Masculinity in Melodrama: A Psychoanalytic "Gaze" at Written on the Wind

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Jacques Lacan had theorized that as human beings, "we have no power of our own, we construct a self in fantasy to make life bearable."¹ Fantasy becomes the primary domain for us to console ourselves, since, according to Slavoj Zizek, "fantasy space functions as an empty surface, as a kind of screen for the projection of desires: the fascinating presence of its positive contents does nothing but to fill out a certain emptiness…"² According to Lacanian theory, this emptiness or "lack", which is inherent in people since childhood, stems from a divide between who we want to be and who we really are.³ Therefore, we look into fantasy to provide idealized images of ourselves as a means of feeling more unified and whole as a person.⁴

As a medium that "satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking […] developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect,"⁵ as well as trying to "please spectators by giving them the illusion of autonomy,,"⁶ cinema acts as the "screen" that play out our fantasies and desires, and as such, can provide an anthropological insight on the socio-cultural issues and experiences of the audience in which it serves to appease. For my paper, I would like to apply this concept to the 1956 film *Written on the Wind* directed by Douglas Sirk. It is through the film that I wish to explore how melodrama, a genre popularized in the 1950's and 60's, reflects general concerns on masculinity—mainly what it means to be a "man". For the most part, I will argue that the film attempts to resolve the masculinity issues presented in the story by utilizing a classical

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¹ Laura Marks, "Too much reality: the Real of psychoanalysis", FPA 335: Introduction to Film Theory (class lecture, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, September 25, 2012).
⁴ Ibid.
⁶ Laura Marks, "Too much reality", September 25, 2012.
Hollywood narrative and structure that reinforces norms on masculinity and conservative ideologies through the dichotomy of "good" and "bad" illustrated by archetypes, such as the "ideal man/hero", and the "shadow/villain". From this argument, I hope to show how this film bridges the gap between the "imaginary" and the "symbolic" by incorporating a character that not only appeals to the audience's fantasy of an ideal masculinity, but represents the gaze of the "Other": the invisible force that defines how men should behave based on guided social rules and codes on masculinity.

In *Written on the Wind*, Kyle Hadley, the son of a wealthy oil tycoon, is the primary character that embodies the problem with masculinity. Before the start of the events within the film, Kyle had a reputation for being an alcoholic and a playboy, and at one point, his father alludes to Lucy of his past, unstable disposition. The initial threat to his masculinity can be surmised as a result of "living in the shadows" of his best friend Mitch, who is suggested as the better man of the two by Marylee in the first meeting with her and Lucy. Furthermore, Kyle later finds out that he has a weak sperm count, and his insecurity on his ability to have children drives him to drink again, which leads him to spiral out of control throughout the film. As pointed out by Kenneth Mackinnon in his article *Masculinity in Movies*, "[male] hysteria was explained by Freud as a psychological reaction in men who failed to take up what he thought of as the proper masculine role […] men may express their distress and conflicts through hysterical bodily symptoms…" The sense of male hysteria is illustrated by Kyle who experiences

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7 Robert Keith, "First meeting with daughter-in-law," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
8 Dorothy Malone, "First meeting with Lucy," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
9 Robert Stack, "Confrontation with doctor," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
10 Kenneth Mackinnon, *Representing Men: Maleness and Masculinity in the Media* (Bloomsbury
tormenting nightmares, engages in fights in a drunken stupor, and behaves irrationally, such as when he hits Lucy for wrongly thinking she was having an affair with Mitch. His delusion to his wife's supposed affair can be viewed as a further threat to his manhood. Zizek suggests, "Women [do not] become a threat to men, insofar as she embodies pathological enjoyment, insofar as she enters the frame of a particular fantasy." The impression of the symbolic unity of his marriage, and the fantasy of Lucy as his dearly, devoted wife becomes broken when he assumes that she is an adulterer. Despite feeling insecure about his wife's supposed infidelity, his marriage can be interpreted as placing him in a precariously emasculating position. According to Mackinnon, "mainstream Hollywood cinema usually suggests that masculine autonomy is retained through the hero's resistance to marriage." The fact that Kyle becomes "tied down" through his marriage, giving up on his hedonistic lifestyle, and than subsequently finding out about his "weakness", metaphorically indicates a consequence of marriage as diminishing Kyle's masculinity. Mackinnon makes an interesting point stating that “where masculinity is the theme, still other ideological and political conflicts are worked through under that heading," such as conflicts pertaining to social classes. The author mentions, "...being working class is identified with masculinity, being upper class with femininity." Considering that Kyle has lived a lavish, and privilege life while Mitch grew up on a farm boy within a working-class family, the film seems to suggest that there is a differentiation between masculine representations depending on the social standing and background of the person.

