

The Redemption of White Masculinity

by [Judith Franco](#)

Des films récents ont tenté de restaurer l'intégrité des victimes blanches mâles qui ont souffert des maux de la masculinité traditionnelle tandis que ceux-ci se consacrent à l'amélioration de leur vie personnelle et de leur « moi » intérieur. Dans ces récits de transformation masculine, qui oeuvrent à personnaliser la crise de la masculinité blanche et donc à effacer ses causes et ses effets politiques et sociaux, les hommes révisés sont déchargés des responsabilités de leurs actions passées.

Jeffords' analysis of Hollywood presentations of white heterosexual masculinity in a group of 1991 films reveals a shift from the violent, individualistic hero of the eighties to the sensitive, caring family man (1). These (bodily and/or metaphorical) transformation narratives suggest that men have been betrayed by "society" and their own muscular bodies into fulfilling a masculine heroic ideal that has alienated them from their own internal needs and "goodness". The integrity of the white male victims who have suffered from the burdens of traditional masculinities is eventually restored as they devote themselves to improving their personal lives and their "internal" selves. In these narratives of masculine transformation that work to personalize the crisis of white masculinity and, thus, to erase its social and political causes and effects, the revised men are absolved from responsibility for their past actions : *The plots suggest that it is the men themselves who have suffered the most from their behaviours, having their lives taking away from them and placed in different bodies. Consequently, they're not called upon to repair the damage they've done – it's not, after all, that severe...* (Jeffords, p. 204) Sally Robinson's analysis of 60s post-liberationist/post 60s mainstream American texts shows that the marking/making visible of dominant masculinity functions as a strategy through which white men negotiate the widespread critique of their power and privilege (2). In the rhetoric of crisis white men claim victimization by appealing to representations of bodily and emotional trauma. Furthermore, the figure of the wounded white male individual enables an erasure of the institutional supports of white and male dominance and works to recentre white masculinity at the expense of evacuated others : women and people of colour. A number of contemporary films (*Monster's Ball*, *Panic*, *K-Pax*, *The Man Who Wasn't There*) take the victimisation/transformation trend further by casting the criminal or morally dubious white male in the privileged, morally superior position of the psychically and emotionally damaged victim-hero. In this article, I propose a close analysis of two representative case studies.

Monster's Ball (Marc Forster, 2000) focuses on intergenerational father-son relationships and locates the drama of masculinity in the traumatized middle generation who is caught between the monstrous father and the sensitive son. This film text works to overdetermine the father's guilt whereas the victimized middle generation is idealized and/or redeemed in a conversion narrative at the expense of women and subordinate masculinities. In *Monster's Ball* the one-dimensional representation and narrative construction of the father figure as an abject patriarch who embodies and perpetuates the worst elements of traditional masculinity - racism, misogyny, violence - casts the son-father in the role

of victim/hero by suppressing/displacing his complicity and guilt. The miraculous conversion of the racist prison guard Hank whose identity is modeled on the father into the caring lover of a black woman whose husband he has put to death, demands a tortuous selfconscious narrative that exposes the film's conservative racial and sexual politics. The film prepares the ground for the unlikely affair between Hank and Laetitia by trivializing and depreciating Laetitia's relationships with black men who are already marked as castrated. Laetitia is portrayed as an abusive mother who terrorizes her obese son and she is emotionally estranged from her imprisoned black husband. Significantly, her last conversation with him is a petty and illtempered row. Furthermore, for Hank and Laetitia to come together, the narrative subjects the black woman to unspeakable loss. Laetitia's husband is executed, her son is run over and killed and she is evicted from her home. As the female/black Other, Laetitia functions merely as a catalyst in the trajectory of the white male who is "reborn" as a sensitive new man. Hank quits his job and buys a gas station he names after Laetitia, he passes on his son's car to Laetitia, he invites her to move in with him and he becomes a sensitive lover who performs oral sex (as opposed to his previous sexual encounters with a prostitute who is fucked from behind). Yet, Hank's conversion is hardly convincing since the narrative is unable to resolve the tension/ contradiction between the monstrous patriarchal heir who is responsible for his son's suicide and the reborn man who distances himself from his father and who incorporates femininity. The final scene foregrounds this ambiguity as Laetitia discovers that Hank was involved in her husband's death. Once again, the black woman's distress and betrayal, signalled by her baffled gaze as she faces Hank's duplicity/ hidden monstrosity, is eclipsed by Hank's condescending remark - "I think we're going to be alright"- and the romantic closing shot of the couple sitting on the porch, watching the stars.

Tania Modleski points out that "Heterosexual masculinity has often been constructed in American society 'at the edge of the territory of the child' while women have typically represented the repressive forces of civilized, adult society - that which man rejects in order to live out his perpetual youth" (3) An important strategy in contemporary male conversion/crisis narratives is the representation of the son-father as boyish/infantile in order to emphasize his victimization by the patriarchal father and his (sexual) inoffensiveness. In *Monster's Ball*, Hank's innocence is signalled by his craving for chocolate ice cream which he insists on eating with a plastic spoon at any time of day or night. Throughout the film Billy Bob Thornton's constrained body language, evoking his previous asexual personae/underdogs in *Slingblade* (Billy Bob Thornton, 1996) and *A Simple Plan* (Sam Raimi, 1998) conveys passivity and awkward boyishness. What little sexual desire Hank is capable of must, moreover, be kindled by Laetitia's sexual advances.

