

# Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush

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DAVID GREVEN



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DAVID GREVEN

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*For my Father, not only one of my best friends but also one of the best film critics I know*

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**Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush**

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## When Hollywood Masculinity Became Self-Aware

During a particularly suspenseful sequence in Wolfgang Petersen's *In the Line of Fire* (1993), Clint Eastwood, playing Frank Horrigan, a Secret Service agent haunted by his failure to prevent JFK's assassination, races across rooftops in pursuit of John Malkovich's wily, manipulative would-be presidential assassin, Mitch Leary. Part of the joke and the pathos here is that, at sixty-three years old, Eastwood is past these heroics, yet he valiantly pushes forward, sprinting over roof after roof, Horrigan's young partner Al (Dylan McDermott) trailing behind. Malkovich leaps across one last great gulf; Eastwood follows suit, but he can't quite make it, hanging desperately by his fingers on the edge. This is one of the most vertiginous sequences ever filmed; indeed, the shot of Eastwood hanging above a vast Nietzschean abyss recalls the opening sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). When Hitchcock leaves James Stewart hanging over the edge, he creates a metaphysical statement about the predicament of humankind, suspended above the unknown.

What statement does Wolfgang Petersen seek to make here? As Horrigan clings to the edge, Leary appears above him, saying, "Take my hand or you'll die." Leary needs Horrigan alive, to serve as witness to his ingenuity and to partake in a lonely game only the two men can play. Eastwood, consistently rejecting Leary's offers of kinship, takes his gun out and points it up at Leary, who finds the gesture amusing (as only Malkovich can convey). "If you shoot me, we'll both die," Leary says, while also taunting Horrigan about his resolve to save the current president. Eastwood resolutely keeps his gun on Malkovich—and then, to demonstrate his confidence that Eastwood won't shoot him, Malkovich *takes Eastwood's gun into his mouth*.

As if to give vent to the building pressure, Malkovich's Leary shoots young Al, who, across the other rooftop, is trying to save Frank. From a low angle, we see Al's face fall before us as he lands on the roof's edge, a bullet wound



**Figure 0.1.** *Clint Eastwood in In the Line of Fire (1993): man over an abyss*



**Figure 0.2.** *Eastwood arms himself.*

clearly shown in his forehead. But then Leary shoots Al *again*, and this time blood copiously pours out of his mouth. If the gun becomes a metaphorical phallus in Leary's mouth, the blood pouring out of Al's mouth metaphorically signals sexual release. The economy of violence safeguards the mainstream integrity of the film from the all-out homoeroticism that threatens to explode the screen, yet this homoeroticism suffuses the entire spectacle to the degree that it takes what had been an effective but formulaic thriller to another level of desperation and intrigue altogether. In the midst of a thriller about Washington and behind-the-scenes power, a fairly unmistakable depiction of male-male fellatio brings the movie to a startling halt.

What was in the water in Hollywood in the early 90s? Eastwood had toyed with psychosexual themes in the 1984 *Tightrope*, but that film was an anomaly in the slew of reactionary films, largely in the action genre, that dominated the Reagan era. *In the Line of Fire*, far from being anomalous, joins with many

other films of its era to put a radically reimagined manhood on the screen. When Clint Eastwood must involuntarily submit to oral gratification from John Malkovich, Hollywood manhood has undergone a profound shift.

*Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* considers the representation of masculinity in Hollywood moviemaking from 1989 up to the first decade of the twenty-first century. The period has been presided over by three presidents: George Herbert Walker Bush, our forty-first president (1989–1993); our forty-second, William Jefferson Clinton (1993–2001); and George Walker Bush, our forty-third (2001–2008). Purportedly, the Bushes' own monikers for each other refer to their presidential numbers; I will follow their lead and refer throughout this study to Bush *père* as “Bush 41” and to his son as “Bush 43.” Although the respective cultural eras of which the presidents are figureheads each brim with numerous issues of urgent importance, this study narrowly fo-



