

MARTIN FRADLEY

MAXIMUS MELODRAMATICUS

Masculinity, masochism and white male paranoia in contemporary Hollywood cinema

Paranoia *n* 1. A mental disorder characterised by any of several types of delusions, as of grandeur or persecution. 2. *Inf.* Intense fear or suspicion, esp. when unfounded.

. . . delusions of persecution are unpleasant, but they are acceptable in so far as the ego remains the focus of attention.¹

THE UNDOUBTED HIGHLIGHT of the typically uneventful 73rd Annual Academy Awards in Los Angeles was the sight of Russell Crowe – the star of Ridley Scott’s Oscar-magnet *Gladiator* (2000) – sneering and pouting his way through the ceremony. As host Steve Martin cracked gag after gag at the star’s expense, Crowe’s sullen features refused to budge, his steadfast scowl threatening to crack the lens of the camera inspecting the actor in leering close-up. Such unflinching disdain remained even when the actor’s performance was hailed as the year’s best by Hollywood’s *glitterati*, his terse acceptance ‘speech’ indicating little more than scarcely concealed contempt. Despite his entertainingly grumpy refusal to grin and bear it, this was still a *performance*; indeed, it was an almost generic turn in a gendered role in which Hollywood has invested much time, money and ideological angst in recent years: that of the angry, beleaguered white male.

This chapter examines how white masculinity has represented itself within the utopian masculine sphere of the Hollywood imaginary. In particular, I explore here the aesthetics, narratives and rhetorical strategies of the Hollywood action movie as it stands today, reading *Gladiator* as a high-profile, near-canonical and – I would argue – symptomatic Hollywood take on what has been dubbed the so-called ‘crisis of masculinity’. Whilst focusing on this revivalist epic, I will also propose that the masochistic narratives and tortured *mise-en-scène* that typify the contemporary action film have their basis in wider cultural narratives characterised by a form of paranoia

which is itself mobilised and soothed by a somewhat paradoxical emphasis on a *narcissistic* and performative masculine angst. By looking at the fantasy space of contemporary Hollywood – the popular bastion, as Robyn Wiegman points out, of US culture's 'historic reliance on the ideological supremacy of everything white, heterosexual, and male'² – I will argue that broad but historically contingent fears, desires, fantasies and anxieties can be read, interpreted and critiqued.

It is widely alleged that the average American male – and, more specifically, the average *white* male – has been having a tough time of it lately. In a cultural discourse which has grown louder and more prominent since the so-called liberationist era of the 1960s, the decentring, disenfranchisement, disempowerment and (more melodramatically) even the *death* of the Great White American Male has been frequently pronounced. Indeed, what with the usual roll-call of supposed post-1960s advancements by, amongst (structuring) others, feminists (read: women), civil rights activists, the ideologues of identity politics, the gay and lesbian rights movement, not forgetting the slow-but-growing acceptance of multiculturalism and postmodern celebration of difference(s), white guys are apparently on the ropes and in danger of going out for the count.³ A 1993 *USA Today* piece entitled 'The End of the Great White Male' typifies this trend. Here, John Graham rhetorically asks:

[w]hat about the future of the Great White Male? . . . There will be pitiful efforts to restore his feathers, to prop up his prowess and power. Nevertheless, the great white male's day has passed, along with his unlimited, unilateral power and influence . . . From now on the great white male will be one of many.⁴

The death of the Great White Male has surely been greatly exaggerated. Nonetheless, Graham raises some pertinent questions; how exactly, we may ask, have white American men, and by extension Hollywood cinema, interpreted, responded to and represented these shifts in contemporary American culture and society?⁵

The answer is, of course, with a great deal of complaint, hysteria and no little paranoia; a potent combination resulting in a dubious appropriation of victim status. The same year that Graham's provocative article appeared, Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993) – perhaps the Ur-text in Hollywood's take on the angsty, angry white male – was released to a mass of controversy and critical debate. The film has been widely represented as an important popular text in this emergent discourse, both deeply symptomatic and highly problematic. *Falling Down* has been thoroughly analysed and extensively critiqued, and is – alongside David Fincher's ambivalent and darkly comic *Fight Club* (1999) – probably the most explicit cinematic take on the much-vaunted 'crisis of masculinity' in post-industrial American culture. This narrative of (so-called) crisis reached its zenith in the 1990s, a decade neatly framed by two key texts: Robert Bly's hysterical tome of essentialist masculine 'mythopoeticism', the bible of the so-called 'men's movement' *Iron John*;⁶ and high-profile feminist Susan Faludi's entertainingly sensationalistic *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*.

Faludi's impressionistic, quasi-ethnographic survey of America and its male discontents focuses upon the baby-boomer generation's angst and alleged patrimonial burden (or, indeed, the *lack* of such a gendered encumbrance). Faludi's rhetoric of – real or symbolic – 'paternal desertion' is typified by a nostalgia for the past and the invocation of abundance and wholeness which came in the wake of the Second World War:

Never, or so their sons were told, did fathers have so much to pass on as at the peak of the American Century. And conversely, never was there such a burden on the sons to learn how to run a world they would inherit. Yet the fathers, with all the force of fresh victory and moral virtue behind them, seemingly unfettered in their paternal power and authority, failed to pass the mantle, the knowledge, all that power and authority, on to their sons.⁷

The overdetermined rhetorical tropes Faludi employs here – abundance/lack, presence/absence – culminate in a quasi-Lacanian metaphor: in the introjective relay of the eternal masculine, the phallus-baton has been dropped somewhere along the way. If this narrative verges on 'mythopoeticism', Faludi's increasingly mixed metaphors merely add to the melodramatic storm-in-a-teacup. Thus, 'paternal betrayal' becomes the 'artichoke's bitter heart' of masculine angst. 'The fathers had made a promise,' suggests Faludi, 'and then had not made good on it. They had lied'.⁸ Employing liquid metaphors of natural disaster, *Stiffed* suggests the emasculating swamp of contemporary American culture whose 'tsunami force' drowns 'fathers as well as sons':

