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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF
ART AND DESIGN
JOINT COURSE - FINE ART SCULPTURE

From the Wild West to *Wall Street*

TRACING AN EVOLUTION OF MASCULINITY
IN AMERICAN FILM

BY
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**Table of
Contents**

Introduction	1
Chapter I - John Wayne Tracking the Westerner	3
Chapter II - Jack Nicholson Traumatising Masculinity	13
Chapter III - Michael Douglas Curing Polymorphus Perversity	21
Conclusion	29
Bibliography	32
Articles	35
Filmography	36

From the Wild West to *Wall Street*

Tracing an Evolution of Masculinity in American Film

Introduction

"Watch a child with his toy guns and you will see: what interests him is not [as we so much fear] the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot." ¹

¹ Cawelti, 1977 p.169

The Western hero is one who looks tough, looks the part, looks like a 'man'. Everything hinges on appearances. His nature is such that it is historically ideal, he suits his surroundings. Set him apart from them and he becomes an improbable figure. To all extents and purposes he is a fairytale character who 'rides off into the sunset'.

During the course of this paper, it shall be made evident that the evolution of masculinity in American film had its origins within the genre of the western.

The course I shall be taking is not that of the action hero who is the westerners more obvious descendent. I shall instead be examining the role of the 'sensitive guy' and his evolution throughout the cinema of the 70s, 80s and 90s.

I shall begin my discussion with an examination of the westerner and his depiction of omnipotent masculinity as typified in the western as a "place where men are men and women are children". ² Chapter two shall discuss the problematizing of masculinity in the 70s and my final chapter shall deal with the attempted reinstigation of masculinity in the late 80s and early 90s.

² ibid. p.170

To cite my examination more concisely, I shall utilise the characters of three prominent stars, one from each stage, to map this evolution. Firstly, John Wayne shall be employed to typify the omnipotent masculinity of the westerner through an examination of John Ford's films, with particular emphasis upon *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956). I shall then examine the role of Jack Nicholson as the traumatised male of the 70s in *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (Rafelson, 1970), and *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974). Finally, I shall rely upon the roles played by Michael Douglas in

the late 80s and early 90s, to depict this attempted reinstigation of masculinity through the demonization of his adversary, the female. For this I shall analyse *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987), *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987), and *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1991).

With the notable exception of the westerns, most of my chosen films do not come under the canon of mainstream Classical Hollywood. Many are low budget independently produced films. Their connection to the western is that they all in some manner make references to it. Many of them depict the lone hero up against a corrupt element in society which is central to the western. Jack Nicholson plays a latter day cowboy who embodies the existentialism of the westerner and Michael Douglas plays the 90s hero who attempts to regain the westerners omnipotence.

In terms of the western, my discussion shall examine the importance of the look and how the westerner is defined through the way he looks. I shall write in some detail about the man who exemplified this look, namely John Wayne. Particular emphasis shall be placed on his "character" as this term has been misinterpreted somewhat to include the "real Wayne". In fact the mythical character of John Wayne has been made more real than the real American historical figures, people like Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and Buffalo Bill. They may have begun as real, but ended as mythical heroes, whereas Wayne began as fiction but somewhere along the line people willed his reality.

The second chapter shall trace the emergence of the traumatised male, a phenomenon rooted within the American peoples waining faith in their patriarchal government with the aftermath of Vietnam and the Watergate Affair. Jack Nicholson's *Hanson*, *Dupea* and *Gittes* depict the 70s as a place where society does not allow for western heroes anymore, a society of moral worthlessness, a place where the gap between pioneer qualities and the world of bureaucrats has widened. According to Woody Haut, the films of the 70s were "indicative of a divided society and a corrupt government."³

³ Haut, 1993 / 1994
p.132

My final chapter shall deal with the manner in which

the film industry attempts to reinstate masculinity to what was its' original peak in the western. In order to retrieve the virile masculinity lost in the 70s, the film industry returned to the portrayal of the independent woman as an evil force loose in society whose rampages must be curbed by means of her elimination. Often she is depicted as sexually ambiguous, either bisexual or a lesbian while the male is imbued with a heightened sexuality, he becomes the phallic god. It is in this manner that the male psyche seeks to redeem male heterosexuality.

John Wayne

Chapter I

Tracking the Westerner

The genre of the western dealt with a battle between good and evil set between wilderness and civilisation, law and disorder. It embodied myths of the wilderness, the frontier and freedom alongside U.S. ideologies of nation building. These polarities inherent in the Western can be traced as far back as Greek and Shakespearian drama. "The western hero was a democratic Oedipus and Hamlet who acted on behalf of, but apart from, the larger society to correct some injustice or moral imbalance in the universal schema"¹ The Westerner was a contemporary version of his ancient counterparts, like whom, he transcended the mundane to overcome obstacles and dangers that defied the ordinary individual and he did so without much reward, for his existentialism was crucial to the plot, he was a lone man against the wilderness one who chose and embraced his solitude. Being thus, a loner of violent methods and means he could not readily fit into society.

¹ Lenihan, 1985, p.16

The western heroes may have helped to win the West, but that did not give them any claim to ownership, the civilisation belonged to the townsfolk. In Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), Ringo (John Wayne) may have saved the occupants of the coach, but Lordsburg and "the blessings of civilisation" are not for the outlaw, nor are they for Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) as he turns his back on the homestead in the closing scene.

"General Douglas Mac Arthur saw him as the model of an American soldier and the Veterans of foreign wars saluted his Americanism."²

² Wills, 1996, p.36

John Wayne was born Marion Michael Morrison in Winterset, Iowa on 26th May 1907. He was initially discovered by Raoul Walsh when working on a Fox set in 1927. It was Wayne's physicality and powerful presence that attracted Walsh, he believed that "the son of a bitch looked like a man."³ Wayne went on to sign with Fox and starred in Raoul Walsh's box office disaster *The Big Trail* (1930). Wayne's career remained in the doldrums throughout the 1930s featuring in

³ Ibid, p.41

many forgettable B-movies for Republic. His big break finally came when he was chosen to star in Ford's epic *Stagecoach*. *Stagecoach* served to both revive the genre of the western and the flagging career of Wayne, it was the film which raised him to stardom. Before its release westerns, with the notable exception of B-movies, were losing in popularity, but *Stagecoach* changed all this and saw the beginning of the life long working alliance of Ford and Wayne.

4 Ibid, p.41

5 Ibid, p. 42

Gradually Wayne began to be seen as a national institution with Mac Arthur viewing him as the ideal American soldier. It was believed by 'Wayne-Olaters' that America lost the Vietnam war because "not enough John Waynes were left to do what was necessary to win." ⁴ In 1979, Congress inscribed a gold medal to 'John Wayne American'. "When he was called an American, it was a statement of what his fans wanted America to be . . . he stood for an America that people thought was disappearing or had disappeared for a time when 'men were men'." ⁵ All this was ascribed to a man who, in real life, was a pacifist, wore suits and hated horses, his public image being anathema to his private one.

6 Quinlan, 1991, p.470

Wayne had a tremendous physicality which meant that he could comfortably dominate the great outdoors, he stood 6'4" tall. His powerful sense of presence awarded him the nickname of 'the unstoppable man'. His moral stature was reflected in his height and his ability to sit tall in the saddle. David Quinlan saw him as "increasingly tall in the saddle, gradually becoming an American institution, as the solitary, basically friendless, almost allegorical man of action." ⁶

It was not only onlookers that viewed Wayne's omnipotence, even his own characters viewed themselves as tough.

