“THEY DON'T MAKE'EM LIKE THEY USED TO”: CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WHITE MASCULINITY IN RECENT U.S. CINEMA

Matthew Schneider

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APPROVED:

Harry Benshoff, Major Professor
Deborah Armintor, Committee Member
Steve Craig, Committee Member
Ben Levin, Program Coordinator for Radio, Television and Film Graduate Program
Alan Albarran, Chair of Department of Radio, Television and Film
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of Graduate Studies
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The purpose of this work is to illuminate how white male hegemony over women and minorities is inscribed through the process of film representation. A critical interrogation of six film texts produced over the last decade yields pertinent examples of how the process of hegemonic negotiation works to maintain power for the ever changing modes of postindustrial masculinity. Through the process of crisis and recuperation the central male characters in these films forge new, more acceptable attributes of masculinity that allow them to retain their centrality in the narrative.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: WHITE PATRIARCHAL POWER IN THE POSTINDUSTRIAL ERA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hegemony and the “Crisis” in White Masculinity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriarchy, Capitalism and Technology</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Films</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'THEY BROKE THE MOLD AFTER THEY MADE HIM': HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE WHITE PATRIARCHAL BACKLASH IN BAD LIEUTENANT AND RESERVOIR DOGS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinvesting in Traditional Patriarchal Masculinities</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deconstructing the White Patriarchal Performance</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Male Sacrifice</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'THE APPLE DOESN’T FALL FAR (ENOUGH) FROM THE TREE': HEGEMONIC</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGOTIATION AND THE PATRIARCHAL LEGACY IN MAGNOLIA AND THE ROYAL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TENENBAUMS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subversive Potential of the New Man</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Inescapable Patriarch</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving the Father</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'TIL SOMEBODY GETS HURT': WOUNDED WHITE MEN AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN THE PALLBEARER AND PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims of the Devouring Familial Female</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dangerous Sexual Relationship</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding the Answers in Miss Right</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION:

WHITE PATRIARCHAL POWER IN THE POSTINDUSTRIAL ERA

Barbara Ehrenreich begins her essay, “The Decline of Patriarchy,” by stating, “I want to talk about the decline of patriarchy, and, I should explain right away, I do not mean the decline of sexism, or misogyny, or even male domination. I mean patriarchy in the original sense of the word, as the intimate power of men over women, a power which is historically exercised within the family by the male as breadwinner, property owner, or armed defender of women and children” (Ehrenreich 284). This straightforward observation becomes complicated when we try to answer precisely what it is beyond the notion of patriarchy, in the “original sense of the word,” that keeps male domination alive in contemporary American culture. While there can be no simple answer, this project approaches the question by examining how white patriarchal power is recuperated through the process of cultural hegemony. Of specific importance to this work is the construction of white male gender identity under the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. Whiteness, as a category of racial identity, is an important factor to consider in light of hegemonic masculinity as it further complicates the process of male gender construction. A critical examination of six films from the last decade (1992-2002) will exemplify how the hegemonic process renegotiates the meaning of white masculinity to fit contemporary ideals and standards of gender identity.

I will examine six films: *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), *Magnolia* (1999), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2002), *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), and *The Pallbearer* (1996). The films are produced under different genre codes by filmmakers with different audiences in mind. Despite these differences there are two points of
similarity consistent in all of them: first, white male identity crisis is the major theme foregrounded throughout the narratives, and second, the narrative resolution allows the white male leads to recuperate their position of privilege through hegemonic means. Though the conflicts in all of these films center around a crisis in male gender construction, these crises are represented and handled in very different ways. Social factors such as age, ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation ultimately affect how the men represented in each film deal with their particular social relationships.

Hegemony and the “Crisis” in White Masculinity

The idea that “contemporary masculinity is held to be in crisis because the central tenets upon which previous masculinity was based (patriarchy, bread-winning, tasks demanding strength) has been eroded” is certainly one that is evidenced in the representations of men in all six films (Beynon 159). However, the subversive connotations associated with the term crisis fail to represent the appropriation of patriarchal power that such a condition affects. As Tania Modleski explains, “however much male subjectivity may currently be ‘in crisis,’ as certain optimistic feminists are now declaring, we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it” (Modleski 7). In Modleski’s view, a crisis in masculinity, while it appears destabilizing, allows for patriarchal power to be recuperated by appropriating what threatens to subvert it. Sally Robinson takes this argument further stating, “the reality of a particular crisis depends less on hard evidence of actual social trauma or do-or-die decision-making than on the power of language,
metaphors, and images to convincingly represent that sense of trauma and turning point....The language of crisis imposes a certain narrative logic on an event or, more nebulously, a social trend or cultural formation” (Robinson 10-11). Furthermore, “The rhetorical power of ‘crisis’ depends on a sense of prolonged tension; the announcement of crisis is inseparable from the crisis itself, as the rhetoric of crisis performs the cultural work of centering attention on dominant masculinity” (Robinson 11). Thus, to speak of a crisis in masculinity is already to be caught up in the discourse that privileges a patriarchal viewpoint. More to the point, beyond the inevitable restabilization that crisis predetermines, the crisis itself is effective in diverting attention away from the subversive influences that surround it, instead allowing us “to dwell in the space of crisis and thus to reimagine the dominant meaning of white masculinity” (Robinson 11). Crisis in masculinity should instead be read for what it truly is, a process of social renegotiation that allows white masculinity to recuperate its position as the “norm” against which other forms of socially derived identities are constructed. Robinson makes it clear that actual social and historical events are arbitrary to crisis, not in the way they ultimately determine how the meanings of masculinities are changed, but that crisis and recuperation are an inevitable part of keeping white patriarchal power intact in the face of ever-evolving social meaning. Crisis and recuperation is the process of cultural hegemony that keeps dominant ideologies of race and gender in power.

Throughout history, changes in technology, economic systems, and intellectual development have informed the shift between the social relations of men and women. In order to understand the “crisis” masculinity presents for men in the postindustrial era, the notion of patriarchy must be placed within a historical context. But first it must be
made clear how patriarchy is defined in terms of power structure. Patriarchy, literally, rule by the father, has come to be known as the rule of men over women, the power relationship of one sex (male) over the other (female). The very meaning of the word patriarchy connotes the need for power, domination, and control. In order to understand the origins of patriarchy and the various ways it has reinforced itself throughout history, it is important to look at two major ways power is held by a dominating social group.

According to Artz and Murphy, there are two modes to power, coercion and hegemony (Artz and Murphy 4). Coercion is the means of control through the physical implementation of force. It most readily connotes government or military action but can also be defined as the physical implementation of power by one social group over another. Male domination is often exhibited through acts of force, such as rape, domestic violence, and assault. Though women are still subjected to physical transgressions, the act of overt force often carries negative connotations and is deemed unacceptable in most Western cultures.

Hegemony is a means of control effected by dominating social groups through consent or collective agreement. It is manifested ideologically through texts, language and thought and solidifies as it materializes in cultural practice. In Raymond Williams’ terms hegemony sees the relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, as in effect a saturation of the whole process of living…to such a depth that the pressure and limits of what can be ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political, and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common sense. Hegemony is then not only the articulate upper level of ‘ideology,’ nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as
‘manipulation’ or indoctrination.’ It is a whole body of practices and expectations…our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting— which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. (Williams 110) It is clear from this definition that the effects of hegemonic power retain an enormous amount of social invisibility: hegemonic power often goes unquestioned because “it implies a willing agreement by people to be governed by principles, rules and laws they believe operate in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not” (Lull 63). Furthermore, subordinate groups “give consent to their own political and economic subordination by living the ‘passing present’ without calling into question the extant social order” (Persaud 37). The “social order” can consist of the global relations between states or the relationships between social groups in a given society. I would dub the former form of hegemony political or global hegemony and the latter form cultural hegemony. Within a given society cultural hegemony forms a multiplicity of contingent relationships between different classes, as well as racial, ethnic, and gendered groups. Hegemony, not necessarily good or bad, should be gauged instead by “who is dominant and for what purpose, and who is subordinate, and what do they gain or lose” (Artz and Murphy 4).

To understand how masculinity as a discursive practice empowers the hegemonic relationship of men over women it must be clear how gender is defined. First, the relationship between sex and gender is not simply the relationship between biology and social construction that they are often thought to be. This comes too close to making sex something that is natural or fixed. Sex should not be viewed purely in terms of nature with gender as its cultural counterpart; “[r]ather, both are inescapably
cultural categories that refer to ways of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationships, our relationship to ourselves and to others” (Golver and Kaplan xxvi). Gender is the discursive practice that allows us to communicate and confirm our sexual identity to others.

By now it is clear that masculinity is not something that is naturally possessed by men and that it takes on many different meanings in different social and historical settings. In fact, “so various are the different conceptions of masculinity and femininity that emerge from the miscellany of sites and settings in modern societies, that we can justifiably refer to them in plural as masculinities and femininities” (Glover and Kaplan xxviii). For the purposes of this work I will be dealing specifically with white heterosexual masculinities. This is an important distinction to make since for these six films, masculinity is a heteronormative gender performance determining the main characters’ social relations with others. This is not to say there is a monolithic concept of gender performance that is prescribed by the white heterosexual men represented in the films. Within each film there are varying contextual factors in play that determine the meaning of masculinity.

Each male character, with his particular personality traits, attests to the fact that masculinity is indeed plural. As the narratives develop the representation of the male characters and their relationships, the narrative process effectively determines what character behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable. As certain character attributes are valued over others, the narrative process becomes a process of hegemonic negotiation. The negotiation between the acceptable and unacceptable is a dialectic process that, instead of deconstructing the power of the male image, allows that power to be
recuperated and hegemony to be sustained in a new form. Each film draws its own terms of hegemonic masculinity on which the main characters resolve their identity crisis.

Hegemonic masculinity “defines successful ways of ‘being a man’ at a particular place and time” (Beynon 16). But it need not stop at men; it also determines how women define themselves in relation to men. Hegemonic masculinity is the invisible cultural force that empowers the continued existence of patriarchy and affects the gender identity of both men and women. Hegemonic masculinity is the deep-seated ideological myth reproduced in all areas of culture that perpetuates male power. Hegemonic masculinity can only be understood through its effects, in turn creating problems in even attempting “to understand it in terms that do not already belong to it” (DiPiero 115).

Conflicts of racial identity shared by many of the major male characters in the films further complicate the terms of crisis and resolution. Whiteness, like masculinity, is the predominate attribute of social identity that links all of these texts together. Like the various masculinities taken up in the films, whiteness functions both plurally as a form of identity and as a singular guarantee of social privilege. It is plural insofar as it is informed by specific social and historical contexts. However, its structural significance throughout modern history has and still does produce powerful ideological effects that manifest economic and social inequalities for non-whites in the United States. The harsh reality that whiteness creates for minorities in American society “accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities
to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination” (Lipsitz vii). What is consistent with all definitions of whiteness is that it exists as a purely discursive category, or as Stuart Hall suggests, “race works like a language” (Hall, Race, The Floating Signifier). Whiteness above all “does not exist at the biological level” (Foster 2). George Lipsitz further contends that “whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity” (Lipsitz vii). From these well evidenced facts about whiteness, whiteness studies have taken many different approaches in theorizing and critiquing the power structures of racism. I will not go into detail on the various paths of thought that whiteness studies has taken. Instead I want to use those aspects of whiteness studies that provide the best intellectual tools for uncovering the representational operations of whiteness at work in the texts under examination.

Whiteness, like patriarchy, functions as a hegemonic form of identity. Whiteness gains power as it is “normalized to the point that it often becomes invisible” (Negra 5). Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, and Wray put into clear terms the argument that whiteness conjures power through social invisibility: The idea that whites do not recognize or acknowledge their unearned racial privileges has become one of the most cited claims of critical whiteness studies. In this line of thinking, whiteness operates by being ‘invisible,’ so ubiquitous and entrenched as to appear natural and normative. Here whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world. Therefore, while
Whiteness is invisible to whites, it is hypervisible to people of color. (Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, Wray 10) Richard Dyer explains how this invisibility is achieved stating “The sense of whiteness is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West” (Dyer 2). Whiteness has maintained social invisibility for centuries. Today, this social invisibility still operates in everyday social discourse. However, the decades following the Second World War have powerfully affected the way whiteness is viewed. The liberation movements beginning in the fifties were successful in establishing the identity politics of marginalized racial groups that challenged dominant social order. Identity politics have commonly been referred to as “the politics practiced by marginalized groups who understand subjectivity as inevitability grounded in the relations of power that structure a given society” (Robinson 3). Furthermore, “a central tenet of identity politics rests on the premise that the minoritized subject proudly claims her own difference from the norm, and so marks herself as the bearer of an embodied particularity” (Robinson 3). Identity politics turns the notion of whiteness as “normal” on its head, leaving something to be desired by those who are identified as white. In other words, the practice of racial identity politics re-equates the meaning of normal (i.e. signifiers of whiteness) with blandness, sameness, and uncreativity while making the visible and the particular desirable by equating it with positive notions of creativity and individuality. In this way identity politics has had profound effects on popular culture and the way that white people view their racial identity. It is one of the major reasons why racial identity factors in as such an important part of male gender identity. The work of renaming whiteness as normal in the very negative sense of the word is of paramount importance to the
representation of masculinities in all six texts. Whiteness carries a certain amount of irony as it is both a mark of social privilege yet at the same time a terrible burden of inadequacy. The implications of these inadequacies and the degree to which they are dealt with vary from film to film.

In some of the films, particularly *Bad Lieutenant*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums*, issues involving race are foregrounded in the narrative discourse. In the case of the latter two films (*The Pallbearer* and *Punch-Drunk Love*) race appears less of an issue since it is never spoken about or alluded to throughout the narrative discourse. Beyond a brief analysis of ethnic star persona and the representation of whiteness, I do not go into any detail discussing racial representation in these latter films since it is not a point taken within the narrative. Of course by taking this stance, I realize that I am falling into same trap that allows whiteness to function invisibly. But rather than speculate on the possibilities of racial relationships that do not exist in these texts, it will suffice to note that the inadequacies of gender identity in these films are suffered as much on account of the “blankness” or blandness of white racial identity as they are from the effeminacy issues affected by the female Other.

**Patriarchy, Capitalism and Technology**

Now that working definitions of whiteness and masculinity have been laid out, I want to turn to the recent historical features of white masculinity most responsible for the decline in traditional patriarchy and the changing roles of white male power and domination in the postindustrial era. A closer look at the major social changes in the last century will illustrate how white patriarchy has maintained hegemony through
periods of “crisis” and recuperation. More importantly, this brief historical overview functions to define two terms crucial throughout my analysis. The terms old industrial man and new man are two buzz words that have become commonplace in popular discourse. Both terms are used to describe the evolving social roles of men through the industrial and postindustrial eras.

