The Caravan Of Hate: The Cautionary Tale of Ben Wheatley's Sightseers and Alternative Spaces for Masculinity On-Screen

Finnemore, D

International Journal of Creative Multimedia

The Caravan Of Hate: The Cautionary Tale of Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers* and Alternative Spaces for Masculinity On-Screen

Daniel Finnemore
ad7568@coventry.ac.uk
Coventry University, United Kingdom
ORCID iD: 0009-0001-5806-8636
(Corresponding Author)

Abstract

Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers* is a brutally violent and darkly comic addition to British cult cinema, satirising British values, habits, and relationships with the humble caravan at the centre of its world. However, Wheatley's third feature warns against the harmful effects of not conforming to masculinity. Performance, recognition, and hegemonic masculinity enter this conversation. This paper critically analyses how *Sightseers* uses frame, sound, character, and narrative to condemn white, working-class toxic masculinity in a regional context. The true cautionary tale is in the numerous and savage manifestations of violence and hyper-masculinity. *Sightseers* is a cult film that shows the harmful effects of masculinity and societal demands, but it neglects alternative masculinities, which may help us comprehend gender construction and portrayal. This research relies on scholars like Jack Halberstam who discuss alternative and subordinate masculinities. How do these affect viewers? This dissertation concludes by considering how current cult cinema may offer alternatives to "heroic" masculinity or "real thing" as Halberstam calls it. Whether it's Everything Everywhere All at Once's "gentle masculinity" or other constructions, different spaces will hopefully continue to reshape our understanding of masculinity and the positive role these on-screen representations can play in this ideology evolution.

Introduction

"I am the best!"

This emphatic declaration of victory from the lead male role in Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers* represents a brief moment of deluded defiance, symbolic of how important the film is regarding hyper-masculinity as a warning rather than a glory: caution rather than confidence. Without seeing the film, audiences might be curious as to what it is that Chris is the best at, and instead of heroic displays of courage and strength, we come to learn that his assertion of masculine success comes in the form of extreme violence, anger, and winning a race to Dingley Dell. This paper will look critically at *Sightseers* as an example of cinema that uses hyper-masculinity not to glorify or reinforce outdated and unrealistic notions of masculinity but instead questions and criticises the role of gender expectations by portraying the destructive consequences of not meeting certain standards laid out by hegemonic masculinity at a particular time. Furthermore, this critical examination will also consider contemporary on-screen spaces within the cult film arena where alternative, often more positive, constructions of masculinity exist.

It may be an extreme stance, but it has been argued that 'hyper-masculinity and its attendant qualities prime men and women as agents for mass destruction on a global scale, possibly leading to the extinction of the human race (Benson, 2014). It certainly has dire consequences for all concerned within the world of *Sightseers*. The idea that 'male angst' on screen is 'intricately and intimately connected to performances of male social roles in everyday life" (Peberdy, 2011) reinforces an important discourse regarding the value we place in on-screen representations and the important things we can learn from reading cinema in this way.

Background Research

Sightseers is a comedy for all intents and purposes. The message it puts forward regarding modern masculinity, however, and how catastrophic things can get, is in fact very serious business indeed. Before I look closely at how the film, and in particular Chris, comes to represent something so important to the dialogue around progressive gender representation in film, it is important to contextualise and explicate the concept of hyper-masculinity. If 'hyper-masculinity is a gender-based ideology of exaggerated beliefs about what it is to be a man' (Vokey, Tefft & Tysiaczny, 2013) then what are these beliefs and how can they be so problematic? Mosher and

Sirkin's 'hyper-masculinity inventory" (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984) outlines toughness, violence, and 'calloused attitudes towards women and sex' as definitive and identifiable aspects of hyper-masculinity. This problematic perception of the concept is solidified by Donaldson, who suggests that some of the motivations for the damaging assertions made through hyper-masculinity come from the 'anxiety-provoking," "brutal, "violent," and "socially sustained" (Donaldson, 1993) expectations established by hegemonic masculinity. These expectations can result in a 'culture of men who feel powerless and anxious about their place in society (Cox & Decarvalho, 2016). It is precisely this spiralling out of control that is painted so vividly on screen in Sightseers, and the result is so much more than the glorification and assertion of masculine traits and the "visibility of the male body" (Kac-Vergne, 2012) that comes to represent on screen hyper-masculinity in many cases.

