

**‘Gods in our own World’:  
Representations of Troubled and  
Troubling Masculinities in Some  
Australian Films, 1991-2001**

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## Abstract

The dominance of male characters in Australian films makes our national cinema a rich resource for the examination of the construction of masculinities. This thesis argues that the codes of the hegemonic masculinities in capitalist patriarchal societies like Australia insist on an absolute masculine position. However, according to Oedipal logic, this position always belongs to another man. Masculine yet ‘feminised,’ identity is fraught with anxiety but sustained by the ‘dominant fiction’ that equates the penis with the phallus and locates the feminine as its polar opposite. This binary relationship is inaugurated in childhood when a boy must distinguish his identity from his mother, who, significantly, is a different gender. Being masculine means not being feminine.

However, as much as men strive towards inhabiting the masculine position completely, this masquerade will always be exposed by the elements associated with femininity that are an inevitable part of the human experience. Yet, the more men are drawn to the feminine, the more they risk losing their masculine integrity altogether under the patriarchal gaze. Men, in this dualistic regime, are condemned to negotiate their identity haunted by the promises of the phallus and the fear of its loss.

I begin with a model of masculine integrity represented in the image of an ideal father, Darryl Kerrigan, from *The Castle* and then proceed to problematise it through an examination of its excesses observed in the father of David Helfgott in *Shine*. In the second chapter I investigate two films that represent mothers as the principal threat to masculine integrity: *Death in Brunswick* and *Proof*. Both films reveal a misogynistic impetus, which is expressed as violence against women in *The Boys*, the sole focus of my middle chapter. With misogyny and violence still resonating, I follow the contours of my argument through an examination of *Chopper* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* in the fourth chapter, where I emphasise the performative nature of identity, before arriving at a discussion of men and their relationships in the final chapter (*Mullet, Praise, and Thank God He Met Lizzie*).

## Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the Barr Smith Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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## A Note on Style

Referencing and formatting throughout this thesis have been done according to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. 15<sup>th</sup> edition.

## Introduction

When we gaze with strained attention at imaginary scenes on the stage or screen, including the screen of the mind's eye when we read or dream, we are engaged in the making of culture, our making by culture, which includes the mechanism both of sexual violence and, someday perhaps, of its undoing. (Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath*, 4)

### **'That's what we are; we're all gods in our own world'**

Brett Sprague utters these puzzling words just before he and his brothers attack the unfortunate girl at the end of *The Boys*, leaving the audience wondering what they might tell us about his behaviour. To be a god is a formidable task. It implies omnipotence, absolute presence and an unchanging wholeness. It assumes a preordained, sanctified and unquestioned right to wield power, like God the father in the kingdom of heaven.

But a god, or the image he created of himself on earth—man, a king in his castle—must have subjects that submit to, or at least acknowledge, his power. These include lesser men, men who might concede but secretly yearn for, or dream of, power for themselves. Sometimes these men might assume this power and exercise it over other men. Sometimes they might also exercise it over women, for, just as God invokes the father, he also invokes the mother who gives birth to man. A woman can be an especially satisfying subject for a would-be god to rule over, as she can serve to remind him that he is no longer the vulnerable little boy who depended on her so completely.

However, as much as he tries, he will not be able to forget those early feelings of powerlessness, as he stumbles across a fundamental obstacle. He can be a god in his own, self-contained and enclosed world, his castle, but he will become isolated and 'lonely

looking down on everyone'<sup>1</sup> and forever exposed to a threat—other gods or kings might consider him their subject. Hence, just as easily as he can assume sovereignty, it can be taken away from him, and he will once again be reminded of the vulnerable, little boy he once was.

Absolute presence and the right to command; the assumption of power, or being pressured to assume power; the fear of losing power, of never gaining it, of being subject to it, of being powerless: these are the nodal points upon which the masculinities examined in this thesis are strung. These are the tensions, uncertainties and anxieties that constitute the troubled (at the personal level) and troubling (at the public, civic level) masculinities in these films as they engage in dialogue with what many commentators have perceived as a crisis in masculinity.

David Buchbinder notes that in recent times ‘a number of writers and scholars, as well as the media, have announced that masculinity is in crisis and that men are now less certain of themselves than ever before.’<sup>2</sup> R. W. Connell adds that ‘questions about men and gender have aroused media interest, academic debate, and political controversy in most parts of the developed world.’<sup>3</sup> Many of the publications emerging from these debates and controversies are linked to the mythopoetic men’s movement, which Connell observes has been ‘a response to the new feminism.’<sup>4</sup> The most notable figure of this movement is Robert Bly, whose publication of *Iron John*, which calls for men to return to their mythic roots, reached the coveted *New York Times Book Review* Bestseller List and remained there for many weeks. Other titles, such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* by John Gray, stress a fundamental difference between men and women that must be negotiated to ensure gender harmony. Furthermore, that there is a crisis is suggested by the titles of the more academic books (*Male Trouble: Looking at Australian Masculinities*, *Male Trouble* by Constance Penley and Sharon Willis, *Masculinity in Crisis* by Roger Horrocks, and *The Hazards of Being Male* by Herb Goldberg, to name just a few). In fact, the first such book to ‘formulate’ the argument that the ‘old masculine ideal is fatal to men themselves’ was

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra, in *The Boys*, speaking to Brett when she visits him in prison.