Historically, the notion of “crisis” for male gender identity in western society has resulted from social changes that shift the ideological structure of a culture, namely in the form of technological advancements. As I analyze the major stages in the history of white patriarchal hegemony in the last century, it will be clear that nothing has affected shifts in this hegemony like the changes brought about by technological innovation. In fact, the overwhelming technological achievements that led up to the postindustrial era have even changed the way hegemony is established and implemented. It cannot be emphasized enough that this is a history of white patriarchal power in America and does not accurately reflect the histories of other racialized groups living in the U.S. who were subject to slavery, genocide, and second-class citizenry.

The rise of the industrial revolution completely changed the face of capitalism and presented a dynamic challenge to white patriarchy. As the workforce became centralized in the urban areas, social roles were increasingly divided. Gender boundaries had to be renegotiated to compensate for the strain placed on familial relations. The increased demand for manufactured goods led to the establishment of factories and centralized work environments. Men and women no longer worked together to provide for their families. The new economic arrangement often drew men out of the home and relegated women to the sphere of domesticity and child rearing.
This consensual social agreement between men and women was not so easily reached. In fact, in the early phases of the industrial revolution both men and women were recruited into the workforce; however, as the hegemonic forces of masculinity were redefined in relation to the technological advances of the industry, women’s and men’s roles became strictly separated. Several innovations are cited for this division: Some trades, such as mining, transport, and metallurgy, had been male preserves since their inception; and as these industries grew in importance with expanding industrial economies, the number of jobs open to men increased. In addition, trades such as textiles manufacture became progressively mechanized, and factory managers claimed that the introduction of heavier and more rapid machinery required greater physical strength. During the early years of industrialization, male trade unions often called for the elimination of child and female labor and the limitation of the available work to men. (Bell 315)

The newly defined division of labor was reinforced by evolving gender roles. Men were increasingly assuming the place as sole economic provider for their family. The average family’s financial viability was controlled by men, allowing them to maintain economic power over women.

There was enormous ideological reinforcement for the changing capitalist climate of the Western world. Ideological values of the time period were indicative of Christian moral standards and led to the overt repression of sexuality through its exclusion from social discourse. The repression of sexuality manifests itself in all forms of cultural practice. From courtship practices to clothing, sexual repression defined “normative” gender roles and relationships. Patriarchal hegemony was maintained
because of the fact that such repression limited a person’s ability to achieve greater autonomy. Sex roles were reduced to procreative purposes: “Victorians believed that a healthy society could not survive without the control of instincts. This was the linchpin of a rigorous public morality” (White 4). These were the terms on which a prosperously democratic and industrial America was based (White 5). Social performance and a strong work ethic were valued over free love and dictated strict adherence to gender codes of the day.

Such ideologies of the Victorian era necessitated certain gender codes by severely limiting sexuality and the roles that men and women were allowed to play in society. The investment in strict gender codes and the silencing of sexuality grew from the need to redefine relations between the sexes in light of technological advancements and capitalist endeavors, which otherwise threaten the fabric of society. I am understandably not arguing that the gender roles in the era of industrialization were universal and necessary in all areas in order to ensure economic stability. In fact, the collision of subversive and differing ideologies can be found at any point throughout history. In light of technological and economic changes that have attempted to open up such limited gender categories, the postindustrial era still struggles with the resonance of Victorian sensibilities.

The term old industrial man alludes to the dominant meaning of masculinity during the industrial era. The industrial man is synonymous with traditional masculinity, a patriarch in the strictest sense of the term. He is constituted by the inherent privilege and fixed social position that his “innate” claim to manhood guarantees. The old industrial man does not describe any single individual but is instead the archetype of
male gender construction preceding the Second World War, often a working class man, defined by his capacity for physical labor. Industrial masculinity has been such an integral part of American cultural identity since the end of the nineteenth century that it still contributes to the meaning of masculinity today.

As the technological and economic climate on which those ideological values were predicated dramatically shifted, consensual support for those ideals became fractured. It is precisely this social shift which precipitated the decline in patriarchy and located male gender identity in its current state of “crisis.” The economic shifts at the end of the Second World War have come to characterize late capitalism and have had the largest impact on contemporary cultural. Donald Bell recounts, “Industrial production began to occupy a less central place than consumer-oriented activities, and the industrial sector of the economy began to be less dominant than the sector concerned with services” (Bell 320). The switch to an economy largely based on the services sector is important because

Within the services sector, professional and technical occupations become more important, and the training of skilled managers and technicians becomes a central activity. Education takes on a more vital role, and new elites based on educational background emerge to challenge old elites which derive their power from industrial or familial sources. (Bell 320)

The switch to a services-based economy created a work environment where men and women could compete equally without gender roles as predominant factor. Discrimination of the female worker continues to the present, but by privileging mental ability, division of labor no longer dictates gender codes. An economic structure which does not rely overwhelmingly on physical performance (i.e. manual labor and factory work) fails to provide the impetus for a patriarchal labor divide.
At the same time, technological advancement in the areas of social living also affects the relationship roles between men and women. For example, the increased popularity of birth control (especially with the advent of The Pill in the sixties) plays a role in the decline of traditional patriarchy. The ability to separate womanhood from motherhood provides the physical possibility for female sexual autonomy. Furthermore, before modern-day technology “it was very hard for a man to live without a woman, because laundry, for instance, took all day, and food preparation and shopping took a tremendous amount of work” (Erenreich 287). With the advent of commodities such as the washing machine and “the TV dinner in the 1950s…any fool could make his own dinner and get to work in the morning, in some fashion anyway” (Erenreich 287). These innovations and others like them increased the economic autonomy of men and women. Thus, late capitalism played a major role in severing the ties between gender codes as the hegemonic means to patriarchal power.

As technology provides for increasing economic autonomy between the sexes, and the service-based economic structure of late capitalism provides a base for competition between the sexes, the ideologies of gender take on an ever-changing and increasingly important function in postindustrial society. The logic of Erenreich’s statement is key to understanding gender roles in the postindustrial era. Male domination of women no longer has its roots in the necessity of labor divisions between men and women. It instead exists in the forms of discourse and ideology which in turn affect cultural practices. As the films under consideration below will attest, hegemonic masculinity today takes many different forms. As a result, defining what it means to be a “man” has become an extremely elusive endeavor in the last thirty years.
Adding to the confusion of whom and what masculinity can represent are the technological and economic products of full blown postindustrial capitalism. The switch from an economy based on mass production to one based on mass consumption ushers in new ideologies of consumerism. Masculinity, in this vein, has also become a commodity in postindustrial times. The meaning of masculinity is increasingly tied to the marketability of the image. The change in modes of production termed post-Fordist or neo-Fordist, is indicative of “a more subtle system of mass production and consumption,” which “produces an heterogeneity of products customized for increasingly diverse lifestyles responsive to rapid changes of taste” (McGuigan 153). Masculinity is redefined as the product of neo-Fordist consumerism. As a result the meaning of masculinity is tied up in clothing fashions and consumer goods. Masculinity is reduced to a superfluous cultural sign. Most importantly, the “heterogeneity” of neo-Fordist niche marketing articulates the newly created diversity of masculine styles and attitudes (McGuigan 153).

Defining the new man is a somewhat dubious project as the term has come to stand for the many different ways of “being male” in the postindustrial era. Essentially, the new man is characterized as a nurturer and/or a narcissist. The term originated in the 1970s to describe a man who is “a profeminist (the ideology-led ‘nurturer’ tradition), attempting to put his ‘sharing caring’ beliefs into practice in his daily life” (Benyon 164). The term took on a different meaning in the 1980s as it describes a “hedonist, seeking out the latest fashions and taking a great interest in grooming and appearance (the consumerism-led ‘narcissist’ tradition)” (Benyon 164). It is fair to say that the new man is not simply one or the other, but instead occupies the middle ground between the two.
Chapman places the concept in hegemonic terms:

the new man represents not so much a rebellion, but an adaptation to masculinity. Men change, but only in order to hold onto power, not to relinquish it...the emergence of the new man has been to reinforce the existing power structure by producing a hybrid masculinity which is better able and more suited to retain control... the new man ideal is manipulated to become a reactionary figure, co-opted into the service of patriarchy...he is a patriarchal mutation, a redefinition of masculinity in men’s favour, a reinforcement of the gender order, representing an expansion of the concept of legitimate masculinity and thus an extension of its power over women and deviant men. (Chapman, in Beynon 116)

Chapman’s insight into the new man is crucial as he draws the hegemonic link between traditional masculinity and the new man. What is most important in deliberating the difference between the industrial man and new man is to make clear that the latter is not a radical break from the former.

Along similar lines Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee observe that, “it seems clear enough that there have been recent changes in the constitution of masculinity in advanced capitalist countries, of at least two kinds: a deepening of tensions around relationships with women, and the crisis of a form of heterosexual masculinity that is increasingly felt to be obsolete” (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 185). In their essay the authors attributes these new modes of masculinity to what they term modernized hegemonic masculinity, a term synonymous with the new man. The new man as a form of modernized hegemonic masculinity is very much a reaction to the deepening of tensions around relationships with women and the crisis of a form of heterosexual masculinity that is increasingly felt to be obsolete, namely industrial masculinity. The use of a term like modernized hegemonic masculinity is more honest and to the point about the true intentions behind the guise of the new man. New hegemonic strategies arise out of old ones, new masculinities arise from their
predecessors. In all six films, hegemonic masculinity blends traditional patriarchal sensibilities with more acceptable modes of masculinity to create a consensual gender identity for the male characters.

The Films

Each case study explores the meaning of hegemonic masculinity in contextual terms. Categories of white masculinities are broken down through each chapter, as the representation of whiteness and masculinity are further informed by class, ethnicity, age, and in some cases religion. The first case study deals with two angry white male films of the early nineties, Bad Lieutenant and Reservoir Dogs. Bad Lieutenant is about a New York City homicide detective who wields his powerful position for his own personal pleasures. His drug and gambling addictions and his abuse of police power create a personal crisis that leads to self destruction. In the end, he gains retribution for his transgressions by sacrificing his life for the life of two young rapists. Reservoir Dogs is a film about a jewel heist gone wrong. As the thieves search for the traitor among them, the paranoia conjured by their own obscured identities leads to an all-out annihilation of the group members by the group members. The bond between Mr. White and Mr. Orange proves to be the only redeemable factor for the otherwise unredeemable group of criminals. The sacrifices made by White and Orange for each other make both men the proper model of masculinity and override their otherwise violent narcissistic actions.

Reservoir Dogs and Bad Lieutenant appropriate genre codes of classic crime film noir. In this genre, there are generally no redeemable characters, and the themes of the
film often speak of the postwar anxieties about the atomic bomb. Similar use of genre codes at work in these two films establish nostalgic identification with traditional masculinities of the classic film era. Furthermore, the underlying social anxieties of these films speak to the fears of white men in the early nineties.

The representation of the angry white man echoes a climate of identity politics particularly pervasive in the early nineties. The Rodney King beating, followed by the Los Angeles riots, the explosion of rap music into the mainstream market with songs such as Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” and N.W.A.’s “F**k the Police,” and films such as John Singleton’s Boyz ‘n’ The Hood (1991) and Spike Lee’s Do The Right Thing (1989), brought racial identity politics to the forefront of popular culture. Legal implications such as affirmative action were further solidifying the need to promote the economic opportunities of minorities. At the same time, these legislative implementations and newly resonating discourses within popular culture were instrumental in bringing attention to the current function of whiteness and maleness in the arena of identity politics. As a result, the early nineties witnessed a renewed voice of angry white male conservatives who felt personally blamed for the structural inequalities imposed on minorities and women. As Wellman argued in 1990,

Whiteness and maleness can no longer be taken for granted. Affirmative action has made Americans in these categories newly conscious of their whiteness and maleness. And once they recognize these attributes and benefits they bestow, white men understandably resist giving them up. (Wellman 322)

Such a sense of alienation, resentment, and the desire to resist can facilitate prejudice and violence. The men in Reservoir Dogs and Bad Lieutenant lash out violently at the Other and one another in order to assert their false sense of power and domination. Their tough talk, physical performance and tendencies toward extreme
violence are narcissistically perverted versions of traditional masculinity. They assert their claim to their patriarchal heritage through force. The films represent their claim to masculinity as dangerously narrow and outdated. However, through the pathos of self sacrifice the violent, sexist, and racist actions of these men are disqualified, granting them a new form of patriarchal power.

The second case study examines the ideological inconsistencies between two generations of men. Both The Royal Tenenbaums and Magnolia centralize the issue of paternity through the relationship between father and family. In both films, aging and dying patriarchal father figures attempt to reform themselves and seek restitution after the emotional and mental pain their selfish patriarchal pleasure-seeking has caused their families. The sons must reconcile their own apathy and emotional blockage by facing their relationship with their fathers. Genre codes play an important role in the meaning-making process of both films. Comedy works in Magnolia and The Royal Tenenbaums to disqualify the sexist and racist attributes of traditional masculinity while melodrama in both films creates pathos and empathy with the male characters and reestablishes identification with the patriarch.

The third case study focuses on the identity crisis carried by younger generation white men. No patriarchal authority figure exists in either Pallbearer or Punch-Drunk Love. The main characters’ identities are solely constructed through their familial relations with women. This creates enormous inadequacy and confusion as they attempt to negotiate their social roles as heterosexual, white men. Generically, Punch-Drunk Love fits the category of a romantic comedy. The comedic quirks of the romantic comedy are present in Punch-Drunk Love as the gender roles of men and women are
inverted. As a result, many female roles are stereotyped negatively and the 
emasculated qualities of the male character are made humorous. Comedy works 
similarly in *The Pallbearer*; however, it falls more along the lines of the traditional 
melodrama. With a man in the lead role, the central issue of male suffering provides a 
great sense of empathy for the main character. The final chapter brings the question of 
male gender identity full circle as the two main characters of the films feel tremendous 
pressure to adopt an assertive masculine identity through coupling and to shed their 
matriarchal upbringing.

All six texts were chosen because they exemplify how gender practices change 
to meet the evolving standards of cultural hegemony. In some of the case studies, 
narrative representation works to soften the punitive practices of characters who adopt 
industrial man ideologies. For others, the narratives reassert certain traditional 
patriarchal values to overcome the apathy and inadequacy of the new man 
masculinities. In any case, it is the compromises made for the sake of a more 
consensual form of gender identity that represent the power of cultural hegemony. 
Ultimately, the greatest impediment for the texts is that whether they purport to critique 
masculinity or not, “through their self-conscious foregrounding of masculine discourse” 
the films potentially “reiterate and recuperate hegemonic masculinity” (Hanke 77). The 
meaning of hegemonic masculinity must be determined by examining the relationship 
between narrative structure and formal representation. To this end the next three 
chapters turn.
‘THEY BROKE THE MOLD AFTER THEY MADE HIM’: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND THE WHITE PATRIARCHAL BACKLASH IN BAD LIEUTENANT AND RESERVOIR DOGS

The hegemonic negotiation of white masculinity in Reservoir Dogs and Bad Lieutenant is very complex. The first couple of times I viewed the films I found myself conflicted over what I felt was a proper reading of them. One question always stuck out in my mind: how is it that two films, whose central characters are overtly racist, sexist, and violent white patriarchal narcissists can still receive positive critical attention? While both texts make powerful statements about the self destructive attributes of patriarchal power, could it not also be said that these texts give reverence to patriarchal power as an ideal? In their attempts to reconcile the most negative aspects of white patriarchal power Reservoir Dogs and Bad Lieutenant ultimately reinforce identification with them. Reinforced identification occurs as the representation of hegemonic patriarchal ideals are renegotiated throughout the narrative. In order to make this argument clear, I have broken the chapter down into three sections. First, I examine all the textual representations that make white patriarchal power identifiable and desirable. Second, I pull out the subversive representations in each text, examining their function in providing the films their progressive reading. Finally, by examining the narrative resolutions, I assess how the texts reinforce the identification with their white male leads through self-sacrifice and the empathy for the paternal relationship. The representation of white male identity crisis in these films fails to substantiate its subversive potential and instead recuperates hegemonic masculinity.
Reinvesting in Traditional Patriarchal Masculinities

In *Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant* traditional white masculinity is represented as the privileged and desirable position of identification. The texts invoke identification with white patriarchal power in two ways. First, narrative focalization is limited to the white male characters, so that all other viewpoints are unavailable. Second, traditional or industrial modes of masculinity are reinvented through nostalgic references to classical Hollywood cinema and star persona.

