

Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

Film and Media Studies (MA) Theses

Dissertations and Theses

Spring 5-2024

Intolerable Masculinity: Screening Men's Shame and Embracing Curious Futures

Cole Clark

Chapman University, nicoclark@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/film_studies_theses



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clark, Cole. "Intolerable Masculinity: Screening Men's Shame and Embracing Curious Futures." Master's thesis, Chapman University, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000537>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Film and Media Studies (MA) Theses by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

Intolerable Masculinity: Screening Men's Shame and Embracing

Curious Futures

A Thesis by

Cole Clark

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Dodge College of Film and Media Arts

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film and Media Studies

May 2024

Committee in charge:

Kelli Fuery, Ph.D., Chair

Ian Barnard, Ph.D.

Morgan Read-Davidson, MFA

The thesis of Cole Clark is approved.



Kelli Fuery, Ph.D., Chair



Ian Barnard, Ph.D.



Morgan Read-Davidson, MFA

April 2024

Intolerable Masculinity: Screening Men's Shame and Embracing
Curious Futures

Copyright © 2024

by Cole Clark

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous support, guidance, and expertise of Dr. Kelli Fuery. Thank you to my partner, Sophia, for your daily words of encouragement, and for our conversations.

ABSTRACT

Intolerable Masculinity: Screening Men's Shame and Embracing Curious Futures

by Cole Clark

This thesis argues that to critique hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in good faith, film and television must focus on the futures created through men's ethical action in the present, rather than inert displays of men's horrific behaviors that rely on audience shame as a tool for reclaiming men's pride. Men's freedom to change their situation is introduced through Manon Garcia's (2022) notion of masculinity as an "impasse," preventing men from authentic connection with others. This concept is furthered using David Buchbinder (2013), with the television examples *Mad Men* (Weiner 2007-2015) and *Black Mirror* (Brooker 2011-2023) each presenting a different masculine reaction to the notion of men's responsibility.

Following this foundation of men's situation as constructed and therefore open to change, this thesis presents contemporary films which appear to critique men's socially significant status, but instead obscure their responsibility to change through a performance of shame. Referencing Sara Ahmed's (2014) study of national performances of shame alongside Jacques Rancière's (2021) notion of the intolerable image, men's shame over their past actions is critiqued as disguising men's responsibility, and drawing attention away from women's experiences of oppression by men. *Men* (Garland 2022) and *The Power of the Dog* (Campion 2021) serve as examples, representing an extreme display of masculine shame in the former, and a stronger yet incomplete critique of men's harmful behaviors in the latter.

Finally, this thesis continues with Rancière, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's (2015) notion of ambiguity, to examine contemporary films which inspire curiosity in the spectator over how men might act ethically. This curiosity is a refusal of the inward turn of shame, and is

crucial to the analysis of *Aftersun* (Wells 2022) and *The Green Knight* (Lowery 2021), films which explore men's ambiguous situation and freedom to act in the present, without indulging in shame as a means of reclaiming men's pride.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
ABSTRACT.....	V
1 INTRODUCTION AND AXIOMS	1
1.1 Critiquing Screened Reality	5
2 THE IMPASSE AND MEN’S RESPONSIBILITY.....	8
2.1 <i>Mad Men</i>	16
2.2 <i>Black Mirror</i>	19
3 SHAME AS AVOIDANCE OF CRITICISM.....	22
3.1 <i>Men</i>	25
3.2 <i>The Power of the Dog</i>	30
4 CURIOUS FREEDOM.....	34
4.1 <i>Aftersun</i>	36
4.2 <i>The Green Knight</i>	41
5 CONCLUSION	47
NOTES.....	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

1 Introduction and Axioms

In “Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!” (1995), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick critiques analyses of masculinities that pertain only to men. She notes that when discussing constructions of masculinity, the

inquiry begins with the presupposition that everything pertaining to men can be classified as masculinity, and everything that can be said about masculinity pertains in the first place to men.¹

To critique masculinity and patriarchy, one must first realize, as Sedgwick points out, that masculinity is not fixed, but rather a complex set of relational, cultural, and socio-political structures. As this thesis discusses films which present an ethical masculinity based on good faith critique of the past, present, and an openness to the future, Sedgwick’s position offers a key starting point. Film and television representations of masculinity which are critical of patriarchy and men’s social status often suggest that it is up to women to change men’s behaviors, or else draw focus away from men’s ethical opportunity to change their behaviors through the weaponization of men’s shame over their past actions, as seen in the horror film *Men* (Garland 2022), and other examples in this thesis.

Sedgwick uses this rigid cultural perception of sexuality and gender expression to outline her own axioms, a practice I take up here to introduce a few key observations regarding masculinity and patriarchy as interrelated structures of power, and to limit the scope of this thesis.

1) Masculine attitudes do not always have to do with men, and may appear across gender expressions. This is supported by Sedgwick’s problematization of masculinity as solely about

men, which allows for expressions of masculinity (hegemonic or otherwise) in any category of gender expression. 2) Patriarchy is different from hegemonic masculinity. Patriarchy is a system of oppression that enables specific subjectivities to dominate others via various structures of power. As David Buchbinder (2013) writes, patriarchy generates “structures, dynamics, identities, possibilities,”² and is thus composed of many unique structures which support the oppression of non-privileged subjects. 3) Hegemonic masculinity is one specific structure of power that serves to reinforce patriarchy, manifesting in the behavior of privileged men who reject others’ freedom, sexualities, and masculinities that do not adhere to the dominant masculinity and femininity based on heterosexual values. I refer specifically to a heterosexual notion of hegemony, not to discount the ways non-hetero sexualities can exhibit hegemonic behaviors, but to define my research area as within primarily heterosexual expressions of masculinity. The expression of hegemonic masculinity by non-hetero subjects is an important field for further study, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

To further emphasize the error in discourses of masculinity which account only for men’s experience, Sedgwick critiques psychologist Richard Friedman’s limited classification of self-respecting boys who possess only “masculine self-regard.” She writes,

The boys I know who were so profoundly nourished, and with such heroic difficulty, by their hard-won feminine and effeminate self-regard—and for that matter, the girls who extracted the same precious survival skills from a sturdy masculine one—ought to present much more of a challenge than they have so far.³

Sedgwick recognizes masculinity as a force which exists both before and for us. There is nuance to her description of the boy who is “nourished” by his effeminate self regard, as well as the girl,

as their interactions with sexual expression are not dictated by their assigned gender. Masculinity is also identified as the girl's "survival skills," suggesting that there is risk in *not* accepting a masculine position. This tells us that, for men as well as others, masculinity is often taken on as a defense against possible harm. The harm that comes to all who interact with hegemonic masculinity must be dissected, but before this can happen, this harm must be uncovered and recognized as such.

As feminist philosopher Manon Garcia (2022) writes, masculinity "is both the norm of humanity and what cannot be seen or analyzed because it seems so unproblematic that it becomes invisible,"⁴ which Garcia critiques through her analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2009), and men's situation as constructed. It is not that we aren't aware of women's oppression through patriarchy, but that we have become accustomed to its frequency. It is the daily law, the etiquette that informs each encounter between men and women. This is the status of hegemonic masculinity: a norm that is harmful, but encountered so often that it becomes the center of discourse on sex and sexuality. Masculinity and femininity are rigidly defined by patriarchal society, and by addressing these notions as normalized and "invisible," this thesis begins by identifying that their societal acceptance is constructed (as is the false binary constructed through discourse on sex and sexuality). There is not a correct way to 'be' in terms of one's sexuality, and as we move further from these hegemonic norms, the more we find ourselves able to embrace non-hegemonic notions of sexuality. As Sedgwick so clearly summarizes, gender expression is adaptable and mobile, and when seen through Garcia's argument of masculinity as an avenue to disappointment for men, we can begin to view hegemonic masculinity as a situation which brings more harm to men, than good.

This thesis argues that to critique hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy in good faith, film and television must focus on the futures created through men's ethical action in the present, such as the refusal of hegemonic masculinity, rather than inert displays of men's horrific behaviors that rely on audience shame as a tool for reclaiming men's pride. To accomplish this, film and television must first acknowledge how masculinity harms men *and* offers the ability to change through their privileged social position. This is where Garcia and Buchbinder's ideas of masculinity as an impasse, and the shifting definition of traditional masculinity, respectively, are introduced and explained. I use episodes from *Mad Men* (Weiner 2007-2015) and *Black Mirror* (Brooker 2011-2023) to contextualize men's desire for knowledge as supporting the patriarchal oppression of women, as well as the harm this position brings to men. Second, film and television must refuse a focus on men's behaviors in the past as a source of men's shame in the present, as this disguises the capacity for men to change, and removes attention from those who have been most oppressed by men. Sara Ahmed's (2014) critique of shame as a performance in service of reclamation of pride is explored using *Men* and *The Power of the Dog* (Campion 2021), illustrating the work of shame in films which appear to critique hegemonic masculinity. This section incorporates Jacques Rancière's (2021) writing on the commodification of disturbing images to underscore Ahmed's point on shame as that which obscures the need for action. Finally, film and television must view men's actions as having the potential to create many possible futures, refusing a desire for control through an embrace of each person's potential to create the future for others, as well as themselves. Referencing Rancière's push for spectators to be active in their curiosity about a disturbing image, this section utilizes Simone de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (2015) to discuss the potential for men's actions to affect those around them in the future, drawing on *Aftersun*'s (Wells 2022) engagement with memory

and overlapping timelines. Concluding with Beauvoir's critique in *Ethics* of the serious and nihilist attitudes, this section uses *The Green Knight* (Lowery 2021) to illustrate how a hegemonically masculine attitude denies ambiguity, remedied through an embrace of actions which help enable futures, rather than attempt to define and predict them.

1.1 Critiquing Screened Reality

Part of the project of this thesis is to identify, critique, and open up discourse on popular film and television representations of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, so that what is typically taken as invisible can be critiqued for the everyday harm it causes to men and those around them. Why are film and television chosen, as opposed to theater, or literature? In the film example *Men*, the repeated image of a man's humiliated face suggests that the audience should feel shame over men's horrific actions in the film, a reaction compelled via the interplay between faces that characterize shame as an affect.⁵ The film's visual focus on men and their supposed shame shows an interest in men's notion of their lost significance above all else, for as the potent reaction to a face causes the audience to take on the shame they perceive in the film, attention is removed from the women who are harmed by men's actions, and the possibility of men's ethical actions in the present. The visual and auditory language of film makes it difficult to discern what is genuine and what is a manipulative performance, but other formal elements often critique this call for shame. In *Mad Men*, the physical sets of a television production inform and critique the society dominated by men who adhere to a hegemonically masculine standard, creating a boxed-in environment for women, as well as themselves. The reused sets are largely unchanging throughout the series, and by identifying how the production design of *Mad Men* illustrates the harm of hegemonic masculinity, the form of television can be used as a means for critiquing

previously “invisible” societal laws, through the often unnoticed details of a serialized production.