**Figure 0.3.** *John Malkovich's killer embodies the threat of a new queer manhood.*



**Figure 0.4.** *Voracious queer desire: Malkovich eating Eastwood's gun*



cuses on the gender politics of Hollywood movies during these years. My central argument is that a struggle between narcissistic and masochistic modes of manhood defines Hollywood masculinity in the Bush-to-Bush period; this claim proceeds from the contention that a profound shift in gendered representation occurred during the Bush 41 years. In *Marching in Place*, Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame critiqued what they called the “status quo presidency” of the first Bush. I do not in any way dispute this assessment of his term in office; I do argue, however, that in terms of popular culture, the Bush 41 era was anything but status quo. An explosion of films that foregrounded non-normative gendered identity and sexualities transformed Hollywood film’s representation of gender and sexuality. Indeed, we can with justification view the Bush 41 years as Hollywood’s queer renaissance, a period the richness of which I can only adumbrate here. In the years that have followed, popular cinema has either emulated or evaded the representational strategies of this era of filmmaking, especially in terms of gender and sexuality.

The queer renaissance of early 90s film was a synergistic outpouring of popular and indie cinema. Mainstream films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *Philadelphia* (1993); crossover indie-mainstream successes such as *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and *The Crying Game* (1992); and a proliferation of gay-themed independent films (Isaac Julien’s 1989 *Looking for Langston*, Tom Kalin’s 1991 *Swoon*, Todd Haynes’s 1991 *Poison*, Gregg Araki’s 1992 *The Living End*, Rose Troche’s 1994 *Go Fish*, and several others) together made queer sexuality visible as never before. In addition to films that explicitly depicted non-normative gendered and sexual identities, several popular films from the same period beckoned readings as allegorizations of queer sexuality: *Dead Ringers* (1988), with its disturbingly incestuous homoeroticism between schizophrenic brothers (both brilliantly played by Jeremy Irons); *Alien 3* (1992), with its central dilemma of the Alien “virus” infecting the body of its heroine Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and its shaven-headed homosocial world of men, who look alternately like AIDS victims and activists; and *Prelude to a Kiss* (1992), based on Craig Lucas’s play, with its story of switched identities between a quirky woman about to be married and an old man (in one of the key scenes, her tormented fiancé kisses the old man in order to kiss “her”).<sup>1</sup> With its homoerotic themes and exchanges of fatal blood between men (Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt as tortured quasi-vampire lovers), Neil Jordan’s 1994 film version of Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* similarly allegorizes gay relationships and the threat of AIDS. Either through explicit or allegorical means, Bush 41 films made queer themes central, tinged with the pathos of AIDS before it became, thanks to protease inhibitors, a manageable chronic disease rather than an automatic

death sentence. Quickly perceived as a distinctive movement, the slew of gay-themed indies were designated the “New Queer Cinema.” But this appellation applied fully as relevantly to popular filmmaking, and only by taking the popular films into account can we fully recognize the radicalism of the New Queer Cinema. As Paul Burstyn points out, queerness “has managed to pervade popular culture to such a degree that it hardly makes sense to draw distinctions between what is ‘mass culture’ and what is ‘queer subculture.’”<sup>2</sup>

It’s worth noting how commercially, as well as critically, successful these films were. If we take the Academy Awards as a barometer of the merging of critical and commercial success, we can note that *Silence* won Oscars for Best Picture and Director, as well as for Best Actress and Actor (Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins, respectively); that *The Crying Game*, the sleeper hit of 1992, received several Oscar nominations, including Best Supporting Actor for Jaye Davidson’s gender-bending performance (Neil Jordan won an Oscar for his original screenplay); and that Tom Hanks won Best Actor for *Philadelphia*.