In *The Cowboys* (Mark Rydell 1971)

Wil Anderson (Wayne): "In my regiment, Mr. Nightlinger, I was known as old lornpants. You might as well keep that in mind."

Raoul Walsh's *Dark Command* (1940)

Mary Mc Cloud (Claire Trevor): "I thought they bred men of flesh and blood in Texas. I was wrong. You're made of granite."

Bob (Wayne): "No Mary. Just common clay. It bakes kinda hard in Texas."

In many films Wayne's physicality is compared to steel and

stone, both sculptural materials which imbue him with statuesque and monumental characteristics. These attributes belie the fact that he is not a patriarchal action hero. His toughness is not that of muscularity, but of endurance and his solidity of body makes for this endurance. He is never the quitter, in *The Searchers* it takes him some six years to find Debbie. Wayne tends to have caring paternal rather than a domineering patriarchal presence. Deborah Thomas believes that his character contains both paternal and maternal qualities and if this "involves a feminising of his body that this is not seen as weakness, but as strength. However, correlated with such incorporation of the feminine into the self is often a renunciation of the sexual and domestic in the world outside."⁷

⁷ Thomas, 1996, p.80

In both *The Searchers* and *Circus World* (1964), he is seen to play the father figure to Debbie (Natalie Wood) and Toni (Claudia Cardinale) respectively. Both these characters, however, unsettle Wayne when they mature to sexual adults. There are very few active sexual relationships in his roles though many plots allude to past or broken marriages. He resists the sexual and therefore the domestic sphere and if he has female partners, he seems to treat them like children, "displaying what seems less like sexual tenderness or passion than playful boisterousness or protectiveness: spanking them, carrying them in his arms like a child."⁸ Perhaps his sexual abstinence can be equated with endurance or that he finds his sexual relief in violence like Travis Bickle (Robert de Niro's) sexual release in an orgy of violence at the close of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), itself modelled on *The Searchers*.

⁸ Ibid, p. 78, 1996

Wayne is rarely seen naked, thus in part desexualising him. In *Donovan's Reef* (1963) he swims with his shirt on and in *Big Jake* (1971) he emerges from a shower with a towel draped around his chest. In *The Searchers*, Ford plays upon the youthful good looks of Martin (Jeffery Hunter) in contrast to the rugged and unerotic appearance of Ethan (Wayne). In the course of the narrative Martin is shown barechested on three different occasions, all in warm, softly lit scenes to emphasise his youthful attractiveness and his "potential as the object of pleasurable visual attention".⁹ Ethan on the other hand is shown barechested only once when he is wounded and bandaged looking very overexposed and unerotic. For the most part, nakedness is masked in the Western, perhaps to avoid a taboo of homoeroticism. Whereas women, Indians and

⁹ Pumphrey, p. 54, 1996.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 51

villains can all be seen scantily clad and decent, "the hero cannot be, must not be, almost never is."¹⁰ The anxieties surrounding male display that shape the westerns representations of masculinity seem to demand this censorship. In the western, relations between men and men are more important than those between men and women, therefore the western must tactfully deny implications of homosexual relations.

These implications arise when the male is made the object of the 'look'. For to present a male body as an object is to feminise it. Laura Mulvey, in her paper, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', concludes that the female is the object of the 'erotic look' and the male the bearer. This however, I shall dispute anon, drawing on the views of Stephan Neale who feels that the 'erotic look' can be and is just as easily applied to the male.

Neale acknowledges Mulvey's realisation that the 'psychic mechanisms' of cinema are 'profoundly patriarchal'. He argues that, outside the 'gay movement' that masculinity has not been viewed as spectacle and heterosexual masculinity is also a valid recipient of 'the look', if done so in a problematised manner. He believes that Mulvey's 'structuring reference points' in relation to the female as object of the gaze are equally applicable to the male.

¹¹ Ellis, 1982, p.43

John Ellis argues that identification is not simply a matter of men identifying with the male protagonist and women identifying with the female. According to him, "cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles. Identifications are multiple, fluid, at point even contradictory."¹¹ He discusses two points of identification, narcissistic identification and that identification involving fantasies of power, omnipotence and control. It is usual within the western that those male fantasies of power and omnipotence are tested and qualified. The male is given a mission, a quest, he must fulfil before the narrative closure, like Ethan's (Wayne's) relentless search for Debbie in *The Searchers*. Ellis' other point 'narcissistic identification' is present in the character of Wayne (Tom Doniphon) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962, Ford) where he "incarnates the narcissistic function of the anachronistic social outsider."¹² The film takes a nostalgic note for the loss of Doniphon and what he represents. "The nostalgia then, is not just for an historical past, for the Old

¹² Neale, p. 283, 1992

West, but also for the masculine narcissism that Wayne represents." ¹³

¹³ Ibid

Mulvey denies the protagonist the function of being an erotic object. According to her, "identification with the male protagonist is only considered from a point of view which associates it with a sense of omnipotence, of assuming control of the narrative." ¹⁴ She believes that for the hero looking is not a matter of pleasure, but a neutral task, one employed for reading tracks or spotting Indian fires on distant horizons that there is also a good reason for it, be it on the defensive or planning an attack.

¹⁴ Rodowick, 1982, p.8

On the other hand, Paul Willemen believes that the male is an object of the erotic gaze within the genre of the western and particularly so in the films of Anthony Mann. "The viewer's experience is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male 'exist' (that is walk, move, ride, fight) in or through cityscapes, landscapes, or more abstractly, history. And on the unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated and restored through violent brutality." ¹⁵

¹⁵ Willemen, 1981, p.16

To revert to Neale, he agrees with Willemen and validates his statement by concluding that the pleasure of looking at the male belongs to repressed homosexual voyeurism, which induces much anxiety and is overcome by the westerns repression of the 'erotic component' of the look by the mutilation of the hero, as in Ethan's shoulder injury in *The Searchers*. This mutilation can also take the form of the protagonist's 'buddy' being killed or maimed as he looks helplessly on, often in reprisal for them becoming too 'close'.

This notion of homosexual voyeuristic looking is evident in any of the struggles or confrontations between males in the plot. "Hence, both forms of voyeuristic looking, intra- and extra- diegetic, are especially evident in those moments at which a narrative outcome is determined through a fight or a gun battle, at which male struggle becomes mere spectacle." ¹⁶ These fights often rely upon close-up shots which serve to fetishise the male. The western attempts to disguise this fetishisation of the male body by having 'the looks' which the males throw at each other being ones of fear or aggression, and in this manner lessening the erotic component.

¹⁶ Neale, *ibid*, p. 284, 1992

Neale concludes by agreeing with Mulvey and saying that the spectatorial look in cinema is for the most part male but that the eroticism of the male is also present if in a

repressed form.

"Male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed." ¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid, 1992, p.286

I shall now examine the evolution of Wayne's characters through the early western as typified by *Stagecoach* to the later western *The Searchers*.

