Narcissistic Self-Love, Male Body Objectification, and Homoeroticism in John Woos’ The Killer and Face/Off

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A theme of homoeroticism/sexually charged appreciation of the male body exerts itself as a clear visual in The Killer and Face/Off. In this paper, some of these homoerotic images and the theoretically gender-based reasoning behind them will be explored. In some ways, Woos’ films The Killer and Face/Off, can be “read” as both example and counterexample to masculine-feminine discussions of gendered cinema. Laura Mulvey, for instance, posits the thesis that cinema is a vision dominated by patriarchal society. Both films I will be analyzing exemplify the superior role of male societal functions; such as males in positions of authority, or with the expectation of fulfilling a stereotypical male protective role. As a counterexample the films can also be read as the objectification of the masculine body, a theory that Paul Smith and Mark Gallegar focus on in American cinema. According to my own interpretations of the films, Mulvey’s patriarchy and Smith’s eroticizing of the male body combine to offer the films as not only contextually patriarchal, but because of the emphasis placed on male bodies, the characters consequently become homoeroticized.

To begin with I would like to explain the theoretical background on which this paper will be based, and then move into a discussion of how it can be applied to these two movies. A single quote from Laura Mulvey can sum up her particular stance on analyzing cinema: “Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form,” (Mulvey, 198). Two of the ways that Mulvey describes film as reflective of patriarchal values are inherent in the “man as bearer of the look” syndrome and the idea of the “buddy movie” (203). The idea of the “look” is the way in which the male lead will objectify the female with his gaze, turning her into the one
who is looked at. This reinforces the male as the dominant power, which in turn leads back to a ruling patriarchal society. The “buddy movie” is the idea that a female will slow or halt the progress of a film and the way around this is to encourage “the active homosexual eroticism of the central male figures,” (203). In this way the female can be left behind with no loss of relationship issues as the male leads feed off each other.

Two other ideas that Mulvey discusses which will come into play when analyzing *The Killer* and *Face/Off* are Freud’s mirror phase and narcissism. These two ideas are actually interconnected and the following quote serves to explicate that:

> The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect. . . The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition. The image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects his body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which reintrojected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others. (201)

To sum up this quote: when a child sees his reflection for the first time he creates his ego ideal as the perfect image being something outside of himself; later on in life he superimposes his own ego ideal onto others that he views as perfect, and thus identifies himself with them. Therefore his appreciation of his own reflected body is narcissistic in how he loves it as the ideal of himself. By transferring that love to others he is reinforcing his own ego ideal/body while eroticizing theirs and his as well. In Mulvey’s analysis this phenomenon is mainly visible in the theater-goers reaction to the hero of the film. The viewer eroticizes the masculine image as their own projected ego ideals because of how the male character embodies every quality they most glorify. However in the case of the two films I will be analyzing, the theory will be applied
solely to the two main male characters in order to see how their status as mirror images of one another affects the movie as a whole.

Before getting into the homoeroticized nature of the masculine narcissism in the films, I must first get through explaining the film theory of Mulvey’s counterpart, Paul Smith. In a book on Clint Eastwood, Smith discusses the objectification of the male body and how this has eroticized the masculine image in film:

There exists a whole cultural production around the exhibition of the male body in the media—not just in film, but in television, sports, advertising, and so on—and this objectification has even been evident of Hollywood itself, while evidently having been intensified in recent years. Scarcely any of this plethora of images depends upon the feminization of male; rather the media and film deploy rather specific representational strategies to eroticize the male body. (158)

This quote captures one of Smith’s main points—that of the objectification/eroticization of the male body in mass media. With his forthright statement Smith shifts the commonly held assumption towards the objectification of women’s bodies to that of men’s, and in the process makes a societal commentary on the voice of feminists in claiming sole rights to victimization. In fact, Smith goes on to describe a director named Don Siegal who negates Mulvey’s claims of the female as object of the male’s gaze, (and by extension, the possibility of her definition of the “buddy movie” originating from a female impetus), by the very fact that he employs no women. Instead Siegal’s “work is often concerned with the activity and dynamics of all-male groups and this concern has allowed the development of something like a cinematic obsession with the male body,” (158). The theories of Paul Smith on the eroticization of the male body lead me to conclude that Mulvey’s abuse of patriarchal film is being responded to in order to display the impact it has on objectifying males equally with females.

