

Masculinity in Crisis

Myths, Fantasies and Realities

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One reason Mussolini attacked Abyssinia in 1935 was that Italy was felt to lag behind other European states such as Britain and France in colonial possessions. But again we cannot ascribe this to the greater rapacity of British or French men, but to the different historical development of British, French and Italian capitalism and imperialism. One might, of course, argue that the colonial urge was itself a male one – but then many cultures have not practised colonialism.

Marx posed the issue starkly: does social being determine consciousness, or does consciousness determine social being?⁴⁸ Male violence must either be seen as a question of original sin (ordained by biology or psychology), or as a social construction required by patriarchal society. Ironically if the first thesis is true, then we cannot blame men for obeying their biological destiny. But there is a lot of evidence to suggest that it isn't true, and that violence is a product of social conflict and exploitation.

9 Male Images and Stereotypes

Women have complained long and hard about the qualities they have traditionally been expected to display, such as demureness, compassion, care, receptivity, and so on. But not so much attention has been paid to the stereotypes that are attached to men, or there has been an unspoken assumption that these are preferable. Of course, as I have said before, one cannot blame the women's movement for not looking at men's position with sympathy – that is something they want to get away from. It is up to men to articulate their anger and frustration at being stuck again and again with the same attributes. Here is a cogent feminist argument:

As a result of their socialization, most women have over-developed certain attributes such as warmth, compassion, tenderness, intuitiveness, nurturance and flexibility at the expense of certain others equally important for effective human functioning, for example, assertiveness, endurance, initiative, industry, risk-taking, and self-reliance.¹

The argument is well put. My point is that it can be reversed equally well – men have overdeveloped the qualities of being assertive, tough, hard-working, self-reliant and so on. I think a lot of men are tired of having to go out to work all of their lives, having to support a wife and children, make insurance provisions, pay mortgages and other bills. Of course, today there is a lot more sharing of these responsibilities as women have become economically more powerful. But this sharing is not only of benefit to women – it releases men from the exclusive burden of looking after families.

Some men are fed up and angry at being constrained in these ways, expected to be the provider, the strong rock, the sexual performer, expected to always cope, not to collapse, expected to be chivalrous, to mend fuses and flat tyres, to make the moves in courtship, expected not to be passive or weepy or frightened, expected to go to war and be killed, or be prepared to kill others.

This is the obverse side of all the justified complaints that women have had in the last two decades. Sometimes men's position has been assumed by default to be all right, that all the things men are supposed to enjoy makes their life a bed of roses. It doesn't! Men die earlier than women, die of heart attacks because they are conditioned not to feel from their heart,

they get ulcers because they are conditioned to keep their anxieties to themselves. They suffer great anxiety and depression because they are not 'manly' in the stereotyped manner, or because they have feelings that seem forbidden to men. They are very lonely because they do not know how to communicate to someone openly about feelings, and hence always remain cut off. They feel deeply abused, although often they don't know how, or why, or from whom this happened.

According to some feminists, men enjoy power, influence, domination, lord it over women and other men, and generally feel like the king of the castle. But most men that I see in psychotherapy feel desperately inadequate, lonely, out of touch with people, out of touch with their own feelings and bodies, sexually unsure of themselves, bored with the job prospects that are available to them. You might argue that that is a biased sample of dissatisfied men, and that most men are living it up, but I doubt it. Everywhere we see signs of frustration, loneliness, despair, lack of fulfilment in men.

Men have been brainwashed to think they are never unhappy, and if they are, they keep it quiet. Thus they bottle up their feelings and develop physical symptoms instead, or they become violent, or criminal or anti-social in some other way.

Why is it young males who vandalize public property, who steal cars, go in for joy-riding, get in fights, carry knives, and so on? Don't tell me it's because of testosterone – that's like saying women are 'naturally' submissive. I think these male youth are expressing their utter frustration and their feeling that they aren't wanted except as factory-fodder, if they are lucky enough to get a job. Their expression is utterly inarticulate and unconscious, but then they have hardly been educated to express themselves.

Men are not supposed to get depressed, just as women are not supposed to get angry or aggressive. The psychiatric hospitals are mostly full of women, and the feminist thesis that women are being punished through psychiatry has some truth in it. But it is also true that men are forbidden to show feelings other than aggression. Men go on and on until they have breakdowns, or they project their depression into their partner, or they drink, or find some other way of anaesthetizing themselves. Thus such indices as suicide, drug addiction, alcoholism are all much higher among men than women.²

Men are not supposed to want to be cared for, and this is another reason they haven't gone into mental hospital as much as women. For a man to take to his bed and go through a regressive period, where he doesn't do much, goes through heavy feelings, weeps, feels sorry for himself – this is extremely taboo, and I believe, is more available to women. Men have self-reliance bred into them, and they turn into fortresses, repelling anyone who

might sympathize with them, terrified of emerging from the fortresses, yet desperately lonely within it. They are hollow men, and the prizes that seem to be offered to them in our culture are often experienced as hollow. A middle-aged business man said to me – 'Sure, I can go in the wine bar and flaunt my money, and my expensive suits, and my portable phone, but no one in that bar knows that I wake up at three in the morning with a terrible dread inside me, and sometimes I cry without knowing why.'

