

PORTOBELLO FILM FESTIVAL

TALKING PICTURES

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Reflections on the changing issues of gender as portrayed in film and media

In the gendered hierarchy of male and female viewing that exists in the conventional cinema, women are generally suspect. In the classic film noir period of 1941-58, it was a world of male bonding. They were usually low budget films with lots of action, which explore the darker side of man's nature. They were predatory, possessive and aggressive. They always had a femme fatale at the centre. She was bad but sexy, usually cleverer than the hero, but she invariably came to a sticky end. It was often the classic scenario of the temptress and her punishment. One of the best examples of this is the Fritz Lang film "The Big Heat" which starred the definitive film-noir anti-heroine, Gloria Grahame. In this film Grahame plays the moll who pays the price and her performance in this film far surpasses most other actresses in this genre.

That women are the root of all evil permeates most major religions, especially Christianity, and the 'evil' that is generally referred to is sexual. This stereotype is often reflected in ancient myths and stories and of course, in the great narrative form of today, film. What causes the sense of guilt that in turn makes man hold women responsible for his downfall?

Even in current neo-noir films this myth is still perpetrated. In 'Fatal Attraction' the mythic female monster, the castrating Gorgon is played by Glen Close, and you remember what a box office hit that was. She meets the immoral, hedonistic character played by Micheal Douglas and has a violently sexual weekend. She becomes obsessed with Douglas and embarks on a compulsive pursuit of him. While her pursuit of him is essentially voyeuristic and therefore sadistic, her character is masochistic. Her real pleasure is obtained in the punishment of her lack, her lack of the company of Douglas. Think of the mad masochistic frenzy she was in when, while hiding in the bathroom of Douglas' house clutching the usual phallic shaped knife, (also used to great affect in Hitchcock's Psycho) she cuts herself rhythmically on her legs. Close here is portrayed as the classic, mythic castrating female monster. Her hair is always wild, she is often dressed in black (the good wife is always in

white or pastels), she is always 'watching or looking'. She is representative of the ultimate male fear of castration, of being pursued and trapped by a female monster into a corner. She is Pandora's box and the temptress Eve and as such she has to die.

In the final scene it is the good wife who kills her, restoring the safe patriarchal norm, the daddy, mummy, me triangle, the safe, familial, controllable, capitalist constellation.

Although the role of women in current society has undergone great and cathartic changes, today's society still perpetuates rigid rules and expectations about masculinity, which the media constantly reinforces. The fact that masculinity is mostly a state of being, -it is possible to photograph or film the male body-but it is far harder to capture the essence of a man. In the realms of combat, physical guts and audacious physical deeds our heroes have been almost entirely male. But what happens to all that strength, might and energy when computerising robots and not men assemble cars, and when there is hardly anything in today's society that cannot be done by women?

Many men are encouraged to believe that their masculinity is related to their aggressiveness and powers of domination and control. Such men honestly feel that they are only men if they are prepared to fight and act like men. The coolest men are the hard-and the hardest testing round is the world of the adolescent male. The coolest dude is the one who messes about and who bullies and belittles with the greatest impunity. If the assumption is correct, and this is the truest way for a man to behave like a man, then in order to for our species to survive, men will have to change or be made redundant-because it is this warrior class of man who is in danger of bringing our planet to the point of extinction. This includes the capitalist and entrepreneurs who are today's warrior male-a term, which applies here to aggressive, driving, dominated energy. The fight to build empires in the business and economic world leads to exploitation and domination. The gap between rich and poor countries steadily increases, and the relentless consumption of the Western consumer societies are leaving us with the prospect of the exhaustion of the worlds natural resources. Behind nearly all the wars that are fought lies the power of the multinational conglomerates in their relentless efforts to accumulate wealth and territory.

The film 'Fight Club' is a brilliant example of the dichotomy in current masculinity, Jack (Edward Norton) is a dynamic young businessman constantly working to improve his status, a slave to the consumer society. He tries to fill the void in his life with various forays into encounter groups which leave him more lost than ever until eventually the character of Tyler (Jack's alter ego) manifests himself. He is all the things Jack would like to be, tough,

confident, handsome, violent, sexually very virile, answers only to himself, despises the pointless accumulation of possessions and other 'soft' things and is completely in charge of his emotions.