Stagecoach contained a certain ambiguity over the civilising of the wilderness but still advocated the "triumph over social order of savagery" ¹⁸ in the defeat of the Indians. It was one of the first westerns to record "the tension between the celebration and the coming of civilisation". ¹⁹ It was subtly suggested within the narrative that the wilderness was a paradise being destroyed by white men. The westerner himself escaped this blame, his existence within the west was permissible, for he, like the Indian, lived with nature and like The Ringo Kid (Wayne) had no desire to civilise it and chose at the narrative closure to avoid 'the blessing of civilisation' that Lordsburg had to offer.

¹⁸ Short, 1991, p.284

¹⁹ Ibid

The film follows the physical journey of a stagecoach across Indian territory to Lordsburg and the subsequent psychological development of the characters on board. The drunken doctor sobers for long enough to deliver a baby, the prostitute proves that she has a heart of gold, the gambler is shown to be a true gentleman and the banker a thief. Wayne makes his entry as a naive young outlaw on his way to seek revenge upon the Plummers in Lordsburg, something he achieves despite the three to one odds stacked against him. In this early mature western, Wayne is depicted as an idealised, uncorrupted hero with his dreams of escaping to his ranch with Dallas (Claire Trevor). He must at all costs avoid the corrupting influence of civilisation, for that would serve to destroy his innocence. At the narrative closure he chooses marriage and rides off with the prostitute presumably to live 'happily ever after'.

It is the norm that at the end of the western that the hero must choose either to ride out of town alone or to settle down, marry and become civilised. The Ringo Kid (Wayne) opts for marriage, but chooses the wilderness rather than civilisation, in effect getting the best of both worlds. Laura Mulvey in her article 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative

Cinema', states that in the western two forms of narrative closure are equally acceptable, 'marriage' and 'not marriage'. She states that marriage signifies social integration which is essential to the Proppian folk tale, but that in the western the hero can also gain from refusal. "As the resolution of the Proppian tale can be seen to represent the resolution of the Oedipus complex (integration into the symbolic), the rejection of marriage personifies a nostalgic celebration of phallic narcissistic omnipotence."²⁰

²⁰ Mulvey, 1989, p.28

In *The Searchers* it is the buddy character who fulfils the hero's repressions and gets married while Ethan (Wayne) opts for solitude. There is a similar occurrence in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, where once again both roles are played out by the two main characters of Tom Doniphon (Wayne) and Ranson Stoddard (James Stewart) respectively.

To return to *The Searchers*, it is a film which portrays many polarities, those of home and wilderness, marriage and not-marriage, masculinity and femininity, and youth and experience. These polarities are depicted in the opposing characters of Ethan and Martin. In many respects Martin is the Wayne of *Stagecoach*, the young and innocent impressionable boy who chooses marriage. Ethan (Wayne) this time around is the true loner, he is depicted as an outsider from the outset, as portrayed in the opening sequence when the door of the homestead stands between him and civilisation and in the closing when the same door shuts him out. Both characters are depicted as belonging to one of two spheres, either domesticity or the wilderness, Martin attempts to traverse both but returns in the end to the domestic. This highlights the westerns point that only the chosen few are suitable for a life in the wilderness and that the qualifying traits are innate and not learned. Ethan is the half wild man who will not live in civilisation, Martin succumbs to romance but Ethan's journey is his romantic quest, his holy grail. Yet despite Ethan's rejection of civilisation, he still retains some of its properties. According to Tag Gallagher, "he represents not wilderness but the purity of civilised values; he values home and family, loathes Indians, and execrates miscegenation."²¹

²¹ Gallagher, 1995, p.284

In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, civilisation has dual characteristics, the hero Wayne surrenders to it while the anti-hero, Stoddard, is corrupted by it. Although *Liberty Valence* is a late western, it takes Stoddard his lifetime to

realise that civilisation is corrupting, something already taken for granted in the much earlier *Stagecoach*. Therefore the evolution of the western has many inconsistencies but in terms of Wayne, he appears to grow more remorseless, more ruthless, and more politically biased as the genre progresses.

Having mentioned Wayne's right-wing political views, it would seem to be appropriate now to attempt to answer Alexander Walker's question of "How far can a star's right wing bias be made consistent with a truly popular image? And how far is such a star the captive of his own image when he comes to propagandise for his political bias?"²²

²² Walker, 1970, p.170

John Wayne was very much a product of his political era, of right-wing McCarthyism and xenophobia. He became a militant right-winger as early as 1944 when he founded a political alliance with Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Robert Taylor and Ward Bond. But unlike the others, he managed to incorporate his right wing bias into his characters and films, something he achieved on screen without harming his box office success. According to Alexander Walker, "he was at the top of the exhibitions poll in 1969 even after he had delivered the 'inspirational address' in support of George Wallace, the extreme right-wing candidate of the U.S. Presidential nomination, and in addition had produced his own 'Hawkish' pro-Vietnam film *The Green Berets* (1968)." ²³ One may query how such a militant right winger, and Indian hater, as is depicted in *The Searchers*, became such a national institution?

²³ Ibid, 1970, p.302

It was the Wayne / Ford alliance which nurtured Wayne's conservatism, for Ford shared many of Wayne's political views, both were fervent admirers of the military among other things. Ford cast Wayne in roles which depicted him as the 'ideal American' with 'ideal American virtues', he was always heterosexual, heroic and patriarchal.

In Ford's earliest films in which he utilised Wayne, such as *Stagecoach*, Wayne still had his innocence intact enough to mistake 'Dallas' for a virtuous woman, but as his character evolved his insight became clearer and his treatment of women and 'others' more brutal. He was in effect a 6'4" tamer of Indians and women. In *The Searchers*, Wayne displays extreme Americanism in his character. After his niece Debbie is inducted into an Indian tribe, he goes in search of her, a search which becomes "a defence of the purity of the race he

belongs to.”²⁴ Throughout his journey he is accompanied by Martin whom he taunts continuously for being quarter Cherokee and when he finally finds Debbie, he wants to shoot her when she refers to the Indians who captured her as “my people”. Wayne’s Ethan is a bitter man with an inbred hatred of non-Americans. At the outset of the film he establishes that he has fought for his values, be that on the losing side of the Civil War. He is a remorseless man who does not believe in surrender. “I’ve still got my saber”.

Ludwig, like Ford, was also a conservative right winger, and his collaboration with Wayne in *Big Jim McLain* (Ludwig, 1957) is a depiction of super-patriotism *par excellence*. In it Wayne plays a special agent of HUAC, tracking down those disloyal Americans susceptible to communism. According to Walker, the film was cited as hysterical propaganda. “It gave it’s nod of approval to informers and offered its pardon to Communists who confessed their errors. The ex-party member in the film, self accused of crimes against humanity, atones for them by working in a leper colony.”²⁵

Big Jim’s refusal to negotiate with “reds” in *Big Jim McLain* can be likened to Ethans refusal to do likewise with the Indians in *The Searchers* - as he sneers “I don’t stand talkin’ to the wind”.

To conclude this opening chapter, I would like to say that as I go on to discuss Jack Nicholson in the second chapter that it will become evident that he was a product of his political era, be it a troubled one, just as Wayne was the product of a more stable era. Wayne was perceived as the ideal role model and epitomy of what the public wanted to see, but Nicholson emerged at a time of crumbling consensus where the agreement as to what the public wanted had become fractured and problematised.

