character in her own right. However Ronnie's virtue is established through her reluctance to initiate a physical relationship with Caine and

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<sup>43</sup> African American vernacular English.



not through the increasingly untenable connection she shares with her ex-partner. While Ronnie's sexual restraint might be interpreted as the Hughes' figuring of her as the excessively moral counterpart to Illena, her chastity at least allows Ronnie to exercise some personal agency. However Massood (1993) is critical of this portrayal of Black womanhood, arguing that through her role as nurturer and protector to a defiantly self-destructive male lead, Ronnie „ultimately becomes more symbolic than real“ (Massood, 1993: 45). Nevertheless, the character Ronnie goes some way towards positively challenging long standing cultural images of that „much maligned group“ (Dyson, 1992: 126) of the Black single mother by depicting her stability, maturity, dedication to her son and ongoing adherence to her own personal aspirations.

Other women feature only briefly, and are relegated to predictable auxiliary roles of either sassy, pugnacious counter clerks or animated yet entirely disposable ghetto „tricks“. Both operate as providers of the immediate demands of the various members of the otherwise male only gang: food, liquor and sex. Even Caine's short lived yet fatal dalliance with Illena, who comes to signify the diametrically opposed *whore* to Ronnie's *saint*, is presented in a rather pedestrian way. Her screen time is minimal, thus details of her personality are left unexplored. As a result, gendered assumptions are used to fill in the usual absences associated with insufficiently rendered characters. There is no evidence other than her willingness to have sex with Caine without any romantic ties – or her wardrobe, which is slightly more contemporary than that of Ronnie's – which classifies her as a „fallen woman“. As Jackson (2006) acknowledges, within the traditions of popular media representations of Black women, „the female's sexiness is determined by the degree to which she reveals her body. That is, a woman who is scripted as sexy is thought to be so due to the amount and kind of clothing she wears ... coupled with the length and style of her hair“ (2006: 69). One might extend this notion to encompass the sexual availability of the woman depicted, with a

provocatively dressed woman immediately scripted as not merely physically attractive, but as „easy“, uninhibited or licentious. It is Caine who determines the nature of this association and by implication, secures Illena’s position within his own *ad hoc* moral hierarchy. Caine approaches Illena with the type of unrestrained bravado that would be considered ill-placed or even offensive if attempted with Ronnie.

Despite her limited screen time, Illena plays a fundamental role in determining Caine’s life path. When he is gunned down moments before he is to leave with Ronnie to Atlanta, it is due in part because he abandoned Illena and their unborn child. Yet here too Illena’s influence is diluted. As Paula Massood (1993) notes, Illena remains „physically absent from the action even at [the] moment when she functions so centrally“ (1993: 35). As noted earlier, „the absence of women only unveils the threat they represent: a life in the „hood“, unwanted pregnancy, enforced responsibility, death“ (Massood, 1993: 45).

### ***Father Loss and Mentors in the Hood***

Where *Menace II Society* differs most from its Hood predecessors is in its treatment of father figures. Both *Boyz N The Hood* and *Menace II Society* engage with the notion that strong male role models are the only recourse to the crisis plaguing young Black men, yet whereas the former appears to endorse this claim, the latter interrogates the assumption by revealing the rather unsophisticated reliance *Boyz N The Hood* places on fathering. In *Menace II Society*, a series of potential father figures are provided to advise Caine on his emergent masculine identity, yet none are able to offer sufficient guidance to successfully steer Caine away from the lure of the drug trade, gun culture and high risk masculine behaviour. Through the gradual revealing of the various men’s inadequacies as well as Caine’s insolence, *Menace II Society* proposes that redemption can only come from the acceptance of a self-defined personhood. While this approach might at first appear to defy the overall male-centred tone

of *Menace II Society*, it is nonetheless in keeping with the overall tendency of pomophobic representations of male lives to play into patriarchal fantasies where succession over the bad father aids in the restoration of the embattled masculine self (Byers, 1996).

As the social impact of growing up without fathers has been publically implicated in the troubles affecting the life choices and wellbeing of young Black men (Dyson, 1992; Hunter et al., 2006), the topic has been rigorously integrated into the work of Black authored cultural product, from cinema to rap music. Yet despite the emphasis placed on maintaining familial relationships, the prevalence of absent mothers in Hood film narratives is not reconciled with the same intensity. In the final section, this chapter will examine the overt privileging of father figures in the lives of the lead characters in both Hood films and narrative structure more generally. It will be argued that both *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* undermine the presence of women within the Black urban drama in order to further restore the cultural authority of the masculine subject.

In *Boyz N The Hood*, the central relationship which directs both the narrative and the film's moral message is that of the lead protagonist Tre and his father, Furious Styles. Exercising a stern yet restrained influence over his son, with whom he shares a mutually respectful and caring relationship, Furious represents the figure of Black manhood seldom seen previously in Black centred motion pictures. Furious is articulate, educated and politically aware, however he understands the grim realities of Tre's environment within which he needs to reconcile his place and is determined to equip him with the skills needed to deal with such challenges.

As the earlier scenes set during Tre's childhood reveal, Tre's mother, Reva Devereaux (Angela Bassett) sends her son to her estranged ex-husband when Tre runs afoul of school authorities. Despite Tre's improved behaviour, Reva remains absent throughout her son's

emerging adolescence except for the occasional phone call. During one such telephone exchange, the shot of Reva sprawled out on a stylish sofa in a sumptuously decorated apartment conveys implicitly her improved financial status and seemingly carefree lifestyle. While this might be done to merely document the economic advancement of Reva's neighbourhood, it nevertheless highlights Tre's living arrangements as comparatively less inviting. Reva's screen presence and ideological influence remains ancillary to the relationship between Furious and Tre. This undermining of the role of mothers is further underscored in the storyline of Ricky and Doughboy who, despite having a capable and engaged mother in Brenda (Tyra Ferrell), are both perceived to be destined for failure precisely because their father is absent (Dyson, 1992).

Although overwhelmingly praising the film, Michael Eric Dyson (1992) concedes that this intense emphasis on fathers in raising Black boys is a failing by the film's director to sufficiently acknowledge the role of Black mothers. Dyson (1992) writes:

Indeed in Singleton's cinematic worldview both Ricky and Doughboy seem doomed to violent deaths because – unlike Tre – they have no male role models to guide them. This premise embodies one of the film's central tensions – and one of its central limitations. For even as he assigns black men a pivotal role of responsibility for the fate of black boys, Singleton also gives rather uncritical “precedence” to the impact of black men, even in their absence, over the efforts of present and loyal black women who more often prove to be at the head of strong black families.

(1992: 126).

What Dyson identifies as a significant oversight emerges as a guiding theme in *Boyz N The Hood*. The heavy, rather simplistic reliance on the presence of strong father figures<sup>44</sup> is not only inadequate as a possible strategy towards addressing the supposed crisis of young Black males, it also reinforces the narrative pre-occupations in the film which positions males as more significant – and therefore more worthy of saving – than females.<sup>45</sup> As Devon W. Carbado (1999) argues, „Black men are perceived to be *significantly* more vulnerable and *significantly* more “endangered” than Black women. They become the quintessential example of the effects of racial subordination” (1999: 4, emphasis in original). Furthermore, the implicit message that only men can raise boys successfully undermines what Dyson (1992) rightfully argues is the integral place women hold in Black families. Such a notion reinforces the rigid division of sex roles which has proven detrimental to both sexes.

Despite the inclusion of a few scenes in which Tre’s mother attempts to reconnect with her son, she is still portrayed as distant, out of touch and ineffective. In the scene where she proposes to Furious the possibility of Tre moving back in with her, the exchange is framed more as an arbitrary show of defiance by Reva rather than a genuine desire to re-establish a relationship with her son. Her delivered demands betray an air of discourtesy, wielding her comparable financial status as a totem of superiority. While Reva’s attempts to assert her

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<sup>44</sup> The excessive moralising characterised in *Boyz N The Hood* and similar films directed by Spike Lee (for instance 1989’s *Do The Right Thing* and 1995’s *Clockers*) was bitinglly lampooned in Rusty Cundieff’s 1993 comedy *Fear Of A Black Hat*. In it, the fictional „Black auteur” Jike Springleton (clearly an amalgamation of Spike Lee and John Singleton) directs a film where Ice Cold (Rusty Cundieff) rescues an infant from the lure of the illegal drug trade before delivering a sentimental monologue about the importance of strong paternal figures.

<sup>45</sup> The Million Man March was both a social and cultural example of this privileging of men’s experiences and men’s crises within certain sectors of the Black community. Marianne Grünell and Sawitri Saharso (1999) note that while many Black men did not subscribe to organiser Louis Farrakhan’s ultra-right wing, separatist, nationalist interpretation of Islam, they nevertheless joined the march „because they wanted to show black men are willing and capable to take responsibility for their families” (1999: 206). As such, the Million Man March, which was attended by an estimated 830,000 (however this figure has been strongly challenged by organisers), demonstrates the persistent, if sometimes inconsistent referral to overt patriarchy at times of historical uncertainty. For a more detailed discussion of the Million Man March within the wider context of Black nationalism, see Michael O. West’s (1999) „Like a River: The Million Man March and the Black Nationalist Tradition in the United States”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol 12, no. 1, pp. 81-100.

rights as a mother are commended by Furious“ tacit approval, this does not compensate for her virtual invisibility for the greater part of Tre“s adolescence. As Dyson explains: „even in the Afrocentric worldview that Singleton advocates, the role of black women is often subordinate to the black patriarch“ (1992: 134).

This subordinating of maternal figures is also present in *Menace II Society*. Caine“s grandmother“s (Marilyn Coleman) scant appearances are never without the company of her husband, Caine“s grandfather. Never addressed by her first name, „Grandma“ is depicted as a hapless innocent whose remoteness from the „realities“ of the outside world is maintained through her containment within the domestic space. Regardless of her years, Caine“s grandmother displays a worrying *naïveté* unbecoming of a long time resident of this volatile environment. This infantilising of a mature aged woman privileges the experiences of men. *Menace II Society* is then typical in its reproduction of pejorative notions of gender, especially in relation to the depiction of women in recuperating embattled masculine authority.

If the premise is only men can offer leadership to troubled male youths, *Menace II Society* demolishes the viability of each potential male mentor in turn. Caine“s Grandpa emerges as at once strangely detached and woefully anachronistic. Under a framed reproduction of the Last Supper, Caine and O-Dog are gently lectured by Grandpa on the sin of murder, presented with similar matter of fact glibness as most parents“ warning on the dangers of smoking. Caine often suggests that it is the religious nature of his grandfather“s largely rhetorical harangue which causes much of what is said to be ignored. Caine later apologises to O-Dog for subjecting his friend to his grandfather“s persistent evangelising. So ineffective are Grandpa“s words that when asked if he cares whether he lives or dies, Caine cannot respond.

The search for mentors extends beyond those men of parental age. With the age difference successfully bridged, it seems more likely Caine would do well to receive advice from his peers. *Menace II Society* entertains this notion briefly, yet those of his own age are gradually revealed to Caine as inappropriate or too preoccupied with their own internal struggles to be of any assistance. One such example is Sharief, who, buoyant on newly found Islamic faith, regularly preaches to his friends on the dangers of alcohol, unprotected sex, criminal activity and discourages the self-referential use of the word „nigga“. Sharief’s puritanical dress code (sensible clothing and an African style *kufi*)<sup>46</sup> and refusal to adopt the preferred regional slang of urban youth make him the subject of ridicule. At times his religious fervour slips into vague conspiracy theories regarding the white population (who are almost invisible in *Menace II Society*), however Sharief’s mistrust of the predominantly white police force for instance is on one occasion, at least, proved warranted, when he and Caine suffer a vicious, unprovoked beating by a group of patrolling officers. Sharief, like Caine’s grandparents, is well-meaning, genuine, and perhaps the most endearing of Caine’s associates. Unlike Grandpa and Pernell, Sharief offers perhaps the most visible example to Caine of how a (young) Black man can, ideologically at least, transcend a hostile social environment. However the film’s tendency to highlight Sharief’s religious inconsistencies both de-legitimizes his transition from „knucklehead“ to spiritual convert and challenges his eligibility as a mentor to Caine. For instance when Sharief warns of the damaging Anglo influence on the Black community, his sexual preference for white women is playfully challenged by his own father, Mr Butler, a respected school teacher. The exchange in which this revelation is made is purely tangential; occurring independently of any meaningful story development yet exists nonetheless. One might interpret this discussion and its inclusion as an implicit hint towards Sharief’s untrustworthiness as a potential purveyor of wisdom given this somewhat hypocritical assessment of whites. Furthermore, it might also suggest that Sharief, like other young men

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<sup>46</sup> A *kufi* is a brimless, rounded, flat-topped hat traditionally worn by African men.

living in the chaotic post-modern urban space, cannot ever successfully construct a coherent identity in the face of increasing cultural redundancy.

The only lecture which leaves an impression on Caine is the one he receives from Sharief's father, Mr Butler (Charles S. Dutton). What he offers by way of advice is no more profound than that provided by Grandpa – indeed Mr Butler also relies on institutionalised religion to provide salvation for Caine by stating:

Sharief used to get into all kinds of shit before he found The Nation [Of Islam]. Now, I'm no Muslim, but I agree with some of the things they say regarding Black people. And if Allah helps to make him a better man than Jesus can, then I'm all for it.

Caine is attentive and reflective throughout the discussion, and appears especially receptive to Mr Butler's bleak conclusion: „Being a Black man in America isn't easy. The hunt is on, and you're the prey". Such fatalism not only mimics Sharief's virulent Black Nationalism, it also conveniently complements Caine's own sense of vulnerability. Caine leaves the meeting to momentarily ponder Mr Butler's words, yet this exchange also goes unheeded. Ultimately it is the hyper violence embodied by the more destructive elements of Caine's relationships which endure. As Massood (1993) notes, „in a film in which relationships among men are predicated on violence, it is no coincidence that Caine's father and Pernell influence Caine in the most sustaining ways" (1993: 44).

This implicitly critical representation of kinship and social networks as ultimately disappointing exacerbates the sense of social isolation intrinsic to claims of (masculine) post-modern unrest. Moreover, *Menace II Society* displays an obvious scepticism towards mentorship as a plausible strategy towards transcending the containment within and lack of



mobility out of the „hood. This preference for erasure<sup>47</sup> – quite literally in the case of Sharief who is cruelly caught in the cross fire and killed in the final sequence depicting the drive-by shooting which claims Caine – highlights the film’s overwhelming message that the urban space is so bleak, so fraught with hardship, that the only way out is death.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has examined the specifically raced readings of the urban space and how masculine, post-modern anxiety is represented through the trope of thwarted spatial mobility. While *Falling Down* and the Hood films analysed differ in their ideological claims to space, the perceived lack of physical movement in each film allegorises the apparent undermining of traditional modes of masculinity. Through implicit appeals to the ways in which the „other“, either visibly present or conspicuously absent, restricts the protagonist’s free movement, this chapter has argued that marginalised subjectivities come to stand in for the cultural events and social initiatives which have impeded the progress of those who nevertheless occupy a place of privilege. In *Falling Down*, „D-FENS“ job loss, marriage breakdown and mounting frustrations over the perceived illegibility of the urban space is symptomatic of changes in the industrial sector, women’s improved social status and the shifting cultural and ethnic makeup of contemporary America. Through overtly para-militaristic altercations with ethnic minorities, extremists and his estranged wife, D-FENS restores his cultural authority by symbolically exerting power over the urban environment. *Falling Down* continues the re-masculinisation process by permitting the formerly desk-bound Prendergast to embark on a fearless, notably urban pursuit of D-FENS. These actions literalise both the sense of cultural displacement experienced by both men, and the recuperative strategies deployed to restore embattled masculine authority.

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<sup>47</sup> Erin Schroeder (2001) similarly argues that Sharief’s Nation of Islam philosophy proves such a challenge to the prevailing model of masculinity in the „hood“ that he and his „message“ are simultaneously ridiculed and, in the scene where Sharief offers his music to play in a friend’s car stereo only to have the friend reject it, silenced. As Schroeder (2001) puts it, „Sharief’s perspective has a sound track that we never hear“ (2001: 169).

In *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood*, the urban environment is experienced by the Black protagonists as repressive and segregating, thus operating as „a primary metaphor for the African American experience“ (Massood, 1996: 85). Through the depiction of Black masculine subjectivity as intrinsically shaped by the chaos of the inner cities (Massood, 1996) as well as persistently subject to institutional oppression, *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood* implicitly critique white, masculine claims of spatial displacement by instead highlighting the effects of systemic racism that prohibits the physical movement of young, Black, urban, under-class males.

