

The Male Form in *Dirty Dancing*

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There is an unwritten law in Hollywood, one argument goes, that the male body cannot be the object of the erotic gaze. Of course this is all too simplistic (or simply plain rubbish?). Just consider the many pin-ups that Hollywood has produced starting with Rudolph Valentino to Clark Gable, James Dean, Robert Redford and, last but in my eyes certainly not least, Patrick Swayze. It is true that Hollywood has produced the pin-up as part of its marketing strategies to sell its blockbusters to as broad an audience as possible. However, within the films themselves, the male star is never contemplated as erotic object.

The argument is part of a wider debate around the body in cinema which happens to be one of the most

image of the performing woman disrupts the narrative flow and man can only sit and watch, man is shown to determine the outcome of the story through his punishing actions.

There are, however, in other films, images of men that disrupt the narrative and are clearly constructed to halt the story development. As Steve Neale (1983) suggests, these images do not display the male body as an erotic object but as a body that inspires awe or fear in those who look. This is the case in the 1970s films starring Clint Eastwood where other men look with fear at his hard cop body, but this is similarly applicable to the *Terminator* or *Rambo* series. These films are also deeply ingrained in the Reaganism of



pervasive ones in film studies. It all started with one article in the now Glasgow-based film journal *Screen*. 'Visual Pleasure in the Narrative Cinema' by scholar and filmmaker Laura Mulvey. She argues that in Hollywood cinema the gaze of the spectator is (male) gendered and its object is the female body. Written in 1975, at the height of the second feminist wave and greatly indebted to Freudian psychoanalysis, the article describes how the female body represents the threat of castration because of its obvious lack of a penis. The male spectator can escape by looking at the female star either voyeuristically, and thereby containing the female body, or fetishistically and thereby substituting part of her whole body as phallus. Both gazes essentially render the female star into an object, a 'thing', as Andrea Dworking would say, which strips the woman of her status as an active agent who acts rather than reacts or simply behaves according to stimulus.

By implication, the male star appears as the active agent who drives the narrative onwards, often by punishing the woman. A perfect example is the 1946 Hollywood film *Gilda* (Charles Vidor) where we follow the male narrator and protagonist Johnny (Glenn Ford) as he re-encounters his old girlfriend Gilda (Rita Hayworth) in a casino. Throughout the film, the spectator assumes his gaze, which is emphasised by lengthy voice-overs spoken by Ford. The narrative itself revolves around two main motifs: Gilda performing a song while Johnny looks at her and Johnny punishing Gilda for flirting with him. While the

their period: born out of a sense of crisis and as part of the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s, masculinities are here portrayed as reasserting the physical power against the feminist-inspired weakened male body of the Carter years. The extremely muscular bodies of Rambo and the Terminator who are continuously displayed as spectacle are shown to be the only ones effective against the threats against America or even the whole human race (*Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985) and *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991).

Looking at the male form in *Dirty Dancing*

It is interesting then that Johnny Castle's (Patrick Swayze's) body in *Dirty Dancing* (1987, Emile Ardolino) is also dwelled upon because of its muscularity. Obviously, Johnny/ Patrick also belongs to the *Hard Bodies* (Susan Jeffords, 1994) of the Reagan years, but *Dirty Dancing* is clearly not of the same cut as *Terminator* and *Rambo*; instead of high-explosive action scenes it offers dance scenes, and instead of male protagonists, a female protagonist leads us through the narrative. Indeed, in comparison to the two action series, *Dirty Dancing* is clearly a 'women's film', aimed at women, written and produced by women and consumed primarily by women.

One of the reasons why *Dirty Dancing* has been able to retain its appeal for me and other like-minded women is that it is one of the few films that portrays female sexuality as confident and assertive. Here,



woman gazes and is not the object of the gaze. Here a man is made the object of the gaze and we as spectators are invited to enjoy his body. The gaze of the woman and indeed that of the female spectator is voyeuristic and fetishist, but essentially different from the male gaze in other Hollywood films. It is introduced to us with a voice-over, indicating that the following coming-of-age story is the story of Baby (Jennifer Grey), a young woman who is on her way to a family holiday and to a less innocent future. As Baby says at the beginning: 'That was before President Kennedy was shot, before the Beatles came'. But inevitably, both Kennedy will be shot and the Beatles will change the way pop music is consumed in rich white houses in America.