Its surge had washed all of the men of the American Century into a swirling ocean of larger-than-life, ever-transmitting images in which usefulness to society meant less and less and celebrityhood ever more, where even one's appearance proved an unstable currency. The ever-prying, ever-invasive beam reducing men to objects comes not from women's inspection but from the larger culture. Cast into the gladiatorial arena of ornament, men sense their own diminishment in women's strength . . . The femininity that has hurt men the most is an artificial femininity manufactured and marketed by commercial interests . . . Truly, men . . . have arrived at their ornamental imprisonment.⁹

Faludi here draws upon and reiterates a series of contemporary (male) paranoia's favoured tropes: Schreberian 'beams'; the abject horror of penetration; the triad of emasculation, commodification and feminisation; homosocial betrayal; objectification and diminished/extinguished utilitarianism, as well as alluding in an intriguing and fortuitously prescient way to one of the biggest Hollywood hits of recent years, *Gladiator*. However, the overt anxiety about the state of masculinity, individualism, identity and its unstable basis in consumer culture evident here can also be found in cultural sites as confused and contradictory as *Fight Club*,

Naomi Klein's best-selling *No Logo* and the recent outbreaks of direct-action protests over the iniquities of global capitalism.¹⁰ The point I wish to make here is less that Faludi is somehow 'wrong' in a broadly sociological sense, but that the argument she forwards is both symptomatic and representative of the social perceptions and frustrations of many white American men.¹¹

Of course, in many ways this is yesterday's news: a rhetorically compelling and suitably angst-filled narrative of white male decentring and decline has become one of the master narratives in post-1960s American culture. As Liam Kennedy has pointed out, '[o]ne notable feature of this paranoia is that it has led to a growing recognition of whiteness as a social category and more particularly of white male selfhood as a fragile and besieged identity'.¹² However, this discourse has become especially pronounced in the 1990s. The anguished howl of Bly's 'wild men' testifies to the perceived displacement of normative – that is, white, middle-class and heterosexual – masculinity by a series of racially and sexually determinate others. Indeed, one key symptom of this sense of victimisation is a powerful nostalgia for a prelapsarian homosocial economy of white male centrality. This is then invariably accompanied by a mourning and/or longing for a 'lost', mythic national wholeness and plenitude. To this end, such masculinist desires have recently manifested themselves in a cycle of high-profile Second World War movies, Oedipal hymns to the 'greatest generation' such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *U-571* (2000), *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and *Windtalkers* (2002).

Paranoia is, needless to say, a fundamentally *narcissistic* delusion, a regressive construction of the self as the external world's object-choice. If we posit that power and paranoia are little more than *noirish* mirrorings of each other, delusions of persecution thus structure the identity of the male subject: paranoid counter-narratives make connections and (re-)order their universe, anxiously re-cohering the world, quite literally, around itself. As such, the grandiose narcissism of the paranoiac can be seen as a form of (over-) compensation for displaced feelings of (personal, cultural and/or socio-economic) worthlessness and inadequacy. Paranoia thus works in a cyclical double bind, staging various masochistic fantasies in order to master them through what Dana Polan dubs a reactionary 'aggressive surety'¹³ wherein anxiety and neurosis manifest themselves in (self-)aggrandisement and unambiguous certitude. As normative masculinity is itself defined largely by negation, dependant upon passified structuring of others for its own ontological (and hegemonic) security, it is inevitable that 'th[is] process of passifying the other generates the fear of retaliation, hence anxiety, and hence more aggressiveness'.¹⁴ The male paranoiac is a reader of *signs*, and his paranoia functions both to make sense of the world and as an ever-vigilant border patrol, forever placing his own tenuous, fragile masculine identity at the centre of a beleaguered narrative of suffering, victimisation and white plight. For Patrick O'Donnell, cultural paranoia operates, like the myth of the phallus, as a 'compensatory fiction', a narcissistic process which sates the desire for 'absolute centeredness, immediacy, transparency and control'.¹⁵ Such narratives serve as a phantasmic corrective to the perceived displacement of normative masculinity as the putative centre of 'America'; at the same time they expose the performativity of masculinity, the need to continually reassert and reiterate the

centrality of that supposed normalcy and the fundamental conservatism it seeks to uphold. Paranoid strategies thus inadvertently reveal the work of white masculinity and its ceaselessly narcissistic operations, a process made clear in the spectacular hegemonic investments of the action cinema.

To be sure, America has a well-established paranoid tradition – faithfully mirrored by Hollywood – from the Salem witch trials through to more pervasive contemporary manifestations, from UFO theorists and anti-government conspiracists, though events at Ruby Ridge and Waco, to Timothy McVeigh's righteous individualist zeal and nightmarish intimations of the (invariably 'Zionist') New World Order. Yet the paranoid spectacle of white masculinity as the 'victim' of progressive social change is perhaps *the* key element – however displaced or obliquely registered – in spectacular narratives of male crisis. This siege mentality and the concurrent fantasies of victimisation which white masculinity has adopted can be explained in several ways. Both O'Donnell and Timothy Melley ascribe the omnipresence of paranoid narratives in contemporary culture to what they see as the abjection of the postmodern condition. Arguing that paranoia and fantasies of persecution are 'symptoms of a more pervasive anxiety about social control',¹⁶ Melley suggests that given America's cultural and historical investment in the nationalist-masculinist fantasy of rugged individualism, such anxieties are particularly acute, with white male paranoia functioning 'less as a defence of some clear political position than as a defence of individualism, abstractly perceived'.¹⁷ As he argues, such anxieties – and the aggressive response(s) they provoke – 'are all part of the paradox by which a supposedly individualist culture conserves its individualism by continually imagining it to be in peril'.¹⁸ The anxious counterblast to this 'pomophobia'¹⁹ is *hyperindividualism*, a near-hysterical (hyper)masculine response to the perceived 'feminisation' of men within postmodernity; a narcissistic fantasy which works 'by seeing the self as only its truest self when standing in opposition to a hostile social order'.²⁰