Violence, intimidation and the objectification of women are deployed as strategies towards claiming some kind of masculine cultural legitimacy. As well as the various discursive practices used to denigrate non-hegemonic subjectivities such as women and feminised men, the young Black male under-class depicted in the Hood film genre utilise these means to combat the institutional biases which have determined their lack of social mobility and to assert their otherwise marginalised masculinity. Young, Black, under-class urban men exercise some level of control over white men in a similar fashion, yet while Black men may obtain authority through their spatial competence within the domain of the „hood, the value of both that domain and authority within it is subordinate to the power wielded by white men more generally.

Crucial also to the restoration of young Black under-class masculine authority is the significance placed on strengthening the father/son bond within the „coming of age“ narratives that characterise both Hood films analysed. The theme of paternal abandonment and the suggestion that progressive cultural shifts have brought about the dissolution of the traditional nuclear family (and with it, the authority of the father) will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Six. It will be argued that those men who experience post-modern anxiety within the

urban space, once again allegorised through the trope of *flânerie*, recuperate their lost cultural privilege by ascending to the role of father or by destroying the family completely.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Getting Even With Dad: Paternal Abandonment and Symbolic Redemption*

#### *Introduction*

The previous chapters of this thesis argued that the post-modern anxieties represented in the films analysed are in part a response to the perceived dissolution of traditional values. These destabilisations are attributed to cultural shifts of the post-World War II period, with the women's movement, gay/civil rights and post-Fordist industrial changes perceived as having profoundly impacted upon the material and economic base of heterosexual, racially dominant men. One strategy to recuperate the supposed loss of masculine authority and the threatened stability of prevailing social configurations is to respond by further marginalising those who are viewed as profiting from rapid social change (for instance women, homosexuals and raced „others“).

This final chapter will examine the ways in which the lead protagonists in Rolf De Heer's (1994) *Bad Boy Bubby* and James Marsh's (2002) *The King* experience spatial displacement as a result of having been actively denied a culturally privileged masculine subjectivity. It will be argued that in these two films, post-modern anxieties are articulated primarily through a sense of paternal abandonment and the perceived dissolution of the traditional bourgeois nuclear family. Furthermore, the women depicted in both films appear only to serve the very limited narrative purpose of representing a dimension of masculine angst. These female characters, who often take on highly sexualised forms, can be regarded as an embodiment of the perceived threat of women's sexuality, improved social status and the increasingly untenable nature of traditional gender relations. This chapter will demonstrate how the male protagonists in both films recuperate patriarchal authority by acceding to the position of father or destroying the family entirely when denied a position within it. In the case of *Bad Boy*

*Bubby*, psychological and physical abuse at the hands of his deranged, incestuous mother is made the cause of Bubby's profound mental handicap. Bubby's father, however, remaining largely peripheral to the narrative, becomes a figure upon which Bubby models his emerging adulthood. In *The King*, Elvis fatally challenges the prevailing hypocrisy of conservative familism by killing his family who are depicted as the agents of his economic marginalisation and cultural displacement. Yet despite the hostilities expressed towards the devout nature of the family unit, the father in *The King* is both spared and idolised, reinforcing the paternal principle and maintaining masculine dominance.

Solitary urban strolling is likewise employed as a narrative device in both films as a means to communicate a sense of cultural displacement. *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* reinscribe the urban space as chaotic, incoherent or alienating through the use of Gothic stylisations to exaggerate the apparent sinister undercurrent present in contemporary society. Doing so places both Bubby and Elvis at risk of interference from aggressive and antagonistic „others“ and repositions them as victims of post-modernity.

The religious imagery deployed throughout both *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* is a symbolic manifestation of the conservative, pejorative ideologies that the pomophobe is attempting to restore. While Christianity is at times portrayed negatively in both films, *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* nevertheless deploy religious motifs, highlighting the interconnectedness of faith with patriarchal authority. Through providing the structuring norm against which post-modern chaos is cinematically opposed, religious symbolism, however vague (as in *Bad Boy Bubby*) or shown as hypocritical (as in *The King*), demonstrates the ways in which pomophobic anxieties regarding the breakdown of traditional values embodied in the bourgeois nuclear family have developed in relation to religion.

Given their rather surreal and unusual narrative forms, *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* are not easily reconciled amongst more mainstream examples of pomophobic *flânerie* previously analysed in this thesis. Coupling these two films and including them within the broader context of this thesis is intended to demonstrate how cinema routinely engages with the theme of culturally displaced men thus offering interpretations of the supposedly alienating nature of the post-modern world. Although *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* differ from the previously discussed films in terms of the degree to which pomophobia can be found in the character's behaviour (indeed, Elvis' initially clear revenge motives are complicated through the film's ambiguous conclusion while explanations behind Bubby's actions too remain largely obscured by his *naïveté*), as in *The Crow*, post-modern anxiety exists within the films' stylisations and the seemingly insignificant marginal characters.

The evocation of „post-apocalyptic“ themes of urban dystopia in *Bad Boy Bubby*, and the representation of suburbia as sterile, synthetic and intolerant of „outsiders“ in *The King* are manifestations of the „free floating“ (Oliver & Trigo, 2002) anxiety which, as previously explored in Chapter Four, articulate persistent masculine fears of displacement owing to the social, cultural, political and economic shifts and initiatives of the post-World War II period. I argue therefore that the „tone“ or „mood“ of these films articulate existential anxiety by complementing the less explicit depictions of urban illegibility which are not necessarily specific or particular to a US socio-political context. Bubby's disability status also ensures that his access to the hegemony available through performing a quintessentially Australian form of „ocker“ masculinity has been denied, a point which I argue contributes to his sense of social alienation and cultural marginality. Nevertheless, this chapter will go on to argue that patriarchal, structuring norms are still reinforced through the depiction of women and in the evocation of the nuclear family in both *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King*.

## **Bad Boy Bubby**

Following escape from his incestuous mother, an intellectually and emotionally impaired man must navigate an unfamiliar urban environment. The effects of over 30 years of incarceration manifest in Bubby's inability to conduct himself in a socially acceptable way, which, while providing much of the film's dark humour, renders Bubby entirely helpless and thus positions the city as overwhelming, calamitous and hostile. The childhood sexual abuse endured and the resultant intellectual disabilities incurred by Bubby provide the necessary mechanism to impart a reactionary, pomophobic message regarding the supposedly illegible and uninhabitable sub(urban) space. Abuse and disability therefore become mere foils for an array of post-modern anxieties. The transformation from a familiar, coherent built environment to a fragmented, disorientating and at times dangerous wasteland is indicative of the presumed loss of civic order and social cohesion, a feature of the pomophobic vision of modern life. These moments of urban unrest and social confusion help drive a conservative claim regarding cultural shifts within contemporary society, all the while under the comic guise of Bubby's own naïve interpretation of social interactions. The at times surrealist nature of *Bad Boy Bubby* assists in further offering comment regarding the often abrasive and bewildering nature of contemporary urban living. The film deliberately positions its hero as existing on the parameters of society yet *Bad Boy Bubby* nevertheless relies on social convention, such as marriage and fatherhood to reform Bubby's behaviour and finally redeem him.

### ***'Christ kid, you're a weirdo' – Portrait of Bad Boy Bubby***

„Bubby“ (Nicholas Hope) is a 35 year-old „manchild“ (Hickey-Moody & Iocco, 2004: 78), confined his whole life by his domineering mother, Florence (Claire Benito), to a two room tenement. „Flo“ insists the air outside the dilapidated building is poisonous, and without a gas mask Bubby would instantly suffocate. She maintains this frightening pretence by donning a

gas mask every time she vacates their home. Bubby's movements are further restricted by the threat of violent reprisal as Flo has convinced Bubby that Jesus is watching his every move. Starved of any external interaction or stimuli, Bubby's cognitive abilities have been severely compromised; he functions much like a primitive child and speaks with a stilted and hesitant cadence. His days are spent absorbing his mother's physical and sexual abuse, imitating her violent paranoia upon his pet cat, all the while upholding ignorance about the perversity of his existence and his relationship with his mother.

The first third of *Bad Boy Bubby* is set exclusively within the house in which Bubby is captive. The *mise-en-scène* does not extend beyond this interior. As a result, it is not immediately apparent where, or even if, that which is shown is occurring. The austere enclave with stripped, mildew-stained walls, little furnishing and amenities is oppressive. The limited colour palette enhances this mood, while the interactions between Flo and Bubby further enhance the discomfort. In their brief yet illuminating exploration of the Gothic elements in *Bad Boy Bubby*, David Thomas and Garry Gillard (2006) regard Bubby's mother's behaviour as having „post-apocalyptic implications“ (2006: 43). Indeed, the viewer is presented with the possibility that what is transpiring on screen is operating either outside the realm of reality or occurring outside the continuum of time and space. It is therefore difficult to discern what era this sequence is set, what time of day (or night) it is taking place or how many days/months/years have elapsed between each moment.

Little dialogue or sound besides the occasional atmospheric noise is heard. Through the amplifying of pedestrian sounds such as gurgling, chewing, refracted breathing, cockroaches scurrying, coarse wash cloths on bare flesh and water running, the film achieves a „powerful and often unsettling aural experience“ (Hickey-Moody & Iocco, 2004: 78) where „sounds which would not normally be incorporated into a soundtrack are loud, uncomfortably close



and unnervingly persistent" (2004: 80). More crucially, the seemingly inconsequential sounds which reverberate around Bubby's dank flat constitute an important element of Bubby's subjectivity by providing him with the means by which to interact with his surroundings and later, a unique form of artistic expression. His inability to articulate himself verbally as well as his lack of socialisation means he relies on these sounds to formulate a sense of place, maintain a delicate connection with the external world while demonstrating „his libidinal relationship to sound" (Hickey-Moody & Iocco, 2004: 81). This unique relationship to sound offers both a means to self-represent and success later in the film through Bubby's performance in a band where his unorthodox performance, and skills at mimicry, is an attraction.

The uncomfortable intimacy characterised in Bubby being bathed by his mother and sharing her bed emphasises the seemingly routine nature of these otherwise abnormal events. What might be interpreted as the depiction of child abuse is tempered slightly by the fact that Bubby is not a young boy, but a balding, fully grown adult. According to director Rolf de Heer, *Bad Boy Bubby* was initially conceived as an allegory for child abuse yet deciding it inappropriate to cast a child actor in the role of Bubby, de Heer instead adapted the character to resemble a grown man, although one for whom informed consent may be impossible. The potential ethical considerations of depicting child sexual abuse were sufficiently avoided with this rewrite, yet the very real issue of child sexual abuse is also circumvented, effectively downplaying the severity of the crime through reducing the sustained trauma of a child victim to simple adult dim-wittedness.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the challenging nature of this early sequence representing incest between and mother and son is still effective. Bubby remains passive

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<sup>48</sup> While I recognise such an interpretation of this text runs the risk of homogenising/essentialising the abuse victim's response to childhood sexual trauma, one might argue that the film's director invests little in representing the impact of child sex abuse through its portrayal of Bubby. The character is depicted as less a deeply traumatised individual but rather a highly sexed, loveable misfit with a speech impediment. Indeed, David Callahan (2001) rightly argues „one can hardly suggest that *Bad Boy Bubby* is a revelation of the social and ethic [sic] issues surrounding men kept locked up by their incestuous mothers; only the most severe metaphorical constructions could suggest there was much of a deeply-involved constituency here" (2001: 108).

throughout these confronting moments, only expressing sadness when he urinates in his seat after his mother instructs him not to move. Further ambiguity is achieved in Flo's unpredictable response to Bubby. One moment she is beating him for soiling himself, the next she is feeding him bread soaked in hot milk. Later, she is praising him during sexual intercourse. The actions of Flo demonstrated in these scenes tend to attest to her own pathology rather than that of Bubby. Flo's appearance (overweight, pendulous breasts which are exposed on more than one occasion, sexually perverted) likewise frames her as a thoroughly abject figure, occupying various forms of female abjection at once. She is the castrating mother in her domination and abuse of Bubby, as well as the archaic mother in her withholding of genuine maternal affection<sup>49</sup> (Creed, 1993; Iocco, 1998; Kristeva, 1982).

A means of escape is presented in the form of „Pop“ (Ralph Cotterill), a man claiming to be Bubby's biological father. When Pop arrives at Flo and Bubby's derelict building late one evening, he is belligerent, intoxicated and wearing a priest's collar. Flo's attentions are momentarily diverted by the lascivious Pop, who at first attempts to connect with Bubby yet quickly tires of his son's peculiar behaviour. Curious about this new visitor, Bubby uses toffee and clipped hair to fashion a beard to his face to replicate Pop's unshaven appearance. He also wears Pop's collar, imitates his speech patterns and, typical of his tendency to impersonate others repetitiously, „adopts [Pop's] criticisms as a mantra“ (Hickey-Moody & Iocco, 2004: 80). When Pop and Flo re-establish their sexual relationship, Bubby is relegated to less inhabitable quarters of the house leaving him slightly bewildered yet relaxing Flo's domination over him.

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<sup>49</sup> One might even interpret the secluded and cavernous house Bubby and Flo inhabit as „womb-like“. However its austere and dilapidated state seems to evoke a decaying rather than generative potential. The trope of „womb as monstrous place“ has been frequently utilised in horror films and artistic depictions of Hell. For more discussion, see „Woman as Monstrous Womb: *The Brood*“ (Chapter Four) in Barbara Creed's (1993) *Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge: London, New York, pp 43-58.

After a brief altercation with Pop (possibly stirred by his sexual jealousy), Bubby is motivated to suffocate both Pop and his mother with cling wrap as he had earlier done with his cat. Ignorant of the consequences of his actions, Bubby is not immediately cognisant of his parents' death or that he has committed a double murder. Discovering from Pop's unfettered access to the house that it is indeed possible to breathe the outside air, Bubby finally departs from what has been his prison for his entire life to explore the alien and, until now, uncharted world outside. This poignant, albeit dramatic, break from the restrictive ties of domestic life vividly conveys the existentialist journey of Charles Baudelaire's (1964) *flâneur*, driven (forcibly) out of the private and into the public in an effort to embark on „his own search for meaning“ (Tester, 1994: 2). However the subsequent scenes which feature Bubby negotiating the chaotic urban space reflect more accurately the contemporary interpretations of Edgar Allan Poe's (1845) „Man of The Crowd“. Through reducing each of those he encounters to mere sound bites, exaggerated through his use of mimicry, Bubby is able to render the unfamiliar and terrifying city legible, while at the same time construct a sense of self through his relationship with his environment. This process of categorisation as both a source of Bubby's intellectual development and a means through which he appropriates a marginal subject position will be elaborated upon in the sections which follow, however first this chapter will turn to a discussion on how psychological trauma or existentialist angst has been represented cinematically as a literalised injury in *Bad Boy Bubby*. Representing intellectual disability as a type of psychological damage absolves Bubby of any potential to be oppressive while repositioning him as a victim, and is a trait characteristic of those Australian films critics have regarded as Gothic.

### *Allegorising Psychic Wounding*

These early segments set within the walls of Bubby's dilapidated apartment do not appear in the film for sheer shock value alone. They operate as part of the overall reconfiguring of the dominant patriarchal figure as inherently vulnerable. The scenes documenting Bubby's lifetime of mistreatment and neglect casts telling light on the origins of his dispossession: Bubby has been messed up all his life, and was not, like D-FENS in Joel Schumacher's (1993) *Falling Down*, pushed to breaking point after a series of personal and economic setbacks. Furthermore, this dispossession is set in motion by the actions of the mother, that age-old Freudian source of masculine anxieties. It is here that the literalised psychic wounds of abuse and neglect come to articulate the erosion of white male privilege and loss of cultural authority. Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990) and similar mythopoetic material of the time used creative license to collapse the symbolic with the literal, the physical with the somatic to corporealise inner scars which in turn might provide a source of empowerment. Bly (1990) writes:

where a man's wound is, that is where his genius will be. Wherever the wound appears in our psyches, whether from *alcoholic father*, shaming mother, shaming father, *abusing mother*, whether it stems from isolation, *disability*, or disease, that is precisely the place from which we will give our major gift to the community.

(1990: 42, my emphasis).

As Flo inflicts Bubby's wounds, Pop represents the absent or remote father who wreaks psychological damage which Bubby can ultimately undo through a process of recognition, release and finally redemption. The swiftness with which Pop appears and is then dispatched prevents a new cycle of abuse from occurring. The hardship Bubby suffers within the domestic space and is poised to encounter in the latter two thirds of the film therefore partially absolves its lead of responsibility and more importantly, renders any considered social attempts to reform the dominant male subject redundant. Unprejudiced, innocent, white, male

and evidently straight, Bubby is completely depoliticised and as a result, can be integrated into a reactionary agenda.

