



Case Study: Masculinity in Film – Context and Representations

The aims of this factsheet are to:

- Identify conventional ideas of masculinity
- Discuss contextual reasons for changes in attitudes to gender roles
- Contextualise representations of masculinity within film texts
- Consider the varied representations of males within modern film texts

The content of the factsheet is suitable for A2 level studies of representation, gender and masculinity specifically.

Introduction

Conventionally, looking at gender representations meant looking at the representation of women. This focus on representations of femininity and females comes from the traditional position of women in society as the ‘second’ sex. Until the latter part of the 20th Century some generalisations about society, women and therefore their representations, could be made:

- Women had a lower status in society
- Most Media representations would be constructed by men
- The desires and pleasures of the male audience were prioritised in media texts – even when the target audience was female
- The representations of women fell into categories which tended to focus on women’s relationships to men and placed them in the domestic sphere

Consequently, much of the early modern gender theory concentrated on representations of women and the effects of these representations.



<http://www.mediabistro.com/unbeige/original/50shousewife.jpg>

However, since the 1970s, women’s position in society has changed and they are no longer expected to take on roles that focus on domestic concerns such as being a wife or mother. Their professional roles and opportunities have broadened and they are no longer limited to traditional caring and nurturing professional roles.

If women’s place within society has changed then it is only logical to assume that men’s has too. More recently gender theory has begun to acknowledge this and there has been a lot of research into the way men are represented and the impact this has on ideas about masculinity in western culture.

AQA/WJEC/OCR

Representation is a central concept in all awarding bodies’ assessments. AQA has representation as a specific topic at A2 but this topic may be relevant within the study of other areas which are based on the analysis of representations within specific genres or across different media forms.

What is Masculinity?

Connel says that definitions of masculinity are culturally and historically specific and culture’s have a number of ‘hegemonic masculinities’ – the dominant sets of values that define the ideals of male behaviour. The dominant values of each culture can be seen to be reflected in gender ideals and masculine identity reflects social and economic aspects of specific cultures.

The working class male: A version of masculinity which was culturally determined.

Some key masculine traits can be seen across the early 20th Century which can be used to identify conventional ideas of masculinity:

- At home he was the head of the household and was the breadwinner (provided the household finances)
- As his family depended on him, he would be responsible and reliable
- He would receive masculine status in the workplace either as a manual labourer using strength and stamina in his work or in a professional environment where he would be ambitious and, at some levels, be in charge of other workers
- He would be free to follow his own interests in his social life in terms of taking up hobbies or by socialising
- He would be sexually dominant



http://content.answers.com/main/content/wp/en-commons/thumb/c/c7/250px/Lewis_Hine_Power_house_mechanic_working_on_steam_pump.jpg

Activity

The conventionally masculine male could be defined as everything that was not feminine. Complete the table below identifying the binary opposite gender traits

<i>Feminine Qualities</i>	<i>Masculine Qualities</i>
<i>Emotional</i>	
<i>Sensitive</i>	
<i>Domestic</i>	
<i>Sexually Passive</i>	<i>Sexual aggressor</i>
<i>Quiet</i>	
<i>Submissive</i>	
<i>A communicator /co-operator</i>	
<i>Physically weak</i>	<i>Strong</i>
<i>Decorative (attractive)</i>	
<i>The damsel who needs protecting or saving</i>	
<i>Fluid and adaptable</i>	<i>Fixed and solid</i>

Social Changes since the 1970s

There have been many changes over the past decades which have altered the roles of both women and men in society. For example:

- In the latter part of the 20th Century attitudes were changing and from the late 1960s onwards the status of women within society was challenged. For example, in the UK, in 1972 a law was passed that made it illegal to pay women less than men if they were doing the same job. It became illegal to discriminate against women and as the time passed it became more and more socially unacceptable to assume women were 'less than' men.
- Divorce became more common and more socially acceptable.
- From the 1960s onwards the contraceptive pill became more widely available and women could take charge of when they had children rather than leaving it up to men or chance.
- Through the 1970s and onwards it became more acceptable for women to have active social lives which were not necessarily based on domestic interests.
- In the 1980s working practices changed as traditionally masculine jobs in manufacturing and heavy industry (which required strength and stamina) declined and the economy began to rely on the service industry (needing customer service skills such as communication and cooperation) and computerised technology.