"Excesses of hyper-masculinity have often been and can assuredly be interpreted as a strident reassertion of male power and dominance" (ibid., 4). This 'strident reassertion' confirms the traditional role that hyper-masculinity on screen has had in the past. That of a positive and resolute call to arms that screams about how traditional male roles are here to stay, within cinema, that is. Some of the most famous examples of this are the action heroes of the 1980s and 1990s, where exaggerating the body, power, strength, and victory for mass audiences around the world placed the traditional roles of masculinity once again front and centre, and only the price of a ticket was needed to bask in this return to glory. The fact that the 'hyper-masculinity and hard body of Sylvester Stallone came to represent a national mastery over foreign and domestic enemies" (Tomasulo, 1995) is a clear example of how exaggerated and distorted representations have in some instances been celebrated, leading to victorious outcomes for the characters on screen and at the same time reviling the audience in the dark. To restrict this glorification of hyper-masculinity to the action films of one or two decades is limited, but i cannot be denied that many of the films from this era do exploit hyper-masculinity to promote and assert more traditional ideologies, which is the total opposite of Sightseer's relationship with the concept and the notion of masculinity in general. A more traditional critical analysis of the concept can tend to focus on spectacle and the framing of the body. Nixon has highlighted how cinematography and film language have in some sense 'established codes of aggression and power associated with masculine display" (Nixon, 1997). How Chris, Tina, and violence are framed reinforces the notion that the aspirational hyper-masculinity that is present in the action

films of Hollywood has been traded for a much more cautionary and repulsive version in Sightseers, therefore supporting the idea that film can and should be used to question outdated gender expectations as opposed to upholding them. Kirkham and Thumim's (1993) perspective on the important 'sites' that anchor discussion and debate around masculinity and film is also essential to an analysis of Sightseers. They have suggested that 'the body, action, the external world, and the internal world" are all areas of focus regarding the representation and reflection of masculinity on screen. All of these 'sites' and how they relate to Chris help lay out a useful framework for an in-depth, critical, holistic look at how his character can be seen as a damning indictment of not only toxic masculinity but the societal conditions that cultivate and perpetuate problematic ideologies and expectations regarding gender identities.

It is interesting to note that in considering the body, Kirkham and Thurmim highlight not only how "the surface," or the skin, can be a canvas for "suffering, endurance, and pleasure," but also how 'the complex codes of male dress and display' (ibid.) are vital to the performative, aesthetic meaning found in on-screen signs. The latter has much relevance, and examining Chris' costume reveals how 'male dress and display' in this context does allow for discussion about how issues such as status, acceptance, and power hierarchies can lurk in the fibres of beige fleeces and khaki trousers. In the opening scenes, particularly, Chris' clothing is the personification of plain, unassuming, and dull. From the fleece to the hiking boots, he shows no signs of someone who stands out apart from "being ginger" and even confesses to feelings of inferiority as a child and wanting to be "invisible." Even though there is no 'surface' to study, the 'complex codes' of costume are still relevant in *Sightseers* and, when considered in context with Chris' actions and relationship to his external and internal worlds, are deeply relevant to the bigger picture and both the cause and consequences of his association with masculine expectations.

The important relationship between the film and hyper-masculinity is not the dangers of distorted glorification but its capacity to warn and enlighten audiences about the destructive consequences of gender, cultural, and sociological expectations. Ben Wheatley's third film is a prime example of an on-screen narrative that highlights the relationship between cinema and socio-cultural discourses affecting men (Peberdy, 2011). The fact that it is a comedy and marketed as such only reinforces its ability to appeal to a wider audience and deliver its salient and timely messages.