This carefully contrived veneer of loveable innocence invites the audience to identify emotionally with Bubby in a way not permitted if the lead character was overtly oppositional. Yet at various points of the film, Bubby's child-like character evolves into that of an anti-hero, an anarchic outsider with his punk blues band, spewing blasphemous rants and avenging his abusers through music and mimicry. This flaying of subjectivities might suggest *Bad Boy Bubby*'s overall confused narrative intentions however it might also point to Bubby's gradual, symbolic ascent to manhood. Despite the varying interpretations Bubby's behaviour invites, his victim status is never entirely subsumed, which suggests the film still invests much in the psychological trauma portrayed in the opening moments of *Bad Boy Bubby*. The application of a detectable yet not wholly explained intellectual handicap<sup>50</sup> further entitles Bubby to a minoritised subject position whilst still retaining a universal identity. It is therefore appropriate to locate *Bad Boy Bubby* among the veritable stream of what Joseph Sartelle (1996) has termed „disability films“, whereby the figurative wounds inflicted on the male psyche are literalised/corporealised through a discernible physical or psychological impairment.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> While it is never fully explained what precise intellectual handicap Bubby suffers from, one might procure a rough estimation from examining the symptoms he exhibits. Although not able to generate a new response from his limited vocabulary alone, Bubby is able to apply the statement previously heard which forms the necessary response according to the situation. For example, when he encounters money, his response is consistent with earlier encounters where money was exchanged or presented. One might derive from this that Bubby has a form of Savant Syndrome which is evident in both his prodigious memory (he is able to recount statements, identify pitch in voice and repeat utterances verbatim) contrasted with emotional, social and linguistic limitations.

<sup>51</sup> *Rain Man* (1988, Dir: Barry Levinson), *Scent of a Woman* (1992, Dir: Martin Brest), *Regarding Henry* (1991, Dir: Mike Nichols), *The Man Without a Face* (1993, Dir: Mel Gibson), *Forrest Gump* (1994, Dir: Robert Zemeckis) and *I Am Sam* (2001, Dir: Jesse Nelson) have all been identified as being of the „disability films“ genre.

*Bad Boy Bubby* subverts a number of cinematic traditions with its often surrealist interpretation of contemporary society and those who reside within it, yet the film is nonetheless typical of the Gothic trend in Australian cinema, „where the normal is revealed as having a stubborn bias towards the perverse, the grotesque, the malevolent“ (Thomas & Gillard, 2003: 40). While tendencies towards „sinister peculiarity“ (2003: 36) in film have often been attributed to the popular anxieties of the socio-political context from which the films were produced, when examining Gothic cinema more generally, Australian films of the 1990s tended to privilege the subject positions of previously marginalised people such as women, Indigenous peoples, those from ethnic backgrounds and diverse sexualities (Simmons, 2003). Nevertheless, the lead’s stunted intellectual development, manifested as an intellectual handicap permits *Bad Boy Bubby* a „certain level of “deniability” against political critiques“ (Byers, 1996: 421). Attempts to resign blame to a dysfunctional upbringing renders Bubby’s dominant subject position – Bubby is male, white, and heterosexual – completely suppressed and entirely irrelevant in light of his victim status. This deliberate portrayal of the narrator as a mystified, socially inept and alienated (white) man-child who endures systematic mistreatment and as a result, is forced to experience abjection and occupy various places of marginality, I argue, is analogous of the presumed vulnerability and subsequent cultural dispossession of the white male subject (Byers, 1996).

*Bad Boy Bubby* avoids extreme depictions of cultural „otherness“ like that presented in more overtly polemic films such as *Falling Down*, nevertheless *Bad Boy Bubby* still contains certain elements which might be interpreted as allegorical of the threatened status of a formerly dominant masculinity. No clearer indication of Bubby’s victimhood is offered than in the early scenes depicting Flo’s physical abuse and sexual exploitation of her son. The fact that the film’s title directly references Bubby’s permanent immaturity suggests the extent to which Bubby’s subjectivity has been severely affected as a result of his mother’s abusive

treatment of him. Yet the most pointed commentary of the threatened status of patriarchal masculinity is apparent when Bubby finally escapes the dominance of his mother which permits the thorough redrawing of the urban space as the site in which post-modern anxieties most vividly play out. The following section will explore some of the more immediate instances of the urban blight that Bubby encounters and the ways in which these examples perform implicit ideological work in ensuring Bubby's victim status.

### ***The Great Unknown – Urban (Sur)Realities in Bad Boy Bubby***

Stepping out into the city's crumbling and decaying landscape one evening, the eerie, mist-shrouded stillness is perforated momentarily by a utility vehicle – that enduring symbol of working-class masculinity – full of combative men who hurl expletive laden threats at Bubby, forcing him off the road. After gaining composure, Bubby continues along the street towards the suburban district where he is presented with a collage of abrasive and confusing images: a woman squealing with terror as she flees her home, a man pursuing another in a wheelchair who has pilfered the purse of a woman.<sup>52</sup> These examples highlight most effectively what Tom McDonough (2002) regards as „the tenuous nature of urban order“ (2002: 101), so quickly descending into retributive violence. Bubby's *naïveté* frames this early encounter with street life/crime as preposterous, communicating the sense of bewilderment felt from experiencing the city for the first time.

Later the same evening Bubby encounters a troop of Salvation Army officers singing a hymn. Bubby is strangely drawn to this display of vocal harmony, and, scrutinising each singer in turn (and seizing the breast of a female vocalist) takes his place at the end of the chorus line to

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<sup>52</sup> The atmosphere of isolation and dispossession was achieved through innovations in sound recording and cinematography by director Rolf De Heer. Microphones stitched into actor Hope's wig approximated the aural experience of Bubby, and also as simulated the lead's confused mental state. Furthermore, 32 different cinematographers were employed on the film, allowing for a unique perspective to each location shoot as well to represent visually Bubby's disorientation through disparate and fractured scenes. The miniscule budget of around \$AU800,000 also permitting the film to appear unembellished and unstructured.

offer his own atonal interpretation. He piques the interests of a young female member who takes Bubby back to her house for casual sex. This event – through void of any of the unnaturalness characteristic of the earlier depictions of sex with Flo – heralds another in a series of encounters which are predicated on Bubby’s sexual precocity and women’s presumed sexual assertiveness<sup>53</sup> (discussed further below).

Navigating this new environment on foot, Bubby begins to supplement his deprived vocabulary with the various exclamations issued from the disparate commuters he happens upon. With no known destination, curious locals respond to Bubby by either berating him or offering assistance. One woman, coded as affluent by her wardrobe, her clipped accent and luxury automobile, leads Bubby into her car, gently fends him off when he fondles her only to eject him when he inadvertently antagonises a traffic officer by imitating the ranting of the hoon drivers he had encountered the previous night. Crucial also to the act of *flânerie*, Bubby remains ambivalent during these moments of social exchange, his indiscriminate gaze allowing him to experience the full array of possibilities each episode might afford him. In this respect *Bad Boy Bubby* does not significantly revolutionise the depiction of disability in cinema. As Kath Duncan, Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell (2006) explain „disability is a fraught space, quite often on the edge of criminality, entitling you to little, except the hope that someone more able will find you and do your walking and talking for you“ (2006: 157). These episodes therefore operate primarily for Bubby to demonstrate his perversity, and play for comic effect.

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<sup>53</sup> It is worth mentioning that both the Salvation Army worker and Flo „straddle“ Bubby during sex. This assuming of a dominant sexual position by both women conveys their comparable control and Bubby’s passivity.



Bubby's confusion over the indecipherable nature of the urban space is further depicted in the brief encounters with various members of the commercial sector. The attendants at the bakery, the printers, and the kitchen-ware outlet where Bubby frolics with a small boy as well as the attendant at the service station are all played by the same actor (Grant Piro), which conveys visually the psychological sense of urban monotony and also contributes to the audience's sense of destabilised spectatorship and limited certainty. In a virtual daze, Bubby is jettisoned from one unfamiliar location to the next, whilst those with relative authority, or at least the capacity to either allow or stymie Bubby's free movement, are portrayed as anonymous. It is here that *Bad Boy Bubby* is able to rehearse sentiments regarding the loss of individuation seemingly brought about by late capitalism, which reduces individuals to passive consumers with no real agency to resist while those in the service industry are transformed into a race of machines (Bartlett & Byers, 2003). *Bad Boy Bubby* underscores this message further by not permitting Bubby the ability to negotiate the terms of the exchange. His diminished vocabulary, as well as lack of socialisation means he is limited by what he can request (or refuse) thus making him vulnerable to exploitation. These scenes might then be regarded as an extension of the film's overall displacement of one man's struggle to comprehend the marketplace onto anxieties about the post-modern dissolution of subjectivities.

As Alexandra Juhasz (2001) reminds us, „the post-modern era disperses authority so that it is intangible, scattered, the possession of *faceless* multinational corporations“ (2001: 217, my emphasis). While multinational corporations are largely absent from the localised *mise-en-scène* of Port Adelaide in *Bad Boy Bubby*, Juhasz's assessment of the scattered nature of authority still stands. Represented as autocratic and uncompromising, authority once again appears in the moment when Bubby watches as a bellicose council worker fells a decorative tree before letting out a satisfied and maniacal laugh. The chain saw wielding man threatens

to emasculate Bubby if he does not clear the path while Bubby looks on with horror at the apparent insensitivity of the man's behaviour. This scene conveniently juxtaposes Bubby's reserved temperament – gently caressing a leaf before curiously placing it in his mouth as a child would do – with the indiscriminate and at times brutal nature of gentrification embodied by the vulgar attitude and perverse nihilism of the council worker. While this scene further reinforces the hostility of urban dwellers the film is attempting to communicate overall, it also depicts the unobstructed pursuit of progress at the expense of the natural world, a much rehearsed lament of those seeking to quell the supposed rapid pace of industrialisation. This encounter with the council worker, like that between Bubby and the colossal printing press churning out reams of fliers portrays the moment when the *flâneur* „confront[s] the opacity of capitalist modernity in the form of the most unreconcilable [sic] aspects of urban life“ (McDonough, 2002: 104). Meaning might also be attributed to the fact that the man threatens to „cut [Bubby's] prick off“ and not, for instance, his head or arm. The threat of being (literally) castrated by another male with an excess of power is significant as it further hints towards Bubby's (figurative) phallic lack. The chainsaw by extension might come to represent the council worker's own impotence evinced by his blue collar status which requires paraphernalia to substitute his diminished masculine authority.

When Bubby is picked up by a pub band, his vocabulary is expanded once more and bonds of fraternalism are tenuously established through masculine rituals of drinking, smoking and gratuitous swearing. He assists the band with their live shows, however when they discover Bubby's dead cat encased in plastic and a newspaper reporting the mysterious „cling wrap“ murders of Flo and Pop amongst his effects, the band quickly dispense with him. Bubby later rejoins the band, reinvigorates their live act and earns them a sizeable cult following when he becomes their front man performing strange spoken word pieces from the accumulated

utterances of those he has interacted with. In the interim, Bubby traverses his way serendipitously through thorny urban terrain.

### ***Appropriating Otherness: Post-Modern Anxiety in Bad Boy Bubby***

By reconfiguring the contemporary urban space and social interactions as hostile or abrasive, Bubby is conveniently located outside of any cultural, social or ideological context with the *problem* becoming society's inability to maintain the necessary borders which keep normalising structures in place and affirm Bubby's patriarchal privilege. When these structures are seen to have been weakened by progressive social change, Bubby can make a claim for victimhood through his position as a besieged, abused and displaced white, urban male. The polymorphous and fractured external world and those who occupy it is made, as in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (Chapter Four) and Schumacher's *Falling Down* (Chapter Five), the culprit to this perceived marginality. The trope of disability in *Bad Boy Bubby* is therefore critical to the reimagining of Bubby as a socially unaware and innocent narrator. As the attributes of „otherness“ are assimilated to Bubby (disabled, „drifter“, and as we will see in this section, feminised victim of male rape) any role the heterosexual white man has in the subjugation of such cultural others is eradicated. This reconfiguring further allows for the installation of a separation between Bubby and every other heterosexual white man who has ever oppressed his gendered, sexed and raced „other“.

In his excellent discussion of Robert Zemeckis' (1994) *Forrest Gump*, which bears many thematic similarities to *Bad Boy Bubby*, not least the utilisation of the naïve and innocent disabled man as central narrator, Thomas B. Byers (1996) summarises the motifs which appear in revisionist cinematic texts. According to Byers, re-masculinisation is achieved through:

... a repudiation of the most negative images of traditional masculinity, by their consignment to a villainous cultural other and/or to an unenlightened past that the contemporary “new man” has superseded. [Another] such motif is rehierarchizing, in which the woman is *put down* and the new man is *raised up* in a way that conspicuously marks the restoration of his identity with the paternal principle.

(1996: 424, my emphasis).

Through representing Bubby as innately innocent, any „evil white guy status“ (Rehling, 2005: 41) Bubby might have otherwise accrued is conveniently emptied out, while cultural subjectivities outside of gendered or racial hierarchies are made more readily accessible to Bubby. Even his earlier acts of murder are depicted as unintended or unknowing. This section will examine the moments when gendered otherness occupies the narrative of *Bad Boy Bubby* and the ways in which these subject positions, while allowing for the articulation of anxieties over the fragile borders of white masculinity, are funnelled towards Bubby himself to buttress his apparent marginality.

Bubby’s most significant appropriation of cultural otherness takes place in the scenes during his incarceration. After being provided a bed and change of clothes from a leering, *avant-garde* artist, Bubby is taken to a high end restaurant before incurring the ire of a red headed woman when he attempts to grope her. Bubby is immediately arrested after the woman’s shrill screams alert police and he is hastily forced into a prison cell. Regressing to the repressed state of his time spent incarcerated by Flo, Bubby spurns a prison officer by refusing to talk to him. Angered by the rejection, the prison officer moves Bubby to another cell already housing an inmate. Bubby introduces himself as „The Cling Wrap Killer“ before the inmate rapes him. Despite himself having sexually molested a series of women, Bubby’s incarceration is depicted as an injustice, compounded further by his rape by his fellow prisoner. His sexual assault, although shot in a tight frame so as to appear less explicit, is nonetheless affecting due to its length, the drowning out of any pained/pleasured moans by

piercing bagpipe music and Bubby's passive expression. The scene which follows immediately after is that of the prison warden informing Bubby that he has been successfully rehabilitated and is thus permitted to be released. Bubby's spell in prison ends as abruptly as it began and he is at once thrust back onto the unforgiving city streets with which he is still yet to fully assimilate himself. The seeming incongruity of being deemed „rehabilitated“ in the aftermath of forced sodomy reveals an unsettling (yet possibly accurate) indifference by prison authorities towards prison rape. However the deadpan delivery of the prison warden when informing Bubby of his release plays to some comic effect, inviting the audience to scoff at the implied reformatory potential of prison rape without allowing any space to consider the implications of this reading.

This sequence satisfies the film's positioning of Bubby as a victim of sexual violence – which indeed he is for the most part – yet also works to reconfigure Bubby's own sexual assault of women as comparably less severe, even playful. Unlike Bubby, who is gentle and curious and who fondles women because he has no knowledge of usual social boundaries and has been conditioned to do so by his mother, Bubby's rapist is thoroughly sinister; he never speaks and his identity is entirely obscured whenever he occupies the shot.<sup>54</sup> The cell walls are smeared with what appears to be excrement which further reinforces the image of the prisoner as deviant. In this way the film distinguishes between what is regarded as a serious sexual offence and what is simply Bubby's unconventional way of making his presence and desires known.