<sup>2</sup> *Masculinities and Identities*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Introduction: Australian Masculinities,’ 10.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Men at Bay,’ 75.

by Sidney Jourard in 1971. His ‘point of departure’ was the decreasing life expectancy of men, in contrast to women, in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Connell points out that Australia ‘is by no means alone in these developments’ but adds that there has been an emphasis on ‘explicit debates on men’s violence and on boys’ education.’<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Australian cinema since the 1970s revival is a fruitful resource for investigating this so-called crisis, as most of its exemplary films are centred on male characters. Furthermore, these characters adhere to a normative masculine model, as Neil Rattigan points out: ‘The consistent and dominant image of Australian cultural identity promulgated by cinema ... since the 1970s ... is of a white male, nearly always Anglo-Celtic (but not rigidly so), down-to-earth, unsophisticated, democratic, and unimpressed by authority.’<sup>7</sup> Tom O’Regan adds that ‘Australian cinema is closely associated with an homogeneous, monocultural, masculinist, xenophobic and exclusionary national identity.’<sup>8</sup> The narrow, exclusionary representations of masculinities in the national cinema seem to protest too much and lend support to the perceived anxiety about identity in the contemporary world.

However, it would appear that there has been a paradigm shift in recent years. Graeme Turner notes that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after the heady days of government subsidisation, the Australian film industry ‘had come to terms with the changed funding environment. The clear commercialization of the local industry ... removed some of the pressure on Australian filmmakers to produce “national” films and thus opened the way for more personal and individual projects.’<sup>9</sup> This resulted in a changing of the guard from versions of Australian identity that were ‘nostalgically masculine, rural and colonial,’ exemplified in the performances of Jack Thompson and Bryan Brown, to a national iconography that is now more heterogeneous, as in the performances of a new generation of actors such as Ben Mendelsohn, Russell Crowe and Noah Taylor. Citing *Death in Brunswick* as exemplary, Turner notes that ‘the semiotics of Australian ethnicities and

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<sup>5</sup> *The Transparent Self*, quoted in Badinter, *XY: On Masculine Identity*, 141.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Introduction: Australian Masculinities,’ 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Images of Australia*, 16. Note also that the revival was dominated by male ensemble films.

<sup>8</sup> *Australian National Cinema*, 132.

<sup>9</sup> *Film as Social Practice*, 170.

masculinities would seem to have changed.’<sup>10</sup> Philip Butters suggests: ‘Much more than a change of personnel marked the new decade however; not only was there a shift in the image of Australian masculinity embodied in particular performers, film narratives themselves seemed newly preoccupied with questions of gender identity, and the construction of the masculine subject. A crop of films, including many of the most successful Australian productions, were now consciously exploring the process of becoming a heterosexual man in contemporary Australian society.’<sup>11</sup>

### **Becoming a Man**

The development of personality is connected firmly to the division of social labour. Childcare is work; the workforce is gendered; This fact matters for emotional development. However we modify the details, this simple and powerful argument must be acknowledged in any future account of the formation of masculinities. (Connell, *Masculinities*, 20)

Any discussion of masculinities must begin with the understanding that the object of study is not fixed and stable. Moreover, when we speak of representations, it is not a simple matter of considering how they reflect what is presumably out there in society.<sup>12</sup> Instead, masculinity is a ‘relational concept,’ understood only when linked to femininity. Concepts of masculinity and femininity are socially determined in patriarchal society as mutually exclusive. They are enunciated as diametrically-opposed positions attracting associations that are perceived as unequivocally feminine or masculine. Hence, when I speak of femininity, I am not referring to some irreducible, biological fact but rather to the common associations that society has attached to the concept, associations that are not masculine. Connell explains that masculinity and femininity only ‘have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Making It National*, 127.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Becoming a Man in Australian Film in the Early 1990s,’ 79.

<sup>12</sup> When I speak of society, I am referring to late industrial, western, capitalist society, such as Australia.

<sup>13</sup> *Masculinities*, 44.

One way to understand how this ‘cultural opposition’ is constructed is to view it through the division of labour, where women are almost universally assigned the task of raising infants, because they are anatomically capable of giving birth and lactating. In tribal societies this often leaves the task of hunting and defending community boundaries to the men.<sup>14</sup> Connell notes that while ‘biological reproduction does not cause, or even provide a template for, gender as practice,’<sup>15</sup> as a ‘body-reflexive practice’ it ‘constitutes’ yet, at the same time, is ‘governed by ... social structures.’<sup>16</sup> Hence, while the division of labour might be biologically initiated, it is socially regulated, and identity is determined through the adoption of the masculine and feminine subject positions. Men in tribal societies, for example, have to be aggressive, physically strong and competitive as they inhabit the public world in order to carry out their duties. As David Gilmore notes: ‘Manhood is the social barrier that societies must erect against entropy, human enemies, the forces of nature, time, and all the human weaknesses that endanger group life.’<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, women under these circumstances are conditioned to be weaker physically, dependent and passive as a result of their reliance on men to protect the community. Furthermore, they develop more competency in the affective and relational domains as they carry out the duties of childrearing and managing the home sphere.

Now, if we transpose this situation to the modern state, where this fundamental division of labour still exists,<sup>18</sup> we can observe that the dynamics are much the same, even though the social structure is different. As I discuss in later chapters, the logic of capitalism has given rise to the nuclear family and the ideology of individualism, causing the erosion of communities as the social unit of society. Instead, individual family units compete with one another for the privileges society has to offer. Men who leave the responsibility of childrearing to their wives must inhabit a generally impersonal, and often hostile, public sphere in order to work to support their family. They develop much the same masculine traits as their tribal counterparts: aggressiveness, competitiveness and toughness. Similarly, women develop those qualities that society associates with femininity: passivity,

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<sup>14</sup> Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making*, 225.

<sup>15</sup> *Men and the Boys*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> *Manhood in the Making*, 226.

<sup>18</sup> McMahan, ‘Blokus Domesticus,’ 154.

dependence and inclusivity. But we can go a step further in this dualistic regime to help us understand the cultural opposition between masculinity and femininity.