'Masochistic' spectacles of heroically suffering white men have become perhaps the key trope in recent Hollywood action cinema. For Paul Smith, the cyclical narrative triad of eroticisation of the male body, through physical punishment and near-destruction (both synonymous – at least within the relentlessly binaristic terms of the masculine symbolic – with *feminisation*) and eventually towards a process of regeneration and remasculinisation, forms 'the orthodox structuring code'²¹ of contemporary Hollywood action movies. The 'temporary masochising' of the male body is, in Smith's schemata, merely a stepping stone *en route* to the re-emergence of an inviolable phallic masculinity displaced by the first two stages of the triad. Using the metaphor of 'the thrill of the chase' to explain the attraction of such narratives/spectacles, Smith argues that the sadomasochistic allure of male powerlessness is not subversive of the paternal law of the masculine symbolic (as Frank Krutnik or Kaja Silverman argue),²² but a mythic, ritualised and recuperative strategy based on the double-bind of disavowal: the hero knows he will get his ball(s) back, but chooses to believe, albeit briefly, that the lost object is irretrievable.

These cinematic rituals are similarly theorised by Rick Altman as, in his terms, the cyclical pleasures of 'generic economy':

[G]eneric reversals produce pleasure in proportion to the distance that must be traversed in order to restore order . . . The greater the risk, the greater the pleasure of the return to safety. The greater the wrong, the greater the pleasure taken in righting it. The greater the chaos, the greater the pleasure of restoring it.²³

Thus, the narrative drive towards remasculinisation is structured on a prior feminisation; for David Savran, the suffering white hero requires the gaze of an audience:

prov[ing] his masculinity only by letting it go momentarily . . . and allowing himself to be hurt . . . Only by temporarily relinquishing the phallus can the [hero] make himself an imitation of Christ and [acquire] the moral authority (and sympathy) to win hearts and minds.²⁴

White male suffering, like white male crisis, is thus deeply narcissistic, overtly performative and rhetorically forceful; the fantasy of victimisation which structures the crisis-discourse of white masculinity is, in Sally Robinson's terms, 'governed by a narrative economy that privileges infinitely deferred release, theatricality and display'.²⁵ She continues:

The rhetorical power of 'crisis' depends on a sense of prolonged tension; the announcements of crisis are inseparable from the crisis itself, as the rhetoric of crisis performs the cultural work of centring attention on dominant masculinity . . . Masochistic narratives, structured so as to defer closure or resolution, often feature white men displaying their wounds as evidence of disempowerment, and finding a pleasure in explorations of pain.²⁶

Perhaps, then, it is safe to argue that white masculine crisis has become – to borrow Kaja Silverman's phrase – the 'dominant fiction' of the US cultural imaginary in recent years.

Surely, therefore, it is more apt to posit that normative masculinity is *always already* in crisis, always under negotiation, dependant as it is upon the anxious defences of projection, disavowal and the myth of the phallus. Indeed, the sheer banality of masculine crisis is both managed and refuted through the prolonged melodramatic spectacles of white male suffering – on one level, epic bouts of *fort/da* – that populate contemporary Hollywood representations. For if the hegemonic power of white masculinity has always depended upon its structuring *invisibility*, then it also has a considerable investment in temporary hypervisibility: normative folks doing their (cultural) work before riding off into the sunset, the ordinarily-extraordinary, extraordinarily-ordinary white man. Mobilising a distinctly phallic metaphor, Hollywood action cinema enacts the fall, abjection and subsequent rise of white masculinity through the metonym of the wounded white hero. Thus, white male *ressentiment*²⁷ is expressed cyclically through a masochistic aestheticisation of physical wounding and bodily punishment of the white protagonist; as Robinson

again points out, this rhetorical socio-somatic process 'materializes the crisis of white masculinity, makes it more *real*', while the spectacular melodramatic excess evidences 'the impossibility of recuperating the [national-masculinist] fiction of abstract individualism'.²⁸ For while white masculinity becomes (hyper)visible through bodily trauma, the performative individualisation and paranoid projections of social trauma – the way 'articulations of white men as victimizers slide almost imperceptibly into constructions of white men as victims'²⁹ – has no little ideological investment:

While it is true that 'crisis' might signify a trembling of the edifice of white and male power, it is also true that there is much symbolic power to be reaped from occupying the social and discursive position of subject-in-crisis.³⁰

It is in this way that we can read the grandiosity of gendered action spectacles in terms of *melodrama*; as Nina Baym has pointed out, it is possible to explain the broad history of American fictional representation(s) of masculinity as, to paraphrase, 'melodramas of beset manhood'.³¹ Indeed, recent work on so-called 'trauma theory' has suggested that melodrama is *the* generic form for representing the psychological and emotional detritus of social upheaval. As E. Ann Kaplan explains: 'It makes sense that personal and social traumas caused by political and social transition [are] displaced into fictional melodrama forms where they could be more safely approached or remembered but also forgotten, in the peculiar manner of trauma.'³² She goes on:

[O]ne might argue that at certain historical moments aesthetic forms emerge to accommodate fears and fantasies related to suppressed historical events. In repeating the traumas of both class and gender struggle, melodrama would, in its very generic formation, constitute a traumatic cultural symptom . . . Rather than focusing upon traumatic cultural symptoms, independent cinematic techniques show paralysis, repetition, circularity – all aspects of the non-representability of trauma and yet of the search to figure its pain.³³

The parallels between the compulsively ritualistic allure of melodrama described here and the generically sadomasochistic aesthetic of the contemporary Hollywood action film are easy to draw. Indeed, the generic iconicity of tortured white male bodies as the displaced register of social angst would certainly seem to cohere with Kaplan's criteria. Action cinema's generic tropes – character archetypes, moral polarisation, transparency of legibility, spectacular and excessive *mise-en-scène* – further link such movies with the structural elements of melodrama.