This appropriation of minority status is further communicated in the moments when Bubby is first detained. Baffled by the circumstances in which he finds himself, Bubby looks on as two Indigenous women remonstrate with the police station's booking officer who refuses to take

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<sup>54</sup> Continuing this de-humanising strategy further, the prison rapist is cited as „The Animal“ in the film's closing credits.

their complaint of theft seriously. With amplified voices as to better hear one another over the sound of clanging metal and extinguishing welding sparks,<sup>55</sup> the police officer makes a deliberate and disrespectful reference to the supposedly inherent Aboriginal practice of spiritual journeying to undermine the women's claim and imply irresponsibility: „we can't help it if you go walkabout at night by yourselves“. When the women explain that they were returning home from work when they were accosted and robbed, the police officer scoffs: „that'll be the day. Something illegal, no doubt“. Defeated, the women turn to leave the station before calling back in unison to the officer: „get fucked“. Later, when busying himself in his cell with the remains of a dead cockroach, Bubby repeats the women's angered reply to the prison officer. By appropriating the discourse of the Indigenous women, a homology is established between the women's oppressed position and that of Bubby, eliding the specificity of the Indigenous women's cultural marginality in the context of criminal justice. While Bubby is still imprisoned, he is spared the assumed criminality of the Indigenous women as his brief detainment and swift release will attest. Just like the gay artist Bubby temporarily lodges with, the Indigenous women have no narrative purpose overall, occupying the screen for approximately 30 seconds. Yet their presence permits for the further highlighting of the supposedly cosmopolitan nature of the urban space which has so markedly impacted on Bubby's perception of the city as fractured and illegible. It is also worth noting at this point that those whom Bubby encounters in the city are more frequently female and always pugnacious (if not physically threatening, they hold their own through verbal abuse). While this provides an alternative reading of the city as a geographic space no longer the exclusive domain of men, it does nevertheless provide reinforcement for the claim that the white, heterosexual male subject is, quite literally, losing ground to formerly marginal „others“. The rather cursory depiction and grouping of disparate, otherwise unrelated events into one segment is itself telling of the film's somewhat dismissive treatment of culturally marginal

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<sup>55</sup> Construction and its disruptive potential appear throughout *Bad Boy Bubby* as a *leitmotif*.

people. Gay men, Indigenous and non-Indigenous women are all part of the illegible, indeterminate „other“ which confuses and confounds Bubby yet at the same time have significant purpose in underscoring Bubby“s victim status.

### ***Redeeming The Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit***

As his impermanent existence and increasing proximity to that which threatens his subjectivity begins to compromise his capacity to integrate into the wider community, Bubby finds temporary solace when he wanders into a church. Amongst the cacophony of workmen chipping away at the cement interior, the strains of a pipe organ powerfully affect Bubby as he descends towards the organist, a mature aged Englishman cited as „The Scientist“ in the film“s closing credits. When Bubby announces his fear that: „Jesus can see everything I do, and he“s gonna beat me brainless“, the man takes Bubby lovingly by the arm. The scene then inexplicably shifts from the church undergoing renovations (possibly to communicate that even a church can no longer provide refuge from chaos in the contemporary world) to a turbine hall of an electric power station (signaling perhaps the dramatic shift from the archaic to the industrial age). Beneath the soothing hum of the machines, the man launches into an atheistic diatribe which encourages Bubby to renounce God and take control of his own destiny:

We measure, plot. We create wonderful music. We are the architects of our own existence. What a lunatic concept to bow down before a God who slaughters millions of innocent children, who slowly and agonisingly starves them to death, beats them, tortures them, rejects them. What folly to even think that we should not insult such a God. ... It is the duty of all human beings to think God out of existence. Then we have a future, because then, and only then do we take full responsibility for who we are.

This episode with „The Scientist“, who, with his weathered and avuncular authority evokes the mentor championed by mythopoetic men“s movement advocates such as Robert Bly (1990) and Steve Biddulph (1994), provides Bubby with momentary consolation. Yet his

new found insight is almost instantly undercut by the subsequent scene. Watching a group of women exit a club room, Bubby, in his typical style, approaches one of the women (who bears a striking physical resemblance to his mother) and promptly seizes her breast. Alerted by the woman's panicked screams, her friends instantly set upon Bubby where he is thrown to the ground and kicked repeatedly by the encircling fray. Pipe organ music bleeds into the scene as the shot closes in on Bubby's passive expression which mirrors almost identically his stunned reaction to his prison rape. Drawing parallels between the physical trauma of a sexual assault and the retributive violence handed down by the women once again establishes, via their very narrative/aesthetic pairing, a correlation between the two events, thus rendering them both the reactions of crazed „others“. It is a dubious equation, not merely because it contributes to the film's overall negative portrayal of women as castrating but simultaneously strengthens Bubby's status as victim. In this instance, the onus of blame is placed not upon the pervert who gropes the breast of an unsuspecting woman, but on the uncompromising „libbers“<sup>56</sup> who fly into a frenzied assault on a disabled man. In turn, the women are depicted as barely less ruthless than the prison rapist.

One might deduce then that the encounter with „The Scientist“ did not necessarily yield any positive effect but instead functioned only to reiterate Bubby's persistent vulnerability, resembling in some ways the self-determinist proposition which dismisses mentors in the Hughes' *Menace II Society* (Chapter Five). The therapeutic potential of Bubby's meeting with „The Scientist“ is further undermined when Bubby returns to the flat he once shared with his mother and, crossing the crime scene tape, weeps over the chalk outlines denoting the placement of his parent's slain bodies. It is here that Bubby begins to appreciate how harrowing the public space is. Indeed for this brief moment Bubby pines for his dead parents despite the abuse he suffered at their hands presumably because unlike the city, his home was

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<sup>56</sup> It is notable that this group of bawdy, volatile harridans who use violence as a means of personal redress are described in the blurb of the Australian dvd release of *Bad Boy Bubby* as feminists – women engaged in liberation and activism who nonetheless abuse others.



infinitely more readable than the fractured and destabilising world “outside”. Having both his psychic and bodily boundaries violated, Bubby contemplates the abject yet familiar mother-son dyad (Kristeva, 1982; Modleski, 1991; Rehling, 2005).

In an act that contributes to his recuperation, Bubby recovers Pop’s clerical clothing and sets off to find his band with which he begins to perform. By adopting his father’s identity and insisting he be referred to as „Pop“, Bubby is able to reclaim the manhood which has been hitherto denied to him by his mother’s infantilising and the oppressive effects of a hostile public. It might be argued that Bubby’s transformation from Bubby to Pop (to which he defiantly attests later: „Bubby a big weird kid... Pop not a kid. Me Pop now“) permits for the thorough elimination of, and triumph over, his Oedipal rival (Byers, 1996). Through killing Pop and assuming his image, „patriarchal fantasies of presence and selfhood, succession and superiority are ... restored“ (Byers, 1996: 424). While Flo might appear to be the more domineering of the parents and therefore the more ideal to emulate, Pop exerts his ongoing control through remaining entirely absent from Bubby’s life. Pop also had the agency to come and go as he pleased as well as sexual access to Flo which was denied to Bubby once Pop arrived. As Nichola Rehling (2005) argues, positioning absent fathers at the centre of masculine anxieties is hardly new within psychoanalysis nor, I would argue, within motion pictures (the previous chapter explored the extent to which strong paternal figures determine the life course of young men, quite literally deciding if the masculine subject lived or died). However through his structuring absence, Pop remains the more desired of parental figures while any enduring association with the abject mother (Flo) is severed.

Tania Modleski’s (1991) Kristevan interpretation of castration anxiety is useful here in explaining Bubby’s need to separate himself from his mother and associate more closely to his father. According to Modleski (1991), „man’s need to separate himself from the powerful

mother ... results in the subjugation of women and the desire to embrace what seems to be a less arbitrary authority, paternal authority" (1991: 68). In this instance, Bubby restores his paternal potency by quite literally becoming his own father. While this strategy goes only part of the way towards recuperating his lost patriarchal privilege (and it might be argued, a denial of any responsibility for the murders), it ultimately facilitates his gradual transition to adulthood.

Bubby's transcendence from wounded, primitive child to socially adept adult is more fruitfully realised when he develops a romantic relationship with Angel (Carmel Johnson), a kindly, yet damaged nurse. When it is revealed that Bubby is able to communicate with an intellectually handicapped young woman for whom Angel is caring, Angel determines that Bubby is not „schizo“ as one nurse suggests, but rather „just a kid“. This perpetual infantilising of Bubby is continued in the following scene where Angel is showering Bubby. When Bubby asks to see Angel's breasts, she agrees only once Bubby dispenses with his aggressive posturing as „Pop“ and reverts back into his childlike state of Bubby. In an effort to convey sincerity, Bubby immediately becomes eloquent, utilising a vocabulary he had not previously possessed. When she asks if her breasts are too big, Bubby responds: „they be perfection“. Bolstered by his positive appraisal, Angel requests that Bubby „go back to being Pop, Bubby's our secret“. What was intended as Bubby's method of self-defence now becomes a strategy for Angel to realise her sexual desires. By exploiting the very means by which Bubby has been victimising women up to this point, Angel discovers both her capacity to seduce as well as the therapeutic potential of offering or withholding her body. However the scene is framed as a moment of innocent sexual exploration whereby Bubby is able to demonstrate his emotional depth and Angel her nurturing capacity.<sup>57</sup> It also operates to denote Bubby's subsequent sexual fidelity, evinced in a later scene when, after being offered

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<sup>57</sup> A similar attempt was made in the scene where the Salvation Army officer takes Bubby to bed. She too interrupts their sexual episode to bathe and shave Bubby. However the preceding moment reveals this was only done to allow Bubby to perform cunnilingus more comfortably.

two groupies by his band mates, Bubby rejects the women's fevered advances because neither possess „Angel tits“.

Ultimately it is Bubby who is healed in this instance, as it is revealed in a later scene when Bubby and Angel are visiting Angel's parents that she is as fragile as ever. Driven to inconsolable crying when her parents ridicule her over her weight, Bubby kills them by the same means used to dispatch his own parents. Their murder, although not screened, nevertheless reveals the almost mechanical inclination towards „cling wrapping“ Bubby has acquired which now appears to be provoked through the evocation of God. Angel's devout mother criticises her daughter's weight with: „God doesn't like fat people“ to which Bubby responds by cursing God in the manner of „The Scientist“. Furthermore, Angel's wailing over her parents', especially her mother's, caustic assessment represents how an otherwise resourceful and mature woman who has made it her life's work to care for others can regress into a child if sufficiently disturbed. This positing of adult traumas as the consequence of harsh parental treatment aids to further mitigate Bubby's homicidal reaction, deeming it no less severe than Angel's hysterical response. Therefore, Angel's distress is only important in that it reaffirms Bubby's pain.

The precedence which Bubby's victimhood takes over all others is further depicted in a moment between Bubby and a band member who, seemingly in secrecy from his beer swigging mates, delivers a pacifistic lecture on the folly of murder. Over a canvas upon which images of various ethnic and religious groups are projected, the man tells Bubby of systematic genocide, referred to as „cling wrapping“, and the enduring turmoil it has wrought on those who are never named by the man yet characterised only by their capacity to „cling wrap“ other „mobs“. „No matter how mad you get at someone, don't kill them, ever“, the man urges in a rather matter-of-fact tone. Presumably this scene was included to abnegate any

concerns audience members might have of Bubby's volatility, as his killing of Angel's parents runs counter to his supposedly innocent nature. This scene might also work to provide the necessary New Age, collectivist offset to „The Scientists“ myopic and almost aggressive atheism. However its inclusion remains for this author a forceful attempt to universalise Bubby's victimisation, imbuing the otherwise surreal tale with a political/social conscience by acknowledging global conflict. This poorly integrated scene, where Bubby's victim status is made akin to century old ethnic struggles represents one of the many examples where the attributes of minorities are projected onto the displaced masculine subject.

### ***Ignorance is Bliss***

One of the more salient features of Bubby's restored subject position is his mystical ability to communicate with those with physical and/or intellectual disabilities. This skill seems to attest to the comforting effects of being unaware of one's surroundings. This lack of awareness is depicted as somewhat enviable, with the scenes set in the nursing home characterised by tranquil scenery, pristine interiors and loving and supportive company. It is in stark contrast to the chaos of the public space. Yet by portraying the experiences of people with disabilities as spiritual, and other-worldly, one even suggests more authentic than able bodied individuals, the realities of disability and the associated power relations at play are largely ignored. This is also achieved through the virtual shutting out of those disabled individuals from the public realm. As Kath Duncan, Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell (2006) argue, „disability [particularly within Australian film] forms a kind of „unreal“ or idealized Australian nation, a place where disability serves certain purposes, none of which are terribly reflective of actual experiences or alternative narratives of disability“ (2006: 154). *Bad Boy Bubby* therefore does not accurately depict the ongoing difficulties faced by people

with disabilities, as Bubby is able to overcome his impediments „through the passionate and eccentric expression of his creativity“ (Ferrier, 2001: 57).

While this re-configuring of Bubby as an energetic performer as opposed to his previous status as felonious oddball illustrates the recuperative potential of artistic endeavours, it nonetheless operates as a textual strategy to underscore the apparent cultural anxieties I argue Bubby is retreating from. As Bubby is revealed to be both physically and psychologically more adept, the residents of the nursing home are permitted no such opportunity to transcend their subject positions; in fact they play only a minor role within the overall plot of *Bad Boy Bubby*. Their impaired movement and speech patterns become instead a source of pity for Bubby,<sup>58</sup> making their narrative function one of merely providing inspiration for Bubby’s therapeutic transformation while emphasising the „otherness“ of people with disabilities. Disability as a cultural identity is therefore envisaged not as an ontological reality but instead deployed as a way to critique contemporary society.

This configuring of Bubby as a receptive and compassionate medium to the physically handicapped plays a crucial role in re-establishing his masculine subjectivity, yet it is Bubby’s status as a father which most effectively propels him into a position of social relevance. In the final scene, Bubby is seen frolicking in a back garden with at least two small children as Angel lovingly looks on while she hangs washing. This rather clichéd depiction is placed squarely within the domestic context although a wide panning shot reveals its location within the wider geographic space of the city. Bubby has become a father; what is more, he is an attentive one who relishes his paternal role. As Nichola Rehling (2005) argues, paternity becomes the „site through which [male] wounds are healed in the following generation, when the damaged son accedes to a more sensitive paternal function“ (2005: 98). While providing

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<sup>58</sup> Illustrated in a touching moment when Rachael (Heather Rose) cries at the realisation that her love for Bubby is not reciprocated.

the necessary narrative closure, this final scene also helps signify the containment of a whole host of contested domains that radical, feminist-inspired social reform risks undermining: the domestication of women, the monogamous, heterosexual family unit and the role of fathers in raising children.<sup>59</sup> This final point is perhaps the most prominent in that it succeeds in „[rescuing] the father from his repressive, castrating function and admits his desire for the child“ (Modleski, 1991: 85). *Bad Boy Bubby* might thus be regarded as an example of 1990s films which screen the trajectory of the wounded son who ultimately redeems himself through paternity, effectively assuaging „paternal anxieties about men’s relatively minimal role in the process of generation“ (Modleski, 1991: 77).

*Bad Boy Bubby* seeks to reinstate masculine authority on a number of other fronts. Hostilities towards the destabilising urban space are rehearsed at various points with the aural underscoring of calamitous noise, physical depletion, the centrality of actual, bodily assault or verbal threats of violence. Bubby reclaims at least a segment of the public domain by becoming a popular live act, inventing and controlling noise on his terms while winning acclaim – and presumably wealth – in the process. Audiences respond to Bubby’s onstage presence which validates his place within society. Temporary respite is found within the exclusive company of an all male pub rock band which illustrates the therapeutic, insulating capacity of homosociality, while hitherto strictly sexual or psychologically damaging relationships with women are reformed through a monogamous union with Angel. Like those films previously discussed, *Bad Boy Bubby* deploys *flânerie* as a narrative device to communicate the simultaneous undermining and restoration of masculine subjectivity.

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<sup>59</sup>It should be noted that while Angel’s labour is depicted in *Bad Boy Bubby*, any wedding or wedding-like ceremony is not. It could be argued therefore that Bubby’s function as a father takes narrative precedence over his role as a husband/partner.

James Marsh's *The King* similarly deals with themes of displacement, abandonment and redemption by evoking paternity as a role through which the pomophobic *flâneur* might recover his embattled authority. Via a concerted campaign to ingratiate himself into his father's life, where his half-sister performs a vital function in this restorative process, *The King* demonstrates how specifically masculine, post-modern anxieties are often predicated upon the supposed collapse of the nuclear family and the uncertainty stemming from women's improved social status.

### **The King**

*The King* centres on the character of Elvis Valderez (Gael García Bernal), a recently discharged Hispanic Navy recruit who travels to Corpus Christi, Texas to establish contact with the white father he has never met. When Elvis' father David Sandow (William Hurt), a preacher and leader of a Baptist congregation, rejects his son, Elvis initiates a sexual relationship with Sandow's 16 year-old daughter Malerie (Pell James). Having instilled strong Christian values in his family, Sandow instructs Elvis to stay clear of his children and wife Twyla (Laura Harring), fearing his safely guarded past – an illegitimate child with a sex worker – will reveal aspects of his own flawed character and destroy his credibility within his congregation. When Malerie's brother Paul (Paul Dano) discovers the affair, he confronts Elvis and is killed when Elvis stabs him during their brief altercation. Soon after David reports his murdered son missing, he welcomes Elvis into his family as a type of penance. David later reveals his past to his parishioners and introduces Elvis as his son. Horrified, Malerie realises they have committed incest and are eternally damned. She confesses the affair and her pregnancy to her mother whereupon Elvis reacts by murdering them both. *The King* ends rather ambiguously with Elvis walking into Sandow's office with blood stained clothing, appealing to Sandow in his need to „get right with God“.

