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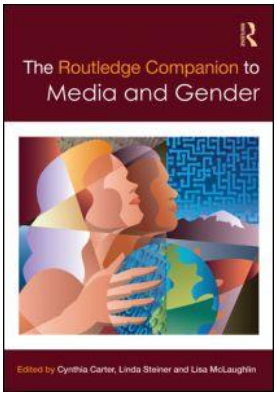

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Lone wolves
Masculinity, cinema, and the man alone

Tim Edwards

Studies of representations of masculinity, particularly in film, exploded in the 1980s and onwards. There were perhaps two dimensions to this: first, a continued theoretical engagement with the ideas of feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey and the applications of psychoanalytic theory to cinema more widely; and, second, a more empirical concern with the rise of the action hero and the spectacle of the male body—and more particularly its muscles—that dominated many of the box office hits of the time, from *Rambo* and the *Terminator* series to the career of Tom Cruise and, later, Brad Pitt (Cohan and Hark 1993; Jeffords 1994; Mulvey 1975). In relation to the first dimension, the work of Kaja Silverman in exploring the psychoanalytic aspects of cinema, this time in relation to masculinity and not femininity as in the case of Mulvey, and Richard Dyer's influential studies of the instabilities of representations of masculinity across a variety of media forms, were critical (Dyer 1989; Silverman 1992). The overall thrust of this work was to question the extent to which traditional notions of masculinity were reinforced in cinema, tending to assert that many filmic representations at once set up patriarchal notions of male power yet also disrupted them and pointed to their internal contradictions.

Masculinity and the media is thus a relatively recent yet expanding area of study mostly, though certainly not exclusively, focused on the ways in which various media forms may (re)present masculinity in relation to sexual politics and second-wave feminism (Craig 1992). Thus a range of cultural texts from adverts to movies and from television to pop music are considered for the ways in which they do, or do not, reinforce traditional notions of patriarchy and men's power over women, or simply set up ideal types of masculinity. Consequently, this area of study is for the most part focused on the consumption rather than production of media. Prior to developing this further it is worth outlining the ways in which masculinity and the media may connect more widely. This chapter will primarily focus on cinema, yet the mapping of issues here may equally pertain to many other media forms.

First and foremost, masculinity may pertain to the production of media given the underrepresentation of women as film directors and producers, and their relative preponderance in roles such as costume designers and make-up artists, such that this work is stereotyped as women's. Kathryn Bigelow's winning of an Oscar for her

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direction of *The Hurt Locker* was the exception rather than the rule in gender terms and often played out by journalists as a personal competition with her ex-husband James Cameron. Second, as is commonly known, roles for women actors are more limited and less well paid. The woman actor is often valued more for her youthful looks, so roles disappear particularly in middle age, until old age, when her looks are of less concern. Few women manage to survive this intact—even Meryl Streep's career dipped. Dame Judi Dench and Dame Maggie Smith, and a few others, find renaissance in film only when much older. Similarly, this maps onto the roles offered to female actors, which may play on wider stereotypes of femininity—as a love interest to the male hero, as leads in romantic comedies aimed at a female audience, or, conversely, as some kind of monstrous man-hating femme fatale. The legacy here of bitchiness associated with the likes of Bette Davis through to the bunny boiling stereotyping of Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* and horrors of female power played out through Sigourney Weaver in the science fiction *Alien* movies is only rarely counteracted by all-female lead movies such as *Thelma and Louise* or TV series *Sex and the City*, the latter raising a disproportionate media furor. These more production-driven elements clearly impact upon the consumption of gender through media as they limit the scope and remit of the representations offered. Furthermore, this *positioning* of men and women differently within many media formats and most clearly in film may play out into the wider sense in which masculinity and femininity are consumed differently in a structured and patterned way.

I will develop these matters shortly. How these factors connect to questions of masculinity is of concern here, however; for this we need to briefly survey the work on masculinity before applying this to one, more contemporary, concern in some recent films—the lone male as a figure of crisis or distress. The lone male—or wolf, given his often prowling sense of sexual allure—is not necessarily new. Hollywood cinema is littered with "wild" male figures whom women wish to "tame," from the mythology of the cowboy through to the brooding heroes of film noir and James Bond, who may get shaken but never stirs. What often characterizes these figures is their silence, rarely speaking of some unknown trauma they have suffered. Their emotional reticence somehow makes them all the more alluring. The grist to my mill here is that this is now shifting in a more nuanced, narcissistic, and complex direction.