As such, white male paranoia has registered itself in various ways in Hollywood representation though the 1990s. The anxious re-centring of the world around Average White Guys was perhaps *the* structuring trait (as it was in their 1970s antecedents) of the recent cycle of disaster movies such as *Daylight* (1997), *Dante's*

Peak (1997), *Volcano* (1997), *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* (1998). Key Hollywood stars have also taken on distinctly paranoid roles: Tom Cruise in *The Firm* (1993), *Mission Impossible* (1996), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Minority Report* (2002) and *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999); Clint Eastwood in *In the Line of Fire* (1993) and *Absolute Power* (1997); Harrison Ford as the saintly, persecuted Dr Kimbel in *The Fugitive* (1993) and hysterical president in *Air Force One* (1997)³⁴; Nicholas Cage in *Snake Eyes* and *8MM* (both 1998); Kurt Russell in *Breakdown* (1997); Bruce Willis in *12 Monkeys* (1995), *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *Unbreakable* (2001); Keanu Reeves in *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *Devil's Advocate* (1997) and *The Matrix* (1999); not to mention uber-paranoid Mel Gibson in the likes of *Ransom* (1996), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), *The Patriot* (2000), *Signs* (2002) and perhaps even *What Women Want* (2001); and, of course, the iconic Michael Douglas in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Basic Instinct* (1992), the aforementioned *Falling Down*, *Disclosure* (1994), *Don't Say a Word* (2001) and the convoluted, self-mocking yuppie nightmare of *The Game* (1997). Meanwhile, Tom Hanks – 1990s Hollywood's American Everyman *par excellence* – has embarked on a series of quasi-revisionist projects – most notably *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *Apollo 13* (1995) – which either place the white protagonist as the unwitting victim of bewildering (and invariably negative) social forces, or as the modest unwilling hero in a notably Caucasian universe. In the survivalist mythopoeticism of *Cast Away* (2000), for example, Hanks's bloated, overworked and undersexed corporate everyguy finds himself stranded on a desert island, forced to shed (indeed, 'cast away') pounds of compromised flabby flesh and rediscover the toned, muscle-bound and essentialised hunter-gatherer that lurks within; an overt narrative of remasculinisation which concludes with Hanks at a (literal) crossroads of quasi-frontiersman opportunity, abundance and (hetero)sexual adventure. Even more extravagantly, both the Baudrillardian nightmare of *The Matrix* and super hero art-flick *Unbreakable* – apparently without irony – forward unwary white chaps as the literal embodiment of the phallus: inviolable, all-powerful, and in the case of the former's Neo, 'the One' (who, presumably, will make good America's lack). And then, of course, there is Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*.

The grandiosity and emphasis on spectacle which characterises the Hollywood action-adventure blockbuster is, as Steve Neale has suggested, the direct descendant and contemporary heir to the epic genre. The Hollywood epic itself has long been interpreted in allegorical terms as an historical displacement of contemporaneous fears, desires and discourses.³⁵ *Gladiator* itself is fairly self-evidently allegorical in its depiction of 'American' imperial might, political corruption and depthless cultural entropy. It is also an 'epic' of populist-masculinist American mythology: the film's portentous promotional tag-line – 'The general who became a slave . . . the slave who became a gladiator . . . the gladiator who defied an empire' – is hardly ambiguous in its comfortingly ritualistic promises of masochistic, individualistic adventures and populist masculine anti-authoritarian defiance. Furthermore, few genres have been quite so closely associated with spectacle, and, in particular, the spectacle of the male body. Here, the film's warrior-hero, Maximus³⁶ (Crowe), is the archetypal self-made man, his masculinity shored up by a potent combination of professional prowess (he is, we understand, 'Rome's Greatest General'), a litany of military conquests and, perhaps most significantly, the pastoral idyll of fecundity

and self-sufficiency that is the American Dream-homestead to which he longs to return. If the film depicts Rome as the locus of corruption, greed and decadence, then it is the etherealised, isolated soft-focus abundance found in the idealised triad of 'a wife, a son, the harvest' for which Maximus pines that is evidently its moral and ethical structuring other.

Maximus/Crowe's star body was the focus of much critical attention during *Gladiator*'s pre-release marketing campaign. Much was made of the disciplining of Crowe's body following the considerable weight gain required for his previous role in Michael Mann's *The Insider* (1999). Like so many recent paranoid narratives, *The Insider* dramatised homosocial corporate seduction,³⁷ and as with Hanks in *Cast Away*, the flabby body of Crowe's protagonist figured as a visual metaphor for a compromised phallic masculinity and the perceived 'feminisation' of subjugation to a hierarchical corporate structure. As Steve Cohan explains, the heroic body in the epic is always metonymic and symbolic, a visual metaphor for an idealised national body.³⁸ As such, it is easy to understand the interpretation of Maximus/Crowe's muscles in terms of a collective male nostalgia for a more authentic, less performative and/or consumerised and commodified nation. This extratextual narrative of Crowe's ability to control and discipline his body after a 'masochistic' (but temporary) loss of self-mastery itself serves as a microcosmic synopsis of *Gladiator*'s narrative.

Crowe's masculine 'presence' was eulogised over when the film was released. *Sight and Sound*, for example, breathlessly suggested that Crowe 'commands the movie magisterially, never more so than when hacking down opponents with a casual economy of movement, barely breaking into sweat'.³⁹ More than a year later, the same journal bemoaned the absence of Crowe's 'stoical masculine gravitas' in subsequent Hollywood productions.⁴⁰ *The Observer* nostalgically compared Crowe to the youthful Mr Universe, Sean Connery.⁴¹ *Empire*'s similarly hyperbolic (and distinctly homoerotic) awe was hardly atypical: 'Russell Crowe was clearly born in a hard month, in a hard year during a freak outbreak of total hardness. The man exudes the physicality of a wild animal. Shifting testosterone like a pre-bloated Brando, he holds the screen with such assuredness you simply can't rip your eyes away from him.'⁴² The same magazine also featured an on-set profile of Crowe, expending many words rhetorically asserting the authenticity of Crowe's unreconstructed masculine charisma:

The credentials of Russell Crowe . . . look impressive. This is, after all, a man who lives on a 560-acre farm, in a remote corner of New South Wales, which he likes to walk – that's *walk* – around . . . Let's be clear from the start, Russell Crowe is not a Starbuck's cappuccino man. 'Rugged' is the word.⁴³