This cryptic end and numerous Biblical allusions has earned *The King* mixed responses from critics. While such ambiguities, from its various themes to its very title,<sup>60</sup> provide much scope for critical exploration, there exists a dearth of academic research dedicated to *The King*. Nevertheless, *The King* offers much by way of provocative material which I argue implicitly affirms conservative, pomophobic attitudes regarding family, paternity, gender, race and religion.

It is Elvis' response to his perceived marginality which positions him firmly within the pomophobia identified by Byers (1995). As his sense of patriarchal authority is articulated primarily through the importance Elvis invests in being part of a cohesive family unit, Elvis begins the film from a position of cultural lack. Estrangement from and later rejection by his biological father and fears over his legitimacy as a reified masculine subject (made all the more prominent by his mixed ethnicity) motivate Elvis to insinuate himself into the Sandow family unit by replacing Paul and seducing Malerie. Doing so allows Elvis to reposition himself as David Sandow's son which reconfigures the family around the nuclear model. Elvis is also able to allay masculine fears of female sexual autonomy by assuming the dominant position of the sexual initiator before destroying Malerie completely. While it is the intent of this chapter to explore the ways *The King* is an example of pomophobic responses to women's improved social status within the domestic sphere, this section will first examine masculine, post-modern anxiety as it is experienced within the urban space.

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<sup>60</sup> Critics have pondered as to why the film bears the title it does. Some have argued it is simply a reference to Elvis Valdez sharing the same first name with Elvis Presley the musician who was also frequently referred to as „The King“. Elvis' (the musician's) rebellious spirit and its impact on conservative family values with that of Elvis' (the character in *The King*) influence on Malerie has also been touted as justification for the film's title. The fact that James Marsh had earlier directed a documentary about Elvis Presley's dietary habits (*The Burger and The King: The Life and Cuisine of Elvis Presley*, 1996) might also signal to this allusion. Biblical connotations to „The King of Kings“ as Jesus Christ is so termed in The Book of Revelation might also illuminate, as does the fact that Elvis fashions a crown out of a paper placemat in a scene in *The King*.



### *Leaving The Building – Elvis in Suburbia*

*The King* differs little from previously analysed cinematic explorations of angry male loners in its appropriation of the figure of the *flâneur*. In *The King*, Poe's (1845) urban stroller is used to communicate notions of psychological estrangement, anxiety and most vividly, embattled masculine authority. The opening title sequence portrays Elvis as drifting aimlessly, establishing only tenuous ties with the world without committing himself to any permanent arrangement: paying for sex with a prostitute, dozing on a bus, wandering around, getting lost. He is seen purchasing a cheap car and continues his urban sojourn on four wheels. The fact that Elvis is a seaman, which *The King* duly refers to at several points in the film (not least when he is shown disembarking from his ship in the opening moments of *The King*), further attests to his itinerant and transient existence. While the ambivalence characteristic of urban strolling is compromised by Elvis' rather conspicuous discount of what Susan Buck-Morss (1989) regards as the *flâneur*'s guiding principle – „look, but don't touch“ (1989: 346) – Elvis nevertheless satisfies the criteria of contemporary interpretations of Poe's *flâneur* by being, as Dana Brand (1991) puts it, „infected“ by his subject“ (1991: 83), obsessively pursuing the Sandow family so as to better identify with them. When David Sandow proves too elusive (in other words, refuses to establish a relationship with his illegitimate son which might permit Elvis to better *know* David), Elvis shifts his focus onto Sandow's daughter, Malerie.

What most definitively codes Elvis as an urban stroller is his almost perpetual solitary existence. Despite his best efforts to assimilate himself into the Sandow family unit, Elvis spends much of the film alone. Apart from his relationship with Malerie, his brief interactions with Paul, Twyla and his cantankerous boss Bruno (played by *The King*'s screenwriter Milo Addica), Elvis spends much of the film in silent solitude. This aspect of Elvis' character, like the old man who feeds Bruno's pizzas to his dog, the agitated clown on

the bridge at night and the trolley wielding bag man seen in the establishing wide shot and final scene outside of the church where David Sandow preaches, positions solitary individuals as both psychologically and geographically estranged from the wider urban community. These examples of shadowy loners convey the town's moral objection to non-conformity and bias towards communal belonging. The obvious masculinity of all those seen sauntering about the urban space further offers telling evidence of the enhanced public identity of men and the oppressed status of women within this deeply traditional setting (of which more later). It is disparaging readings of the urban terrain such as this which qualifies *The King* as an example of the „nomadic schizophrenia“ (Bartlett & Byers, 2003: 35) of reactionary, pomophobic narratives of contemporary society in cinema. Through the deployment of the narrative device of the *flâneur*, *The King* conveys the alienating effects of the urban space.

While most notably demonstrated through Elvis's estrangement from the family unit, the sense of alienation is further conveyed through the city's physical appearance. The town projects an idyllic environment of lush green lawns, neat homes and vibrant wildlife, with a sense of twee superficiality exposed through the presence of less decorative sections, such as those which Elvis inhabits. The slapstick, „family-friendly“ comedy show the Sandow family watches with Elvis denotes a kind of repressed and sanitised version of contemporary life where laughter is generated only by a gag as well worn as a timed pie to the face. *The King* creates a further sense of disquiet through „dreamlike“ mood and meandering pace. It offers a subdued tone where even the most confronting moments, such as Paul's stabbing murder and Elvis's incestuous pursuit and subsequent conquest of Malerie, are characterised by very little dialogue. Lugubrious, plodding music creates the sense of steady and pervasive tension and often stands in for the lack of verbal cues.

The sense of urban alienation extends beyond the culturally marginalised. Even the Sandow family's evangelical zeal does not always accord with the dominant attitudes of the town, as demonstrated by Paul's ostracism from his peer group at school following his public campaign to have the theory of intelligent design integrated into the otherwise secular school curriculum. David Sandow incurs resistance when he attempts to evangelise to a car salesman. It is instances such as this that reveal the Sandow family to be outsiders in their own right: too zealous for the already deeply religious Bible Belt yet still deemed to have morally transgressed as illustrated by the reaction of some of David Sandow's congregation when he introduces his illegitimate son to his church. The condemnation of the churchgoers who leave the service in disgust is more a display to reaffirm bourgeois family values rather than indicative of any underlying racial prejudices. However it could be argued that by fathering a child of mixed race heritage, Sandow could be perceived as a „race traitor“ by more extreme sections of the church. The public shunning of Sandow by a few parishioners (although many stay and applaud his humility and Elvis' entrance into the church) is itself telling of the community's attitudes towards those who fail to conform.

Cultural displacement and paternal rejection is in part predicated on Elvis' mixed race heritage. It is therefore difficult to perceive Elvis as immediately comparable to other „angry white men“ of backlash action-dramas such as *Falling Down*. However, residing outside of any fixed racial identity places Elvis in a precarious (non-homogeneous) subject position, vulnerable to threats of racial de-territorialisation and cultural subjugation from those of less fluid racial categories. Furthermore, Elvis' „otherness“ is rendered all the more powerful as race is visibly inscribed on his body. Although often wrongly cited as Gael García Bernal's first English language role (Bernal starred as Londoner Kit Winter in the 2003 film *Dot The I*) *The King*, like Bernal's earlier Spanish language films, trades on the actor's „heart-throb“ status. While it would be heavy-handed to suggest that Elvis' ethnicity is precisely what

marks him as deviant, I would argue that his allure, at least for Malerie, owes much to Elvis' status as an exotic outsider, a charge often assigned to Latino men and one which is invariably informed by anxieties regarding miscegenation. Furthermore, Elvis' comparatively diminished class position (he buys a cheap car, rents a cheap room and appears, until securing work at a pizza parlour, to subsist on a severance payment) likewise places Elvis on the periphery of society. The airy opulence of the Sandow family home is often aesthetically juxtaposed to Elvis' grimy and cramped motel lodgings. Nevertheless, Elvis is male, English speaking and heterosexual as well as physically mobile which paradoxically affords him an improved cultural position yet also the possibility for it to be undermined.

As demonstrated earlier in the analysis of *Taxi Driver* (Chapter Four), the protagonist's sense of marginality is informed by his hitherto anonymity. Like Travis Bickle, Elvis emerges, as if from nowhere, to reclaim his cultural authority. With little or no biographical information to go by, Elvis begins to reinvent his past. While he initially tells Malerie his mother is a wealthy Miami resident who „has a house and a big pool“ before recanting and admitting that she is dead, he never discloses to her that David Sandow is his father. This crucial omission provides the necessary plot device for intrigue and deception to flourish. When Malerie enquires whether her father and Elvis' mother were once „in love“ (the possibility of which might indicate that Elvis is her brother or would at least explain his interest in establishing a connection with David Sandow), Elvis is quick to reject any such claims. This initial exchange with Malerie, as well as the deceptions which he will later commit, establishes Elvis as dishonest, or at least as someone with a lot to hide and reveals the possibility that he could be intent on revenge. Apart from the occasional reference to his naval career which implies at least some familiarity with weaponry, Elvis' past is neither shown nor entirely relevant to the overall story. While some further understanding of Elvis' movements prior to leaving his ship might give some insight into any pre-existing psycho-pathology, like Travis Bickle of

*Taxi Driver*, Elvis' enigmatic nature aids in creating the sensation of an unknown yet ever present threat upon which the film relies for its „thriller“ qualities. It is through its utilising of dramatic disclosures within an atmosphere of staunch respectability that qualifies *The King* as an example of „Suburban Gothic“.

### ***Rockin' The Suburbs – Suburban Gothicism in The King***

With its evocation of „strange worlds of freakish outsiders placed in lovelorn barren landscapes, penetrating heat, and closed spaces“ (Gleeson-White, 2001: 108), *The King* has been regarded by some critics as a modern example of the Southern Gothic/Southern Grotesque tradition, a literary sub-genre which, like Gothic generally, „aligns itself with a gloomy vision of modernity, according to which the soul of man is both aimless and loveless“ (2001: 108), and allegorising „the human condition itself as existential alienation and angst“ (2001: 108). With its various excursions into the macabre, *The King* certainly owes much to this literary tradition. However I argue that the predominance of suburbia as both a geographic location as well as a psychological state in *The King* more accurately positions the film as part of the „Suburban Gothic“ sub-set. In *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009), Bernice M. Murphy describes the sub-set as:

concerned, first and foremost, with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighbourhood, or house, or family, has something to hide, and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident.

(2009: 2).

The centrality and significance of a present, if not easily identifiable (or articulated) anxiety echoes that previously discussed in relation to the „free-floating“ existential angst (Oliver & Trigo, 2002: xiv) of *Taxi Driver* and *The Crow* (Chapter Four). Furthermore, Murphy attributes this sense of unrest to the mass suburbanisation of the post-World War II years in

the United States which brought with it „rapid change in lifestyle and modes of living“ (2009: 2) and a break from „old patterns of existence“ (2009: 2). Intellectual commentary at the time suggested that such social, cultural and economic transformations would bring forth some kind of terrible consequence (Murphy, 2009). These disparaging assessments of what was, for millions of upwardly mobile young families, a realisation of „the American dream“ were motivated in part by, Murphy suspects, a „fear at the unprecedented pace at which American society was reinventing itself“ (2009: 16). It is not surprising then that the suburbs soon became an appropriate setting upon which novelists and screenwriters could „[reconfigure] the tropes and conventions of existing gothic and horror literature in order to skilfully dissect the mores and anxieties of the modern age“ (2009: 17). Most interesting however is the way in which post-World War II political, technological and social changes have been identified as mitigating the vague unease and sense of general anxiety which pervades the genre. Suburban Gothic, like *film noir*, provides cultural expression for the underlying fears surrounding the changing social character (Murphy, 2009; Martin & Savoy, 1998). Therefore, *The King*’s pomophobia resides in part with the film’s sinister tone and unsettling mood and not exclusively in the actions of the lead protagonist.

The alienating (sub)urban space and the concomitant feelings of threatened hegemony such notions of displacement invite are most prominent in *The King*’s subtle evocation of race. Corpus Christi, although having a combined Hispanic and Latino population of more than 50%,<sup>61</sup> is represented in *The King* as ostensibly Anglo. In one scene Elvis is featured seated alone at a bar which caters exclusively to Hispanic and Latino clientele, where the band plays Spanish language music and the patrons all appear to be of an ethnic background. The development of racial enclaves such as this demonstrates both the extent to which non-white residents occupy places of marginality as well as the enduring resilience of the very

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<sup>61</sup> Statistics provided by 2000 US Census Bureau <http://corpuschristi.areacconnect.com/statistics.htm>

essentialist forces that maintain such ethnic borders. The only other non-white residents to occupy screen time are two Black children Elvis asks directions from when carrying out his pizza deliveries. The fact that he encounters them in the rural regions of the town indicates their cultural and geographic marginality. A Black female cashier at a fast food drive-thru who Elvis and Malerie patronise also suggests the relegation of raced „others“ to positions of menial labour and insignificant narrative space.<sup>62</sup>

This conspicuous erasure or containment of raced „others“ is a familiar trope of Suburban Gothic narratives. According to Murphy (2009), „minorities tend not to feature much, save as exploited outsiders, bit players or dangerous interlopers“ (2009: 2). Indeed, it is the case that in *The King*, Elvis, the only protagonist who might be considered a racial minority *is* the dangerous interloper of this Suburban Gothic tale. While *The King* neither admits nor alludes implicitly to a specific message about US racial politics,<sup>63</sup> the film nevertheless evokes examples of difference which may offer credence to the enduring presence of social institutions such as the church and family. This following section explores the ways in which the respective pomophobia of Elvis and David is facilitated through conservative constructions of the family and the representation of gender therein.

### ***Maintaining the Status Quo – Family and Religion in The King***

Just as Joel Schumacher’s *Falling Down* has been interpreted as a tale of two men (Davies, 1995; Dyer, 1997; Dunn & Winchester, 1999; Rehling, 2005), James Marsh’s *The King*

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<sup>62</sup> For a moment during the scene when Elvis and Malerie go swimming, the shot fixes briefly on the image of a Black man with a bare upper body standing waist level in the water with his back to the camera, entirely obscuring his identity. As he has no narrative purpose, the man’s presence suggests instead an attempt to inject the otherwise mundane shot of locals frolicking in a pool with an aesthetic sheen. It could also be argued that the somewhat racially diverse site of the swimming hole is envisioned as a locale „nice“ girls, like Malerie, would not frequent.

<sup>63</sup> However film reviewer Robert Roten (2006) does suggest that *The King* invests enough in demonising Elvis’ difference that the film „could be used as a rallying symbol for those people who are in a big frenzy about stopping illegal immigration“. Given Elvis is not an illegal migrant but an ex-US servicemen it is interesting that such an unflattering picture of Elvis is drawn from an occupation which is otherwise invested with such patriotic regard.

utilises the narrative trope of competing/polarised masculine identities to re-establish patriarchal dominance and reinforce traditional values. Marginalised by his father's pomophobic reaction to his „otherness“, Elvis responds by murdering all members of Sandow's family. This fatal intrusion by Elvis into the excluding Sandow family represents precisely an extreme example of the threat to coherence and authority which brings about post-modern identity crisis. Elvis' „otherness“ is dependent on a pre-existing structuring norm embodied in the Sandow's familial completeness. As David Clarke (1997) puts it „while from the one vantage point the stranger seem[s] nothing but a potential threat, from another – ultimately separable from the first – the stranger is the very agency necessary for the institutional structures of modernity to function“ (1997: 4). Therefore while Elvis performs aspects of Byers' pomophobia by attempting to assimilate himself into a cohesive family unit in an effort to reconcile his own ideological uncertainty, Sandow's own conservative attitudes regarding the traditional nuclear family and sexuality are reactions against the threat of destabilisation.

