

BIG-BOY MOVIES OF HOLLYWOOD: UNREALISTIC GENDER RULES AND SILENT MASCULINITY CODES

Fei Jiun, Kik

Tunku Abdul Rahman University College, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA, kikfj@acd.tarc.edu.my

Abstract

Unpleasant biases of female images in Hollywood mainstream movies had been broadly discussed for years. However, with a closer look at Hollywood productions, males are visibly portrayed in multifarious to unpractical images recently; and these unrealistic traits are getting a strong foothold in the society. This stereotyping of males has automatically becoming as a silent agreement and guideline between film industry and society: an invisible slaughter of male representations seems as an inevitable process of pursuing visual pleasure and cinematic capitalism. Females are stereotyped for male gaze as *Laura Mulvey* mentioned in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* at 1975, while males are stereotyped recently with its "heterosexual masculinity" as mentioned by *Steve Neale* in his *Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema* at 1985, or trained to be an latest "ultimate man" with extreme masculinity traits according to *Michael S. Kimmel* in *Guyland: the Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* at 2008. By following the ideology, this paper focuses on Hollywood's masculine movies which emphasizing on manliness, that creates unrealistic images, distorted identifications of male physically and emotionally. By organising the created and twisted masculine rules and codes from American films, this paper justifies the relationship among movies, masculinity, identity conflict, social pressure and unequal cultural structure.

Keywords: Hollywood Movies, gender Stereotyping, Masculinity

1 HYPOTHESIS

This paper attempts to prove that the unrealistic masculine representations in Hollywood popular cinemas will transform to realistic masculine rules and codes; eventually cause to tension and anxiety among male viewers. To get this hypothesis answered, five concepts will be studied:

1. Unrealistic masculine identities are created in Hollywood popular cinemas.
2. Unrealistic masculine identities are developing progressively in big-boy films.
3. Big-boy films transfer the virtual masculine identities into a practical masculine guideline toward viewers.
4. Viewers will face gender pressure in society when they are unable meet the expected masculine guidelines.
5. A transformation of unreal masculine representation (on movies) into a real masculine pressure (in society) happens. Qualitative research will be conducted in two separate but relate studies: study I for concept 1 and 2; and study II for concept 3, 4 and 5.

2 STUDY I: IDENTITIES AND REPRESENTATIONS

The first study is to analyse the identities and representations of male characters in 30 selected Hollywood popular big-boy films in genres of action, science fiction, superheroes, drama, gangsters, and war. (refer to table 1).

Table 1. 30 selected big-boy films of Hollywood from 1976-2014.

Films	Films
Taxi Driver	There Will be Blood
Scarface	The Taking of Pelham 123
Braveheart	The Expendables
The Usual Suspects	Drive
The Rock	The Dark Knight Rises
Saving Private Ryan	Men in Black 3
The Matrix	The Avengers
Fight Club	Fast and Furious 6
Gladiator	Taken 3
The Transporter	American Sniper
300	Transformers: Age of Extinction
The Bourne Ultimatum	Hercules
Spider-Man 3	RoboCop
Die Hard 4.0	The Equalizer
No Country for Old Men	Guardians of the Galaxy

The films selection is based on an operational understanding of big-boy films: the male oriented films with protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) are males; and the involvement of female characters is comparatively low. The films and the leading characters will be analysed externally and internally. External identities connect to the visible physical constructions of portrayal, image and symbol such as appearances and behaviours. The internal identities refer to the implicit representations including expression of value such as personalities, emotions, feelings, thinking, abilities and violence.

2.1 Findings of study I

2.1.1 External Identity: Code of Masculinity One – A Tough Hero.

In this study, all the male characters are physically portrayed as healthy, fit, strong and solid individuals, except Verbal: a less machismo, timid and weak crippled suspect that played by Kevin Spacey in *The Usual Suspects*. Ironically, this manless character is just a mask for him to outwit the police and escape at the end.

Three different types of masculinity in films are found in this study:

Radical masculinity – male characters are symbolised with extreme masculine traits, particularly by outlook. They are objectified as muscular heroes, by excessive highlights on male bodies, exaggerated figures, and absolute health conditions. More, topless or half naked males are exposed to the audience for visual pleasure and icon enhancement purposes, particularly in warrior films such as *Gladiator*, *300*, *The Expendables*, *The Avengers*, *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Hercules*. Also, warriors with a brink-of-death yelling (the “Freedom...!” by William Wallace in *Braveheart* and the stone pushing’s shout in *Hercules*) indicates manliness to extreme and upgrades hyper-masculinity to the maximum.