SUPERMAN, FREDDY AND SCHWARZENEGGER

If we want to look more closely at the stereotyped images of men in our culture, it is very illuminating to examine those found in the media and in the arts. Here we find images which provide an insight into the expectations of the culture, and also into the unconscious depths of masculinity. That is, we find both images that consolidate or reinforce the stereotypes of masculinity, and those images that subvert it. We find both the macho man and something quite different.³

One image that has been resurrected in the cinema is Superman. This is a typical ambivalent model: behind Superman is Clark Kent, bespectacled, diffident, hopeless with women, rather clumsy. So here we have a polarity between the male who is nice but useless, and the male who is omnipotent. Of course, Superman is basically a modern rendition of an archetypal figure, who solves insoluble problems, puts disasters right, and can actually control nature. This is man the scientist, the space explorer, the accumulator of knowledge and technology – but in Superman he is totally positive. Superman doesn't cause pollution or war, but prevents them.

Superman is a kind of jokey image: we smile when we think of him in his tights and underpants, and his cape, and Clark Kent's quick change in the telephone booth, and the films tended to encourage the rather camp humour. But there are also some serious ideas about men here: that beneath the outer surface of competence, knowledge and sureness there is someone less assured, more nervous about himself. But then the polarity in this fantasy can be reversed: Superman is the fantasized compensatory image for the man who feels inadequate.

An opposing male image is provided by Freddy Krueger, star of the *Nightmare on Elm St* series of films. The first of the series was based on a brilliant image: Freddy first appears in a girl's dream, and gradually emerges into her daylight reality, persecuting her and her friends. One of the most disturbing things about the film is that it is often difficult to tell if

a particular incident is really happening, or is part of the girl's dream. For example, at the end, when Freddy appears to have been vanquished by the heroine, he suddenly reappears, spreading mayhem again. But is this really happening, or is she dreaming again? That blurring between fantasy and reality which many people experience is captured vividly in these images.

What kind of man is Freddy? He is macabre, violent, with a fiendish sense of humour, and a deep desire to mutilate people – his body is adapted to this, with its massive claw of razors.

One of the fascinating things about Freddy is that he became a cult. You could buy all kinds of Freddy Krueger paraphernalia – masks, hands. My own son fervently desired a Freddy hand, and walked round the house for days brandishing his claw. He totally enjoyed the fantasy of being a mutilator, and having this power to terrorize people. This is one way children can find a cathartic relief for their guilt about being full of nasty feelings towards Mum and Dad. It's interesting that some parents don't let their children have such fiendish toys – believing like some feminists that fantasy leads to reality (or fantasy is reality), whereas on the contrary it's through the working through of aggressive fantasy that children learn to distinguish it from actual violence. Surely this is one reason that fairy-tales, cartoons and comics are tremendously violent.

In *Nightmare on Elm Street II* (subtitle: *Freddy's Revenge*), the theme is given a new twist, in that now a young adolescent male continually dreams of Freddy, and has the fear that he is Freddy. He finds the claw in his room, finds himself in his girl-friend's bedroom with the claw attached to him. Here is the male nightmare – that his sexuality is a ravaging monster, that will savage and terrorize women. This is a particular fear at adolescence, but many adult men retain it. Along with the fear is a deep unconscious wish to be a Freddy, to be a scourge and destroyer and rapist towards women. But in fact, in *Freddy's Revenge* most of the victims are men – possibly suggesting that deep-seated homophobic fears are being expressed.

A rich body of images about men has been provided in recent years by the Schwarzenegger films. Aided by excellent special effects, his later films – including *Terminator*, *Total Recall*, *Terminator II*, *Kindergarten Cop* – provide a highly complex set of fantasies about being male.

In *Terminator*, Schwarzenegger is a machine in a man's image, and the plot of the film revolves around his hunting down a woman who is to give birth to a new leader in the future. In the end the man-machine is himself destroyed, and broken into pieces. Here is the theme of man as machine, robot, conformist, obeying authority, attacking women, becoming dehumanized in the process, and eventually destroyed.

In *Total Recall*, the process has gone further: the protagonist's mind has been stolen, and he sets out to recover it. Here is a kind of male lament: his mind has been raped by the culture, and the struggle is on to reclaim his individuality, and to assert that he is something distinct from the implanted and alien mind structures. 'Your life is a dream' his pseudowife (herself an implanted memory) tells him – but can he work out which is dream and which is reality?

In *Terminator II*, the robot hunter takes a new twist: there are now two of them, one good, one evil. This is a fascinating extension of the Terminator theme: now the male is part destroyer, part restorer and creator. This undoubtedly reflects many men's unconscious unease about their ambiguous nature, loving but hating, kind but aggressive. How can we be both?

Special effects in this film are the star, as the evil Terminator, a man made of liquid metal, dissolves and reformulates himself as different objects or people. Thus destructive masculinity is seen as protean: able to assume any shape. Reassuringly, Schwarzenegger is the good Terminator, who is rapidly humanized by a young boy – he asks the boy 'Why do you cry?' A vital question for the autistic male.