Deeply misogynistic overtones lurk in this film-the one female character is almost superfluous; she is always turning up uninvited into this masculine world and ruining things. Her sexuality is a trap and to be avoided and only handled by the alter ego who is 'man' enough to do so. The sex scenes are presented as a fight (as are the sex scenes between Close and Douglas in 'Fatal Attraction)- a wild battle with the alter ego casually coming out and offering her on to the other persona Jack. She is referred to as weaker and best got rid of. In fact the only people the various men are at ease with in the film are other men. The blame for the feminisation of men is laid on the consumer society and its emphasis on the 'feminine' objectives of comfort, security and cosiness. But in their search for a real man Tyler and Jack find a destructive, regimented Fascist monster that finally turns on the society it helped to create-the film pushes the compulsive drive for masculinity, i.e. toughness, control, detachment of feelings to the very edge and in the bleak and hopeless ending of this film the audience is left with the grim realisation that until the heart and attitude of humanity changes, the world will continue on its helter skelter ride to oblivion.

Another film worth mentioning is the British film 'Full Monty'. The film has an altogether more optimistic message although the film is set in a depressing dour small Northern City where the majority of the male citizens are unemployed as the local steel works have shut down; yet all the women are working in reasonably paid jobs. The men gather in groups to bolster their morale. After witnessing some women having a drunken night out in a club, Gary, (the lead character) says, "When women start pissing like us, that's it. We're finished. We're not needed any more are we, obsolete, like dinosaurs, it's all yesterday's news.... you're like the rest of us, on a scrap heap'. This is one of the first films to draw an explicit relationship between male inadequacy as a result of sudden unemployment and male anxiety concerning his sexual potency. But in a final, hilarious, role reversal ending of the film, it seems to indicate that if men lighten up and don't take themselves so seriously as 'males', things can get better!

Many of the popular films of the 1980's in particular reflect nervousness in the face of advanced technology. There is a deep fear that man will be overtaken by the machine. In fact it seems that the man can only be a hero if he is incorporated into a machine. In the film 'Robo Cop', neither Alex Murphy nor Robo Cop is heroic as separate identities. It is this fusion of the man and the machine that reinstates a heroic masculine identity. By the time

viewers reach the film 'Robo Cop 3' the USA. Police force are literally apologising for being merely men 'we are cops, nothing more, we are not robots, if that's what you mean', states one anxious policeman. Robo cop is but one of dozens of such films incorporating a mixture of man and technology to create a super-hero. In the 1999 Box Office hit 'The Matrix' Keanu Reeves finally defeats the super villains who are machines disguised as men, but only after undergoing a machine induced nemeses which turns into a suitably powerful avenger.

Masculinity is now legitimised by technology, rather than imposed by sheer physical or legal force-witness the recent war in Afghanistan. But hand in hand with technological developments is a collapse of certain fundamental beliefs. The questioning of what it means to be a man in a world constantly encroached by technology and women's using the technology is inescapable.

One of the main focus pints of the crises in masculinity is the difficulty of combining private emotions and the public, the emotional and intuitive feelings and the rational. It is the struggle to protect the private and the personal life in the work place of an increasingly voracious and competitive economic system. People now go to bed early in order to spend more time at work and if anything has to be cut out its leisure time! As Oliver Bennett says in 'Cultural Pessimism: narratives of decline in the post-modern world'-'this latest phase of capitalism has reached a point of historic crisis, where the very structure of human societies are threatened". Society has indeed sold its soul to capitalism!!

In the world today what physical aspects of masculinity can be said to be important, given that even war has been totally given over to the domain of technology? To be a brave soldier means nothing if you can be wiped out by a finger pushing a button on bombs of mass destruction and not even see your enemy in the flesh.

In Will Self's book 'Perfidious Man' he says: 'his manhood resides in his relationships with it, as a partner, as a father, as a patriarch...' these aspects are the true criteria of masculinity.

Society must endeavour to find a method of understanding why men behave in the ways that they do and how they might release themselves and women from the chains that such behaviour imposes, and to participate in the setting up of a post-patriarchal age. A mind boggling difficult and challenging manoeuvre. .