It’s also worth noting that, at the time, many of these films were greeted with as much consternation as excitement. Indeed, many commentators then and throughout the years have denounced the films as homophobic, especially *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Basic Instinct* but also *The Crying Game* and *Philadelphia*. *Silence* and *Basic* inspired activists to protest in the streets against Hollywood homophobia; in New York City, a campaign to out *Silence* star Jodie Foster as “Absolutely Queer” garnered a great deal of attention. Some of these particular films were indeed awful, both on aesthetic and ideological grounds. Yet it is absurd to lump disturbing but also profoundly imaginative films like *The Silence of the Lambs* (a masterpiece) and *The Crying Game* (a flawed but brilliant film) with crude (if luridly fascinating) films like *Basic Instinct*. That *Basic* actually garnered a healthy number of lesbian fans at the time and that *Philadelphia*, a film that determinedly seeks to *challenge* homophobia, actually manages to list among the most homophobic of its era alerts us to the difficulty of distinguishing the positive from the negative portrayal. Indeed, as Judith Halberstam suggests in *Female Masculinity*, it may be worthwhile to reconsider the negative values we attach to the negative portrayal. As Linda S. Kauffman puts it in a discussion of transgressive films such as those made by David Cronenberg and Brian De Palma, these directors “confront life in its most frightening forms: the intersection of the sex and death drives, the psyche’s violent vicissitudes, the cataclysms that make no sense.”<sup>3</sup> As I will be arguing throughout this study, very often the most disturbing, least “positive” films about sexuality most daringly address the complexities of sexual identity in our compellingly strange time.

The impact of the openness of queer themes in the Bush 41 period has been considerable, altering the representation of gender and sexual identity. But the impact has also been unclear. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) was a surprise critical and box-office success that explicitly put a gay love story on the screen. The dearth of gay-themed films made in *Brokeback's* wake, however, has led commentators to question what effect the film has had, if any, on Hollywood, which is still stuck in its homophobic reluctance to represent homosexuality. But while indeed troubling, the dearth of gay-themed films is only a seeming dearth. Since the Bush 41 era, homoeroticism, queerness, and the sexually non-normative have informed Hollywood filmmaking. It's not that queers are being explicitly represented; it's that representation has turned queer. The openness of queer sexuality has transformed the shape of movie masculinity itself. For example, Robert Zemeckis's *Beowulf* (2007), a highly altered film version of the great medieval epic, presents a digitized rendering of the titular character as a buff gym specimen. This isn't a shaggy, rough-hewn medieval body but, instead, a delicately sculpted, gleaming example of postgay musculature: proportionate, nearly hairless save some delicate decorative chest hair tendrils, feminized. Beowulf's face, appropriately grizzly, suggests the medieval period, but his body emblemizes the preoccupations of our own time. Turning the peek-a-boo, flowerpot-covering-the-phallus shenanigans of the *Austin Powers* films on their head, *Beowulf* has its hero strip down completely to battle the fearsome, pitiable monster Grendel. We watch as Beowulf nimbly leaps over and ducks beneath the pile of loathsome, bawling Grendel flesh, the spectacle being about what we *don't* see, Beowulf's presumably prodigious but invisible medieval manhood; the film explicates the paradoxical nature of the phallus as sign of both male power and of castration. And when in the final moments, the huge, gloriously golden-scaled dragon—which in the film version is actually Beowulf's son by Grendel's mother, a femme fatale played by Angelina Jolie, her hair a long, winding caudal appendage—dies and reverts back to enchanted human form, lying beside the dying Beowulf as foamy tides ebb and flow over their bodies, the effect is stunning: the aged, ruined Beowulf beside a golden, sleek version of his former exquisite self. This is truly the dream of American manhood as D. H. Lawrence described it, to “go backwards, from old age to golden youth.”<sup>4</sup> Bush-to-Bush films fuse the Lawrentian and the queer.

As stated earlier, this book focuses quite narrowly on Hollywood films and what they tell us about masculinity. The sociopolitical life of the nation in the years after the Reagan era, the distinct versions of America we have experienced under the leaderships of Bush 41, Clinton, and Bush 43 demands

the kind of careful attention I simply do not have the space to provide in this book. And several films and directors significant for the themes of this book—Oliver Stone, Quentin Tarantino, the recent films of Steven Spielberg and David Cronenberg—await treatments in a future study.<sup>5</sup> What I offer here is engagement with certain films that I believe are among the key texts of the Bush-to-Bush era. I am committed to close reading of texts and believe the strength of my argument lies in such readings. My hope is that the treatment of films and directors and stars in these chapters will be useful to those who undertake, in myriad directions, the study of this volatile, shifting period.

### Chapter by Chapter

I will now offer brief summaries of the chapters and highlight the ways in which they address some of the major themes of the study taken up in this introduction.