The language of editing also allows for the past, present, and future to collide in a way that mirrors the ambiguous situation of all people: *Aftersun*, for example, collapses a daughter’s childhood memories of her father with flashes of her future as an adult, along with fantasies of her father at a nightclub, frozen in time. By showing glimpses of the futures our actions create, and the potential futures our harmful attitudes engender (as in *The Green Knight*), film allows us to think through and reflect upon our own potential as subjects whose actions enable many possible futures, rather than stick us with an immobile focus on shame. All of the examples in this thesis are, at the time of this writing, recently released (the oldest being *Black Mirror* in 2011). The popular mediums of film and television can represent contemporary attitudes toward gender and sexuality, and it is important to examine these contemporary examples in a study of developing attitudes regarding men, their behaviors, and their response to criticism of these behaviors.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière illuminates the paradox of passive spectatorship, as we are “separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act”⁶ as a result of our ignorance regarding how the images we consume are produced, and our inability to meaningfully interact with them. He argues not for a refusal of spectatorship, but for “a theatre without spectators,”⁷ inviting us to engage with represented images as a starting point for critical thought, rather than accept them as they are. For our purposes, film and television which show an awareness of men’s dominance, women’s oppression, and patriarchal power structures make up the images that are easy to engage with passively. Their representation has already done the work of identifying what is wrong, so there appears to be no need for the audience to think critically.

This is problematic, as I explore through film and television examples which exploit this awareness, but for now it is worth keeping in mind Rancière's notion of what a spectator ought to be: "active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs."⁸ As active participators, we may adopt a critical attitude toward all the images we come into contact with, treating them not as answers in themselves, but as invitations to learn and take action.

How does reflexivity and knowledge of men's objectification of women appear in these examples, and why is it relevant to this thesis's discussion of shame and men's responsibility? *Mad Men* and *The Power of the Dog* depict masculinities that are often romanticized, but from a contemporary perspective that allows the creators to comment on what is depicted. As I go on to argue, the appearance of reflexivity and criticism can function to reclaim masculine pride, relying on an incitement to shame over men's past actions as a way to avoid responsibility for enacting change in the present: the men of *Mad Men* and *The Power of the Dog* were bad, and because we recognize it now, we are absolved, losing the necessity for action in the present. Other examples, like *Black Mirror* and *Men*, further demonstrate how criticism can be used to disguise men's responsibility to change, whereas *Aftersun* and *The Green Knight* present an ethical framework for men to change their behaviors.

I begin with Garcia, as she argues that through their objectification of women, men are "alone with [their] love instead of having an authentic relationship with another human being,"⁹ and in a position of constant disappointment. In order to change, men must acknowledge their own privileged social position. To supplement these ideas, I reference Buchbinder's *Studying Men and Masculinities*, as he contextualizes how and why men are motivated to abuse their privileged positions, along with Candida Yates (2007), who writes on the connection between masculine jealousy and shame as forces that exacerbate one another. I reference Silvan Tomkins'

(1995) writing on shame as an isolating affect, to address the potential for shame to turn men inward and away from the need for change. Ahmed's argument that national shame prioritizes a display of regret, in order to reclaim a perceived loss of national identity, serves to highlight my critique of film and television which critique men's behaviors in the past with a mind toward restoring masculinity's reputation. The affective power of shame is further considered through Rancière, where his idea of the "intolerable image"¹⁰ and its inaccessibility is key for my analysis of *Men* and *The Power of the Dog*, which depict men's horrific behaviors. I pair Ahmed with Rancière so that the social, group-oriented aspect of my analysis of masculinity is not lost in a discussion of the affect of images, as I explore how shame makes it easier for men to disengage with the possibility for improvement in their behavior, turning them cynically inward, similar to Rancière's discussion of difficult images that paralyze us with the simultaneous need for intervention, and our inability to access images in the face of their endless commodification. As I approach films which recognize an ethical attitude for men, I utilize *Aftersun* and *The Green Knight* in conjunction with Beauvoir's *Ethics*, as her argument engages with our responsibility to create a better future through actions in the present, and our ambiguous situation as subjects. The films I discuss often look backward for ways to improve men's historical oppression of women, but as Beauvoir shows, there is more value in working to create a better future through our acknowledgment of the freedom of others, than in a view which treats the present as mere pages to be added to a record of history.

2 The Impasse and Men's Responsibility

Good faith criticism of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy first requires an understanding of masculinity as a harmful situation for women, but also, in different capacities, for men. This

section argues that men's disappointment with the women they objectify, and the harm they incur trying to maintain a masculine image, result in hegemonic masculinity as a harmful situation for men, as well as women. The television examples—*Mad Men*'s "Signal 30" and *Black Mirror*'s "The Entire History of You"—each focus on a perceived aggression toward a man, followed by a man's violent outburst, revealing that punishment of others, as well as the self, is a "survival skill"¹¹ that ultimately harms men in patriarchal societies.

It can be dangerous to demonstrate the harmful situation of hegemonic masculinity for men, in light of women's direct subjugation and domination perpetrated by men. Criticism of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy can function to reinstate an order of law and obedience by engaging with shame's capacity to bind groups of men who then reclaim their lost pride. A bad faith critique of men's situation might be thus: If men are harmed by masculinity, and masculinity is constructed through oppressive structures of power, doesn't that make men victims of the same law and order as women? Of course, to say that men are just as harmed as women by hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy is false, as men make up the socially significant group who dominate women, and thus have power to change their position, unlike the women they subjugate and in turn dominate. Toril Moi (1992) summarizes one of the key differences in women's situation as compared to men:

The specific contradiction of women's situation is caused by the conflict between their status as free and autonomous human beings and the fact that they are socialized in a world in which men consistently cast them as Other to their One, as objects to their subjects.¹²

Moi goes on to discuss how this status of Other creates difficulties for women seeking meaning in their objectified bodies, but here I want to focus on the notion of "contradiction." While both

men and women are caught between opposing notions of themselves as solely objects and as subjects living in the world, men do not have to justify their sexuality to women. Conflict between men over what is considered masculine is common, but does not incorporate an appeal to women's notion of men, at least in terms of hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity.

Furthermore, while men are certainly caught up in a system of censorship and oppression regarding sex and sexuality, they occupy a privileged position compared to women. To quote Garcia,

Masculinity is a privileged situation that results from the power men have always had over women, and it also provides men an avenue to inauthentically reap the benefits of their privileged position.¹³

As long as men accept the benefits of their socially significant position, their relationships with women (and others) will be inherently flawed, based on laws of sex and sexuality that require women to obey men's desires, or else be punished. For men to recognize their responsibility, they must accept the ambiguous situation of all people. Ambiguity is a key notion for this thesis, opening discourse on sex and sexuality by refusing a dominating perspective. Moi writes that,

the word ambiguous often means "dialectical" and describes a fundamental contradiction underpinning an apparently stable and coherent phenomenon. In *The Second Sex*, every conflict is potentially both productive and destructive: in some cases, one aspect wins out; in others, the tension remains unresolved.¹⁴

Ambiguity for Beauvoir means that we are all free to act, and thus are caught up in the projects we instigate as well as the projects of others, which intersect each other to form a world that is not inherently good or bad, but that we have an obligation to approach ethically through our

actions for others. To reach this reciprocal recognition, however, we must first identify how discourse on masculinity has become related to a purely hegemonic notion.

Buchbinder, who writes on historical depictions of hegemonic masculinity through art and sculpture, sees the production of masculinity through negation. He writes,

masculinity has traditionally depended upon and required a double definition by negation: *masculinity is not appropriate to women (a definition by gender); and masculinity is not to be attributed to homosexual men (a definition by sexuality).*¹⁵

Obedience to this rule of sexuality means that any man's behavior that might be considered feminine or homosexual is a transgression against the rule of law, and must be punished, and what constitutes feminine or homosexual behavior is subject to change by those in positions of power. In other words, the content of what is punishable is not always stated, but instead left implied, making the known act just as punishable as the unknown. How does this situation harm men, when it appears to be constructed to maintain their social significance? In "Masculinity as an Impasse," Garcia takes up men's normalized oppression of women and hegemonic masculinity, exploring how they prevent men's authentic connections with women. Driven by Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex* of women's situation in the world, Garcia argues that Beauvoir is also defining masculinity's situation. This is not presented by Garcia as a one-to-one explanation of men's situation via women's, but as a position from which to analyze how women are oppressed by men within patriarchy, and thus what power men exercise in their daily lives. She notes the work done by R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, as they identified the many hierarchized¹⁶ forms of masculinity that exist within the umbrella term of masculinity and discussed what should be retained from earlier studies¹⁷ of hegemonic masculinity. Connell and

Messerschmidt identify the precedent for diverse masculinities to be absorbed into a hegemonic definition:

Cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities.¹⁸

Masculinity is not a monolith, but rather subject to an intensely punitive system of law regarding sex and sexuality, intended to keep women oppressed and, consequently, to limit men's sexuality and gender expression.

Men are still free to change their behavior, however, because they are the ones who benefit most from the current system. The question of men's freedom informs Garcia's argument, as she examines the conditions men create for themselves that cause them to be disappointed. Masculinity is labeled an "impasse" because it does not allow men to maintain healthy relationships with others. Garcia bases this claim on a history of women's forced obedience to men, highlighting the moment of men's choice in this situation. Quoting Beauvoir, Garcia comments that

men's situation allows them to avoid this costly authentic recognition. Because men 'have always held all the concrete powers,' they have the power to turn woman into the Other.¹⁹

Rather than a simple acceptance of benefits and social status, masculinity for Garcia relies on men's avoidance of reciprocity with women, and on men's constant choice to objectify women. The choice to avoid and objectify suggests men can choose otherwise. There will of course be men who have no problem with their situation, who would not mind or even recognize the inauthenticity of their relationships with others. What Garcia adds to this is a notion of personal

limitation, as men are constantly disappointed by the women they objectify. The “impasse” of masculinity is an isolating path, offering no opportunity for men to grow and progress in their relationships. They are always able to take, and the expectation that women will meet this demand erodes the potential for a positive relationship. Beauvoir outlines the long-term issues of an inauthentic relationship in *The Second Sex*:

Her joy is to serve him: but he must gratefully recognize this service; giving becomes demand according to the customary dialectic of devotion. And a woman of scrupulous mind asks herself: is it really *me* he needs...would he not have just as singular feelings for another?²⁰

Expectations for women may appear to be different in a contemporary context, but Beauvoir’s argument remains relevant as we consider how oppression evolves in a contemporary context: women’s access to abortion is no longer protected in the United States, even as Americans have elected a liberal President and Vice President.²¹ Law regarding sex and sexuality in patriarchal society demands men exploit women as objects, and as women fail to find meaning in these relationships, affection becomes obligation. If there is reciprocity between a couple, this transformation of devotion into servitude is avoided as both parties are recognized for their subjectivity, as well as objectivity. Men’s social significance allows them to avoid this ethical situation. While Garcia observes that men’s inauthentic recognition from women leads them to disappointment, Buchbinder and Emmanuel Reynaud explore the consequences of this situation as it relates to men’s bodies in the present moment.

In his chapter “(Em)bodying Masculinity,” Buchbinder examines the tradition for masculine bodies to take up physical space as a sign of dominance over their environment. He gives the example of a man who is obese and taking up several seats on a train, and a heavily-

muscled man who takes up the same amount of space, to suggest that the space the obese man occupies is commonly thought to be “illegitimate,” as it results from a perceived lack of control over the body’s health. The muscled man takes up the same amount of space, but is less likely to be thought of as an annoyance, because his body aligns with a traditional image of masculinity.²² This example shows the ease with which masculinity can be turned against men who do not fit a predetermined type, as well as the socially constructed nature of laws regarding sex and sexuality. Buchbinder later summarizes research by Antony Easthope and Peter McMillan, exploring masculine bodies as both a defense against the exterior world, and as giving men the right to be loud, brash, and oppressive to others due to the sheer size of their bodies compared to others.²³ Finally, Buchbinder clarifies what is implied in these author’s statements.

