

Ghost Faces, Genre Bodies

Part 1: Bodies

The Enduring Reign of Masochism: Post-9/11 Hollywood and the Death Drive

The events of September 11, 2001, were the most significant act of terrorism on United States soil. Coming on the heels of the panic, now forgotten but then potent, over the new millennium and what it might bring forth, 9/11 seemed like a confirmation that society had entered into a horrifying new reality. Given the gravity and wide-reaching implications of 9/11, it is not surprising that post-millennial Hollywood masculinity is commonly read as a reaction to these events. If we consider certain films of the 1990s, such as Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), with its extended torture scene; Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), in the connections it makes between a murderous, lawless society and the breakdown of the Oedipal family, signaled by father-daughter incest; and David Fincher's *Seven* (1995), with its grisly and unprecedentedly graphic images of violated bodies and its innovation of the serial killer aesthetic it helped to enshrine, the pessimism of popular culture was already well under way by the time 9/11 occurred. What changed after 9/11 was that this culture of exuberant grimness became newly validated along with a new representational mode of graphic literalism, especially in terms of violent content. Hence films such as Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005), television programs such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), the zombie-apocalypse drama *The Walking Dead* (2010–present), and the endless glut of Reality TV shows that trade in on the public humiliation and suffering of their subjects.¹ What remains interesting in the post-millennial period and what requires further interpretation always are the ways in which films (and television programs) of this era continue to reflect what is at stake for American culture—and reveal that this “what” is forever staked on the image of masculinity.

The horrible and wrenching events of 9/11 made pessimism permissible as a popular culture mode.² “What was the long range impact of 9/11 on Hollywood?” asks Thomas Pollard. Filmmakers responded to these events—after an initial period in which it seemed that no real response would be offered (signified by the scramble to remove all images of the Twin Towers from films that were scheduled to be released shortly after 9/11)—“by producing some of the most pessimistic, violent, cynical movies of all time. ‘Post-9/11’ movies, not the peaceful, nonviolent fare desired by many, appear to be the norm.”³ The impact of 9/11 is most keenly felt in the rampant masochism on display in films of the ’00s across the genres.⁴

As Freud argued, masochism, the desire to receive pain and the pleasurable experience of pain, is linked to the death drive.⁵ Masochism, I argue, dominates the films of the ’00s—not the politically subversive form of this sexual and affectional mode that theorists such as Steven Shaviro have extolled, but one that is tied to the combative and reactionary aspects of the broad pessimism of the era.⁶ If, as I have argued, the period from the late 1980s to the early ’00s can be interpreted as a struggle between narcissistic and masochistic modes of masculinity, masochism has emerged as the default mode of a normative masculinity that has adjusted itself to the contemporary and often incommensurate demands of feminism and queer sexuality. This retooled and innovated masculinity heralds a white, straight male privilege now founded on loss. Post-millennial films, in their rejection of beauty and embrace of savagery, ugliness, and pessimism, make the masochistic trends in the films of the 1990s the dominant mode of representation—make, in other words, the death drive central.

While the reality of torture and its myriad implications have characterized the post-9/11 moment, my focus here is not on torture as a legally sanctioned technique of law enforcement and anti-terrorism. A proper analysis of torture in post-9/11 works would require an exhaustive inquiry into the United States’ political, social, and cultural complicity in a new era of human rights’ abuses. My analysis of male sexuality in post-millennial Hollywood film must necessarily consider cinematic depictions of torture, which I argue are the most vivid indication of a gathering negativity in American film, one that suggests a willful embrace of the death drive. I have argued that the period of American film from the late ’80s to the early 2000s (the Bush to Bush years) thematized a struggle between life drive and death drive forces, and I offered as an indication of the former a level of sexual playfulness that suggested a potentially exciting, novel transition from modes of staunchly hegemonic to more polymorphously perverse masculine styles.

We can say that the transition occurred, but without radicalism, without joy, without subversion. In other words, polymorphous-perverse styles of masculinity have become normalized, as the rise of beta male comedies and bromances most clearly, though not exclusively, reveal.⁷

A preoccupation with male bodies is nothing new in American cinema, which has since the 1980s at least been entrenched in this preoccupation. But this preoccupation has increasingly entered into masochistic and even more deeply sadomasochistic phases in the '00s. Masochism in this period reflects the "opening-up" theme that I argue characterizes depictions of masculinity at present. It also informs the process that I call *dismantling*, the cutting and opening up of masculinity, which occurs through both film content and formal technique, although not always both at once. Dismantling binds representations of masculinity across the genres. These assaults on the body and the psyche suggest, I am arguing, the desire to see masculinity laid open, laid *bare*. This was an underlying motivation of the films of the 1990s, which demonstrated an active curiosity about exploring the possibilities of putting male bodies at the center of screen scrutiny, as the distinct examples of Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 film *Point Break* and Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* evince.⁸ It has become an ever-more literalized, brazen pursuit in post-millennial representation, indicative of post-millennial cinema's investment in and promulgation of graphic literalism.