Masculinity and film

The study of masculinities is now vast, yet what most share is an emphasis on masculinity as a social construct or as a set of associations and characteristics that shift over time and pertain to social and cultural phenomena, even women, and not merely male bodies (see Edwards 2006). The problematic raised by film studies underpins this sense in which the spectacle of the male—and his body—is used to somehow symbolize, signify, or (re)construct masculinity. Underpinning this, in turn, is second-wave feminism's critique of the problem of sexual objectification, i.e. the idea that film creates, perpetuates, or reinforces the positioning of women as (sexual) objects. Sexual objectification in turn depends upon the positioning of women more widely, not only as objects but also as objects *to be looked at* by men. The problem of

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objectification is effectively a double one: first, in constructing the person as an object lacking in subjectivity and devoid of emotion; and, second, in setting up that person as passive and helpless, or at least disempowered, to resist that construction. One of the most influential analyses of this process has come from film studies, and the analysis of femininity and female subjectivity as being the object of the (male) gaze is premised almost entirely upon Mulvey's famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).

The visual pleasure offered through cinema for Mulvey is essentially twofold: first, scopophilia or the voyeuristic pleasure derived through looking; and, second, narcissism, or the pleasure developed from recognition and identification. Yet the true cut of her thrust appears when these concepts are overlaid in gendered terms. Put more simply, men, the male subject, and masculinity *look*, whilst women, the female object, and femininity are *looked at*. The more particular problematic that then ensues is the idea that the male and the masculine "cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (Mulvey 1975: 12). Similarly, narrative plotlines are also seen to reinforce the activity of the male subject, often conceived as heroic or powerful, and the passivity of the female object, who mostly serves the purpose of providing erotic interest.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Mulvey's work has since received a barrage of criticism. First and foremost, her approach is seen to underplay the importance of female pleasure in looking and indeed the significance of women's spectatorship more widely; so her analysis of looking relations is regarded as overly simplistic in its emphasis upon a strictly polarized gender divide in viewing relations (MacKinnon 1997; Silverman 1992). Second, the perspective she develops deflects attention away from more complex forms of identification that may exist (Neale 1982). Following from this, men as well as women may engage in various viewing positions that exist *across* any strict gender divide (Neale 1983). More significantly, the tendency to deflect the visual and sexual objection of men within cinema may be motivated as much, if not more, by the disavowal of male homoeroticism as by the heterosexual imperative to objectify femininity and women (Green 1984). Third, her use of psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud's work around ambivalent identifications and polymorphous sexuality, is criticized (Rodowick 1982). Most severely, her analysis is seen by some as overly Westernized, middle class, and racialized in its emphasis and examples (Gaines 1986). Yet Mulvey's primary assertion that the *way* men and women look and are looked at is somehow different may well still stand. In sum, *how* we look is often perceived as impacting upon *what* we are looking at and vice versa.

Two important collections, as well as the work of Jeffords in particular, challenged these ideas more in relation to masculinity: figures as diverse as Tarzan and Rambo were seen to exhibit contradictory qualities, macho yet wimpy, as their outward aggression and swagger became seen primarily as a defensive response to more internal masculine insecurities (Cohan and Hark 1993; Jeffords 1994; Kirkham and Thumin 1993). One factor rather skimmed over in such analyses, however, is what I would like to call the cinematic *trope*—or symbol through use of a recurring character or ideal type. Of course many tropes exist. Yet one key figure here is that of the lone male, historically located within the Western genre in the figure of the cowboy, and now played out in other genres with similar, and also differing, consequences.

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Man alone: *Drive* (dir. Winding Refn, 2011), *Shame* (dir. McQueen, 2011), and *A Single Man* (dir. Ford, 2010)

At first glance these three films have little in common: Winding Refn's *Drive* is a tale of a Hollywood stunt driver and part-time criminal taxi service, punctuated by scenes of extreme violence; Steve McQueen's second major directorial offering, *Shame*, tells the provocative story of a "sex addict" in contemporary New York; whilst Tom Ford's *A Single Man* is a highly stylized remaking of Christopher Isherwood's novel into a near-existential contemplation on the grief of a gay academic in California. However, the films all focus centrally and pivotally on the figure of a man alone, struggling to relate to his fellow human beings and enduring severe psychological crisis. The result is near-death in two out of three cases and near-death by association in the other.

Nicolas Winding Refn's film *Drive* is based on the novel of the same name by James Sallis. The film, about a Hollywood stunt driver who at night becomes a getaway driver, was released in 2011 to rave reviews, particularly at the Cannes Film Festival, and further catapulted Ryan Gosling into the spotlight. Specific content aside, it furthers the career of Winding Refn as a director specializing in existential character portraits of men, previously seen in *Valhalla Rising*, and adds to his knack of spotting and developing new talent, previously seen with Tom Hardy in *Bronson*. The film's plotline is fairly simple and arguably unremarkable. The driver falls in love with his neighbor, Irene, played by Carey Mulligan, who is helping her ex-con partner and father to her child escape his past and pay off his debts in one last heist. Suffice to say, the pawn shop heist goes wrong and the driver is then engaged in trying to protect the girl and her child from the violent criminal world of which he has otherwise been a part.

What characterizes the film and makes the unremarkable extraordinary are three things: (1) Refn's direction and Hossein Amini's screen writing; (2) the casting and indeed dressing of Ryan Gosling; and (3) the electro synth pop soundtrack co-developed with Cliff Martinez of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Refn's direction is characterized by a near-constant juxtaposing of wide angle and close-up shots, with characters often positioned off centre. Of particular significance here is the filming of the driver himself, frequently framed within mirrors and other prop devices or literally within the car rather than outside of it. For example, early on in the film the conversation between the driver and Irene is conducted through a mirror in her apartment, the driver's face is often seen through the car's rear-view mirror, and it is later seen at the film's denouement framed within the door to the criminal gang's pizzeria.

The overall effect of such devices is to make the film feel at once intimate and yet simultaneously surreal and mysterious. The direction is also, above all else, intensely self-conscious, from the toothpick-chewing cowboy mythmaking of Sergio Leone films starring Clint Eastwood and the violence characterizing Tarantino's work, to the interior scenes devoid of dialogue derived from David Lynch and the fetishism of cars and clothing used in Anger's *Scorpio Rising*. Complementing all of this is Amini's relentlessly stripped-back dialogue—the driver barely speaks and, when he does, does so with huge delays and pauses. Complementing this imagery is the similarly inflected use of electro synth pop that dominates the score. This music is

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well known for its associations with the 1980s and its later development into gay-oriented euro disco. More significantly, it plays upon the human/electronic, expressive/repressive and feminine/masculine ambiguities that dominate the character of the driver—he is never entirely coherent but lurches violently from one extreme to the other.

What drives the film, to pardon the pun, is not the plot or the cars but the mystery that surrounds the driver himself—a nameless, past-less, future-less character often hidden behind masks, shades, the theatrical costumery for the film parts he plays, or—if nothing else—Gosling's impassive gaze. The casting of Gosling is critical here. Gosling exudes a blue-eyed innocence that is juxtaposed with his slightly feminized yet physically toned sexuality. It appeals to gay men and women in a way not dissimilar to David Beckham. This juxtaposing of innocence with sexually and or violently inflected knowingness is what characterizes much of Gosling's on-screen presence. The dressing of Gosling is critical here and acknowledged by Refn to be overtly fetishized. He dons a silver satin jacket with a gold scorpion imprinted on the back whenever he is engaged in his more criminally related activities, clearly nodding towards Anger's use of the same symbolism in *Scorpio Rising*, as well as the wider myth of the scorpion and the frog crossing the river (which is cited at one point). He wears perfectly fitted jeans, sometimes with a matching denim jacket, and leather gloves that literally stretch and creak at various otherwise-silent points in the film. The sexuality here is both blatantly erotic and ambiguous. If it were not for his near-chaste relationship with Irene one could equally code the driver's sexuality as gay. Refn's lingering direction would seem to give Gosling the same double b(l)uff appeal of a young James Dean. Of significance, then, is the sense in which the presentation of Gosling as the driver is far more nuanced, feminized, and sexually ambiguous than that of many of his predecessors.

What does any of this tell us concerning masculinity? In the first instance, the film plays on a traditional tale of a bad guy tamed by the love of a woman who tries to go good but doesn't quite manage it. At the same time it clearly invokes the archetype of the cowboy loner, down to the toothpicks he chews, who drives rather than rides into town and then out again. What gives all this a far newer twist, however, are the three elements above that scratch at the surface of the character of the unnamed driver and render him both far more mysterious and yet infinitely more emotionally vulnerable than any latter-day cowboy. Key within this are the overtly feminizing influences of the music, the casting and dressing of Gosling, and the knowing yet sparse direction and writing of Refn and Amini that—combined—speak volumes about the ambiguities of a young man alone.

Shame is the second major film directed by Steve McQueen, whose earlier work, *Hunger*, was highly acclaimed. Unlike the other two films under consideration here, it is an original piece co-written by Abi Morgan and concerns the supposed "sex addiction" of Brandon, a successful advertising executive, played by Michael Fassbender. His highly controlled life of porn, sex, and work comes under fire when his sister Sissy, interestingly also played by Carey Mulligan, comes to stay; meanwhile his computer at work comes under investigation due to a virus, revealing excessive use of pornography. Again, the plotline is fairly simple as Brandon becomes overly stressed. He cracks under the pressure of exposure. His sister is also clearly mentally

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unwell and later attempts suicide. Whilst the film was mostly positively reviewed, some criticized the lack of back story explaining the unstable behavior of the brother and sister, although there are a few vague allusions to earlier abuse. A subplot concerns Brandon's relationship with Marianne, a co-worker, who is attracted to him, and they go on an awkward dinner date. Brandon is, however, impotent afterwards and returns to his use of casual encounters and prostitutes for sex. The overriding theme of the film is that Brandon cannot connect and, whilst surrounded by multiple sex partners, is effectively emotionally isolated.

The film is not perhaps as remarkable in its direction or writing as it is controversial; yet it contains some defining, and very moving, scenes. The most notable of these are set on the subway, where Brandon encounters a woman, played by Lucy Walters, with whom he exchanges glances and who he then pursues at the station. She returns, wearing red lipstick, in the final scene in the film, where she is far more assertive, in a repetition of the earlier scene, their hands (again showing her engagement ring) meet on the train's grip pole. What dominates these scenes are the long shot-reverse-shots of the two characters and the overlay of Escott's score—a repetitive string-based refrain set against the ticking of a clock. These elements are also echoed in the film's denouement, which starts around 75 minutes into the running time. McQueen intercuts footage of Brandon deliberately provoking an attack from a girl's boyfriend whom he meets in a bar, his visitation of a gay sex club where he gets a young man he sees on the street to go down on him, his receipt of phone messages from his sister crying for help, and his visit with a group of prostitutes. The scene with the prostitutes is particularly extended, ending with a close-up of Brandon's increasingly desperate expression. Again Escott's score is used to full effect. The opening of the film deploys the same temporal intercutting technique, showing Brandon on the subway, having sex with a prostitute, using the bathroom, and ignoring phone messages from his sister. The impression gained from this is that Brandon himself is equally fragmented, whilst the more constant element throughout is the music.

This temporal intercutting, use of sound effects and/or music, and near-total absence of dialogue is what gives the film its curiously intense yet distant feeling, heightening Brandon's all too evident isolation. The only dialogue that invades such scenes is pertinent to the film's main themes: "You're disgusting" at the end of the film's opening; and the oft-quoted line from his sister, "We're not bad people; we just come from a bad place." Given McQueen's avoidance of explanations and back story, the film inculcates a debate concerning sex addiction and problems of intimacy in the age of the internet or, perhaps more widely, a crisis of white Western middle-class masculinity as previously explored in films such as *Fight Club* and *American Psycho*. There is a clear nod to the latter in McQueen's portrayal of Brandon wandering naked in a minimalist New York apartment and using the bathroom, a scene identical to the set-up used in Hannon's earlier film. Given the traditional portrayal of male promiscuity as merely playboy hedonism, the film radically overturns this into a depiction of such practices as nervy and compulsive, thereby shifting the terrain of masculinity quite significantly.

A Single Man, a slightly older film, indeed takes aging as one of its key themes. Based on Isherwood's book of the same name, it tells the story of one day in the life

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of George Falconer, an English university lecturer in Los Angeles. George, played by BAFTA award winning and Academy nominated Colin Firth, is aging and—more to the point—grieving for the loss of his relationship with Jim, who died in a car crash around eight months earlier. The story is told in part linear and part flashback fashion, sticking in large part like glue to the original novel, except for the potential suicide plotline that director Tom Ford added. Like *Shame* and indeed *American Psycho* it opens with the protagonist waking in bed, using the bathroom, showering, and performing mundane morning routines. Yet, unlike those films, *A Single Man* for the most part stays on precisely this terrain. What also makes George's grief all the more excruciating is Isherwood's and indeed Ford's excoriating drilling into the loneliness that goes with it. The film's first full—and perhaps most powerful—scene shows George receiving the news by phone that his lover has been killed. He is also told that the funeral is for family members only and that one of their dogs is dead and the other is missing. Given this is the early 1960s, gay sexuality is neither legal nor liberated and George is forced to endure his grief in silence, other than for the support of his equally lonely but alcoholically enlivened friend Charley, played by a typically on-form Julianne Moore. Ford does not shy away from portraying this. The extended and uncut scene of Firth's face as the sad news is painfully and silently realized is one of the film's highlights. Thus the film is more forward than many of its predecessors in portraying explicitly male emotion and vulnerability.