Beyond being male-centered narratives, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant* are unique in their exclusion of any other character viewpoints. Racism and sexism become normalized and justified through the narrow discourse of the all-male, homosocial group. In *Bad Lieutenant*, the women and racial minorities are completely ambiguous. Most characters in the film have no names and lack proper introductions, their roles and relationships to the main character must be guessed at. Peter Lehman observes how in *Bad Lieutenant*,

> Even the current relationships he has with his family and with other unidentified women are presented in such an oblique and ambiguous manner that we can hardly determine their nature. Even though several scenes take place in the home, were it not for the fact that one character refers to his wife it would not even be clear if he had a wife or if he was divorced since we also hear a reference to an aunt who lives with them. (Lehman 27)

All supporting characters are completely subordinate to the privileged focalization of the main character, Lou (Harvey Keitel). Whether Lou is read as desirable or detestable, the film gives no alternative vantage point from which to read the narrative. This epistemological exclusivity is the most powerful narrative element constituting white patriarchal hegemony throughout the film. No matter how condemnable Lou’s actions are, his subjective viewpoint commands empathy.
In *Reservoir Dogs* the representation of the Other works similarly. Because the majority of the action occurs between the all-white male group in a warehouse, there is no place for the visual representation of Otherness. The female and racialized Others are represented solely in the verbal discourse of the white male characters. Replacing visual representation with discourse, it becomes easier for the white male characters to manipulate the meaning of race to fit their own desires. Race in *Reservoir Dogs* is completely constituted through the white male imagination. The film goes to lengths to illustrate the fascination with blackness and the desire for the racial Other. For example, one of the gangsters, while telling a story, describes the beauty of a particular black woman. He explains to the other men, “If you saw this girl, you’d have to jerk off to her at least once.” In another instance, the men are in disagreement over their aliases. Mr. Pink (Steve Buscemi) asks, “Why can’t we pick our own names?” Joe (Lawrence Tierney) replies, “Doesn’t work you get four guys all fightin’ over who’s gonna be Mr. Black…” The language used in these scenes exemplifies the effect that identity politics has had on the meaning of whiteness for these white men. The desire to be Mr. Black or to lust for the black woman illustrates how the men imagine racial appropriation as a way to compensate for their perceived lack of cultural particularity. Furthermore, this language, as far as it appears to glorify blackness as a positive quality, masks its truly racist premise and effectively cancels out other comments made throughout the film that are severely racist. To this end, Sharon Willis asserts that

> Through white men’s identification of them, black men become icons, gestural repertoires, and cultural artifacts, as the threads of cross-racial identification are wound around a white boy that remains stable. Perhaps more important, these fantasmatic identifications maintain an aggressive edge: the white subject wants to be in the other’s place, without leaving its own. These are identifications that still operate through a gaze that is imagined to remain stable before the volatile
image it wants to imitate. What results is a reinscription of black masculinity as an image, a cultural icon, seen through white eyes. (Willis 61)

Both films are immediately limited by rendering other gender and racial subject positions inaccessible. The construction of such limited points of view is the most important feature of how patriarchal power is reinforced.

In *Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant*, the representations of masculinity are replete with nostalgia for the old industrial man. A closer look at the meaning of nostalgia confirms how intertextual iconography can specifically direct the process of meaning-making in film. Nostalgia is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed… a sentiment of loss and displacement, but...also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym xiii). Cinema itself, as it represents reality, can generally be regarded as a vehicle for nostalgia. It is important to keep in mind that “nostalgia is not history. And history is not nostalgia, nor is it simply generational. The same cinematic moves that figure history as cultural waste, as trash to be collected and recombined, allow for the production of false social anchors…” (Willis 67). Nostalgia allows us to create or pick out the desirable details of a history. The stability of certain genre codes in the history of cinema lies beyond what is simply recognizable and familiar; they surface over and again because of what is acceptable or desirable.

The nostalgic references to the old industrial man are constituted in the representation of the male characters in the crime film. *Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant* resurrect nostalgia for the industrial man by encoding the characters with particular attributes of masculinity from Hollywood’s past. The two major symbolic attributes of both films that inscribe nostalgia for traditional masculinity are the physical
appearance and performance of the male characters and the star persona of Harvey Keitel.

The physical appearance and performance of the men recall old ideals of what it means to be masculine. Perhaps most important to this category is the clothing worn by the men in both films. The classic black suit, symbolic of authority, power and gender difference, has been a staple for lead male characters such as Cary Grant and Gary Cooper. Drawing attention to the male body in a way that does not allow it to be called into question, it emits a subtle sexuality yet retains the power of the masculine facade. Furthermore, the classic black suit marks a time when individual expression through fashion was often an unacceptable way of being masculine.

The suits in *Reservoir Dogs* are probably the most recognizable icons of the film, in many ways larger than the characters themselves. The images of the suits have been readily reproduced in marketing promotions of the film and are most objectified by the camera during the film’s title sequence. The men are introduced one at a time, in slow motion, the camera closing in on each character. In *Bad Lieutenant*, Lou is dressed in a similar looking suit. Wearing the standard detective uniform, Lou emits the persona of the old-school police detective, an iconographic figure that has traversed the genre of the detective drama.

The men in both films are representative of the working class. They live on the streets exhibiting “tough guy” mannerisms stereotypical of industrial working class masculinity. The demeanors of the men in both films are similar: characters exercise the overtly masculine quality of emotional restraint, retaining power by never letting their guard down. Lou retains his position of authority in front of the other detectives by
maintaining an emotional indifference in the face of brutality. More than once he sublimes the acknowledgement of a gruesome crime by talking about baseball. Hegemonic masculinity determines the detectives’ action in these particular instances. When one of the detectives responds emotionally to the news of a nun’s rape, Lou counters with sexist disdain, saying, “Chicks get raped every day, now they want to put up fifty Gs just because these chicks wear penguin suits.” Lou’s apathetic attitude toward the situation is quickly adopted by the rest of the men in the group, as no one wants to be perceived as emotionally weak in identifying with the woman’s position.

In Reservoir Dogs, though all the men show emotional restraint at different points in the film, the uncanny “coolness” of Mr. Blonde (Michael Madsen) is synonymous with representations of the hard gangster mentality. He first appears in the warehouse seemingly out of nowhere. He calmly leans against a pole, sipping a soda (which he apparently took time out of fleeing from the cops to get), looking over his sunglasses at the two intensely argumentative figures Mr. White (Harvey Keitel) and Mr. Pink. Throughout the rising tension between the bickering and paranoid pair, Blonde’s emotional state remains intact. When Mr. White aims his gun in attempt to intimidate him, Mr. Blonde’s emotional state never changes. He even acknowledges that his heart is beating so fast he feels like he is “fixin' to have a heart attack,” a claim that his physical composure completely contradicts. This comment is meant to incite comic relief and to focus the viewer’s attention toward the slick masculine persona of Mr. Blonde. Through his emotionless performance, he seemed every bit as authoritative and dangerous as those brandishing their firearms. His performativity bespeaks his possession of the most coveted masculine quality, that of total emotional control and
self-confidence. This quality can be found in most every overtly masculine hero in cinema’s past and is typical of a hypermasculine tradition conditioned through hegemonic practice.

Besides emotional restraint, anger is the only emotional state that the men tolerate. Anger facilitated through feeling of paranoia and guilt runs rampant through the social interaction of the men in both films leading to violence and validating power through physical action. Anger is the only emotion acceptable in the traditional representation of masculinity.

Star persona can play a complex yet vital role in validating a film within a particular genre. A star persona often becomes a staple within a particular genre, so his or her image may be the most easily identifiable code in the narrative. The image of a particular star carries with it a prepackaged meaning in relation to race, gender, and ethnicity that traverses the star’s entire canon of work. The star persona is thus deeply invested in cultural meaning as it “represents typical ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed. Much of the ideological investment of the star phenomenon is in the stars seen as individuals, their qualities seen as natural” (Dyer 617). The prepackaged meaning of star persona also carries the connotations of other characters and the embodiment of other action from past texts. The repetition of a star’s image over a series of texts builds the imagined dimensions of a persona.

In Reservoir Dogs and Bad Lieutenant, Harvey Keitel’s presence plays an important role in qualifying the genre of film. His persona draws from his roles in other crime films, particularly the early films of Martin Scorsese. Such intertextual referencing
is nostalgic as it links text to text, creating an imagined past. So Keitel’s persona precedes his character’s masculinity by conjuring up his past roles. Most reviews of the films at their release make the link between the Scorsese films largely due to Keitel’s contribution to the acting roster. Kim Nueman in Sight and Sound contends that Reservoir Dogs has a “pop culture reflexiveness…signaled by the hulking presence of Harvey Keitel,” while Jamie Bernard of The New York Post asserts that “Harvey Keitel…is a natural for the role of Mr. White, being that he is from the Martin Scorsese school of tough talk and martyrs” (Bernard 23) The allusions to the intertextuality of Keitel’s persona are heavy in the language of Aileen Jacobson’s report in Newsday: “Think of Keitel’s most explosive moments in Taxi Driver, Mean Streets, and Fingers and run them together” (Jacobson 66).

There is a further sense that star persona moves beyond the sum of its texts in the realization that the actor is a flesh and blood person and in the connotations of the corporeality of the star’s image. There is a physical familiarity implicit in every text a star appears. Whether it is a gangster film or a comedy, a melodrama or paparazzi footage from a red carpet premiere, “no matter how different their roles, they bear witness to the continuousness of their own selves. This continuousness within becomes what the star ‘really is’” (Dyer 611). In the case of Harvey Keitel, his features are rough, his face is worn, and his corporeal image bears aged toughness, a thick skin which is on par with the image of the old industrial man. Keitel’s persona carries with it the connotations of a working class “Joe,” an old-school patriarch.

In respect to such identification, Sharon Willis looks critically at what Tarantino himself has to say about the actor. She writes, “In an interview with Lisa Kennedy,
Tarantino locates Harvey Keitel in his personal psychodrama: ‘the father I never had.’ Speaking as auteur, Tarantino shapes himself as a fan, so that Keitel’s paternity constitutes a relationship of cultural adoption” (Willis 47). The filmmaker’s statement incites his own nostalgic investment in the patriarchal figure. Mr. White embodies the most patriarchal role of all the characters as he plays a mock-paternal role in addition to the dominating hypermasculine male persona. In effect, Tarantino’s paternal identification with Keitel is manifest in the representation of Mr. White.

Returning to the previous assertion made by Willis, nostalgia is not history. These texts do not refer back to a concrete location in history in which ‘industrial masculinity’ was a reality. Instead they point back, nostalgically, to a time when the expectations for such masculinity were more agreed upon, more consistently consented upon within the dominant ideology. And though now the meaning of masculinity is more discursively diffused in terms of differing types of masculinities and ways of being male, masculinity’s implicit correlation to patriarchal power remains stable. This is why presenting these films from a white male subjective viewpoint and drawing on the familiar elements of gender in crime film guarantees that the film maintains a limited position from which to identify with white patriarchal culture.

Deconstructing the White Patriarchal Performance

On one level, there are many good things that could be said about the way both Reservoir Dogs and Bad Lieutenant deconstruct the power of the white patriarchal image. Both films find unconventional ways of representing white patriarchal power as pure illusion. However, these deconstructive representations only confirm the need for
change and renegotiation of acceptable masculine values. These examples of deconstructed masculinity should be viewed as a guide to what attributes of traditional masculinity fall outside of consensual hegemonic practice. In *Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant*, deconstruction of the white patriarchal image occurs in three ways. First, hegemonic masculinity is represented as an illogical fiction. Second, white patriarchal violence and bigotry is so overt and pervasive throughout the film that at some level all white male characters lose credibility as identifiable characters. Finally, perhaps the most powerful deconstructive image is that of the wounded and impotent white male body.

From the beginning, the mask of masculinity is the overriding feature of identity for the otherwise ambiguous characters in the films. In *Bad Lieutenant*, Lou’s (Harvey Keitel) name only appears in the credits and his social relationships remain completely anonymous. The interplay between power and identity is particularly apparent in *Reservoir Dogs*, where none of the men in the group know the identity of the others. Access to the characters’ past is heavily mediated in *Reservoir Dogs* and denied completely in *Bad Lieutenant*. Identity culminates in actions of the present. Thus, identity is completely predicated on performance, and power is mediated through the hegemonic relationship of the all-male group.

*Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant* make very incisive efforts to represent the false mask of industrial masculinity. The films make it apparent that identity is constructed and that power ultimately lies in performance. This is probably the most atypical feature of these films as crime dramas. Whereas traditional conventions of the genre conceal the construction of masculinity, these films blatantly point it out. Jonathan
Romney in *New Statesman & Society* points out the parallels to the theater in *Reservoir Dogs*,

The stage is an abandoned warehouse in which characters are carefully positioned to face the audience and for maximum bodily interaction. Long takes emphasize the rhythm of words and gestures and foreground acting skills to a remarkable degree. The film's point is that the life of crime is entirely about acting. (Romney 34)

This insight into the diegetic structure of the narrative has implications for gender representation since the life of crime is, in all reality, the life of masculine gender performance. The conditioning of masculinity is exemplified as the narrative recounts the origin of Mr. Orange. Mr. Orange is literally an actor, and the film goes out of its way to present the “Mr. Orange” segment as the story of a cop learning to assimilate by telling lies and mimicking the actions of other men in order to be considered an authentic hard-bodied criminal.

Furthermore, paranoia within the group of overly aggressive men ends in all out annihilation. Joe, the crime boss organizing the heist, is the designated leader of the all-male group. His power is unquestioned for two reasons: he is older and therefore embodies a literal position of patriarchal authority, and every one of the men working for him already has a personal relationship established with him. The importance here is that Joe is not an anonymous figure to any of the men, and he therefore claims an immediate position atop the hierarchy of the all male group. The anonymity between the rest of the men forces them to sort out, via pure performance, who will listen to whom, who dominates the decision making process, and who falls into subordination. It is here that the film makes its explicit point about the punitive power of masculinity. As the situation falls into an “every man for himself” fatal crisis and the gangsters are
unable to resolve the relational conflict of the inter-male group, the hegemonic process fails, leading to disastrous ends.