The chief aspects of the masochistic sensibility of contemporary films, in terms of the parameters of this study, are the willingness of the male to suffer and the susceptibility of the male body to pain, torment, and ruination. *Hostel* became instantly infamous for subjecting young and largely, though not exclusively, white, straight American men and their bodies to sadistic and murderous violence at the hands of European clients (all of whom are male in this film, as opposed to the 2007 sequel, also directed by Eli Roth, which features female protagonists and female tormentors). Rather than innovating such an approach to masculinity, *Hostel* inherits an increasingly explicit pattern of cinematic male suffering, both in emotional terms and in terms of bodily assault. These bodily assaults are on prominent display in titles as disparate as *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004); the James Bond films starring Daniel Craig: *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006), *Quantum of Solace* (Marc Forster, 2008), and *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes, 2012); *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002) and its many sequels; comic-book movies too innumerable to list; and the new sword-and-sandal-meets-classical mythology CGI epics such as *Immortals* (Tarsem Singh, 2011) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2007). While grave wounds

to the flesh seize our immediate attention, the more resonant wounds may be those invisible but no less onerous ones to the male psyche, as Mark Seltzer has argued in his analysis of what he calls “wound culture” in his book *Serial Killers*.

Casino Royale exemplifies the sadomasochistic tendencies of the '00s, as I will elaborate on below. This first Daniel Craig Bond film offers an exemplary representation of the pleasurable aspects of male physical pain, evincing its sadomasochistic sensibility. It also demonstrates the current cinema's characteristic maneuver of acknowledging queerness by foregrounding a homoeroticism that is then repudiated, a tactic that I call *disrecognition*. In one key scene, James Bond (Daniel Craig), the British secret agent also known as 007, is tortured by the villain, Le Chiffre (played by the Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen, who stars as the titular serial killer cannibal-psychiatrist on the NBC series *Hannibal*, which premiered in 2014). Tim Edwards analyzes the scene thusly:

Removed of all tracking devices, a bruised and battered but still rather beautifully tuxed Bond is forcibly stripped and strapped stark naked on a chair with the seating removed. Le Chiffre then proceeds to torment him with a heavily weighted rope operating as implement for bodily punishment, [not conventional flagellation but rather] the whipping of Bond's genitals exposed through the open chair. . . . The blatant homoeroticism is also increased by the lighting of Craig's body which although bruised and bloody in places, literally gleams with phallic virility (the shirt ripping opening is the first of many mini-climaxes here), while his performance in the scene overall shows an extraordinary degree of both suffering *and* pleasure as if to ram home the sadomasochistic sexual thrill once and for all. Aside from the [question of the action cinema's role in] the increasing sexual objectification of the male body, what this scene would seem to highlight is the sense in which the true spectacle of male masochism within cinema depends quite literally upon the *simultaneous* display of suffering and triumph, weakness and endurance, pain and pleasure.⁹

As I will show, the sadomasochism on ample display here, which produces feelings of both pain and pleasure and derives its effects precisely from this mixture of affectional modes, is crucial to the cinematic rendering of male bodies in the contemporary era.

A New Sadomasochism

Cinematic masculinity in the '00s can most accurately be described as sado-masochistic, reveling in both the infliction of pain and in the experience of pain. This sadomasochism is distinctively rooted in this period in a playful performance of masculinity as ostensibly heterosexual but aware of its potentially homoerotic appeal. To clarify, I do not mean playful in a joyous or affirming sense; rather, I mean to imply levels of meta-awareness, of self-conscious performance, acting, *role-playing*. Cinematic masculinities revel in forms of sadomasochistic play.

As I will discuss, Gilles Deleuze and his collaborator Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* is crucial to my theory of the uses of the face in representations of masculinity in the post-millennial period. Deleuze's work on masochism in his study *Coldness and Cruelty* is helpful to the consideration of male bodies in contemporary Hollywood. Deleuze famously deconstructed Freud's view of sadism and masochism as reversible concepts—the pleasure of inflicting pain versus the pleasure of receiving and experiencing pain—and persuasively demonstrated that each psychological process is distinct.¹⁰ Deleuze argues that sadism is about negativity and negation, whereas masochism stems from disavowal and suspension.

In Deleuzian terms, we can theorize that the cinema's representation of the male body is sadistic, associated with negativity and negation, which, as I discussed in the Introduction and as examples from films such as *Casino Royale* clarify, takes the form of assaults to the male body that are linked to alternately defiant and sacrificial acceptances of the pain of these assaults. I argue that negativity and negation also takes the form of nullifying sexual freedom, a nullification that allows the male hegemon to maintain a coherent form of male sexuality that eschews any nonnormative associations and/or possibilities. This program of normalized sexuality has, of course, always been characteristic of the cinema generally, but what is novel in the post-millennial period is that a nod to—a pointed wink at—nonnormative sexualities (and genders) is now incorporated into male gender performance onscreen. The incorporation of the knowing sexual nod and wink does not impede or disrupt the overall program of sexual normalization, the strict maintenance of normative gender and sexual roles and affects—it simply, or not so simply, updates it. As I will show, the interest in male faces in film of this era complements while also being distinct from the fascination with male bodies.

In terms of sadomasochism as a compound structure, I am drawing on the work of Jessica Benjamin and Mark Edmundson. And as I will discuss

in part 2 of this chapter, the sadomasochistic aspects of American cinema in the '00s relates to the prevalence of the Gothic mode, as Edmundson has established, across a wide range of genre and subgenre narratives and to the recurring interest in the historical aspects of American masculinity. Jessica Benjamin notes that sadomasochistic fantasy, “the most common form of erotic domination, replicates quite faithfully the themes of the master-slave relationship. Here subjugation takes the form of transgressing against the other’s body, violating his physical boundaries. The act of violation of the body becomes a way of representing the struggle to the death for recognition. Ritual violation is a form of risking the psychological, if not the physical, self.”¹¹ For our purposes, the desire for recognition in sadism—sadism as an attempt to know the other—is crucial.