Sightseers does make you laugh. Out loud at times. It also shocks you into submission. What it does most successfully, however, is force onto the screen and into your consciousness 'moments n which the idea of male instability is made particularly prominent' (ibid., 54). We are lured in by the cringe-inducing awkwardness of Tina and Chris' relationship, which is only intensified by their road trip and the means by which they travel, but when you really look closely at what is actually going on, even this has some significance. Peberdy (2011) also discusses the 'wildman' notion in terms of physical appearance but also in actions and rituals. She discusses how important the dominance of 'the frontier' is to an American assertion of masculinity. A similar obsession is omnipresent in Sightseers. She goes on to highlight how the "feminising effects of mass culture" (ibid., 97) have caused a cultural and sociological response that asserts traditional masculine ideologies, one of which is the right to roam and assert one's dominance through freedom. For Chris, there was a frontier, which was the possibility of success both professionally and romantically, but then these opportunities faded away. This aspect of the narrative is extremely important to a wider discussion about negotiating masculine expectations against reality and what a failure to do so can cause. Benson suggests that the frontiers man in the American context had a 'penchant for violence, sexism, racism and recklessness' (Benson, 2014) that has been embraced by many as a norm to aspire too. In *Sightseers*, all the baser qualities of the frontiersman are present but ultimately lead to Chris' demise and not the bright, successful future that he had planned.

Case Study Analysis

In fact, the opening scene of the film uses the frame to show the possibility and importance of the frontier. This may be a map of the outer limits of the West Midlands and the wonders the region has to offer, but to Chris and Tina, the endless possibilities to explore new frontiers and break away from the things that hold them back and ultimately define them are everything. The need to not only escape but also re-invent is omnipresent for both characters at the beginning of their journey, and it is as cathartic for Tina as it is for Chris and is only reinforced by his opinion that "mobility is the key to personal opportunity." As the montage of maps, dog photos, and painful moaning continues, the proposed journey out of the Midlands to foreign wonders in the north is a nod to not only the journey that will unfold but also the desire to seek out new frontiers. This notion of a desperate need to escape is further reinforced by Tina leading up to

the couple's emancipation. "I hate this room; if it were all destroyed, I would be quite happy." An embrace of new worlds and the obliteration of old ones are important for both.

In her observations surrounding the angry young men films of the 1960s, Claydon (2005) has suggested that the important thing to grasp regarding any 'crisis' in masculinity is the destructive 'discontent and the projection of that dissatisfaction onto others'. Arthur Seaton and Chris's characters have very similar issues to resolve, and aside from the increased irony provided by the film's black comedy and ultra-violence, it could be argued that British cinema is still trying to grapple with the problem of toxic masculinity sixty years on from the seminal kitchen sink dramas that first provided vital reflections of gender politics and their impact on society. This continued fascination of masculinity in crisis on-screen also highlights the fact that the problem is ongoing and evolving and rather than starting and ending at specific points, there is more value in accepting that 'there are many femininities and masculinities cyclically and culturally' (Gurkan & Serttas, 2017). At the same time as acknowledging the similarities between the issues presented in the 1960s and those front and centre in *Sightseers*, we must also examine the culture of, and reasons for, violent and destructive behaviour that may be linked to contemporary white, working-class masculinity in crisis.

Attempting to regain some control, respect or even status by discovering new frontiers (however mundane they may be) is only the beginning regarding *Sightseers* and hper-masculinity. In discussing the nature of gender itself, Butler (2004) suggests that 'desire is always a desire for recognition.' This is such an important hurdle for Chris and when unable to overcome it, both anger and violence snowball becoming an increasingly volatile and ruinous coping mechanism. If 'to be a man is a performance to be proved or acted out' (Peberdy, 2011), then the ritualistic scenarios acted out by Chris and surrealistically framed by Wheatly, represent hyper-masculinity at its most violent, frenzied and noxious. When the cracks begin to show, it reveals a person who on the surface is calm and together in many respects but is easily frustrated and angered by the world around him. Senel (2017) has argued that 'a man in power, a man with power and a man of power' is the perfect storm to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity. This contested concept is the topic of much disagreement and debate but has much importance especially when engaged in a discourse with hyper-masculinity.