Establishing independence from the maternal figure is a key manoeuvre of subject formation and is something all children must do to develop a mature adult identity. However, for boys, their identity is formed in relation to someone of the opposite sex, while for girls it is formed in relation to a person of the same sex. For a boy, being a separate individual means being a different gender, because given the relational, binary nature of gender identity, to establish his masculine identity, he is expected to distance himself from his mother. As Coppelia Kahn notes, a girl's femininity 'is reinforced by her original symbiotic union with her mother and by the identification with her that must precede identity, while [a boy's] masculinity is threatened by the same union and the same identification. While the boy's sense of *self* begins in union with the feminine, his sense of *masculinity* arises against it.'<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the maternal object for the growing boy often becomes an abject figure, resulting in a greater accent on gender polarity in males than in females. As Elisabeth Badinter notes: 'Male identification remains more largely differentiated than female identification. Traditionally, masculinity is defined more often by the avoidance of something than by a desire for something. To be a man signifies *not* to be feminine; *not* to be homosexual; *not* to be effeminate in one's physical appearance or manners; *not* to have sexual or overtly intimate relations with other men; *not* to be impotent with women.'<sup>20</sup>

What often results for the child when he grows to be a man is an incomplete subjectivity amputated from the affective, relational world of the maternal figure as he strives to define himself in opposition to his mother and femininity in general. In his attempts to live out this inadequate version of subjectivity, he becomes anxious and insecure because of the danger that his identity might at any moment regress or 'collapse' back into that symbiotic fusion with the maternal figure, for the elements that are associated with femininity are a significant part of what makes us all human (for example,

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<sup>19</sup> *Man's Estate*, 10. All emphases within quotations throughout this thesis are in the original.

<sup>20</sup> *XY: On Masculine Identity*, 115.

feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, dependence and fear).<sup>21</sup> Hence, this form of masculinity will always be brittle and unstable and constantly in need of propping up. As Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherall point out, masculinity becomes a ‘fantasy of conduct and behaviour which can never be realised in practice because constantly men will be defeated by their actual humanity and mix of feminine and masculine capacities.’<sup>22</sup>

Steven Nock provides us with a neat summary of the masculine predicament: ‘In the search for the meaning of manhood we must keep these two possibilities in mind: first, masculinity is earned by accomplishing things that are not female; second, there is no critical juncture at which point males may proclaim their masculinity as secure and “earned.” The pursuit of masculinity will continue in men’s lives.’<sup>23</sup> We can observe this pursuit in the emphasis in our society that is placed on proving manhood, or being a *real*, absolute man. In contrast, Gilmore explains that ‘although women, too, in any society are judged by sometimes stringent sexual standards, it is rare that their very status as women forms part of the evaluation.’<sup>24</sup> As Badinter phrases it, ‘being a man implies a labour, an effort that does not seem to be demanded of a woman. It is rare to hear the words “Be a woman” as a call to order, whereas the exhortation to the little boy, the male adolescent, or even the male adult is common in most societies.’<sup>25</sup> This is because being a woman is generally viewed in society as a biological given (women have babies and are inevitably associated with nature). Moreover, very few words are available to describe a woman who fails at being a woman, in contrast to the abundance of words available to describe a man who fails the numerous tests of manhood that he encounters daily.<sup>26</sup> A woman might be a

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<sup>21</sup> To be sure, this delimiting version of subjectivity is experienced by women too as, in their desire to experience the full gamut of human experience, they can also be aggressive and competitive. It is common to think that these characteristics have surfaced only as a result of the recent feminist movement, but they have always existed in women. Consider the reflections of the narrator of *Jane Eyre*, which reinforce my point about a common humanity: ‘Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts just as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer’ (109).

<sup>22</sup> *Men in Perspective*, 53.

<sup>23</sup> *Marriage in Men’s Lives*, 48. Note how menstruation ‘lays the basic foundation for the possibility of adult womanhood. No such thing happens for boys.’ Hence there is no critical moment that males can declare that they have attained masculinity (46).

<sup>24</sup> *Manhood in the Making*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *XY: On Masculine Identity*, 1–2.

<sup>26</sup> *Manhood in the Making*, 11. Looker points out that ‘men sometimes learn that quite absurd things signify manliness, such as ... acceptable and unacceptable ways of crossing their legs’ (‘Doing it with your Mates,’ 213).

‘whore’ or a ‘slut’ but she still retains her womanhood nonetheless, whereas a man who is called a ‘girl’ or a ‘sissy’ loses his masculine integrity entirely. This leads to the question of how this situation is sustained. To find an answer, we have to understand the concept of hegemonic masculinity where these prevailing, dominant notions of masculinity are generated.

### **Staying a Man in the Hegemony of the Masculine**

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as that which is ‘most honoured or desired’ or ‘the most visible.’ Connell explains that it is ‘connected with prominent institutions and cultural forms, such as business and sport, and is extensively presented and promoted in mass media.’<sup>27</sup> He observes elsewhere that ‘hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual,’ adding that ‘it is the successful claim to authority ... that is the mark of hegemony.’<sup>28</sup> The media proves to be most efficacious with regard to this claim. Whilst specifically addressing the cultural hegemony of the North American-dominated mass media in Australia, Turner’s observation of the power of the media equally applies to the hegemony of the masculine: ‘To gain control of the representational agenda for the nation is to gain considerable power over individuals’ view of themselves and each other.’<sup>29</sup> Given that there is a ‘small, elite group’ of media producers within society that are ‘predominantly White, middle-class, and male’ and have the largest share of media power which enables them to ‘make sense of society on behalf of others,’ it is not difficult to conceive that it is their interests that are promoted, their representations that dominate.<sup>30</sup> These interests and representations inform the hegemony of the masculine, whose chief characteristics can be identified and spoken of in the singular. Indeed, a masculine ideal (powerful, absolutely present to itself and void of femininity) insinuates itself repeatedly in these representations, an ideal which Badinter observes ‘has changed very little over

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Introduction: Australian Masculinities,’ 14–15.

<sup>28</sup> *Masculinities*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> *Film as Social Practice*, 158.