The extreme form of the exterior world’s incursion into the male body is the physical penetration of the latter by that world. Such penetration is often regarded not only as a sign of weakness but also of feminization.²⁴

Defined in part by what is rejected from it, traditional masculinity leaves little room for expression beyond displays of strength and resilience, which can result in serious harm for men engaged in competition with one another. In *Holy Virility* (1983), Reynaud analyzes the embodied wounds men suffer through their pressure to maintain traditional masculinity, similar to Garcia’s identification of men as isolated by their pursuit of unrealistic relationships with women. Turning his analysis to men’s expectation of physical strength, Reynaud asks,

what does it matter what the means and the end are, as long as the mutilated body shows signs of the heroic struggle man has waged against his fears and his own flesh?²⁵

The body that has eliminated all signifiers of weakness and non-hegemonic sexuality is a tool for men’s survival in a patriarchal society, but it can also be a means of their destruction, turned

against men through a change in what is considered masculine. Reynaud argues that an increased show of pain can signify masculine resilience, converting what might be thought of as weakness into a show of one's resilience against adversity. Through the work of Garcia, Beauvoir, Buchbinder, and Reynaud, we see a glimpse of how hegemonic masculinity negatively affects men, as well as women. Alongside Beauvoir's argument that women's devotion to men often results in unhappiness for women, Garcia's claim is authoritative as it locates men's objectification of women as resulting in unsatisfying relationships, as men become a constant source of disappointment for the mythological women they seek. Buchbinder and Reynaud detail the physical costs of accepting the benefits of hegemonic masculinity, expanding the scope of masculinity to that which boxes men into rigid conceptions of sex and sexuality. In placing these authors together, this section presents men's hegemonic behaviors as harmful to themselves, as well as the women they objectify. Recognizing this, we begin to see men as capable of changing not only what is punishable, but their own behaviors, a move toward a Beauvoirian ethics based on our ambiguity as subjects.

First, however, I examine two television examples of the harmful situation men create for women, as well as themselves. The episodes are chosen for their focus on masculine violence as it is justified and upheld by men, and to show how men's recognition of their harmful behavior leads to evolved forms of patriarchal oppression. In *Mad Men's* "Signal 30," there is a nuanced depiction of the physical environment created by men's inauthentic relationships with women, an environment that ultimately restricts men to narrow and harmful definitions of masculinity. I then use the fraught marital relationship in *Black Mirror's* "The Entire History of You" to demonstrate Beauvoir and Garcia's point that men are unhappy in their relationships as a result of their objectifying exploitation of women.

2.1 Mad Men

Following the lives of Madison Avenue, New York advertising executives from the late 1950s through the 60s, *Mad Men* presents various images of masculinity, from hegemonic to marginalized, as well as masculinities which reach for but fail to achieve total self-sufficiency. The criticism is made from a distance, subtly probing audiences to consider their attachment to the charismatic characters as they engage in increasingly destructive behavior.

Middle management executive Peter Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) values the patriarchal status quo, expecting his marriage to benefit him without any consideration of his wife's feelings. He is physically smaller than the higher-ups, living in the shadow of executives Don Draper (Jon Hamm) and Roger Sterling (John Slattery). During a routine partner's meeting of Campbell, Draper, Sterling, Bert Cooper (Robert Morse), Lane Pryce (Jared Harris), and secretary Joan Harris (Christina Hendricks), Pryce storms into the conference room and instructs Harris to leave, after which she and co-worker Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss) listen in through a one-way radio designed for observing clients. Pryce informs the men of his failure to secure the business of Jaguar cars. This puts the advertising agency at risk of going bankrupt, and Campbell insults Pryce by implying that Pryce was not man enough to do the job. Pryce challenges Campbell to "address that insult"²⁶ in a fist fight, and as the men stand to fight, Sterling remarks, "I know cooler heads should prevail, but am I the only one who wants to see this?"²⁷ After a few awkward blows, Campbell is struck by Pryce and falls to the ground. Pryce leaves in a huff, and Draper helps the bloodied Campbell to his feet. Both men bleed and nurse their bruises for the remainder of the episode, with Pryce collapsing in his office the moment he closes his door. Intercut during the fight are shots of Harris and Olson listening in horror through the radio.

This example, which illuminates the harmful situation men create for themselves, is an anomaly in *Mad Men*. Unlike other series of its era, such as *The Sopranos* (Chase 1999-2007) or *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan 2008-2013), physical violence is a rare occurrence in the boardrooms of Madison Avenue, as characters typically solve their bourgeois problems with dialogue. “Signal 30” is a shock, escalating men’s simmering jealousies and grievances into a flurry of sudden violence, with several characters acting as stand-ins for the audience. Campbell’s homophobic jab shows Buchbinder’s ideas in practice, as Pryce jumps to defend his own masculine image from the threat of penetration. The order for Harris to exit shows not only the men’s rejection of femininity, but also their fear of being perceived as weak by the women they objectify. Pryce attempts to prove he is not homosexual by demonstrating his strength, but this results in significant harm for both men. Reynaud’s question of “what does it matter”²⁸ what scars are gained in a defense of one’s honor is relevant, as the everyday office setting and muffled reactions to the fight lend weight to the men’s actions, stripping the violence of any romantic quality. Punches are awkward, and the horrified women listening from the other room signify the traumatic surprise of the moment. These are men who trade insults through the veneer of business moves and petty disagreements, and while that is certainly an exercise of power, the fight recontextualizes these behaviors as defenses of masculine pride. It matters that the men choose to fight, because *Mad Men* exists in a context that does not typically tolerate physical violence. That sanitized context becomes relevant, however, as the episode depicts the stifling physical environment created by men’s adherence to patriarchal notions of masculinity.

As Harris and Olson listen through the one-way radio, the physical architecture of the office illustrates the patriarchal culture of obedience and surveillance. They are unable to watch, and even by listening, they refuse to obey the masculine law of the office, risking punishment.

They do not interfere, just as the men standing in the room do not interfere, out of an obedience to masculine notions of strength and the purifying act of violence. Supporters of this patriarchal order might say that there is no need to intrude: the system will produce a winner, and this mess will sort itself out, but as the men's humiliating and painful blows demonstrate, the protection of one's masculine image comes at a high cost. Sterling's desire to watch the fight despite his better instincts reflects the position of a passive spectator, his ability to act neutralized by his adherence to the masculine boundary. As laws of sex and sexuality dictated by patriarchal discourse demand obedience, people stop intervening, and instead choose to censor themselves. They are limited by their physical environment, itself a manifestation of patriarchal culture that renders certain actions permissible for men (such as listening to clients having a meeting), and punishable for women (listening in on men).

“Signal 30” demonstrates both the mutually harmful violence, and the pressure to obey, that define hegemonic masculinity. Physical violence is rare in *Mad Men*, but to see this rupture as a product of a rigidly patriarchal culture reframes less overtly-violent interactions as efforts to preserve a status quo, rather than defend against any real danger. Through Reynaud's questioning of the means men use to secure their masculine image, we come to see the harm done by violence as lasting, and mutually harmful, as characters hold onto their resentments and scars throughout the episode. Working towards ethical examples of critique, film and television must first acknowledge men's situation as harmful, so that the totality of men's responsibility may be realized. Men also have the potential to refuse their responsibility, seeing their harmful actions as necessitated by the actions of others, resulting in an upholding of hegemonic masculinity. Analyzing a representation of hegemonic masculinity in *Black Mirror*, this danger comes into focus through Michel Foucault's (1990) theory on confession.

2.2 Black Mirror

“The Entire History of You” imagines a future where most of British society carries a brain implant called a “Grain,” giving individuals access to a database of everything their eyes and ears have experienced. Memories are available to rewatch, and can be viewed personally, or projected onto a screen for others to see. After showing up late to a house party, Liam (Toby Kebbel) secretly observes his wife, Ffion (Jodie Whittaker), talking to an old boyfriend, Jonas (Tom Cullen). Liam suspects Ffion is cheating on him, and will not rest until Ffion admits it. Not wanting to engage his paranoia, Ffion shouts, “It was years ago,” and Liam replies, “Not to him.”²⁹ Liam’s distrust of Ffion is not related to her experience, but rather the prospect of another man claiming experiences that Liam claims for himself. Beauvoir helps us understand this dynamic of possession:³⁰ Ffion is a sexual object for Liam that someone else is claiming to possess, enraging Liam. Ffion’s sexual knowledge that cannot be controlled and possessed by Liam is not obedient, which means Liam must punish Ffion by forcing her to confess the details. The confession he seeks is ultimately intended to affirm his masculine pride, resting on a claim to his paternal rights over their child, as well as their marriage. Foucault references confession as a disciplining technology of power through which sexual experience is censored. He writes that confession “came to signify someone’s acknowledgment of his own actions and thoughts,”³¹ but notes that personal confession alone was not what granted the confession meaning.

For a long time, the individual was vouched for by the reference of others and the demonstration of his ties to the commonweal (family, allegiance, protection); then he was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself.³²

A personal confession must appeal to the laws put forth by structures of power. The law of what is an acceptable confession is decided ahead of the individual's need to confess, making the confession a punishment of the subject that lends legitimacy to the law. The 'truth' of what is acceptable is constructed (and controlled) by those in positions of power. This means that the seemingly inevitable revelation of sexual truth is a reflection of obedience to the law, at least principally. Ethics may come into play in a relationship that is reciprocal, but in the case of Liam and Ffion, the wife's confession must appeal to the husband's preconceived notion of truth within patriarchy, regardless of her lived experience.

When Liam confronts Ffion with evidence that she and Jonas slept together within the last 18 months, she tells him that this was in response to a five day period where Liam walked out, making no attempt to contact her. Liam ignores this knowledge, as it contradicts his controlled definition of who is at fault in the relationship. Instead, he fixates on the possibility that Jonas could be the biological father of Liam and Ffion's child. The child is another object Liam claims possession over, a result of his fulfilling his masculine role through reproductive sex. The accusation of infidelity causes Ffion to curl into herself on the couple's bed, as Liam screams at her, "This isn't me! Look at what you're doing to me!"³³ He demands a confession that aligns with his perceived masculine right to his wife's sexual experience, as well as a right to possession of their child. Confession here serves as a hegemonic disciplinary technology of power, a means of reasserting patriarchal control just as Liam's faults become clear. We see a glimpse of how this situation causes unhappiness for Liam, as he becomes angrier and more violent towards Ffion in his search for truth. This is what Garcia means when she says that "Possessing women sexually...is one way among others to inauthentically get recognition,"³⁴ as Liam punishes Ffion for lying to him about her sex life, while simultaneously driving her away

from their marriage, and thus their sex life. Garcia notes that “Through this love of a mythical, unreal vision of woman, man fails at encountering woman,”³⁵ leading to her critique that man is “alone” in this situation as a result of his objectification of women. Here, we see how Foucault’s notion of the social order that authenticates confession interacts with masculinity, as Liam pursues a version of Ffion that does not exist, and is disappointed when she does not comply with his vision.