#### CHAPTER ONE — MANHOOD IN HOLLYWOOD FROM BUSH TO BUSH

In this chapter, I provide the theoretical framework for this study as a whole. Narcissism and masochism as theoretical concepts have been crucial to film theory in the past few decades; Hollywood film puts these concepts into fascinating play. I track the uses of the concepts from their psychoanalytic origins to their deployments in film theory as well as psychoanalytically inflected queer theory, considering theorists such as Freud, Theodor Reik, Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Gaylyn Studlar, Leo Bersani, and Lee Edelman. The main thrust of this chapter is that narcissism, though often cast in a pejorative light, may be useful as a mode of masculine cinematic performance that affords considerable erotic and identificatory license to the queer viewer. In order to make this case, I explore the ways in which critics have valorized masochism as a resistant mode of masculine subjectivity; I challenge this valorization by suggesting that masochistic male sexuality often serves to bolster, rather than subvert, traditional masculinity.

#### CHAPTER TWO — AN ILL-FATED BACCHANAL: *CASUALTIES OF WAR* AND THE HORROR OF THE HOMOSOCIAL

In Brian De Palma's great antiwar film *Casualties of War* (1989), his characteristic, career-wide experimentation with split-image effects—the split-

screen, the split-diopter—takes on an entirely new significance in terms of De Palma's staging of *the masochistic gaze*. Daniel Lang wrote an account in 1969 of one of the most harrowing episodes of the Vietnam War: the kidnapping, rape, and murder of a young Vietnamese woman by a group of American soldiers, one of whom refused to participate in and unsuccessfully opposed the group's treatment of the woman. The first, and only, film version of this case, De Palma's film emerges in the year that Bush 41 takes office and within a new wave of Vietnam films instigated by the surprising box-office success of Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986).

In this chapter, I consider the original account by Lang and De Palma's cinematic rendering of it, which I view as the synthesization of several key themes in his oeuvre, especially the failed heroism of American manhood. I examine De Palma's film as a representation of American homosociality, providing a historical contextualization of it that illuminates American misogyny and homophobia, the latter no less a key factor in the events as described in the Lang account and De Palma's film. I provide a theoretical framework of the homosocial that allows us to consider De Palma's film as a critique of the normative codes of American manhood and what Gayle Rubin, following Levi-Strauss, calls the "traffic in women." The association of Eriksson, the man who opposed the kidnapping, rape, and murder of the woman, with homosexuality by the ringleader of the group, Meserve, is analyzed as a crucial component of the narrative. I explore the ways in which the film represents homoeroticism as both a galvanizing and threatening element in homosocialized manhood, which inculcates misogyny and homophobia. Further, this film represents a strong corrective to the particular forms of nationalism in the Reagan era, carried over into the Bush era. I also examine the film's staging of a masculine battle between a "negative narcissism" and a "heroic masochism."

#### CHAPTER THREE—MALE MEDUSAS AND FEMALE HEROES:

##### FESTISHISM AND AMBIVALENCE IN *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS*

This chapter reexamines the pervasive academic understanding of Jonathan Demme's 1991 film as a homophobic text. Considering the early reception of this film about a female FBI agent trainee on the hunt for Buffalo Bill, or Jame Gumb, a serial killer of women, I address the ways in which the film was simultaneously praised for its feminism and denounced for its homophobia, arguing that the representation of queer manhood and femininity should not be thus bifurcated but understood as shared elements of the film's overarching critique of patriarchal manhood. From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective,

I make the case that Gumb should be interpreted not as a gay man but as a fetishist, a distinct sexual identity with complexities of its own; I also link male fetishism to the figure of the phallic mother. This chapter deviates somewhat from the narcissism/masochism split of the study as a whole (though it remains implicitly important here), but treats fetishism, like masochism, as an alternative form of male strategy for the avoidance of homosexuality. I also tie in the film's respective quest characters—Clarice Starling, the heroine, and Gumb—with the historical project of American self-made manhood, arguing that the film should be understood as an element within the project of American individualism.