In intersubjective terms, violation is the attempt to push the other outside the self, to attack the other’s separate reality in order finally to discover it. . . . The controlled practice of sadomasochism portrays a classic drama of destruction and survival. The thrill of transgression and the sense of complete freedom for the sadist depend on the masochist’s survival. When the masochist endures his unremitting attack and remains intact, the sadist experiences this as love. By alleviating his fear (guilt) that his aggression will annihilate her, she creates for him the first condition of freedom. By the same token, the masochist experiences as love the sharing of psychic pain, the opportunity to give over to pain in the presence of a trusted other who comprehends the suffering he inflicts. Hence the love and gratitude that can accompany the ritual of domination when it is contained and limited.¹²

Benjamin, as many of even the most brilliant psychoanalytic critics do, is writing strictly in terms of dyadic heterosexual relationships, basing her theory on the French novel *The Story of O*, an S/M novel that focuses on a woman’s submission to her sadistic lover’s every sexual whim. (It was published in 1954 by French author Anne Desclos under the pen name Pauline Réage; *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its heterosexual S/M narrative clearly revisits the earlier work, thematically at least.) Without discounting the importance of this subject, or the complexities of the associations, quite conventional ones, between masculinity and sadism, on the one hand, and femininity and masochism, on the other hand, what I want to suggest here is that post-millennial film (and television, gamer, Reality, and myriad other media forms) versions of masculinity position the heterosexual male subject

as both sadist *and* masochist. Males usually inflict the suffering, but males now also do the suffering, as *Hostel* and torture porn-horror most vividly indicate. The sadistic desire to know the other and the masochist's desire to have another person with whom to share the masochist's psychic pain find rather unusual treatments and reconfigurations in twenty-first-century representation. In the beta male comedies and bromances that I discuss in chapter 3, these patterns take the form of a recurring, even obsessive, gay-baiting, as males in dominant positions, in various ways, relentlessly probe the nonnormative male subject, usually about his sexuality.

We can return to *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* for instructive examples of the queer aspects of sadomasochistic desire, albeit from a perspective that is strictly within the heterosexual-homosocial realm and also heterosexist. Andy (Steve Carrell) is a shy, awkward fortysomething-year-old man who works in a big electronics store. He lives by himself in a home that is filled with his secret possessions: action figures and other telltale signs of his geek culture-obsessions occupy entire rooms, lining shelf after shelf. This geek *mise-en-scène* establishes Andy's sexuality as childlike and regressive. His big secret—that he is still a virgin—is discovered by his coworkers, who then actively work to help him to meet people of the opposite sex, grow confident about and within his own sexuality, and to have sexual intercourse at last with a woman. (He is eventually able to do all of these things when he meets a single mother named Trish, played by Catherine Keener, with whom he develops an ultimately fulfilling relationship after several road-blocks, some quite literal.)

"You gay, man?" one of his coworkers in the electronics store questions Andy. The question posed to the nonnormative, potentially queer male subject by the straight male interlocutor takes on the form of sadomasochistic ritual in the beta male film, albeit often in ways that can be described as variations on a theme; for example, in this same film, the sustained exchange between Seth Rogen's and Paul Rudd's characters organized around the question "Do you know how I know you're gay?" Gay-baiting is a core element in beta male comedies.

As I observed in the Introduction, Carrell's Andy is subjected to scenes of graphic physical violation, such as the body-waxing scene, which his male coworkers watch him receiving (and which he does in compliance with their commands). The laughs proceed from the procedure's having gone horribly awry and from Andy's ornate and often nonsensical verbal expressions of pain and suffering. Crucially, the scene of Andy's suffering is one that is witnessed by other men, which is the classic masochistic fantasy of having a witness for the event of one's prolonged suffering. At the same time, that

Andy's meddlesome, endlessly inquisitive coworkers are all standing around watching him getting waxed, great swaths of the hair on his hairy chest getting yanked off as he howls in multilingual pain, establishes this scene as sadistic, their own participation in the scene an expression of their desire to *know* Andy. That Andy is an enigmatic object of desire—that he must be violated, penetrated into decipherability—is further confirmed by the voyeuristic investigation of his inner realm, his house and secret possessions. The shelves full of action figures, comic books, and other geek-culture paraphernalia all confirm his regressive childhood state for the audience. This regressiveness is crucial, given that those who are sexually nonnormative are typically associated with arrested development, backwardness, even primitivism, as Valerie Rohy has shown.

Voyeurism and fetishism, the dual strategies that Laura Mulvey famously theorized were crucial for the representation of femininity in classical Hollywood film, strategies designed to alleviate male castration anxiety, take on a new life in contemporary treatments of masculinity on the screen. Mulvey's and Deleuze's theories usefully intersect. For the purposes of clarity, let me establish that I view the fixation on male bodies and on dismantling the male, on physical, emotional, and psychic levels, as voyeuristic. From the perspective of *Coldness and Cruelty*, we can establish that the interest in male faces is fetishistic, fetishism "belonging," as Deleuze puts it, to masochism and its modes of disavowal and suspension. Fetishism, however, exceeds the fascination with faces; it extends to the fascination with the parts of male bodies that have been broken down into components that have been, as I call it, dismantled. These new, male-focused forms of voyeurism and fetishism coalesce in movies like *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. The desire to penetrate hapless Andy's bewildering mystery in *Virgin* is voyeuristic in nature. The inspection of his secret geeky possessions and the delectation over individual aspects of his exposed body in the waxing scene are fetishistic and voyeuristic at once.