Familism has been a central tenet of much religious teachings in the United States (Edgell & Docka, 2007). Through pastoral programmes and congregational rhetoric, religious institutions promote a strong family-focused ideology, with an emphasis on life-long marriage, sexual chastity, parental authority and discipline. Family and religion remain interdependent institutions, with religion exerting „a uniform influence on the family“ (Wilcox, Chaves & Franz, 2004: 491). However, with the availability of assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment, contraceptive devices, as well as the growing social acceptance of same sex partnerships/parenting, adoption, surrogacy, divorce, single parent households, blended “step” families, dual earner couples, de-facto relationships and communal living, the traditional, bourgeois nuclear family is considered somewhat retrograde in the wake of shifting cultural values. Debates over the



extent to which the bourgeois nuclear family does or ever did reflect the actual experiences of individuals in the past is used to query the ongoing relevance of such an arrangement (Cogswell, 1975; Firestone, 1972; Lehr, 1999).

Nevertheless, the bourgeois nuclear family still remains the cornerstone of nationhood in the US, with many political conservatives viewing the gradual decline of the bourgeois nuclear family as having a profoundly negative impact on civic virtue. The move away from religiously informed familism to more secular, individualist lifestyles has equally concerned religious leaders, activists and people of faith (Wilcox, Chaves & Franz, 2004). Religious communities have therefore sought to preserve the bourgeois nuclear family, with recent research suggesting the *Ozzie and Harriet*<sup>64</sup> familial arrangement of a wedded, heterosexual couple with genetically related children remains the formative and dominant model for mainstream religious communities in the decades following the 1950s (Edgall & Docka, 2007).

As contemporary society began to move away from traditional ideas regarding the family, religious institutions sought to shore up authority on other fronts. At the time of *The King*'s release, Christian movements were propelling public debate and driving socio-political agendas in the US. While the Bush administration's foreign policies after the "terror" attacks against New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 were regarded by some commentators as „aggressive“ (Wallis, 2004: 62), the pre-emptive war against Iraq and the dichotomised absolutism of being „either with [the US] or with the terrorists“ (Bush, as quoted in Coe et al., 2004: 234) provided the necessary doctrine towards establishing US strength in the face of a perceived religious threat. The teaching of creationism in schools, a struggle

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<sup>64</sup> *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* was a popular US sitcom airing during the early 1950s to mid 1960s which featured the real life Nelson family. It has since become synonymous with the 1950s ideal American family.

depicted in *The King*, was gaining enough support that proponents won the right to have Texas schoolbooks carry a statement which read that evolutionary theory was „still a matter of scientific dispute“ (Anjum, 2009: 1).

In the so-called Obama era of US politics, the degree to which Christian groups share a policy platform with ruling political parties has somewhat waned, not in the least due to the fact that the Obama administration does not so closely align its policies with those which immediately reflect the interests of Christian lobbyists at least not to the extent of previous administrations.<sup>65</sup> In fact, the current Obama administration has publicly down played the level to which the US considers itself „a Christian nation“, instead preferring to regard the US as „a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values“ (White House Joint Press Release, 2010). This statement angered many Right wing Christian political pundits, with many stating that President Obama’s comments were „fundamentally misleading about the nature of America“ (*Media Matters*, 2009). Comments made by members of the public on various news website forums assert otherwise, with many arguing that while US constitutional laws were founded on Judeo-Christian beliefs, the US is still a secular society. In any event, the issue of religion and the extent to which it should or does inform social practice is a topic of ongoing debate and a subject of narrative importance in *The King*.

*The King* references this tension between appearing tolerant yet retaining a strong faith-based sense of order early in the film when Elvis first follows the Sandow family home in his car

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<sup>65</sup> Indeed one area of constant dispute and public contention during the 2008 Presidential Election was Barak Obama’s religious affiliation. Republican opponents and Democratic detractors alike delighted in reminding voters that Obama’s father, a Kenyan, was Muslim and that Obama’s middle name is Hussein. Democratic Party primaries opponent Hilary Rodham Clinton forced the resignation of two campaign volunteer coordinators when it was found they were responsible for circulating e-mail spams claiming Obama was linked with Islamist jihadists. Former Democratic Senator Bob Kerrey on the other hand told the *Washington Post* on Dec. 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007 that Obama’s Muslim background would earn him considerable sway with the international community (Murray, 2007). Ongoing speculation during the 2008 presidential campaign where genuine concerns over whether Obama’s suspected Muslim background posed a threat to America’s national security led Obama to openly declare that he was a Christian and had a „personal relationship“ with Jesus Christ.

one afternoon after a church service. After introducing himself, it is not long before David Sandow registers who this young man is and the potential risk to his family and community standing he poses. Elvis' excitement at meeting the father he never knew is as visible as the horror on Sandow's blanched face when he realises his youthful, pre-Christian indiscretions have materialised so vividly before him. „Let me tell you something. *This* is my family and *that* is my house“, Sandow sternly informs Elvis before returning back to the car to instruct his children not to speak to „that man“. Sandow denies ever meeting Elvis – this much is true as it is implied later that Sandow abandoned Elvis' mother long before he became aware of her pregnancy – until later that evening when he is depicted attempting to appease his visibly disappointed wife who seems to have anticipated this potentially devastating revelation. Defeated, Elvis returns to his motel room, makes macaroni cheese, before retreating to the more agreeable setting of a Hispanic bar where he is seen in a state of silent contemplation. He acquires work as a pizza delivery man and appears to establish himself in Corpus Christi yet the calculated nature with which he goes about his business gestures towards the possibility that mere acknowledgement and assimilation is not Elvis' primary incentive. Revenge is implicit as a likely motivation.

These scenes of Elvis' solitary, seedy and thankless grafting are juxtaposed by scenes emphasising the Sandow family's domestic cohesion and religious devotion. While Elvis delivers pizzas in a battered used car for paltry sums of crumpled money, Paul confidently and eloquently addresses his school assembly before delighting in his new four-wheeled drive, a gift from his proud parents. It is revealed that Paul is poised to attend Bible college to train as a pastor and is a committed member of his father's parish, providing the musical accompaniment to David's impassioned sermons. Yet when Paul exhibits some degree of agency with his atrocious Christian rock band by performing a song inspired by his recent difficulties in getting Creationism recognised in his science class, David's previously

unwavering approval of his son is tested. This public flouting of church rules which insist all church music must reference The Scriptures stirs bitter resentment in David Sandow, who chastises his son for being self-indulgent. Despite this momentary clash over the validity of Paul's composition, David and Paul appear to share a close bond articulated through strictly father and son deer hunting expeditions. This narrative coupling of Elvis' hardships with Paul's achievements and the punctuated moments of familial „quality time“ signals to the audience the basis of Elvis' growing animosity: Paul is living the life Elvis should have had as Sandow's son.

### ***The Head of the Woman is the Man: Female Subjugation in The King***

As *The King* invests considerable screen time in depicting the Sandow men's (virtuous) activities in order to provide the counterpoint to Elvis' (secular) ennui, these scenes also demonstrate the comparable lack of public and familial standing of the Sandow women. Sandow's aggressive defence of the gender order, which positions David as the influential head of the household while his wife and daughter remain safely interred within their strictly prescribed domestic roles, aids in restoring Sandow's patriarchal authority which he sees as having been challenged by Paul's insolence and the surprise arrival of Elvis. Simply put, Sandow's anxieties over his inability to control his male offspring are unfairly displaced on his female family members. As Byers (1996) argues:

the image of “man”, that is unstable, that constantly needs to be re-created or re-told, is the image of the individual masculine subject who possesses the phallus – who occupies and is adequate to the position of the paternal signifier – who is, in short, the Father.

(1996: 423).

*The King* poignantly dramatises this struggle through its depiction of the female characters. David's taciturn wife Twyla maintains an unremarkable presence throughout. She barely

utters two lines of dialogue and spends most of the film ashen with fear over her missing son. Such is her repressed grief that when she suffers a breakdown outside Sandow's church in full view of stunned attendees, Twyla can only manage a sustained moan. This display of emotion, however muted, is a strong show of defiance as it risks undermining David Sandow's carefully crafted façade of familial order. Female sorrow, as Germaine Greer (1999) argues, is „a subversive force“ (1999: 179). However as soon as Twyla finds her voice it is almost instantly silenced when David decides to publicly admit to siring an illegitimate child by inducting Elvis into his church. Twyla appears resentful and ashamed but nonetheless acquiescent of her husband. Even after warning Elvis of her son's return, her authority is once again challenged by Sandow's desire to have Elvis take up residency in Paul's bedroom. The depiction of David's wife Twyla reflects the feminist argument that the nuclear family is „the primary site in which gender oppression is produced and experienced by women“ (Dua, 2007: 109) and where men can most comprehensively reinforce their supposed embattled authority with the hysterical deployment of repressive gender norms.

Much like her mother's anguish over her son's disappearance, David's 16 year-old daughter Malerie defies David Sandow's attempts to retain his paternal position. Excluded from the bonding exercises between David and Paul, Malerie is otherwise available to Elvis's pursuit of her. He picks her up after school, takes her to lunch and then the two go swimming. Eventually Elvis and Malerie become sexually involved. These moments of physical intimacy are telling in that Elvis's pleasure is privileged while Malerie, although freely acquiescing to her sexual desire for Elvis, is passive in her response to sex.<sup>66</sup> Both appear less inclined to develop a relationship on an interpersonal level as not much verbal interaction

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<sup>66</sup>The dispassionate nature of their relationship as well as the languor of the sex scenes seems to attest to Malerie's gradual *contamination* by Elvis. While a more literal critique about the anxieties of miscegenation might be well placed here, one could interpret these moments as the permeation of identity borders, both physical and ideological, by a deterritorialising „other“ (Byers, 1995).

takes place between them. Their coupling then is more one of realising long repressed sexual urges than establishing any meaningful emotional bond.

They conduct their affair in secret while Malerie becomes increasingly disenchanted by her parent's religious fervour. She is violently reprimanded by David when she interrupts her parents' fasting and prayer session after coming home late from a secret rendezvous with Elvis. She registers little emotion when her brother is reported missing, however she is seen sauntering about Paul's bedroom where she peruses his personal effects and wears his baseball cap. While this could be interpreted as Malerie attempting to connect with her missing brother, her lack of obvious grief suggests instead that Paul's absence allows her the chance to defiantly challenge his previous instructions to not interfere with his belongings. Malerie's lowly status within and exclusion from the family is hinted at when she is seen removing the entrails and mopping the spilt blood from a deer her brother and father have hunted and killed. At church she occupies the stereotypical female role as a child minder for the babies of parishioners and in a later scene she is shown preparing dinner with her mother.

It is *The King's* implicating of Malerie in the Sandow family's demise which reveals several pomophobic aspects of the film more generally. Her impassive demeanour makes Malerie receptive to Elvis' superficial charms and she emerges through her fascination and subsequent affair with Elvis as highly suggestible. She appears to delight in risk taking and flouting her father's authority by allowing Elvis in her room late at night. We, the audience, know enough about Elvis to recognise this relationship as doomed, and to witness Malerie being drawn further towards him is unsettling. Much of her apparent docility might be attributed to the rather dogmatic nature of David's religious instruction. She can offer no substantial explanation for the rules her father imposes. When Elvis requests a beer from the Sandow family fridge, Malerie responds „dad doesn't believe in it". She watches quietly and

attentively as Elvis displays his rifle drill, appears fascinated by Elvis' single tattoo (which is rather underwhelming given he is a sailor) and secretly searches her mother's dressing table for lipstick like a schoolgirl playing „dress up“. When she allows Elvis in the house one evening without her family's knowledge, Malerie, in an effort to entice, is shown wearing a dress that is almost comically retrograde, reminiscent of 1950s styles of cut and fabric.<sup>67</sup>

Although framed largely as a passive subject of manipulation, it is Malerie's refusal to follow her father's instruction which sets in motion the chain of events which culminates in the Sandow family ruin. Typical of a hysterical response to the undermining of masculine authority, Paul heroically follows Elvis to his motel room to confront him over his and Malerie's secret affair. Adopting the tone and demeanour of his father, Paul sternly instructs Elvis to leave his sister alone. Angered by Paul's attempts to intimidate him, Elvis seizes a nearby kitchen knife and plunges it into Paul's stomach. As Paul writhes in pain, Elvis, in a Blyian blurring of psychological and literal wounds, ominously asks: „how does it feel?“ Realising Paul is dead, Elvis goes about meticulously disposing of Paul's body and eliminating any evidence of a murder.

Under the illusion that her brother had merely run away following the argument over the self-indulgent song performance, Malerie continues her affair with Elvis. After Malerie reveals she is pregnant following a privately conducted pregnancy test in the girl's toilets at school, Elvis, in a moment of uncharacteristic honesty, confesses to killing Paul. Initially, Malerie appears stunned but forgives Elvis before the two recite a rote learned prayer by the riverbed where Paul lay slain. While her reaction seems insensitive, it is not altogether surprising of a girl who has remained largely marginal from the family dynamics. Her lack of any visible grief for her dead brother, even in light of Elvis' revelation, seems to attest to the resentment

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<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Chris Flynn (2006) writes that if not for the occasional glimpses of modernity, one might think the events in *The King* are transpiring during an immediate post-World War II era, „a time of simple Christian values of rapidly diminishing relevance“.

Malerie might harbor towards Paul. Her brother's death, although tragic, allows the possibility for Malerie to replace Paul in her father's affections. Such a reading could explain Malerie's somewhat credulous attachment to Elvis who, despite displaying no genuine love for her, is literally allowed by Malerie to get away with murder. Germaine Greer (1999) anecdotally, although poignantly suggests that:

For many young girls, their father is the object of an unrequited love, in that he is less interested in them, less mindful of them than they passionately want him to be. They learn from his indifference that they are unattractive, that they will sooner or later be rejected by people who they love the most. As they fail time and again to command and hold their father's full attention, their self-confidence wavers. This early disappointment can have lifelong consequences.

(1999: 211).

It could be argued therefore that Malerie's jealousy over Paul's relationship with David and marginality within the family and church lead her to seek affection from Elvis who, like her, is alienated yet, like David, is unattainable.

Stifled by Sandow's repressive religiosity, Malerie's relationship with Elvis presents the opportunity to rebel against the oppressive dictates of her family's faith and cultivate an identity beyond that which has been so fastidiously shaped by Christian morality. Yet Malerie's lily white innocence and lack of visible introspection (besides the inclusion of a fleeting shot of Malerie curled up on the shower floor in an attempt to convey to audiences some form of psychological turmoil) permits no portrayal of her other than a pliable, naïve and unquestioning dupe who exercises no restraint and no judgement. Her apparent indifference to her brother's murder might be interpreted as evidence of Malerie as having been rendered docile by her strict upbringing and thus made easily influenced and controlled by male authority. This might also be true of Malerie's willingness to be manipulated by Elvis.



Yet what might have just been a regrettable dalliance with an inappropriate man is made cataclysmic in *The King* as Malerie's affair brings about the systematic murder of her family. Burdened with the shame of her promiscuity, an unplanned pregnancy and later the knowledge that her lover is her half-brother, Malerie finally admits to her mother her predicament which in turn signals Twyla's demise when she and her daughter are shot and killed by Elvis. An eerily quiet, slow tracking shot through the interior of the Sandow home reveals a smattering of blood on the wall. As the focus moves towards the master bedroom, Elvis is seen placing Malerie on the bed beside her murdered mother, before he detects her breathing and smothers her with a pillow.

The film's overwrought and excessively violent conclusion seems to offer a warning against what are not uncommon adolescent frivolities such as coming home late from school, disobeying your parents and casual sex. The evocation of hysterical masculinity in turn frames Malerie as a type of disobedient Eve. Tempted by a smoking, drinking, swearing sailor serpent, Malerie might have saved her whole family had she simply done as she was told. Setting Malerie up as the „sacrificial lamb“ to Elvis' degenerate and violent predilections reinforces cinematic conventions of young women as hapless innocents led astray by their own unchecked lascivious impulses and gives credence to the film's pomophobic tone.

An alternative reading might emphasise Malerie's psychological and sexual independence and typical adolescent curiosity about the secular world which would in turn highlight the fact that it was David's, not Malerie's, „sin“ which catalysed the Sandow family's demise. Indeed, it is Pastor David Sandow who holds the devastating secret which threatens to disrupt the foundations of his suburban idyll. Such an assessment however would require a dramatic rethinking of powerful, socially determined gender roles where masculinity occupies both a

place of privilege and the status of victim. It is through *The King*'s unsubtle causal relationship between sex and death and positioning a 16 year-old girl at the centre of this equation that stereotypes of women as wilful, deceitful and dissident are deployed.