<sup>30</sup> O’Shaughnessey and Stadler, *Media and Society*, 23. Connell observes that it is no ‘statistical accident, but a part of the social construction of masculinity, that men and not women control the major corporations and the great private fortunes’ (*Men and the Boys*, 25).

hundreds of years.’ She adds that ‘most cultures have adhered to this masculine ideal and created their own models, but it is America, without cultural rival, which has imposed its images of virility on the whole world.’<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, dominant versions of masculinity cannot be imposed on the population that easily. As significant minority and interest groups (notably feminist and gay groups) within society jostle for input into the representational agenda, hegemonic masculinity will always be exposed to challenge and contestation. Connell points out that hegemonic masculinity ‘need not be the most common form of masculinity, let alone the most comfortable. Indeed many men and boys live in a state of some tension with, or distance from, hegemonic masculinity.’<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere he observes that hegemony ‘does not mean total control. It is not automatic, and may be disrupted—or even disrupt itself.’<sup>33</sup> Indeed, there is a danger in viewing hegemonic masculinity as unitary or monolithic, because social and historical contingencies ensure that it remains contradictory and divided. However, despite these tensions, the ideal man still reigns in the hegemonic order of society, and this is because of a fundamental inducement.

Society compensates males for the pain and anxiety they feel when they are pressured to distance themselves from their mothers and all things feminine (what Maggie Carey terms ‘the mother wound’<sup>34</sup>) through the simple equation of the penis with the phallus. This is the ‘dominant fiction’ that Kaja Silverman refers to in her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*.<sup>35</sup> The powerlessness and vulnerability that men feel but don’t admit to, due to the masculine façade, is massaged by the reward of absolute masculine self-possession, if they stick to the rules of masculine conduct. Boys are helped in this process by identifying with powerful, authoritative masculine figures (particularly strong fathers) that promise power and privilege when they grow up. A young man can dream of omnipotence, mastery

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<sup>31</sup> XY: *On Masculine Identity*, 129–31. In Australia, the reducibility of the vast array of media images to the common elements I have suggested is aided by the fact that the media are controlled by two men, Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer. Their media empires which extend to the rest of the world (including the USA) give rise to the question of a global hegemonic masculinity or a ‘world gender order’ (Connell, *Men and the Boys*, 40).

<sup>32</sup> ‘Introduction: Australian Masculinities,’ 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Masculinities*, 37.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Healing the Mother Wound.’

<sup>35</sup> *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 15–16.

and the right to wield power when it is time for him to step into the shoes of the father, because he possesses the privileged mark of sexual difference, the penis. Consequently, most men are content to believe that it is possible to recover, one day, the power they lost in the separation from the mother. In the meantime, however, many are happy to sustain themselves on the privileges that being a male in patriarchal society provides, what Connell identifies as the 'patriarchal dividend.'<sup>36</sup>

But it remains to be said that no man can embody all the qualities of the ideal man, as lived experience jars with the promise of power. Someone else always seems to be more powerful (a movie star, public figure or sporting hero), another male who, as Kramer points out, 'maddeningly ... almost never appears in his own person. He hides behind a symbol, a persona, or an emissary' and remains 'an impalpable nameless phantom.'<sup>37</sup> Hence, there is a significant and fundamental contradiction within masculine subjectivity. Kramer explains:

For both men and women, to become a subject, to acquire an identity, is to assume a position of femininity in relation to a masculinity that always belongs to someone else. This other is the wielder and bearer of authority in all its forms, social, moral, and cultural; both pleasure and truth are in his charge; yet no man, and certainly no woman, can securely identify with this masculine subject-position. Instead, biological men are directed to occupy a position that is simultaneously masculine in relation to a visible, public, feminine position, and feminine in relation to an unstated, often unconscious position held by the figure (trope, image, or person) of another man. The same men are directed to repress their knowledge that this doubling of polarity by the dim, ever-looming figure of the other man renders their own position masculine in content but feminine in structure.<sup>38</sup>

This ambiguity creates enormous tensions. In addition to repressing knowledge of their feminine position in relation to a masculine position 'that always belongs to someone else,' men must also repress their desire for this masculine ideal when it is notionally embodied

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<sup>36</sup> *Masculinities*, 82.

<sup>37</sup> *After the Lovedeath*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

in an actual person, as this desire places them in the very same feminine position they are seeking to escape. Homoeroticism will always be repressed in a homosocial economy that is subject to the tyranny of the absolute masculine position.<sup>39</sup> These repressions are mainly facilitated through ideological processes that ensure that contradictions are smoothed over and absolute masculine possession is naturalised as a biological given. Turner explains that:

implicit in every culture is a ‘theory of reality’ which motivates its ordering of that reality into good and bad, right and wrong, them and us, and so on. For this ‘theory of reality’ actually to work as a structuring principle it needs to be unspoken, invisible, a property of the natural world rather than human interests. Ideology is the term used to describe the system of beliefs and practices that is produced by this theory of reality; and although ideology itself has no material form, we can see its material effects in all social and political formations, from class structure to gender relations to our idea of what constitutes an individual.<sup>40</sup>

In relation to masculinity, these ideological processes achieve materiality mainly through rituals of gender surveillance. Typically, men are punished within the homosocial economy for transgressing conventional masculine norms. And, in turn, not only is punishment inflicted by others, it is also internalised by the subject through intense self-surveillance when men aim to be masculine through-and-through. As Judith Butler sums up: ‘Gender is ... a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness.’<sup>41</sup> Viewed from a different angle, Peter Looker observes that ‘if we are driven by the biological imperatives of natural difference, then it has to be asked why we expend

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<sup>39</sup> When I refer to the masculine position, its links to the absolute ideal and hegemonic masculinity are inevitably brought to bear. Hegemonic masculinity is informed by the myth of the absolute masculine position or the ideal man and, therefore, all aspects of hegemonic masculinity (its codes of conduct, its figures and models) can potentially be equated with this position if these aspects are taken to be absolute. Hence, the terms ideal man, absolute masculine presence or position, or simply the masculine position are interchangeable according to context.