Heterosexuality and heterosexual sexual intercourse play decisive roles in this film, as the entire point is to bring Andy not only into proximity but also normative alignment with these dispositions and experiences. But his relationship to the male group is equally significant, especially in its delineation of the sadomasochistic aspects of contemporary screen masculinities. Homosexuality and queerness, aspects of a continuum of nonnormative sexualities, play the important role in representation of being threats to the stability of the normative male. The male group desire to know the nonnormative male is, at least in part, a desire to know to what extent his sexuality

is queer. The masochistic male desire to be seen, to be witnessed, stems, perhaps, from a longing for affirmation from the male group, which represents male heterosexual homosociality itself. It also indicates the ongoing effort to insinuate queerness in male characters, one that can be exposed but then ultimately transcended. Male heterosexuality is queered but ultimately safeguarded. The sadist is not just witness to masochistic male queerness but also sexual mentor to the masochist, hoisting him up to the upper rungs of normative male sexuality, the position from which the sadist's attentions flow. By implication, screen male masochists long not for the perpetuation of their own suffering but to become sadists themselves.

In *Manly Arts*, his ambitious and impressive study of masculinity's centrality to the transition, in the United States, from a white male-centered literary national culture to the early cinema and its similar fascinations with masculinity and pursuit of cinematic realism, David Gerstner notes that

the repetition of discourse and practice that organizes the terms for American masculinism and nationalism by no means augurs a homogeneous ideological culture. Instead, it is the ironic failings, the peculiar twists and turns, and the over-determined polemical pronouncements that generate—with powerful affect—the uncanny resiliency of masculinist nationalism in the American cinematic arts.¹³

I agree with Gerstner that “a homogeneous ideological culture” does not exist, but, at the same time, I believe that twenty-first-century Hollywood movies *on balance* exhibit a strikingly similar series of conventions in terms of the depiction of masculinity.¹⁴ The focus on bodies is, I argue, metonymic of the larger voyeuristic obsession with penetrating the mysteries of manhood, one that extends to the international cinema but can also take on more radical dimensions in films made outside of the United States.¹⁵ This voyeurism is itself metonymic of a larger preoccupation with the image of masculinity, of which the fetishistic fixation on faces is the chief indication. Thinking about the disjunct between unruly bodies and uncanny faces allows us to develop deeper insights into the instabilities inherent within the representation of American masculinity. It also allows us to address a potent dimension of this representation, a split between a normative understanding of masculinity as stable, coherent, and rigidly contained and a queer understanding of masculinity as porous, fluid, open to interpretation, and always already destabilized.

Part 2: Faces

Ghost Faces in Film

In media representations of the '00s, the face emerges as the key to the male self, index of its conflicts, map of its overlaps with various others, code to its breaking point. The Ghost Face of post-millennial American films is a male character whose psychic and emotional conflicts, anxieties over his desires, potential for violence, or simply his inscrutability is made physically manifest in his face.

One particularly resonant image of masculinity recurs in the films of the '00s: a male face that has been rendered distorted or otherwise altered, that signifies either blank impenetrability or fiendish, mocking cruelty. The mask the killer known as Ghost Face wears in *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996) and its several sequels provides the inspiration for my book's title. The mask both heralds a new kind of *male visual identity* and provides an apt allegorical depiction of the melding of genre modes (here, comedy and horror) in the genre-hybridic '00s, a tendency that *Scream* exemplifies. More literally, ghostly male faces abound on the Travel Channel series *Ghost Adventures* (2008–present), a prominent example of the popular and wide-ranging “ghost-hunter” genre of Reality television.¹⁶ Self-promoted as “raw” and “extreme,” *Ghost Adventures* is known for its combative tagline, “Can you handle the lockdown?” The lockdown refers to the ghost-hunter team's self-imposed incarceration in “haunted” buildings of various kinds over the course of an evening. The premise of the series is that its three male investigators, led by the host and creator of the series Zak Bagans, travel around the country and investigate its supposedly haunted sites. The series combines the travelogue and the Gothic genres, Americana, history lessons, and the male-bonding commonly associated with beta male comedies. During the nighttime lockdowns, the men film the interiors of the haunted institutions in which they have sequestered themselves; they also film themselves, images of their faces in the darkness captured in denatured, green-night-vision photography. With their eerie green faces and bodies and white eyes, the investigators gradually evoke the spirit forms they aggressively and theatrically hunt down.