Jack Nicholson

Traumatising Masculinity

Chapter II

Jack Nicholson's 1970s films "reflected the state of 70s masculinity as a spoor of doubt, confusion, ambivalence and dead ends."¹

¹ Penman, 1994 p.7

Nicholson was born in Neptune, New Jersey on April 22nd 1937. Much of his early roles were in low budget unsuccessful productions until his big break came in *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969) where he played the alcoholic lawyer, George Hanson, who was only too willing to abandon his meaningless existence in a small town for the open road. *Easy Rider* was cited as a non-conformist film where his abandonment of responsibility was applauded by the youth culture but ultimately punishable by his death. In the western, this was not an issue, man could abandon responsibility for the greater good, but not in the 70s, not in the aftermath of the 50s "breadwinner" ideology. An ideology which encouraged men to marry and assume financial responsibility for their spouses and offspring, thus discouraging females from the labour market.

Throughout the 70s, Nicholson played the outsider. In Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail* (1973) he was a dim-witted military policeman whose protests against the injustices of society were ineffective. In *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974) he was a jaded detective whose efforts to restore law and order went terribly wrong. In *Carnal Knowledge* (Nichols, 1971) he played a chauvinistic lawyer. In *The Missouri Breaks* (Penn, 1976) and *Reds* (Beatty, 1981) he was still playing the pitiful outsider.

² Palmer, 1992, p. 732

Nicholson came in the 70s to represent a particularly American dissatisfaction with the status quo, a dissatisfaction that leads to the rejection of social trammels but which is ultimately rendered ineffective by a fear of forming attachments.²

It may be interesting to point out here that the anti-hero of the 70s had this fear of attachment and commitment which came from an inability to relate to and commit to others.

Whereas the westerner mainly made a deliberate choice to avoid the burdens of commitment and the socialising influence of women.

³ Williams, op cit,
Penman, 1994, p.8

"There's Jack and there's the rest of us." ³ John Wayne became a celebrated national hero because he embodied all that a man could wish to be. One may question why Nicholson became known as "Mr. Hollywood" ? According to Penman in his article 'Sisyphus in Ray Bans', Nicholson did not gross nearly as much money during his golden period (1969 - 76) as Clint Eastwood or Robert Redford. Penman found his answer in the realisation that Nicholson is neither an Eastwood nor a Redford, but an everyman with flaws. "Nicholson's everyguy is a beer-poppin', basketball applaudin', eyebrow - twitchin', belly - scratchin', nose - sniffen', kinda figure." ⁴ Basically, he is a model with whom other men can identify.

⁴ Penman, ibid, p.9

After the 1970s Nicholson went on to star in more commercial, mainstream films such as *Batman* (Burton, 1989), *The Witches of Eastwick* (Miller, 1987), and *Wolf* (Nichols, 1994). These films shall not be given further consideration in this paper as I feel that the Nicholson persona has become irrelevant in the late eighties and nineties, and to the focus of this chapter which is on the traumatised male.

In his article 'Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films', Cawelti discusses *Chinatown* as a generically transformed *Noir*. I, for the purpose of this paper shall be examining *Chinatown* as well as *Easy Rider*, and *Five Easy Pieces* (Rafelson, 1970) as generically transformed westerns with Nicholson as the latter-day cowboy.

"*Easy Rider* is not only an elaboration of a motorcycle film, but a deliberate reaction to the most classic of all the Hollywood genres, the Western." ⁵

⁵ Cagin, and Dray,
1984, p.68

To all extents and purposes, *Easy Rider* is an 'Eastern' in which Hopper, Fonda and Nicholson play three drop out westerners on a journey of self discovery which takes them on the reverse route to the westerner, from the West to the East and symbolically to their own destruction. It is significant here that because the time of the westerner is past that anybody attempting to emulate him is doomed to destruction. Peter Fonda's character, Wyatt, has a name that alludes to the west-

ern hero, Wyatt Earp, but significantly, his father Henry, played Wyatt in *My Darling Clementine*, a fact which locates the character within the past.

Wyatt and Billy are updated cowboys attempting to live off the land but their depiction of the land and how they are seen to relate to it differs greatly from the westerners depiction. In the traditional western long shots are employed by the cinematographer to dwarf the figures within a vast landscape. In *Easy Rider* the figures occupy most of the frame while the landscape whizzes along beside them from their moving viewpoint. According to Cagin and Dray, the difference between both is as great as that "between a travelog and a painting."⁶

⁶ Ibid, p.69,

During the course of the narrative Wyatt and Billy are arrested for parading without a license and end up sharing a cell with Nicholson (George Hanson), the hungover alcoholic lawyer. On a whim, Hanson decides to accompany the pair to New Orleans to visit Madame Tinkertoy's Whorehouse, of which he has heard great things. Nicholson's Hanson is a rich Southern lawyer who has little in common with his two traveling companions. He is the only articulate character within the film, the only one with true insight into the bias' and corruptions of American society. He can justify the trio's hostile treatment at the hands of the rednecks in the cafe by concluding that they treated them so because they resented their freedom.

"Oh, they say they're free, but talking about it and being it, that's two different things. Being bought and sold in the marketplace, it's real hard to be free. 'Course they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' just to prove to you that they are."

Hansons statement is like a bad omen, for that very night he is clubbed to death by the same men as he camps in the woods outside town.

On the road, they are assailed by the anarchic dangers once associated with the wilderness, and at the trails end they reach not the opportunity represented by unsettled lands, but death at the hands of a couple of rednecks who don't like their long hair.⁷

⁷ Ibid

When Wyatt and Billy eventually reach the mardi-gras, they are disappointed with what they find. It is Wyatt who comes to the eventuality that "We blew it", something which is later literally enacted when they are 'blown up', getting across

the message that America is so corrupt and bigoted that any attempt to escape from the system will ultimately end in annihilation by that very same system.

The admission that "We blew it" is a very important message that *Easy Rider* gets across of the willingness of a new generation of Americans in the 70s to admit their fallibility.

Five Easy Pieces "sculpted a new kind of sexiness out of louche existential perplexity; it made alienation an offer you couldn't refuse."⁸

⁸ Penman, Ibid.

Five Easy Pieces also has formal and thematic links with the western, with its protagonist Bobby Dupea (Nicholson) setting out on a literal and symbolic journey. But Dupea's journey is an ominous and foreboding one which like that of the *Easy Rider* characters will most probably end in doom.

Yet again Nicholson plays a rebel non-conformist hero who seeks escape from an unsatisfying career, this time as a concert pianist. His journey takes him first to the Texan oil fields where he cohabits with Rayette (Karen Black), his country hick girlfriend who has ambitions of becoming a country and western singer. Her endless playing of Tammy Wynette records infuriates him, proving that although he may be running from culture and a bourgeois homelife, he still retains some of its refinement within him.

As the narrative progresses, he returns home to see his ailing father who is recovering from a stroke and to escape the responsibility of the pregnant Rayette. His homecoming, like his sojourn in Texas proves disastrous. Like the westerner, he seems to be searching for a community but shuns all that offer themselves to him. Unlike the westerner, his energies are destructive, he is the cause of much of society's trouble rather than the remedy. He picks pointless fights with the police and attacks his father's male nurse when he catches him with his sister. Having said that, he appears to be trapped within a vicious circle whereby it is the state of American society in the 70s which is the cause of much of his characters pitifulness.