Joe’s rebuttal to Mr. Pink during their “alias picking” conversation alludes to the cause of crisis as he recounts, “Doesn’t work, you get four guys all fightin’ over who’s gonna be Mr. Black. They don’t know each other so nobody wants to back down.” They do not know each other, and so no one will back down as they have only their aggressive masculine performance to assert themselves. Sharon Willis notes the subversive potential in such a representation observing that

If the absence of women in Reservoir Dogs for example... does not put off female spectators, it may be because Tarantino’s films offer masculinity whose worst enemy is itself. Or, it may be because the film interpolates women spectators into the reassuring posture of judge, adjudicator, or evaluator. In this case, self-deconstructing adolescent white masculinity is on parade before the discerning, and perhaps satisfied feminine gaze, a gaze that can take its distance from a transgressive eruption designed precisely to provoke her. (Willis 58)

*Bad Lieutenant* echoes this point as Lou slowly destroys himself with drugs. The paradox is that his personal crisis stems from his unquestioned privilege as a patriarch; his excessive lifestyle has turned into pathological self-destruction.

In *Bad Lieutenant*, examples of the preformative construction of hegemonic masculinity permeate almost every scene. During the credit sequence the first audible sound is the voice of a radio commentator aggressively speaking his opinion about baseball. This aggressive male voice sets the narrative into motion and plays an important part throughout the film. The announcer’s voice is the voice of tension and competition as his monologue haughtily contests Lou’s gambling strategy. The commentator fills the position of an omnipotent voice of hegemonic masculinity. He is an imaginary figure relentlessly taunting Lou. The absence of both sports commentator
and bookie from the field of visual representation serves as the best example of how hegemonic masculinity works. They are not flesh and blood but instead purely imaginary, ideological constructs, all powerful in their absence. They are the competitive voices from which Lou’s own sense of masculinity is derived. Their power humiliates Lou, making him more pathetic as he fails to ascend to an impossible position. By representing Lou’s opposition as an imaginary one, as one that he can not realistically compete with, Lou’s performance becomes absurd. His actions appear desperate, and his addiction to gambling and drugs intensifies his self-destructive attempt to prove his manhood.

As for male characters that are visibly represented, Lou takes every opportunity to maintain a dominant hegemonic relationship. The opening scene is the only time Lou’s literal role as father is exerted. He shouts at his sons who inadvertently made themselves late for school by not standing up to their aunt (a woman). “You tell Aunt Wendy to get the fuck out of the bathroom, it’s my house! Are you men or are you mice?!” This cliché line is indicative of the value of male authority Lou is trying to instill in his sons.

In front of the detectives, Lou maintains his dominant position by lying about who he is putting his money on in the series. He challenges them into agreeing with him by making statements like, “Are you a doubter? Tell ya what, don’t listen to the way I steered you yesterday, so you owe me money.” Lou’s use of language is even more performative in front of the bookie’s middleman, as he casually laughs off the repeated warnings of the consequences of his actions. His line, “I’ve been dodging bullets since I was fourteen, nothing can kill me, I’m blessed…” sounds like a one-liner out of an
eighties action film, but instead of reinscribing a fantastic masculine ideology, it ironically foreshadows Lou's inevitable destruction. The audience's foreknowledge of his contradictory actions creates a dramatic irony which further discredits his hard masculine persona.

*Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant* link the problem of violence to masculine gender performance. The angry white male backlash is uniquely literalized in the representation of both films. The image of the white male as angry and unjustly violent works subversively to disrupt the viewer's desired identification with him as a hero. Instead they are (like the officers' on the Rodney King video) guilty, caught on film with "their pants down." Their actions, blatantly depicted on the screen, speak for themselves. The texts leave little room for sympathy or second guessing the true intentions of their actions.

Whether the male characters are supposed to be fighting crime or participating in it they are all explicitly involved in equally transgressive acts of violence. White masculine identity transcends other social roles. In *Reservoir Dogs*, Mr. Orange consistently forgets his primary role as a police officer. His superior corrects him after he praises the criminal witness Long Beach Mike as a "really good guy." Furthermore, Mr. Orange allows his loyalty to Mr. White to take precedence as he does nothing to stop him from killing two pursuing police officers. Beyond the ambivalent actions of Mr. Orange, all male characters in the film, whether cops or criminals, exhibit the same racist, sexist white patriarchal viewpoints. As the title implies, *Bad Lieutenant* represents the criminal and the cop in the same character. All the male characters, whether they are detectives or rapists, remain compassionless, owing to their "tough guy" mentality.
By blurring the lines between cop and criminal, by finding the common bond between Lou and the rapists or Orange and White, the films draws a parallel to violent masculinity in both contexts. All the positions of male authority are subject to the uncontrollable excess of patriarchal violence.

Even when *Reservoir Dogs* attempts to validate its use of racist and sexist language, the language is so relentlessly blatant that the text just as easily lends itself to an oppositional reading. Nearly every single comment made about a woman is derogatory. The only word in the film used to describe black men is “nigger.” When any of the white men lose their cool or act out in an unprofessional manner they are referred to by the rest of the group as “acting like a nigger.” In one scene, Mr. White acknowledges Mr. Pink’s disdain for Mr. Blonde’s irrational, murderous behavior in the jewelry store, posing the question, “How old do you think that black girl was?” This line immediately conjures images of race and sex in the mind of the viewer and implies prejudice (evoking the image of a white man specifically targeting a black woman) in what was supposed to be an indiscriminate killing spree. In *Bad Lieutenant*, the text is very explicit in representing Lou’s prejudice. With the exception of the nun, Lou’s only interest in women is sexual gratification. He treats minorities in the same manner as do the men in *Reservoir Dogs*, calling Darryl Strawberry a nigger after he loses the game and forcing an Asian store owner out of his own store while he extorts two black youths for the money they took from the cash register.

The films ultimately turn patriarchal violence on its head by representing it in an unheroic, extremely sadistic manner. The acts of sadism in both films are excessive and drawn out. The scene in *Reservoir Dogs* when Mr. Blonde cuts off the ear of a
policeman is ironic since he has been built up as the smoothest, coolest (and therefore the readily identifiable) gangster, he even dances around to an upbeat seventies song during the torture, yet his sadistic brutality in this scene threatens to disrupt any sutured desire of identification. In *Bad Lieutenant*, two men violently rape a nun, and a few scenes later, Lou forces two school girls to physically expose themselves as he masturbates. These scenes are raw, straightforward representations of patriarchal violence and, for both films, are the apex of the negative representation of violent masculinity.

The representation of the male body in film representation has been discussed over and again in terms of spectacle. I have previously mentioned the subtle sexualization of the male body as it is presented in the classic black suit. However, both films once again break the rules of the genre and the representation of the cinematic male body by representing it as both wounded and desexualized. One scene portrays Lou drinking and dancing with random women at a cheap motel, and one shot presents him fully nude before the camera. Peter Lehman firmly asserts,

> I know of no other shot like this nude shot in the history of U.S. feature cinema. It is so ambiguous...since there is no evidence that anyone else is present, we cannot read the shot as being an approximate point of view shot or one in any way motivated by another character's gaze: only the camera and the spectator stare directly at the displayed body. (Lehman 28)

The shot is pivotal to the film, communicating directly to the viewer the fiction underlying Lou's performativity. His body is well defined but unlike the spectacularly muscular bodies of so many hypermasculine figures before him, the sight of his penis deconstructs any fantasy notion of a masculine hard body. As Lehman further suggests, “The privileged signifier of the phallus most easily retains its awe and
mystique when the penis is hidden. The sight of the actual organ threatens to deflate and make ludicrous the symbolic phallus” (Lehman 2000, 27). This particular scene in Bad Lieutenant lacks any sexual charge. Lou is not sexually potent, for we never actually see him involved in any direct sexual relation with the women. As Lou stands fully nude in front of the camera, two major inferences can be made. First, he is stretching his arms out, moaning in anguish; this is clearly done to draw a parallel to the Crucifixion, the sufferings of Christ, and the desire to transcend his bodily, material state. The themes of religious affliction are pervasive throughout the film. Second, Lou’s muscular definition is in direct contrast to his flaccid penis. The contradiction is emasculating in nature since “…a hard, contoured body does not look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies. A sense of separation and boundedness is important to the white male ego” (Dyer 152). Exposing the flaccid penis deconstructs the masculine spectacle created by a “sense of separation and boundedness” of the male body.

The wounded male body has much the same effect in Reservoir Dogs. From the very beginning of the film, Mr. Orange is shot in the stomach and is panic stricken and in pain in the back seat of a stolen car. Throughout the entire film he lies on the warehouse floor, slowly bleeding to death. There is a constant awareness of his wounded body even when it is not visually represented on screen, his woundedness finds its way into the dialogue over and again. This representation is compounded as there is no explanation of how he came to be shot or what his true identity is until the very end of the film. This forces the viewer further into contemplation over the wounded body. Mr. Orange’s wounded body is a constant source of disruption and juxtaposition
against the other, intact hypermasculine bodies in the warehouse.

The image of corporeal damage delimits the power of masculinity as it serves as constant reminder of the finitude of the male body. The fantasy of the male body is broken and stripped of its power. Through the exploitation of the male body, the underlying theme of masculinity crisis is at once apparent and undeniable.

White Male Sacrifice

Both films have subversive potential to deconstruct the nostalgic iconography of masculinity, but how does the narrative resolve the issue of male gender crisis? The answer lies in what Richard Dyer has theorized as “white death.” In White, Dyer devotes a chapter to the subject of whiteness and death and the various ways that the two implicate each other in Western culture. The final images of Bad Lieutenant and Reservoir Dogs bear traces of a cultural ideology in which “the beauty of white death, as well as the romantic longing for it…are well attested” (Dyer 209). This romantic longing is exemplified by the traditionally masculine codes of chivalry and self-sacrifice.

As mentioned before, Keitel’s characters take on paternal roles in both films, but only when Mr. White and Lou become symbolic father figures do the narratives allow the otherwise despicable patriarchs to redeem themselves by redirecting their patriarchal energy. In this respect, the death of the main characters in Reservoir Dogs and Bad Lieutenant, parallel the death of D-FENS (Michael Douglas), the character from Falling Down (1993), of which Dyer observes, “He has done the only decent thing left for a white male begetter in the modern world to do: annihilate himself so that reproduction is taken care of by a corporation” (Dyer 218). Self-annihilation is, for the
angry white patriarchal protagonist, not only a means to an end, but the only real option left in a society that has betrayed his power.

In *Bad Lieutenant*, Lou takes on a symbolically paternal role, not with his own family, but oddly enough with two urban youths whose acts of violence, sadism, and transgression against the Other are comparable to Lou’s. The parallels to Lou’s paternity are strikingly clear through the dense symbolism of a crucified Christ, whose sacrifice parallels Lou’s final act of redemption. Lou commits his only act of compassion as he finds the two young rapists and gives them the money he owes to the bookie, thereby sealing his own fate by putting them on a bus so that they might have a second chance to change their ways. In the end, Lou’s compassion and sense of paternity redeem his otherwise cold, alienated patriarchal persona.

In *Reservoir Dogs*, the father-son bond between Mr. White and Mr. Orange is similar to that between Lou and the two rapists constituting the only redemptive space for the main characters in the film. This bond is pronounced in the opening sequence as White tries desperately to console Orange after he is shot in the stomach. White even goes as far as partially revealing his identity (giving Orange his first name). Once in the warehouse, White further explains his emotional closeness with Orange by holding him and whispering in his ear. This overly suggestive homosocial sequence stands out from the otherwise tough and emotionless performance given by the rest of the men throughout the narrative.

Toward the end of the film, Mr. Orange’s back story depicts the evolution of White and Orange’s relationship. As White goes through the steps of the robbery, Orange takes cues following his lead and seems to have an inquisitive childlike
reverence to White. The extent of this father/son bond is illustrated as Orange forgets
his role as police officer, not stopping White from killing two other cops. White in return
repeatedly defends Orange’s self-sacrifice after “he took a bullet meant for” him. In the
final scene, both characters trade off the ritual of self-sacrifice as White refuses to back
down to Joe’s determination to kill Mr. Orange. Once shot, White and Orange are once
again in each other’s arms. In this final moment Orange tells White the truth about his
status as a cop. By coming clean, he acknowledges his guilt in betraying White (the
father). He symbolically pledges allegiance to their relationship and sets himself up for
his own self-sacrifice at the hands of White. The father-son relationship between White
and Orange constitutes the only sympathetic relationship between any of the men in the
film. The beauty and pathos of self-sacrifice not only allows the otherwise demonized
patriarchs narrative redemption and sympathy from the viewer but also reactivates the
moral standards of traditional masculinity.

Looking at the texts as a reinscription of traditional masculinity and also as a
deconstruction of that same traditional masculinity may seem to argue the case for two
very different readings of the narratives. However, it is both the reconstruction of
nostalgia and the deconstruction of the male image that coconstitute the meaning of
masculinity in the films. In other words, the representation of masculinity in the texts
exemplifies the larger hegemonic process within contemporary postindustrial
filmmaking. The representation of the white male image has been reworked and
reconditioned to re-establishing the meaning of whiteness and masculinity into more
acceptable forms for mass consumption. Conjuring empathy through sacrifice, the
narratives solicit a dominant reading that allows the traditional white male patriarch to retain his position of privilege through the power of identification.
‘THE APPLE DOESN’T FALL FAR (ENOUGH) FROM THE TREE’: HEGEMONIC NEGOTIATION AND THE PATRIARCHAL LEGACY IN MAGNOLIA AND THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS

The films Magnolia (1999) and The Royal Tenenbaums (2001) move the examination of male representation firmly into the late nineties and the new millennium. In both films, the landscape of white male representation has become increasingly diversified. In order to give these texts a fair reading, I shall consider them in the light of previous critical work done on similar texts from the early nineties. Specifically, Susan Jeffords’ work on masculinity is particularly applicable. Her 1993 essay “The Big Switch” (a precursor to Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era) is an investigation into the cinematic representation of white men resolving emotional conflict through familial relationships. Jeffords has taken a critical position in regard to trends she located in a group of Hollywood films produced in 1991. Films like Kindergarten Cop (1990), Lethal Weapon 2 (1991), Terminator 2 (1991), Beauty and the Beast (1991), and The Switch (1991) share fundamental themes with Magnolia and The Royal Tenenbaums. In them, the white male lead finds himself reflecting on the past; why he is lonely, alienated, or angry; and why he has been forgotten or demonized by his society. The answer for the characters always lies in reestablishing their paternal role in the family. In her own writing, Jeffords finds the texts to be overwhelmingly conservative. Though she acknowledges any number of alternative readings, Jeffords’ own feminist assessment locates the faults the films fail to overcome, namely,

…that the transformations undergone by white male characters do nothing to address the consequences of the privileges associated with white U.S. masculinities…these men do not have to take responsibility for their past actions, or acknowledge the systematic structures that so often dictate the treatment of
men and women as socially, economically, and culturally different. Their histories as men are limited to their personal sufferings at the hands of traditional codes of masculinity and their messages of change remain at the level of individualized experience within the interpersonal realm. (Jeffords 207)

This feminist standpoint will inform the discussion of white masculinity in *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Magnolia*.