In a related subject on the male body, Mark Gallegar wrote about the mutilation of the male body in film, and what it contributes to the debate on the representations of masculine
power. This article is specifically discussing Mel Gibson movies (primarily *Braveheart*), but it can be tied into Woo’s movies, as will be seen later on. Galleghar writes that, “‘The representation of masculinity has always been inextricably tied up with issues of power, but that power has not always been represented in bodily terms,’” (Galleghar, 23). This implies that previously perhaps the body was not the repository of the visual play-out of a male/female power struggle, however presently the body has come to represent the vying force of masculine power and by mutilating that body Galleghar suggests cinema is reflecting a dissatisfaction with current values. More specifically he states,

the films present decadent societies that have lost contact with traditional patriarchal values. Gibson’s (*Braveheart’s* director) characters sacrifice themselves as an attempt to champion a return to an older, more conservative social system. . . .Although in both cases Gibson’s character is erased from the narrative, others successfully carry on his cause—an implicit invocation to spectators to do the same. (229)

In Galleghar’s essay the male body is not eroticized so much as it is shown to stand in for a system of mutilated values. In terms of the other readings that I will be discussing later on in the paper, though, one can see that a return to the patriarchal values of the past constitutes a return to a stricter sense of “brotherhood” which can be read as homoerotic in its extremes.

Now that I have outlined my main theoretical bases for investigation of the homoerotic nature of *The Killer* and *Face/Off*, I will begin applying these critical lenses to the films themselves. In doing so, I hope to draw out some of the major themes in the films that correspond to the ideas espoused about the male body which I have described. Upon first viewing of *The Killer*, I was struck by how obvious the affection between the two main male characters seemed. *The Killer* follows the relationship between a hired killer and a police man. The killer is Chow Yun Fat, named John in the movie, and he has internal strife issues with the gang to which he is affiliated. Jeff, played by Danny Yee, is the police officer set to track down
and stop this gang and who, along the way, becomes obsessed with the character of John. The two develop an unlikely friendship and work together at protecting the main female lead, Jenny, as well as trying to stop the gang.

I became interested in the homoerotic undertones after considering the men’s behavior in light of the Mulvey essay. *The Killer* is a perfect example of the “buddy movie” and displays two characters who so completely typify the mirror image syndrome. This likeness has been noted by several authors that I came across in my research, one example being:

*John Woo’s* *The Killer* reteams Chow Yun Fat and Danny Lee. In it they play an assassin and a cop who become mirror images of one another. The movie confronts . . . the idea that the only difference between the hunter and the hunted is a badge. This concept is reinforced by Chow’s character being depicted as a noble killer. (Logan, 120).

The fact of the male characters becoming mirror images of one another hearkens back to Freud’s (articulated by Mulvey) theory on the mirror phase in adolescence. If the two characters consider each other mirror images then they are reinforcing their ego ideals. This is particularly evident in the case of Danny Lee’s character Jeff who visually considers the representations (police drawings) of John in an idealized way. Jeff conceives a sort of hero worship of John and this can be read as symptomatic of the mirror phase events. John Woo’s use of slow-motion and freeze framing to highlight the “looks” that pass between Jeff and John echoes the director Siegel who used similar techniques that Smith wrote about. One of the stylistic devices that Smith accredits to Siegal is “a preponderance of facial close-ups in which the actor’s gaze is directed from right to left at a roughly 45 degree angle,” (158). In *The Killer*, there is a segment outside the church when the camera slow motions and freeze frames on each of their faces in turn at a very close-up angle with one looking to the right and then, in turn, the other looking to the left so they are facing one another and gazing directly into the others’ eyes. The freeze framing, then, allows for an enactment of mirroring the characters on the screen, while also creating a moment
for the male gazes to objectify each other instead of a female. According to Mulvey’s “buddy movie” theory *The Killer* also corresponds to the female’s negative effect upon the pleasure of the narcissistic look because it is impossible for Jenny to reinforce the narcissism of the male’s gaze since she is blind. Deprived of sight, she cannot return John’s look or reinforce his ego ideal, John must turn to Jeff for his idolization. Because of the tendency to distance one’s self from the mirror image, the recognition of the ideal in another registers easily within the common psyche.