Confident to the extent of cockiness, she ventures out into the world of Kellerman's, a hotel complex for rich white Americans and promptly encounters Johnny who will introduce her to dancing, the meaning of class difference and, ultimately, femininity. The first time, she sees Johnny, is when he and 'college boy' Robbie Gould (Max Cantor) have one of their less physically

not dependent on distance (in *Gilda*, Johnny sits miles away from the performing Gilda), but on closeness to the extent that it becomes a tactile experience. This is most apparent in the first love scene between Johnny and Baby. When Baby asks Johnny to dance with her, she circles him slowly, kissing his chest and shoulder, then touching his behind. The camera follows her movements in close-up, finally cutting to a close-up of his behind as she touches it. Both the establishment of a strong identification with Baby and the physical closeness of the camera to his body enhance the effect of feeling with her in the sense of experiencing the same tactility.

Fred Astaire vs. Patrick Swayze

Steve Cohan (1993), discussing Fred Astaire's late films, argues that Astaire's dance performances have the ability to halt narrative. Indeed, Astaire appears feminised in these performances. However, his star persona often overrides the feminisation so that spectators both in and outside the film look on in awe as the great Astaire delivers yet another stunning



aggressive encounters while Robbie sets the tables. Johnny here performs not only for the female gaze, but also and foremost for another man. Thus the scene shows two masculinities performing for each other while the third, female party only happens to be observing and ultimately retreats: we are shown how Baby slowly moves backwards away from her window position. Unobserved herself, Baby watches the scene, visibly intrigued by Johnny. Her look is clearly voyeuristic, but it lacks the power dynamics of the voyeuristic male gaze in Hollywood cinema. She does not look in order to contain Johnny, nor does her look imply admiration – she knows far too little about Johnny to feel such admiration. Rather, her gaze is that of curiosity that is gradually transformed into sexual attraction.

This attraction grows as her admiration for his dancing increases. What is important to note in the early dance scenes is that the film avoids close-ups of Johnny and mostly stays in long shot or even panoramic shot, thus avoiding fetishisation. Only when Baby joins him as a dance partner does the camera move into close-ups of his body. Most notable are shots of his bare chest and back as he dances, the muscles moving in rhythm of the music. Here, the unobstructed view onto the spectacle that is Swayze's body does not halt the narrative at all but is actually essential to its development through the dance lessons and growing sexual tension. Moreover, though there is no question that these images fetishise parts of his body, they are

performance. When Patrick Swayze played Johnny in *Dirty Dancing* he was nowhere near as well-known as Fred Astaire. Yet, his acting career similarly betrays a split between feminisation and assertive masculinity: Swayze's biggest hit to that point had been his leading role in the costume drama *North and South* (1985 and 1986) where he played a crippled Southern farmer and ex-soldier. His character was both feminised by his disability which left him considerably weakened and by his devotion to his wife whose ethnic background caused most of their marital problems. As actor for other TV films and series such as *Renegades* (1983) and *Comeback Kids* (1980), he further established himself as partially belonging to the feminine, domestic realm of television.

At the same time, however, Swayze also starred in the more typically 80s hard men action films such as *Youngblood* (Peter Markle, 1986), *Red Dawn* (John Milius, 1984) and *Uncommon Valour* (Ted Kotcheff, 1983) which basically re-narrates *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. Thus, Swayze's star persona encompassed both the realm of the feminine and the realm of the very macho 80s masculine. This is also included in *Dirty Dancing* itself: although Swayze is the object of the female erotic gaze, his muscular body also inspires awe and admiration in other men.