In this film, Schwarzenegger also carries out the time-honoured male ritual of self-destruction – he spectacularly descends into a vat of molten steel, in order to destroy the chip in his brain that might condemn humanity to nuclear holocaust. This film contains an amazing synthesis of male roles: the invulnerable machine, the masochistic Christ figure, the destroyer, the young boy. When the liquid Terminator is himself terminated (also in molten steel), he goes through a macabre series of transformations, before totally regressing to a pre-human, pre-life stage of formlessness.⁴

The image of the male as robot is widespread in modern cinema: replicants in *Blade Runner*, androids in the *Alien* trilogy, See Threepio and R2D2 in *Star Wars*. A related image is that of the disembodied male intellect: Spock in *Star Trek*, speaking computers in many films such as *Solaris* and *2001*. But this theme has long antecedents: Sherlock Holmes, the desiccated misogynist solver of crime puzzles; the cerebral Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels*. But in *Gulliver's Travels* Jonathan Swift also describes the Yahoos – depraved filthy beasts – and the image of the male as animal is often counterposed to the desiccated intellect. In *Star Wars*, we have Chewbacca, the inarticulate companion for Harrison Ford; and in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* we find Caliban, the noble savage, contrasted with Ariel, the spirit of the air. Thus reason and flesh are often portrayed as split: the male is both rational and bestial.

American films as a whole have given us a remarkable and profound analysis of maleness – there are numerous studies of love between men (*Butch*

Cassidy and the Sundance Kid), or of male solitude and autism (*A Fistful of Dollars*) or male brutality (*The Dirty Dozen*; *Dirty Harry*). The male psyche has found one of its major vehicle of expression in Hollywood.

There are such a rich variety of images that spring to mind: one thinks of Jack Lemmon in *Some Like it Hot*, playing a woman who gets engaged to a man who doesn't mind that 'she' is a man ('nobody's perfect' his fiancé says). Or Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*, rediscovering male camaraderie with Native Americans and his connection with the wolves and the earth; Antony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs*, ruthless, intellectual, cannibalistic; Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*, allowing free rein to the widespread male fantasy of being a woman; from an earlier period, Gary Cooper at the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, wounded, waiting for the Fascist troops to arrive, ready to sacrifice himself to save the others – martyred, Christ-like; Gregory Peck in *The Gunfighter* (1950), austere, sombre, utterly doomed; Henry Fonda in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, sadistic, extremely un-Henry Fonda-like; Paul Newman at the end of *Hud*, arrogant, abandoned, cut off from humanity. Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Robert de Niro, Al Pacino, Hoffman, Micky Rourke – these artists have given us fascinating and sometimes profound analyses of masculinity.

THE BUFFOON

Superman, Freddy Krueger, Terminator, Hannibal the Cannibal – these are larger than life images of man as god, demon, destroyer. But there are other, less inflated images as well. For example, there is the buffoon/clown figure.

In British culture, one of the finest examples of the buffoon has been John Cleese's portrayal of Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers*. This was a masterly performance by Cleese: Fawlty is emotionally castrated by his bitchy wife, but nurses perennial grudges and thoughts of revenge against her, constantly makes a mess of things, but retains grandiose fantasies that he will get it right next time. This summary cannot do justice to Cleese's comic genius – one thinks of the episode where Germans arrive at his hotel, and Cleese ends up marching up and down swearing that he will not sing old Nazi songs, but compulsively begins to, and does a grotesque and utterly tactless imitation of Hitler goose-stepping in the middle of the restaurant.

It is a superb portrait because we all recognize the truth of it. He is a man at war with himself, desperately wanting to perform well and surprise his

wife, but again and again sabotaging himself. It is also supremely uncomfortable to watch: Cleese has that ability to tread on the razor's edge between farce and anguish.

The buffoon has a rich tradition in British humour. One thinks of Tony Hancock, *Steptoe and Son*, the *Mr Bean* series by Rowan Atkinson, Tommy Cooper, Michael Crawford in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, the TV series *Only Fools and Horses* – the inadequate man has been a deep vein in British comic art. But the comedy is a catharsis and relief against the fear that we are like that – we are clumsy, we are terribly dependent on our wives and mothers, we are child-like, petty, peevish, but also grandiose, inflated. Men fear that they are little boys at heart, and the comedy enables us both to mock ourselves in the form of Fawlty, or Del, and to laugh in relief: perhaps it's not so awful being a man. 2

In America, there has been a more surreal vein of comedy: one thinks of the Keystone comedies, Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, Chaplin, Jerry Lewis. There is still the image of the useless male, but it is portrayed more physically and more wildly than in British comedy (and in Chaplin, much more romantically). The inept male is transformed into an extravagant image of anarchy, that ultimately seems to subvert bourgeois order itself – he becomes heroically and splendidly chaotic.

Woody Allen has presented a more intellectual study of inadequacy and pretension – he has raised impotent self-consciousness to a new and agonizing pitch of comic art: 'I'm the only man I know with penis envy.' The remark is typical of Allen: self-deprecating, wonderfully exaggerated, narcissistic. He is not strictly a buffoon or a clown, but a man ludicrously obsessed with himself and his own insecurity: 'don't knock masturbation – it's sex with someone I love'.