Moving onto the film *Face/Off*, this movie is about a criminal named Castor Troy, played by Nicholas Cage, who is arrested by Archer, a cop played by John Travolta. In order to infiltrate Castor’s gang and get some important information, Travolta’s character has an operation performed which gives him the appearance of Castor. Castor Troy has been unconscious through this, but when he wakes up with no face he takes retaliation by assuming the appearance of Archer.\(^1\) Within the context of mirror imaging, even though the characters have literally become one another, the idealization process is less evident. I would almost say that in the case of each man it is a slightly different ideal that they are superimposing. When John Travolta occupies the body of Nicholas Cage, he releases his id ideal, the seat of passions and desires, in the prison fight scene. Through the realization that he is now Castor Troy, Travolta is released to be as ruthless as he would like to be. Whereas Nicholas Cage behind John Travolta’s face is aware of his super ego ideal, that of ethics and morality, when looking in the mirror. He says to Archer’s wife “I just want to be the man you deserve.” Taken in context this proves that he realizes his own shortcomings and wishes that he were more like John Travolta’s character who has moral certitude.

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\(^1\) From here on the characters will be referred to in conjunction with their assumed identities plus their real names. e.g. Castor/Travolta is John Travolta’s character with Nicholas Cage’s face.
As I mentioned above *The Killer* has a visible homoerotic strain of the “buddy movie” in it whereas I would argue that *Face/Off* has a less homoerotically charged tension. Yet there is still some semblance towards this tendency of homoeroticism in the narcissistic self-love which transcends into a self-homoeroticism. This comes across in a scene in prison where Archer/Cage comes to visit Castor/Travolta. Upon seeing his body, Archer/Cage exclaims, “Whee! You’re good-looking! You’re hot. It’s like looking in a mirror, only not.” He then proceeds to lick his face’s cheek, saying “Boy I miss that face.” In this scene the narcissistic love Nicholas Cage’s character holds towards himself makes itself palpably obvious. The narcissism is the projection of the ego ideal onto the image one sees outside of oneself that Cage is being redrawn towards under the bizarre circumstances of the movie’s face changing procedure. It thus fulfills every aspect of narcissism as, instead of just admiring himself, he actually acts in a sexual manner towards his own body. Which is why I called it a transcending of the narcissistic aspect into self homoeroticism because it carries the “pleasure of the look” that step further to the pleasure of tactile contact.

In analyzing the film under the auspices of Mulvey’s ideas one can see the emphasis placed on homoerotic and narcissistic male actions in cinema. Switching gears a little now, I will be looking at the films through the ideas of Smith and Galleghar. In their respective cases there is more of an emphasis placed on the eroticization and symbolic meaning of the male body itself.

The passage of Paul Smith that I quoted in the first part of my paper outlines his belief that the male body has become an eroticized commodity in modern media in general. One of the examples already cited is the camera techniques of Siegal that, to Smith, epitomize the eroticization of the male body. Another one of Siegal’s methods is the “traveling shot and pans
that follow the male body’s movement in a relatively smooth motion and usually center the body in the frame,” (Smith, 158). In the case of John Woo, through his use of stylized violence, freeze framing, and slow-motion shots, he also manages to highlight the male body by careful representation of its fluidity and barely leashed violence. The method through which his films capture fighting scenes displays these attributes to perfection. The use of guns (a phallic symbol) also reinforces the erotic nature of the masculine violence in the films.

Switching focus slightly, the film interpretation of Galleghar gives credence to the mutilation of the body as a stand in for the downfall of patriarchal society. Although he discusses this in relation to American cinema, the same ideas can be related to Hong Kong cinema as the films were reflective of the breakdown of society before the 1997 Handover to Chinese rule. Because of the general breakdown in societal order that had the citizens of Hong Kong in a panic over the future of their country, the violent action films of the 80’s and 90’s acted as an outlet for stress, as well as a stylized reflection of actual events within society. In an essay entitled “The Return of the Father: Hong Kong New Wave and its Chinese Context in the 1980’s” Li Cheuk writes about how the Hong Kong action film “satisfies the audience’s need to vent its frustration and anger,” while at the same time the films encapsulated “the sense of ‘here today, gone tomorrow’—no doubt reflect[ing] the average Hong Kong person’s own anxieties over the future,” (174-75). Out of their fears, the country romanticized violence and out of this pessimism the ending of films such as *The Killer* display a marked elegy towards the past order. *The Killer* typifies the breakdown by having Chow Yun Fat’s character killed in the final cataclysmic showdown. The role of the hero as being “either maimed or killed by the final reel,” was a typical one in so-called “heroic bloodshed” films,” (Logan, 126). The mutilation of the male body hearkens back to Smith’s views on the victimization of masculine power complicit in
the harming of the male body, and I would say that in this time period the male body became representative of the country itself. With the fall of Hong Kong the mutilation of the male form mirrored the societal fears and actual events.