The uncanny—strange, twisted, or denatured—male face emblazons such films as *Donnie Darko*, with its protagonist's encounter with both his own face in the mirror and that of a nightmarish, leering rabbit-man¹⁷; *25th Hour* (Spike Lee, 2002), with its protagonist's alternately triumphant and self-heckoring rant in the mirror, a sustained encounter between himself

and his reflection; *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, with its climactic close-up of its protagonist Andy, now triumphantly *post-orgasmic* after having sex for the first time and right before he bursts into song¹⁸; *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011), with a revelation that its protagonist is, in actuality, little more than just a face; Rob Zombie's *Halloween* remakes, aforementioned; *Drive* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011), which focuses intently on Ryan Gosling's impassive and *intense* facial expressions and also tropes on the idea of masculinity as a mask (literally representing the criminal protagonist, a stunt double among other occupations, wearing a mask, and not just for diegetically justified reasons); and *Magic Mike*, discussed in the Introduction, which figures its protagonist's "turn" toward a moral and properly heterosexual life (i.e., a life in which he is no longer a male stripper for female audiences, and certainly not for gay male audiences, never shown in the film) through a sustained close-up of his face, his expression at once aghast and resolved. What's behind the face as a symbol for men? Especially when we consider that it is the woman's face that, throughout film history, has been not only the cinematic face, but the figural representation of the cinema itself?¹⁹ (I will discuss the formal techniques for representing male faces in the last section of this chapter.)

Drive, starring Ryan Gosling as the unnamed "Driver," is a prime example of a film in which a meditation on the male face emerges with a focused intensity that exceeds the demands of the plot. *Drive* is not a successful work by any means, but it significantly indexes the possibilities of the male face and demonstrates the fertile possibilities of genre, here the crime drama, for the exploration of masculine styles as they are held in relief—as Deleuze would say, in suspension—in the contemporary cinematic moment, which is marked by a tendency to blur and blend not only genres but temporalities. In terms of the latter, *Drive* invites us to consider its relationship to classic film noir through its citation of noir tropes: the ambiguities and inscrutable motivations of the male protagonist, the evil mob boss, the good blonde woman versus the dark-haired gun moll, et al. Refn holds the camera on Gosling's smoothly even yet tautly held face, to the point that his intense, blank stare starts to suggest alternative possibilities, becoming not so much a mutable canvas as a canvas that mutates. The close-ups of Gosling held for such a lengthy duration invite us to consider the meanings of this expressionless/hyper-expressive face, the strange stillness of which is one of the major motifs of the film.

In addition to being a driver in the criminal underworld, Gosling is also a stunt double, using his driving prowess in this capacity as well. The film oddly intermixes the crime drama with the meta-filmmaking subgenre,

which focuses on the behind-the-scenes world of making a movie. Gosling's brooding, impassive screen presence sutures these subgenres. The camera lingers, indeed loiters, on the image of his face. (Indeed, Gosling's cinematic works are obsessed with his facial image, making them one continuous story of a face.) As we contemplate this face, we are, I believe, invited to meditate on the stoical blankness of the male film noir protagonist, embodied by Humphrey Bogart in films such as John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) (though not Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place*, released a decade later, in which Bogart is increasingly unhinged and apoplectic). Gosling's impassive yet suggestive face—his skill at suggesting reserves of feeling beneath that impassivity—is here a frieze of filmmaking's fascination with traditional masculinity and its codes of silence and distance. Gosling's able embodiment of these codes updates them with the almost queer sense of wounded vulnerability in his persona—the quality that has, perhaps, allowed him to emerge as an unlikely feminist icon.²⁰ As Frank Krutnik writes from a Freudian perspective, the noir hero “can serve as an ideal ego, who, in the imaginary form of (fictional) fantasy, achieves the fulfilment of ambitious and erotic wishes. . . . [T]he hero can operate as an idealized figure of narcissistic identification who will ultimately unite authority, achievement and masculine-male sexuality.” Among Krutnik's examples are Ian Fleming's James Bond and Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer.²¹

I would argue that in contemporary film, the differences between a figure like James Bond and Gosling's Driver are telling. Bond is, in the first Daniel Craig film of the rebooted Bond films of the '00s, primarily a body, spectacularly displayed as such in the much-discussed moment in *Casino Royale* in which Bond rises up from the water at the beach and walks toward the camera, in gloriously bare-chested form, wearing nothing but a speedo. Interestingly, we are shown Bond in this objectified manner as Bond checks out a woman who is on a horse. Through his POV, we see the woman on the horse through a long shot. As she is put on a limited visual display, he is put on a more extensive visual display. In other words, in a sequence that ostensibly conforms to Laura Mulvey's paradigms of the male as the subject of the male gaze, Bond is the more emphatically object of the gaze. In contrast, Gosling's Driver is a face, almost decorporealized as such. As a face, he is a goad to dreamlike contemplation and fascination that dovetails with Deleuze's theories masochistic fetishism. In both cases, the male hero is the audience's ideal ego, but narcissistic identification is disrupted by the incitement of erotic desire (whether or not one actually experiences this feeling while looking at Craig; I do, but clearly not everyone in the audience does), on the one hand, and Deleuzian suspension of time and

space, on the other hand. Which is to say, the meditation on the Driver's face disrupts desire and identification both, forcing us to contemplate the face as the *screen itself*.