But all of these comic geniuses provide a catharsis against our own inadequacy and pretentiousness. They raise our deepest fears from the unconscious and turn them into burlesque – what a relief that we can laugh at them!

MALE LOVE

Male love is one of the dominant themes in American film. In many films, women are peripheral: the central dramatic tension concerns the possibility of men discovering their love for each other. The 1988 film *Rainman* is a classic example – Tom Cruise discovers that he has an autistic brother (Dustin Hoffman). At first, he simply wants to use him to get his share of an inheritance, but comes to love him. But there are innumerable studies of

this theme, often based on two men who have become distant from each other, and must find their mutual need. Examples are *Midnight Cowboy*, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (describing an ambivalent love/hate relationship between Garrett and Billy), *Dances with Wolves* (the white man and the red man discover each other and their need for each other).

The whole western genre, or the police thriller genre, or works such as the massive *Godfather* trilogy, take as their central focus men living together, struggling to work through their mutual love and hate. In the *Godfather* stories, women are there as lovers, mothers and wives, but the real passion exists between men. There is a scene in *The Godfather* when they have 'gone to the mattresses': they are in siege against other warring families – the men sit in the kitchen, one of them cooks a spaghetti sauce. Sonny (James Caan) is fired up with war-like emotion, there is a feeling of warmth, comradeship. Michael (Al Pacino) returns to the bosom of the family, and becomes his father's avenger.

Yet there is also something dismaying in this homoeroticism – not because it is homoerotic, but because it only allows the full intensity of male love to develop in the proximity of death and suffering. Again and again we find this equation of love and death in writers and filmmakers. We find it in Hemingway, who courted death all his life, and finally succumbed to it, and whose novelistic heroes court death – think of Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. We find it in Lawrence, whose strange sadistic/masochistic fantasies about sexuality and death can be found graphically in his story 'The Woman Who Rode Away'. We find it in many novels and films about war – men finally discover their need for each other, are able to care for each other, as they lie bleeding in the trench, mutilated by the grenade, or indeed at the point of death.

We might say that death is both a symbol of orgasm – which presumably many men unconsciously desire with other men, but are also terrified of – and also symbolizes a kind of ultimate point in life, when there is no point any more in concealing one's deepest feelings. A client of mine described how he saw in his dying father's face the deep love for himself – a love that had never been spoken of between them, and was still not spoken of at the moment of death. But many men have the fantasy that finally, as they lay dying, they will be able to express their love for others, and receive it – a love too painful to bear in life.

Death can also be equated with the womb – going back into the safe darkness, where there is no struggle, no identity. Death is a great and final non-separation – it strikes me that in the western film, for example, male love is simultaneously so intense yet so taboo that the only gift that men

can give to each other is death. This is almost explicit in a film such as *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1957), which is really concerned with the intense mutual need and dependence of Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday (Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas). The film ends with Earp saying in anguish over the dying Holliday: 'I need you Doc'. This is the great unmentionable need of man for man – but in *OK Corral*, it becomes acceptable since Doc is a doomed man.

The death-love connection reveals the deep-going masochism that exists in male psychology. It is OK for one man to love another if they are mortally wounded – suffering permits the stripping away of the normal mask of impassivity. Indeed, the masochism is the expression of love: 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13). This is a profound perversion: love equals suffering. But male love has been perverted, such is the fear surrounding it.

Yet how attractive such films as the western and the thriller can be: they are Zen-like, positing a world that is anti-Christian, anti-domestic, anti-feminine.⁵ Precisely through their concentration on death, and their rejection of the normal liberal definitions of the meaning of life, they appeal to that part of the human spirit (particularly in men) that yearns for a more primitive kind of life. Isn't this why men climb mountains, go pot-holing, hang-gliding? I don't think such activities are simply masochistic or defensive: they reveal that something has been lost in male existence, a kind of concreteness, a living in the present, and a lack of concern for the future or for a life after death.

WESTERNS

The most significant film genre describing male love is undoubtedly the western, which became increasingly sadistic and quasi-psychotic in the post-sixties period. The directors Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah developed a luxuriant eroticism of violence, photographed with stylistic bravura.

For example, at the beginning of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1969), three men wait for Charles Bronson to arrive on a train. No words are spoken; the heat and barrenness of the day is conveyed brilliantly: one man traps a fly in his gun; another collects water dripping onto his hat. Bronson arrives and shoots the three men: the gunman explodes in orgasmic violence. Later in the film three gunmen – Bronson, Henry Fonda, Jason Robards – compete for the attentions of Claudia Cardinale. As in

hard-core porn, the competing men, whilst ostensibly pursuing the central heroine (whore with a heart of gold), also use her as a mirror in which to refract their mutual fascination. One might suggest that the voluptuous savagery of Leone and Peckinpah reflects an increasingly tenuous suppression of homosexual desire.

Just before the climactic shoot-out in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Bronson and Fonda have one of those enigmatic dialogues which mark the western, and which the Italian western exaggerated to operatic/farcical proportions:

BRONSON: You're not a business man.

FONDA: Just a man.

BRONSON: An ancient race.

FONDA: Nothing matters now, not the land, not the money, not the woman. I came here to see you. I know you'll tell me what you're after.