<sup>40</sup> *Film as Social Practice*, 155.

<sup>41</sup> ‘From Interiority to Gender Performatives,’ 366.

so much energy in asserting, maintaining and policing those differences and in repressing ... contradiction[s].<sup>42</sup>

Fear of not attaining, or of losing one's notional masculinity is often assuaged by projecting this fear onto others, which inevitably raises the question of violence. Violent acts that render others inferior in some way can be a means of reaffirming masculine integrity. As femininity is the primary target of this violence, women prove to be most efficacious as the object of this projection. Kramer notes that 'biological women are made to bear the main burden of occupying the official, visible feminine position and in doing so of maintaining the fiction that the position held by men is genuinely polarised.'<sup>43</sup> Making women see this is one of 'the defining privileges of the absolutely masculine position.'<sup>44</sup> To be sure, violence is integral to expressions of masculinity, as it is inscribed at the inauguration of masculine subjectivity and sustained within the economy of gender relations.

### **Theoretical Manoeuvring**

We are free to recognize a psychoanalytic theme in art, but we are not compelled to; and if we do recognise a psychoanalytic theme, we need not be disturbed, because we are free to drown it in a rich orchestration of multiple meanings. (Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*, 56)

From my discussion above, it is apparent that a psychoanalytical framework would prove most efficacious in focusing my argument. Indeed, psychoanalysis and film have been an inevitable partnership ever since film study was established as a discipline in the 1970s due to the impetus of Lacanian film theorists, such as Christian Metz whose seminal work *The Imaginary Signifier* was the first significant study of the intimate connections between the techniques and conventions of the cinema and the human psyche. As Laura Mulvey explains, 'the formal preoccupations [of mainstream film] reflect the psychological obsessions

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<sup>42</sup> 'Doing it with your Mates,' 206–7.

<sup>43</sup> *After the Lovedeath*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

of the society which produced it.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, ‘the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer.’<sup>46</sup>

Barbara Creed points out that the ‘oedipal narrative form is central to the writings of film theorists who draw on psychoanalysis in their reading of film texts.’ She claims that these theorists ‘proceed from the premise that a film is influenced structurally and thematically by the unconscious of society’ and that they believe ‘the oedipal scenario ... is central to all forms of mainstream film narrative.’<sup>47</sup> In line with this thinking, Creed argues that ‘Australian cinema has developed a rich tradition in oedipal narrative forms.’<sup>48</sup> Teresa de Lauretis notes that the Oedipus myth has been ‘honed by a centuries-long patriarchal culture and [is] still at work with a vengeance in contemporary epistemologies and social technologies.’ She concludes: ‘All narrative, in its movement forward toward resolution and backward to an initial moment, a paradise lost, is overlaid with what has been called an oedipal logic—the inner necessity or drive of the drama—its “sense of ending” inseparable from the memory of loss and the recapturing of time.’<sup>49</sup> More importantly, as Mulvey points out, the oedipal scenario as it is understood from the point of view of psychoanalysis is ‘a political weapon demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form.’<sup>50</sup>

Freud saw the Oedipus complex as ‘the central experience of the years of childhood, the greatest problem of early life and the most important source of later inadequacy,’ adding that ‘if psycho-analysis could boast of no other achievement than the discovery of the repressed Oedipus complex, that alone would give it a claim to be counted among the precious new acquisitions of mankind.’<sup>51</sup> Such a polemic inevitably attracts criticism and has generated a seemingly endless amount of commentary. To add to this is a daunting task but, for the purpose of developing my argument, it is necessary to highlight some

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Creed, ‘Mothers and Lovers,’ 22.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, 125.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ 14.

<sup>51</sup> *Outline of Psycho-analysis*, 60–61.

significant points and terminology of the oedipal drama as understood by psychoanalytic theory.

The transition from the symbiotic fusion with the mother, where need, dependence and polymorphous desire are the modality of existence, to a fixed subject position that, through the blocking and rechanneling of desire, becomes the basis of a gendered identity, is fraught with difficulties. A child's desire to possess the mother is not easily relinquished, especially for a boy who, as I have noted, feels the disjunction of individual identity-formation more strongly. This desire becomes complicated when, from about the ages of two or three, he becomes aware of his penis as a sign of sexual difference (what Freud describes as the phallic stage of development). As a consequence of his 'observations and intuitive surmises of sexual life,' the boy's penis becomes the focus of his desire to possess his mother, which he enacts on a physical level. Freud claims that the moment a boy 'feels pleasurable sensations in his sexual organ and learns to procure these at will by manual manipulation, he becomes his mother's lover.'<sup>52</sup> This is reciprocated when, through the physical care she provides for the boy's body, she becomes his 'first seducer' and his 'first and strongest love-object and ... the prototype of all later love-relations—for both sexes.'<sup>53</sup> As William N. Stephens notes in his cross-cultural study of the Oedipus complex, 'generalised maternal nurture or mother-love, in and of itself is, to some extent, sexually stimulating to the infant.'<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, he provides evidence that 'women are capable of being sexually aroused by nursing,' especially in cultures where a lengthy post-partum taboo exists.<sup>55</sup>

This 'early awakened masculinity' establishes a trajectory that inevitably leads to rivalry with the father, where the logical consequence of the incestuous fantasy of possessing the mother is the desire to dislodge the rival progenitor.<sup>56</sup> However, this desire

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>54</sup> *Oedipus Complex: Cross Cultural Evidence*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 34. Additionally, evidence suggests that infants with attending mothers tend to masturbate more frequently as opposed to those who do not have mothers, as in the case of orphans (36).