The interrogation can begin by applying some of Jeffords’ assertions to these two texts. How does the depiction of the white patriarch limit the films to represent change in terms of personal suffering? In other words, how do these films side-step the history of white patriarchal privilege and relegate the problems faced by white men to the realm of interpersonal, individual experience? Jeffords’ critical inquiry into masculinity provides historical context to an ongoing critical investigation of the evolving modes of white male representation in Hollywood film.

The function of forgiving the father in *Magnolia* and *The Royal Tenenbaums* provides a means for consent under a more acceptable form of patriarchal hegemony. It is not important for the patriarchs to pay for the past but for the other characters to be granted the ability to reconcile their dysfunctional gender identities under a new form of hegemonic masculinity. To fully explore how this works in both texts, I have divided this case study into three subsections. In the first sub-section, I examine the subversive potential in the textual representation of the new man. In the second, I examine how the texts assign the highest value to paternity as the determining factor for all other social relationships between the characters and how this actually undermines the possibility for any radical break with traditional modes of masculinity. In the third and final sub-section I examine how the paternal relationships are resolved on unequal
terms for different characters and how these biased resolutions confirm the privilege of
the patriarchal figure.

Subversive Potential of the New Man

Though the new man may only be the hegemonic repackaging of the industrial
man, at some levels the differences between the two make possible subversive
representations of male gender construction. In this section I will explore how some of
the concepts of new man, as defined in the introductory chapter, contribute to the
renegotiation of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal power. The visual and literary
design of the films exemplifies new man sensibilities calling into question the relevance
of traditional patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore, the genre codes of comedy and
melodrama function to articulate the ideological values that not only define progressive
aspects of postindustrial masculinities but also disqualify many of the negative and
outdated aspects of traditional masculinity.

The visual and literary designs are littered with elements that distinctly define the
new man. For example, the narratives are predicated on the deep emotional inner-
workings of the male familial relationships. Also, the representation of the male body
has nothing to do with male physique and everything to do with hip and trendy clothing
styles (this is particularly apparent in The Royal Tenenbaums), a consequence of
postindustrial consumerism. Furthermore, the soundtracks heavy with the melancholy
music of Aimee Mann and Elliot Smith hardly create worlds suitable to the values of the
old industrial patriarch. As a result, Royal (Gene Hackman), the father figure for which
the title of the film is named, Jimmy (Philip Baker Hall), the abusive father and game
show personality, and Earl (Jason Robards), the adulterous television mogul, are all completely out of touch with the world around them. Their desire to seek forgiveness and recant their past is an attempt to reconnect themselves to a world that finds their ideologies obsolete.

It is fair to say at some points during the struggle over gender identity, the sensibilities of the new man open up the progressive potential for the male image. These points of possibility are manifest through the interplay between melodramatic and comedic genre codes. Royal's antics and overly narcissistic demeanor provide a great portion of the subversive humor in *The Royal Tenenbaums*. For instance, Royal's shooting the young Chas (Ben Stiller) in the hand with a B.B. gun makes Royal appear childlike in his narcissistic behavior, less intellectually responsible than his own children. His repeated racist references to Henry Sherman (Danny Glover) are a continuous source of humor in the film as he slips into extremely antiquated, racist dialogue in conversation. At the gravesite of his mother, he nonchalantly poses the question to Ritchie, “So what do you think of this big ol' black buck movin' in up there?” to which Ritchie confusedly replies, “Who?” Ritchie’s reply renders Royal’s comment absurd.

Royal is financially bankrupt, and more importantly, Henry Sherman has become a possible suitor for his estranged wife. The fear of the vacant place he once filled being filled by another drives him into (male) competition. Royal’s first meeting with Henry Sherman, as Henry arrives at the Tenenbaum home in a cab with Etheline, invokes humor as the exchange of the gaze between the two men initiates a power struggle that appears within the film both futile and outdated. Royal greets Henry with stereotypical “black” gestures connoting subtle racism. He gives him “five” and mimics street slang,
saying, “Hey man, lay it on me!” The biggest confrontation between Royal and Henry takes place one morning in the kitchen when the two men are finally alone. Royal antagonizes Henry with racial slurs, calling him “Coltrane.” Henry is finally provoked into fighting after Royal proclaims, “even if I did [call you Coltrane], there is nothing you could do about it, is there?”

Royal’s overly simplified dismissal of the life-long pain he has created for his family serves a comedic purpose as well. For example, he forgets Chas’s wife repeatedly and refers to her in harshly impersonal terms at the Tenenbaum home: “Oh, I guess we’ll have to swing by her grave too,” and again at the graveyard stating, “Oh, I almost forgot we’ve got another body buried here.” He treats Margot in the same manner, alienating her as a child by making a point to introduce her as an adopted daughter. When Margot mentions that she was never invited with the rest of the family to see their grandmother’s grave site, Royal replies, “Well she wasn’t your real grandmother…and anyway, you’re invited now.” His insincerity is connotative of the expectations inherent in his privilege as a patriarch: he can simply will away the pain he has caused. He is oblivious to the gravity of his past action and furthermore does not even recognize the wrongs he has committed. A great part of this humor is derived from the fact that Royal believes he can just reenter the family, reclaim his position, and win back their love by pretending to care. His insincerity is so over the top that his attempt appears farcical to everyone (especially the audience) but himself. Thus the use of comedy in the film works to dispel rather than perpetuate the ideology of traditional masculinity.
The same line of humor appears in *Magnolia* as Frank T.J. Mackey takes on the role of the overly performative male as the lead spokesman for “Seduce and Destroy.” Frank’s introduction at the “Seduce and Destroy” seminar sets the stage for his over-the-top female bashing. While the climactic *Also Sprach Zarathustra* plays in the background, his silhouette appears out of darkness, and he thrusts himself into the foreground to the sound of shouting and cheering men. He goes through his seminar introducing techniques such as “how to form a tragedy” and “how to fake like you are nice and caring” all designed to help inept men trick women into sexual relationships. This character is so outlandish that it immediately invokes irony and humor. Frank’s performance and preaching are so outrageous that he is evidently working hard to cover his own insecurities. The representation of hypermasculinity in the Frank character is deconstructive in its unbelievability. Thus, the film makes it explicitly clear, even before Frank’s past is revealed that such hypermasculine performativity cannot be taken seriously. Frank is the only other character in the film besides Jimmy and Earl who has anything to lose by shedding his overly masculine persona.

Further, there are several examples in both films of how subtle moves from comedy to drama are extremely effective in constituting the younger male characters’ identities and relationships. For example, Jim Kurring in *Magnolia* provides a constant source of humor as he appears overly sensitive and obligated to his unrealistic sense of moral and ethical duty. He does not cuss and is taken aback by Claudia’s use of profanity. His feeble attempt to interact and flirt with Claudia conjures humor. Quiz Kid Donnie Smith (William H. Macy) is also a source of humor as he crashes his car into a convenience store and begs his boss for the money to get braces he does not need in
an impractical effort to gain the attention of “Brad the Bartender.” There are similar moments of humor in *The Royal Tenenbaums* when Ritchie has his meltdown on the tennis court. He takes off his shoes and one sock, he softly lob the ball and refuses to continue playing. The announcer makes the observation that he is crying under his sunglasses.

Further in the narratives, the same social and emotional ineptness is a source of melodrama. Losing his gun dodging bullets near an apartment complex, Jim is soon in tears, begging to God, desperately searching for the weapon. Quiz Kid Donnie Smith, making a drunken fool of himself in front of Brad, rushes to the toilet to vomit. Ritchie’s suicide attempt in *The Royal Tenebaums* is the darkest and most brazenly serious scene in the entire film. Set to the music of Elliot Smith, full of symbolic flashbacks, the scene completely departs from the light-hearted melancholy of the rest of the narrative.

How can this apparent contradiction in representation be made clear? On the one hand, the narratives poke fun at male sensitivity and the absence of a self-assuredness so often equated with a strong sense of masculinity. On the other hand, the narratives give absolute empathy to the same male insecurities and weaknesses in a series of serious dramatic scenes. The display of comedy and melodrama does not contradict itself but instead works to qualify the representation of masculinity within the rubric of new man sensibilities. The new man, as sensitive and emotionally vulnerable, can be made fun of and is able to revel in his own quirks and shortcomings. He is subjected to his own vulnerability and what is, at times, humorous is also at other times found to be most endearing. The fact that these characters are represented with all the ticks and off-beat behavior that open them up in such vulnerable ways and that they
wear it on their sleeve rather than covering it over in the stereotypical style of a more traditional masculinity may be the most progressive element of the two films.

At the same time however, the use of genre does not locate a solution to patriarchal power. Whether comedy sets off the unacceptable racist or sexist discourse of characters like Royal and Frank, or foregrounds the vulnerability and sensitivity of more acceptable modes of masculinity, it creates a middle ground for the representation of male gender identity. At some level, the texts have begun the task of renegotiating possible ways of being male. However, it is important to remember where these emotional disconnections stem from, and ultimately, for the purposes of resolution, where they must return. From this point, genre codes affirm the hegemonic process of renegotiating the meaning of masculinity as it affects the role of the patriarch.

The Inescapable Patriarch

The hegemonic role of the patriarch is the driving force of both narratives. In this sub-section, I will examine four important ways in which patriarchal hegemony is confirmed. First, both films represent the historical presence of the patriarch as a catalyst for character conflict. Second, the narrative structure in *Magnolia* and the visual design in *The Royal Tenenbaums* function to illustrate the common inescapable linkage that all characters share with the patriarchal figure. Third, the symmetry between the relationships of Royal and Chas and Earl and Frank makes them the best examples of the power of the patriarchal legacy. They inscribe the patriarchal figure with unparalleled significance in the lives of their sons and the sole ability to resolve their problems. These specific father-son relationships are privileged in the narrative
because the sons’ attributes and actions most closely resemble those of their fathers’ past. Furthermore, through their own personal regret and suffering, Royal and Frank are endowed with the wisdom to heal all the other characters’ suffering.

*Magnolia* and *The Royal Tenenbaums* locate the present conflicts of their characters in terms of their painful past. *The Royal Tenenbaums* spends the first ten minutes articulating the origins of the family’s dysfunction. The film continually accesses the past through flashbacks. *Magnolia* furnishes access to the past through dialogue and the depiction of the interconnection between the characters. All the history, which is so important to the narrative discourse, always leads back to the familial relationship with the patriarch. The repetitious line in *Magnolia* “And we may be through with the past, but the past is not through with us” could more accurately be read we may be through with our patriarchal past, but our patriarchal past is not through with us.

In *Reservoir Dogs* and *Bad Lieutenant* the lack of any history behind the identity of the characters made the characters’ adoption of identity via gender performance all the more crucial. This can be staunchly juxtaposed with the male identity crisis of *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Magnolia*, where the histories of the characters’ identities are determined by their relationship with the patriarch. In other words, gender performance in the films is not just a mask filling the void of an otherwise absent or empty identity. Male gender performance in these films is instead a mask for the pain and resentment caused by the father figure.

The divergent paths of male gender identity (father vs. son) elicit the need for emotional responsibility between male characters. The sons must reconcile with the
dominant patriarchal presence of their fathers in order to reclaim emotional health. It is
the necessity of this return to the father that limits the subversive potential for the
representation of gender identity in the film. The texts place great emphasis on the fact
that the sons are bound by their father, caught in his shadow, limited by the fact that
they are constituted through him. They must recognize and reconcile with him before
moving forward. So the positive representation of a more sensitive and emotionally
capable man is ultimately preceded by and bound to the father and not free from him.

The films go to lengths to represent a sense of boundedness and connection to
the patriarch through literary and visual design. The title of *The Royal Tenenbaums*
makes this connection explicit enough, but further connections are made symbolically
through the film’s visual design. Specifically, the color pink, a color directly correlated to
Royal, who is seen wearing it in almost every scene, functions as a symbol. Etheline
(Angelica Houston), Royal’s wife, is wearing pink when Royal admits he is dying. The
interior of the Tenenbaum house, which has been almost completely unaltered since his
leaving, is lavished with pink walls, paying homage to the father figure. The most overt
example of the use of pink is in the pants worn by Pagoda (Kumar Pallana), the
Tenenbaums’ housekeeper and Royal’s right-hand man.

In *Magnolia*, the patriarchal link is drawn through the film’s allusions to the many
coincidental intersections among the characters. Big Earl Partridge Productions owns
the *What Do Kids Know* television game show of which Jimmy Gator is the host and
Stanley Spector (Jeremy Blackman) the young contestant. This is the same game show
that earned Quiz Kid Donnie Smith (William H. Macy) his undesired celebrity status.
Beyond the literal (paternal) patriarchal pressure placed on them, Donnie and Stanley
are products of a patriarchal (capitalist) institution. Even Officer Jim Kurring, who bears no direct relationship to either patriarchal father figure, is affected by Jimmy Gator’s presence in Claudia’s life, as it affects his relationship with her. Equally important when considering Jim’s gender identity is the hegemonic, patriarchally driven police force from which Jim often finds himself excluded as a result of his sensitive, emasculated behavior.

The films lay claim to a world in which new modes of gender construction arise causally from their predecessors. Keeping with this line of thinking, perhaps the most dramatically affected father-son relationships in the two films are that of Royal and Chas in *The Royal Tenenbaums* and Earl and Frank (Tom Cruise) in *Magnolia*. Besides their fathers, Frank and Chas are the most narcissistic men in either of the films. This narcissism is fueled by the self-hatred inflicted on them by their fathers. As a result, Chas and Frank share many similarities with their fathers while at the same time denying a relationship with their paternal oppressors. They accomplish their denial in several ways. Frank has changed his legal name from Jack Partridge to Frank T.J. Mackey and denies in an interview that his father is alive. Chas also tells his sons that their grandfather is dead until it comes to light that he is really dying. Furthermore, Chas has destroyed Royal’s career and financial life through a series of litigations that exposed Royal’s corruption. Denial is the source of character conflict for Chas and Frank as they have the most to lose by acknowledging the harsh realities of their painful past relationships with their fathers. Though they have gone to lengths to separate their identities from their fathers’, the actions and attitudes of Frank and Chas are nonetheless comparable to them.
In *Magnolia*, Frank has made a career of his sexist and narcissistic demeanor which parallels Earl’s infidelity and selfish behavior toward Frank’s deceased mother. Frank is the founder of the male self-help group “Seduce and Destroy,” which teaches inadequate men how to sexually seduce women. Frank is the major spokesman for the group, and as an over-the-top chauvinist, he has made a career out of masking his emotional problems. His hatred of women is compounded by the fear of loss spurred by the trauma of his mother’s death. Throughout the narrative, Frank is forced to recognize and acknowledge what has been hidden in his identity, which is most at stake in relinquishing his destructive hypermasculinity.