Clearly, such journalistic hyperbole is part and parcel of the promotion and construction of a star's public persona, but the insistence upon Crowe's all-too-real unreconstructed masculinity is striking; it builds upon previous 'tough' roles in *Romper Stomper* (1992), *L.A. Confidential* (1997) and the aforementioned *The Insider*,

helping to elide the gap between masculine presence and masculine performativity. The terms used to both construct and help audiences understand Crowe are also significant: he is portrayed as a quasi-frontiersman (albeit the Australian outback), unpampered by Hollywood wealth and glamour, whilst the nostalgia for a pre-commodified masculinity can hardly be missed in the reference to Starbuck's coffee. This distinctly fetishistic adulation surrounding Maximus/Crowe's quasi-bestial masculine persona belies a return of the repressed: a nostalgic longing for a mythic masculine essence, a phallic presence rather than a *bricolage* of 'decorative' and commodified signifiers. Of course, this is exacerbated by the generic throwback to the 1950s epic and the national-masculine certitude it worked to represent. *Gladiator*'s disingenuous contempt for 'the mob' and 'feminine' mass culture, whilst wholly contradictory (though arguably self-mocking) given the hyper-commercial basis of Hollywood entertainment, also help structure Crowe/Maximus's masculinity, whilst simultaneously disavowing the feminising construction of Crowe/Maximus as object of the gaze and mass-culture's commodified star.⁴⁴ The anxious insistence on real, corporeal physical presence is exacerbated by the visible 'truth' of Crowe/Maximus's muscles amidst the hyperreal CGI *mise-en-scène*. Maximus not only does battle with a corrupt, shallow and feminised world; he also, apparently, casually vanquishes the so-called 'Adonis complex': a muscle-bound ego-ideal, and then some.

If one incredulous colleague who witnesses Maximus's fury and proficiency in battle has trouble imagining 'Maximus the farmer', so does *Gladiator* itself. As in *The Patriot*, the family in *Gladiator* functions primarily as a structuring absence, their demise granting Maximus's quest 'rooting interest' in the terms of generic economy. Karen Schneider has argued that Hollywood action-adventure movies have become 'hysterical about families', suggesting that many 'seem hell-bent on the spectacular rearticulation of the traditional – white, bourgeois, patriarchal – family':

the action hero's story is the story of the family, tortured and triumphant. These narratives violently enact the centrality of the family to the structuring of contemporary American experience . . . reveal[ing] a desperate attempt to rescue and reassert the hegemonic family, widely perceived as under siege.⁴⁵

Schneider is right, I think, to point out the anxiously overdetermined investment in the patriarchal family that is evident in many recent action movies, but conversely I would suggest that the threatened family largely functions to motivate and structure the white hero's masochistic, hyperindividual exploits. However, Maximus's slain wife and son enable the film to conveniently resolve the tension between masculine man-of-action and domesticated husband-father, while the true (melo)drama is the suitably epic confrontation between corrupt state and righteous individual subject. Maximus's nuclear family unit barely exist as a presence within the film except as either corpses or as etherealised phantasms within our hero's fevered and traumatised imagination. In this way, *Gladiator* almost seems to fold

under its contradictory strategies and structuring tropes. For example, the family serve to structure Maximus's heterosexual normativity, but their absence also underlines the impossibility of the nuclear unit in the homosocial universe of the diegesis. As Cohan points out:

the dualism of freedom and slavery [in the epic] . . . expose[s] the contradictions inhering within both the United States' own domestic operations as a modern national-security state and the traditional imbrication of masculinity in the nationalistic myth of rugged American male individualism.⁴⁶

That is, the true focus of *Gladiator* is homosocial conflict and the postmodern 'agency panic' of Melley's diagnosis.

Gladiator is, in effect, an Oedipal melodrama of beleaguered white masculinity, with a narrative revolving around the relationship(s) between 'fathers' and 'sons', patrimony and homosocial inheritance. Indeed, the central drama of the film gravitates around the issue of an authentic patrimonial line murderously interrupted when benevolent Emperor Marcus Aurelius (Richard Harris) opts to leave the Empire in the capable-but-unwilling hands of Maximus rather than bitter and estranged biological son Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix): issue is not the issue, as it were; 'authentic' masculinity, patriarchal authority and the egalitarian meritocratic democracy of 'American' society clearly is ('You,' the Emperor informs Maximus, 'are the son I *should* have had'). If the masculine angst evident in the overdetermined exchanges between Marcus Aurelius and Commodus unintentionally lapse into camp ('Your faults as a son,' weeps the former, 'is my failure as a father!'), *Gladiator* has a considerable investment in the insistence upon righteous patrimonial inheritance. Maximus is clearly Rome/America's true son, fit to cleanse the culture of its 'fallen' decadence, his aptitude for the task demonstrated when he deferentially prays to the (all male) ancestors: a willingly introjective subject of a conservative patriarchal lineage. And if the film's posters attempt to interpellate their audiences into the grandiose mythology of individualism ('What we do in life,' we are ponderously informed, 'echoes in eternity'), it is surely no coincidence that it is a *white*, unmistakably middle-class male who, *Gladiator* suggests, can recuperate America's democratic utopia.