<sup>56</sup> *Outline of Psycho-analysis*, 57.

is cut short when the father prohibits the boy's masturbatory activities.<sup>57</sup> The boy realises that he alone is not the sole object of his mother's desire and that there is a phallic power greater than his which, within the dynamics of the oedipal triangle, initially resides with the father but is ultimately to be found in the wider society to which the latter is linked and which he represents. This establishes an anxiety over losing his most precious organ (what Freud terms the 'castration complex'), an anxiety necessary to ensure that the boy's desire for the mother is repressed 'more or less completely.'<sup>58</sup> For a boy to become a heterosexual male in a patriarchal world, he must repress his desire for his mother (or substitute) and redirect it towards a suitable female love object when he grows up. However, while the sense of threat needs to appear real to the little boy to propel him through the Oedipus complex, it exists mainly at the level of fantasy, and its effects are mostly symbolic.<sup>59</sup>

Significantly, for Jacques Lacan, the onset of the Oedipus complex coincides with the acquisition of language, when the child is inserted into a pre-existing order. This is the moment of humanisation, when the child becomes constituted as a subject and 'his nature is woven by effects in which is to be found the structure of language, of which he becomes the material, and that therefore there resounds in him ... the relation of speech.'<sup>60</sup> This structure is governed by the signifier, to which the subject is reduced, and on which must depend, and which bars access to the pre-oedipal world of plenitude, as the child's identity now exists in the field of the Other and is no longer absorbed into the imaginary identification with the mother. Subjectivity is hence predicated on lack and leaves the individual hopelessly divided. As Lacan explains, 'man cannot aim at being whole ... while ever the play of displacement and condensation to which he is doomed in the exercise of

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<sup>57</sup> While it is true that it is often the mother who literally prohibits the boy, especially when the father is absent from the home, 'for the little boy, the castrating agent is the father—the authority to whom, in the last resort, [the boy] attributes all threats made by other people' (Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 57).

<sup>58</sup> *Outline of Psycho-analysis*, 59.

<sup>59</sup> The argument goes that when a boy observes that girls do not have penises he assumes that they have been castrated, especially if he observes female genitals during menstruation, as is often the case with the mother. Furthermore, it is common practice for adults (especially males) to tease boys when they reveal their penises with the threat that they will lose it ('a bird will come and peck it off') if they don't put it away or put some clothes on.

<sup>60</sup> *Ecrits: A Selection*, 284.

his functions marks his relation as a subject to the signifier.’<sup>61</sup> Hence, it is the law of language, or what Lacan calls the ‘symbolic order’, that acts as the castrating agent in the way it serves to prohibit the child’s desire to remain in possession of the mother. Therefore, while the figure of the father often embodies this law to the child, when Lacan speaks of the father (the symbolic father or *nom-du-père*, name-of-the-father), ‘he has an agency in mind which cannot be reduced to whatever forms may be taken by the “real” or the “imaginary” father—an agency which promulgates the law.’<sup>62</sup> As Lacan notes, ‘it is not only man who speaks, but that in man and through man *it* speaks.’<sup>63</sup>

Subjectivity, then, can be said to turn on this question of agency, conventionally symbolised by the phallus and chosen ‘because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation.’ It is a ‘privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire,’ providing coherence to the order via the necessary illusion of a fixed relationship between the signifier and the signified.<sup>64</sup> As a transcendental signifier it serves as a provisional grounding agent to the endless play of signification. Lacan explains: ‘For it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier.’<sup>65</sup>

Identification with the phallus is driven by the desire for presence and completeness and is therefore imaginary. It refers to any sense of potency or control or subjective unity, real or imagined, that is experienced through the authorisation of the symbolic order. It refers to the claim a subject makes on a coherence of meaning, truth or knowledge, and the power, prestige or advantages that these, in their institutional manifestations, bestow on the subject, who in patriarchal society is mostly male. However, as Lynne Segal points out, the phallus is not something that men automatically possess by virtue of being male or having a penis ‘but a seemingly timeless symbolic order, representing sexual difference and the law of the father, which holds women and men alike in its thrall.’<sup>66</sup> In practice, then, what occurs is a ‘slippage’ between the phallus and the penis, ‘between the fluctuable and

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>62</sup> *Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 440.

<sup>63</sup> *Ecrits*, 284.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>66</sup> *Slow Motion*, 87.

material male organ itself and the magnificent idea of it—for the phallus, unlike the penis, never tumescens and detumescens; it is always already erect.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, just as the phallus is the mark of power, it is also the mark of castration, as no one individual can embody it fully and at all times.<sup>68</sup> As Bowie explains, ‘the phallus is the promise of meaning organised by an organ and, equally, it is the loss or cancellation of meaning perpetually being foretold.’<sup>69</sup> True phallic power necessarily always belongs to the Other and resides in the ‘real,’ which leaves the subject exposed to the imminent threat of losing potency, control or a sense of subjective unity. As such, castration can take many forms, as the primary fear of losing one’s testicles is displaced onto other instances of significant loss. Kramer notes that ‘in the world of gender polarity, any absence can become a castration.’<sup>70</sup> In addition to the transposition onto other parts of the body, like the eyes or the limbs (the blinding of Oedipus being the most notable example), castration can be perceived when one loses such things as employment, a significant acquisition, like a home, or any other similar loss that leads to the disruption of subjective unity. Furthermore, ‘the agency of the father lends itself to a great variety of substitutions’ —the state, institutions, public figures, mothers, ‘phobic subjects’ or any agency that can derive power from the symbolic order.<sup>71</sup>

As important as the Oedipus complex is in understanding human subjectivity, it is wise to heed a few warnings. The sociologist Connell concedes that the oedipal narrative is an important tool, because from psychoanalysis we get ‘two important points: the extent to which adult masculinity is built on over-reactions to femininity; and the connection of the making of masculinity with the subordination of women.’<sup>72</sup> However, he points out that it is one among many and warns that it is ‘radically incomplete.’<sup>73</sup> He claims that it cannot provide a complete map of masculinity, providing instead ‘a map of *one* historically

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<sup>67</sup> Hurley, *Gothic Body*, 146.