Super masculinity – male characters are transformed from comic icons to fictional portrayals with imaginable ability and unreal weapon such as superheroes with superpowers and super conditions. These illustrations of imagination are reflected on *Spider-Man 3*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *The Avengers*. Super masculinity also applied to male characters that are heroised into machines and the human saviours in *Transformers: Age of Extinction* and *RoboCop*.

Conservative masculinity – male characters are focused on traditional masculine ideologies such as brotherhood, fatherhood and patriotism. It could be observed in *Scarface*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Fight Club*, *The Transporter*, *The Bourne Ultimatum*, *Drive*, *Fast & Furious 6*, *Taken 3*, *American Sniper* and *The Equalizer*, where males are displayed as heroes with unmoveable insistence by putting their self-safety out of concern and ready to scarify for family, brothers, loved ones, country, or even strangers

2.1.2 External Identities: Code of Masculinity Two – A Fighting Machine & A Virtue Terminator.

Male characters in the selected films are given a killing privilege and termination power mostly with the cliché reason: a bad power declares a challenge toward a good power, and the good power answers the challenge. By continuously showing the antagonists' hurting and killing of innocence, the viewers' levels of anger, hatred and violence will be increased accordingly; and it makes the heroes' determination of wreaking vengeance seems like forgivable, honourable and agreeable. The viewers' praises of violence will heroise the protagonists into an icon of justice, morality, or law. The beautification of heroes' killing transformed the movie violence into a dangerous double standard: an eye for an eye it is what a real man do, self-executing and masculine retaliating is somehow recognisable.

In films, killing does not direct connect with legal punishment, but the real world does. In this study, other than 5 warriors died (*Braveheart*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Gladiator*, *300*, *American Sniper*), the rest of the leading males who involved in fighting and killing (leave aside killing innocence or not) are hurt but dramatically survived without getting any obvious punishment. On the contrary, they are honourable rewarded by the society either in the form of big amount of money, women admirations, mortality loves, huge respects, good names, or a long desired freedom.

In another way, leading males in *Taxi Driver* and *Scarface* died (not killed by policemen) where authority of individual is highly celebrated. Tony Montana (*Scarface*) killed by another gangster in glamour way; and Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*) ended by serious injuries – after both of them conducted a homicide. A mock to dysfunctional of legal system is obviously observed in big-boy films. In such scarcity, it is noted that in one film, *There Will be Blood* arranged a self-judgement to Daniel Plainview as his lifelong punishment (by turning him into a lonely, unhappy, hatred alcoholic in the ending with his last line: "I'm finished"). In another word, excluded three films abovementioned had put the leading males to death or "finished" as their killing's punishment, all selected films are rewarding characters' violent action with fame, token, freedom, or love.

2.1.3 External Identity: Code of Masculinity Three – A Sophisticated Underdog & A Loner.

To produce a mutual consonance between characters and viewers, males are no longer portrayed as an unproblematic hero without realistic circumstances. In one hand, they are portrayed inferiorly with realistic imperfection of masculine qualities: facing rejections from marriage, family, relationship, financial, emotion or social. They are standing a low chance in society, living up a low-profile life with a hidden identity, and dealing everyday problems like ordinary guys. In another hand, they are unrealistically fightable and will have a superior winning at the end.

Jason Bourne (*The Bourne Ultimatum*), a lost and unidentified trained assassin, trying hard to find out his real identity. Peter Parker, the *Spider-Man 3*, a superhero who has critical financial problem that he can't afford his rental. Cade Yeager, a single parent who claims that he is an inventor but he is just a picker of old stuff who has serious communication problem with his teen daughter in *Transformers: Age of Extinction*. Masculinity imperfections also happened to: Robert McCall, a low profile night crawler in *The Equalizer*; Dominic Toretto, as an ex-fugitive in *Fast & Furious 6*; John Patrick Mason as an ex-con in *The Rock*; Walter Garber, an unnoticed dispatcher who took a bribe to pay his daughters' tuition fees in *The Taking of Pelham 123*; and Barney Ross and his bunch of veteran mercenary in *The Expendables*. This close-to-reality portrayals not only intended to call the consonance from viewers but more to increase the films' convincing power. Above all, the purpose of Hollywood is to make viewers feel connected to the story and the industry, and this will be discussed later in conclusion.