It is also important to acknowledge the beliefs of many academic perspectives that question the validity of hegemonic masculinity based on concerns over the lack of complexity it allows for. Lotz (2014) has been an important voice in the need for 'dismantling the binary opposition of feminine and masculine in order to create a language that speaks of various masculinities.' There is no doubt whatsoever that notions of masculinity that are binary, rigid, and limited in scope are indeed outdated, and it must fall to academic voices in many respects to champion a more flexible and varied approach to the issue. If we consider a certain definition of hegemonic masculinity, however, as one valid perspective among a varied set of approaches, then this does indeed have some relevance in this particular instance.

For Connell and Messerschmidt, via Feasey (2008), hegemonic masculinity represents 'white, heterosexual, competitive, individualist, and aggressive men.' Although this should not be seen as the only perspective regarding traditional and dominan notions of masculinity issues, this observation has strikingly obvious and resounding synergy with the issues that Chris himself is struggling to resolve. The first signs of something more sinister reveal themselves at the Crich Tramway Village. Chris witnfloor, a blatant disregard for public order when a fellow passenger throws a wrapper on the floor and he is not only ignored but is publicly humiliated for his efforts to chastise the culprit. His response to this indignity is a "bit of the old ultra-violence" (Kubrick, 1971) that represents his need to assert the absence of power and control caused by not only this situation but also numerous instances in his past. The Carpenter like score that creeps in during the first murder combined with the dream like slow motion and part smirk on Chris' face all combine to reflect his deepening psychological crisis. This initial moment of violence and mayhem is not framed with realism and verisimilitude in mind. Instead, Wheatley uses cinematic language that reflects the cathartic release that the incident brings Chris. It allows the audience to be fully immersed in the hedonistic moment that he has orchestrated yet made to look like a tragic accident.

This use of surrealism and dream-like sequences is employed throughout the film, not to draw us in to the brutality of the moment like in *This is England* or *Nil By Mouth,* for example, but rather to allow us to enter the interior of Chris' consciousness, his 'internal world' (ibid.), and the pleasures and gratifications derived from the violence that he inflicts. The normal becomes the arena for the twisted and hyper, which makes it all the more shocking, reflecting his disdain for

the world around him. Consider the scene at 'Dingley Dell," where the caravan is used to assert power, hierarchy, and status. The idea of a caravan being used in this way emphasises the absurdist, comedic nature of the film but also highlights the tragedy and desperation felt by Chris and his attempt to resolve it. In fact, by seeing this as a legitimate assertion of his authority, he reveals the true extent of his shattered self-esteem and broken perceptions of right and wrong in an almost fervent and childlike display of petulance and supremacy. Even when observing the nature that surrounds him at Dingley Dell, Chris' thoughts are still obsessed with failure, success, and recognition. He applauds the Old English Oak for its refusal to "stab you in the back" or "belittle your five-year plan."

Not surprisingly (and maybe inevitably), class raises its divisive head as Chris takes his final victim before the baton of the murderous spree is taken up by Tina. "Did you go to a private school?" Chris sneers. "I thought so. It's the tone, the entitlement." His distain for the privately educated rambler who lambastes Tina for the dog mess not only reveals another target for Chris' simmering and constant anger but also the hypocrisy at the heart of his character considering his previous feelings and violent outburst towards a littering perpetrator. The altercation escalates into a savage attack, which is a joyous release for Chris and a revelation for Tina, while Wheatley once again frames the brutality with surreal humour by adding William Blake's *And Did Those Feet In Ancient Time* and slowing the violence down with additional sonic layers of stick meeting bone. Post-kill, Chris even justifies his actions with the retort, "He's not a person, Tina, he's a Daily Mail reader," solidifying his contempt for another male that poses a threat to his beliefs, status, and place in society. The reflection that follows this scene is perhaps one of the most poignant examples of Chris' desires, fears, feelings of inadequacy, and moments of revelation that clearly have some relationship with the wider context of toxic masculinity and its violent consequences. "I just want to be feared and respected. It's not too much to ask for in life, is it?" It is at this moment that Chris vocalises in one moment the driving force behind his anger, his disillusionment, and his pernicious actions towards others.