### ***Faith No More – Pomophobia and Masculine Redemption in The King***

As argued in the previous chapters, the pomophobic response to a presumed undermining of masculine cultural privilege by marginal identities is to appropriate victim status. The ability of the masculine subject to remain the sympathetic figure despite his dominant subjectivity is testament to the ambivalence with which contemporary cinema depicts post-modern masculine angst. In *The King*, the very structuring norms Elvis and David Sandow rely on to maintain their cultural positions are seen to have broken down, while those who are genuinely oppressed by such structuring norms like Malerie and Twyla, are assumed to have not suffered at all or, in the case of Malerie, been active agents in their own victimisation. This final section explores how Elvis and David Sandow remake their masculine subjectivity in a way which permits them to claim victim status yet still reap the rewards of having undergone a journey of redemption. This transformation, it will be argued, is depicted in *The King* as explicitly religious, revealing how preserving Christian morality is another recuperative strategy for post-modern anxiety.

For the most part, *The King* privileges Elvis' point of view where his loneliness and desire to belong is given significant narrative space. The audience is thus invited to empathise with Elvis and allow for alternative interpretations as to what motivated his behaviour. This reading is further articulated in the final scene when Elvis, having killed Twyla and Malerie and torched the Sandow family home, enters David's office and, making no effort to conceal the blood on his hands and clothes, asks to „get right with God“. His desire for absolution from David implies at least that Elvis is not entirely without remorse and presumably is

prepared to face the consequences, be they legal or divine, for his crimes. The decision to conduct an affair with the girl he knows is his sister, risk exposure by suggesting they ought to have their baby, and connect with both David and Twyla only to murder all but one of his adopted family members might reveal Elvis' underlying desire for vengeance, or simply an erratic expression of frustration over his abandonment. Nevertheless, Elvis' final bid for forgiveness significantly disrupts the apparent senselessness of his prior actions and suggests, if only perfunctorily, Elvis' genuinely distressed state.<sup>68</sup>

David Sandow likewise undergoes transformation in narrative development from the critical and distant patriarch who ignores his daughter while indulging his son to a generous and accessible man who emotes (albeit privately) for Paul while actively pursuing the son he abandoned. No such effort is made with Malerie, nevertheless, as Elvis is made the primary subject of David's cruel rejection; it is he who David is in most need to appease. His actions are validated when he introduces his son to his church and in the process admits to having repeatedly paid for sex with a prostitute that led to Elvis' conception. As David invites his son onto the church pulpit to share in the parish's exultant acclaim, Twyla's humiliation and Malerie's repulsion is apparent, yet the overall positive response from his parishioners satisfies David's smug hubris and most crucially aids in remaking the masculine subject by restoring weakened paternal authority. Personally validated, spiritually fulfilled and publicly celebrated, Sandow emerges as the hero of the film, overcoming his own prejudices to establish a relationship with the son his religious convictions did not initially permit him to acknowledge. Conversely, it could be argued that Sandow's misguided charity, by compelling him to make amends with the son he previously denied only to create the conditions which would later devastate his family, was a realisation of his own „reflexive-sadomasochist“ tendencies previously identified by David Savran (1996). Sandow's

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<sup>68</sup> Presuming, of course, Elvis' pleas for forgiveness are authentic and not simply another attempt to enact revenge upon Sandow by challenging the adequacy of faith to deal with such extreme acts.

reclaiming of his own cultural privilege, then, might be achieved through his post-bereavement status. In the end it is Sandow, who, although spared by Elvis, emerges as the ultimate victim.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has explored how Rolf De Heer's (1994) *Bad Boy Bubby* and James Marsh's (2002) *The King* might be read as cinematic representations of specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety. It was argued that both films depict their male protagonists as having become estranged from their masculine subjectivity through fraught relationships with negligent or absent fathers. The traditional nuclear family then comes to represent both the normative structures which are perceived as having been broken down as well as a site whereby this lost masculine authority can be restored. The urban space is rendered hostile via the now familiar evocation of threatening cultural „others“. *Flânerie* in *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* therefore operates as a device through which post-modern anxiety is articulated. In an effort to communicate how those which make up the inscrutable public are both figuratively and literally on the margins, both films portray individuals who occupy the urban space as aggressive, frightening or troubled. Experiencing the urban space as hostile and threatening suggests the urgency with which cohesion, indeed patriarchal dominance, must be (re)established within the home.

As argued in Chapter Four, narrative tropes and technical stylisation aid to further communicate this existentialist angst. Both *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The King* employ, to certain degrees, aspects of Suburban Gothic, communicated most successfully in the thoroughly abject figure of Bubby's mother, Flo and the depiction of the urban space as illegible. *The King* likewise represents the (sub)urban space as a site vulnerable to permeation, indeed, as earlier discussion of Murphy's (2009) work reveals, cultural representations of the suburbs

are frequently premised on the inscrutable nature of this environment and the ways in which it has, cinematically at least, come to stand in for specifically post-modern notions of unrest and uncertainty. However it is through duelling patriarchal narratives that fears of post-modernity and its capacity to destabilise masculinity's traditional prerogatives are most effectively communicated. Both Elvis's violent response to familial estrangement and David's puritanical approach to maintaining familial accord are efforts to reinstate embattled masculine authority in the face of radical social change. The dual instances of murder in both *The King* and *Bad Boy Bubby* might then be viewed as the protagonist's extreme response to the extent to which the collapse of normative structures which previously maintained masculine cultural privilege (and secured the father/son bond) can adversely affect male psychological development and undermines masculine claims to space.

Although remaining largely ambivalent towards religion, both films reference Christianity in a manner that reduces it to mere symbolism, yet nonetheless it retains its cultural, indeed recuperative, importance. *The King* panders to Christian concerns that the contemporary world is threatening by placing a deeply religious family at the centre of the unfolding drama. Instead of merely having their faith tested, the Sandow family pays severely for their desire to live virtuously, as Elvis (the wages of sin) is precisely the amoral, secular „other“ that David has shielded his children from. Elvis's final, if disingenuous plea to „get right with God“ suggests the power that religion has even for those who have so completely morally transgressed (however see note 69, page 250). Bubby embarks on a quest for religious salvation as a way to reconcile the trauma of abuse and assimilate himself into mainstream society. While the desire for a spiritual dimension to his existence goes unfulfilled, Bubby's masculine authority is recuperated through his eventual positioning as head of a household, a role which, I argue, carries with it religious and cultural significance and restores normative

structures previously thought undermined by post-World War II socio-political initiatives and events.

## CONCLUSION

### *Alive and Kicking: The Pomophobic Flâneur Reborn*

This thesis has explored how seven selected films have represented specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety as it is experienced within the urban space. Extending the concept of pomophobia by Thomas B. Byers (1995, 1996), which postulates that significant cultural shifts of the post-World War II years have impacted upon the material, economic and social base of those men who rely on patriarchal, hegemonic norms to maintain cultural privilege, this thesis has argued that these factors frequently inform the cinematic representation of masculine crisis. It has examined the ways in which embattled masculine authority is restored cinematically through various recuperative strategies, most notably the marginalising of those who are seen to benefit the most from limited social change, particularly women, gay and non-racially dominant men. Furthermore, in an effort to isolate these perceived cultural threats, members of the formerly dominant group have reasserted their embattled authority by redefining identity borders around a heterosexual, masculine subjectivity. By Byers' account, pomophobia is a response to the dissolution of imagined boundaries which sustain and reinforce patriarchal, heterosexual, cultural hegemony (Byers, 1995, 1996).

To analyse how these masculine, post-modern anxieties are cinematically represented within the urban space, an arena in which the thesis has argued the changing social makeup can be most vividly observed, the *flâneur*, (particularly as he is depicted in Edgar Allan Poe's (1845) short story „The Man of The Crowd“), has been deployed as an aesthetic and narrative device to examine notions of urban bound, cultural displacement. This thesis has argued that Poe's *flâneur*, unlike traditional interpretations of solitary urban strolling (Baudelaire, 1964; Benjamin, 1999), communicates more effectively the existential anxiety implicit in urban spectatorship through adopting the attributes of a detective. Doing so, this thesis has argued,

permits the *flâneur* to exercise a degree of control over his environment by making legible that which he views as inherently threatening.

Contemporary interpretations of *flânerie* have provided insight into the ways cinematic representations of male spatial dislocation allegorise broader anxieties regarding the perceived undermining of the formerly dominant, patriarchal subject (Brand, 1992; Gunning, 1997; Salzani, 2007; Tester, 1994; Werner, 2001). Continuing this academic renewal, this thesis has proffered a post-modern prototype of the alienated, urban pedestrian – one which I have termed the pomophobic *flâneur*. Applying Byers' concept of pomophobia to those cinematic texts which employ *flânerie* to depict specifically urban located, masculine discontent aids in an exploration of how feelings of ideological uncertainty within the urban space are represented cinematically through exhibiting hostilities towards previously marginalised „others“.

This thesis has argued that film analysis, through the application of feminist film theory and masculinities studies, offers much by way of interpreting cinema as an apparatus for facilitating meaning making in contemporary society. Exploring the underlying ideological assumptions embedded in and communicated through film permits a greater understanding of how cinematic representations of gender legitimise culturally prescribed behaviour, and more specifically, how masculinity has been constructed in film as a privileged yet volatile subjectivity. The work of Laura Mulvey (1975), Steve Neale (1983), Susan Jeffords (1988, 1993, 1994) and Yvonne Tasker (1993a, 1993b, 2004) has proved important in developing the arguments about how the so-called masculine crisis is cinematically represented and the recuperative strategies used by the male protagonists in the films selected for analysis in this thesis. R. W. Connell (1987, 1995, 2000) and other masculinities theorists (Buchbinder, 1998; Edwards, 2006; Kimmel 2003; Kimmel & Messner, 1995) provide useful scholarship



towards examining the multiplicity of masculinities, how certain masculinities become hegemonic and the ways in which masculinity, like gender more broadly, is the result of repeated performance (Butler, 1990). Academic contributions by Black feminist scholars bell hooks (1992, 2004) and Paula J. Massood (1996, 2003) have been invaluable to the discussion of how race and class intersect as parts of a larger system of determinants to inform the construction of socially validated modes of masculinity and the strategies used by marginalised Black men to recuperate cultural authority. It was argued in Chapter Five that while Black men remain marginalised to white men more broadly, young, Black under-class men as they are cinematically represented in the films *Menace II Society* (1993, Dir: Albert and Allen Hughes) and *Boyz N The Hood* (1991, Dir: John Singleton) assert their cultural privilege within the specific context of the „hood in ways which are informed by white-authored constructions of masculinity.

Feminist film theory, engaging with wider understandings within academia of the status of masculinity in post-modern society, can therefore illuminate the ways in which fictional characters come to stand in as symbols of social issues affecting men. It has been argued throughout this thesis that cinema, as an accessible and privileged cultural text, reinforces the notion that progressive social initiatives and events intended to improve gender and race equality as well as greater workplace participation have instead brought about a sense of ideological and existential uncertainty in the formerly dominant, masculine subject. Cinema, then, is an important site for analysis as it offers a means to legitimise individual claims of masculine disenfranchisement whilst providing a cultural apparatus through which the apparent threats to male cultural hegemony can be simultaneously exposed and assuaged.

By examining how feelings of cultural displacement are articulated through the trope of solitary urban strolling, more specifically as it is depicted in Poe's (1845) short story, this thesis argued that masculine, post-modern anxiety has been represented in film as a type of spatial usurpation. *Flânerie*, this thesis argued, comes to represent the uncertainty with which the post-modern masculine subject negotiates the fractured urban space as well as the means to facilitate a sense of ideological completion.

Cinematic representations of men who experience the urban space as threatening and chaotic were therefore interpreted by this author as indicative of an underlying resentment towards the social, political, cultural and economic developments which have worked to improve the spatial, and by extension, social mobility of the formerly marginalised. Each film analysis chapter revealed that the recuperative strategies employed by the male protagonists to consolidate masculine authority in the face of perceived cultural threat were dependent on a reaffirmation of traditional modes of masculinity. This re-masculinisation was read as both a symptom of, and a means to insulate against, the uncertainty of the post-modern world. Pomophobia, then, is evident in the protagonists' actions, in the general malaise represented within the urban setting of each film through its stylisation and in marginal, seemingly inconsequential characters.

Chapter Four examined the manifestation of masculine, post-modern anxiety as it was depicted in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Alex Proyas's *The Crow* (1993). It was argued that both films utilised specific visual cues to emphasise the hostile and chaotic nature of the urban space. The disparaging depiction of the city within these films operates as an allegory for the gradual decline of contemporary society and those institutions which have ensured the maintenance of patriarchal privilege. By portraying the male leads as socially isolated or ideologically at odds with the fractured urban environment, both *Taxi Driver* and

*The Crow* reveal „soft“ constructions of masculinity to be inadequate for dealing with the supposedly hostile public sphere which is composed of criminals and degenerates who threaten the safety (and in the case of Bickle, the sanity) of these men. As a method towards restoring civic order and a means to privilege traditional, overtly violent modes of masculinity, both protagonists undergo physical and psychological transformation. Travis Bickle adopts para-militarism through which to cleanse the city of its „filth“ while Eric Draven is literally resurrected and supernaturally transformed into a primitive, urban vigilante. Both films reveal the over-determined positioning of women as a castrating threat to male hegemony within the patriarchal narrative. In *Taxi Driver*, Betsy humiliates Bickle while Iris challenges his spatial authority. In *The Crow*, Darla and Sarah are represented as „at risk“ and are eventually reassimilated back into the domestic space. Women within both films therefore work to simultaneously legitimise notions of lost masculine privilege as well as provide the means to finalise this elaborate masculine recovery.

This discussion analysed the use of *noir* aesthetics, particularly as it is understood by Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo (2002) to explore how the „mood“ or „tone“ of a film are stylistic markers of a primal, or underlying anxiety provoked by post-World War II cultural shifts. Oliver and Trigo’s (2002) work was used in Chapter Four to examine how in *Taxi Driver*, and more subtly in *The Crow*, significant details such as lighting techniques and camera angles, as well as gendered and raced „others“, anchor „free-floating“ existential anxiety through a process of condensation and displacement.

Chapter Five explored how frustrations owing to notions of thwarted spatial mobility were exasperated through the hostile presence (visible or otherwise) of raced „others“ in Joel Schumacher’s (1993) *Falling Down*, Albert and Allen Hughes’ (1993) *Menace II Society* and John Singleton’s (1991) *Boyz N The Hood*. Through a comparative analysis between what is

still regarded as US mainstream cinema's quintessential „angry white man“ text and two exemplars of the then popular „Hood“ genre, this chapter argued that each film represented masculinity as susceptible to cultural undermining by social forces which have sought to improve the status of non-hegemonic subjectivities.

*Falling Down* positioned its white male protagonist as alienated from his family, marginalised within the labour market and victimised by raced minorities in an attempt to communicate the ways in which formerly dominant white men have been displaced culturally by progressive socio-political initiatives and economic events. In *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N The Hood*, young Black men are depicted as subordinate to white agents of the state, locked in a cycle of poor housing, education and employment prospects and as a result, are made susceptible to the allure of drugs, gun and gang culture and high risk sex. This chapter argued that in order to navigate and survive the hostile, post-modern urban terrain, white men and Black men equally rely on traditional modes of masculinity to wrest control from those they view as having undermined their spatial and cultural authority. Expressions of pomophobia, therefore, differed little between each protagonist and indeed differed little between each film in their depictions of inner city Los Angeles as a crime ridden, dilapidated „concrete jungle“.

One dimension of Byer's original concept which has undergone renewed consideration in this thesis is the implicit whiteness of the pomophobic male. This thesis has argued that the formally dominant, „reified subject of bourgeois humanism and compulsory heterosexuality“ (Byers, 1995: 6) which Byers refers to in his article, need not be white. Chapter Five analysed in depth the ways in which Black masculine authority, as represented in at least two Hood films, is consolidated through the ongoing maintenance of arbitrary identity borders. Strategies deployed by Black urban males within Black, urban cinema, or Hood film, to counter and contain contemporary threats posed by socio-political shifts and radical social

progress for instance differ little to those of white men within the „white male paranoia fantasy“ genre. Both strive to achieve cultural superiority through the elaborate and often hostile (even violent) reaffirmation of patriarchal privilege. Moreover, both Albert and Allen Hughes“ *Menace II Society* (1993) and John Singleton“s *Boyz N The Hood* (1991) present the urban centre as a specifically gendered as well as raced space that is under constant surveillance by a largely invisible white police force. This surveillance does determine the degree to which inhabitants are spatially confined, the „hood however is still the domain of men. While mounting such an argument might present an academic challenge, and more importantly, be seen to undermine – even discredit – the claims of civil rights activism, this thesis has shown it is possible to examine critically the messages embedded in cinematic representations of Black men“s experiences without suggesting that Black men are no longer an oppressed group.