When the Driver performs a car-chase stunt scene, he puts on an unusual, huge mask that makes him look like he has stepped off of an assembly-line of mass-produced musclemen. Gosling's mask, white and large and flat of feature, transforms the driver into a blank, inscrutable version of a hyper-masculine male. It suggests hyper-masculinity in that the face could only belong to someone of Titan stature. This motif has the effect of reifying the suggestions of blankness in the Gosling face-image, emphasizing the marbled, statue-like qualities of the impassive face on display. It also makes more salient the trope of impersonation (a feature of *prosopopoeia*, the impersonation of another through the wearing of a mask in a performance or by rhetorically representing a faceless other, as I will develop below) in the depictions of male identity in this era. At one point, the mask *explicitly* exceeds its diegetic function: Gosling puts it on when he confronts the mob boss (played with nasty aplomb by Albert Brooks in a surprisingly effective counter-intuitive casting) who wants him dead. The mask emerges as a metaphor both for killing-machine vengeance and for the play of masculine styles on ample display here. These styles emerge through the constant contrasting of the Driver against other kinds of men, defined by type: the violent but ultimately victimized Hispanic ex-husband (Oscar Isaac) of the "good woman" (the ubiquitous Carey Mulligan) that the Driver protects; the mob boss; his large, formidable, violent henchman (Ron Perlman); and Shannon, the sad, ruined friend, played by *Breaking Bad's* Bryan Cranston, who runs an auto-repair shop and also works for the mob boss. The obsession with male faces finds, all too typically, misogynistic vent: witness the *Scanners*-like explosion of the surpassingly beautiful head of the redhead gun moll Blanche (Christina Hendricks) in the bathroom.²² Adorned by lush Pre-Raphaelite crimson hair, Blanche's head, when shot by one of the mob men during a gunfight, splatters red everywhere; Gosling's character escapes unscathed.

Similar motifs inform other films of the same period. In *The Town* (Ben Affleck, 2010), based on real-life crimes, a ring of thieves from Boston's South Side dress up as nuns to rob banks. The nun outfits on the men do not feminize them, exactly; rather, they suggest elderly yet surprisingly musclebound men in drag crossed with otherworldly creatures. Affleck pauses on the shots of the men in their nun-drag, allowing the strangeness of their uniformly doleful expressions and appearances (a masculinized femininity) to dominate the image. The film prolongs our contemplation

of these masked male faces so that we begin to view them as denatured, alien, baffling.

The masked Driver anticipates the looming, Titan-like centurions of Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012), a prequel of sorts to the *Alien* film series (the first of which was indelibly directed by Scott). In this film's mythology, these hulking, looming, and exclusively masculine beings are responsible for seeding Earth with organic life. The centurions' mythic, musclebound bodies resemble works of classical sculpture come to life. An eerie, sumptuously visualized prologue sequence features aerial shots of the Earth before life appeared on it. One of the looming centurions, mysteriously hooded and dark-robed, stands on a precipice above a roaring chasm. An enormous mother-ship hovers portentously in the sky (a steal from Kenneth Johnson's 1980s NBC alien-invasion miniseries *V*). The centurion ingests some viscous concoction from a vial (it looks like raw, futuristic fish eggs). Then, his marble body begins to seethe with dark strands of newly engineered and activated DNA. As his body explodes, it plunges into the roaring water below and seeds the newly born planet Earth. It's a fantasy of male birth, life gushing forth from Adam's body with no Eve in sight. These DNA Centurions (as we can now call them) are the military personnel of an unseen alien race (called The Engineers by the characters in the film) that created humans but then decided to destroy the life they created. The DNA Centurions' faces and skin are a pale, pale white, their faces and bodies uniform in appearance.

The militarized male contours of the DNA centurion's body lend the film a surprisingly homoerotic dimension. The shapely, sleek contours of their bodies evoke marbled, godlike youth. The homoeroticism of the conception of these male figures is further amplified by the dandyish cyborg David (Michael Fassbender) and his obsession with the style of Peter O'Toole's masculinity in *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), a homoerotic epic itself. The obsession with the male face reaches an apotheosis here, with the cyborg David endlessly rewatching *Lawrence* while styling himself physically after O'Toole in the film, dyeing his hair a similar shade of blond. The blond cyborg David explicitly evokes O'Toole's *Lawrence of Arabia* as it recalls the gender-bending young David Bowie and also Rutger Hauer's blond replicant-angel in Ridley Scott's earlier film *Blade Runner* (1982). Later, David will be decapitated by a reactivated Centurion, shown to be a killing-machine rather than a benevolent creator. This Centurion will *himself* be orally penetrated at the climax by the gigantic Alien-hybrid creature, which looks like one of H. P. Lovecraft's octopus-like alien monsters in his Cthulhu mythology. Discovering how murderous the Centu-

rions—and, implicitly, the Engineers they serve—truly are, the scientist heroine Elizabeth Shaw (the great Noomi Rapace) utters the signature line of the film: “We were wrong. We were *so* wrong.” She will carry around David’s decapitated head, which continues to speak, unaltered, with Michael Fassbender’s mellifluous British cadences. Reinforcing the visual scheme of the film, Meredith Vickers, the tough-as-nails woman commander played by Charlize Theron wearing short blonde hair, sports a queer fascist-masculine look. Vickers envies cyborg David’s proximity to her old, wealthy, tyrannical, *Citizen Kane*-like father. Her metallic look and short blonde hair link her to her cyborg “brother” David. (Her underdeveloped character is the least successful element of the film, being a misogynistic cartoon of the female in power. Unsurprisingly, she is annihilated at the climax.)

Uncanny Men: Historical Masculinity and the American Gothic

While male protagonists of films of the '00s recall older versions of the male hero such as the Bogart noir protagonist or the John Wayne western lead, the specific obsession with faces in '00s film links this body of representation to deeper levels of American history, specifically, I argue, to the literature of the antebellum United States and its emphasis on the Gothic genre. Mark Edmundson in *Nightmare on Main Street* has posited that we live, today, in a culture of the Gothic, presided over by Edgar Allan Poe and Freud; moreover, this culture is sadomasochistic in nature.²³ Edmundson’s thesis is more persuasive now than ever. This is an era steeped in the elements of the horror genre, in which most television programs feature grisly content, mayhem, and violated and mutilated bodies, images of violence so graphic one wonders how they made it past even the most lenient censor, and the movies follow suit.