For *Gladiator* – like the men in Faludi's scattershot analysis of America's masculine crisis – is almost obsessed with the question of who is fit to inherit 'Rome'. From the quasi-paternal relationship between Maximus and Marcus Aurelius, through the murder of the former's son (and, therefore, heir), to the restoration of order with the reinstatement of Gracchus (Derek Jacobi), on to the film's evident anxiety over the fate of Lucius (Spencer Treat Clark), the young son of Lucilla (Connie Nielson), and his positive (and, again, quasi-paternal) bond with Maximus. Of course, the threat to this white masculine hegemony lies in both engulfment by the fickle ebb and flow of 'feminising' mass culture – as signified by the notably passive proletarian lumpen hordes in Rome – and more specifically by Maximus's wildly overdetermined nemesis Commodus. If masculine anxieties can already be detected in the excessive musculature and phallic potency of Crowe's star body – what Cohan

has dubbed male 'drag' – it seems that abs, pecs and 'ceps are simply not enough to secure your manly credentials: your structuring arch-rival must also be a sexually ambiguous, cowardly, narcissistic, morally corrupt, effeminate, affluent, decadent (and, therefore – note how his flamboyant costumes contrast sharply with Maximus's no-nonsense tunic – more consumerised), incestuous and patricidal inverse of the Oedipal ideal. Not only does Commodus murder his own father (perhaps the ultimate crime, given *Gladiator's* unrelenting Oedipal logic), he also has sexual designs on his sister, alongside indeterminate but doubtless sinister plans for his male nephew, and a notably obsessive relationship with Maximus. Indeed, Commodus's incestuous desire(s) for his sibling seems to be largely motivated (and, indeed, triangulated) by her one-time affair with former lover Maximus. Commodus's 'queerness' – rendered in wholly negative terms – is exacerbated by the film's knowing discourse concerning the 'decadence' of Rome's higher echelons. Amidst the homosocial environs of the Roman Senate, the fear of 'backstabbing' takes on an unmistakably homophobic taint. Finally, a scantily clad, chained Maximus (in an overtly sadomasochistic-style crucifixion-pose) is literally stabbed in the back by Commodus in an echo of the embrace of *amour fou* with which he earlier despatched his benevolent father.⁴⁷ Just as *Gladiator* proposes a man like Maximus as the antidote to an ideologically emasculated, spiritually diseased and commercially feminised culture, Commodus acts as a metonym for all that Crowe/Maximus is *not*: the phallus, in other words, as bad object.

This Schreberian take on homosocial paranoia subsequently serves to disavow the overtly homoerotic bonding between the enslaved gladiators. These 'real' men, with their taut, glistening bodies are structured as the antithesis of the pampered ruling elite with their silk togas and horticultural pursuits. And this textual paranoia is made all the more acute by *Gladiator's* almost exclusively male focus. Marcus Aurelius earnestly wishes out loud to his daughter Lucilla: 'If only you had been born a man!' Similarly, Maximus's murdered child is a boy, and later – knowing how to *really* hurt his usually stoic nemesis – Commodus gloats that Maximus's first born did not take it like a man, but in fact 'squealed like a girl'. Women are thus almost entirely marginal to this phallogocentric melodrama. Leading lady Lucilla's role is essentially a structuring one, relevant only in relation to other men: she gives birth to a son, and structures both Maximus's heterosexuality and Commodus's ambi-sexual perversity. Maximus's wife's rape, meanwhile, is represented primarily as a violation of the white hero, her presence in the text a fleeting, etherealised one. Conversely, it is the homosocial bonds between men in the film that dominate *Gladiator's* melodramatic emotional core, and alongside the strenuously disavowed eroticism of these bonds there is a significant narrative thrust towards the casually naturalised re-centring of white masculinity.

Gladiator is, above all else, the story of the fall and rise of Maximus Decimus Meridus. Following the murder of his family, Maximus is cast into an abyss of bodily punishment, *literal* commodification and an abject universe of racial and ethnic otherdom. Upon finding his wife and child slain, Maximus reveals the first of his hysterical symptoms: he *faints*. Awakening later (the trauma has clearly been considerable), our hero finds himself passively nursed by a benevolent African slave,

surrounded by a disorienting, diverse (and menacing) collective of disenfranchised racial others. This abject condition finds its socio-somatic bodily metonym in the bloody trauma marked on his arm – a wound stuffed with writhing maggots. Advised by his saintly comrade to allow the pupae to 'cleanse' his wound, Maximus begins the quest for purification and re-birth which structures many action narratives, and the classical *rite de passage* structure which underpins this male tale. Having fallen from privileged middle-class professional and institutional security to the level of 'stock', Maximus must perform his way back to the political and ideological centre in the gladiatorial arena. The film's glib rhetorical attempt at racial relativism – both Maximus and his black comrade Juba (Djimon Hounsou) are enslaved, equals in their subaltern status, longing to return to their families/homelands – is on particularly dubious ground when, in an emotional exchange, Maximus reveals that *he* actually has it worse since he has no family or home to return to. This masochistic one-upmanship and casual co-option of a race-based victim-discourse by a land-owning, middle-class professional white male and *from* a disenfranchised black slave is both profoundly overdetermined and, needless to say, astonishingly crass given the painful history behind the African-American presence in the US. No matter how displaced in terms of history and geography *Gladiator's* allegory is, Maximus's appropriation of a discourse of enslavement, upheaval and emancipation here is symptomatic of the deeply problematic workings of the paranoid white imaginary as represented through the melodramatic prism of mainstream Hollywood representation. That Juba is eventually freed by Maximus's righteous actions (the former offering grateful thanks to the martyred hero in the film's elegiac closing moments) merely highlights his status as racial fetish in *Gladiator's* troubling ideological schemata.

Nevertheless, such homosocial bonding works, like Maximus himself, extremely hard to naturalise the re-centring of normative masculinity. *Gladiator's* emphasis on homosocial bonds almost inevitably collapses into a celebration of homoerotics which at times is almost beyond disavowal. Such pleasures are hardly alien to the genre, of course: one of the key pleasures of the genre is precisely the overt display of the male body as part of the spectacular pleasures of the text. In *Gladiator*, however, part of Maximus's masochistic journey towards remasculinisation is the abject experience of becoming a commodified, objectified spectacle. While Crowe/Maximus's sneering defiance and stoical suffering affirms his status as epic hero, it is the reverse psychology of his angsty masculine *performance* in the gladiatorial arena which paradoxically/strategically encourages the gaze whilst the ultraviolent action serves to disavow threatening notions of passivity or 'feminisation' which such aggressive narcissism may suggest. Maximus despatches opponents with a strutting, athletic surety whilst at the same time sneering at the cultural dupes who cheer him on, his masochistic ordeal requiring the adoring gaze of the masses he treats with such contempt. In this way, Crowe's visible contempt at the Oscars ceremony is a precise echo of his performance as Maximus: the 'manly' disdain is registered only by way of a petulant, pouting narcissism. The rhetoric of the mutinous and martyred body encourages and desires the collective gaze ('win the crowd' Maximus is continually told) just as he paradoxically asserts his indifference/defiance towards it.