Chas, mimicking his father’s prejudice, is the only character other than Royal who is afraid to accept Mr. Sherman as a potential member of the family. Chas overworks his young sons Ari and Uzi, treating them as intellectual equals and raising them in the same overly sheltered environment that had such negative effects on him. Beyond how he has suffered from the cycle of betrayal and abandonment at the hands of his father, Chas also suffers the trauma of his wife’s death. He suppresses this fear of loss through extremely obsessive behavior. His fear of imminent disaster (e.g. the fire drill scene) becomes an excuse to move back in with his mother.

It is apparent that both Chas and Frank are deeply affected by the loss of the women in their lives. Chas appears in one shot looking through old photos of his wife and has become obsessed with the safety of his sons. Frank’s hatred of women and acute anger at the mention of his mother’s death attests to his unresolved issues. The death of the women in both their lives initially represented an enormous psychological burden, yet the resolution of this particular loss is never a point which the film takes on.
The loss of wife and mother is background to the resolution of father and son, or rather the resolution with the father stands in for both. This detail underscores a basic problem with a text that finds its representational center in the patriarch. By reinforcing the father’s centrality on all issues, the film negates the possibility of divesting his importance for other (namely female) characters.

None of this is to say that the texts do not give responsibility to the fathers for their actions. The fathers in both films admit guilt and actively seek reconciliation. Yet the films slip back into the same trap: through the active recognition and reflection on their past transgressions, Earl and Royal also become the ultimate voice of reason, imparting a “blanket” wisdom for all the characters that ultimately ties the respective narratives together. Royal and Earl have the insight that Frank and Chas lack to see the potentially disastrous paths their sons have taken.

After Royal attempts to take the mental well-being of Chas’s sons into his own hands, Chas confronts Royal in the game closet. It is here that Royal tells Chas he is “having a nervous breakdown.” Chas’s animosity toward his father and his refusal to acknowledge the remark makes it obvious that Royal has struck a cord. Later, when Royal is thrown out of the house, he warns his son, saying, “Be careful with those boys, Chas, you don’t want this to happen to you.”

In Magnolia, there is a crucial moment in the middle of the film when Earl confesses the wrongs he has committed against his family. As Earl speaks to Phil about cheating on his wife and leaving young Jack (Frank) to watch his mother die, the shot cuts to the other characters, all of whom are in the midst of their own personal crisis. As the narrative cuts between characters, Earl’s unpolished utterances on the ownership of
regret, letting love go, and the burden of a long life all emphasize the overarching
affliction the other characters are unable to articulate. Earl’s voiceover thus speaks for
and of the characters who are committing their own painful acts in an unreflective state.

It is the access to reflection (born out of their own misdeeds) for Royal and Earl
that allows them to play the most pivotal role in the film as they hold the key to
successful emotional resolution for the entire family. This wisdom and insight can only
come from the father. At the same time, we never hear any similarly wise or reflective
thoughts from Etheline, the would-be matriarch who has held the family together without
help. Instead, she is reduced to a passive maternal position, victimized in the same
manner as the rest of the family.

Forgiving the Father

The character resolutions in each film provide concrete evidence of how the texts
are limited by their fixation with the patriarch. The family members must ultimately gain
“permission” from the father before gaining access to the possibilities of their own
gender identities. Getting “permission” or approval from the father plays a crucial role in
the resolution of the narrative. The films reconcile each family relationship differently.
The male relationships are privileged over the female. In the case of the female siblings,
such approval extends beyond the patriarchal figures of Royal, Earl, or Jimmy. The
texts, for all their ability to make statements against the outdated practices of racism
and sexism, fall short of equitably representing the daughters Margot and Claudia in
their relationships with their fathers. Chas, Ritchie, and Frank all have the opportunity
and the ability to reconcile directly with their father. Neither Claudia nor Margot is
compensated comparably. Claudia never even comes into contact with her father after the initial meeting early on in the film when the audience is left wondering what sort of history could trigger such an uncontrollable rage in her. Jimmy, who is narrowly saved from his suicide attempt, never has to “pay up” by directly engaging with Claudia. The narrative never returns to him throughout the remainder of the film.

The relationship between Royal and Margot is not definitively reconciled either. In their final scene alone together at an ice cream parlor, Royal once again tries to gain Margot’s forgiveness by not honestly apologizing to her. “Can someone be a shit their whole lives and try to repair the damage? I mean I think people want to hear that.” With this less than genuine statement, Royal acknowledges his own failure to put real effort into making amends. The scene ends with Royal unable to remember his daughter’s middle name (a name that he gave her), and from here the text never returns to resolve properly the rift in their relationship.

Though the films fail to repair the relationship between father and daughter, both Claudia and Margot resolve their paternal issues through romantic relationships. In the final scene of Magnolia, Jim Kurring enters Claudia’s room the morning after their failed dinner date. His voice is partially drowned out by the Aimee Mann song Save Me. He professes his feelings for her and vows to her that he wants to be honest and open. The final shot in the film is Claudia smiling directly into the camera, implying that Jim (in classic Hollywood style) has come along and saved her from her troubled past.

Margot’s reconciliation with Ritchie works in similar fashion. After her failure to get the proper closure with her father at the ice cream parlor, she is finally alone on the roof with Ritchie, where they share a cigarette and where he tells her that Mordecai’s
(Ritchie’s pet falcon) loss of color signifies a traumatic experience, to which she responds, “Well I’m sure he’ll get over it.” With this scene, the narrative resolves Margot’s issues with extreme secrecy and sexual promiscuity by rectifying her relationship with her brother. Whether or not Margot pursues romantic involvement with Ritchie is not important here. What is important is that Margot’s resolution is found solely in her relationship with Ritchie, while her relationship with her father is never properly resolved.

The textual positions of Claudia and Margot are more aligned with the stereotypical relationships of classical Hollywood rather than any sort of progressive female representation. Instead of resolving their conflicts with their fathers directly, as do the other male siblings, they instead are relegated to a romantic relationship that stands in for what their fathers cannot give them. Both Ritchie and Jim Kurring are represented as the type of emotionally open, caring individuals that the films deem more appropriate male figures. Though they are the only men in the film capable of a responsible romantic relationship with these women, the texts overwhelmingly strip the women of any chance of autonomy from the patriarch. The texts therefore are unequal in their representation of the daughters and sons, relegating the daughters to the space of domesticity and romantic love as a cure-all for the transgressions committed against them by the father. The permission these women seek in order to move on in their lives does not come from the father at all but instead from a romantic male substitute.

The Royal Tenenbaums, by contrast, privileges Ritchie as he gets the approval of his father and is in turn able to forgive him. First, Ritchie makes amends with Margot after he attempts suicide. The would-be couple is finally able to express openly the
romantic situation that has left them in a state of emotional melancholy for a large portion of their lives. Rectifying this situation also means gaining the approval of his father, as the two relationships (Ritchie/Margot, Ritchie/Royal) are closely linked.

The film illustrates the link as Ritchie (after his talk with Margot) replaces the boar’s head on the Tenenbaum’s wall. This gesture is symbolic for two reasons: first because it belongs to Royal. Throughout the film Royal is searching for it but never has a chance to replace it himself. Ritchie replacing it connotes the connection to his father and his desire to actively seek out a relationship with him. Second, the boar’s head is a hunting trophy. Such a trophy is synonymous with “traditional” modes of masculinity (the autonomous, powerful hunter/warrior, etc.). From this view the gesture articulates Ritchie’s regaining a lost male libido that has left him emotionally insecure since his days as a tennis champion.

Royal abandoned Ritchie after Ritchie failed on the tennis court as a result of the stress he felt over Margot’s marriage to Raleigh. Unable to face his own insecurities Royal reacts to Ritchie’s outward display of emotion by avoiding his son altogether. At the cemetery, Ritchie (in tune with his father’s insecurities) consoles his father saying, “…I understood, I know you’re not very good with disappointment.” From here he is finally able to confront and confide in his father. Once Ritchie explains the reason for his athletic failure, Royal, in turn, is able to admit his shortcomings as a father in light of his son’s revelation. Royal becomes open in expressing his own self-doubt when he tells Ritchie, “Don’t listen to me: I never understood her myself; I never understood any of us. I wish I could tell you what to do, but I just can’t.” Ritchie responds sensitively with “And that’s okay”. Ritchie’s response makes it clear that he did not come to his father seeking
any answer but instead approval for his actions. Royal’s approval of Ritchie reconnects their relationship and sets into motion a series of events that allows Royal back into his family’s life. The reconnection of familial relations is signaled symbolically as Mordecai miraculously returns. Ritchie turned Mordecai loose once after Royal announced his split with Etheline to the children and again when he initially returns from his time at sea to face Margot and his father. These two occurrences tied to the moment of the bird’s return give it particular symbolic value.

The reconciliation between Royal and Etheline is not possible until Royal is able to realize that her affection cannot be won back as he wishes it could be. The first attempt he makes at reconciliation (in the park) on the surface appears genuine, except that he is really faking a terminal illness to break Etheline and Henry up. As they walk, he even hints at what sounds like an honest apology for his failure as husband and father, saying “I don’t know, I’m ashamed of myself”.

Only after his fulfillment of the divorce is there proper reconciliation to their differences. Though the scene plays out with Royal giving up what rights he believes he has with Etheline and recognizing Henry as “everything he is not,” he does not actually lose his position in the relationship at all. Granting the divorce does not vanquish Royal from the position of patriarchal power but instead guarantees his immovable position of influence and authority. Etheline and Henry could not progress in their romantic relationship without Royal’s approval through divorce. In granting permission to Henry and Etheline, Royal retains his position of power in a gesture that appears on the surface to relinquish him from it.

The films find the final resolution for Royal and Earl in their dying moments with
the sons who have been most adversely affected by them, Chas and Frank. Frank’s final dramatic confrontation with his incapacitated father acccents the climax of the narrative. Frank’s initial reaction to the sight of his dying father is pure contempt as he verbally unloads years of pent up aggression on him, however as the scene intensifies, Frank is reduced to begging for the life of his father. As he cries out “Don’t go you bastard, don’t go,” Frank is finally able to articulate his fear of loss and desire for retribution. Frank is ultimately searching for acceptance and approval from his father with his plea for his father’s life. Earl’s dying words, “I love you,” give Frank the approval needed from his father to actively move on from the fear of loss that has dominated his life and at the same time allows Earl to die a forgiven man. The patriarch, by uttering his dying words of love to his son, solidifies a stronger position in his son’s life.

Royal achieves final reconciliation with Chas after saving Chas’s children from an out of control car and purchasing his family a new dog to replace the deceased one. Royal’s noble actions make him the answer to Chas’s fear of loss and insecurity. By saving Chas’s family, Royal retains the symbolic role of all powerful protector and the heroic father figure. As a youth, Chas was excluded from the company of his father. He was always treated second best to his brother Ritchie. When Royal comes back into Chas’s life, he makes the same mistake, excluding Chas while secretly taking Ari and Uzi on misadventures around the city. When Royal apologizes to Chas and makes an honest gesture of good will (purchasing a new dog, saving his sons, etc.), Chas finally gains the approval he has desired his entire life. Chas begins to recapture his lost
youth, reconnecting with his father by sharing in the misadventure (riding on the back of a garbage truck) with Royal and his sons.

Frank and Chas are likewise the only witnesses to their fathers’ deaths. The representation of the patriarchs’ deaths holds the ultimate importance for the meaning of the films. Frank’s transformation as the witness of his father’s death and the fact that Chas is depicted in the back of the ambulance as his father lies dying attest to the centrality of the patriarchal power that dominates the meaning of the texts. The death of the father has greater implications for the narratives than simply the renewal of family relationships; in a broader sense, it attests to the obsession with patriarchal values on which both films determine the representation of male gender identity.

The deaths of Royal and Earl (the events that resolve both narratives) finally make clear what in their living representation was obscured by their presence. Their absence allows the texts to take up what is of key importance in their representation. The texts do not spend time representing what the fathers had learned, or how they change their lives after taking responsibility for their actions. As soon as they have resolved the conflicts with their families, they die. What the texts deem important is the transformation of the rest of the family members’ lives as they are affected and constructed though their relationship with the patriarch. It was never really about Royal’s and Earl’s changes but about how their presence (and absence) affected and continues to affect those lives around them. The final shot in The Royal Tenenbaums illustrates this dynamic, as the representation of Royal becomes an inanimate thing (i.e. the burial plot, the tombstone, the name plate on the gate) and the meaning of his life is taken up by each one of the characters that files by the camera in slow motion. The reflections
It is safe to say that *Magnolia* and *The Royal Tenenbaums* fail to deconstruct the position of the patriarchal center. For the most part, the dying patriarchs do honestly apologize for their past actions, but to what effect? Both Royal and Frank are dead long before they have to make any real changes or sacrifices in the name of their own reconciliation. The reconciliations do more to redirect the sons’ personal and emotional relationship to others, but again this is not to say that they have broken away from their fathers’ dilemmas with patriarchal power.

The patriarchal hierarchy has not been discarded (as is apparent in how the narratives treat women); instead it has been simply redirected and reconceptualized in light of more contemporary times. Both films in fact illustrate well how the new man is, as Chapman declares, “a humanist ideal, a triumph of style over content, a legitimation of consumption, a ruse to persuade those that called for change that it already happened” (Chapman, in Benyon 115). The notion of new man, as it has been defined and used throughout this chapter, carries with it a wide range of connotation for male gender identity. The films represent a full gamut of new man personas, from the slick, sexist, business savvy Frank T.J. Mackey, to the sensitive male nurse, Phil Parma, who can cry on cue and does so unashamedly. It is not always a clear defiance against industrial masculinity: instead it is a renegotiation of how to be male. The new man is less a move in favor of gender equity, falling more along the lines of a renegotiation of a historically granted patriarchal privilege in a postindustrial era of identity politics and mass consumption.
The patriarchs are not made to pay for their past transgressions. They do not address the larger social issues of patriarchal power structures outside of the interpersonal familial relationships. The reconciliation of male gender identity only pertains to the sons who go on living and who have been affected by their fathers’ past. The once apathetic family members are finally able to find positive emotional resolution under the renegotiated hegemony of the patriarchal figure. This new identification with emotionally responsible masculinity is the rejuvenation of male-centered privilege that the father, upon his death, has set in stone.
‘TIL SOMEBODY GETS HURT’: WOUNDED WHITE MEN AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN THE PALLBEARER AND PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

The Pallbearer and Punch-Drunk Love recreate, with structural precision, the genre conventions of melodrama and romantic comedy with men as their central characters. Both films posit serious commentary on the neurotic dilemma surrounding the characters’ emasculation. The appropriation of a narrative space generally reserved for female representation calls into question its intentions. Rowe attributes this representational shift to “the widespread assault to the structures of masculine authority that occurred in the 1960s—the Civil Rights movement, the revival of feminism, the Vietnam War, the Pill, Stonewall and the demand for gay rights, Watergate, inflation—all of which rattled institutions built on racial and sexual privilege to such an extent that masculinity could no longer serve as a safe subject for comedy” (Rowe 185). Rowe’s own analysis of the postclassical male melodrama published in 1994 could not be more relevant for The Pallbearer and Punch-Drunk Love. She observes,

the intermingling of romantic comedy and melodrama evident in these films should come as no surprise, given the thematic and structural similarities between the two genres. Linked by common ideologies of gender, romantic comedy and melodrama are, after all, the primary narrative forms available for telling the stories of women’s lives…. What is more surprising, however—and disturbing—is the increasing use of melodrama to tell the story of men’s lives and male suffering—and to tell it straight. Underlying the seemingly innocuous fantasies of these recent comedies is another, darker scenario that recasts the story of the struggle for women’s rights into a melodrama of male victims and female villains. (Rowe 185)

Reorganizing these genre codes around suffering male characters is an example of hegemonic negotiation at work and is indicative of what is most at stake for postindustrial masculinities.