Activity

These social changes can be seen to have dramatically changed women's place in society. What effect do you think these changes may have had on the traditional masculine roles identified earlier?

Consider:

- *Men's status in the home (the domestic sphere)*
- *Men's status at work (the professional sphere)*
- *Men's social life (the social sphere)*

Recent social changes have made defining what it means to be a man more difficult as many traditionally male roles have been undertaken by women and it has become more acceptable for women to display 'masculine' attitudes and desires. In addition some feminine traits (e.g. communication) can be seen to have more value in the modern workplace rather than masculine ones (e.g. strength and stamina). Modern culture has been called 'feminised' because of these factors and it is argued that masculinity is in 'crisis' in modern culture as day to day life has blurred the previously clear binary opposition between masculine and feminine.

The Action Genre as a Response – Reclaiming Masculine Identity

Since the 1980s the Action Genre has been extremely popular with audiences. Within this genre a specific representation of masculinity dominates – the action hero. In the early examples of the genre, there were two main types of hero – characters depicted by actors such as Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Van Damme and the (slightly) more realistic heroes as portrayed by Willis and Gibson.

Activity

Consider typical 80s action heroes. What masculine traits do they depict?

Arnold and Sly's Version of Masculinity



http://www.rippedcorner.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/arnold-schwarzenegger-big_muscle.jpg

The focus on the male body and this 'pumped up masculinity' (*Tasker*) has been argued to be an attempt to reinstate an idea of male strength and power through the visual representations of a muscular body. This type of image has also been called 'hyper-masculine' (*Tasker*) as it is beyond any realistic ideal and shows an extreme version of the male physique. The characters played by these actors are fantasy males. Importantly though, they are able to ignore the social changes which had marginalised the need for extreme strength and power in the male

Bruce and Mel's Manliness



<http://www.howardwho.com/diehard.jpg>

These males also embody traditional masculine traits. However, these representations can be seen to be a more attainable aspirational ideal.

This males represents an idea of the 'working class' male and can be seen to be nostalgic of a time when men's roles were clearly defined and their place in society was certain.

Case Study – Terminator (1984-2003)

There are three Terminator films and each one depicts a different type of threat to masculine identity and a different kind of response to it.

- *Terminator 1* (1984: dir. J. Cameron) – reacting to the threat to male identity coming from independent females and the loss of identity in the workplace
- *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991: dir. J. Cameron) – responding to the loss of masculine roles and a more masculinised femininity by redefining the importance of the father
- *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003: dir. J. Mostow) – unable to match the power of the feminine with anything other than brute force

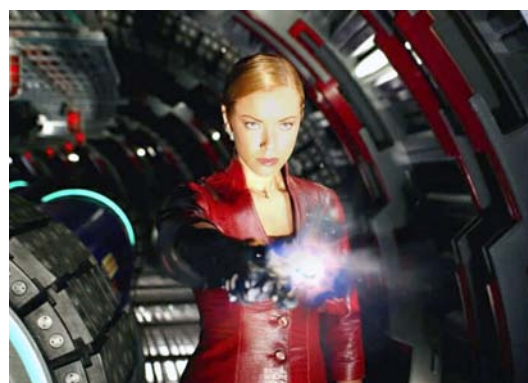


In the first film Schwarzenegger plays the villain of the title and he is sent to earth to kill the future-mother (Sarah) of the man who will eventually save mankind in a war against machines.

The hero is a soldier from the future who is sent to protect the woman. However, both males are eventually destroyed and only the woman survives.

<http://imagecache2.allposters.com/images/pic/adc/10229354A~Terminator-2-Judgement-Day-Posters.jpg>

The soldier sacrifices himself to save Sarah and Sarah kills the Terminator by crushing it in a factory machine.

**The TX – a feminine threat**

http://www.chasingthefrog.com/Scoop_Pages/T3/terminator3tx.jpg

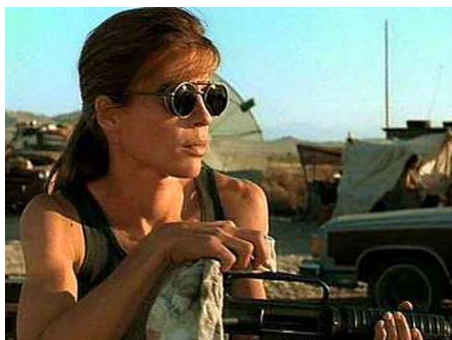
The third film, however, shows an almost defeated masculinity.