As issues of masculinity permeate throughout the story, the film attempts to resolve it by

USA, 2003), 189.
12 Mackinnon, Representing Men, 189.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 190.
utilizing a classical narrative structure that reinforces masculine norms and conservative ideologies. In the article *Ideology, Genre, Auteur*, Robin Wood explains that classical Hollywood cinema has a tendency to incorporate values and assumptions that validate the "American capitalist ideology."¹⁵ One value that specifically applies to *Written on the Wind* is "the work ethic", which is the "notion that "honest toil" is in itself and for itself morally admirable…”¹⁶ When such an ideology is reinforced, it "logically" leads to the emergence of ideal figures, namely the "ideal male" who is the "virile adventurer, the potent, untrammeled man of action" and the "ideal female", embodied by such figures as the "wife and mother, the perfect companion, the endlessly dependable mainstay of hearth and home."¹⁷ Furthermore, these ideal figures have their own respective "shadows", which are the "settled husband" and the "erotic woman."¹⁸ The pairing of these ideal figures and their respective shadows allows ideological tensions to be harmoniously resolved by simply "eliminating one of the opposed terms."¹⁹

In *Written on the Wind*, Mitch would constitute as the "ideal male", since firstly, he projects the ethos of "the work ethic" by being devoted to his job as a geologist for the oil company. His devotion is exemplified when he considers leaving his country for Iran to continue his profession.²⁰ Secondly, Mitch is acknowledged as the better man of the two when Marylee states "now there's a man for you" and compares the two men by explaining how Mitch is the one who picks up the slack, takes the blame, and resolves the issues within Kyle's life.²¹ Furthermore,

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¹⁵ Robin Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur", in *Film Genre Reader III*, edited by Keith Barry Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2003), 61.
¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Ibid., 62.
¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Ibid., 63.
²⁰ Rock Hudson, "The Kiss with Lucy," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
²¹ Dorothy Malone, "First meeting with Lucy," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk
Mitch is not seduced by Marylee's constant advances and rejects the notion of marrying her numerous of times. His refusal to be tied down to the "erotic woman" justly validates him as the "ideal male" because he does not follow sexual temptations, and reserves his love for the conservative, proper, and graceful Lucy—the epitome of the "ideal woman."

Kyle, on the other hand, conveys the "shadow" of the "ideal man." He is the polar opposite of Mitch in terms of living off of his father's wealth and investing his time in worldly pleasures, such as travelling to exotic locations and dining with beautiful women. As well, his ineptitude is conveyed by his father's doubt of his character. Most importantly, he cannot be considered the "ideal man" because he does not fit the definition of potency as previously mentioned. His role as "the shadow" is proven by the fact that he gets shot and dies during the confrontation with Mitch at the end, which conclusively eliminates the opposition within the narrative and solidifies the ideology of working-class masculinity, and conservative and traditional values and norms, such as hard work, loyalty, sensibility and other cerebral qualities that is displayed by Mitch and is absent from Kyle's character.