Film and television exist within a patriarchal system of representation—obvious in the content of these programs—and can therefore identify previously invisible technologies of power through good faith criticism. While *Mad Men* creates space for audiences to feel themselves trapped within the surveilled spaces of a 1960s New York office, *Black Mirror* uses its technology to offer a shortcut for men. The episode ends with a reflection on the society Grain technology has created, as time skips ahead and we learn that Ffion has left Liam, along with their child, leaving Liam alone in their empty home, as he reviews memories of happier times. Tormented by these memories, he decides to remove his Grain, cutting it out from behind his ear as images of his marriage flash in rapid succession, and the episode ends. While certainly a comment on society’s reliance on external methods of memory and knowledge, this ending also shows a tricky relationship to the ideas of responsibility and ethics, as Liam rather easily ignores his privileged position and chooses to forget all of his past actions. He imagines that a confession (appealing to his Grain’s disciplinary record of the affair) from Ffion will exonerate him of blame, and having forced this truth out of hiding, he is disappointed to find himself not exonerated, but alone, lost in happier memories that remind him of what he has lost. Liam’s walking-out on Ffion is collapsed into one of many memories he cuts out, along with moments of the couple’s bliss. The dissonance between Ffion’s experience and Liam’s expectations have

brought him disappointment, but the episode is too quick to center the tragedy of his situation, refusing a more meaningful engagement with the fallout of Liam's actions for others. It is possible to extrapolate from this ending that Liam's alone-ness (and his tormented suffering) is justified by the 'truth' that Ffion was dishonest, when in fact it was Liam's response to the event that resulted in the end of their marriage. With his memory technology gone, his responsibility goes, too. Ignorance soothes his troubled psyche, and after all, the truth was bound to come out eventually.

The performance of pain can be used to obscure women's experience and men's responsibility, and as this thesis moves to discuss other films which deal with men's oppression of women, inauthentic performances of men's shame carry the same function. If it is necessary for film and television to acknowledge the harm that masculinity creates for men, it is equally (if not more) important to focus on the experience of women. Returning to Garcia,

Masculinity does not offer itself as a topic of investigation; it is too transparent. It becomes one only when what it constructs as what it is not—femininity—starts to be analyzed.³⁶

Men's experiences must be analyzed, but without considering the perspectives of women, men remain the authority of what is permissible regarding hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, refusing ambiguity and responsibility in favor of a reclaimed masculine pride.

3 Shame as Avoidance of Criticism

It is the project of this thesis to identify ethical critiques of masculinity and patriarchy, but in raising criticism, there is the potential for bad faith arguments to wash out good faith critique, leaving masculinity and patriarchy as they were. The example of *Black Mirror* illustrated how

men absolve themselves of responsibility by denying their privileged position. This section examines films which critique inauthentically, purposefully or inadvertently absolving men of their responsibility through an appeal to men's shame and lost pride, rather than their ambiguous situation which allows them to act ethically in the present.

Both *Men* and *The Power of the Dog* were released in a historical moment where men's abuses of power in Hollywood (and larger culture) was being questioned in a public forum, through movements like #MeToo, and the high-profile trials of abusers such as Harvey Weinstein. However, just as some men are criticized and/or criminally prosecuted for their actions, there is potential for oppression to evolve. Entertainment figures like Louis C.K.,³⁷³⁸ and Chris D'Elia³⁹ went publicly silent following accusations of sexual misconduct against women, but their careers have since been reclaimed, as these men routinely fill arenas.⁴⁰ In a time where men lament the loss of their social significance, *while preaching to audiences that recognize them as significant*, film and television must be willing to engage with men's responsibility to act ethically, and not engage solely in representations of shame.

Shame is a powerful affect, one that Silvan Tomkins describes as turning the subject "away from other objects" and towards themselves following a disorienting encounter with something that was thought to be familiar.⁴¹ Derived from a perceived failure "of the self by the self,"⁴² shame burdens us with the notion that we have transgressed a social boundary, creating an affective response that film and television often help create. For our purposes, the idea of personal shame is secondary to the eventual overcoming of shame, namely how this overcoming is weaponized by structures of power to negate men's responsibility. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed asks, "What do expressions of national shame do?"⁴³ Her question is directed at White Australians' performance of shame regarding their nation's treatment of Aboriginal

peoples in the past. She argues that White Australians do not feel genuine shame over their nation's past, but that the appearance of shame is used to signal that the nation is more ethical now because of the shame they supposedly feel towards those White Australians who failed to act ethically in the past.⁴⁴ Shame, then, can be used, even if it is not felt. The display of shame, as opposed to its lived experience and validity, is Ahmed's focus, and she identifies shame as a political rallying cry for White Australians eager to reclaim their national pride. Rancière offers an important perspective on this process of hiding responsibility, as he outlines how difficult images are commodified through their popularity, trapping the spectator in a loop of guilt over the content of the image, without a way to meaningfully act in the face of so many difficult images.⁴⁵ To appear shamed is (in theory) to begin the process of moving past shame, and both *Men* and *The Power of the Dog* primarily rely on images that affect shame in the audience, obscuring a lack of interest in the women men oppress.

In her book *Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema*, Candida Yates examines jealousy as it is used to justify men's continued abuse of women, citing—among others—*Unfaithful* (Lyne 2002) and *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976) as examples of films which engage masculine jealousy's capacity to escalate into violence. She identifies the public role of shame as an exacerbation of masculine jealousy, writing that

the experience of shameful jealousy may be made much more severe by a societal response that pillories jealousy as a purely negative emotion and a sign of narcissistic weakness.⁴⁶

Here again we see Foucault's notion of confession as it is confirmed by societal laws, echoed in new contexts. A masculine response to jealousy may be inflamed by shame, so that the shame incurred over failure to achieve patriarchal standards of masculinity drives further jealousy over

the loss of significant status men perceive themselves to be entitled to. Critics acting in bad faith might assume that without pride, men as a group become weak,⁴⁷ leading to jealousy over those they perceive to have taken their pride (namely women and those who rightly criticize men's harmful behaviors). Shame acts as a justification of jealousy, obscuring reality so that men acknowledge their inability to live up to a patriarchal standard, but ultimately use their remorse as a means of reclaiming this standard as a source of pride.

Shame can be revealing, challenging, and indicative of societal structures: as Ahmed writes, shame is experienced "as *the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence*."⁴⁸ To acknowledge shame, however, is not enough. These films show the worst of men, without contextualizing their behaviors as those which men are capable of changing. They exemplify the danger of criticism without action, when shame and the exploited secret of sexuality are used to ensure the survival of hegemonic masculinity and the patriarchal society it supports. A Beauvoirian perspective sees the individual as ambiguous, and thus bound to face difficulty along with a range of other indeterminate experiences. Shame may not be avoidable, but it is important to see shame as an affect which we might respond to ethically, rather than simply display it in an attempt to restore a comfortable status quo.

3.1 Men

Shame dominates *Men*, even as the film appears to critique the situation men's behaviors create for women. The film follows Harper (Jessie Buckley) during an ill-fated getaway to a rented English countryside estate, an interlude following her husband's (Paapa Essiedu) suicide, which he blamed Harper for just before jumping off the roof of their London apartment. In the countryside, Harper is accosted by various men: caretakers who assume she cannot possibly be vacationing alone, priests who blame her for her husband's death, and nude men who follow her

into the woods. Aside from the actor playing Harper's husband, every one of these men is played by Rory Kinnear, lending a homogeneity to their actions for the audience, even as Harper perceives them as unique individuals. Her grief manifests into horror, and the film's overall message, as Harper learns not to fear the various men around her, and chooses to see them for their manipulative, violent, and ultimately pitiable ways. In the climax, she faces a nude man who approaches her before falling to the ground, his stomach expanding as he gives birth to one of the other men who has been following Harper. This newly-born man steps forward, then gives birth to another man, cycling through every man in the film before ending with Harper's husband. His broken foot and sliced arm (injuries from his fall off the roof) have carried over to every man thus far. As he moves to sit beside Harper, she asks, "What do you want from me?", to which he replies, "Your love,"⁴⁹ as the film ends.

Where is shame operating in *Men*, and how does it obfuscate men's responsibility to change their behaviors? Returning to Tomkins, shame is visible in the face,⁵⁰ and as audiences are affected by the image of men's horrific actions in *Men*, it is a unified masculine face that comes to represent both the horror and harmlessness of men. Our response of accordance of shame, or a more critical distance from the film, nonetheless draws attention toward the prospect of men's shame over their objectification of women. As Harper witnesses the men's cycle of birth and death, her ability to act or react to the men's actions is lost in the display of humiliated masculinity. As the film quickly ends after this moment, it is Harper's witnessing of the event that appears to grant her the strength to face the memory of her ex-husband, suggesting that men's behaviors need only be recognized as harmful in order for them to change. This leaves out the potential for men's responsibility and ethical action, wallowing in a display that relies on the already-precarious notion of audience's shame over the images shown in the film.

Tomkins further notes that shame reduces joy, as the subject becomes highly aware of their failure to meet social expectations. Still, the subject's circumstances and reaction to shame can modify this reduction: "Once shame has been activated, the original excitement or joy may be increased again and inhibit the shame or the shame may further inhibit and reduce excitement or joy."⁵¹ Shame does not always eradicate joy, even temporarily. Collective shame, which Ahmed discusses, only suggests an internal conflict, refusing to engage at all with shame as a personal failure of the self. In her example of White Australians' performance of national shame, joy does not enter the equation. Instead, Ahmed discusses shame's capacity for binding a nation together, even as those people in it do not feel shame for historical atrocities in their nation's past.

The projection of what is unjust onto the past allows shame to be represented here as a collective shame that does not affect individuals in the present, even as it surrounds and covers them.⁵²

As Ahmed critiques, collective shame is not genuine, and thus the ceasing of joy that defines shame for Tomkins is transformed into a reclamation of that joy. Mass groups will always contain those who don't feel shame, and are even proud of the events others are made to feel shameful for. These are the privileged people who benefit from the current system, and thus are not incentivized to change it. Not all men will watch *Men*, see a critique of masculinity, and feel shame—and yet it is not collective shame's capacity to reduce personal joy that is harmful, but the way it is deployed as a shift of focus from the primary victims of hegemonic masculinity. Shame may not personally affect men "in the present," but its performance signifies the work of shame, as that which will eventually be surpassed toward a more harmonious situation (for men, at least).

As Ahmed continues, this characterizes the “double play of concealment and exposure [that] is crucial to the work of shame,”⁵³ for while harmful actions in the past may be brought to light, without action, shame obscures responsibility through a show of remorse. The only action being performed is in favor of reducing shame, and thus reclaiming a collective pride. There may be a new type of masculinity to replace the historical one, but without attention to women’s experiences of oppression by men, it is too easy for men to continue their past actions in redressed forms. The filmmakers identify that men oppress women at various points, but take this identification as a solution, and not as the first step towards recognizing the ambiguous situation of all people.