BRONSON: Only at the point of dying.

FONDA: I know.

Then the Morricone music goes into overdrive, the two men stalk each other in the heat and dust. The camera dwells on the two men's faces – Bronson has a flashback to the sadistic killing of his brother by Fonda – and kills Fonda. Robards dies of gunshot wounds, and Bronson takes his body off for burial. The woman is left in the new railroad town as the custodian of civilization.

What does this archetypal sequence reveal? These two men are merely husks, emptied out of compassion, personality, meaning. Bronson is consumed by revenge; Fonda is heartless, seductive, dazzling in his inhumanity. The western – which in the B-movie gave us such artless charm – has become not merely tragic, but has gone beyond tragedy into nihilism and despair. Whereas in the classical western – say *Shane* – there always seemed to be some point to the violence (Shane kills the cattle baron's gunman so that the homesteaders can farm and build their homes), now in the decaying brilliance of Leone, for men everything has collapsed. They can only look at each other, and kill.

The looking is crucial – in many westerns, men continually stare at each other, held in each other's gaze with a passionate intensity quite different from their regard for women.⁶ At the beginning of *Shane*, Alan Ladd says to the young boy who worships him: 'I like a man who watches things going round. Shows he'll make his mark some day'. Men watch and wait upon each other, ready for the climactic moment, when they find love – or

death. And there seems to be little difference between the two – since male love cannot be found in life, it must be found in death. American Marines have sometimes used the term 'eye-fucking' to denote the intense experiences they found in war – the western is the opera of eye-fucking.⁷

In one sense such films as Leone's are impassioned expressionist poems; in another sense they are both ludicrous and sinister. They shrink male existence down to a tiny arena, where exotic and ritualistic dramas take place – nothing like real life, one might say. At the same time they do illuminate dark and unconscious areas of masculinity, as do the Japanese samurai films. I find them both repellent and fascinating. Are they not a shriek of pain and rage against the strait-jacket placed upon men by modern society? Yet they have no real solution except an atavistic nostalgia for an era when 'men were men'.

If we go back only ten years before Leone's masterpiece, the homoeroticism in the western is less strained, less apocalyptic. In the splendid *3:10 to Yuma* (Delmer Daves, 1957) the gunfighter Glenn Ford is waiting with his captor Van Heflin for the train that will take him for trial in Yuma. In a brilliant scene the two men are closeted in the bridal suite of the town's hotel, while Ford cajoles, bullies, seduces Van Heflin to let him go. At the end of the film, however, Ford turns against his own gang, who have come to release him, and jumps with Van Heflin into the train, out of respect for his goodness, tenacity and manliness. The seducer is seduced – and after six months' drought the heavens open and the rain pours down. The coming together of the male couple is celebrated by nature.

The director handles this relationship with affection and humour – while they are eating, Van Heflin cuts up the meat for the handcuffed Ford, who implores him plaintively: 'cut off the fat, I don't like it'. The bridal suite is of course a witty yet significant symbol: the two men are trapped in it, and have to break out to find their real identity.

The western rejects bourgeois society as a castrating feminizing instrument that takes men away from this particular moment, this concrete instant, and from each other. The western never explicitly theorizes or speculates: it presents action set in landscape; it is utterly sensuous. Above all it celebrates beauty – I doubt if there is a more beautiful film genre, constantly dwelling on the shape of the land, the mountain, the river, the desert, within which stylized choreographed male violence is depicted.

The remarkable thing about the western is how universal its appeal has been. How odd that a few insignificant characters from the American West (Billy the Kid, Buffalo Bill, Wyatt Earp) became worldwide cultural icons, and that the actors who have played in the western – John Wayne, Gary Cooper, James Stewart, Clint Eastwood – are instantly recognizable.

This suggests that the rise of the western was not simply due to certain American historical developments (the frontier, the clash between the white man and the Native American), but reflects more universal feelings and needs. The western reveals the repressed: the male couple, the male family, enrapt in their visions of love, death, empty deserts, horses, huge skies, the far country.

ANDROGYNY

Homoeroticism has generally led a hidden life in the western and other films depicting a male world, but in the post-war period a new generation of American film actors began to openly subvert the masculine image portrayed by John Wayne and Rock Hudson. Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando and James Dean depicted a different kind of man: full of anguish, yearning.⁸ A new kind of acting emerged: neurotic, dangerous, searching for authenticity, not afraid to look weak or clumsy. And these three actors also projected a narcissism, a femininity, that produced something highly charged and intense on screen. They seem locked in some private self-dialogue, fascinated in their own bodies, their eyes full of veiled meanings, uncertain about what kind of man they are. In Graham McCann's book *Rebel Males*, there is an extraordinary picture of Clift: he stands against a desk, his head turned towards a woman sitting there.⁹ The body stance, the tilt of the head, the hand resting on the desk, the lowered eyelids is very like a woman, yet Clift is dressed in the white T-shirt that became the uniform for macho film actors. This ambiguity in fact gives these three actors a considerable erotic fascination – it's like watching a man and a woman in the same body. It's surely no accident that Clift, Brando and Dean were all obsessed with their mothers, and Clift and Dean in particular had strenuously bisexual lifestyles. They portray men haunted by uncertainty, perplexed by gender, full of anger and anguish.