<sup>68</sup> Refer to note 37 above.

<sup>69</sup> Lacan, 128.

<sup>70</sup> *After the Lovedeath*, 95.

<sup>71</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 56.

<sup>72</sup> *Masculinities*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

possible pattern.’<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, he evaluates the significance of psychoanalysis with regard to masculinity as dependent ‘on our ability to grasp the structuring of personality and the complexities of desire at the same time as the structuring of social relations, with their contradictions and dynamisms.’<sup>75</sup> Stephen Frosh would seem to agree, noting that ‘the theory of the Oedipus complex provides a description of some possible mechanisms by which social structures are incorporated into individual consciousness and have a formative role on the ordering of the psyche.’<sup>76</sup> Later, paraphrasing William Reich, Frosh states that ‘repression is not natural, but is a product of a particular form of society, the “patriarchal-authoritarian” form. This has its central power base in the family, through which the oppressive injustices of capitalism are translated, in early experience, into the child’s character. The Oedipus complex, for example, through which so much of the child’s personality is organised, is produced by the structure of the family under capitalism and transmits to the child the (ideological) values of the parents, derived from their own position in the productive process.’<sup>77</sup>

While the Oedipus complex has endured relentless challenges, and its limitations as an analytic tool have been exposed over the years,<sup>78</sup> it still remains embedded in some form or another in the various understandings of human behaviour as a compelling model for the analysis of identity formation and cultural reproduction. As Nancy Chodorow argues: ‘Until we have another theory which can tell us about unconscious mental processes, conflict, and relations of gender, sexuality, and self, we had best take psychoanalysis for

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>76</sup> *Politics of Psychoanalysis*, 48.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>78</sup> Namely by feminists such as Judith Butler, Kate Millet and Luce Irigaray who, in stressing that Freud was influenced by the patriarchal values of his time, object to the way in which female sexuality and femininity in general, through a perceived deviation from a masculine norm, is constructed as lacking. Furthermore, as Connell indicated above, traditional psychoanalysis is not very sensitive to historical contingencies and tends to lapse into essentialism, a point taken up by one of psychoanalysis’ most vigorous opponents in recent times, Jeffrey Masson. He insists that the interpretive methods of psychotherapy (which inform the model for psychoanalytic theories in the academy) are fundamentally flawed because they are based on the assumption that the patient’s problems are ‘self-created.’ This results in the subordination of social factors to the psychic domain of the individual. Moreover, the analyst’s impartiality cannot be guaranteed, often resulting in his or her ‘views’ being imposed on the patient (*Against Therapy*, 43–44). Finally, we cannot overlook the savage critique in *Anti-Oedipus*, by Deleuze and Guattari, of the oedipal regime as it operates in contemporary western society.

what it does include and can tell us rather than dismissing it out of hand.<sup>79</sup> She concludes: ‘I am more convinced even than I was during an earlier period that psychoanalysis describes a significant level of reality that is not reducible to, or in the last instance caused by, social or cultural organisation.’<sup>80</sup> At the very least there can be no doubt that, as Segal claims, ‘we can never escape the influence of our mothers and fathers.’<sup>81</sup>

In response to these theoretical problems, I attempt to locate my discussion on that dynamic fault line between the personal and social construction of masculine subjectivities. While analysing the particular, personal constructions of the characters on the screen through their relationships with their parents, I also situate the discussion in its social context. Moreover, I am mindful that the characters on the screen are not real, in the sense that their life does not continue beyond the margins of the frame, but they are nevertheless constructed out of the same signifying economy and are informed by the same textual consciousness, or ‘*mise en scène* of desire,’<sup>82</sup> from which real flesh-and-blood people (like myself and the audience) piece together, through cathected images and signs, their own understandings and expressions of selfhood.<sup>83</sup> Hence while psychoanalysis remains at the foundation of this thesis, it is liberally supplemented by Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Poststructuralism in order to steer it away from any essentialist or universal tendencies. In this way, I hope to loosen the exclusive connections of the oedipal narrative with psychoanalysis. When analysing a narrative such as Sophocles’ *Oedipus* we must be attentive to the text within which it is embodied. This approach compares to the analyst who treats the patient as an individual by following up specific ‘individual symbolic connections.’ We must pursue the ‘associations that culture and the ethnographic context build around every story or myth.’<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> *Slow Motion*, 28.

<sup>82</sup> Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 5.

<sup>83</sup> As a man, I am not quarantined from the processes I am describing, despite the adoption of an objective voice throughout this thesis. My retention of the first-person plural in the quotation of the title, therefore, is deliberate, as it applies to me as much as it does to the world I am gesturing towards.

<sup>84</sup> Sissa, ‘Interpreting the Implicit,’ 36.

## Thesis Outline

In traditional narrative, women seek men, but men seek manhood. Traditional narrative is so preoccupied with this search that manhood itself seems to be won as much—or more—in narrative as in reality. Unless a man has a story to tell about his attainment of manhood, he has not in fact attained it. And even if he has a story, it has to be told more than once. The story itself is another one of those little extra pieces by which masculine identity contrives the illusion of wholeness. (*After the Lovedeath*, 146)

I have chosen films that show men negotiating their manhood in the contemporary world. Many have enjoyed mainstream commercial success and wide social currency and, because of their popularity, need to be included for their consensualising tendencies. Examination of the status quo is a necessary starting point to understand how ideas about manhood are reproduced through ideological processes. I begin in chapter one with *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997), which serves this purpose well, as Darryl Kerrigan is constructed in the film as a model of masculinity and fatherhood. Against this I set another enormously popular film, *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996), which, though consensualising in different ways, serves to unsettle and destabilise, and hence critique (through the excesses of patriarchal authority displayed in Peter's fathering of David Helfgott), the comforting images of fatherhood presented in *The Castle*. Nevertheless, despite both films' consensualising tendencies, like all films, they contain the seeds of their own subversion. As Rose Lucas points out, 'images of masculinity in the cinema may indeed reflect and thus perpetuate dominant social ideas about masculinity; they may equally—and perhaps, at the same time—work to challenge and problematise those dominant representations.'<sup>85</sup>

In the second chapter, the focus shifts to the mother figure and its significance in the manhood of the two central characters in *Proof* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991) and *Death in Brunswick* (John Ruane, 1991). In contrast to the depiction of the father in the first chapter, the father is absent in the lives of both Carl and Martin, leaving the mother as the centre around which their identities orbit and the principal threat to their subjective integrity.

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<sup>85</sup> 'Dragging it Out,' 139.

With David Helfgott's disturbed subjectivity still resonating, I explore undercurrents of misogyny that rupture the surface of these narratives which end safely in heterosexual marriage (*Death in Brunswick*) and homosocial solidarity (*Proof*). In these films the mother and women in general are linked to abjection or the abject, which, after examining Elisabeth Badinter's and Nancy Chodorow's analyses of the myths of motherhood, I explore through the writings of Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed. I conclude the chapter with an examination of closure in a reintegrated masculine subject through the narrative theories of Laura Mulvey and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of homosocial desire.

My first choice has always been to include films that consciously problematise and challenge received images of manhood. Unfortunately, they are less popular with audiences but warrant inclusion because of their complexity, nuance and engagement with the tensions of contemporary masculinities. *The Boys* (Rowan Woods, 1997), which is the sole focus of my middle chapter, fits this description. In this film the feminine, maternal figure is abjected to its logical conclusion. The misogyny that lingered just below the surface of the films in the previous chapters now erupts into actual violence against women. With this chapter we can complete the descent into the core of masculine subjectivity where violence is sovereign. Notably this descent is accompanied by gothic elements which can be observed in the films of the first three chapters. Kelly Hurley notes that the Gothic 'has been theorised as an instrumental genre, re-emerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises.'<sup>86</sup> Hence it is no accident that I have placed *The Boys* literally at the centre of my thesis, where I examine some of the possible reasons why men like the Sprague brothers use violence as an essential part of the expression of their identity. After discussing violence's uncanny relationship with the ordinary and everyday according to Sigmund Freud's theorising, I utilise the writings of Lawrence Kramer, Michael Kaufman and R.W. Connell to explain how violence is structured into patriarchal society. In particular, I examine Alfred Adler and R.W. Connell's reworking of the notion of the masculine protest. Furthermore, through the theories of Lawrence Kramer, Jurgen Reeder, Laura Mulvey and Marie Balmory, I explain how violence is

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<sup>86</sup> *Gothic Body*, 5.

intrinsic to the symbolic order as an effect of the figure of the ‘uncastrated man’ and hence, ineluctably, a part of masculine subjectivity and gender relations.

In the last three chapters, while still attending to the personal, I turn my attention more closely to the social. *The Boys* becomes the pivotal film of the thesis, as its violence is foreshadowed in the opening chapters and haunts the remaining chapters. Moreover, the social implications of the uncastrated man, stemming from the oedipal triangle discussed in this chapter, are traced from convictism through to the figure of the larrikin in the fourth chapter where I focus on castration anxiety in the characters of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliot, 1994) and *Chopper* (Andrew Dominik, 2000). The spectacle of the larrikin figure leads on to a discussion of camp, which can be read against the essentialising tendencies of psychoanalysis. Here the writings of Judith Butler, Carole-Anne Tyler and Richard Dyer make a significant contribution to my argument.

In the last chapter I use Nancy Chodorow’s discussion of oedipal asymmetries to explore heterosexual relationships in the films *Mullet* (David Caesar, 2001), *Praise* (John Curran, 1998) and *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (Cherie Nowlan, 1997) and how the relationship with a woman, as the suitable love object, impacts on masculine subjectivity. I also examine the legacy that the patriarchy has passed on to its sons as they face significant intimate relationships, marriage and fatherhood. This legacy is shaped by the impetus of modernity and its concomitant ideology of romantic love in late capitalist, western societies, as explicated by Anthony Giddens, Steven Nock and Jacqueline Sarsby. The films reveal wounded spirits and a tendency toward melancholia, which I explore through the theorising of Sigmund Freud and Julia Kristeva. I use the character of C. J. Dennis’ Sentimental Bloke as a benchmark to evaluate the constructions of masculinities in this chapter within a local and increasingly globalised world. As Connell notes: ‘The pattern of “Australian Masculinities” does not make much sense until it is seen as part of the history of settler colonialism, dependent industrialisation, and contemporary globalisation.’<sup>87</sup>

In the choice of my films I make no claims of comprehensively covering the field of Australian masculinities. Nor do I make claims to know the object of my study. O’Regan

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<sup>87</sup> ‘Introduction: Australian Masculinities,’ 19.

cautions that because Australian cinema is an ‘*unprincipled assemblage*,’ by necessity ‘it has an open-ended and highly contingent character and ...cannot provide anything more than a contingent grasp of its object.’ He explains: ‘There can be no privileged point in the cinema where all the diverse elements could be summarized into a generalized principle. It is the network—made of a collection of hybrid entities—that governs the cinema’s form and character. The various ways in which agents know Australian cinema depends on their place in this web.’<sup>88</sup> Therefore my aims are relatively modest. In my selection of films I am ‘assembling possibilities rather than ... demonstrating necessities.’<sup>89</sup> My thesis could be demonstrated with an altogether different choice of films.

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<sup>88</sup> *Australian National Cinema*, 40.

<sup>89</sup> Kramer, *After the Lovedeath*, 19.