In *K-Pax* (Iain Softley, 2001) the redemption of the symbolic father and son carries religious overtones. The film opens with the apparition of Prot, a mysterious Christ figure who claims to come from another planet. The K-Paxian is arrested and treated in a psychiatric hospital where he has a beneficial effect on his fellow patients and Prot also transforms Dr. Mark Powell, an indifferent workaholic psychiatrist into a caring family man who seeks contact with Michael, his estranged son from a previous marriage. *K-Pax*

is primarily concerned with the renegotiation of relationships between father figures and sons (signalled from the very beginning by superimposing Mark's and Prot's face in reflecting surfaces, a bonding process that culminates in the formation of male couples : Mark-Prot and Mark-Michael). Dr. Mark Powell soon becomes obsessed with his patient and he decides to cure Prot of his delusions by subjecting him to hypnosis. Regressive therapy reveals a traumatic experience and further investigation leads the analyst to identify Prot as Robert Porter, a man who disappeared after having killed the murderer/rapist of his wife and daughter. Even though *K-Pax* works hard to redeem masculinity by idealizing the intellectually and morally superior Prot from the very beginning through religious metaphors, by emphasizing his pacific nature (he is a vegetarian in touch with the "weak" : animals, children and psychiatric patients) and by focusing on his pain as he is forced to relive his trauma in three consecutive scenes that victimize/ feminize the character ; Prot's partial and indirect confessions (he never speaks in the first person) suggest that the true story/persona behind the wide eyed asexual alien is in any case that of a killer. Prot's alter ego who surfaces during hypnosis worked in a slaughterhouse as a "knocker" ("A knocker is the guy who knocks cows on the head so they won't struggle while they slit their throats. Barbaric isn't it ?") a profession he inherited from his dead father, and he killed the drifter who murdered his family.

During hypnosis Prot's violence also surfaces as he grabs Mark by the throat. Although the flashbacks, emanating from Mark's point of view as he visits Robert Porter's home, and the sheriff's official version represent Robert Porter as a traumatized victim who rightfully avenged his wife Sarah and his six year old daughter Rebecca, one could also read Porter, the husband/father as the perpetrator who wanted to get rid of his "shackles" as he calls it (Sarah's unwanted pregnancy at the age of 17, a life of misery following in the footsteps of his father...). Significantly, water is a privileged motif in *K-Pax*, signalling Robert Porter/Prot's purity and redemption. After the massacre, Porter washes the blood from his hands and disappears into the river and he "walks on water". The climax shows Prot once again transcending his mortal body and sacrificing himself to save Bess, a black fellow-patient who has no home and who is chosen to accompany him to *K-Pax*. All that is left on earth are Prot's sunglasses and a catatonic body inhabited by a superior spirit that Mark will try to revive.

In *Monster's Ball* and *K-Pax* masculine identity is negotiated mainly through narrative structure and by contrasting different versions of masculinity. The ideological agenda of these male family dramas is geared toward redeeming masculinity in the figure of the son-father/middle generation who is the site of crisis split across abject/violent masculinity and alternative/caring masculinity. In *Monster's Ball* monstrous masculinity is externalized/ embodied by a father figure who is exorcized by the son in a narrative of conversion whereas *K-Pax* locates both the (repressed) patriarchal and benevolent version of masculinity within the son-father/human-alien whose duality is never resolved. As such, *K-Pax* has to resort to extreme idealization - religious metaphors and a resurrection narrative - to redeem masculinity. These predominantly homosocial narratives work hard to absolve the son of responsibility and guilt despite his complicity in the crimes of the Father, by recentering him as a wounded victim-

hero who has the courage to challenge the patriarchal law/order, passed on by fathers to their sons. In the process, women and subordinate masculinities are once again sacrificed to the trajectory of the morally superior white male in crisis, thus confirming Sally Robinson's critical feminist analysis of white masculinity in crisis : *Representations of a hysterical, masochistic, or wounded white male body testify to the real, material effects of a perceived displacement of white masculinity away from the centre, from the normative, from the mainstream. But such representations also work to recentre white masculinity, to carve out a new place for white men in relation to changing notions of normativity.... The representational and rhetorical strategies through which the wounded white man comes to occupy the position either of true rebel or true victim should give us pause : what happens when others get evacuated from that position ? What happens to "liberation" when the social group with the most economic and political power imagines itself in need of liberation ?... Predictably, the perceived disempowerment of white men has produced a backlash against feminism and civil rights understood to be at odds with white men's interests (4)*

Notes (1) Susan Jeffords (1993) ; The Big Switch : Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties, in Film Theory goes to the Movies ; (ed) Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins , AFI Film Readers, Routledge, pp. 196-208. (2) Sally Robinson (2000) ; Marked Men. White Masculinity in crisis. Columbia University Press : New York. (3) Tania Modleski (1991) ; Feminism without Women. Routledge : New York and London, p.99. (4) Robinson, p.190.