Individualism is highly practiced in big-boy films too. Male characters are portrayed as loners and maverick most of the time. They live life by themselves and they don't have much understanding from friends and family. They look cool but their sadness showed through details that only viewers able to witness. They are: Bryan Mills who bought a big soft toy to his daughter but not getting much appreciation in *Taken 3*; the insomnia Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, a post-war victim, who has a strong but twisted opinion toward his country's politic system and plans assassination all by himself; and Bruce Wayne from *The Dark Knight Rises*, a dark hero who has serious depression.

2.1.4 Internal Identity: Code of Masculinity Four – A Fearless Fighter.

In Hollywood popular films, males are packaged into an internal and primal masculine representation: a heterosexual, a fearless hero and an active fighter. Male characters are having unrealistic capability and bravery to deal with all kinds of close-to-the-edge danger. They are men with all skills: driving quick, fighting

hard, shooting sharp, reacting fast, jumping high and punching tight in every extreme situation. They are applying different levels of aggression based on the primary two reasons: to protect or to revenge. Aggression unleashed directly to against threats or destructions toward family (*Gladiator*, *Spider-Man 3*, *Die Hard 4.0*), friends (*The Transporter*, *Drive*, *The Equalizer*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*), themselves (*The Bourne Ultimatum*, *No Country for Old Men*, *There Will Be Blood*, *Taken 3*, *Hercules*) and country or mankind (*Braveheart*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Avengers*, *American Sniper*, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, *RoboCop*). It is noted that, 67% of selected films contain serious violence. For instance, the very disturbing scenes from *Drive*: stabbing a man's eye with a fork, following by stabbing in his throat with a knife; and stomping a man's face for 15 times after his head being bashed against a wall twice and his face being kicked once in a lift; or in *Fight Club*, that scene which portrayed a disfigured and blood-covered face of a man resulting from a continuously fist punch by another man.

2.1.5 Internal Identity: Code of Masculinity Five – An Emotion Constructor.

Big-boy cinemas portrayed male characters with combination of negative emotions such as lost, grief, pain, depress, angry. The reason of these negative emotions is related with the discussion above: the direct reflection of destructions and unfair treatments in reality. The heroes experienced painful of lost love, slain partner, or external bullies and caused heroes great misery and eventually seek revenge. The primary emotions that evinced are: rage (*Taxi Driver*, *Scarface*, *Fight Club*, *300*, *The Will Be Blood*, *Taken 3*, *The Avengers*), distress (*Gladiator*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Spider-Man 3*), quiet (*The Transporter*, *No Country for Old Men*, *RoboCop*), and the most common – stoic (*The Matrix*, *Drive*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, *No Country for Old Men*). Stoic is highly performing through silent type heroes in big-boy films. They are highlighted with extreme ability of bearing painful emotion and handling crisis with calmness.

With no contradict to the point above, big-boy characters are celebrating their positive and potent emotions through friendship, leadership and pair-bonding in popular cinemas. It could be visible from *Men in Black 3*, showing strong cross-racial partnership between Agent J and Agent K. Also in *The Rock*, showing strong mentorhood between the ex-con John Patrick Mason and the mild-mannered chemist Stanley Goodspeed. As well as in war films (*Braveheart*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *300*, *American Sniper*); action films (*The Expendables*, *Fast & Furious 6*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*); and science fiction films (*The Matrix*, *The Avengers*, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*), where the brotherhood are highly praised. The emphasis of men's faithfulness and loyalty toward their "buddies" is becoming an intensifying symbol of manhood. Sadly, in this subtle man-to-man relationship, women are silently ejected from the circle. The removal of women from this prototypical male's relationship seems to allow manhood moving ahead smoothly toward the holistic "togetherness of masculinity" without any interruption.

The complex emotion's construction of every male character produced a dominance but attractive personality: deep, mysterious and unpredictable. These complicated emotions of male characters are fascinating viewers. The blending of two extreme emotions of leading males is enhancing their masculine signature, also is increasing viewers' empathy and admiration toward leading males, eventually turning them to significant agreeable heroes.