The performance of the hero-martyr is a reflexive one, for sure: but the gaze that Maximus's body and manly essence attracts is primarily *male*. Indeed, *Gladiator* is positively bursting at the seams with adoring, awestruck reaction shots whenever Maximus is in action, often a slow zoom to close-up intercut with reverse shots registering the move from admiration to adoration. Certainly, Maximus has no shortage of male admirers: from his ever-loyal troops, through his new-found gladiatorial comrades, to his adoring manservant Cicero (Tommy Flanagan) and the youthful Lucius's introjective fandom, Maximus's homosocial magnetism is reflexively asserted throughout the film's formal and narrative strategies; but this overdetermined animal magnetism has its dangers, with the ever-tenuous distinction between identification and desire threatening to erode completely. If, as I would argue, the film serves as a melodramatic treatise on who is fit to inherit 'America' and its masculinist traditions, *Gladiator* calmly suggests that the remasculinisation of the nation is the only authentic (or, indeed, viable) way forward; in this sense the film is distinctly millennial. Progression from the entropy and abjection of post-modernity here requires the collective introjection of Maximus's brand of masculine certitude. Furthermore, it is entirely in keeping with the film's populist agenda that Maximus comes to lead the slave revolt ostensibly because of his professional skill and experience, rather than, say, his hardly insignificant ethnic or social status. Maximus is so clearly the centre of the film both diegetically and extratextually, his cause so 'obviously' righteous that all his (largely proletarian) comrades – even the selfish and cynical slave trader Proximo (Oliver Reed) – are more than willing to give up their lives for him for the greater good: a narcissistic wish-fulfilment fantasy (and, perhaps, even a form of displaced aggression) if ever there was one.

Gladiator thus operates around a rhetorical binary discourse of authentic/inauthentic national-masculine ideals, metonymically represented by the key opposition of Maximus–Commodus. Yet this structuring relationship, rhetorically over-determined as it is, effectively collapses under the weight of its own anxious signification. 'We are not so different, you and I,' gloats Commodus as he leers over the glistening, bound body of his gladiatorial nemesis. While both Maximus and the film struggle to disavow this possibility, to emphasise Commodus's *misrecognition*, the homosocial paranoia that drives the narrative becomes wildly apparent. As such, Commodus figures as a monstrous doppelganger for the idealised masculinity that *Gladiator* fetishises: a melodramatic, gothicised projection of all that normative masculinity must reject in order to stabilise, purify and affirm *itself*. Just as Maximus physically rejects the interpellation of a (now-)corrupt homosocial regime literally inscribed on his body in the form of a regimental tattoo, there is a considerable contradiction between his own hyperindividual exploits and the utopian, 'democratic' homosocial collective restored at the film's conclusion. Similarly, Maximus's phallic and inflexibly rigid individualism is contrasted with the cultural dupery of the crowd and Commodus's own polymorphous openness to the fickle ebb and flow of the masses' desires. Here, the former's gladiatorial narcissism and ability to 'win the crowd', to both resist *and* revel in his commodification as spectacle supposedly outweighs the Emperor's lack of integrity and commitment to shallow populism. Again, Commodus's diabolical queerness functions as an overt

disavowal of the erotics at work in *Gladiator*'s excessive display of muscular male bodies and its near-obsession with homosociality. There is, after all, a thin line between fear and desire, and nowhere is this more evident than in the antithetical structuring relationship between the phoney Emperor and the 'real' man.

And it is here that *Gladiator*'s certitude comes undone. As Maximus cleanses this allegorical America of its sins with his final commandments, casually restoring a legitimate social order in his own image as he does so, the film seems to concede its own excess(es) with the necessity of the re-centralised hero's demise. First, given their structuring interdependence, we must question whether Maximus could possibly survive narrative closure following Commodus's death. Second, Maximus is, in Robinson's terms, a *marked man*⁴⁸; 'You have a great name', he is sagely informed at one point. While the film flexes all its muscles in an effort to emphasise individualist ideology and a utopian version of social mobility, Maximus's privileged social standing problematises such populist dogma. Maximus both is and is not the film's *eponymous* hero; both the warrior-phallus and simply 'a' gladiator. Recall the scene in which Commodus requests that the gladiator-hero remove his mask and reveal his identity: Maximus refuses, ostensibly because he wants Commodus to believe he is dead, but on another level it is precisely because he wishes to maintain his *invisibility* as a hegemonic male; Maximus/Crowe's central speech ('I am Maximus Decimus Meridus') melodramatically and rhetorically points out the incongruity of his great white *name* and his degraded position. Clearly, then, Maximus suffers from a peculiar brand of white man's burden; but if *Gladiator* suggests that our hero is an entirely self-made 'great man' – as opposed to one 'burdened' with socio-economic privilege by his very normativity – it also admits the impossibility of that phallic masculine essence in its ultimate etherealisation. Similarly, it is this essence – the phallus in all but name – which is destabilised by its narcissistic performativity in the gladiatorial arena. Indeed, *Gladiator*'s cultural work strains precisely *to* stabilise and recuperate a masculinity perceived to be under threat, victimised – improbably – by virtue of its virtue. Furthermore, these anxieties (and even longings) are also unmistakably evident in the excess of Crowe's body/performance, and the rapturous (even *hysterical*) critical reception it received. *Gladiator*'s melodramatic excess, in a grand Hollywood tradition is, like Maximus, simply too much, a phantasmic and impossible ideal; something which the film appears to admit with the reluctant, remasculinised hero's departure, death-driven (with all of Rome's eyes upon him, of course) back to ordinarily domestic, yet phantasmically mythic wholeness: a spiritual return to the insular bosom of his family which gently disavows any social or political stake in his spectacular wrong-righting.

