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# HUNG LIKE A HORSE: MALE STRIPPING IN RECENT FILMS

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The male body has been a cinematic fetish for many years. This is not to deny that women have featured as erotic objects throughout cinematic history. It is simply to observe that from the late fifties there has been an awareness of the female gaze such that the physiques (or at least naked torsos) of Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, Charlton Heston and (since 1964 and *A Fistful of Dollars*) Clint Eastwood have constructed what one film studies scholar has termed "masculinity as a spectacle."[1]

In the early 70s Burt Reynolds was the first of many male film stars to pose nude for the centerfold of a women's magazine (*Cosmopolitan*) and with the appearance of Gibson, Ford, Stallone and Schwarzenegger we have moved into another generation of male icon. The presentation of this female gaze can present problems in the form of erotic sub-currents. For quite frequently the kind of action films in which these iconized bodies

[1] "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Masculinity," in Steve Neale and Ina Rae Mark, eds., *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 9-20.

feature are orientated towards a male audience; the *Mad Max, Rambo, Die Hard* and *Terminator* series, for example.

A homoerotic gaze plays about these screenings of the male body. Hollywood has become more frank about this gaze and its appeal. Several of its younger stars have submitted their bodies to such a construction: River Phoenix in *My Own Private Idaho*, Brad Pitt in *Interview with a Vampire*, Leonardo DiCaprio in *Total Eclipse*.

Each of these presentations of the male body in cinema reinforces the ideology of masculine potency. The bodies are shaped to elicit audience desire. Whether what is screened is the muscular, hirsute and toned physique of Bruce Willis (in *Twelve Monkey*) or the lean, pale and hairless body of Brad Pitt (in *Thelma and Louise*), both, in their different ways, are representations of phallic power–though the more toned and muscular, the more the body consciously and visibly presents itself as one great hard-on.

What is interesting and significant, therefore, is a series of recent films where the male body is stripped and exposed to the erotic gaze in a way that expresses not its potency but its vulnerability. Rather than figuring male erection, these representations critique phallocentrism and, in their frank shots of the male penis, show that for the majority of the time, that penis is detumescent.

Three films, in particular, point the way towards a different scripting of the male body: *The Pillow Book* (Peter Greenaway), *Boogie Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson), and *The Full Monty* (Peter Canttaneo). In the first of these films, Jerome (Ewan McGregor), an English translator living in Japan, allows his body to be written upon so that a women poet might enable her work to be read by an important, exploitative homosexual publisher.

The camera lovingly films, in close-up, the calligraphic movement of the pen upon the male body. Jerome then delivers himself into the hands of the publisher and strips before him in such a way that we are conscious of how both Jerome's body and the homoerotic desire and gaze are scripted. The flesh becomes text–quite literally, for Jerome's body is finally skinned and made into a book.

The plot of *Boogie Nights* follows the rise, fall, and resurrection of Eddie Adam alias Dirk Diggler's (Mark Wahlberg) enormous cock in the pornography industry. In the final scene, Dirk stands before a mirror, just prior to the shooting of his comeback film (all sexual innuendoes are intended by the film), unzips his pants, and pulls out for his gaze and the audience's, the instrument which has been concealed (and yet foregrounded in dialogue) throughout the film.

In a long take, while Dirk pumps up his ego before the mirror, the camera dwells on the length and impotence of this ridiculous member. Dirk's dick is no more than a kitsch accessory in a film which plays *a la* Tarantino with the dramatic as the banal.

*The Full Monty* narrates the story of a group of steelworkers rendered socially, politically, and physically impotent by unemployment. Inspired by Gaz (Robert Carlyle), who observes the impact that the Chippendale male strippers have on the local women and his own lack of cash, the group get together and train to take the stage at the local pub for one night.

The significant difference between the Chippendale version and their own act is that the Chippendales all present the tanned and toned-up bodies of the masculine sex-icon, and (to keep sexual illusion constantly in play) they keep their jockstraps on; this group of emaciated, pale, unmuscular (but for one), overweight and aged male bodies are determined to go all the way, revealing the inner sanctum of masculinity, the cock behind the jockstrap–for one night only.

In each of these films there is a staging of the self-conscious spectacle of the male body. The exposure of the genitals receives an audience within the film itself, and this audience is significant for the naming of the ostensive gaze and desire. Jerome is caught between the gaze of the female poet and the male homoerotic gaze of the publisher; his body functions as a screen for the projection of their parallel desires. Dirk gazes at himself, but it is a gaze without desire. His narcissism is fragile; it is required so that he can give himself an erection, because without an erection he will not be able to perform for the cameras which await him. But the dick remains limp as he folds it away and bursts out of his dressing room door determined to conquer.

The audience in the pub who have come to see Gaz and his friends perform, is mixed, but it is the female desire and gaze which is foregrounded. There is an exuberance displayed by the men, an ecstasy of final unveiling, concomitant with the ecstasy on the faces of the women, as the strippers approach, hands on the police hats covering their genitals, ready for the climax. Both performers and audience, men and women, share a sense of triumph, release, even giftedness, when the hats are tossed aside. But the cinema audience is withheld from that final participation. The camera views the men from behind and then freezes the frame before the credits roll.

In each film, though much more so in *Boogie Nights* and *The Full Monty*, the audience is interloper, voyeur; we are never (or only momentarily in *The Pillow Book*) directly invited to be excited by what we see. The male bodies are not fetishized; they are presented as vulnerable organic forms caught up in a play of social, political, economic, and sexual scriptings which plot for them the possible modes of action.

How do we read these scriptings of the male body? Certainly, they announce a new consciousness by men (each film is directed by a man) of their vulnerability; of the way their bodies have been written upon (by the film industry, by pornography, by commercial advertising). These bodies are no longer in charge, no longer wielders of phallocentric power.

In *Boogie Nights* and *The Full Monty* being hung like a horse is viewed, on one level, as a certain advantage. But the advantage is economic; if money cannot be earned by the sweat of the worker's brow then the male worker has to find other assets. When a young, good-looking and Greek-figured man auditions for Gaz, he displays the size of his dick as his only qualification for joining the troupe. Gaz immediately remarks that the man has become their "walking lunch-box."

In *The Pillow Book* and *Boogie Nights* there appears no way of escaping this scripting; both men are sacrificed for the sake of productions that far exceed their importance. Jerome's body being turned into a book in a way parallels Dirk's cashing the bank cheque that his body has become in order to live well, materially. Both bodies, in these films, men–now on the other side of phallocentrism–are reduced to flesh bought, sold and exchanged.

In *The Full Monty*, on the other hand, both the men and the women join together in resisting the sex-icon scriptings for the male body. There is a celebration of the male body in a manner which does not exalt itself at the expense of the female body. As the credits roll, Hot Chocolate sing "I believe in miracles." There is a resurrection of the male body; a salvation. From the despair and failure with which the film opens, there emerges an affirmation. The affirmation has required self-exertion, but it does not depend upon self-assertion (and the subsequent denigration of others).

Read eschatologically, that is, read in terms of the movement of the body of Christ in and through cultural history towards full redemption: these films announce new images of male possibility beyond the hung-like-a-horse power-play of the phallus. Expressed is a desire for a new openness and honesty, an examination (at last) of the gendering of men: with *The Full Monty*, the promise of a new affirmation of male embodiment in a multi-gendered society; with *The Pillow Book*, the castrating fears that new vulnerability brings; and with *Boogie Nights* the cynical comment that now men's bodies too, as women's bodies previously, are both used and users.