In study I, leading males are analysed with their external and internal symbols. Externally, heroes are physically tough (code 1), applying violence (code 2), and loners (code 3). The code 1 and 2 are more to unrealistic compare with contemporary masculine society. Internally, heroes are portrayed as fearless individuals (code 4) with radical emotions (code 5). These two codes are providing a rigid guideline of masculinity toward viewers.

3 STUDY II: REACTIONS OF SPECTATOR

With the support of study I, study II is to evaluate the reactions of male spectators toward the construction of unrealistic masculine guidelines in cinemas and realistic masculine expectations in society.

3.1 Findings of study II

In an interviewing study, 20 male spectators aged 18-63 reflected various reactions toward big-boy cinemas. Three types of common spectators are found:

3.1.1 Spectators with Pressure.

The first type of spectators, with a reflection the sponge viewer effect: the continuously of absorbing

cinematic masculine ideologies will gradually form a psychological pressure to individuals. In this study, 7 young college males described how big-boy films have caused an unpleasant experiences in current society: the realistic society (family, peers and females) compared them with cinematic characters, and the differences between virtual and actual masculinity traits jeopardised their self-identification. According to them, the patriarchal society commonly encoded the hero's supremacy into a general expectation, then implement it to them and caused masculinity burden. The masculine shortages in real life (heights, faces, body sizes, social skills, and financial ability) decreased their confidence, created depression when dealing with traditional society, and finally led to anxiety in the way moving to their manhood. In this study, this type of viewers is coded as *spectators with pressure*.

3.1.2 Spectators with Pleasure.

However, for *spectators with pleasure*, they use cinematic heroes purely for entertainment gaining (from simple plots and exciting effects). Heroes are strong, handsome and winning, yet heroes are heroes in the movies. Spectators see no connection between films' masculinity and reality pressure. All the films is merely functioning for escapism of reality, as long as cinemas still feed them with male heroes.

3.1.3 Spectators with Condition.

In the third group of spectators, coded as *spectators with condition*. They intended to find similar criteria from film characters that match with their past experiences, individual backgrounds, personal ideologies and existence confidences. This contextual viewers are concerning the ideology closeness between themselves and the films. The study found out, matured male spectators have higher tendency to select a particular big-boy film to fulfil their faith of masculinity.

In particular cases: a spectator, aged 44 with deeply admired *The Bourne* series, said: "*The Bourne* series is a smart summary of *James Bond* 23 series." For this spectator, James Bond is overly masking his masculine identities with unpractical benefits and expensive accessories: all good in faces, bodies, skills, watches, cars, gadgets, fames and women. It makes those films look like a sports car advertisement with a man of everything. At most, it merely contributes to build an unrealistic cinema's plastic. These repetitious and homogenous stories are tiring spectators. Comparatively, Jason Bourne looks closer to the reality, he is angry, lost, but insistence. He finds his way out without many external supporting materials that connects to an everyday life, and convinces everyman.

Another spectator aged 63, he watches every Sylvester Stallone's movies as he is the hero that giving the spectator a beginner lesson of masculinity in *Rocky* [1976-1982] and *First Blood* [1982]. The passion stays on, the spectator still enjoying *The Expendable* series. *The Expendables* expands his belief of masculinity, and enhances his primal denial to the contradiction of age and manliness.

4. CONCLUSION

Review to the hypothesis, concepts 1 and 2 are proven through study I that unrealistic masculine identities are created and keep developed in big-boy films. While, concepts 3, 4 and 5 are partially proven through passive viewers (particularly to young spectators), who face gender pressure from cinematic virtual codes of masculinity; while active viewers search matching codes of masculinity in big-boy cinemas.

Cinematic males are superiorly setting up their own moral rules and social codes, loudly living with homogenised philosophies and ideologies, ideally trying to make things right in their stories. Externally, they are portrayed in ultra-physiques, hard bodies, and unrealistic hero; internally, they are the likable icons without pursuing of personal establishments and accomplishments. They are silent neighbourhood protectors and hidden good-will fighters; who standing up for the weak, standing tall for justice, sacrificing for the greater good.

For the ultimate purpose of hitting the box office of Hollywood, this industry is smartly creating different heroes to fulfilled different needs; and fitting those heroes into different masculinity expectations in society. These established masculine illustrations in big-boy productions, characters of mortality warriors, luxury heroes, or a down-to-the-earth winners are ready to be marketable. And society embrace these characters with huge encore, admirably welcome and long term faithfulness. With this positive mutual relationship between viewers and industry, all men's need is cared, no one left behind, some types of pressure facing, all types of pleasure achieving, masculinity lives on, everyone is happy.