Johnny vs. Robbie

The continuing tension between Johnny and Robbie

are an important part of the construction of Johnny's masculinity as 'better'. Though Johnny is working-class (his alternative to dancing is to become a house painter and plasterer) and Robbie middle-class (whose main occupation is to study at Yale medical school), Johnny is continuously shown as more honest, more reliable and more trustworthy, in short: as a better man for women to be with. The film emphasises their difference through different means, one of which is their clothes. Robbie is mostly shown wearing either his waiter's uniform or his college jumper. The waiter's uniform is part of his masquerade, something that he puts on, but does not reflect his personality; his college jumper on the other hand is part of what he is, and perhaps more importantly, what he wants to be. Though not yet part of the rich class that he serves, he has all credentials to become one of them: he trains as a doctor and is therefore aligned to Baby's father who is also a doctor. Moreover, the jumper puts him into the category of intellectual which, as Susan Jeffords suggests, had come under acute criticism in the Reagan years. Intellectuals were portrayed as sexually liberated only to such an extent that men could have their fun while women had to look out for themselves; they were seen as having jumped onto the bandwagon of feminism by becoming weak and cultured, but thereby also losing their ability to protect America and by implication American women.

Johnny, on the other hand, is shown to wear a mixture of upper-class and working-class clothes. His work requires him to wear a tuxedo and often he keeps wearing the trousers while putting on a body-hugging T-shirt or sleeveless builder's top. He thus combines upper-class dandyism with working-class work attitude and therefore encompasses a safe mixture between upper-class culture and working-class dependence on the upper classes. His body similarly betrays this mixture: it is the trained, six-packed body of the fitness-crazed 80s upper-classes who is able to hide the muscles under a tuxedo and it is the bicep-packed body of a man used to manual work. Robbie on the other hand is weak as the fight scene between the two clearly shows. Johnny does all the punching and kicking and has to invite and give Robbie time for a punch as well. In one medium shot he points at his chin, waiting for Robbie to stagger back up to his feet and take aim which he nearly misses. Johnny is not only the better fighter, he is the only real fighter who needs to teach Robbie how to fight in order to give him a chance. Moreover, Johnny does not punch and kick him till he is unconscious – the more typical portrayal of working-class masculine violence in more recent media representation – but stops when he lies on the floor, saying: 'You're not worth it.' There is a sense of honour involved here that goes across the class boundaries but has been broken by Robbie and his sexual liberation which includes getting a woman pregnant and then leaving her. Robbie as the outcome of feminism and sexual liberation, therefore, is portrayed as harmful to women while Johnny, the pre-feminist, slightly naïve, uncultured but essentially good-hearted and protective masculinity, is a man women can rely on.

Dirty Dancing: Hurting No-One.

Dirty Dancing then is ultimately very much a product of its time. Though it presents us with a female spectator who is invited to gaze at and feel the body of its male star (note that Swayze's name is credited before Jennifer Grey's), it leaves enough space for a male spectator to look at Johnny as comparable to Rambo and the Terminator. Though less privileged and by far the most powerless of them, Johnny's is still also a body that can inspire awe despite and also because the obvious limits it encounters in this classed world it inhabits. After all, Johnny is a 'strong leading man' as Penny points out who is able to lead his group of fellow under-privileged employees and an upper-class woman to expression through dance. His teaching eventually brings her closer to her mother who insists that 'she got that from me'. Thus, Baby, the father's pet, learns to be less attached to the masculine realm of education and speech and more involved in the feminine realm of emotional expression through the body. Ultimately, she learns femininity with the help of a working-class man. Though this is problematic at best, it is also a strangely empowering message: women do not have to be like men in order to make a mark on the world but are allowed to rely on their femininity as well. However, in the end, it is still a man who leads the revolution, and if it is just on the dance floor.

Dirty Dancing, therefore, manages to be incredibly progressive for its time while at the same time being horrible conservative and Reaganist. This is perhaps its greatest strength as it manages to give space for women to imagine themselves as active agents of a narrative without alienating a male audience. And with its fast moving narrative pace, it leaves enough gaps that can be filled according to inclination. Though clearly a women's film, it can still appeal to men. Or as the nice chap in the video shop said to me when I asked him if he had liked the first *Dirty Dancing* film: 'No. – Well, of course I did. But I'm a guy. I'm not allowed to admit it.'

Works Cited

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