I introduced the concept of historical masculinity in the Introduction. Historical masculinity evinces an understanding of masculinity as simultaneously rooted in time and timeless, of its moment and a continuous cultural identity with key precedents in the past. American Gothic works of the antebellum period provide such precedents and are explicitly evoked as such in contemporary representation (for example, a scene, set in the high school library, in Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* in which the teen heroine and her female friends gossip about their romances, commences with a shot of various posters of great nineteenth-century American authors such as Poe and Whitman; the title and premise of the Fox network’s Gothic-forensic television series *Sleepy Hollow* [2013–present] rework Washington Irving’s famous 1820 short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”). As I will demonstrate in the chapter on beta male films and bromances, Irving’s tale haunts

representations of masculinity, particularly its central relationship between the pedagogue Ichabod Crane and the ne'er-do-well Brom Bones and his homosocial gang—the conflict between isolate and group forms of male identity. But Irving's story is only one aspect of a complex lattice-work of cultural and historical allusions in the present. Current patterns of representation in terms of masculinity recall one of the most famous imperative sentences in classic American literature: "If man will strike, strike through the mask!" from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). As I will develop, the overlaps between a work like Melville's novel and films of the present can be seen in the shared preoccupation with the face as oblique, paradoxical, maddening, a mask. Melville's elaboration of the theme of a horrifyingly blank whiteness—what is, essentially, his invention of whiteness studies in chapter 42 in *Moby-Dick* called "The Whiteness of the Whale"—provides a crucial intertext for contemporary Hollywood's figuration of the mask-like nature of white masculinity.

As Christopher Lukasik has shown, an obsession with the face and with the truth it apparently makes visible has been a preoccupation of American life since the late eighteenth century. Within the visage lay, for the early American republic, "a permanent, essential, and involuntary sense of character . . . that no amount of individual performance could obscure." It was during this period that a now commonplace maxim began to dominate American social relations: "there is a face that you put on before the public, and there is a face that the public puts on you."²⁴ I argue that a sense of masculinity as an identity written on the face endures in images of masculinity in the '00s. These images strategically and indicatively make use of the face to hide "truth"—to register a fascination with the inscrutable nature of masculinity while forestalling inquiry and analysis. The Melvillean idea of a maddening inscrutability—an inscrutability that stems from malice or that concentrates the essence of malice—finds a continuous life in male representation.

The story of Melville's famous novel *Moby-Dick* is well-known, but to recapitulate, it concerns the obsessive quest on the part of Captain Ahab to hunt down and kill the White Whale, the titular Moby-Dick, who bit off his leg. The novel is narrated by the character Ishmael, whose famous first line "Call me Ishmael" commences the novel. Ishmael is a sailor who leaves Manhattan in search of adventure on a whaling ship, eventually making his way to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he meets his newfound friend, Queequeg. An initially fearsome figure, the tattooed cannibal Queequeg is from a Polynesian island that has no geographical record. Ishmael's friendship with him is a model of interracial brotherhood, as Leslie Fiedler

extolled in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Both men make their way to Nantucket, Massachusetts; once there, they enlist in the *Pequod* whaling voyage, captained by Ahab. Ishmael recedes into the background after the first third of this epic novel, the remainder of which focuses on Ahab's vengeful quest.

Part of the greatness of Melville's conceptualization of the mad, defiant Ahab is that he possesses keen insight into everything except his own murderous obsession with the Whale. As Ahab says to Starbuck, the first mate of the *Pequod*, in chapter 36,

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.²⁵

The obsessive, tyrannical, monomaniacal, poetry-spouting Captain Ahab's view that everything we see before us is merely a series of "pasteboard masks" has proven a remarkably resonant one for American culture. Ahab's nebulous motivation for pursuing the white whale is a textbook example of the literary theme of vengeance. It also allegorizes the psychoanalytic concept of desire, the split between need and demand (Lacan) and a force that has neither aim nor object (Freud). The closest Ahab can come to explaining why the whale provokes him so is that he sees "sinewing" in the whale "an inscrutable malice." As Ahab declares, "That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate[.]" Nothing is more of a pasteboard mask than Ahab's own obsessive desire to destroy the whale. I posit that American masculinity is its own white whale, an inscrutable object, never more so than in the post-millennial moment. But what goads the pursuit?

There is more to say regarding connections between the White Whale and Ghost Faces, but let me add another crucial intertext for patterns of male representation in cinema of the present. Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Minister's Black Veil," first published in the 1836, provides

a template for the idea of masculinity as fundamentally masked, hidden, obscured, a surface behind which a mysterious other resides. The definitive Hawthorne story, “The Minister’s Black Veil” typically concerns a young man on the verge of marriage, Mr. Hooper, the Minister of the title, who presides over a small Puritan village. Hooper mysteriously decides to don the titular black veil in order to remind others of the “secret sin” that the veil “obscurely typifies.” The bachelor/marital anxieties that frequently mark Hawthorne’s males are unmistakably linked to this young man’s decision to wear the veil. He even asks his fiancée, Elizabeth, to bear with his decision never to take off the veil, not even for her. Unsurprisingly, they never marry.²⁶ The townspeople never lose their horrified dread of and fascination with the minister’s veiled face, even when Hooper, now an old man, lies on his death-bed, still wearing the veil. The sheer blankness of Hooper’s veiled face is suggestive for our reading of contemporary cinematic versions of masculinity—the ways in which this blankness defers and incites interpretation.