This point is highlighted in the films chicken-sandwich scene, where the only way Dupea can get toast as a side order in a diner is to order a toasted chicken sandwich without the chicken. This scene acts as a metaphor for "An America in which desire is both pitifully shrunk - to the banal object - and

⁹ Gallafent, p.261

¹⁰ Easy Rider, Poster campaign Slogan, 1969

frustrated; that even so limited a request cannot be met.”⁹ Everything seems to dissatisfy Dupea, perhaps annihilation is his subconscious aim. He is still the *Easy Rider* man who “went looking for America but couldn’t find it anywhere.”¹⁰ His journey becomes a metaphor for life and his America self-fulfilment, and like in *Easy Rider*, death seems to be the only freedom.

Dupea is a male chauvinist and a womanizer, who like the westerner, shuns relationships when it comes to commitment. He uses Rayette and then abandons her and then proceeds to seduce his brother’s fiancée, Catherine Van Ost (Susan Anspach). Catherine is however afforded a little more intelligence than the average female, she recognises society’s hypocrisy and corruption but also realises, something that Bobby does not, that escape and flight are not the only answer.

The film restages the classical western ending in a down beat fashion. ‘Man in, man out, man alone’. Dupea abandons Rayette at a gas station for a truck going to Alaska, a continuation of his journey of self-destruction, this time northwards. Dupea’s life is one of a lack of identity, impotence and despair, he is no more than a destructive loser, one who is constantly running away but not towards anything. He is the apotheosis of a ‘patsy’, a hopeless bum who cannot and will not achieve anything.

His journey to Alaska will, without the coat he left at the gas station, most likely end in his death.

¹¹ Penman, ibid p.8

Just as Bobby Dupea is a hopeless specimen of masculinity who cannot achieve anything, so too is Nicholson’s Gittes in *Chinatown*. In both films “masculinity was shown to be in a state of suspension and flux, caught between old sureties and new demands, old ideals and new realities.”¹¹ In *Chinatown* this idea of out of context masculinity belongs to both Gittes and the Mulwray character, as both appear to be out of place in both their surroundings and in the inherently evil world that is *Chinatown*. Mulwray is first seen wandering along a dried up river bed looking awkward as he stumbles over the uneven terrain, totally inappropriately dressed in a bowtie, suit and glasses. His encounter with a young boy on horse back “simultaneously refers us to the western and emphasises the gap that has opened between pioneer qualities and the world of bureaucrats.”¹² He is out of place and therefore not viable,

¹² Gallafent, ibid, p.262

he is perhaps too sincere, too corrupted and therefore unfit to deal with the forces stacked against him. The next shot of him is of his dead, suit clad body, being winched up out of a run-off channel. It is the norm for the noir hero to possess the physical strength and gun skills of the western hero, but Gittes, 'our hero', is likened not to a traditional western hero but to Mulwray and we saw what happened to him . . . Gittes appears in a dark suit like Mulwray's and retraces his footsteps along the dried up river bed and meets the same boy on the horse and asks him about Mulwray. That night he goes back to where Mulwray's body was fished from the run-off channel, and he himself is almost drowned by a rush of water and subsequently has his nose slit by a hired gunman for trespassing.

In *Chinatown* it is not Gittes (Nicholson) who plays the latter-day cowboy but rather it is all the 'evil' characters who assume this identity. Noah Cross (Huston) assumes the identity of the western villain, as do his evil henchmen, especially those on horse back in the orange grove. Whereas in the western the villains were traditionally the losers, in *Chinatown* they win through. Gittes may attempt to be omnipotent but in fact it is Cross who is the true descendent of the westerner, a villain who has triumphed in the face of the hero's ineffectivity. All the other references to the western within the film serve to depict Gittes as an ineffective individual who has accidentally wandered into a western plot "without the apparatus for survival."¹³ Gittes' nose injury necessitates his sporting of a bandaged nose for most of the ensuing narrative. According to Virginia Wexman "his vulnerability and moral deformity appear metaphorically in his slashed nose."¹⁴ It has clear Oedipal overtures and is indicative of his impotence when he fails to perform with Evelyn Mulwray.

The second time Gittes is beaten up is when he visits the orange grove in his car where he is confronted by a man on horseback with a rifle and finally beaten up by a farm worker. The man and horse being representative of the western villain outdated but this time unbeatable. . .

"*Chinatown* becomes a symbol of life's deeper moral enigmas, those unintended consequences of action that are past understanding and control."¹⁵

Chinatown is a society which has reached an impasse, it is too evil to be readily redeemed. The deep evil is symbol-

¹³ Ibid p.263

¹⁴ Cawelti, 1977 p. 366

¹⁵ Ibid

ised by *Chinatown* as a place where gross depravity exists, where the individual is completely helpless to do anything against it. In traditional film noir the exotic was linked with evil and with the degenerate. The evildoer was normally an 'other', either a female or a foreigner, sometimes from the Orient, hence the connotations attached to the film's title *Chinatown*. Throughout the film Gittes is seen to ridicule the 'other'. This is in a similar vein to Wayne's portrayal of Ethan in *The Searchers* where he ridicules Martin for being part Indian, and to many other of his roles where his contempt for Mexicans and Indians are apparent.

In *Chinatown* Gittes' biggest shortcoming is his tendency to view Evelyn Mulwray as the criminal. She does connote this otherness, however with her vaguely Oriental appearance and her status as *femme fatale*. Therefore, because of her Oriental appearance, Gittes' growing involvement with her signifies his ultimate return to *Chinatown*.

In *Chinatown* sexual degeneracy appears to be rewarded, certainly so in the case of Noah Cross. Cross is seen to represent the 'triumph of the old west', but this time it is the villain who triumphs. Early in the narrative he appears in a scene when he and Gittes sit eating a meal on his terrace. Cross is dressed in braces and dons a cowboy hat while the sheriff's boys practice riding in the background, as if in the Wild West. Gittes makes a statement about him that "given the right circumstances, a man will do anything", referring to his crimes of incest and murder. This is a statement which is applicable to the westerner and the values of the Old West, especially so to the villain.

Cross undermines Gittes' sexual perversity and domination and according to Cawelti, the embodiment of Freud's primal father from 'Totem and Taboo.' Gittes on the other hand is impotent.

In film, characters are normally "enlarged to the stature of gods, heroes or monsters in mythic dimensions."¹⁶ This is achieved through close up camera shots, and the positioning of the actors within the frames. In Ford's films, Wayne's stature and positioning within the frame dominated the other characters; even without favourable positioning, Wayne has a towering and overwhelming presence. Nicholson, however, is not so

¹⁶ Polanski, 1979, p.2

favourably shot in *Chinatown*. Gittes/Nicholson is normally squashed into the side of the frame or boxed in by other characters. Cross, on the other hand is favoured within the frame. When Gittes visits him first, he approaches Gittes' car as seen from Gittes' point of view through the windshield. He, Cross, takes the central frame position and is flanked by his lackeys. This is a common generic positioning used to show power, rank and order. In the western the villain walks down the street of a town flanked by his henchmen.

The 1970s presented a no-win situation for the hero where he was up against a society too corrupt for one man to have any effect upon. He may still be borrowing from the legacy of the westerner but in a place and time where this legacy is inadequate.