Men’s claim that men can be monsters and must be stopped is not unsound, but how does Harper put an end to this cycle, and why is it her who must do it? Her personal journey of grief puts her in an extremely vulnerable position, as she attempts to reckon with the fact that her husband was abusive and manipulative, but that she still grieves his loss. When the local men torment Harper in the countryside, she is shocked by their behavior, or else runs in fear of danger. She is not forced to confront her grief as it complicates her notion of herself as a wife and as a subject for herself, nor the misogynistic roots of the police department and casual sexism of the various other men of the world. Instead, Harper endures these forces, surviving long enough for the men to embarrass themselves. By exposing one aspect of patriarchal society and concealing another, this ending exploits the larger culture of misogyny and violence towards women through its double play of shame, simplifying patriarchal violence so that it is shocking, but not so terrible that it cannot be easily overcome.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault writes that “Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes,”⁵⁴

suggesting that the body is where power is most often exercised. Even as the film recognizes men's hegemonic behaviors through their shared face, the focus on this face as a point for the audience to feel shame simplifies men's oppression of women into a question of men's shame, rather than their potential to act ethically, or of women's experience of oppression. Rather than see men as inherently powerful, we must view their relationships with others (and thus their privileged social status) as constitutive of the power they exercise. The climax's focus on men as pitiable creatures relies on their previous depiction as monstrous oppressors, revealing them 'as they are' in the end, but without any attempt to contextualize their actions in a larger patriarchal society. This suggests that though men have been monsters in the past, they are no longer capable of hurting Harper if they are simply recognized for their monstrous actions. Buchbinder and Sedgwick's problematization of who masculinity pertains to is seen here, as the film suggests that men's vulnerability will expose them as weak and pitiable. While this could lead to a critique of hegemonic masculinity as turning men into abusive monsters (following the horror genre), the film suggests that Harper must be the one to change them, avoiding men's responsibility to reject the benefits of their privileged position. As Harper grows bored of the sight of men's docile bodies, it is her process of coming to see the men as harmless that ultimately renders them so. The arrangement of bodies is important for establishing who is exercising power, and in this instance, Harper mystically gains a resolve that grants her power, while stripping it from men.

This is not a productive way to situate men and women's relationships. Recognition is undoubtedly important, but films have recognized the power men unjustly exercise against women for many years.⁵⁵ Not all men in the film are portrayed as antagonistic towards Harper, but they all share the same face. Good and bad are collapsed into a hegemonic image of men's

oppression of women, and it is this history of oppression that Harper overcomes simply by enduring men long enough to realize that they, too, are harmed by the narrow sexuality they've defined for themselves. We can see how the film does the work of identifying masculinity as an impasse, but as this section argues, shame without action results in an upholding of patriarchal oppression. The prospect of women's freedom, or even men's growth, is ignored. Recognition becomes an exercise of power in itself, as the film attempts to show the power women wield by identifying men's harmful behaviors. This lack of action appears differently in *The Power of the Dog*, as the film grapples with similar problems of men's harmful situation, without attending to the possibility of men changing their behaviors, or considering the experiences of women.

3.2 The Power of the Dog

Not every critique of masculinity will advocate for direct ethical action in the present, but a good critique will create the curiosity in the audience to seek out that action. Rancière discusses the need for "images of the true reality," or images that can be easily converted into action by viewers, as anything less will result in us becoming pure spectators, lacking the capacity for action.⁵⁶ His analysis of images predates Ahmed's discussion of shame, but strikes a similar tone in his phrasing that "the demonstration of her guilt is perhaps more important to the accuser than is her conversion to action."⁵⁷ To view the reality of men's harmful treatment of women, and then refuse to act in the benefit of women in the present, is to remain a spectator, perpetuating men's role at the center of discourse on masculinity *and* femininity. *Men* loses its critique of patriarchal culture in its conclusion, assuming that women will solve men's problems for them, but what of a film that more consistently critiques patriarchal society? If we are trying to reach an ethical critique of masculinity, surely a film depicting the cultural construction of masculinity will inspire audiences to examine their behaviors. *The Power of the Dog* accomplishes more than

Men, identifying cultural forces that create hegemonic masculinity, but it also serves as an example of critique that encourages empty spectatorship, lacking an interest in the experience of women, and men's responsibility.

Campion's film portrays the silent, experienced pressures of patriarchal society, along with men's struggle to live up to a mythologized ideal of masculinity. Set in 1925 at a rural Montana horse ranch, Rose (Kirsten Dunst) and her son Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee) join the Burbank family after George (Jesse Plemons) meets and quickly marries Rose, a union which he does not appear interested in apart from the social significance it grants him. For example: Rose claims to have only a passing knowledge of the piano, yet George sets up a social gathering at the house for guests to listen to her play, embarrassing Rose as she is not prepared to perform for an audience. Before the marriage, we see Rose operating a restaurant and supporting herself, with the help of her son, but she is stripped of this arrangement as servants take on tasks she was capable of doing herself. This appears to be an important element of the film, depicting Rose as self-sufficient before showing how a traditionally patriarchal marriage ignores her subjectivity, but the film does little with Rose's experience after this point. George's ranch-hand brother, Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch), resents Rose for taking up his time with George, and torments her with petty annoyances such as interrupting her piano practice by playing his banjo. Phil idolizes the deceased man who taught him his cowboy lifestyle, Bronco Henry, and the film implies the two had an intimate relationship, one that Phil divulges to Peter. He is at once a traditionally masculine aggressor, but also openly influenced by the intimate connection he had with a man. Rose's unhappiness in her marriage leads to alcoholism, which Peter links to Phil's torments, and in an effort to protect his mother from the ambiguously hetero/homosexual Phil, Peter decides to kill him. Peter secretly poisons a cut with anthrax, and after Phil dies, the film ends with George

and Rose returning home from Phil's funeral, the safety of their marriage symbolically restored as Peter looks down at them from his bedroom window with a blank expression.

The Power of the Dog engages with shame, but in a tricky way. Peter's relative silence and lanky build are linked to his lack of interest in ranch activities, as he studies to become a doctor. He is able to recognize in Phil some of what he sees in himself, exploiting his lack of traditional masculinity even as he is influenced by patriarchal laws regarding men's duty to protect women. He is stamping Phil out to protect his mother, but also to eliminate the influence of homosexuality on the heterosexual family unit he has become part of. Yates writes that for masculine jealousy, "The aggression towards the rival and the hurt at the betrayal of the beloved can feed into the jealous subject's own tragic narrative of unrequited love."⁵⁸ Peter is simultaneously caught in the hegemonically masculine shame of not being able to protect his mother, and the patriarchal family structure that seeks to censor homosexuality. Afraid of losing his own significance in the newly established family, his actions speak to a perceived loss of love which could be avoided through a tempered reaction to jealousy as a normal phenomenon, but his jealousy is instead amplified by the shame of identification with Phil's homosexual desires. This depiction of shame in the film uncovers the masculine, jealous drives that pit men against one another, anchored by patriarchal notions that freely disregard women's needs in favor of men's.

Rose is the central figure that inspires George to settle down, disturbing the Burbank brothers' peace so strongly that Phil pesters her endlessly, leading Peter to kill him for it, but amidst the attention paid to the men, Rose's perspective is lost. Rancière writes that "it is not obviously the case that knowledge of a situation entails a desire to change it," suggesting that critical evaluation of troubling art in the past disguised a need for action, becoming lost between

the “awareness of the hidden reality and a feeling of guilt about the denied reality.”⁵⁹ I don’t deny the film’s ability to make viewers aware of the sexual repression that is central to maintaining hegemonic masculinity, but shame is an affect that turns the subject inward, rather than leaving open the potential for ethical action. As discussed before, what of those who are already aware of men’s duplicitous behaviors, or those who readily accept them for the significance they grant? Shame is too easily deployed as an end in itself, and as Rancière identifies, this is in part due to the double play of shame. The need for action regarding the repression that has been denied is neutralized through the recognition and subsequent guilt over the previously hidden/denied repression. We are made aware, but turn inward towards the guilt over our previous lack of awareness, rather than outward toward the future. This limits the film to analysis of the society men uphold and create for themselves, with women’s experiences holding only a minor narrative weight.

Rancière’s argument invites a firmer critical perspective on the film. Discussing the effect of a disturbing image on a spectator, he observes that while these images motivate us to act through their content, their status as commodities which we consume reminds us of our inability to meaningfully engage with their content.

The virtue of activity, counter-posed to the evil of the image, is thus absorbed by the sovereign voice that stigmatizes the false existence which it knows us to be condemned to wallow in.⁶⁰

Rancière reminds us that our perceived failure to rise above the commodification of images is false. Presented with the unbearability of men’s actions, it is too easy to resign ourselves to shame over this previously denied reality—to be convinced that men’s harmful behaviors are an insurmountable commodity that we enjoy consuming too much to change.

The depiction of women's experiences change this, as the next section explores through analysis of *Aftersun*, but it is important to see that film which centers men's shame instead of the women they oppress is in service of men's reclamation of pride, rather than women's (or men's) freedom from patriarchal structures. The first section of this thesis argued that critical film and television must recognize men's responsibility within their privileged position, and this section's analysis adds a qualification: for film and television to move towards an ethical critique, action cannot be secondary to shame. As Ahmed and Rancière illustrate, to become caught in between our recognition and shame over a previously hidden/denied reality is to refuse change, as we are made into docile spectators through our failure to engage with disturbing images through action. Using Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity as it relates to ethical action, the next section explicitly examines films which engage with women's experiences, as well as the implications of men's actions in a broader ethical framework.

4 Curious Freedom

Having explored the notions of masculinity as an impasse for men's authentic connections, men's responsibility to change their behaviors, and the roles of shame and commodification in reducing the significance of women's experiences, what can film do to address these issues and critique masculinity and patriarchy ethically? While neither *Aftersun* or *The Green Knight* fully embody every good faith critique of masculinity, each film focuses on men who are isolated from their societies, driven by pressure to maintain a traditionally masculine image. Both films also engage with the notion of freedom as that which builds the future, which I relate to Beauvoir's *Ethics* to examine films which follow an ethical framework to critique hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. Beauvoir writes that

To be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom.⁶¹

Beauvoir presents an existentialist ethics, meaning an avoidance of bad faith, the preservation of others' freedom, and the idea that we must take responsibility for our freedom. She also argues for an ethical worldview that sees each subject as free to act ethically in their current situation, as long as each person's freedom is reciprocally recognized.

Following the discussion of Rancière and *The Power of the Dog*, I analyze *Aftersun* as it creates a curiosity for the future not through depictions of violence, but through a daughter's desire to understand her relationship with her father, from a future where he is no longer present. Rancière writes of the danger of submitting to the impenetrability of disturbing images, noting that "Melancholy feeds on its own impotence... casting a disenchanted eye over a world in which critical interpretation of the system has become an element of the system itself."⁶² When men are the focal point of critical film and television about men, it becomes easy to view the images cynically, a justification for nothing to be done in the face of the ubiquity of the images. As Tomkins wrote, "Shame turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self,"⁶³ away from our need to act. For men to act ethically, there must be an engagement with the future, and of others' freedom, in order to ward off an impulse to succumb to disturbing images and the seemingly immovable power structures they identify.

Beauvoir writes that freedom "is not a question of giving men time and happiness, it is not a question of stopping the movement of life: it is a question of fulfilling it,"⁶⁴ "fulfill" meaning to surpass one's current situation through projects that preserve the freedom of others and open possibilities for the future. This can be a difficult concept, as the socially significant

status of men shows us that there is a comfortability in exploiting others for one's personal gain. As *The Green Knight* illustrates, this exploitation is harmful not only to others, but to the self. Actions taken for ourselves take shape in the lives of others, whether we realize it or not. To demonstrate how this pre-decided perspective is challenged by the film—why it is better to act for others, and how recognition of one's ambiguity creates a less binary discourse on masculinity—I analyze Beauvoir in conjunction with Foucault and Rancière. For film to meaningfully critique hegemonic masculinity, it must attempt to reckon with the nuances regarding the past, present, and future as they are defined by the actions of men, and as both *Aftersun* and *The Green Knight* demonstrate, no critique is meaningful without a direct engagement with the future.