Lapsley and Westlake explain that the "spectator narcissistically identifies with an idealized figure […] in a process that recapitulates the discovery of the image of oneself in the mirror phase," a phase in which there is a divide between the perceived self and the actual self known as the ego. As the "ideal man", Mitch's character invokes the fantasy image that is alluded to in Lacanian theory. Mitch's character undoubtedly operates on Lacan's "imaginary" domain because he represents an ideal self that, as the authors mention, can never be attained, but is misconstrued

(1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.

as true." The imaginary, according to the authors, "comprises the repertoire of images that the subject invokes to annul the originary gap, and is present in the mirror phase as the image of the other" (the projection of the ego) that provides a source of identification and "masks its division."

However, in order to transcend the imaginary and make Mitch a possible resolution of emasculation, his character uniquely operates on a "symbolic" level as well, and bridges the gap between fantasy and reality. According to Lapsley and Westlake, the symbolic comprises the "Other", which is different from the "other" (emphasis on the small "o") in the way that it represents the "laws, rules, codes and prohibitions, to which [one] must submit in order to enter society, and is present in the mirror phase because the identity available to [the individual] comes from elsewhere" as oppose to the figment of the ego.

Mitch represents the "Other" because he is used as a "mirror" to Kyle's character, who is perceived through a sort of "Mitch gaze". In other words, we perceive Kyle not only as a contrast to Mitch, but we perceive him in a manner that guides our desires for him to become more like Mitch, since Mitch is the source of identity available that constitutes society's expectations, and therefore the other's expectations, of a proper man and model to assess Kyle's character. This fact is confirmed in several ways through the film. First, the character's themselves compare the two, and this is evident through the dialogue, such as when Lucy asks Mr. Hadley whether he trust Mitch's judgment more than his own son, or, when Marylee explains the dynamic between the two men and says, "Kyle starts something. Mitch finishes it for him. Kyle falls on his face. Mitch

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24 Lapsley and Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 69.
25 Ibid.
26 Lauren Bacall, "Meeting the father-in-law," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
picks him up. Kyle steals. Mitch takes the blame…"

Second, Mitch and Kyle operate in their respective roles as the "ideal man" and "the shadow", as established earlier in the paper. With each of these archetypical roles comes a set of actions and consequences defined by the genre of melodrama that positions one as the "good guy/hero" and the other as the "bad guy/villain, such as when Mitch steps in as the hero by protecting Lucy from Kyle, or when Kyle gets killed and eliminated from the picture as the villain. Therefore, the assessment between the two becomes easy when we, as the audience, recognize their generic roles. Lastly, there is the motif of actual mirrors that cues us to understand whose character is being re-evaluated, namely Kyle. For instance, in one scene, Kyle is seen looking at himself in the mirror and splashing a glass of alcohol on it to blur his own image, which signify that he is not satisfied with himself. Another instance of the mirror motif that seems to convey the point more coherently is at the end when Mitch enters the study room, his body is positioned right next to a mirror while Kyle stands across from him. Their respective positions not only make it more accessible to physically compare himself to Mitch while gazing into his own reflection, but also suggest that Mitch is whom he is being compared to within that scene, albeit metaphorically.

In conclusion, the film attempts to resolve the wavering standards of masculinity, embodied by Kyle's character, by providing the audience a standard model of accepted masculinity in the

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27 Dorothy Malone, "First meeting with Lucy," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
28 Rock Hudson, "The slap," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
30 Robert Stack, "Brother and sister confrontation," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
31 Robert Stack, "The last confrontation," *Written on the Wind*, directed by Douglas Sirk (1956; USA: Criterion Collection, 2001), DVD.
form of Mitch. Based on the generic archetypes presented in classical Hollywood narrative, we as the audience internalize the gaze of the "Other" that it sets to reinforce because we come to expect a set of conventions used in the melodrama genre, namely that good prevails while bad perishes. However, the film illustrates a moral dichotomy of good and bad by embodying them in two different representations of masculinity, which unfortunately perpetuate a prejudice against those who do not live up to the standards and definition of accepted masculinity.
Bibliography