Early rock 'n' roll was characterized by either the macho type, such as Elvis, or the clean-cut boy-next-door type, for example, Ricky Nelson, Fabian. In the late sixties and early seventies, singers with a more unconventional image began to emerge: David Bowie, Marc Bolan, Alice Cooper, Freddy Mercury. Here were men who cultivated a 'camp', feminine, or bisexual image. Thus in 1971, Bowie visited America for the first time, wasn't allowed to perform because of visa problems, but 'gets plenty of publicity when he wears dresses in Texas and Los Angeles'.¹⁰ In 1972, Bowie openly declared his bisexuality.

In the eighties, British bisexual singers such as Boy George and Freddy Mercury were quite open about their sexuality, and there was also a plethora of gay singers: Pet Shop Boys, Erasure, Jimmy Sommerville, Frankie Goes to Hollywood.

It's not so much that such groups and singers blazon their bisexuality and homosexuality, but rather that it is accepted within the music world. You don't have to be a butch male to be successful as you did in the fifties, and to a degree in the sixties.

Some of these singers became extremely popular because they propagated an image entirely at odds with the old macho image. David Bowie, Boy George, Freddy Mercury – these were men with an ability to project theatrical fantasies that teeter between masculinity and femininity. Young people have obviously enjoyed and, to a degree, imitated such play.

One might of course argue that such presentations are entirely ephemeral and unimportant, but I disagree. Popular art, precisely because it is more naive and less solemn than 'serious art', reflects directly and rapidly shifts in the collective unconscious. And in pop, the statement we have been getting is that men are not as constrained by the old 'masculine' role. I am not suggesting that men will suddenly start walking around in dresses or being camp – that isn't the point. Rather that in pop we see fantasies and images that stretch our conceptions of being a man, and allow some elasticity within traditionally hidebound stereotypes.

The opposite of androgynous pop has been heavy metal. This is 'hard-on' music, it is so virile and aggressive, the singers are so insistently masculine – leather, shaggy hair, gold chains, crucifixes – that it gets wearisome, and easily crosses over into misogyny. But at its most authentic it gets close to the blues, it has a kind of elemental rawness (Gary Moore, Extreme).

GAY MAN

Male homosexuality is surrounded by ambivalence in our culture. To be sure, there are any amount of negative images of it – the spread of AIDS allowed all kinds of myths to surface – the 'gay plague', the man who had sex with two thousand men. The association of the HIV virus with blood lent a grisly and sinister overtone to the notion of 'bad blood' in homosexuals.¹¹ There was also the suggestion of 'God striking back' at gay men for being so unnatural. At times, the British tabloid press have had a field-day with their 'poofers' and 'queers' and 'dykes'. In Jeffrey Week's book

Sexuality and its Discontents, the section on AIDS is called 'Sex as Fear and Loathing.'

Yet since the 1970s the gay and lesbian communities have also seen a powerful growth in self-assertion and confidence – 'gay pride' has become a focus for festivals, demonstrations, books, and so on. This suggests that the self-hatred of gay men has been considerably reduced.

One of the interesting things about the death of Freddy Mercury (1991) was the considerable feelings of sadness, warmth and love towards him that was expressed beyond the gay community. I sensed among some heterosexual men strong protective feelings towards gay men – not that they want to become gay, but that they are glad that some men are. Perhaps male love is finding its feet in the world – for the heterosexual man, the gay man represents something important, something he has had to deny, that he has lost and mourns. This can be referred back to every man's love for his father – but also to the possibility of love between friends, going beyond the normal emotionally strangled 'Hail fellow well met' kind of contact that we see in pubs and elsewhere.

Of course there have also been severe backlashes – certain newspaper editorials accused Freddy Mercury of being a murderer! But the massive pop concert at Wembley in his memory was shown on TV, and there was no attempt to hide the fact that he died of AIDS, and that money from the concert would go to AIDS charities. The same thing happened as Rock Hudson lay dying of AIDS in 1985 – he was amazed at the thousands of letters that poured in, some from very unlikely people.¹²

The vitality of the gay community is a sign of the psychic health and unity of the whole community, since attacks on gays fundamentally represent self-attacks on the homosexual component that exists in everyone. We see on the other hand that societies where gays are persecuted are always repressive, dictatorial and self-hating societies. Think of Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union – sexuality becomes a front-line weapon in any authoritarian state. The right wing in any society will always attack homosexuality, since totalitarian thought wishes to discipline and constrict human beings into rigid categories, and at a deeper level is compelled to attack those parts of itself that don't fit the prescribed image. This reached ludicrous and savage proportions in Nazi Germany – men were virile blond warriors, women were breeders, and gay men were killed in the death camps. Splitting, projection and scapegoating were institutionalized into the fabric of the state.

At the unconscious level I would argue that patriarchy actually finds male homosexuality very exciting – and threatening. Lesbians have not been the subject of persecution in the same way because it is the gay man who irri-

tes, stimulates and excites the conservative heterosexual males who form the backbone of patriarchal rule. Like pornography, the fantasy of homosexuality promises an orgasmic release from the straitjacket of marital heterosexuality – hence male homosexuality is often associated with the fantasy of promiscuity. This strange mixture of fascination and horror can be seen in nineteenth-century works such as Krafft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) which almost lovingly records details of sexual 'perversion'.¹³

But sexuality is a political weapon in patriarchal society – revealed explicitly in the dictatorships, but also found in our culture. The notorious Clause 28 in Britain shows this – the family must be protected from single mothers, homosexuals, and other riff-raff. Yet as Jeffrey Weeks says, 'far from diminishing the public presence of lesbians and gay men, it greatly contributed to an enhanced sense of identity and community'.¹⁴ It strikes me that we are at a very delicate stage in the acceptance of homosexuality – or perhaps we are at a crossroads. Will the macho heterosexual jackboot reassert itself, or will the masculine gender become more and more relaxed? Thus the future of homosexuality is closely tied up with the whole future of men and masculinity.

THE MALE BODY

The female body is a modern icon, used to sell all kinds of commodities, and used as a sexual fetish. Women have rightly complained about this fetishism, that is completely unreal, and demeans real women. But what about men's bodies? They are not exempt from this process. Although they are not blazoned across our TV screens or in magazines and newspapers as much as women's bodies, none the less there is a significant amount of use of the male body. Particular areas that are used in advertising are the face and the upper body, but attention has also moved to buttocks, thighs, belly, particularly in TV advertising. The famous Levi advertisements, which show a young man taking his jeans off and washing them in a launderette, has a fascinating strip-tease theme – will we get to see his penis?

The two critical areas of the body for many men are the head and the penis. The head is the instrument of thought, and therefore the source of intellectual and organizational power; and the penis, while potentially the most potent, is also the most vulnerable area. In between these two organs is the heart – which for many men is no man's land, alien territory. Yet ironically, heart disease and failure is a common cause of death in men, as if male indifference to matters of the heart reaps a savage reward.

In certain men that I work with in psychotherapy, one might say that their existence is both cerebral and 'penile', but not heartfelt. There is thinking and there is sex – but what is in between? An emptiness, a hollow, an embarrassment, a shame about feeling.

If one made a drawing of some men's bodies that was psychologically rather than physiologically accurate, there would be a huge head balanced above an erect penis, perhaps with exaggerated biceps and pectorals. But the legs would be dwarfish, the feet minute, the face immobile. This is a ghastly caricature, but then aren't some men just that? It is striking how little many men know about their body, compared with women. For example, prostatic disease – which is commoner than breast or cervical cancer – often goes on for years before men do anything about it as they are either too embarrassed to seek help, or just assume that it's an inevitable part of growing old. By contrast, women's health has become an important issue in our society, and 'Well Women Clinics' are part of the British health service – as far as I know, there is no screening for prostatic disease.

HEAD

Many men get stiff necks, from carrying around that enormous head, full of its information, its built-in Filofax of data, appointments, birthdays, shoulds and shouldn'ts, and so on. What an enormous weight!

I have often heard women joke that their male partners think with their penis. One can reverse this, and say that they probably also make love with their heads. Or indeed, that all experience is perceived as happening in the brain. This is also true of many women, but amongst men it is epidemic. Men will actually argue passionately that since the brain is the focal point of the nervous system, that experience really is in the head.

Behaviourism, which is surely the pinnacle of patriarchal reductionism, triumphantly announced in the forties and fifties that the mind was only a series of stimulus response connections – and therefore (like God) was dead. Not the triumph of mind over body, but brain over mind. Emotion was only a series of synaptic surges in the cortex.

What about men's bodies? The body is for sport and sex and eating. When it's tired, it sleeps. Thus it is quite an efficient functional instrument for many men.

The idea that the body is an amazingly sensitive emotional register is totally alien to them. They just look blank if you talk about it. That the body feels as well as senses, emotes as well as digests – this is unknown.

Sometimes if a man in therapy says he is angry, I might say 'Where do you feel the anger?', and I get the blank look. They feel it in their head – where else?

When I was a kid, I used to read a comic which had stories about Mekons. These were creatures on another planet with enormous swollen heads and huge eyes, and dwarfish bodies. When I talk to men who are academics or computer programmers, accountants or business men, I sometimes have the fantasy they are Mekons. They experience the world through their eyes, ears and intellects, but the whole front of the body is numb.

It is interesting to consider what kind of subjective body-image such men have – I am sure some of them actually experience themselves as 'talking heads'. Thought reigns, logic holds sway, rationality is king. Such men are disdainful of women and their emotionality and irrationality, and feel bewildered when women attack them for their aloofness.

At some point in their development, their awareness, which as a child is naturally spread all over the body, got shrunk, compressed into the head. Excitement, joy, despair, rage – which are all orgasmic feelings that suffuse the whole body, became miniaturized into the cortex, where life seems like a video game, fast and furious, but bodiless, heartless.

What kind of orgasm do these men have? They have orgasms in the head. Can they cry? Can they explode in rage? All the time the force of rationality exerts its cold baleful pressure on such bodily experiences, which become strangled and alien.

But on the other hand it is amazing to watch a man begin to experience feelings in the heart region – there is an opening up, a new sensitivity to other people and the environment, feelings of warmth and love, and often deep pain, a sense of heart-break. From the body having been an efficient machine, or a piece of meat that is taken for granted, it can become the seat of emotion, a remarkably sensitive indicator of one's openness to the world. This can be a revelation to many men, who have tended to ignore the body except as an exercise area, or the arena of sexual athleticism.

It is interesting to note in parenthesis that working as a therapist with people, I continually use the front of my body as a kind of radar, to tell me what is going on with them. My face, heart region, stomach, belly, genitals – all the time these are registering the other person, being emotionally responsive to them and their feelings. It is a kind of transmission system between my unconscious feelings and their unconscious feelings. With certain people, a particular area of my body becomes numb, since theirs is, but with others feels totally alive. With some men, I find that my head feels excited, but the rest of my body is blank.

PECS, BICEPS, TRICEPS, DELTOIDS

At the beginning of the film *Total Recall*, Schwarzenegger is in bed with his 'wife' (like everything else his marriage is a memory implant). She starts to unfasten her nightdress to expose her breasts, and the interesting question arises (for this viewer anyway): 'Who has the larger breasts?'

Later in the film Schwarzenegger goes to Mars, to find out if his memories of it are also implants or real and he arrives disguised as a woman. In the best scene in the film 'she' stands in the arrival hall, her head begins to peel open, and there stands the grinning Arnie, ready for some more orgasmic violence. This is a classic 'transformation scene', of which there are many in Hollywood cinema, and illustrates nicely the ambiguity about the male musculature, at one level, emblem of 100 per cent virility, yet at another, envious of, competing with, imitating the female torso. And later in the film there is a male pregnancy – the leader of the Martian guerrilla army is a baby encysted in the belly of a man. (The film *Alien* has a bloody male childbirth scene.)

2. Schwarzenegger's physique reflects the considerable amount of narcissism about the male musculature in our culture, comparable with the attention paid to women's breasts, thighs, buttocks, and so on. But with men it tends to be justified as to do with sport, keeping fit, being active, consolidating the image of the male as invulnerable warrior/athlete. Remember the old adverts for Charles Atlas – 'Don't be a seven stone weakling.' In the ad, a man with muscles bulging like car tyres poses, infatuated with his own image. Such a man is in love with himself. He is self-existent; he neither loves nor needs love.

2. Such a body can be seen both as a massive penis, but can also be construed as quasi-female. In body-building the pectorals become massive, jutting breasts which are flaunted. I notice with pop singers such as Prince and Michael Jackson that there is a vogue for lifting the T-shirt up suddenly to expose their chest, in a grotesque parody of centrefold girl exposing her breasts. Michael Jackson also frequently clutches his crutch while dancing, as if to reassure himself and us that his penis is intact. Thus we end up with a man with breasts and penis. He is truly self-sufficient!

Body-builders usually have narrow hips, admired in men partly, I would think, to distinguish them from women's child-bearing hips; while the hefty shoulders denote 'upper body strength', that phrase so beloved of sports commentators. This contrast between upper and lower body is shown most grotesquely in American football players – above the waist, gigantic Goliaths, minotaurs, inflated by all the body armour, but below the waist like tiny dancing dolls with petite buttocks. There is both an ultra-machismo and a girliness combined in this body-image.

Considerable attention has been paid in modern psychology to the penis-like qualities of such a body, connected with the 'phallic character'.¹⁵ It is erect, always ready for action. It is deeply veined, ribbed, with a massive head. It tenses itself, ready to explode. But crucially it is rigid, since the man himself is emotionally rigid.

This means, amongst other things, that ironically such men often feel sexually permanently dissatisfied, since their rigidity does not permit a full emotional and physical surrender during intercourse. Alexander Lowen comments: 'The phallic male finds no deep satisfaction on any level of activity and he is forced into continued pursuit and conquest.'¹⁶

They are often narcissistic, obsessive men, who are unable to relax, or be spontaneous. The fetishism of the body is in fact a defence against other people, who are actually experienced as frightening, and a defence against the body's spontaneous rhythms. The phallic male wants to control life, and must therefore be permanently on guard.

BEERGUTS

French and Saunders – the British female comedy duo – have a biting sketch where they play two gross men, complete with enormous beer-guts, sitting in front of the TV, making lewd comments about the women they see: 'Cor, I could give her something', complete with obscene gesture.

These men are pathetic, because their defences are so paper-thin – that is the point of the sketch. They are only fooling themselves. No woman would possibly be interested in them, they are so corpulent, so gross, and so narcissistic.

Of course this is cruel parody. But what about the real beer-guts, sitting in the pubs, or sitting at home with the six-pack? What makes them tick? Does anybody care?

The beer-gut is a formidable defence. You walk through a crowd, and people have to get out of the way because your gut precedes you. You can hide behind it, you can almost hit people with it. It is also a badge of manliness – I can drink sixteen pints a night, and I wear this to prove it. Never mind that it could easily kill me, the sheer effort of carrying it around – I'm proud of it. It shows I'm a real man.

It also hides my penis, which is good, because then I won't frighten people with it, and I won't frighten myself with it. In fact if I look down I can't see it! That's a relief because then I don't have to think about being a