Various conversations throughout the film refer to his and other minorities' "invisibility," set against a backdrop of paranoia and fear around the Cuban missile crisis and the legacy of McCarthyism. This more political point is juxtaposed with the film's existentialism. The paradox of the film, and what gives it its existential edge, is that George's day actually goes rather well, full of new and potentially exciting encounters—particularly with one of his students, the very beautiful and clearly rather flirty student Kenny, dinner with a friend, and even skinny dipping on a warm summer's night—and yet the punch line is that he never gets to choose suicide or even life as his body decides it for him. This theme is echoed throughout in Ford's use of the sound of a heartbeat, recurrent shooting of scenes of bodies under water, and—again as in *Shame*—the use of a ticking clock.

The film marks the debut of Tom Ford, otherwise known for his work as a globally renowned fashion designer. It was a critical and commercial success, yet some critics likened it to an advert, given Ford's meticulous attention to every conceivable aspect of *mise-en-scène* from clothing and make-up to lighting and interior decoration in a way often likened to the hit television series *Mad Men*. In addition, Ford's most original and distinctive trick is to change the hue according to mood. When George is about his mundane or grieving activities he and his surroundings are immersed in dull sepia. All springs into Technicolor whenever he is happier, enlivened, or diverted from his grief. This is particularly striking in the scene where he visits a local liquor store, meets a woman with the same breed of dog that he had with his partner, and then a handsome wannabe actor-cum-rent boy named Carlos. His kissing of the dog and admiration of the boy's body see the entire screen flood with color. This fades to grey as he returns to his suicidal preparations. Similarly, the film's denouement, where he encounters Kenny in the same bar where he met Jim and goes skinny dipping, is shot with a constant near-orange glow that literally drains from the screen at

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the end. Like the other films mentioned, the languid and lyrical score—this time by Academy Award nominee Able Korzeniowski—also plays a part.

Conclusions: lone wolves

What do these films tell us concerning contemporary masculinities or, perhaps more accurately, their representation? My earlier work on film highlighted the sense in which many particularly American films were beginning to focus on the so-called crisis of masculinity thesis, where men are seen to be "in trouble" due to the rise of feminism and the decline of the traditional male role (Edwards 2006). Examples of this included *American Beauty*, where the Kevin Spacey character regresses into a kind of hippie, *Fight Club*, where men attempt to reclaim a more physical masculinity in a world of consumerist narcissism, and *American Psycho*, where Patrick Bateman is at once a groomed Wall Street city boy and a serial killer. The films considered here would seem to play on similar themes as their lead characters crack and dissolve, yet also harken back to an older trope of the man alone most strongly played out in the cowboy myth and the film career of Clint Eastwood, for example. Their crises are related to typically masculine emotional reticence yet are perhaps less crises of masculinity *per se*.

The films also continue to raise questions concerning Mulvey's thesis regarding the male gaze. All three protagonists are the object as well as the active subject here in the driver's fetishized dress, Brandon's nakedness, and George's immaculate suits. What also emerges is an inflection of Willemen's (1994) frictions or the fracturing of the gaze into parts, from camera to actor, actor to actor, viewer to actor, and ultimately actor to viewer. The facial close-ups in all three films are key here as the actors are not looking at anyone else but rather at us. Thus, part of the paradox of Mulvey's thesis is that if men are active their passive subjective worlds become all the more mysterious—rather like hollow men they have all the hard exterior of acting out yet almost nothing at their center. The three films I have examined in this chapter start to scratch at this predicament as, most fundamentally, character portraits of flawed men who are alone and struggling with how they feel. Their emotions are not told so much as shown through the way in which they are filmed—impassive, often silent, and put in situations that should provoke enormous reaction yet frequently do not—whilst shot-making, music, and silence somehow tell us what they are feeling. We are and are not on new territory here—men as emotionally incapacitated loners that directors portray tumbling into crisis. A more complete gender revolution would involve men discussing their feelings in some sort of *Sex and the City* for men where all the women do is yap on about such things non-stop—admittedly George does some of this, but primarily to himself—and falling apart rather than heroically holding it together.

What limits this discussion and much of what has preceded it is that we are still dealing with a specifically white, Western and often North American form of masculinity and indeed its Hollywood representation. Thus, in many ways these studies of masculinity in film echo wider populist concerns about "men in crisis" that in sum focus on a rather particular complaint. What these characters may suffer as a crisis of identity may for others be nothing more than routine experience. However,

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these lyrical—and often emotionally powerful—portraits still inflect their male protagonists with a few more levels of complication than before.

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