¹ Hutchins, 1992, p.300

"The archetypal Douglas character is someone who for various reasons finds it difficult to live up to the dominant values of the world in which he finds himself." ¹

Michael Douglas was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey on 25th September 1944, son of the actor Kirk Douglas. His screen debut was as Carl Dixon in Miller's *Hail Hero* (1969). In the early eighties he played the idealist adventure hero Jack Colton in both *Romancing the Stone* (1984) and *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985). In the late eighties this idealism becomes more problematised in the film *Black Rain* (1989) where he plays a cop on the take. His failure to live up to society's values is embodied in both *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Basic Instinct* (1991). In the former, his fall from grace into an affair endangers the stability of his family and in both he plays a protagonist who compromises his professionalism to follow his hormones.

According to Peter Hutchins his frailty and the sense of vulnerability that goes with it, point to the way the Douglas hero . . . can be seen as the New Man of American cinema, someone who is able to combine a rugged heroism with a sensitivity and tenderness that in earlier times would have been considered unmanly. ²

² Ibid, 1992, p.301

The sensitive side of many of Douglas' characters is present in order to counterbalance his flaws. Take *Fatal Attraction* for example, throughout the narrative the viewer is encouraged to identify with the Douglas character although it is his lack of scruples which has landed him in the mess he finds himself. In *The War of the Roses* the viewer is also subtly encouraged to take sides with Douglas although he is at as much fault as his wife. However, this presence of sensitivity also has a negative side as it disables him from achieving the macho omnipotence of the westerner. This omnipotence is reinstated however, in *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987) where he plays the ruthless business tycoon Gordon Gekko, a man totally lacking in sympathy.

For the purpose of this paper, I shall be discussing the later films of Douglas, namely *Fatal Attraction*, and *Basic Instinct* as *Neo-Noirs*. This is relevant in that the Douglas persona in both, is a *Noir* "patsy" with Glenn Close and Sharon Stone playing the respective *femme-fatales*. I shall borrow from the B. Ruby Rich article 'Dumb Lugs and *Femme Fatales*' to expand upon how the *Neo-Noir* term is applicable to the above films.

"In *Neo-Noir*, the women are irresistibly sexy and inexplicably evil, the men as dumb as they come and heading for a fall." ³

³ Rich, 1995, p.8

According to B. Ruby Rich the 1990s adopted a dumb-is-good philosophy, where the male patsies who appear to be no match for their female counterparts turn out to be the only truly authentic characters. The 90s is a post modern time where being too clever is dangerous. "Dumbness becomes the only marker of authenticity, the only guarantee of any integrity in a universe of shady deals and double crossing comrades." ⁴ The 90s admires dumbness; take the commercial success of *Dumb and Dumber* and *Forest Gump*. The protagonists are still ineffective patsies but ones who are glorified by their idiocy where the women are demonised by their intellect.

⁴ Ibid

In *Fatal Attraction*, Douglas is seen as an innocent victim of a psychotic jilted female rather than a professional who should know better than to violate his code of ethics and become involved in an extra-marital affair. In *Basic Instinct* Douglas yet again plays the patsy who is duped into believing in Tramel (Stone's) innocence because his hormones refuse to accept that someone so sexy could possibly be guilty.

These dumb lugs are accorded a morality denied to the women. At the same time, in a moment of crisis for masculinity in the movies, these dumb guys are real men. The bid for authenticity in the 90s is stupidity. Were this model placed in a historical context, the United States would be the dumb-lug who post-communism can't figure out who or what he is or what he's supposed to do; feeling spurned and duped, all he can do is stumble on clueless, in a world dimly perceived as dangerous. ⁵

⁵ Ibid

Keeping in tune with the previous chapter, many of

Douglas' films can also be discussed as "disguised westerns", whereby the westerners contempt for the Indian is transmitted into the female, where she becomes his main adversary.

However, in order to achieve this the female persona must be altered in some way for merely being a female is not enough to warrant becoming a loathsome adversary. Hence, the demonisation of the independent woman employed in both *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*. It is important that she be an independent career woman occupying a highpowered role in the work place because she is therefore assuming the males role, occupying his territory and posing a threat to his masculinity.

According to Elizabeth Traube, the demonisation of the working girl in *Fatal Attraction* is "generated out of reawakened infantile fears of being under female power, the fantasy of the demonic woman split female sexuality into what then appears to as lawful and unlawful forms."⁶ Unlawful is Alex (Glenn Close), she pours acid over Douglas' car, house breaks, and boils a bunny rabbit. Unlawful too is Catherine Tramel (Sharon Stone), the cold blooded novelist come murderess. The unlawful acts of both these protagonists serve to equate them with the equally unlawful Indian. In *The Searchers*, the Indian party who attacked and killed the homesteaders did so out of pure savagery. The women and children involved posed no real threat to their Indian attackers, their murder was therefore unwarranted so too was Alex' boiling of a live rabbit in *Fatal Attraction*. In *Basic Instinct* Douglas' partner Gus (George Dzunda) can be equated with *Fatal Attractions* bunny rabbit and his cold blooded murder at the hands of Tramel can be viewed as just as vindictive as Alex' rabbit stew. Therefore, these females go over the top, they are not just evil, they are savage new age Indians.

These demonic females have another purpose, according to Traube. "Demonic women also create the narrative situations in which men can legitimately appropriate such feminine qualities as seductiveness and nurturance in a sense offering themselves as substitutes for what is repudiated."⁷ This may explain why Douglas' characters tend to be sensitive 90s men. In *Fatal Attraction* he combines both seductiveness and nurturance with his patriarchal control. He plays the loving husband and seductive lover along with being a successful professional.

⁶ Traube, 1992, p.113

⁷ Ibid, 1992, p.121

Fatal Attraction tells the story of Dan Gallagher (Douglas) the happily married attorney who has a whirlwind affair with the antagonist Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) the weekend his wife and daughter are out of town. Dan envisages the affair to be shortlived but Alex has other ideas. When jilted by Dan, she slits her wrists, her attempted suicide a reenactment of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* which plays over and over in her barren flat. Her next attempt to get Dan back is when she tells him she is pregnant. "I'm thirty-six years old; it may be my last chance to have a child," the psychopathic Close pleads, but her wails fall on deaf ears. It is from this point in the narrative onwards that her gradual descent into madness commences. She goes from pouring acid over Dan's car to bunny rabbit boiling to attempting to murder Beth Gallagher (Anne Archer). The final showdown in the bathroom is like a remake of '*Les Diaboliques*' where "one knows that the apparently drowned Alex is going to rise up from the tub because Lyne cuts back so often to her seemingly lifeless body under the water."⁸ It is Beth that finally gets to shoot her. It is significant that it be the good wife who destroys the femme fatale, thus setting moral order straight again.

⁸ Petley, 1988, pps. 14-15

Susan Faludi, in her book, '*Fatal and Foetal Visions: The Backlash in the Movies*', discusses how the theme of *Fatal Attraction* became a trend. There were seven cover stories in 'Time' and 'People' about the recurrent phenomenon of the psychotic jilted female and Glenn Close's character was dubbed "most hated woman in America".