- The threat is female and Schwarzenegger's Terminator is slow, old and clumsy compared to the flexible and adaptable female.
- She is able to control technology and is at least his equal in a fight.
- She uses her sexuality against a policeman who becomes distracted when she inflates her breasts to match a lingerie model she has seen.
- She can adapt to fit into a range of environments and this contrasts with the idea of masculine solidity represented by the Terminator.
- Even when the Terminator tries to find some clothes he discovers that the leather jacket and trousers he wears are now icons of gay culture not of conventional masculinity as they once were.

The third film shows the Terminator being able to do nothing but attempt to run and hide from the new threat. Eventually though, after many battles, he manages to crush her when he crashes his very large helicopter into her much smaller one – showing that with determination and brute strength the feminine threat can be overcome.

Exam Hint:- When discussing representations of masculinity it is worth considering how a text deals with the binary opposition of femininity. Does the text reinforce the natural separation of gender with men being shown as strong and powerful and women as weak and powerless? Does the text show males with what may be considered 'feminine' traits? Does this empower them or weaken them?

In the second film Sarah has had a son but has failed in her role as a mother - she has become masculinised both in her physique and in the fact that, instead of nurturing her son she had adopted a more father-like role which focussed on teaching John to fight and survive.

**A masculinised Sarah Connor**

http://www.martinwildig.com/pictures/sarahconnor_1.jpg

In order to achieve this she becomes emotionally distant. This is a dysfunctional family. Sarah is imprisoned in a mental institution and John is being fostered but is shown skipping school and stealing money from a cash machine. Without a strong father figure the family is out of control. This time Schwarzenegger is the hero of the film as he is sent from the future to protect John. He takes on the father role and the narrative of the film shows the family being drawn back together as a functioning unit. Once he has achieved this, he sacrifices himself to allow the future to unfold as it should.

Case Study – Die Hard (1988-2006)

In the first film (1988: dir. J. McTiernan) John McClane (Bruce Willis) travels to Los Angeles from New York to see his wife who has a successful career working for a large Japanese company. Because of their separation and her career their marriage is under threat and he hopes that he can persuade her to come home. His wife becomes a 'damsel in distress' when the work's Christmas party is hijacked by terrorists and John has to act in order to stop the terrorists and save his wife. He is not as muscular as Schwarzenegger but is still shown to have many traditional masculine traits. He is calm and controlled, he acts rationally and is resourceful and strong, being able to set traps and fight the villains.



In *Die Hard 4.0* (2006: dir. L. Wiseman) the older John is still struggling with family issues. He is represented as a traditional father who attempts to control his daughter's sexuality by threatening her boyfriend. She becomes a 'damsel in distress' later in the film but the main part of the narrative is based around John needing to defend a young man who is depicted as a weak male. The young man is a computer geek and has no physical presence or ability to protect himself from violence. He represents modern masculinity and it is shown that he needs to learn lessons from an older version of masculinity if he is to survive.

http://www.toxicshock.tv/news/wp-content/uploads/live_free_or_die_hard.jpg die hard 4

Activity

The action hero is not the only type of representation of masculinity in modern texts. What other stereotypes of masculine identity can you identify?

Masculinity in other Genres

Conventional action films provide a fairly simple definition of what it is to be a man. Often these ideas are based on traditional masculine values such as physical strength, aggression and the protection of the weak. However, there are alternative representations of the male and masculinity can be seen to be a complex idea and it is clear that defining masculine identity is difficult to pin down in modern society.

Child-Like Masculinity

<http://ronniemervis.files.wordpress.com/2007/06/knocked-up.jpg>

Some texts show the modern male to be immature and irresponsible. In *Knocked Up* (2007: dir. J. Apatow) the comedy is based around a man's inability to deal maturely with forthcoming fatherhood

Traumatized Masculinity

<http://abowlofstupid.com/wp-content/2007/10/fight-club1.jpg>

Some texts depict males' struggles in finding a clear identity within the modern world. In *Fight Club* (1999: dir. D. Fincher) the protagonist is traumatised by feelings of emasculation which culminates in him attempting to create a masculine identity but this proves to be destructive.