When confronted with the nature of his actions following Tina's similar descent into violence and mayhem, Chris seems incapable of accepting or acknowledging his true nature. "I'm not a writer" is followed by the scathing response of "no, you're a serial killer." Although her actions are as heinous as those of her maniacal lover, she offers some sense of realisation as to the reality of their situation that Chris is unable to comprehend. The ending of *Sightseers* is

something that is sardonically poetic in many ways and drives home the notion that there is very little to gain and everything to lose from following a hyper-masculine path that ultimately leads to self-destruction, along with the horrific consequences it can have for those in reach of its tentacles. What at first appears to be a resoundingly victorious and amorous culmination to their adventure turns instantly on its head and not in Chris' favour. As the symbol of their new frontiers goes up in glorious flames, Wheatley scores the drama with Frankie Goes to Hollywood's 'Power of Love', suggesting that the duo share some similarities with criminal but infatuated silver screen lovers like *Bonnie & Clyde* or *Thelma & Louise*. If things ended there, it could be argued that the bloody and violent journey was all worth it in the name of rebellion and romance, but it is in the film's very final scene that the true contempt for hyper-masculine destructive behaviour is revealed. After confirming that this is indeed what Tina wants, Chris leaps to his death, fully convinced that their bond will see them through to eternity. Tina seemingly chooses life instead, one without the foreboding sense of dread and cynicism that her time with Chris ultimately offered. When Wheatley lingers on Tina's face and unclasped hand, there is a sense of freedom that pervades, and Chris' demise is cinematically delivered with zero fanfare or hallucinogenic intensity given to his victims previously in the film.

For all of *Sightseers'* important and cautionary motivations, the representation that is offered is far from a positive one, even though the film poses many questions that could and should lead to wider progressive thinking around the concept of gender on-screen. There are some contemporary examples of cult cinema, however, that offer more positive, empathetic, and compassionate cinematic versions of masculinity that can be seen as equally important in shaping understandings regarding the future of what masculinity is, both on and off screen. One of these alternative constructions is the idea of 'gentle' or 'tender' masculinity within cult films.

Alternative Spaces

For example, Ari Aster's 2019 horror *Midsommar,* in many ways, offers an opportunity for female empowerment on screen, but this is achieved in part by the stereotypical representation of the male characters in the film. The actions of these characters have strong ties with hegemonic masculinity in that their respective downfalls are linked to traits such as arrogance, greed, entitlement, and sexual desire, even if their destinies may have been predetermined as sacrificial

offerings. These representations, however, are still rooted in a similar place to *Sightseers* in that the version of masculinity we see has many negative connotations, even if the function of these ultimately serves a positive purpose by highlighting the destructive nature of hegemonic masculinity itself. Where are the more positive spaces in contemporary cult cinema?

In writing more specifically about Female Masculinityarticle,rstam has provided some vital observations that contribute to a wider discourse surrounding alterntive spaces for masculinity on-screen. One of these is the concept of 'minority masculinities' (Halberstam, 1998) as an act of resistance against hegemonic masculinity and the accompanying ideas of the 'heroic' or 'real thing.' One version of this that deserves more investigation is the idea of gentle, tender, or positive masculinity or characters that provide support, love, and understanding in many ways as opposed to seeking for or asserting their dominance. A recent example of this antidote to the negative cautionary tales found in *Sightseers* and *Midsommar* can be found in the 2022 cult hit, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Kim (2022) has looked critically at this in a recent article also bringing the complexities of his Asian American heritage and identity into the conversation. He goes as far as to say that Waymond's character in the film offers a 'possibility of liberation from patriarchal norms.' He goes on to suggest that "the hard-earned decency of Waymond and his 'willingness to hold space for the women' in his life "create an alternative path.' This 'alternative path' is extremely important in what it offers all audiences in terms of the possibilities of masculinity on screen and within society as a whole. Rather than a cautionary tale, Waymond becomes a mirror for what can be rather than what shouldn't be. This is seen at various points within the complex and surreal narrative of the film, but especially at the start, when we witness his compassion and patience in a tense and claustrophobic opening scene made even more intense by the film's cinematic language. The camera weaves in and out of multiple tight, cluttered spaces, jumping from character to character, who all demand answers in one way or another. Waymond is the only one offering solutions in the hectic scenario and even finds the time to make sure the clean laundry has its own happy place. He is criticised for his perceived weakness by his wife but still manages to find connections with all of those around him, including relative strangers. In this scenario, it is Waymond's wife Evelyn who represents a lack of openness, compassion, and sensitivity. This is clearly informed by her relationship with her own father, who embodies many of the negative traits of hegemonic or hyper-masculinity.