For years, male identities are nothing much improved in popular cinemas except some little tricks like partially insert underdog characters to make closer contact with viewer's realistic experience; or slightly add dispensable female character(s) to join the big boys' gang to gain supports from female audiences (even is to satisfy the "male gaze" just like Laura Mulvey said). However, despite of whichever technique applied, all techniques must react positively to business principles. In this industry, the process of building up a box office not merely made characters the puppets of announcing twisted gender concept, more it caused viewers the victims of capitalism. The different responses of spectator, the various conflicts of ideology, the changed norms of society, have no direct connection with financial benefits in popular film industry.

Magically, a message from the entertainment industry now could be so real, with setup the rigid representations of gender in an unreal cinema. The misrepresentations of masculine in the films (especially in those film series) are not only repetitious, but homogenous and hegemonic. It creates confusion of reality and unreality in traditional society; at the same time, this construction brings a huge worship to masculine superiority. Fact is, people are still seeking for grand and untouchable surprises in popular cinemas to get rid of reality's depression. Consequently, the multibillion-dollar solution of creating immortal heroes will be still standing tall in big-boy cinemas, and the political economic games of Hollywood will never die.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was financially supported by Tunku Abdul Rahman University College of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

REFERENCE LIST

Burton, Alan and O'Sullivan, Tim. (2009). *Film, Media and Cultural Studies: Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph*. Edinburgh University Press.

Edwards, T. (2006). *Cultures of masculinity*. Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Evans, K. (2012). Media representations of male and female "co-offending": how female offenders are portrayed in comparison to their male counterparts. *Internet Journal of Criminology* vol. 1 (2045-6743).

Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: the perilous world where boys become men*. NY: Harper Collins.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Oxford Journals*. vol. 16/3.

Neala, S. (1983), Masculinity as spectacle. *Oxford Journals*. vol. 24/6.

Prince, Stephen. (2010). *Movies and meaning: An introduction to film*. 3rd ed. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.

Shepard, I. (2009). Representation of children in the Pixar films: 1995-2009. *Red Feather Journal*. vol.1. (2150-5381).

Sparks, R. (1996). Masculinity and heroism in the Hollywood "blockbuster": the culture industry and contemporary images of crime and law enforcement. *British Journal and Criminology*. vol. 36 (1464-3529).

Wong, Cindy H. (2011). *Film Festivals: Culture, People, and Power on the Global Screen*. Rutgers University Press.

FILM LIST

Taxi Driver. Dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976.

Scarface. Dir. Brian De Palma, 1983.

The Usual Suspects. Dir. Bryan Singer. 1995.

Braveheart. Dir. Mel Gibson. 1995.

The Rock. Dir. Michael Bay. 1996.

Saving Private Ryan. Dir. Steven Spielberg. 1998.

Fight Club. Dir. David Fincher. 1999.
The Matrix. Dir. Andy Wachowski & Lana Wachowski. 1999.
Gladiator. Dir. Ridley Scott. 2000.
The Transporter. Dir. Louis Leterrier and Corey Yuen. 2002.
300. Dir. Zack Snyder. 2006.
Spider-Man 3. Dir. Sam Raimi. 2007.
The Bourne Ultimatum. Dir. Paul Greengrass. 2007.
Old Country for Old Men. Dir. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen. 2007.
There Will be Blood. Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. 2007.
Die Hard 4.0. Dir. Len Wiseman. 2007.
The Taking of Pelham 123. Dir. Tony Scott. 2009.
The Expendables. Dir. Sylvester Stallone. 2010
Drive. Dir. Nicolas Winding Refn. 2011.
The Dark Knight Rises. Dir. Christopher Nolan. 2012.
The Avengers. Dir. Joss Whedon. 2012
Men in Black 3. Dir. Barry Sonnenfeld. 2012.
Fast & Furious 6. Dir. Justin Lin. 2013.
Transformers: Age of Extinction. Dir. Michael Bay. 2014
Guardians of the Galaxy. Dir. James Gunn. 2014.
Hercules. Dir. Brett Ratner. 2014.
The Equalizer. Dir. Antoine Fuqua. 2014.
American Sniper. Dir. Clint Eastwood. 2014.
RoboCop. Dir. José Padilha. 2014.
Taken 3. Dir. Olivier Megaton. 2014.