Immoral Masculinity

Some texts criticise the ideals of modern masculinity. In *Phone Booth* (2002: dir. J. Schumacher) the lead character appears to be an ideal modern male (he works in show business, is a womaniser and looks the part wearing designer clothing) but he finds himself in a situation where he is punished for his behaviour and he is 'persuaded' to face his responsibilities as a husband and a man.

<http://moviesmedia.ign.com/movies/image/phonebooth-14-sm.jpg>

Exam Hint :- If you are to write on masculinity in the exam, you must be able to show detailed knowledge of texts that you can use as examples. In preparation for the exam you will need to closely analyse a number of texts which you can use to support your ideas.

Modern Representations of Masculinity

In some modern texts, the idea of masculine identity is challenged and questioned. In two recent versions of traditional masculine heroes (Batman and James Bond) the simple version of male identity of the past is rejected and, without losing any heroic power, the protagonists can be seen to be integrating both masculine and feminine traits into their identities. Conventional action films attempt to reinforce the binary oppositions of ideas of gender identity. The following brief case studies demonstrate a more flexible approach which defines a masculine identity which is not bound by traditional ideas.

Case Study: Batman Begins (2005: dir. C. Nolan)



http://www.smh.com.au/ffximage/2005/06/16/batlead_wideweb_430x393.jpg

Batman Begins focuses on Bruce Wayne's search for an identity which becomes the alter ego Batman.

In his public life he performs the modern masculine role expected of him living the hedonistic life of a young wealthy male. In his private life he rejects the masculine role model of his father, which was based on charitable and caring behaviour.

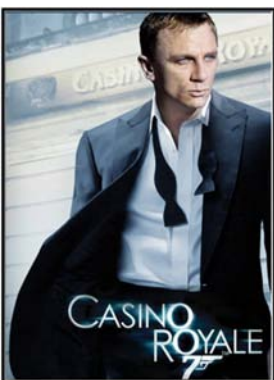


http://movies.hometheaterblog.com/images/2006/10/batman_screen.jpg_batman_2

Bruce's father can be read as a more feminised character but this made him vulnerable when faced with the harsh reality of street life in Gotham.

As an alternative to this, Bruce trains under Raj al Gul but he rejects the arrogant violence of this form of masculinity. Bruce takes some elements of past masculine identities in order to construct a modern masculine identity that is selfless and caring as well as being strong and forceful. Bruce brings more moral judgement to his version of being a man than either of the two father figures before him.

Case Study: Casino Royale (2006: dir. M. Campbell)



<http://www.simplenomics.com/wp-images/Casino%20Royale.jpg>

Traditionally Bond has been depicted as unemotional and cold. His masculine identity had been based on conventional ideas which showed him as acting in a machine-like way unaffected by the violence of his life and the many women he encountered. In *Casino Royale*, however, Bond's character is shown to be remorseful and he becomes emotionally connected to Vesper Lynd. In fact, this Bond is saved by a woman who sacrifices herself so that he can survive – a subversion of the usual hero/damsel in distress relationship.

The Object of the Gaze?



http://tonova.typepad.com/photos/uncategorized/ursula_address.jpg



http://www.virginmedia.com/microsites/movies/slideshow/top-ten-movie-bikinis/img_3.jpg



http://us.movies1.yimg.com/movies.yahoo.com/images/hv/photo/movie_pix/mgm/casino_royale/daniel_craig/royale17.jpg

Objects of a sexualised gaze (Mulvey): Ursula Andress in Dr No (top left); Halle Berry in Die Another Day (top right) and Daniel Craig in Casino Royale (left).

In these images it is clear the producers of the Bond films have replicated images from the past to indicate sexual attraction. In *Casino Royale* Bond has a traditional hyper-masculine physique but his body is gazed upon and sexualised throughout the film. Conventionally this would be seen as something that weakens 'the object of the gaze' (Mulvey) but in this film Bond's masculine identity is secure even when being challenged by Lynd or being tortured by Le Chiffre.

Summary

Representations of masculinity in modern film texts can be seen to be reactions to changes in masculine society in the wider social and economic context. In some texts the reaction has been to attempt to reassert an idea of masculine dominance via traditional ideas of strength, stamina and physical power. Within more action based films, some contemporary texts continue this idea of the physically dominant male whilst others acknowledge changes to masculine identity and show more complex ideas of what it means to be a man in the modern world.

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