Bell hooks (1992, 2004) and Angela Davis (1982, 1990) have frequently argued in their invaluable work regarding the interconnectedness of race, class and sex that efforts towards improving the social conditions of Black people generally are not devoid of misogynist attitudes towards Black women. Certainly the erasure and containment of Black women within the Hood films analysed in Chapter Five reflect this general ambivalence towards the particularity of Black, specifically under-class, women“s experiences within the US context. Such overt negations of Black women“s narratives are especially pronounced when presented in the aggressive posturing of Black urban masculinity in its various mediated forms.

Chapter Six analysed the ways in which patriarchal privilege is reconstituted through appeals to the traditional nuclear family within the films *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993, Dir: Rolf De Heer) and *The King* (2005, Dir: James Marsh). It was argued that while estrangement from or neglect within the domestic setting operated as the principal source of both protagonists“

unrest, Bubby and Elvis nevertheless sought familial re-assimilation as a means towards overcoming their sense of loss. *Bad Boy Bubby* allegorised escape and self-discovery through *flânerie*, yet the urban space, represented as hostile and chaotic, proved too illegible to facilitate Bubby's ideological completion. Family, and more specifically fatherhood, emerged as a source of masculine consolidation, while also re-establishing the appropriate maternal role of women previously undermined by Bubby's incestuous mother, Flo. It was argued that Bubby's unspecified disability operated as a means to communicate the perceived undermining of heterosexual, masculine hegemony. While his treatment by his abusive mother establishes Bubby's victim status, the apparent ease with which he comes to occupy the role of domesticated father at the film's conclusion suggests Bubby's disability was not a genuine impairment but instead a narrative device reducible to child-like, presumably temporary *naïveté* (summed up in Angel's assessment of Bubby as „just a kid“). Through the trope of disability, Bubby's perspective is given the weight of authenticity; the urban space, and those contained within it, are *truly* hostile, chaotic and bewildering, and not simply the result of a paranoid or negative world view. Disability, then, provides a contrivance for ideological uncertainty and existential angst to be normalised, rationalised and reconciled.

*The King* initially represented the nuclear family as a refuge from the alienation experienced in negotiating the urban space. Through depictions of Elvis' disorientated and lonely perambulations after his father's cruel spurning, Corpus Christi, Texas is made the locus for Elvis' transplanted animosity. The suburban environment in *The King* becomes subtly inflected with a strange, unsettling ambience (Murphy, 2009) where loners and outcasts are relegated to the margins of society. To assuage his sense of cultural displacement, allegorised through *flânerie*, Elvis conspires to undermine the insular and morally self-righteous world his father represents by initiating a sexual relationship with his 16 year-old half-sister. Like

Angel in *Bad Boy Bubby*, Malerie performs the necessary role of offering a means to infiltrate the family that has rejected Elvis and reclaim his place within the patriarchal structure.

The sense of unrest and undercurrent of tension in *The King*, it was argued, can be read as a constellation of persistent fears stemming from profound cultural shifts of the post-World War II era. By deploying the now familiar Gothic trope of an enticing yet ultimately dangerous stranger disrupting the serenity of a seemingly happy and unsuspecting family, *The King* implicitly critiques the diminishing role of traditional values. Pomophobia in *The King*, then, operates at both the level of narrative and characterisation. Placing a deeply devout and previously functional household at the centre of the unfolding drama suggests the very vulnerability of the traditional, bourgeois nuclear family and the patriarchal ideas it represents. Elvis' extreme response to his „othering“ at once depicts the degree of cultural displacement he experiences as a result of having become estranged from a father figure and entirely vindicates David Sandow's initial reluctance to re-engage with his biological son. David Sandow's post-modern anxiety is further evinced in his ambivalence towards Elvis, his restless daughter and deeply unfulfilled wife.

Through the analysis of cinematic representations of specifically masculine, post-modern anxiety, this thesis contributes to ongoing scholarship within feminist-informed, film studies by recognising the importance of cinema as an ideological site subject to critical inquiry. Film offers much by way of facilitating audience engagement with issues of social relevance as well as revealing aspects (indeed anxieties) of the culture from which these films emerge. Identifying the ways in which these anxieties are often spatially inscribed, this thesis has engaged with contemporary interpretations of the solitary urban stroller, or *flâneur*, and by doing so, has exposed the urban space as not a location where masculine privilege is necessarily assured, but instead a domain which is often experienced as hostile and

powerfully undermining. By exploring the underlying ideological assumptions of cinematic representations of the solitary urban stroller, this thesis has extended the work of masculinities studies which argues that traditional „hegemonic“ modes of masculinity, however culturally validated, are nevertheless depicted as susceptible to radical destabilisation.

In the Introduction of this thesis it was suggested that despite being conceived at a specific historical moment, Byers' concept of pomophobia remains relevant today. Indeed, as Byers argues, specifically masculine anxieties over identity and cultural displacement, while certainly subject to the conditions of history, emerge most prominently at moments of cultural, social and economic uncertainty. As it is the case that the developed world has once again undergone considerable cultural change in the aftermath of the events euphemistically referred to as 9/11, contemporary strains of pomophobia can be observed in those who have struggled to reconcile such socio-political developments with their privileged status and in popular culture representations of such tensions. Current and emerging manifestations of these anxieties are an area which would be valuable considerations for future research.

Economic conditions, as Byers had earlier argued, have affected the status of men who rely on their roles as breadwinners to inform their masculine subjectivity and legitimise their cultural authority. The US financial crisis of 2007 and the global contagion which followed had a significant impact on the job security and consumer activity of those who had previously enjoyed comparable financial stability. Key businesses, such as General Motors folded, resulting in massive workforce downsizing. From the global financial crisis (GFC) and the large bailouts which were deployed in an effort to stabilise the economy, the Tea Party Movement emerged as a formidable socio-political presence with their often acerbic public protests characterising the re-emergence of conservative populism in contemporary America.



Drawing on a specific period in US history, the Tea Party protests reference the slogans, symbolism and aggressive anti-government rhetoric of the anti-tax protests of 1773. While ostensibly concerned with reducing national debt and government power, The Tea Party Movement is equally preoccupied with an originalist interpretation of the United States Constitution, a perceived weakening of abortion laws and an implicit anti-immigration stance. Progressive commentators have suggested that The Tea Party Movement has capitalised on the growing public disillusionment over the dire economic situation to promote an explicitly anti-Obama agenda. Steve Fraser and Joshua B. Freeman (2010) have argued that the Tea Party Movement shares with current anti-immigration movements a distinct „fear of displacement“ (2010: 81), precisely the type of anxiety that characterised the sense of ideological uncertainty depicted in the films analysed in this thesis. The Tea Party Movement might then be read as a social dimension of the pomophobia conceptualised by Byers and evidence that in times of global uncertainty, deep and persistent fears will once again be stirred in racially dominant, heterosexual, men.

The Tea Party Movement and other neo-conservatives frequently rail against the corrosive effect of the liberal values promoted in Hollywood film. At the same time they recognise the currency of popular representations of their values. This can be seen in the popularity of television commentators such as Glenn Beck, who uses a mix of incendiary rhetoric and hack showmanship to appeal to, or as some critics have suggested (Stelter & Carter, 2009), foment, the current strains of US conservative populist anger. The „sense of siege“ (Poniewozik, 2009) characterised by Beck is also perceptible in the business model of [declarationentertainment.com](http://declarationentertainment.com), a „grass roots film-financing movement“ that makes public appeals to raise funds to finance the films which „Hollywood used to make – Movies about Freedom and Sacrifice, Hard-Work and Self-Reliance, Faith and Family“.<sup>69</sup> While postulating

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<sup>69</sup> <http://declarationentertainment.com/how-it-works>

a return to an imagined past presents its own problems for those who do not have access to the privileges inherent in white-authored, implicitly masculine and Christian narratives of nationhood, the suggestion that Hollywood no longer invests in such myths is itself debatable. At the time of writing this thesis, a campaign to erect a statue of cybernetic law enforcer and notable „hard body“ (Jeffords, 1994) RoboCop by users of the popular micro-blogging site Twitter proved successful when \$US50,000 was raised by on-line donations to fund the statue’s construction. According to the campaign’s leader, the statue would bring about a boost to tourism for the city of Michigan (where the movie *RoboCop* was set) which has been crippled in the wake of the 2008 GFC, leading to the collapse of city’s once thriving motor industry (*Daily Mail*, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

Given that *RoboCop* has been interpreted by scholars as an articulation of the Reagan-era desire to marshal technological might to combat external political threats, there is little wonder why, like the recent resurgence of John Rambo, potent symbols of explicitly masculine resilience provide a sense of comfort in times of uncertainty. It could be argued therefore that any concerted abandoning of these images of male suffering and redemption has yet to take place. Certainly, to date, no alternative representation has managed to capture the popular imagination to a similar degree. These recent developments suggest that cinematic constructions of traditional hegemonic masculinity persist and that their power as condensing symbols of the reinvigoration/recuperation of the dominant order is undiminished.

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## ***Films and Television***

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- Apocalypse Now!*, Dir: Francis Ford Coppola, United Artists (1979)
- Bad Boy Bubby*, Dir: Rolf De Heer, Vertigo Productions (1993)
- Bad Boys*, Dir: Michael Bay, Sony Pictures Entertainment (1995)
- Bad Boys II*, Dir: Michael Bay, Sony Pictures Entertainment (2003)
- Bad Company*, Dir: Joel Schumacher, Touchstone Pictures(2002)
- Basic Instinct*, Dir: Paul Verhoeven, Artisan Entertainment (1992)
- Bat\*21*, Dir: Peter Markle, TriStar Pictures (1988)
- Batman*, Dir: Tim Burton, Warner Bros. Pictures (1989)
- Beverly Hills Cop*, Dir: Martin Brest, Paramount Pictures (1984)

*Beverly Hills Cop II*, Dir: Tony Scott, Paramount Pictures (1987)

*Beverly Hills Cop III*, Dir: John Landis, Paramount Pictures (1994)

*Blade Runner*, Dir: Ridley Scott, Warner Bros. Pictures (1982)

*Born on the Fourth of July*, Dir: Oliver Stone, MCA Universal Home Video (1989)

*Boyz N The Hood*, Dir: John Singleton, Columbia Pictures (1991)

*Burger and the King, The: The Life and Cuisine of Elvis Presley*, Dir: James Marsh, BBC (1996)

*Bullet Proof*, Dir: Ernest R. Dickerson, MCA Universal Home Video (1996)

*China Beach* (tv series) Creator: William Broyles Jr., John Sacret Young, ABC (1989 – 1991)

*Clockers*, Dir: Spike Lee, MCA Universal Home Video (1995)

*Coming Home*, Dir: Hal Ashby, MGM Home Entertainment (1978)

*Crow, The*, Dir: Alex Proyas, Village Road Show Company (1994)

*Crow: City of Angels, The*, Dir: Tim Pope, Bad Bird Productions (1996)

*Crow: Salvation, The*, Dir: Bharat Nalluri, Edward R. Pressman Films (2000)

*Crow: Stairway to Heaven, The* (tv series) Creator: Scott Williams, Alliance Atlantis Communications (1998)

*Crow: Wicked Prayer, The*, Dir: Lance Mungia, Dimensions Films (2005)

*Deer Hunter, The*, Dir: Michael Cimino, Universal Pictures (1978)

*Die Hard With A Vengeance*, Dir: John McTiernan, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment (1995)

*Disclosure*, Dir: Barry Levinson. Warner Bros. (1994)

*Don't Be A Menace To South Central While Drinking Your Juice In The Hood*, Dir: Paris Barclay, Island Pictures (1996)

*Dot The I*, Dir: Michael Parkhill, Summit Entertainment (2005)

*Do The Right Thing*, Dir: Spike Lee, Universal Pictures (1989)

*Falling Down*, Dir: Joel Schumacher, Warner Bros. Pictures (1993)

*Fatal Attraction*, Dir: Adrian Lyne, Paramount Pictures (1987)

*Fear of a Black Hat*, Dir: Rusty Cundieff, Incorporated Television Company (1994)

*Fight Club*, Dir: David Fincher, Twentieth Century Fox (1999)

*First Blood*, Dir: Ted Kotcheff, HBO Video (1982)

*Forrest Gump*, Dir: Robert Zemeckis, Paramount Pictures (1994)

*Full Metal Jacket*, Dir: Stanley Kubrick, Warner Bros. (1987)

*Full Monty, The*, Dir: Peter Cattaneo, Twentieth Century Fox (1997)

*Grand Canyon*, Dir: Lawrence Kasdan, Twentieth Century Fox (1991)

*Hamburger Hill*, Dir: John Irvin, Vestron Video (1987)

*Hoodlum*, Dir: Bill Duke, 905 Corporation (1997)

*I Am Sam*, Dir: Jessie Nelson, New Line Cinema (2001)

*In The Heat of The Night*, Dir: Norman Jewison, MGM Home Entertainment (1967)

*Juice*, Dir: Ernest R. Dickerson, Paramount Home Video (1992)

*Just Another Girl on the IRT*, Dir: Leslie Harris, Miramax Films (1993)

*King, The*, Dir: James Marsh, Content Film (2006)

*Lethal Weapon*, Dir: Richard Donner, Warner Bros. Pictures (1987)

*Lethal Weapon 2*, Dir: Richard Donner, Warner Home Video (1989)

*Lethal Weapon 3*, Dir: Richard Donner, Warner Home Video (1992)

*Lethal Weapon 4*, Dir: Richard Donner, Warner Home Video (1998)

*Lost In Translation*, Dir: Sophia Coppola, Focus Features (2003)

*Man Without a Face, The*, Dir: Mel Gibson, Warner Home Video (1993)

*Menace II Society*, Dir: Albert and Allen Hughes, Sony Picture Home Entertainment (1993)

*Mrs. Doubtfire*, Dir: Chris Columbus, Twentieth Century Fox (1993)

*Murphy Brown* (tv series) Creator: Diane English, CBS (1988-1998)

*New Jack City*, Dir: Mario Van Peebles, Warner Home Video (1991)

*New Jersey Drive*, Dir: Nick Gomez, Gramercy Pictures (1995)

*New York, New York*, Dir: Martin Scorsese, MGM Home Entertainment (1977)

*Platoon*, Dir: Oliver Stone, Orion Pictures (1986)

*Play It Again, Sam*, Dir: Herbert Ross, Paramount Home Video (1972)

*Rage In Harlem*, Dir: Bill Duke, HBO Video (1991)

*Rain Man*, Dir: Barry Levinson, MGM (1988)

*Regarding Henry*, Dir: Mike Nichols, Paramount Home Video (1991)

*Rambo*, Dir: Sylvester Stallone, Lionsgate (2008)

*RoboCop*, Dir: Paul Verhoeven, Orion Pictures Corporation (1987)

*Roman Holiday*, Dir: William Wyler, Paramount Pictures (1953)

*Ronnie Johns Half Hour* (tv series) Creator: The 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree, Laughing Stock Productions (2005-2006).

*Rush Hour*, Dir: Brett Ratner, New Line Cinema (1998)

*Rush Hour 2*, Dir: Brett Ratner, New line Cinema (2001)

*Rush Hour 3*, Dir: Brett Ratner, New Line Cinema (2007)

*Scent of a Woman*, Dir: Martin Brest, Universal Pictures (1992)

*Searchers, The*, Dir: John Ford, Warner Bros. Pictures (1956)

*Set It Off*, Dir: F. Gary Gray, New Line Home Entertainment (1996)

*Sex and the City* (tv series) Creator: Darren Star, Rysher Entertainment, HBO Original Programming (1998-2004)

*Shaft*, Dir: Gordon Parks, MGM Home Entertainment (1971)

*South Central*, Dir: Stephen Milburn Anderson, Warner Home Video (1992)

*Straight Out Of Brooklyn*, Dir: Matty Rich, HBO Video (1991)

*Sugar Hill*, Dir: Leon Ichaso, Twentieth Century Fox (1994)

*Taxi Driver*, Dir: Martin Scorsese, Columbia Pictures (1976)

*Terminator, The*, Dir: James Cameron, Orion Pictures Corporation (1984)

*Three Men and a Baby*, Dir: Leonard Nimoy, Buena Vista Pictures (1987)

*Tour of Duty* (tv series), Creator: Steve Duncan, L.Travis Clark, CBS (1987-1991)

*Unforgiven*, Dir: Clint Eastwood, Warner Bros. Pictures (1992)