4.1 Aftersun

When film depicts the present only as a reflection of a monstrous past, it is too easy for guilt and shame to obscure a focus on the future. Before discussing the character interactions that *Aftersun* uses to create a focus on the future, it is worth illustrating how images can depict the uncertainty of the future. In his section on the intolerable image, Rancière references photographs of road blocks in Gaza, made of piled up stones that stand in for the larger Israeli occupation. This, for Rancière, is an image that refuses a surrender to inaccessibility, and instead creates “a more discreet affect, an affect of indeterminate effect—curiosity, the desire to see closer up.”⁶⁵ Though he admits to not knowing the full scope of what this curiosity entails in the viewer of the photographs, the desire to understand further is mobile, whereas guilt and shame often stick the viewer with knowledge they already had, or else lead to the inaction of despair. In *Aftersun*, we as spectators watch as a daughter integrates memories from her childhood with her present as an

adult, suggesting a productive and curious state of adolescence for the character (as well as the spectator) that Kelli Fuery explores in the context of Beauvoir:

adolescence functions as an embodied template which affectively (that is unconsciously) reverberates in response to the turbulent aesthetics, appeals for empathy and emotional experience we experience in cinematic spectatorship.⁶⁶

Adolescence as a situation, not being tied to age, is thus a moment for the subject to make new plans and reflect on the choices that they and others have made. When we watch a film, we are invited to reflect on the decisions, thoughts, and behaviors of characters, and so spectatorship itself becomes a kind of adolescence, a reflective position for us, as well as the characters. The emancipated spectator, as Rancière describes, is one that uses images to form new thoughts and ideas, rather than accepting the mythical ‘truth’ of the image in-itself. *Aftersun* uses a troubled daughter’s own reflective position of adolescence to invite the viewer to do the same. It encourages a curious attitude, engaging with our desire not just to learn from cinema, but to become more ethical spectators amidst its “turbulent aesthetics.” These notions of emancipation, curiosity, and adolescence are contextualized as products of our ambiguous situation as subjects, which requires “holding contradictory perspectives within our ways of being,” a process we would rather avoid, according to Fuery.⁶⁷ Rancière’s notion of difficult images and their inaccessibility is directly related to our struggle to accept our ambiguity as subjects, as Fuery highlights the problem of taking in difficult emotional experiences. As I go on to discuss *Aftersun*, it is important to remember that the holding of two seemingly opposing perspectives is what defines us and (as I move towards *The Green Knight*) enables us to act ethically.

Calum (Paul Mescal) and his eleven year old daughter Sophie’s (Frankie Corio) vacation is presented as Sophie’s memory, with certain events captured on a home video camera and

represented 'in real time,' so to speak, while others are represented as traditional narrative film. Interspersed are scenes of a grown-up Sophie, fantasizing about a nightclub where she catches glimpses of her father under a strobe light, appearing and disappearing between frames. He is depicted as a loving, attentive father who suffers from a heavy depression that makes it difficult to remain present with Sophie. During the vacation, he confesses to a scuba diving attendant that he didn't think he'd make it past 30, and though his death is never depicted, Calum's absence in Sophie's future suggests that this vacation was the last meaningful time the two spent together.

In a tender scene, Calum and Sophie float on a raft and chat about a boy Sophie kissed. Calum listens, and says that whatever sex, drugs, or parties Sophie might engage with in her future, "I've done it all and you can too. I just want you to promise me that you'll talk to me about it."⁶⁸ He isn't enforcing obedience, but rather meeting Sophie's growing freedom with his own life experience, refusing judgment in favor of compassion and understanding. Calum's depiction in the film creates curiosity: if he was able to be a good father then, what makes his relationship with Sophie so strained in the future? Alongside the image of his struggle is Sophie's adult perspective, as she longs to understand her father, looking at the past from her adult position, both as a daughter to Calum, and as a mother to her own child. True to their ambiguous situations, Sophie does not remember her father in only one way, and Calum is often eager and happy to engage with Sophie as both his child, and as a growing adult.

The "affect of indeterminate effect—curiosity" that Rancière identifies in photographs of Gaza road blocks manifests through its engagement with the past, present, and future. It is this same effect that *Aftersun* achieves through editing, as character interactions occur across time and space. A playful dance between Calum and Sophie at the end of the film shows how Sophie's own curiosity is created through her incomplete memory of her father. On the last night

of their vacation, Calum pulls Sophie onto the hotel dance floor, an apology for his emotional distance the previous day. As he embarrasses her with his dancing, the film intercuts shots of the adult Sophie struggling to find Calum in the fantasy space of the nightclub. She eventually finds him, dancing frantically, his eyes shut as the strobe light catches him only a few frames at a time. As she moves to embrace him, the film cuts back to their dancing at the hotel. Calum pushes Sophie away in the nightclub, vanishing as Sophie screams in frustration, her voice inaudible through the pulse of David Bowie and Queen's "Under Pressure," which soundtracks the sequence.

The editing of the scene works like a memory, lodging the past firmly in Sophie's future, as she manages her complicated need for acceptance—but expectation of absence—from her father. His actions during the vacation make up their difficult 'past,' but there is no opportunity for the audience to take on shame, because we are also shown how Calum's positive relationship with Sophie makes him an important figure to her. The effect is one of curiosity, rather than a resignation to the inaccessibility of the pressures of hegemonic masculinity. We see Sophie's attempt to understand her father as a model for our own behavior, following her curiosity to see Calum "closer up,"⁶⁹ as his presence in the dance sequence is simultaneously compelling and distressing. We see little of Sophie's emotion in this project to understand the past, but it is clear in the sequence that the connection they once shared has been severed. A moment of joy with her father in the 'present' of their vacation quickly becomes a memory, something which has come to represent the search for her father in her adult life.

This intercutting allows the past and future to take on a present-ness for Sophie, as the viewer experiences the two in dialogue, each informing the other. The curiosity Rancière writes of is only the first step, secondary to what the viewer of the intolerable image is made to be

curious about. It's easy to see how a viewer might be enthralled by the aesthetic properties of film and television, becoming curious about something that is not directly linked to the content of the film. Depicting the spectacle of men's harmful behavior may instill curiosity as to how the filmmakers accomplished the recreation of various bloody special effects and choreographed fights, leading to an obsession with what allows men to abuse their power, as opposed to a curiosity of how they can change. Far from creating a feeling of despair or hopelessness, *Aftersun*'s interplay of past, present, and future is a reflection of each person's obligation to treat the present as a point of action, from which many possible futures may result. Beauvoir details this position we find ourselves in:

The present is not a potential past; it is the moment of choice and action; we can not avoid living it through a project; and there is no project which is purely contemplative since one always projects himself towards something, toward the future.⁷⁰

Hegemonic masculinity enforces a definition of masculinity that is capable of domination. Men are expected not to cry in front of others, and to keep their feelings largely to themselves. Through careful intercutting and depictions of Calum's positive relationship with Sophie, *Aftersun* engages in a daughter's curious desire to understand how these pressures affected her father, as he is no longer present in her future. Beauvoir describes our freedom as embodied, growing as we age, and generating "sympathy or repulsion"⁷¹ from the world around us as a result of the inextricable link between freedom and relationality. On this "sympathy or repulsion," Fuery writes:

These two emotive reactions illustrate the affective relationality of ambiguity as the adolescent visibly negotiates their encounter with the world, as a being that seeks affirmation as much as individuation.⁷²

As a child, Sophie's freedom is still growing, a state her father meets by treating her with respect and compassion. As an adult, however, Sophie is undoubtedly a different person, though she still longs for love and affirmation from her father. These seemingly contradictory perspectives are what define Sophie's ambiguity, which she embraces by moving forward as a daughter, mother, wife, and subject for herself. Her embrace of this situation is what allows her to have sympathy for her father, curiously searching for him in her past, as opposed to defining their relationship by its loss.

Rather than throw up our hands over the seeming inevitability of our actions to harm others, this father/daughter dynamic is a platform from which to analyze the ramifications of every part of their relationship. The positive memories of the vacation are readily accessible on videotape in Sophie's future, but so is the haunted fantasy of her father in the nightclub. If men are to recognize their ambiguity and change their behaviors, then they must not only see hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy as systems which limit men's connections with others—they must also see connection with others as an ethical question. *Aftersun* engages with curiosity as a recognition of our ambiguity, but it is now time to turn to a discussion of ethics for men.

4.2 The Green Knight

Beauvoir outlines the serious⁷³ position as one that sees the world as determinable, a series of causes and effects that can be understood, repeated, and exploited. This is similar to the position of hegemonic masculinity discussed earlier—men who are happy with their position of privilege and, seeing no problem with their limited scope of the world, treat others as objects to be used. Beauvoir compares this position to the nihilist, who recognizes the lack of meaning in the world (but wrongly assumes that their actions have no meaning), in order to arrive at a third viewpoint:

that of ambiguity. She proposes that true personal freedom to live in an undefined world comes from a recognition of others' freedom:

Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men...Moral anxiety does not come to man from without; he finds within himself the anxious question, "What's the use?" Or, to put it better, he himself is this urgent interrogation.⁷⁴

When every person asks themselves "What's the use?", each person recognizes their capacity to define the "use" of their existence in the world. Rather than extrapolate from this the serious conclusion that the world is predictably unpredictable, Beauvoir advocates for an ethical philosophy based on the potential for each person's actions to help create an ethical future for all, not just for the self. We must make the world through our actions, embracing the possibilities created by the actions of others that invariably affect the individual. To illustrate using *Mad Men's* "Signal 30": when Don Draper and the other men in the conference room fail to intervene in a fight that could have been prevented, they take on the serious position, recognizing the animosity between two enemies and permitting it so as not to disturb the status quo. Beauvoir advocates for the indeterminate possibilities of ambiguity, embracing a lack of knowledge of how the world will function positively or negatively, with the assurance that just as the individual subject is free to make the world around them, so is everyone else.

The Green Knight presents the serious position to show its failure to predict the world, as well as the destruction this attitude brings. In this retelling of the Arthurian legend, the young Gawain (Dev Patel) is thrust into fame after accepting the mythical Green Knight's (Ralph Ineson) challenge to a duel, in which the Knight's axe is offered to anyone who can land a blow on the Knight, with the catch that he must then receive the same blow one year later. Gawain

accepts, cuts off the Knight's head, and after the Knight magically rises and exits (his head in tow), Gawain is revered as a local hero. During the challenge, we see a parallel sequence of Gawain's mother (Sarita Choudhury) summoning the Knight in secret, arranging the challenge so that her son might achieve a higher social standing. A year later, Gawain ventures off to find the Knight, but not before his mother gives him a sash that prevents the wearer from being harmed.