CHAPTER FOUR—THE HOLLYWOOD MAN DATE: SPLIT  
MASCULINITY AND THE DOUBLE-PROTAGONIST FILM

In Bush-to-Bush films, one genre exists in which the narcissism/masochism split is literalized through the complex negotiation for narrative dominance between two protagonists, usually male, both of whom lay legitimate claim to the narrative, a new genre I call the double-protagonist film. With the rise of the double-protagonist film—which, as I explain below, is related to but also distinct from the much more commonly understood “buddy film”—Classic Hollywood isolate manhood is transformed into dyadic manhood; dyadic manhood threatens to topple the reign of the heterosexual relationship presumably central to Hollywood film; and male-male relations of all kinds must now contend with, account for, and orient themselves around a central, often contentious, always complex relationship between two male protagonists played by two male stars of commensurate stature, who therefore demand equal attention and narrative importance.

CHAPTER FIVE—DESTROYING SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL:  
NARCISSISM, MALE VIOLENCE, AND THE HOMOSOCIAL  
IN *FIGHT CLUB*

David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) is one of the most culturally resonant and influential films of the 1990s, spawning the still-active titular clubs for young men. This chapter reads *Fight Club* as an example of fascist ideology in popular filmmaking, arguing that it is an attack on the perceived “softening” of American men in the Clinton era. I insert the film within the rise of male reformation/men's movement projects such as Robert Bly's *Iron John* and the Promise Keepers, arguing that, like these projects, Fincher's film—which represents a revision of the gender politics of his previous films—works to

restore normative masculinity by purging it of the threats of femininity and queer sexuality. *Fight Club* exemplifies what I locate as a crucial agenda of the double-protagonist Bush-to-Bush film, to transform narcissistic manhood into a more normative masochistic version.

CHAPTER SIX — “AM I BLUE?”: VIN DIESEL AND  
MULTIRACIAL MALE SEXUALITY

Whereas Michael Jackson has been largely impugned for, among other things, the attempt to “whiten” his image, Vin Diesel’s ability to pass as white—despite the explicit problematization of his race in his 1999 film *Multi-Facial* and in interviews—has been a largely undiscussed aspect of his star image. Another, also occluded, facet of his star persona is his sexual ambiguity. With his intersecting racial and sexual ambiguity, Diesel emerges as one of the most fascinating and problematic of current male stars. Looking at such films as *Pitch Black* (2000), *Chronicles of Riddick* (2004), and *xXx* (2002), I explore the ways in which racial and sexual ambiguities, as embodied by Diesel, get negotiated and the relationship of such issues to genre filmmaking. I also claim that, while his early films depict him as a brazen, queer narcissist, Diesel’s later films strive to transform him into the normative masochist, a project that has implications for the representation of both his racial and sexual identity.

CHAPTER SEVEN — THE DEVIL WEARS ABJECTION:  
*THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*

Most of the popular and critical discussions of Mel Gibson’s 2004 film have centered on the issue of anti-Semitism. This chapter enlarges these debates by incorporating the film’s representation of queer sexuality into the discussion. This film pits a masochistic Christ against a narcissistic Satan. The androgynous figure of the Devil represents the height of a homophobic sensibility that undergirds Gibson’s oeuvre and relates to the historical, though underexplored, associations of homosexuality and Satan. I make the case that Gibson’s homophobic representation of the Devil is not unique to him but part of a longstanding tradition in Christianity. Yet, I also argue that it is precisely Gibson’s homophobia that impels his most ingenious cinematic achievements; I consider the relationship between aesthetics and hate as exemplified by Gibson’s filmmaking. I also reinsert the film into the tradition of the Hollywood Biblical epic.

CHAPTER EIGHT — NARCISSUS TRANSFIGURED:

*BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*

This chapter places Ang Lee's 2005 film within the tradition of the pastoral, arguing that, as a pastoral, the film is itself only one facet of a larger tradition of male representation. Lee revises the Western genre, which often featured a "split hero," two heroes who represent, in Laura Mulvey's terms, an upholder and a personification of the law, through the terms of the new-style double-protagonist film. In doing so, he both critiques the Western genre and brings the insights of the classic Western to bear on postmodern representations of manhood. Arguing that Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) represents a queer version of the masochistic gaze subject, I further argue that Ennis Del Mar (the late Heath Ledger) simultaneously represents queer manhood and a straight male narcissistic subjectivity that must be redressed and reimagined. This film makes a moral case for the "transfiguration" of Narcissus.



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