And so here is the white man, a weight on his shoulders. And yet for all its cultural work, all its sombre and elegiac *gravitas*, the masculine utopia of *Gladiator* – and, by extension, the Hollywood action film *per se* – flaunts its paranoia, renders its symptomatic hysteria as visibly as Maximus's wounded body. In effect, these fantasies of white plight and the rhetorical masochistic scenarios of the likes of *Gladiator* protest *too much*. By giving the game away through their overwrought, melodramatic angst they unravel the populist, conservative agenda in play. For if

the prevalence of the tortured white hero in contemporary American cinematic representation belies anxieties simmering underneath utopian national ideologies, then it is precisely their basis in the narratives of the Hollywood imaginary which suggest that this is an outlet for strategically masochistic/narcissistic white male fantasies of being beaten. As such, it is perhaps safest to posit that only those secure enough and assured of their continued hegemonic centrality that can afford to play so regularly and so melodramatically with 'epic' fantasies and mournfully paranoid delusions of disempowerment, displacement and degradation. As the surly Maximus would doubtless concur, albeit with a sneer, sometimes it hurts so, so good.

Notes

- 1 Teresa Brennan *History after Lacan*, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 34.
- 2 Robyn Wiegman *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 131.
- 3 Richard Dyer *White*, London: Routledge, 1997; David Savran *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998; S. Robinson *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- 4 John Graham 'The End of the Great White Male', in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic (eds) *Critical White Studies: Looking behind the Mirror*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, pp. 3–5.
- 5 As Robyn Wiegman points out, the synergy between Hollywood representations and notions of American identity are far from trivial, *American Anatomies*, p. 131.
- 6 Robert Bly *Iron John: A Book About Men*, New York: Addison-Wesley, 1990.
- 7 Susan Faludi *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1999, p. 597.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 598.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 598–9.
- 10 Naomi Klein *No Logo*, London: Flamingo, 2000.
- 11 Although Faludi's survey does not focus exclusively on white males, the 'crisis of masculinity' more generically seems to be dominated by the complaints of white men.
- 12 Liam Kennedy 'Alien Nation: White Male Paranoia and Imperial Culture in the United States', *Journal of American Studies*, 30: 1, 1996, pp. 87–100.
- 13 Dana Polan *Power and Paranoia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 14.
- 14 Brennan *History after Lacan*, p. 75. This process is all-too-evident in American culture's attitude towards so-called 'rogue states' in the wake of the astonishing events of 11 September, 2001; one only has to watch the news to see how vulnerability and paranoia find their mirror image in the aggressive surety which seeks to place such uncertain objects under passifying control.
- 15 Patrick O'Donnell *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 7.
- 16 Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, London: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. vii.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 19 I borrow the term 'pomophobia' from Thomas Byer's insightful essay 'Terminating the Postmodern: Masculinity and Pomophobia', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 41, 1994, pp. 5–34: p. 12.
- 20 Melley *Empire of Conspiracy*, p. 25. Donald Pease has outlined the fundamentally paranoid structure of US national identity and interpellation of national subjects, in his essay 'National Narratives, Postnational Narration', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 43, 1997, pp. 1–23.

- 21 Paul Smith *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 156.
- 22 Frank Krutnik *In a Lonely Place: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, London: Routledge, 1991; Kaja Silverman *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, London: Routledge, 1992.
- 23 Rick Altman *Film/Genre*, London: BFI, 1999, pp. 155–6.
- 24 David Savran *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 147–8.
- 25 Robinson *Marked Men*, p. 13.
- 26 Robinson *Marked Men*, p. 11, emphasis added.
- 27 See Wendy Brown 'Injury, Identity, Politics', in A. F. Gordon and C. Newfield (eds) *Mapping Multiculturalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 149–66.
- 28 Robinson *Marked Men*, p. 9.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 31 Nina Baym 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors', in Elaine Showalter (ed.) *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, London: Virago, 1986, pp. 63–80.
- 32 E. A. Kaplan 'Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma', *Screen*, 42: 2, 2001, pp. 201–5: p. 202.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 203–4.
- 34 In a reversal of this trend, Ford played the menacing 'other' of female paranoia in *What Lies Beneath* (2000).
- 35 Steve Cohan *Masked Men: Masculinity and Movies in the 1950s*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997; Steve Neale *Genre and Hollywood*, London: Routledge, 2000; Lesley Felperin 'Decline and Brawl', *Sight and Sound*, 10: 6, June 2000, pp. 34–5.
- 36 Revealingly, early versions of *Gladiator's* script named the lead Narcissus.
- 37 Other films which follow this pattern include *Wall Street* (1987), *The Firm* (1993), *Devil's Advocate* (1997) and *Antitrust* (2001). The homophobic metaphor of corrupt homosocial 'seduction' serves to structure their paranoid schemata.
- 38 Cohan *Masked Men*.
- 39 Felperin 'Decline and Brawl', p. 35.
- 40 A. O'Hehir 'Gorilla Warfare', *Sight and Sound*, September 2001, p. 13.
- 41 P. Kane 'Hero today, but gone tomorrow?', *The Observer Review*, 25 June, 2000, p. 5.
- 42 I. Nathan 'Gladiator', *Empire*, 132, June 2000, pp. 46–7: p. 46.
- 43 M. Palmer 'Grrrrr . . .', *Empire*, 132, June 2000, pp. 76–80: p. 77.
- 44 This process of male bodily display/eroticisation, action and disavowal is analysed in Steve Neale's classic article 'Masculinity as Spectacle', *Screen*, 24: 6, 1983, pp. 2–16.
- 45 Karen Schneider 'With Violence if Necessary: Rearticulating the Family in the Contemporary Action-Thriller', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 27: 1, 1999, p. 4.
- 46 Cohan *Masked Men*, p. 133.
- 47 For more on the homophobic structure of the male epic (and its contradictions), see Leon Hunt 'What Are Big Boys Made Of? *Spartacus*, *El Cid* and the Male Epic', in Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (eds) *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993, pp. 65–83.
- 48 Robinson argues that 'in a post-liberationist America . . . white men have been "marked" as the bearers of power, privilege, and a violent sexuality' (*Marked Men*, p. 180).