Already, the film is engaging with men's privileged social status as a construction, and reflecting a serious attitude that sees honor and knighthood as the only goals worth pursuing, while treating the world as predictably cruel and vulnerable to exploit for personal gain. A fellow traveler (Barry Keoghan) offers Gawain valuable advice, but after asking for a reward, Gawain tosses him a single coin. Later, Gawain finds the ghost of a girl named Winnifred (Erin Kellyman), who asks that he swim to the bottom of a lake and retrieve her skull, to which Gawain inquires what his reward will be. She chastises him for making such a request, reflecting how his serious attitude has brought him out of step with an opportunity to show his character. His image as an honorable man is frequently undercut by his behavior, and is put to the greatest test upon finding the Green Knight and preparing to receive his reciprocal blow to the head. Gawain runs just as the knight moves to strike, and in quick cuts we see Gawain arriving home to the Round Table, claiming to have honored the challenge. He is rewarded with knighthood, and soon after, he takes on the mantle of King. As time skips forward, Gawain has a son with an old lover, Essel (Alicia Vikander), whom he casts out in favor of a diplomatic marriage. Moving forward, his son, now a grown man, is killed in battle, and as Gawain returns from the battlefield, sullen, there are few friends left at the Round Table. He is alone when nameless attackers finally break down the throne room door, and as he removes the sash from his waist,

his head falls from his shoulders. The film then cuts back to Gawain as he kneels before the Green Knight, his head ready to be chopped. This time, he decides to remove the sash. “Well done, my brave knight,” the Green Knight says, followed by, “Now, off with your head,”⁷⁵ as the film ends.

As the flash-forward/dream of his future demonstrates, the serious position returns nothing but disappointment for Gawain. Beauvoir writes that the serious subject has sought outside of itself the justifications which it alone could give itself. Detached from the freedom which might have genuinely grounded them, all the ends that have been pursued appear arbitrary and useless.⁷⁶

The traveler who asks Gawain for a reward, Winnifred’s ghost, and Essel are immaterial to Gawain’s quest for a solidified position of power. The film is acutely aware that the privileged position Gawain occupies is constructed, itself a manipulation that encourages him to see the world as exploitable for his own gain. The hegemonically masculine choice is clearly to seize power, to wear the sash that prevents death, and to exploit others before they exploit you. There is a power exercised through this simplification of the world into that which exists only for the self. A serious (or hegemonically masculine) attitude is an exercise of power, supporting patriarchy’s continued oppression of women, as individual interactions in the world come to form a trend of censorship and repression. As per Foucault,

the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole.⁷⁷

He goes on to say that these groups form a homogenized chain, linked by their opposition to the same behaviors and censorship across numerous structures of power. In a serious, hegemonically

masculine attitude, actions in the present only serve the goals that the serious subject has determined, outside of themselves. As the film continues, the disappointment of adhering to these outside goals is shown in stark images of loss and despair. In Gawain's vision, reciprocity with Essel is denied, both for himself and for her. He takes from her only that which will ensure his patriarchal legacy, a son, who dies young. In his imagined final moments as King, he is disconnected from the world, powerful but alone: "all the ends that have been pursued appear arbitrary and useless."⁷⁸ To put it another way, the serious position imagines that the self knows best, thus making others unimportant, and so the world becomes composed of people's predictable *actions* and the *consequences* of those actions, rather than the people and the potential futures their actions create.

The Green Knight depicts the serious attitude as one that denies Gawain's own freedom, as he is set free by realizing his ambiguity, and adopting an ethical attitude. Moi's phrasing of ambiguity is a good reminder of the concept: "every conflict is potentially both productive and destructive,"⁷⁹ meaning that ambiguity is not itself a solution to the problem of existence in a world without defined meaning, but a reflection of our situation as caught between the positive or negative outcomes of our own projects, and the projects of others.⁸⁰ Ambiguity is not itself an answer for how to live, but rather a situation that, when identified, invites curiosity over how to act ethically. It is an adolescence, a point of reflection: an opportunity to contest myths and recognize the negative patriarchal actions that objectify women, while acknowledging that each subject caught up in this patriarchal system is capable of taking action to change their situation. Some are more capable than others, as Moi and Garcia identify via men's exploitation of their privileged position, but *The Green Knight* demonstrates the cost of refusing ethical action in the face of a harmful situation.

Waking from his vision and casting off the sash, Gawain relinquishes his desire for status, and treats the Knight as an equally-free subject. Whether the Knight returns the blow to Gawain is left ambiguous, but this demonstrates the lived experience of freedom. Beauvoir writes,

at the moment one releases his hold, he again finds his hands free and ready to stretch out toward a new future. But this act of passing beyond is conceivable only if what the content has in view is not to bar up the future, but, on the contrary, to plan new possibilities.⁸¹

In other words, one avoids freedom by imposing their will onto others, to “bar up the future” and treat it as impending, rather than curious and exciting. The Knight calls Gawain “brave” after he removes his sash, indicating the courage he has found to embrace the possibility of death in his future, a death that will allow others to go on living. At the “moment one releases his hold” he finds an ethical way to live, and the sacrifice that is often necessary to live ethically requires one to be brave. Gawain (and the audience) doesn’t know what future his choice will create, but the film’s final image of his smiling face refuses an opportunity to grieve for his death, instead ending with the serenity he has achieved as a result of his ethical choice. He avoids the despair that could have come to him, and his embrace of Beauvoirian freedom is confirmed by his not knowing what will happen following his action. His choice creates the possibility. What comes after is yet to be determined.

Aftersun and *The Green Knight* each pay attention to the actions we take in the present, following their ramifications as they affect others. As Rancière and Ahmed examine the commodification of action into an inward-turning despair, the films analyzed here show not only men’s responsibility to take action, but the fact that men’s actions are constantly creating the

future—not just for men, but for those they have historically oppressed. Beauvoir’s writing further shows that freedom is not found in controlling or possessing the world, but in recognizing our ambiguous potential to create many possible futures. Ethical action in the present, with knowledge of the past, and openness to the future, creates a more ethical society. Men who embrace the ambiguity of freedom refuse hegemonic masculinity at its very essence, as they work towards multitudinous definitions for their future, and in turn, help to enable the same for others.

5 Conclusion

This thesis discusses hegemonic masculinity as a harmful situation that must be critiqued by film and television. One of our limits, then, comes in the examples which largely depict heterosexual, white characters. Further research into the hierarchy of various masculinities, and how they may each hold up or indirectly support hegemonic masculinity, is needed to explore the minute nuances of masculinities which are not immersed in heterosexuality and white privilege.⁸²

As stated in the introduction, it is important for film and television to not only criticize hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy, but to carefully consider the ways in which men might embrace criticism inauthentically. It is easy to see the depiction of men’s oppression of women as a critique in itself, but without an appeal to the future and our inherent freedom as subjects, men’s behavior becomes a display of shame, rather than a call to action. Film and television that seek to critique men in a move towards progress for men’s notion of themselves, for women, and for the opening of discourse regarding sex and sexuality cannot rest on men’s shame over their behavior as an incitement to action. I argued that hegemonic masculinity must first be thought of as a harmful situation for men, as well as women. This led to a discussion of shame as a masquerade for avoiding criticism, as films which focus on men’s actions in the past lack a

needed depiction of women's experiences and, consequently, function to reclaim a masculine pride for men. There is no action here, only a relief in the perception that men are 'no longer that way,' when hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy have simply evolved. To avoid succumbing to this very trap of circuitous criticism, this thesis presented films which engage with women's experience, and furthermore, brought critique into the future. Ethical examples of critique were put forth, opening the discussion of masculinity into more than simple rejection or acceptance of heterosexual, patriarchal values. Ending with Rancière and Beauvoir's arguments for images that create curiosity and an embrace of ambiguity, respectively, is an effort to leave this critique of masculinity with a mind toward the future.

A logical question raised by this emphasis on the future is whether or not hegemonic masculinity can be fully rejected, or lived without. In the face of so much stifling discourse on masculinity and femininity, it is easy to take on the melancholy attitude Rancière describes, as we seem to live in a world "in which critical interpretation of the system has become an element of the system itself."⁸³ Television and film might continue to adopt shallow criticism, leaving the work of good faith criticism unaddressed. I find this to be a cul-de-sac argument, as Rancière does not advocate for a resignation to the apparent reality of the situation, but for active engagement with the images we come across. He approaches this very problem of circuitous discourse:

To escape the circle is to start from different presuppositions, assumptions that are certainly unreasonable from the perspective of our oligarchic societies and the so-called critical logic that is its double.⁸⁴

The image is not handed down from our "oligarchic societies" so that we can torture ourselves with our inability to access them; rather, we as subjects have the capacity to read differently, to

refuse single definitions of images that seem to insist on their meaning and affect. He goes on to say that images don't present a fixed reality, or demand a fixed interpretation, reminding us that "every situation can be cracked open from the inside"⁸⁵ through our own critical engagement. We as subjects are capable of changing our presuppositions, of opening discourse to reflect more diverse sexualities and modes of gender expression. When Foucault writes on how power is exercised, he finds its origin in the social structures we interact with every day.⁸⁶ In other words, it is in our relationships with others that we find the root of our hegemonic laws and attitudes toward sex and sexuality; via the very words we use, and those we censor in ourselves; in our daily interactions. Foucault's argument is not a surrender to the impenetrability of structures of power like patriarchy, but a reframing of these structures as constructed, and thus able to be changed through our daily interactions with/for others.

Notes

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!” in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (Routledge, 1995), 12.

² David Buchbinder, *Studying Men and Masculinities* (Routledge, 2013), 97.

³ Sedgwick, “Gosh,” 12.

⁴ Manon Garcia, “Masculinity as an Impasse,” in *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 32.2 (2022): 191.

⁵ “Particularly when the face blushes, shame is compounded. And so it happens that one is as ashamed of being ashamed as of anything else. Thus occurs both the taboo on looking directly into the eyes of the other and the equal taboo on looking away too visibly.” Silvan Tomkins, “Shame-Humiliation and Contempt-Disgust,” in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Duke University Press, 1995), 137.

⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2021), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Garcia, “Masculinity,” 202.

¹⁰ Rancière, *Emancipated*, 85.

¹¹ Sedgwick, “Gosh,” 12.

¹² Toril Moi, “Ambiguity and Alienation in *The Second Sex*,” in *Boundary 2* 19, no. 2 (1992): 98.

¹³ Garcia, “Masculinity,” 203.

¹⁴ Moi, “Ambiguity and Alienation,” 100.

¹⁵ Buchbinder, *Studying*, 98, original emphasis.

¹⁶ R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” in *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 846.

¹⁷ Connell (and their fellow authors) identify and confront what is one of the central arguments of this thesis, that men’s guilt over their past oppression of women is an unproductive position from which to change one’s behavior toward women. “A relationship with feminism is indeed crucial to any counter-sexist politics among heterosexual men; but doing a series of back somersaults is not a strong posture from which to confront the patriarchal power structure” (576). That is not to say this position is unproductive, as the authors go on to say regarding the (then popular) Books-About-Men genre: “when it comes to the crunch, what it is about is modernizing hegemonic masculinity. It is concerned with finding ways in which the dominant group - the white, educated, heterosexual, affluent males we know and love so well - can adapt to new circumstances without breaking down the social-structural arrangements that actually give them their power” (577). The earliest studies in CSMM were concerned with how men might use the appearance of guilt to appear to change, while adapting their behaviors to a more socially-aware society. It is the goal of this thesis to continue in this tradition of questioning movements which foreground men’s guilt (or shame) over their past actions, as the appearance of remorse often disguises a move toward new forms of oppression. Tim Carrigan, R.W. Connell, and John Lee, “Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity,” *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 576-77.

¹⁸ Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic,” 846.

¹⁹ Garcia quotes a portion from Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (2009), “History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers,” 159. Garcia, “Masculinity,” 200.

²⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage Books, 2009), 699, original emphasis.

²¹ Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, at the time of this writing. While I do not intend to suggest that all non-Republican Americans are in favor of Biden’s administration, I want to emphasize the problematic issue of women’s loss of reproductive rights under an administration which has routinely professed to protect these rights.

²² Buchbinder, *Studying*, 138-39.