The film industry was appropriating the 'demonisation of the female' as a means of reinstating masculinity. At the close, Alex is shot by Beth in reprisal for her over ambitious nature, her 'masculine' sex drive, and most importantly, her daring to disturb the harmony of a stable family unit. Douglas (Dan) emerges at the close as 'the innocent party' who was led astray by a wanton wicked woman and not as the irresponsible protagonist who placed his family's stability in jeopardy by following his hormones. According to Faludi, the entire storyline was twisted from what was its original version in a short film called *Diversion* (Deardon 1979) to the mutated version directed by Lyne. The original story was intended to "explore an individual's responsibility for a stranger's suffering: to explore how

¹² Huberman, 1992 p. 4

⁹ Faludi, p.146

this man who inflicted pain, no matter how unintentionally, must eventually hold himself accountable.” ⁹ Paramount rejected this script for the feature film version. The feeling was that more of the onus should be placed upon the female. The rewrites make her the initiator of the affair and more venomous while the husband became more lovable. Eventually, the two female characters became polar opposites, the bland, subservient housewife versus the female villain. Close became the black leather clad Neo-Indian with an apartment in a barren loft in a meat packing district while Douglas was viewed as the ‘cowboy protector’ of moral order in the family by seeking to eliminate the cause of its destruction, namely Close.

When asked to comment on how he felt about starring in such a negative portrayal of femininity, Douglas made the following statement:

If you want to know, I'm really tired of feminists, sick of them. They've really dug their own grave. Any man would be a fool who didn't agree with equal rights but . . . It's time they looked at themselves and stopped attacking men. Guys are going through a terrible crisis right now because of women's unreasonable demands.¹⁰

¹⁰ Douglas, op cit, Petley 1988

In *Basic Instinct* as in the earlier *Fatal Attraction*, Douglas once again plays the professional who is led by his hormones, but in this instance he is up against “rich, beautiful, man-slashing crypto-lesbians”.¹¹

¹¹ Verhoeven, op cit

In *Basic Instinct*, “Douglas synthesises all previous roles from *Fatal Attraction* and *War of the Roses* to *Black Rain* and the long-running television series *The Streets of San Francisco*. He is a superego tied into a pretzel, a cop with an addictive personality who consistently does the wrong thing.”¹² We learn that he has shot two tourists who accidentally got into his line of fire, for which he is undergoing psycho-analysis and it is suggested by Tramel (Sharon Stone) that he may have been on cocaine at the time of the shooting. Later in the course of the film, he kills a third innocent, his police psychologist-come-lover, Doctor Beth Gardner (Jeanne Tripplehorn) whom he comes across at the scene of his partner Gus' (George Dzundza) murder. He may be thus compared with Jack Nicholson's character Gittes in *Chinatown*, both of whom

¹² Huberman, 1992 p.4

through their blunderings cause the death of an innocent. But unlike Gittes, Detective Nick Curran's lack of insight is more than compensated for by his ooze of sex appeal. All the female characters may be potential lesbians, but that does not prevent the majority of them succumbing to the phallic power of Douglas. He describes his sex with Tramel as "the fuck of the century" and outmatchos Roxy (Leilani Sarelle) Tramel's live-in-lesbian lover during their "man to man" talk in the bathroom after she spends the night jealously watching them. It is significant that Roxy is so jealous of Nick's relationship with Tramel that she tries to run him down because according to Tramel she has never before been jealous of any of her male lovers. It is not only the females who are jealous of Douglas' sexual prowess. When his partner Gus deduces that he has slept with Tramel, he is as jealous as Roxy, "goddamn son-of-a-bitch, you fucked her. How could you fuck her?" Later on in the film, Gus is murdered. His murder is not really necessary to the plot structure but serves more to allay the homophobic anxieties that are present when two filmic characters are depicted as 'buddies' or partners. Gus overstepped the mark he expressed desires for his partner, a crime which is punishable by death in the 90s film industry just as it was in the western.

As the narrative unfolds, we are given further comparisons between *Basic Instinct* and the western. In his office Douglas is seen to drink his coffee from a mug with a sheriff's badge on it, alluding both to the old west and the portrayal of omnipotent masculinity. His character is similar to that of Wayne's Ethan in *The Searchers*, both men are defiant and stubborn. Ethan refused to surrender his saber or his quest for Debbie. Douglas' defiance however is a result of his desire to play the "bad boy" to Stone's "bad girl". He copies her reckless driving and when under suspicion for Nilsens murder, he gives the same retort as she did when asked not to smoke in the interview room, "what are you going to arrest me for, smoking?"

This bold behaviour, however, is not enough to establish his masculinity and this is where his phallus comes into play.

In *Basic Instinct*, all the female characters are potential lesbians. Sharon Stone is bisexual as is Jeanne Tripplehorn (Dr. Gardner), and Leilani Sarelle (Roxy) is a lesbian. In normal circumstances lesbianism is the realisation for the male that he

may in fact be expendable, but not so for Douglas, for even potential lesbians cannot resist him. In fact, the power of Douglas' phallus is such that it can 'cure' lesbianism. After Douglas has copulated with Tramel, he brags to Roxy that his performance has cured her of her polymorphous perversity. *Basic instinct* is a portrayal of homophobia par excellence. The film's release prompted an outcry from the lesbian and gay communities at the supposed link made between bisexuality and homicidal mania. Not only is Stone a lesbian but one, according to the film's forensic psychologist, "with a devious, diabolical mind . . . a deep-seated obsessional hatred . . . someone very dangerous and very ill." Dr. Gardner (Tripplehorn) is cast as the probable murderess of her parents and husband and Roxy (Sarelle) is a convicted child murderer.

Therefore it would be fair to assume that Douglas' masculinity is defined first and foremost by his phallus and that his omnipotence is raised by his positive heterosexuality while the female antagonists are marred beyond redemption by their negative homosexual practices.

Wall Street depicts an America where "It's good to feel bad about America again."¹³

¹³ French, 1988 p. 136

I shall conclude this final chapter with a reference to Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987) in which Michael Douglas plays the ruthless business tycoon Gordon Gekko. The subject of the film is that of Ivan Boesky's insider dealing and his subsequent arrest.

Wall Street is a depiction of ruthless masculinity where Douglas abandons his 'sensitive guy' persona in order to play a character on the other side of the coin. Gekko is the "dazzling, dynamic takeover artist who cannot be reformed." Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen) plays a young stockbroker who, in a desperate bid to become rich, gathers insider information for Gekko.

Fox's first meeting with Gekko is when he "visits him in his plate-glass eyrie on his birthday and finds him chewing up companies, discoursing on the pleasures of power and announcing that 'lunch is for whimps' while feeding his birthday cards into a shredder."¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid

It is Fox's desire to imitate Gekko which is the initiator of his gradual descent through negative capitalism to jail. According to Traube, *Wall Street* "personifies the moral

dichotomy of destructive and productive capitalism in contrastive styles of masculinity.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Traube, *ibid*, p. 113

Gekko's morals are simple, he believes that “If you're not inside, you're outside.” He attempts to share this moral legacy with Fox, but his legacy turns out to be a negative one whereby Fox is living, like a parasite, off the misfortunes of others. This realisation finally comes to Fox when Gekko attempts to liquidate Blue Star Airlines, the company where Fox's father works. Fox is finally redeemed, but pays the price for his wrongdoing as a sojourn in prison awaits him at the film's close. Fox gets some satisfaction, however, when he splits on Gekko and drags him down with him.

At the end of the film, when Fox confronts Gekko in the park, Gekko makes the claim that without him, Fox would have been nothing, “I gave you your masculinity.” Gekko equated masculinity with power and monetary gain. It was this power which makes the beautiful Darian (Daral Hannah) fall for Fox and the loss of it which prompted her to dump him. Masculinity and power can therefore be viewed as a transitory thing in the late 80s.