The Pallbearer and Punch-Drunk Love depart from the representation of
hegemonic masculinity, seen in the past four films, in important ways. Unlike the previous films, no traditionally patriarchal characters are present in the text. Their narratives provide no (archetypal) figures of properly masculinized men to serve as examples. Instead, the film charges the female familial figures with the largest role in determining the neurotic, antisocial identities of Tom (David Schwimmer) and Barry (Adam Sandler). Patriarchal hegemony is recuperated as the emasculated male characters learn more successful gender roles solely though female relationships. As a result I have organized this case study differently from the others. Three major relationships with women (the familial mother/sister relationship, the sexually dominant female relationship, and the romantic/ideal female relationship) contribute to the construction of both Tom’s and Barry’s gender identity. An analysis of the relationships represented in the films will clearly reveal how the women in the film represent the impediment, the threat, and ultimately the answer to the dilemma of male gender identity.

Victims of the Devouring Familial Female

In The Pallbearer, Tom still lives at home with his mother; the father, though briefly mentioned, is completely absent. His mother (played by Carol Kane) is overbearing, treating Tom like an adolescent, butting into his affairs, and violating his privacy at every turn. Her constant intrusions and awkward timing provide a constant source of comic relief (early on, Tom has a chain lock installed on his bedroom door in an effort to keep her out). She serves no purpose outside the home. In fact, she is never seen outside the house. She is oblivious to Tom’s predicament, lacks an evolving
relationship with her son, and provides no insight into his life. She is completely self-involved. Her selfish desire to hang onto her son’s youth culminates in the last scene of the film, when she locks herself in Tom’s room in protest of his moving out. She is a one-dimensional character whose sole purpose is comic relief and to legitimate Tom’s pathetic situation.

Tom’s mother is reminiscent of a character that has been at the butt of jokes for the better part of a century. She embodies a stereotype that has no basis in historical fact and can most readily be traced back to the anxieties felt by Americans toward non-assimilated Jewish culture in the decades after World War II, that is the Jewish mother as devouring mother. The stereotype popularized by comedians in the fifties and sixties had three faces. First, her excesses knew no bounds. She thus suffocated her family, but especially her children, with food and nurturance that made giving and receiving a poisoned act. As an excessive giver, she never wanted or received anything directly, but she was highly manipulative. Her name was synonymous with guilt, her second attribute. Her demands were impossible to meet because she wanted what usually seemed impossible—total loyalty. Finally, she was often portrayed as naïve, stupid, or hopelessly out of touch with the world of her children. (Prell 145)

Forty years after this particular fabrication of the Jewish woman, as the devouring mother, the myth still lingers, yet its function serves a new purpose. Tom’s mother never speaks of her religious or ethnic affiliation, and only the most subtle hints (she asks Tom and Julia if they want Bosco, her son is Jewish, etc.) would lead the viewer to believe she is actually Jewish. The stereotype of the devouring mother moves beyond its strictly Jewish implications into a larger, ethnically anonymous realm of male-female
relations. This stereotype, cultivated in the anxieties of assimilation, has become a subtle answer to the feminist political movement of the last thirty years.

A similar dynamic is evident in *Punch-Drunk Love*, though not ethnically coded: Barry’s seven sisters harass him throughout the film. Like that with Tom’s mother, the interaction between Barry and his sisters is a constant source of humor. Comedy is achieved through the stark contrast between Barry’s shy, nervous personality and the overbearing, short-tempered personality shared by all the sisters. The sisters are introduced through a bombardment of phone calls made to Barry at work. One after another, their abrasive language and verbal taunting make clear where Barry’s gets his previously unexplained neurosis. The sisters, especially Elizabeth (Mary Lynn Rajskub), are constantly demanding that Barry stop acting “so weird.” Like the devouring mother, they are “hopelessly out of touch” with the world of their brother and unaware of the role their own actions play in producing such behavior. Elizabeth’s concern for her brother’s social well-being is an obvious mask to gratify her own selfish demands, leaving little of her character to positively identify with. The constant teasing is also cause for a series of strange violent outbursts by Barry. These violent fits are so uncharacteristic and spontaneous that they do not, at first, appear to fit the focus of the narrative, let alone Barry’s otherwise meek personality.

Instead of representing the positive possibilities of a heterosexual man in touch with his feminine side, the narratives make it into a farce, a desperate tribulation, and ultimately a conflict that must be faced and overcome if there is to be proper character resolution. Tom and Barry suffer the consequences of being sexed male, raised solely by females in an extremely effeminate environment, and then expected to perform as
men under the pressures of a patriarchally dominated society. In short, they are victims, and women in their lives are to blame.

The Dangerous Sexual Relationship

Narrative conflict is conjured through Tom's and Barry's experience with the overly sexual woman. One of the more vexing areas of social assimilation that both characters confront is the assertion of sexuality. Both men are abnormally sensitive and emotionally driven, and those emotions spill over into their sexual relations with women. Unlike the traditional masculine approach to sex, which is emotionally aloof and often driven by aggressive physical gratification, Tom and Barry approach their sexual interactions first with the desire for emotional interaction, and the physical expression of sex is secondary. Their sexuality is represented as naïve and undeveloped and therefore leaves them vulnerable to the (sexually autonomous) female figure. Though it would be difficult to reduce the women to the role of modern-day vamp, since their roles are more complicated than that, their sexuality is the undeniably corrupting factor for the film.

Tom becomes involved with the older, more sexually experienced Ruth Abernathy (Barbara Hershey) when he fails to correct her assumption that he is the childhood friend of her recently deceased son. His inability to correct the mistake results from his empathy to her grievous emotional state. Tom is overcome with emotion: as he later relates the story to his friends Brad (Michael Rapport) and Scott (Michael Vartan) he explains, “What was I supposed to do, there was crying involved, how am I supposed to respond to that?” His sensitivity proves to be his largest
weakness rather than a positive attribute, driving him deeper into the dilemma with Ruth. His more masculine male friends laugh as he explains his peculiar position.

Within this world of suffering, there are also more subtle unconscious intentions behind their sexual relationship. It functions as a doppelganger for their roles as mother and son. The film draws many similarities between Tom and Ruth’s deceased son, Bill Abernathy. Besides the fact that both are uncertain about their futures and still live with their mothers, their individual lifestyles are similar. They share a strong connection with their adolescence. Tom still retains many of the things indicative of his childhood: his room still has bunk beds and is full of toys and pop star posters. He drinks Bosco through a looped straw; he keeps his old yearbooks around, and so on. Bill Abernathy has a baseball card collection and an affinity for the Mets. Still sitting on his computer desk is a half-eaten sandwich and a glass of chocolate milk. At one point, Tom even attempts suicide in precisely the same fashion as Bill. As Tom is vexed by the parallels between his own life and the deceased, he becomes increasingly desperate in his relationship with Mrs. Abernathy.

At the same time, Mrs. Abernathy functions as a doppelganger to Tom’s own mother. She was obsessively close to her son, another reason her loss is easily identified with by Tom, which also explains why she is so intent on reaching out to Tom through her grieving. He reminds her of her own son.

Through her relationship with Tom, Mrs. Abernathy is able to physically express her grief, desperation, loneliness, and fear of death. He is attracted to her because she fills the role of substitute for his mother. Their sexual relationship finally allows him to turn the tables on his role as the submissive, dominated son. Through sex he is able “to
conquer the mother” and comes one step closer to securing a more masculine identity.

Instead of Tom being held responsible for taking advantage of Mrs. Abernathy, exploiting her grief for sex, his own personal sufferings justify his actions. The narrative shows that sex is necessary for both parties to overcome personal life obstacles. This is why when Tom is finally forced to reconcile and come clean about the truth of his identity to Mrs. Abernathy, he is immune from being made into a villain.

When Mrs. Abernathy confronts Tom, creating a scene in front of his love interest Julie (Gwyneth Paltrow), and her parents at a restaurant, she hurls accusations at him, “This is the way you say good-bye? It was just for the sex wasn’t it? What’s with this lousy poem? Is this supposed to mean something to me? Sex, sex, sex! You’re a horrible young man!” None of these accusations can be accredited to any intentional maliciousness on Tom’s part. As the narrative has made clear, it was never “just for the sex.” Tom was just as emotionally invested in the relationship as Ruth was, for Ruth was responsible for initiating the relationship. Furthermore, the love poem was not Tom’s fault either; such an insincere gesture could never honestly come from a person as sensitive as Tom. Out of inexperience, he was simply following the best advice of his incompetent friend.

The scene, in fact, does more to discredit Ruth, turning her into a negative figure. She shouts accusations that are, given the viewer’s prior knowledge of narrative events, completely meritless. Her outlandish behavior appears desperate and unstable. Her rash actions effectively destroy the possibility of a relationship between Tom and Julie. Her neediness throughout much of the film has been represented in comedic terms. So when she comes knocking on Tom’s front door and chases him down the street as he
evades the confrontation, we do not sympathize with an emotionally distressed and rightfully confused woman, but instead an obsessive, aggressive mental case that threatens to railroad Tom’s progress toward a normal, healthy relationship with Julie.

The situation is resolved when Tom explains to Ruth his own deep-seated fear about being forgotten and demonstrates his sincerity by bringing her the “real” Tom Thompson. Ruth is finally sympathetic to Tom’s position in her final words to him; “It’s just so hard to let him go. I guess I just needed someone.” To which Tom replies, “I needed someone, too.” With these parting words, Mrs. Abernathy acknowledges Tom’s mutual suffering to be equal to hers and their relationship, which by the logic of the narrative, is resolved. He is a victim of circumstance like Ruth; furthermore, he is the victim because he is a man, automatically assumed to be a willing manipulator simply for the purposes of sex.

Though forged along very different lines, Barry Egan suffers a similar fate in *Punch-Drunk Love*. Unlike the more complex sexual dynamics involved in Tom and Ruth’s relationship, Barry’s relationship with a phone sex operator (Ashley Clark) is straightforward. Through his attempt to simulate a sexual relationship with a woman, he becomes the outright victim of extortion. Up to this point Barry, has been depicted as an insecure, misunderstood, and lonely individual. He is completely void of sexuality, making him a docile figure, easy to empathize with. Barry’s intentions with the phone sex operator are not initially sexual. Though he emits subtle hints of sexuality throughout the phone call, he is simply starved for an emotional connection and wants to express himself to someone who will listen.
Georgia, the phone sex operator, is by definition portrayed as sexually aggressive and opportunistic as she immediately asks for credit card information. She is slow in motivating Barry to masturbate, as he is more intent on carrying on his conversation with her. At one point Georgia asks Barry if he has an erection to which he replies, “I don’t know what it’s doing down there.” This child-like statement is indicative of Barry’s awkward understanding of his own bodily function. Like Tom, Barry maintains adolescent qualities that inform his emasculated persona. Throughout the conversation, Barry speaks his inexperience and inhibition. Georgia asks Barry a second time if he’s “strokin’ it yet,” to which he answers, “No.” She then inquires, “Well, do you ever?” To which he replies, “Sometimes, when I’m lonely.” His reply exemplifies the connection he locates between sex and his emotional state.

In subsequent scenes, Georgia attempts to extort money from him, first by threatening to tell his fictionalized girlfriend, and then by trying to use his information to take money out of his account. Finally, Georgia resorts to employing three brothers to extort the money from Barry physically. The job is orchestrated by Dean Trumbell (Philip Seymour Hoffman), and the brothers terrorize Barry throughout the film. As in The Pallbearer, Barry’s sexual endeavor sets into motion a chain of events that constitute the major narrative conflict in the film. However, unlike Tom, Barry’s problems are not compounded by any dishonest actions of his own. Barry is a victim in the truest sense. His only crime is a healthy curiosity about his own sexuality and the desire for companionship. Barry suffers betrayal at the hands of those he confides in. The sex hotline scam is the apex of wrongs visited upon the last person who deserves it. So it is easy to find humor in the comment the brothers make to Barry after taking his money,
“Now this is what you get for being a pervert,” since it is clear that perverse behavior is far from Barry’s intentions.

There is a lesson to be learned from Tom’s and Barry’s sexual escapades. The sensitive, emotional, emasculated new men that Tom and Barry represent cannot profit from these kinds of sexual relationships. It is apparent that the sexuality expressed between Ruth and Tom or Barry and the phone sex operator is a complete mismatch and as such is sure to end in disaster. Thus, such powerfully sexualized women garner manipulative situations to take advantage of unsuspecting, naïve men like Tom and Barry. They are entering a world of sexuality that has been traditionally defined by a hypermasculine mentality. The only hope for an answer to the identity crisis Tom and Barry face is proper romantic coupling with a nurturing woman who honestly identifies with their emasculated positions. Luckily for Tom and Barry both films present such model females.

Finding the Answers in Miss Right

Apart from the rather deplorable representations of the men and women given attention thus far, Lena (Emily Watson) and Julie Demarco (Gwyneth Paltrow) are a breath of fresh air. Both women function in their respective films as the “correct” romantic match for the hapless male leads. They are autonomous, socially adjusted women. Lena appears the most mentally stable person in Punch-Drunk Love. She is a financially independent career woman whose business takes her around the world. Julie Demarco’s situation in many ways mirrors Tom’s. She is a recent college graduate, who has moved back home under the wing of her parents with no clear career objectives
and her future in question. However, unlike Tom, she is willing to confront her confusion and actively take steps to secure her future. She plans to move away on her own to explore her possibilities and prove to herself that she is independent. She remains steadfast in her decision throughout the film, though she is pressured to change her mind. Throughout the film, she proves to be stronger and more mature than Tom. So, if these women are the models of independence and maturity that they are represented to be, why are they so willing to take a step back and become involved with someone so socially inept? The logic the narrative provides as an answer to this question is unsatisfactory.

Though Lena and Julie occupy emotionally autonomous roles in comparison to Tom and Barry, they are relegated to support roles for these less than adequate men. Their own needs and desires are marginalized as they use their rational wisdom and emotional resolve to support and strengthen their romantic others’ desperate, emasculated position. This is undeniably apparent in *Punch-Drunk Love*.