²³ *Ibid*, 139-40.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 140.

²⁵ Emmanuel Reynaud, *Holy Virility: The Social Construction of Masculinity* (Pluto Press, 1983), 144.

²⁶ *Mad Men*, Season Five Episode Five, “Signal 30,” directed by John Slattery, aired April 15, 2012, on AMC.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ Reynaud, *Holy Virility*, 144.

²⁹ *Black Mirror*, Season One Episode Three, “The Entire History of You,” directed by Brian Welsh, Aired December 18, 2011, on Channel 4.

³⁰ From Beauvoir’s chapter, “The Married Woman”: “It is still accepted that the love act is a *service* she renders to the man; he *takes* his pleasure, and he owes compensation in return. The woman’s body is an object to be purchased; for her it represents capital she has the right to exploit” (444). While Ffion in *Black Mirror* is clearly able to act and live for herself, especially as she eventually leaves Liam along with their child, Liam’s demand for her confession shows how Beauvoir’s critique of man has evolved in new contexts: Liam “*takes* his pleasure,” giving nothing but cruelty in return. Later, Beauvoir outlines the double standard to which wives are held in regard to their sex lives. “she should have sexual pleasure only in a generic form and not an individualized one...she has no right to sexual activity outside marriage; for both spouses, sexual congress becoming an institution...but man, as worker and citizen transcending toward the universal, can savor contingent pleasures prior to marriage and outside of married life...he finds satisfaction in other ways; but in a world where woman is essentially defined as female, she must be justified wholly as female” (450). Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 444, 450, original emphasis.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 58.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ “The Entire History of You,” directed by Brian Welsh.

³⁴ Garcia, “Masculinity,” 201.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 202.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 192.

³⁷ The original report on C.K.’s sexual misconduct in 2017. Melena Ryzik, Cara Buckley and Jodi Kantor, “Louis C.K. Is Accused by 5 Women of Sexual Misconduct,” *The New York Times*, 9 November, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/arts/television/louis-ck-sexual-misconduct.html?_r=1.

³⁸ A 2020 article on C.K.'s return to packed theater audiences, three years after admitting to sexual misconduct. Elahe Izadi, "Louis C.K.'s sexual misconduct tanked his career. Now he's selling out theaters," *The Washington Post*, 11 March, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/03/11/louis-ck-new-standup/>.

³⁹ The original report on D'Elia's sexual misconduct in 2020. Amy Kaufman, "After Twitter outcry, five women detail Chris D'Elia's alleged sexual improprieties," *The Los Angeles Times*, 20 June, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-06-20/chris-delia-accusations-sexual-improprieties-twitter>.

⁴⁰ In the years following the 2020 article on D'Elia's sexual misconduct, he continued to perform stand up comedy. Recent reports (at the time of this writing) of further misconduct have led to some of his stand up dates being cancelled, but he continues to run two successful podcasts, "Congratulations" and "Lifeline." The link to C.K. in the San Antonio Current report suggests a similarity, perhaps stemming from the men's responses to their accusations, which involved a public admittance of fault, followed by a strong legal defense. In effect, both men (and surely others) utilized their shame in order to avoid consequences. Abe Asher, "T.J. Miller, Louis C.K. and Chris D'Elia all to perform in San Antonio despite sexual misconduct claims," *San Antonio Current*, 11 January, 2023, <https://www.sacurrent.com/arts/tj-miller-louis-ck-and-chris-delia-all-to-perform-in-san-antonio-despite-sexual-misconduct-claims-30772644>.

⁴¹ Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 136.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Sara Ahmed, "Shame Before Others," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 108.

⁴⁴ "The proximity of national shame to indigenous pain may be what offers the promise of reconciliation, a future of 'living together', in which the rifts of the past have been healed." Ahmed's argument is a critique of White Australians' incapacity for shame, but here we see how her argument investigates shame as a productive performance. The reality of the shame is not the question so much as the group's performed shame in "proximity" to the trauma of Aboriginal peoples. The shame of White Australians obscures the needs and experiences of Aboriginal peoples, as White Australians focus on 'living together' and reclaiming their pride as a united nation. Ahmed, "Shame," 102.

⁴⁵ Rancière, *Emancipated*, 87.

⁴⁶ Candida Yates, *Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 32.

⁴⁷ This is not the position of this thesis, but rather a recognition of the situation of hegemonic masculinity. Those who see their sexual expression as part of a hegemonic tradition are engaging with masculine pride, and while I argue that our existence is defined by our inherent ambiguity and freedom as subjects, this is different from a hegemonic notion of men's collective pride, which is earned by ascribing to a certain set of behaviors.

⁴⁸ Ahmed, "Shame," 107, original emphasis.

⁴⁹ *Men*, directed by Alex Garland (2022).

⁵⁰ "By dropping his eyes, his eyelids, his head, and sometimes the whole upper part of his body, the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person's face, and to the other person's looking at him, particularly at his face." Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 134.

⁵¹ Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 135.

⁵² Ahmed, "Shame," 102.

⁵³ Ibid, 104.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Vintage Books, 1995), 202.

⁵⁵ Some examples of studio-backed and independent films, produced in various countries. The grouping of these films is not meant to suggest a single argument presented across each film, but rather a consistent interest in the secondary social, political, and legal status of women in multiple nations and markets: *Priscilla*, dir. Sofia Coppola, 2023. *You Won't Be Alone*, dir. Goran Stolevski, 2022. *The Last Duel*, dir. Ridley Scott, 2021. *Atlantics*, dir. Mati Diop, 2019. *The Assistant*, dir. Kitty Green, 2019. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, dir. Céline Sciamma, 2019. *The Nightingale*, dir. Jennifer Kent, 2018. *Wildlife*, dir. Paul Dano, 2018. *Hidden Figures*, dir. Theodore Melfi, 2017. *A Separation*, dir. Asghar Farhadi, 2011. *Morvern Callar*, dir. Lynne Ramsay, 2002. *The Piano*, dir. Jane Campion, 1993. *Orlando*, dir. Sally Potter, 1992. *Smooth Talk*, dir. Joyce Chopra, 1985.

⁵⁶ Rancière, *Emancipated*, 87.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 88.

⁵⁸ Yates, *Masculine Jealousy*, 23.

⁵⁹ Rancière, *Emancipated*, 27.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 88.

⁶¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Open Road: New York, 2015), 91.

⁶² Rancière, *Emancipated*, 37.

⁶³ Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 136.

⁶⁴ Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 80.

⁶⁵ Rancière, *Emancipated*, 104.

⁶⁶ Kelli Fuery, *Ambiguous Cinema: From Simone de Beauvoir to Feminist Film-Phenomenology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 26.

⁶⁷ Fuery, *Ambiguous Cinema*, 23-24.

⁶⁸ *Aftersun*, directed by Charlotte Wells (2021).

⁶⁹ Rancière, *Emancipated*, 104.

⁷⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 76.

⁷¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 41.

⁷² Fuery, *Ambiguous Cinema*, 66.

⁷³ "He will always be saying that he is disappointed, for his wish to have the world harden into a thing is belied by the very movement of life...The serious man wills himself to be a god; but he is not one and knows it...There then blazes forth the absurdity of a life which has sought outside of itself the justifications which it alone could give itself." Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 52.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 72.

⁷⁵ *The Green Knight*, directed by David Lowery (2021).

⁷⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 52.

⁷⁷ Foucault, *History*, 94.

⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 52.

⁷⁹ Moi, "Ambiguity and Alienation," 100.

⁸⁰ This situation is visible in cinema through women who are at once commodified by the screen, yet distinct in their sexuality. In *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome* (1962), Beauvoir comments on the seemingly contradictory representation of Brigitte Bardot as both a sexual object for men, and subject for herself. "She is showing her body, neither more nor less, and that body rarely settles into a state of immobility. She walks, she dances, she moves about. Her eroticism is not magical, but aggressive. In the game of love, she is as much a hunter as she is the prey." Denise Warren comments on Beauvoir's argument, writing, "Beauvoir's lesson, however, is about power and representational practices. It is about ambiguity as a contestatory strategy. Her positing of the Eternal Feminine as the site of the representational operations of patriarchal ideology, of its myths as transmitters of this ideology, as lessons-for-becoming and instructions for compliance with the socio-sexual order." Warren describes ambiguity as "contestatory," a useful phrase for understanding our ambiguous situation as one that is in conflict with patriarchal, hegemonically masculine structures of power, as Warren identifies. Ambiguity is not itself an ethical philosophy, but rather a situation which, when recognized, reveals us at our most authentic: as both subjects and objects in a society limited by structures of power. Simone de Beauvoir, *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Four Square, 1962), 30. Denise Warren, "Beauvoir on Bardot: The Ambiguity Syndrome," in *Dalhousie French Studies* 13 (1987): 49.

⁸¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics*, 30.

⁸² The works of Andrew Haigh and Barry Jenkins engage with masculinity as it is interpreted and expressed by men of non-heterosexual and non-white masculinity, especially in Jenkins' *Moonlight* (2016) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018).

⁸³ Rancière, *Emancipated*, 37.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 48.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

⁸⁶ Foucault, *History*, 94.

Bibliography

Aftersun (2022, dir. Charlotte Wells)

Ahmed, Sara. "Shame Before Others." In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. NED-New edition, 2., 101–21. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. Four Square: 1962.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Translated by Bernard Frechtman. Open Road: New York, 2015.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2009.

Buchbinder, David. *Studying Men and Masculinities*. Routledge, 2013.

Carrigan, Tim, R.W. Connell, and John Lee. "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity." *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 551-604.

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59.

"The Entire History of You," *Black Mirror* (2011, dir. Brian Welsh)

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books, 1995.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vintage Books, 1990.

Fuery, Kelli. *Ambiguous Cinema: From Simone de Beauvoir to Feminist Film-Phenomenology*. Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

Garcia, Manon. "Masculinity as an Impasse." *Simone de Beauvoir Studies*, vol. 32.2 (2022): 187-206.

The Green Knight (2021, dir. David Lowery)

Izadi, Elahe. "Louis C.K.'s sexual misconduct tanked his career. Now he's selling out theaters."

The Washington Post. 11 March, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/03/11/louis-ck-new-standup/>.

Men (2022, dir. Alex Garland)

Moi, Toril. "Ambiguity and Alienation in *The Second Sex*." *Boundary 2* 19, no. 2 (1992): 96–112.

The Power of the Dog (2021, dir. Jane Campion)

Rancière, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. Verso: 2021

Reynaud, Emmanuel. *Holy Virility: The Social Construction of Masculinity*. Pluto Press, 1983.

Ryzik, Melena, Cara Buckley and Jodi Kantor. "Louis C.K. Is Accused by 5 Women of Sexual Misconduct." The New York Times. 9 November, 2017.

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/arts/television/louis-ck-sexual-misconduct.html?_r=1.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your

Masculinity!" In *Constructing Masculinity*. Edited by Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson, 11-20. New York: Routledge, 1995.

"Signal 30," *Mad Men* (2012, dir. John Slattery)

Tomkins, Silvan. "Shame-Humiliation and Contempt-Disgust." In *Shame and Its Sisters: A*

Silvan Tomkins Reader. Edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 133-178. Duke University Press, 1995.

Warren, Denise. "Beauvoir on Bardot: The Ambiguity Syndrome." *Dalhousie French Studies* 13 (1987): 39–50.

Yates, Candida. *Masculine Jealousy and Contemporary Cinema*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.