Wall Street is a job success story in which bureaucratic seduction is depicted as a positive aim for the male, while discouraging the female from such ambitions. All the females within the plot occupy ‘tamed’ careers.

It has been cited that *Wall Street* was a ‘patriarchal moral discipline story’, but not a very successful one, as it was a box office disappointment. This theme however is a recurrent one, emerging in other Douglas films such as *Fatal Attraction*, and *Basic Instinct*. This time around the new formula being used is the identification of the “dangerous, uncontrolled forces loose in society with the independent, upper-middle-class, professional managerial woman.”¹⁶ Therefore masculinity's only redemption is through the belittling of its opponent, femininity.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p. 106

Conclusion

In summation, the focus of this paper has been to explore the evolution of masculinity in American cinema. On the whole, the course of this evolution seems to have taken a downwardly spiralling trajectory whereby the omnipotent masculinity of the westerner became the pitiful excuse for manhood as depicted by Nicholson in the 70s. In the 80s the lifebuoy thrown to the male by the film industry was only partially inflated and in the 90s he is still bobbing half above, half below the water level.

This dissertation chose to focus, not upon the action hero, the obvious heir to the westerner, but upon the other avenue, the "fallible" male hero and his struggle through the late twentieth century. In doing so, reference has been made to much of the independently produced non-mainstream cinema of the 1970s, particularly the B.B.S. production of *Five Easy Pieces* and Dennis Hoppers equally low budget *Easy Rider*.

The discussion on Michael Douglas borrows heavily from the assumption that both *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* can be viewed as Neo-Noirs, referring them to the equally non-canonical genre of Film Noir.

All these films, however, can be justifiably linked with the dominant genre of the western by virtue of the fact that they can all be viewed as "disguised westerns". In both *Easy Rider* and *Five Easy Pieces*, the Nicholson protagonist plays latter day cowboys on journeys of self discovery. In *Chinatown*, Nicholson plays not only the generically transformed noir protagonist (discussed by Cawelti) but one who is operating within a world in which characters straight out of a western pop up with great frequency.

John Wayne's fear and hatred of miscegenation is transformed in the late 80s and 90s into fear and hatred of the female. Thus linking *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* with the western. It is in *Wall Street* that Douglas almost regains the omnipotence of the westerner but this omnipotence is too deeply enmeshed in "negative capitalism" to succeed.

The omnipotence of the westerner was never really of an obtainable sort to the average Joe Soap, he was an improbable role model, one rooted too deeply within the past. For him, masculinity was an existential task, a life in which very few

men could exist, a solitary life with no legacy. Those later filmic characters who imitated the westerner were themselves as improbable, one off super heroes in the mould of Batman, Rambo, or the Terminator.

The western was also problematic in its toerance of "not-marriage" as an acceptable destiny for the hero. If the hero was not seen to procreate, where did all the ensuing heroes spring from? This was an unusual departure in a time where marriage and within it, the breadwinner role were so highly favoured in American society. The westerner manages to escape to solitude while all the other protagonists are being married off.

In the 1970s the male's flaw was his inability to show commitment, to settle down. While this may have been a positive factor for the westerner, in the 70s it led to the protagonist's ultimate doom. The 80s and 90s emulated the 1950s with their call for stable family units, for the procreation of children, but had to contend with feminism and the female unwillingness to conform to this model.

The 70s filmic 'masculinity crisis' was firmly rooted within the political climate of the time. The loss of Vietnam and the Watergate Affair led to the people's waining faith in a patriarchal government. The films being produced reflected this erosion of trust and feeling of powerlessness. Masculine authority figures were being problematised, made impotent as personified by Nicholson's role in the 70s.

These 'newly weakened' men attempted to fight back, to emulate the masculine values of the Old West, but failed. Rather than shirking commitment like their western counterparts, they feared it and this time around their abandonment of responsibility was punishable. Nicholson's characters could not escape the system of a corrupt and bigoted America and their attempts to do so resulted in damnation.

In the 90s the male is still B. Ruby Rich's 'Noir patsy' but this time he is a patsy with sex appeal. A patsy with the nickname 'Shooter', and the ability to convert lesbians to heterosexuality. He is a patsy who spends most of the script romping around naked, his only weapon tucked away in his y-fronts. Not only has he the ability to make females fall at his feet but even his partner is jealous of his sexual prowess. He may be dumb, dumb enough to follow his hormones instead of his intellect but that is what makes him so endearing. Brains

are a commodity that the 90s do not demand in a male, let the females have them to use to their own destruction.

Not only do these females have intelligence, but they also have power. It, however, is a warped power, marred by their supposed sexual preference. The woman is portrayed as homosexual in a homophobic world. One must marvel at the film industry's nerve to depict homosexuality as an illness from which one can be cured by a good dose of Douglas.

Both *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* are patriarchal masochistic fantasies with no win situations for women. Thus making 80s and 90s cinema the obvious successor to 40s *Noir* where the strong woman either perishes or is transformed. In *Fatal Attraction*, Glenn Close must perish for she has disrupted the harmony of a family unit, a crime, which in American cinema, warrants the death penalty. In *Basic Instinct*, Douglas naively attempts to transform Sharon Stone's homicidal impulse by suggesting that they "fuck like minks, raise rug rats and live happily ever after." The 90s is not a place for fairytale endings as *Basic Instinct* points out as the camera cuts to the ice pick hidden under the bed within Stone's grasp.

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Selective Filmography

<i>Basic Instinct</i>	Verhoever	1991
<i>Big Jake</i>	Sherman	1971
<i>Big Jim McLain</i>	Lugwig	1957
<i>The Big Trail</i>	Walsh	1930
<i>Black Rain</i>	Scott	1989
<i>Carnal Knowledge</i>	Nichols	1971
<i>Chinatown</i>	Polanski	1974
<i>Circus World</i>	Hathaway	1964
<i>The Cowboys</i>	Rydell	1971
<i>Dark Command</i>	Walsh	1940
<i>Diversion</i>	Deardon	1979
<i>Donovans Reef</i>	Ford	1963
<i>Duel in the Sun</i>	Vidor / Dieterle	1946
	Von Sternberg	
<i>Easy Rider</i>	Hopper	1969
<i>Fatal Attraction</i>	Lyne	1987
<i>Five Easy Pieces</i>	Rafelson	1970
<i>Forest Gump</i>	Zemeckies	1995
<i>The Green Berets</i>	Wayne	1968
<i>High Noon</i>	Zimmermann	1952
<i>Jewel of the Nile</i>	Teague	1985
<i>The Last Detail</i>	Ashby	1973
<i>The Man Who Shot</i>	Ford	1962
<i>Liberty Valance</i>		
<i>Missouri Breaks</i>	Penn	1976
<i>Romancing the Stone</i>	Zemeckis	1984
<i>Scarface</i>	Hawks	1932
<i>The Searchers</i>	Ford	1956
<i>Stagecoach</i>	Ford	1939
<i>Taxi Driver</i>	Scorsese	1976
<i>WallStreet</i>	Stone	1987
<i>The War of the Roses</i>	DeVito	1989
<i>9 1/2 Weeks</i>	Lyne	1987