Waymond is an example of a minority masculinity that confirms that there is room for more empathy, kindness, and a different type of strength within the world of representation, masculinity, and cult film. Similar, more mainstream examples are found in Steve Carrell's haunted father David in *Beautiful Boy* and Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*. The attempt to understand and comfort rather than judge and control takes centre stage in both of these films, where compassionate paternity provides the opportunity for this minority masculinity to shine amidst a myriad of complex issues. The concept of gentle or tender masculinity as a crucial alternative to representations of hegemonic masculinity may be only one of the multiple constructions of gender identity on screen, but it is one where the power lies in the positivity it represents for all audiences and the ideological impact it can have.

References

[1]   Benson, J. (2014). Hypermasculinities in the Contemporary Novel: Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 8.

[2]   Butler, J. (2004). Undoing Gender. London: Routledge. 2.

[3]   Claydon, E.A. (2005). The Representation of Masculinity in British Cinema of the 1960s: Lawrence of Arabia, The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner and The Hill. New York, Lampeter: Edward Mellen Press. 5.

[4]   Cox, Nicole. B & Decarvalho, Lauren. J. (2016). "Ride Free or Die" Trying: Hypermasculinity on FX's Sons of Anarchy. Journal of Popular Culture. 49 (4). 825.

[5]   Donaldson, Mike. "What is Hegemonic Masculinity?" Theory and Society. 22(1993). 647.

[6]   Feasey, R. (2008). Masculinity and popular television. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

[7]   Gurkan, H. & Serttas, A. (2017). 'The Representation of Masculinity in Cinema and on Television: An Analysis of Fictional Male Characters'. European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 8 (4), 404.

[8]   Halberstam, J. (1998). Female Masculinity. London: Duke University Press.

[9]   Kac-Vergne, M. (2012). Losing Visibility? The Rise and Fall of Hypermasculinity in Science Fiction Films. Media The French Journal of Media Studies. 2 (2). 3.

[10]   Kim, N. (2022). 2022's Asian American Cinema is Reclaiming Gentle Masculinity. Film Cred. https://film-cred.com/2022-asian-american-cinema-is-reclaiming-gentle-masculinity/

[11]   Kirkham, P & Thumin, J (eds). (1993). You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men. London: Lawrence and Wishart. 11.

[12]   Kubrick, S. (Director). (1971). A Clockwork Orange. Polaris Productions; Hawk Films; Warner Bros. Pictures.

[13]   Lotz, A,D. (2014). Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century. New York: NYU Press. 20.

[14]   Mosher, D. L & Sirkin, M. (1984). Measuring a macho personality constellation. Journal of Research in Personality, 18. 155.

[15]   Nixon, S. (1996). Hard Looks: Masculinities, Spectatorship and Contemporary Consumption. London: UCL. 5.

[16]   Peberdy, D. (2011). Masculinity and Film Performance. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

[17]   Senel, N. (2017). 'From Hegemonic Masculinity to Masculinity Crisis: The Exploration of the Failure of Idealized Masculinity on the White Screen.' Masculinities Journal, 8. 22.

[18]   Tomasulo, Frank. P. (1995). Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era by Susan Jeffords Review. Film Quarterly. 49 (1). 50.

[19]   Vokey, M. Tefft, B & Tysiaczny, C. (2013). An Analysis of Hyper-Masculinity in Magazine Advertisements. Sex Roles. 68 (2), 567.

Funding Information

Authors' Bio

Daniel Finnemore is currently lecturing in film at Coventry University as well as researching for his PhD which focuses on destructive masculinity and on-screen representation. Starting out in television after completing his MA at the University of Birmingham, he began lecturing in 2009 as well as continuing to produce short narrative film, music videos and documentaries. His practice now focuses more on composing and soundscape work for features and television with his latest project, the UK indie crime thriller Fixed, a winner at the 2022 National Film Awards amongst others.