As I quoted earlier from Galleghar, “others must successfully carry on [the] cause” of the deceased, and Jeff does this by revenge killing of the last member of the triad in retaliation for John’s death. He will also fulfill John’s wish for Jenny’s cornea transplant. Through his loyalty, Jeff upholds the traditional notions of brotherhood, or yi, that were an integral part of male bonding relationships in a glorious past of Hong Kong/Chinese history. By this deliberate acknowledgment of the past, the film draws the audience into viewing the past as superior to the present by contrast of ideals. In the past, yi existed which postulated a “system of brotherhood, honor, and justice binding all who operate within a (class or caste-defined) fraternity,” (Teo, 176). Whereas, within the movies’ creation period the public was inundated with constant apprehension and a feeling of isolation within their own country from fear of the advent of Chinese rule. Obviously, the former ideal would look more appealing, and it is The Killer’s portrayal of its fall that creates an empathic reaction within its viewer for that particular time period in Hong Kong history. Also the film reflects in the death of its hero a fear for the future peace.

Face/Off, released only 2 days before the Handover, but released in America, no longer has quite the same overarching inherent symbolism in its schematic. At the end the “good” guy triumphs and the “bad” guy falls, thus it does provide a wonderful counterpart in that it displays a reversal in public opinion on the evils expected out of the Chinese takeover by having a more optimistic ending. In a news article written the day before the Handover, “So Britain’s departure is not the end of the world. It is no doomsday. It is not a time for tears,”
John Woo comments on one of his other movies, *Hard Boiled*, as one in which he purposely created a connection to the Handover in the final scenes, in which people are in a hospital that is burning down. He said, “it had some symbolism for what was soon to happen in 1997: people trapped in a place, hoping they will survive, and maybe wishing for a savior. And Chow saves the baby, and I wanted the baby to stand in for the idea that there was hope, that there was hope for the future,” (Server, 36). So, in some of Woos’ films there is an optimistic note about the fate of his country, or at least a hopeful one, as reflected by the outcome of the hero within the plot line. However, I would argue that the symbolic removal of the characters’ faces could be seen as a loss of identity on the part of the Hong Kong people as they were switching from one outward face (Britain) to another (China). And the changes that went along with such a transformation could produce an identity crisis within them as a nation similar to that seen in the movie.

In conclusion, I would like to provide a counterpoising quote from John Woo himself:

> People will always bring their own preconceptions to a film. If they see something (in *The Killer*) that they consider homoerotic, then that’s their privilege. For them it clearly must be there. It’s certainly not intentional, but, then, a lot of the other things people have pointed out about my work were never intended when I made the film! (Logan, 122)

From this quote Woo provides a common complaint of the creator against those who embellish a work to the point of assigning it unrelated themes. However, I would argue that even though perhaps the homoeroticism was unintentional, it nonetheless exists in *The Killer* and *Face/Off* as a part, at the very least, of Woo’s unconscious imagination. One argument for the motives beneath Woos’ films could be his own narcissistic self-pleasure. In Chow Yun Fat, Woo found “his perfect cinematic alter-ego,” (Logan, 116), who could act out Woo’s ideal male vision in *The Killer*; complete with spiritual background, heroic personality, and even the same first
name—and the same for the character of John Archer played by John Travolta in *Face/Off*.
Consciously or not, Woo projects his ego ideal onto the screen through the mediums of each pair of male leads, who in their conversation, actions, and still images, manage to convey the homoeroticism of the narcissistic male’s body originating in the body’s objectification on screen.
Works Cited