Freud’s famous 1919 essay “The Uncanny” has been especially influential for theorizations of the horror genre.²⁷ Freud theorizes that the uncanny is the return of something familiar (*heimlich*) in a disturbingly unfamiliar form (*unheimlich*). Freud’s concept of the “return of the repressed,” as Rick Worland points out, has been broadened into a “sociopolitical critique” by recent horror critics, for whom the genre resonates with the return of any “number of [repressed] actions and desires.”²⁸ This is certainly the view taken by Robin Wood in his influential writings on the horror film, in particular his essay “The American Nightmare,” in which Wood popularized the notion of the uncanniness of horror and of the return of the repressed as its defining feature.²⁹

Josh Cohen considers “The Minister’s Black Veil” in terms of Freud’s theory of the uncanny.³⁰ Cohen persuasively observes that it “is a narrative meditation on the uncanny otherness at the heart of every human being, on the stubborn inextricability of the uncanny and the human.”³¹

The veil is so awful because it reminds us, not unlike psychoanalysis, that even without a veil we’re in perpetual disguise, as obscure and unrecognizable to ourselves as to others. . . . [What the minister’s congregants] are seeing in the veil, then, is nothing more than their own possession of an unconscious, their haunting by what Freud calls a double of themselves: “the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the ‘double’ being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted” (SE 17: 236). . . . [T]he unconscious double is

itself double. The outward self or ego we present to the world enables us to pretend the double isn't there. My face, as I both know and don't want to know, is a black veil, disguising the uncanny other that 'I' is.³²

Ghost Faces—masculinities defined by and that hide behind a face—evoke the black veil, disguising the uncanny other that the normative screen male protagonist “is.” But what is this uncanny other? The answer, I posit, lies in the unknowledgeable (except in the limited and conditional ways I have discussed) presence of queerness. Given the preponderance of white faces onscreen, the male face is a *white* veil, obscuring all non-white identities. Ghost Faces point to a void at the center of white male screen subjectivity but also constitute this very void.

Theories of Prosopoeia: De Man and Muñoz

In his essay “Autobiography as De-Facement,” Paul de Man discusses the ambiguous figure of *prosopopoeia* in several writings by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth. As de Man notes, *prosopopoeia* is “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech. Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face [in Wordsworth’s *Essays upon Epitaphs*], a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poiien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*). *Prosopopoeia* is the trope of autobiography, by which one’s name . . . is made as intelligible and memorable as a face. Our topic deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration.” While I do not want to take us too far afield with a discussion of Romantic writings and de Manian theory, I want to establish that de Man points to a telling tension in Wordsworth’s discussion of works by Shakespeare and Milton: *prosopopoeia* offers a crucial opportunity to give the dead a voice but must be used with caution and creates problems of its own. In terms of historical masculinity, de Man’s location of a powerful ambivalence in Wordsworth’s treatment of *prosopopoeia* is illuminating. Historical masculinity is a gendered *prosopopoeia*, an impersonation, a donning of various masks that indicate earlier forms of male identity but also uses them to deflect meaning and inquiry. This form of *prosopopoeia* functions, on the one hand, as a citation of prior forms of masculinity; it functions, on the other hand, as disaffiliation with these earlier forms—a refusal to engage with the meanings of the historical masculinities being cited.

Judith Butler's early but still useful theory of performative gender identity as reiterative and citational is useful here. Butler distinguishes gender from sex, arguing that gender operates as "the social construction of sex."³³ The social construction of gender "is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both 'subjects' and 'acts' come to appear at all." There "is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability."³⁴ Historical masculinity is just such a process of "reiterated acting"; Ghost Faces make clearer that such versions of masculinity are performances in which historical masculinities function as and are donned as if they were masks.

José Esteban Muñoz, reworking de Man's essay for the purposes of queer theory, discusses faces in the context of AIDS, gay men, memory, and the crucial concept of *prosopopoeia*:

Prosopopoeia was understood by De Man as the trope of autobiography, the giving of names, the giving of face, "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech." The autobiography and the portrait give voice to the face from beyond the grave; prosopopeia is also a way of remembering, holding onto, letting go of "the absent, the deceased, the voiceless." Thus, in the same way that she who writes in a biographical vein summons up the dead, by the deployment of prosopopeia, she who mourns a friend summons her up through elaborate ventriloquism. This contributes to an understanding of how the transhistorical call-and-response . . . might function. . . .³⁵

Contemporary media's male faces signal the presence of and the preoccupation with history, as I have been suggesting. But, unlike the kinds of representation evoked by Muñoz, these faces frequently signal a conservative re-entrenchment rather than an attempt to memorialize. They *stem* from history, reflecting an ongoing set of problems as well as representations, as the examples from the antebellum American Gothic are meant to indicate. But they also deny history—the blankness of the male face forestalls attempts at historical inquiry and analysis. Male faces in contemporary media imply a *willed impassivity* on the part of contemporary masculinities; to the question of what men currently want, they offer a logic-defying, irresolvable, enigmatic response.

The ancient roots of *prosopopoeia* underlie this contemporary trend. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word has two meanings: