TURN OF THE GAZE: TOWARDS A (RE)VISION OF READING MASCULINITY

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ABSTRACT

Turn of the Gaze: Towards a (Re)vision of Reading Masculinity contends that how we read masculinity, within popular culture, is overdetermined.

Within the dominant discourse of patriarchy, masculinity is commonly read to be synonymous with both the male body and heterosexuality. When academic discussions on masculinity, namely, feminist reinscriptions of gender, continue to describe and identify individual men in equally essentialist terms, the problem is exacerbated. One such site where these configurations of masculinity converge is in that cultural practice of seeing and reading representation(s)—the male gaze.

This study examines such an acculturalized site/sight. It argues that if masculinity is to be revised, we—those of us within the academic field of gender studies, and, more importantly, those of us who are male readers—must reconsider how masculinity can be alternatively read when textually represented. To a large extent, this is necessary because some contemporary texts represent the apparent masculinity of the male body to be nothing less than a spectacularized site of contradiction. We can begin to appreciate this need when such films as *The Purple Rose of Cairo, The Silence of the Lambs,* and *Batman, the Movie* as well as such fiction as *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall, Equal Affections, Kiss of the Spider Woman, American Psycho*, and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* challenge our otherwise normative understanding of what masculinity presently is.

Our current postmodern focus on difference enables us to re-read masculinity through a politics of discoherence. This is both the focus and aim of my study. I want to propose that how and what we understand masculinity to be is never solely, or singularly, a matter of representing the male body with the male gaze. Rather, the potential of this gaze to be a chiasm—a space stimulating discoherence—inevitably results in a dislocation between the apparent masculine identification it is argued to

engender and the generic masculine subjectivity it inherently seems to guarantee a reader who deploys the male gaze.

If we can no longer read the representation of masculinity in these problematic sites with the certainty of what is now a dis-eased male gaze, our ability to locate, engender and identify our subjectivity as the reader/spectator of texts no longer corresponds with that subject position of the generic masculine reader/spectator in dominant culture. That this problem forces us to ask the question, "what is a masculine subject?" implicitly foregrounds a need to rethink how we can re-present subjectivity, and the masculine representation it engenders, within the postmodern condition. As such, this study ends by suggesting the possibility of a performatively "queer" identity for the reader/spectator today—in each act of reading gender, he or she can be, quite possibly, the cross-(ad)ressed masculine subject this study proposes in its conclusion.