From the first moment Lena appears in the film, she works hard at getting Barry’s attention. She comes out of nowhere to ask Barry to take care of her car. Later, we learn this was done purposely just to meet Barry. Her only explanation for her interest in Barry is that she saw him in a photo with all his sisters, and he looked like someone she wanted to meet. When Barry asks if she has any siblings, she explains, “No, I’m the exact opposite.” There is a sense of loneliness that comes out of their respective familial experiences that draws them together. It is this invocation of loneliness that forms the empathetic driving force behind the pathos of their romantic relationship.

Lena’s appearance in the film also coincides with the mysterious appearance of
the symbolic harmonium outside of Barry’s warehouse. Lena mentions its presence to Barry in their initial meeting, and throughout the film, she makes reference to it. In the car ride home from their first date she educates Barry on its proper name and inspires him to play it:

Lena: Did you steal it from the street?
Barry: Why is it yours?
Lena: No, it's yours...Are you learning to play?
Barry: Well I wouldn't put on any concerts just yet.

During the course of the conversation, its relevance as a symbol for Barry’s adjustment in his social/romantic role as a man becomes clear. Barry’s masculinity could just as easily substitute for the subject of conversation. Lena’s knowledge of the instrument and her guiding presence over Barry’s interest in it endows her with a transcendent quality that overrides the need for any rational explanation for her romantic involvement with Barry. In other words, if the plausible explanation why Lena should be a match for Barry is frail at best, it is just as well that she is “sent from heaven” to straighten out Barry’s social qualms and give him reason to exercise the inherent masculine qualities that he has repressed most of his life.

Once Lena is in Barry’s life, his odd quirks begin taking on relevant meaning, his actions fall into purposeful place, and his emasculated identity takes on more “properly” masculine qualities. Barry’s once random scam to get frequent flyer miles suddenly makes sense as Lena explains that her job forces her to travel all over the world. Barry adamantly pledges at the end of the film that “in six to eight weeks I can redeem my frequent flyer miles, and I can fly with you wherever you have to go, so we never have to be apart again.”
The most important breakthrough made by Barry over the course of his romantic involvement is the proper utilization of his violent tantrums. Anytime he is so much as reminded of being made fun of by his sisters, he breaks into a physical rampage. The first outburst occurs at his sister’s birthday party. The moment Barry steps into the house, his sisters are taunting him with questions of his sexuality. The audio space in the scene is polluted with the mindless, incoherent jabbering of his family. The chaos is silenced as Barry kicks in three panels of a glass wall, enraging his sisters. The second tantrum is sparked during Barry’s initial date with Lena when she re-tells a story from Barry’s youth when his sisters made him so angry he threw a hammer through a sliding glass door. He releases his rage by tearing the restaurant’s restroom apart and is subsequently thrown out.

Barry’s sporadic acts of violence are attributed to an unhealthy expression of animosity towards his sisters, but once Lena becomes the object of his affection, his rage takes on a controlled purpose. He finally stands up to his sister Elizabeth demanding that she give him Lena’s information, telling her once and for all that she “has no right to treat [him] this way.”

The most poignant redirection of his violence occurs when the brothers attack for the second time, injuring Lena. Barry avenges the attack with unexpected confidence, single-handedly beating the gang of extortionists. The scene equates to a moment of transformation. Barry ascends, through his actions, from the emasculated victim to the chivalrous masculine hero. The masculine qualities Barry exhibits are clearly innate qualities that have finally been derepressed through his new role in a heterosexual love relationship. Barry suddenly takes on traditional masculine responsibilities, prioritizing
his manly duty as protector over supporting Lena in the hospital.

The final confrontation between the owner of D&D Mattress Man, Dean Trumbell, and Barry subtly references the “final showdown” sequence of the classic Western. Barry appears silhouetted before Dean, and clutches a broken phone receiver like a gun. Instead of a physical altercation, the apex of the conflict is reduced to verbal sparing, quickly put down by Barry’s powerful ultimatum, “I didn’t do anything. I’m a nice man. I mind my own business, so you tell me that’s that before I beat the hell from you…. I have so much strength in me you have no idea. I have a love in my life; it makes me stronger than anything you could imagine. I’d say that’s that, Mattress Man…..” The narrative is resolved as Barry is finally secure in his male identity, no longer plagued by the unassertiveness and cowardice that comes with effeminacy. In the end, he successfully retains his sensitivity and neurotic behavior, both endearing attributes so long as they are offset by his physical performativity and loyalty as a man.

After he returns from Utah he carries the harmonium to Lena’s apartment in a gesture that affirms the symbolic relevance of the instrument in correlation with his relationship with Lena. In this final scene, Lena, the once independent yet incomplete woman, illustrates that she has finally found her proper place as the supporting partner to Barry as she walks up behind him and lovingly puts her arms around his neck and whispers the words, “here we go.” Barry Egan’s transformation through coupling proves that success as a new man is indeed a product of hegemonic negotiated gender performativity.

In The Pallbearer, Tom is obsessed with the unsuspecting Julie. Julie Demarco was the object of Tom’s affection in high school and occupied a higher social ranking
than he did. As a result, her perceived social status and his past infatuation create an unequal playing field between Tom and Julie. Tom from the very beginning is in a position of powerlessness with Julie. Upon first seeing her at a party, he forces Scott to trade shirts with him to appear more mature. This is the second time in the film that Tom asks to wear Scott’s clothes in an effort to distance himself from his immature, adolescent identity and appear more adult. There is a similar motif in *Punch-Drunk Love* as Barry Egan dons a blue suit for no real reason other than to appear more business-like (i.e. masculine). The use of clothing in both films is ironic, as it invokes the desire by both men to aspire to a particular image of masculinity that neither is capable of. However, Tom’s concern for clothing becomes moot during his first conversation with Julie, when it becomes clear that she does not remember him at all. Confusion of identity (a recurring motif throughout the film) in this instance is instrumental in building empathy with Tom’s character.

Julie’s show of emotion at the funeral provides a common ground for their relationship. Though she does not know the deceased, the mere sight of the dead body moves her to tears. Like Tom, she is easily swayed by her emotions. This mutual emotionality makes them, by the film’s logic, right for each other. Just as Lena is drawn to Barry through their shared loneliness, Tom is drawn to Julie’s sensitivity.

However, Tom’s sensitivity impedes his honesty, hurting those around him (namely Ruth Abernathy) and stunting his social growth into adulthood. Julie’s relationship with Tom is implicit in making him a functionally mature man. In one of their first in-depth conversations, Tom reminds Julie of her sensitivity in high school, yielding her musical ability in competition so as not to hurt the feelings of her classmates. Tom
positively identifies with her actions since she was “just worried about their feelings.” But Julie counters Tom saying, “The thing is, if you spend your life worrying about how other people feel, you sort of lose track of how you feel.” This is the ultimate wisdom that Julie passes on to Tom. He is too soft. He lacks emotional discipline. Julie provides that direction for Tom’s maturity.

After the humiliating incident in the restaurant, Tom reconciles with Julie at Brad’s wedding by supplying her means of transportation to go on her trip. This gesture is Tom’s acknowledgment of the important meaning behind Julie’s trip. His act of selflessness symbolizes his personal growth, illustrating that he has learned emotional maturity by Julie’s example. Yet Julie’s willingness to concede her justified disdain for Tom’s actions simply on the merit of Tom’s gesture ironically compromises Julie’s autonomy. The film’s oversimplification of a rather complicated relationship issue makes clear Julie’s presence in the film is only relevant as a support system for Tom’s newly emerging masculine identity. Tom never has to justify his actions to Julie. The narrative is not so much concerned with their relationship as with how their relationship benefits Tom’s personal growth as a man. All is forgiven as what is really important is that Tom has proven his maturity through sacrifice.

The film ends with Julie gone and Tom in the midst of moving out of his mother’s house. Though the most important event in the narrative was the successful coupling of Tom and Julie, the films ends with Tom on his own again. In the last scene of the film, Tom has packed all of his belongings into a moving van and stands there, deep in thought, reluctant to shut the door. He is still unsure of his future; his insecurities are unresolved. The film ends on a note of uncertainty, atypical for a contemporary film of
this style, yet reminiscent of the conventional ending of the classical Hollywood melodrama where the lead, usually a woman, dramatically exits the film while the emotion lingers and the suffering goes unrelinquished. Such films are often read with a feminist subtext, as representing the plight of woman condemned by the patriarchal structures of society. However, the gender issues are inverted. The man suffers. The end of *The Pallbearer* leaves masculinity up to question. Such an open ending suggests that this heterosexual male must go on suffering endlessly as a result of destabilized patriarchal social structures that place women in positions of relative autonomy while marginalizing the desires of men.

In the end, the male characters in both films suffer because they have been forgotten, neglected, and completely out-voiced by the female Other. As Tom so eloquently says to Ruth about his memory of her son, “…the fact that I could forget him like that, that his life could leave so little an impression on me...that really scared me. It terrified me, because I wouldn’t want to be forgotten.” This statement ties together Tom’s entire dilemma and sums up the fears shared by Tom and Barry in both films.

The fear that Tom espouses is symptomatic of forty years of social change. It is out of the Civil Rights battles of the sixties and seventies that white men have come to be marked like the minority groups that they have for so long held an inherent social advantage over. Films such as *The Pallbearer* and *Punch-Drunk Love* ironically tell the straight story of a white male who has suffered from his apparent social invisibility since it is exactly this invisibility that has historically given white men a powerful edge in American society.

Tom and Barry represent a new generation of white men who suffer along with
other minority groups at the hands of contemporary identity politics. But this suffering is not comparable as it is divorced from the structural inequities that affect women and minorities. In *The Pallbearer* and *Punch-Drunk Love*, “the strategies through which white men represent themselves as disempowered depend on a systematic erasure of ways in which white and male power are socially and institutionally embedded” (Robinson 21). Progressive male attributes, such as sensitivity and the ability to deal with emotional wounds become effective tools in appropriating patriarchal power through empathy.
EPILOGUE

The introduction of this work has described many of the historical factors that constitute masculinity. It outlines many of the basic assumptions that have informed gender studies over the decades. Most important in the opening discussion is that gender, as an ideological force, results from the social relationships organized around the two sexes and sexuality. A social relationship of any sort is synonymous with politics. Thus, gender is always political. Gender politics, like national politics, is subject to similar hegemonic constraints determined by larger cultural, technological, and economic forces. The analysis has delved into the nuances of how such constraints affect a trend in a handful of male-centered narratives over the last ten years. This work accounts for a specific facet of gender politics (white masculinity) within the historical context of the last decade. Yet within this narrowly defined analytic space lies a correlation to a larger social context. In an effort to make the correlation more apparent three final questions must be posed: 1) what larger cultural value do the six films under analysis carry? 2) What are the limits inherent in the specificity of the analysis? 3) Is it possible to have a positively progressive male-centered narrative?

Since it is clear that any film text is a product of the cultural industry and therefore carries some amount of cultural value, the first question may be more accurately framed in terms of the extent of cultural value the films carry. The six films analyzed are synonymous with American popular culture. To be sure filmmakers such as P.T. Anderson, Wes Anderson, and Quentin Tarantino have not only set a standard in contemporary mainstream filmmaking, but their texts have also defined the cutting edge of popular culture. These films have not only had a great amount of distribution
and box office success in the United States, but in many cases gained a cult following solidifying their longevity and status with younger generations over the last decade. Their resonance today is unquestionable. Beyond the narratives themselves, the star personas of actors like Harvey Keitel, Adam Sandler, and David Schwimmer communicate an immeasurable amount of cultural meaning through intertextual representation. The definitive impact that these texts have had on contemporary American culture attests to the fact that the male gender issues represented in the films are overwhelmingly identified with by large portions of the viewing public. The economic clout held by the aforementioned filmmakers and film stars makes it equally apparent that these particular representations indicate the types of gender performativity aspired to and desired by the spectator. Thus the immense cultural value these texts hold for the larger context of contemporary American society make them very important to the subject of critical analysis.

The specificity of the project necessarily limits the gender and race issues under analysis. Masculinity is as diverse as the social realities that inscribe it. There are many masculinities that make up the American popular culture landscape. The research undertaken over the last three chapters provides insight on an exclusive trend in the cinematic representation of white male gender that in turn reveals the effects of certain cultural ideologies. The research is specific in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. The texts also belong to mainstream American cinema, and as a result, the analysis leaves out more marginalized filmmaking as well as representational trends in other media such as television. Furthermore, the genre codes employed by the films (comedy, melodrama, crime film) determine the types of masculinities represented as
well as their market audience. Thus the project falls short of researching other genres with comparable economic sustenance, such as the action adventure films that traditionally stand out as masculine.

The historical specificity of the project is also important in providing clear access to social issues affecting the texts. However, organizing it, at some level, is problematic. The chapters are arranged in a temporally logical order, not in terms of the specific year that the films were made but in terms of a general change in gender values over the decade. I place great stress on the term “general” in this situation. As a result the order falls into a somewhat “neat” progression in terms of a generational ideology shift. The order of the chapters moves from analysis of the angry white man to the suffering, or pathetic, white man. These chapters are organized to provide a simple and clear way of viewing a particular evolution of social thought with regard to gender issues.

To a limited degree these films exemplify dominant social issues for the years they were produced; however in reality, the evolution of particular social issues hardly fit neatly into so specific a time frame. Thus, while a film like *Reservoir Dogs* may exemplify the social concerns pressing conservative white men in the early nineties, such concerns cannot with any accuracy be solely relegated to the early nineties. Issues in the nineties came out of the liberation sixties and seventies and more importantly continue to show up in mainstream film representation today. Likewise, the emasculated new man is not simply a child of the millennium but also has roots in the sixties and seventies and can be found in a wide variety of media representations throughout the seventies, eighties and nineties. So for all the attempts to temporally
categorize the social issues dealt with from text to text, such categorization is a limiting factor that at best provides clarity to the generational shifts in white male gender performativity and at worst reduces the same performative shifts to a specific time period. By approaching a particular facet of gender and race issues, other equally valid issues are excluded. However, such limits are ultimately necessary, for attempting to speak on many issues at once can lead to further generalization. Thus working within a micro-historical framework provides potential for greater accuracy in understanding the cultural reasoning behind particular trends.

The final question of whether it is possible to have a progressive text can be certainly answered in the affirmative. There are many examples of contemporary American films that progressively represent the identity politics of whiteness and masculinity though few ever make box office success or enjoy the high-profile status of the films analyzed in this work. Most progressive films remain at the margins of popular culture mostly for the reasons of economic logic that were just touched upon. The closer any of these films comes to gaining successful financial status, the closer it comes to consent with capitalist ideology.

Ultimately the question of whether or not white masculinity can be truly represented in a progressive manner is asking whether or not the power structures that grant masculinity and whiteness positions of power can be changed? This question can again be answered in the affirmative. Identity politics, like all other politics, is a constant struggle over meaning. The struggle can just as easily be won or lost. For this reason, critical work in the field of cultural studies and media representation are of paramount importance. Such work is indispensable as it constantly marks the weak point and
fissures in the larger spectrum of cultural and ideology. The hegemonic negotiation of identity politics demands ever-present critical attention as it functions to fill the meaningful gaps of subversive potential.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


